
WB&B

A REPORT TO THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

ON

**Post Transition Experiences
Of
Military Seeking Jobs in the Private Sector**

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WB&B About this Survey

At the request of the Joint Staff of the office of the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Wesley, Brown & Bartle* undertook a study to determine how well former career military personnel are being assimilated into the private sector workplace. Through conversations and correspondence with former military personnel, the Joint Staff was concerned that former career officer and enlisted people were having a difficult time making the transition from military to civilian employment. While the transition process has always been challenging, there was compelling anecdotal evidence that the traditional gap was widening. There is concern that future military recruiting and retention efforts will be jeopardized if career military people perceive that they cannot be assimilated back into the private sector.

Before the All-Volunteer Force, there were well defined markers phase points for active duty people to begin a transition back to civilian life. For those drafted, in most instances, it was assumed that the person would return to civilian life once the initial commitment was completed. Those who voluntarily joined the military did so for a variety of reasons: avoiding the draft -- choice of military branch or specialty, education and training with post service benefits, life experiences and/or a desire to serve the public and nation. For those who were having personal or professional difficulties with military service, there was usually ample warning that the person should prepare for separation. For the career officer or non-commissioned officer there was an option to voluntarily resign or remain long enough to qualify for retirement benefits.

While the All-Volunteer Force has fielded the finest professional military in the world it also widened the gap between the military careerist and the private sector.

The end of the draft exposed fewer people to military service. At the time the military was promoting a career in uniform and incentivizing people to stay in, their civilian counterparts were rising in the corporate ranks. Decades earlier, a significant portion of the population either had some military service or had a close family member who served. There was generally more understanding of the military experience. Furthermore, the captains of industry probably felt a special kinship with the military, having matured during the World War II or Korean Conflict era. Hire the veteran programs were pushed by the Federal government and willingly accepted by corporate America.

The end of the Cold War and the necessary down-sizing of the All-Volunteer Force finds the separating NCO and officer in a difficult position. Not only are military careers prematurely interrupted, but even those who have enough service to qualify for separation benefits are having a difficult time finding meaningful employment. The problems are compound:

- Corporate America is undergoing a massive downsizing at the same time the military is forced to reduce its force levels.

- - The gate-keepers making private sector hiring decisions have little or no experience with career military people and are screening them out before they gain access to meaningful job interviews. Ample evidence exists that military resumes are either destroyed or dead-filed with no follow-up. The veteran is no longer viewed as an experienced resource.
- Executive placement firms, recruiters, career counselors and others involved in the vast employment field do not view the military as a marketable source. Therefore, they do not submit them to their clients either out of ignorance or an unfounded sense that the military can't compete in the private sector.
- The All-Volunteer military has distanced itself from the public.
- News and entertainment media have fostered false stereotypes of the military.
- The military career transition programs are inadequate -- in terms of misapplication of resources, practical guidance, education and placement. There is little or no marketing of the former military person to the private sector. The separating service member has little knowledge of how to compete in the private sector.
- Networking is one of the most effective techniques for job search and is the least understood or used by military retirees...Sadly, even former military now in a position to help are not being accessed or made aware that a serious problem exists.
- The individual military non-com or officer who has been trained to accept responsibility for all failures, stoically accepts their lack of success in finding rewarding employment as a personal failure.
- The military resume is an obsolete means to communicate with the private sector. A new legal tender needs to be devised to transfer the shared values of military performance between the military organization and the business community.

The *Wesley, Brown & Bartle* "Military Career Transition Survey" concentrated on measuring the attitudes and experiences of those who have ended their active duty careers. Through the use of a direct mail questionnaire of recently separated officers and NCOs, a troubling picture emerged of an All-Volunteer force that is struggling to reenter the private sector.

The questionnaire sampled former service personnel who had separated from the military during the period January 1994 to February 1995. The random sample consisted of the four uniformed military branches. The survey results do not attempt to identify any one service but concentrates on the military career transition experience as a whole. Included in the survey were officers and enlisted both with and without separation benefits and/or retired pay.

Those mailed the survey were chosen at random from a base of 17 thousand names identified by the Department of Defense through a single social security number digit. Of the surveys mailed, approximately two-thirds were returned by the U.S. Postal Service as undeliverable due to no forwarding address. Of those not returned by the post office, and therefore are assumed to have been delivered, approximately 54% completed and returned the questionnaire. This high rate of return is particularly impressive since this was a blind survey from an unknown firm and required a significant investment of time to complete.

Nonetheless, the responses produced a valid representative survey of the targeted population. Under guidelines provided by "Gilbert A. Churchall, Jr., in *Marketing Research, Methodological Foundations*, and numerous other references, the *Wesley, Brown & Bartle* survey meets the criteria of a sample or field study -- "A cross sectional study in which the sample is selected to be representative of the target population and in which the emphasis is on the generation of summary statistics such as average and percentages."



SURVEY FINDINGS

The assessment and numerical calculations thus far completed in the Military Career Post Transition Survey reveal very powerful statistics and information. When combined with the respondents' (subjective) narratives describing their individual experiences, the result is particularly profound.

In evaluating the returned questionnaires, a unique, poignant story unfolds. In the most succinct summary we can formulate, we have found:

- A highly trained, motivated, committed, capable group in what would ordinarily be the prime of their productive lives leaving the military in great numbers due to downsizing and/or early retirement decisions (which were obviously made in anticipation of the continued reduction in force waiting for them);
- This professionally trained, disciplined, motivated group is leaving mostly unprepared for competing and gaining access to meaningful private sector employment. The process is turning out to be far more arduous, demeaning and longer than they anticipated or were led to believe.
- They move into the post transition process attempting to find employment with obsolete information on career opportunities; little knowledge on how to access the invisible or hidden job market; and few, if any, practical tools or education on "how to network." In essence, a picture is painted that reflects extremely limited comprehension of the nature of the job market, the process, potential employer expectations, and how to use leadership skills to "close" on potential positions. In short, they move forward without even the rudiments of a practical strategic plan or a primitive road map.

Perhaps we can bring this story more sharply into focus for you by citing some of the glaring statistics culled from the survey:

- 87% of respondents were 26-45 years old with the greatest concentration in the 26-30 year old range (22%) and in the 26-35 year old range (29%). **We are indeed dealing with an age range the private sector generally deems highly employable.**

Though a full 80% of respondents took part in the Career Transition Programs offered by the military, the survey clearly shows the program content fell woefully short of what is actually needed to effectively access the private sector market and

sustain the kind of effort necessary to avoid underemployment or unemployment. As one respondent offered, "Transition should be expanded to include placement help."

The actual services provided by the military were simplistic in nature mostly consisting of aid in resume preparation, provision of job listings, and brief (usually 1-3 day) seminars. Of the 80% of the total respondents who availed themselves of the services offered, 17.6% found them "very helpful."

Though it is obvious the military transition programs were "successful" in what they offered and the recipients pleased to partake, unfortunately, as stated earlier, these programs proved either irrelevant, or even impractical to accessing and winning viable offers of employment.

The survey shows that the military personnel left with information on "how to" prepare resumes and "how to" access the job lists provided and followed up by sending out an enormous amount of resumes:

- 16% sent 100 resumes or more
- 14% sent 50-100 resumes
- 53% sent 1-50 resumes

The lack of responses to these resumes generated from prospective employers was a terrific surprise and a huge disappointment to the veterans. The information provided had led them to have much higher expectations.

- a full 25% received no response whatsoever
- 53% received only 1-5 calls
- 12% received 6-10 calls

These percentages drop even further when applied to the number of **actual interviews** which were generated from the resumes sent:

- of the resumes sent to personnel agencies, a staggering **67% achieved no interview**. And of those sent to companies, 28% had no in-person interviews and 73% were invited for only 1-5 interviews. In walking this process through to its unfortunate conclusion, the total process of learning how to prepare resumes, the actual preparation of resumes, the accessing of lists of potential opportunities, the forwarding of resumes -- this effort resulted only in the most minimal of chances to even be interviewed: **The survey shows that in 84% of the cases, the entire resume process did *not* result in even one job offer.**

This finding cannot be emphasized enough. However, for those familiar with corporate hiring procedures, the results came as no surprise. This survey further reveals that though well-intentioned, the current Career Transition Program is a wasteful misapplication of resources which utilizes antiquated methods no longer effective in competing in the private sector. As part of the survey, we encouraged veterans to submit their resumes along with their answers to the Questionnaires: Over 50% did and we had further opportunity to evaluate the actual content of a resume. We found that, firstly, the resumes themselves did not adequately represent or relate the individual's skills to private sector criteria. But even this is somewhat unimportant as in the total context of a job search, simply sending resumes is an exercise in futility.

It is common to the job market that no matter who is sending resumes and no matter how well they're prepared, the majority of positions are not obtained in this manner. By the time a position is listed, it's already too late in the hiring process to make an impact. This is particularly true of individuals in under-represented classes including females, minorities, the military, and the physically challenged.

Former military resumes are generally dead-filed, screened out, and rarely gain access to the hiring managers with the authority to make decisions.

The cold hard facts are that there is a hidden job market that has to be accessed in a more aggressive, direct manner than through resumes. And as stated, this is particularly true for veterans as there are unrelenting myths and misconceptions surrounding the supposed inadequacy of the military experience as preparation for private sector employment.

Interestingly enough, the survey respondents state that the private sector is not biased against the military. Rather, the data and the remarks reflect a modern day phenomenon: a dismal lack of knowledge and, even outright *ignorance* of any of the aspects of the military: what they do; who they are; their training and its application to the business world. Many company executives are not aware that a problem exists with former military seeking positions. We can fill a book with comments to illustrate this. But for now, here are the words of a 33 year old Captain with 11 years active duty and now 2 years in the private sector: "One personnel manager told me I was in the military too long. Employers look at vets as being straight-laced, direct, unemotional, tight and violent. I know we are dedicated, hard-working and adjust to change better than most."

But to move on to complete our current examination of the balance of the job survey, the survey questionnaire covered all aspects of the transition period

wherein we begin to get a fuller understanding as to the toll it takes on its participants.

As stated earlier, the group surveyed turned out to be of age levels, training and education generally quite attractive to the private sector market place: 12% received high school diplomas or GED's while in the service; 20% earned BA's in civilian educational institutions and 37% earned graduate degrees. For example, a 45 year old Major with 20 years in the military, a law degree, and a very impressive legal career in the military, writes, "Law firms have difficulty hiring at my age and career level. I am too old to be treated as an associate and can't bring in enough clients immediately to bring in as a partner." He is still unemployed.

The statistical data showed them to be *highly* motivated as 73% stated they sought work aggressively. Every step of the process found the veterans unprepared for the reception they received in the private sector. Time and time again the survey exposes a tremendous **disparity between the way the veterans perceive themselves and the way the private sector perceives them.**

As a 39 year old 20 year veteran states, "I cannot believe the lies that were told to get employees into this company. For my own search, I learned the hard way. You must be on your toes and not be afraid to ask hard questions when being interviewed if you ever expect to get the truth." For example, though the survey results indicate that 73% of the private sector does not appear to value the entire military experience, 71% of respondents believe their military service was a "help" in their job seeking.

Another example:

In evaluating their own individual capabilities, skills and strengths with regard to their private sector job search, 37% of the respondents thought they were "more competitive," 35% thought they were "less competitive" and 22% thought of themselves as being equal to civilian competitors for positions. These opinions held *despite* the reality that 25% remain unemployed, 36% believe their current employment has little or no career potential, and 22% consider themselves in low status situations. In essence, the survey data quantifies the fact that the downsized military have *no idea* of their value in the private sector marketplace.

As the questionnaire moves through the transition period from military service to civilian employment in the private sector, there are other serious, critical issues uncovered, many of which have a great deal of relevance to the military with regard to their designing future, effective and practical transition programs geared to reach successful outcomes.

Below are just a few examples:

- 73% of the respondents were most anguished to learn that potential employers totally disregarded their military backgrounds -- particularly with regard to the military schools they attended, their military specialties as well as their overall general military experience.

- In prioritizing their greatest strengths in regard to private sector employment, the majority of respondents listed leadership, management, self-discipline and maturity. One glaring disparity in job seeking is apparent. The military stress leadership and management skills but the private sector hires "functionally"... only the highest level of business people - presidents, SVPs, etc. - with demonstrated records of success in their fields in the private sector are hired on the basis of the intangibles of leadership. And even they must have previous demonstrated records of success in the private sector. Therefore, when a transitioning veteran with little or no industry experience emphasizes these skills, it is considered irrelevant.

Since the information asked of the respondents is for the most part subjective, the survey was thereby designed to identify discrepancies and inconsistencies in individuals' responses to enable the researchers to delve "underneath the numbers" to garner a more objective, accurate, realistic understanding of the transitional experience. As one respondent learned the hard way: "Civilians start you at the bottom, not at the top."

One of these "hidden" messages uncovered in the survey data shows a consistent theme which was confirmed and reconfirmed as cross calculations were made. It was revealed that the majority of the veterans surveyed (47% who had 16-20 years of active service and 29% with 6-15 years) are convinced that the obstacles they encountered while job seeking and the poor results they achieved were a result of *their own* shortcomings. Underlying the comments, there was an almost stoic, quiet resignation for self-blame from those who had been formerly respected for success in the military sphere.

Clearly, a program of building self-esteem may benefit these veterans as they compete for positions in the private sector. At present, the survey remarks indicate a resigned attitude to take what's offered as opposed to an assertive, targeted selling of one's capabilities from a position of confidence.

Another major discrepancy appears in the respondents' answers to a wide range of questions. Their answers are frequently in direct contradiction to one another.

Though they may state otherwise, the veterans appear to "accept" their reduced status and very limited future. This "contradictory" theme is further borne out of the numbers where 31% reported that the transition had a "negative effect on their health" and 33% believe the "quality of their life has declined." Throughout the survey, veterans found it hard to focus on their own problems. Instead, in this general tone of resignation, they offered help to others. As one 37 year old stated, even after he described a very difficult transition process, "It's too late for me, but I hope this survey helps others."

Though this survey only briefly touched upon the veterans' perception of the family's experience, there are indications that this is indeed an area for further study. The family's expectations for life in the civilian sector appear to differ widely from the veterans'. In the narratives, we find continued reference to the family's attitude that "now it's our turn." Significant sampling stated they expected the separating veteran to earn "a lot more money" and strongly believed that in the private sector they could "get back all that they felt they deserved." 37% of respondents stated the transition was easier on their family than on themselves.

REVIEW:

Overall, the post transition, civilian job seeking experiences by the military have resulted in lowered employment status. The military transition services have been helpful only in providing unhelpful tools which are of little consequence in the practical campaigns necessary to network and win access to compete for jobs in the private sector. For many of the enlisted personnel who found the transition services helpful because it aided in preparing a resume, the results were often little more than minimum wage compensation. They had no basis for comparison.

The resounding theme among officers was that the service had not instructed them on how to network; or that there was a networking infrastructure to learn and to utilize. In retrospect, they said that the process should have begun much, much earlier.

One respondent, a 40 year old Major with two years in the private sector who listed his current position as low status, appears resigned about his own position but states: "For those transitioning, you have to start looking and preparing yourself at least a year in advance. Be aggressive and don't sell your skills short." An overriding theme was the blockage of access to meaningful positions based on

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a lack of education and/or information about the military within and among professionals and executives in the civilian and private sector. Others in their remarks suggested the need for the military to be "marketed" to the business community to build awareness of a tremendous yet under-utilized reservoir of leadership and talent.

All of the findings from the survey gain even more poignancy when we learn that 63% of the respondents, even knowing what they do today, would still pursue a military career.

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NEXT STEPS

The amount of funding for this study was only sufficient to create this survey and assess results and make recommendations as to how to address identified problems.

Armed with the Military Career Transition Survey results, Wesley, Brown & Bartle is in a unique position to create a strategic blue-print on how to best solve these transition problems.

- Serve as career transition consultants to the Joint Staff and individual military departments in assessing existing career transition programs.
- Develop plans to reorient career transition programs to a more substantive direction more relevant to today's private sector market.
- Develop an education/information program to educate military personnel as to their personal responsibility in the career transition process. The process needs to begin sooner and military people need to be taught how to access the hidden job markets.
- Create a separate program solely for the family members of transitioning military personnel directed towards their *own* career and family concerns.
- Develop a private sector communications plan to acquaint former military people now in key civilian jobs of the current military transition problems.
- Enlist their active participation, perhaps as board members (see below).
- Assist the Joint Staff and DOD in seeking low cost regulatory relief in the transition process, i.e. extending the time for the final separation household move, creating industry segment and professional career job banks...To both the executive and legislative branches, small investment now may produce a true "Peace Dividend" later. There may be enough support to undertake a "Career GI Bill."
- Develop an aggressive communication plan to acquaint private sector employers to the wealth of talent available in transitioning military personnel.
- Develop a career transition board or strategic task force or other designated umbrella group.