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An Inclusive Guide to Manage and Work with Military Veterans in the Civilian Workplace

Why Hire a Veteran

Hiring military veterans contributes to a diverse and inclusive workforce and demonstrates a company's commitment to supporting those who have served their country. Military veterans bring several benefits to an organization: discipline, dedication, a teamwork mentality, and the ability to perform under pressure. However, hiring managers must understand the potentially challenging cultural and professional adjustments as veterans move from military to civilian life. By recognizing these challenges and implementing supportive measures, hiring managers can facilitate a smoother transition for veterans, enabling them to maximize their potential and significantly contribute to the organization's success.

"Change is situational. Transition, on the other hand, is psychological. It is not those events but rather the inner reorientation or self-redefinition you must go through to incorporate any of those changes into your life. Without a transition, a change is just a rearrangement of the furniture. Unless transition happens, the change won't work because it doesn't take." -William Bridges.

Culture Shock
For many veterans, military life and its work environment represent their first and only experience in a professional work setting. Many veterans joined the military immediately after high school. Some use tuition assistance to get a college degree to rank up; others focus more on their Military Occupational Specialty to develop skills that may be transferable to the civilian world. Some serve in the military for one or two contracts, which vary from 2 to 6 years, and leave, while others serve until retirement. Either way, entering the civilian world can come with a significant cultural shock for a veteran. Learn more on the various underline culture shock effects on veterans.

Work Cultural Differences

	Military Workplace	Civilian Workplace	Perspectives and Tips
Hierarchy and leadership styles	Highly structured, directive; Highly formal and deference given based on title (greetings, names)	Flatter structures, collaborative Less formal interactions (fewer titles, first-name basis)	It can be initially uncomfortable for a veteran to address people in higher roles by first name.

	Military Workplace	Civilian Workplace	Perspectives and Tips
Work hours	Regimented and strict schedules	Flexible Sometimes remote or hybrid Time is often self-managed	Realize this can be disorienting. Help to develop time management and self-motivation skills.
Instruction and autonomy	Explicit and detailed instruction (what needs to be done, when, and how) Instruction creates synchronicity and clearly defined responsibilities and roles	Employees are often invited to take initiative, make decisions independently, work with fewer explicit directions	Autonomy can be liberating and intimidating at first. Encourage the veteran to communicate what they are comfortable with Introduce them to the culture in stages
Dress code	Uniform	Business, business-casual	Attire and preparing for the workday can suddenly become very different in approach for a veteran

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder/Post-Traumatic Stress Injury (PTSD/PTSI)

Post-traumatic stress injury (PTSI) is a preferable term to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) This considers the condition ass an injury rather than a disorder, which implies that it can be treated and healed. This change in language aims to reduce stigma and encourage individuals to seek help for their symptoms. TSI, particularly for combat veterans and veterans with disabilities, can manifest in various ways, including anxiety, depression, flashbacks, and a feeling of disconnect from the new environment. In the civilian world, these understated symptoms can hinder a veteran's ability to integrate effectively, affecting job performance and collegial relationships. The culture shock may be further amplified by the lack of understanding or awareness of PTSI in many civilian settings. Research has been done on the effects and role of social connectedness for veterans with PTSD/PTSI.

Tips to Aid a Military Veteran's Transition

A hiring manager is critical for facilitating a veteran's smooth transition into the civilian world. Supervisors and human resource departments can implement several actionable strategies to support their veteran employees:

1. **Provide structured onboarding and orientation**: Onboarding processes should introduce veterans to civilian culture, including dress codes and communication norms. Providing clear guidelines and expectations can help ease the initial culture shock.
2. **Offer mentorship programs**: Pair veterans with experienced mentors within the organization. If mentors who understand military and civilian cultures can be found, they would be best suited to guide veterans through the nuances of the workplace, helping them adapt more quickly.
3. **Provide staff awareness training**: Conduct awareness sessions for existing staff to foster understanding of veterans' experiences and challenges. This will promote empathy and inclusion within the team.

4. **Professional development**: Provide opportunities for professional development that help veterans translate their military skills into the civilian context, including training programs, workshops, or access to online courses. Some veteran organizations offer training and workshops willing to collaborate with civilian organizations to achieve this.
5. **Consider support networks or employee resource groups:** These allow veterans to share experiences and advice with other employees. A veteran employee resource group could be one such group.
6. **Provide or share resources for mental health support**: Ensure that veterans have access to mental health resources, including counseling services and support groups, particularly for those coping with PTSI.
7. **Communication channels**: Maintain open lines of communication, encouraging veterans to voice their needs and suggestions. This would ensure that the veterans will feel heard and valued in their new roles.