

Moving From the Military Into a Civilian Job

Start a Civilian Career, How to Make a Successful Transition from the Military

By Diane Burns

How many times have you heard a client say, "Do you think I have any worth in the civilian marketplace? What do you think my chances are of getting a job compared to other clients you work with?" This is the most common question asked by departing military personnel. They know that making a successful transition from the military to corporate America can be a challenge; they are transitioning from one culture to another, and they must be prepared.

When faced with this question, my response always begins with a review of their career history:

The average officer who completes Officer Candidate School is about 23 years old with a bachelor's degree. They are often entrusted with extreme responsibility for personnel, training, and performance in addition to full accountability for millions of dollars worth of assets, capital equipment, and resources. They are told where to report for their first assignment; they are expected to learn quickly and perform to high standards. Military personnel are placed in certain assignments based on performance evaluations or fitness reports that swell over the years in their personnel file. Skills, accomplishments, and training are evaluated, and then personnel are reassigned to new jobs and new installations.

Compared to the average civilian college student who graduates with a bachelor's degree, military members are highly trained, exceptionally skilled, and remarkably disciplined. They possess a strong work ethic and strive to accomplish a task correctly the first time. To top it all off, military personnel are trained in all aspects of management to include personnel administration, EEO, sexual abuse and harassment issues, drug and alcohol prevention, basic personnel counseling, use of cutting-edge technology including computers and classified programs, and quality assurance. Their average civilian counterparts of the same age are hired into an internship or entry-level trainee program, with limited authority (there are, of course, exceptions to every rule). When a college graduate contacts my office, they usually ask, "How do you get experience, if the employer won't take a chance and hire me?" Military members move way ahead of their civilian counterparts when they enter military service.

Military members work hard, and deserve the best guidance and assistance when seeking corporate employment. Buzz Buse, Director of The Officer Placement Service (TOP) for The Retired Officer's Association (TROA) says, "Military members have commitment to core values, hard work, trustworthiness and loyalty. Everything they do...working or training...is oriented to defend our country, so they develop a mindset of a winner. Second place is not an option."

The military provides soldiers with many experiences and training that civilians may not obtain. Let's look at some specific values that military members acquire.

Disciplined / Self Starters

The military is recognized for being disciplined, which is a good selling point: it exudes reliability. Military are able to accept tasks or assignments and ensure completion; able to lead a team, delegate appropriately and complete a task; or serve on a team to work through tasks together. Military are able to do more with less and ensure projects are seen through to completion. In the event of deployments, military members find themselves in charge of projects or offices with little or no instruction, yet they are able to assess an immediate situation and move forward on their own initiative.

Drug Free / Healthy

The military is a drug-free environment and many companies now require drug testing. Moreover, military members are required to maintain a certain level of exercise and health in a military regime. Consequently, most military members are relatively thin, healthy, young (even retiring military officers average 40 to 45 years old) and look great in a civilian suit.

Trustworthiness & Loyalty

Officers, senior enlisted and critical career field specialties require a security clearance. Many Department of Defense (DoD) contractors and defense companies require employees to be able to attain clearance as a condition of employment. In fact, many companies recruit military members who already hold a clearance, so the candidate can immediately begin work on the company's special project. Secret and Top Secret Clearance levels require a candidate to subject themselves to a rigorous background check of their personal life, finances, drug use, criminal record, and loyalty.

Training

During the course of a 20-year military career, service members could complete thousands of hours of specialized training and professional development to enhance their knowledge of certain topics, systems, or processes, or upgrade their leadership, management, personnel administration, and public speaking abilities. Training is conducted on-site, resident and via correspondence. Competition is high to make "Distinguished Graduate" or "Commandant's List." Resident courses require a passing mark and some courses are required to move to a new rank or position. Most courses include a written evaluation of the student's progress and success.

Excellent Communicators

Military members are required to read and write with some precision including preparing recommendations or forecasts; writing SOPs or other technical guidelines; drafting personnel counseling statements; preparing briefings and other technical or narrative reports; and effectively communicating such information up and down the chain of management in meetings, briefings, discussions, presentations and consulting sessions.

University Education

Many officers attend graduate school and attain a master's degree, MBA or PhD while working a 40-hour workweek and juggling their military deployments. Enlisted members and those seeking Warrant Officer positions often attend college and obtain associate's, bachelor's and master's degrees—again while working 40-plus hour work weeks and juggling worldwide deployments. Scholarships and incentives encourage military members to complete higher degrees. Often times, military courses and experience equate to university credits.

Problem Solvers / Innovative

Military members, due to their unique life or death circumstances while on the job, especially during real-world deployments, often need to quickly assess situations and make immediate determinations to correct complex issues or fix immediate problems. They are given great latitude in their assessment and problem-solving abilities to deem, and use, what is necessary to “get back on track” or increase production. Military are action people—they make things happen.

Leadership

Military members are excellent leaders. They are required to teach, train, instruct and manage others early in their careers. They rotate through varied leadership and staff positions during numerous worldwide assignments. They are entrusted with responsibility for many personnel, resources, and high-dollar budgets.

Fast-Paced Environment/Life-Threatening Situations/Well Traveled

The military mission is hands-on, fast moving and critical—it often involves immediate decisions that affect life or death. When troops deploy to other countries, supplies need to be logistically managed and distributed in order to feed, clothe, and properly supply soldiers to accomplish their job. During a crisis situation, soldiers must be able to think on their feet and manage problematic circumstances with a calm head. Military members are accustomed to family separations due to deployment and adapt quickly to living in foreign countries, working and living on bases, ships, submarines or in the field. A USA Today Snapshot, June 2001 (taken from the Department of Defense source, December 31, 2000) indicates that there are currently 263,000 U.S. military personnel stationed abroad. That number does not include the thousands of family members who accompany their military spouses overseas for regular tours. Many service members are deployed to “hot spots” and for humanitarian efforts, from their foreign station, for up to a year at a time, leaving family members to manage in foreign countries.

So, using just the above information, military members can stress and capitalize on the fact they are always on time, accept and follow instructions with perfection, are capable of taking charge of a project on a moment’s notice and will complete it in record time, and enjoy a busy job with a challenge. Bottom line: service members offer great value to corporate America.

According to Buse, hiring authorities often have misconceptions about military members. They think they are too rigid, always shouting orders, only working a task after an order is given, or not having experience with profit and loss. However, as we read above, these are truly misconceptions and, in reality, military members have great value to offer the corporate marketplace. Business managers often need to be educated about the benefit of hiring service members. Buse stated that most military officers only give official orders once or twice in their entire careers. Yet, television depicts military members at work, shouting constantly, “That’s an order, soldier,” leading the public to believe that all they do is shout and respond to orders.

Here’s one such example ... An Air Force Colonel recently interviewed with his former university for the position of Alumni Director. During the panel interview of seven, he was asked how he would manage volunteer workers since he was accustomed to “giving orders” his whole career. He replied that he had only received one official order and only given one official order during his 25-year military career as an officer. He further stated that orders are normally only given in times of extreme emergency or when a staff member is insubordinate and there is a personnel

problem. He further informed the interview panel that he would design incentive programs to encourage volunteer participation and meet with them directly to determine and listen to their needs. He concluded with noting that he worked with volunteers on military bases around the world. Many military community service programs are organized and led by volunteers including the American Red Cross, school bus monitors, community events, and fundraisers. So, in reality, he had worked quite frequently with volunteers.

As military members anticipate entering corporate America, they need to prepare and engage in the same steps that a civilian would to conduct a successful career search campaign. They need a professional, formatted resume and electronic resume, cover letters, interviewing and salary negotiation training, and the development of a solid career marketing strategy. Military members need to learn to remove military acronyms, jargon and specific terms from their resumes and letters (which tends to confuse civilian employers) and replace them with corporate terminology. They need to purchase and wear a suit for interviewing and train themselves to refrain from using military speak during interviews (e.g., excessive use of Sir and Ma'am, referring to military rank).

A key to a successful career search campaign for a military member is prior planning. They should begin thinking about and preparing for the transition 12-18 months before military separation. Military members need a goal, they need to determine where they want to live and work, and they must identify the skills, accomplishments and value they offer corporate America. Some service members benefit well from assessment testing and goal planning with a career coach, especially those who want a drastic career change.

Understanding the complete process of transitioning from the military to the civilian marketplace will ease the conversion for the military member—it is much more than just needing a resume. Many military members have never experienced a job interview or heard of an "electronic" or "key word" resume. The whole career search process is much like learning a foreign language and assimilating into a new culture—starting with the basics: goal planning, resumes, interviews, negotiations, translating military acronyms and so much more.

When military members call my office to ask about resume or career coaching services, they often say, "This is 'Sergeant' or 'Commander' or 'Colonel' Smith calling." I reply, "Yes, Mr. Smith, how may I serve you?" Do you see the subtle transition? I am helping the military member to cast off his military rank. As "Commander" Smith becomes Mr. Smith, he needs to learn to translate his entire career from military terminology to civilian equivalents.

Military personnel, especially retiring military with 20 years or more of service, are more comfortable using military jargon, terms and acronyms than civilian terms, and often they simply do not know the civilian equivalent. Consequently, they require training and coaching in order to ease into the civilian marketplace. Military members need to translate such words as "commanded" to "supervised" or "directed," "Lt. Colonel" to "CEO" or "Executive Officer," and "Battalion" to "250 personnel." Military members should qualify and quantify accomplishments as often as possible: "Directed an organization with 250 personnel, supervised 12 department managers, executed an operational budget of \$3 million, managed assets worth \$70 million, and reduced logistical backlog by 87%." A short quantitative statement is successful in describing years of leadership.

Functional and combination resumes often suit a military member's background and portray a well-rounded career history and areas of strong experience in two pages, more effectively than a chronological resume. A functional resume describes specific skill areas, using skill headings and brief descriptive entries. A combination resume combines the best of chronological and functional resumes, by describing skill areas, either at the top of the resume or under each employment heading (used for individuals with fewer positions). If it's done at the top of the resume, then the chronological career history is listed elsewhere. Functional and combination resumes allow military members to focus on specialized areas of expertise, cover their career chronology and maintain a neat two-page resume.

On the other hand, a chronological resume describes a career history from most recent to past, listing employers, job titles, dates and a short position description for each employer. Military personnel with 20 years of experience could potentially list 10 or more chronological positions—which can fill several pages. Thus, this type of resume is generally not the most effective for transitioning military personnel.

During one career coaching and job focusing session with a senior enlisted soldier getting ready to retire after 20 years of service, I said, "Well, just tell me a little about what you have been doing for the past 20 years—give me an overview." He stated, "Well, ma'am, I was trained to kill."

I replied, "I am not aware of any of those types of positions available in my resources, but let's look a little farther into your career history and determine an appropriate career focus." As it turned out, he directly supervised, trained and evaluated 40 personnel, supporting over 2000 troops in three countries, with an inventory list of 1500 line items and material assets valued at \$65 million (including large vehicles). This client moved to a new duty station at worldwide locations nearly every two years for 20 years. Consequently, we constructed a combination/functional resume, highlighting his career overview and breaking down his functional areas of expertise, which included personnel management, logistics and operations. Many of his assignments were similar in nature and if we had built a chronological resume, it simply would have been too long, complicated, and repetitive.

Another soldier, an Army Major, said to me at our initial meeting, "Ma'am, I am a bomb disposal expert and I was called back to Saudi after the Gulf war to manage the clean up project. I want to become a salesperson, specifically pharmaceuticals." Talk about a challenge...her resume details all of her experience working as a manager of people and resources, her ability to "market and sell" programs, convince management to revise and improve processes, her savvy negotiation abilities, and her strong oral presentation and written communication skills. There is only one line in the resume referring to her extensive knowledge as a bomb disposal expert.

It is essential that our military clients understand that they need to "paint the picture" they want someone to see; not reiterate their military career history. This process requires a careful review of each client's military career history to determine specific skill areas and a thorough translation of military terms.

Service members hold a number of skills and expertise they may not realize they have obtained until they work with a career coach who has the knack to draw out what they actually did on the job. Then, the coach can help them formulate career

goals based on their skill sets as opposed to what they believe their occupational specialty as it was branded on them when they entered military service.

As service members learn to construct a 'demilitarized' resume, they will also learn to speak less military and more civilian. The education process is, however, two ways: military members need to learn to speak and think less military, and corporate America needs to be educated to the vast benefit that service members offer the corporate marketplace. Corporate interviewers simply need to ask a military member to explain acronyms or military terms that may be spoken in an interview. Service members will be most eager to describe the actual meaning of "Battalion," "Commanded," "CW," "Admiral," "Platoon Sergeant," "MOS 76B," "E-6," or any number of thousands of military terms they may use.

Service members succeed well in their quest to obtain corporate employment if they prepare early before leaving military service and ignite a networking campaign by informing friends and colleagues of their intention to enter corporate America. They should circulate initial resumes and networking letters to get advice, leads and guidance; attend job fairs, community events and military transition assistance programs; target and research companies and positions; knock on doors; enlist the support and assistance of reputable recruiters; learn to conduct online career search job campaigns; learn to translate their military history; and, be trained and coached in managing a "corporate" style career search campaign with all the appropriate components and career marketing tools.