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Fighting for a Job:
The Reality of Veteran Unemployment in Virginia

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Abstract

Unemployment is a reality for many veterans, especially those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, due to a subpar military transition program, lack of effort by the veterans themselves, and the inability of businesses to recognize the value veterans may bring. According to the Pentagon (2015), the current veteran transition program fails on many fronts to equip veterans with the communication and networking skills required to find gainful employment. Additionally, Veterans Affairs statistics (2015) suggest that whether through a sense of entitlement or simply an inability to understand the complexity of the civilian labor market, are poorly positioned to compete with non-veterans for jobs. On the other hand, Gudmundsson (2015) argues that there is no veteran unemployment issue, with the topic being little more than a political bargaining chip. However, according to other sources, businesses are insufficiently informed of the unique skills that veterans often possess, and often choose to hire non-veterans who may have higher education credentials, but lack the leadership and other real world experience of veterans. The issue of veteran unemployment can be turned through proactive measures by each of these groups to expand the job-seeking and professional networking skills, ensuring gainful employment for veterans and high skilled employees for businesses.

Keywords: unemployment, veterans, Virginia

Fighting for a Job: The Reality of Veteran Unemployment in Virginia

“Veterans unemployment rate drops to lowest point since 2008” cheers a recent *Washington Post* headline (Hicks, 2015, March 24). Yet despite its rosy title, the article later admits the unemployment rate for recent veterans, those who fought and served in Iraq and Afghanistan, remains a full percentage point higher than that of non-veterans (para. 6). One percentage point difference may not sound like much, but this means these veterans face unemployment at a rate 16 percent higher than the national average. Virginia has the nation’s fastest growing veteran population, and nearly 750,000 Virginians previously served in the military, according to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2015). Though Virginia’s unemployment rate for veterans is lower than the national average, statistics show recent veterans in the Commonwealth still have a tougher time finding a job than other groups (Schwartz, personal communication, April 2, 2015). Finding a job, especially for those who have recently left service, is a real problem, and with the nation’s fastest growing veteran population, could prove a dire issue for Virginia. However, the veteran unemployment crisis can be turned, and that begins with understanding its causes. Virginia’s veterans are having a hard time finding jobs because Virginia business don’t fully understand the benefits of employing former military members, the military has insufficiently prepared veterans for life after military service, and the veterans themselves are missing opportunities to find and keep good jobs.

One method to address the issue of veteran unemployment is to ensure businesses understand the benefits of hiring veterans. Andrew D. Schwartz (2015) is a Marine Corps veteran who currently serves as the program manager for Virginia Values Veterans, a program Virginia’s governor initiated in 2011 specifically to address veteran unemployment. The goal of the Virginia Values Veterans program is to educate businesses as to why they should consider

hiring a veteran and how language and cultural divides can be crossed, he said. “Since its inception, [the program] has held firmly to the philosophy that hiring veterans is a good business decision,” Schwartz said (personal communication, April 2, 2015). Through their military service, veterans have developed many intangible traits, like leadership, that can take years to develop, and hiring veterans with these traits helps businesses, Schwartz said. Though the program has demonstrated effectiveness, Schwartz said, the requirement for active participation from businesses can limit its overall scope. “We’ve only reached a small number of companies here in Virginia, but those we have reached have been extremely successful in creating employment opportunity for veterans,” he said (personal communication, April 2, 2015). Fred Wellman served in the U.S. Army for 22 years and now operates two businesses in Fredericksburg, Virginia: a public relations firm and a health and beauty store. Wellman, in an interview with Fredericksburg’s *The Free Lance-Star*, said he opened his public relations firm because, like Schwartz, he wanted help businesses be more honest in their efforts to honor veterans, and because he personally could not find work elsewhere (as cited in Estes, 2014, July 5). “I needed a job and no one else would hire me, so I hired myself,” Wellman told *The Free Lance-Star* (para. 7). Wellman’s firm helps businesses develop meaningful ways to support veterans, military members and their families, including developing in-demand job skills. However, according to Wellman, the greatest threat to veteran unemployment today is that as the labor market improves public perception of the value of veteran unemployment initiatives may wane (para. 8).

“Americans may be shocked to learn there is no veterans’ unemployment crisis,” quipped Peter Gudmundsson in a January 17, 2015, opinion article for Norfolk’s *The Virginian-Pilot* (para. 3). Gudmundsson, a Marine Corps veteran, heads RecruitMilitary, a corporation that

matches qualified veterans with potential employers. Gudmundsson's disagreement on the validity of the veteran unemployment claim derives from his disagreement on recent Congressional legislature to solve the problem. This legislature, the Hire More Heroes Act, proposes to provide a financial incentive for businesses to hire veterans, Gudmundsson said. Under Hire More Heroes, the more veterans a business hires, the more employees it can maintain without having to offer health insurance benefits. Gudmundsson is right that the Hire More Heroes Act has the potential to cause more damage than it prevents. By allowing employers to avoid healthcare law provisions, Hire More Heroes could prevent recently separated military men and women from receiving equitable benefits. Gudmundsson is also correct in his assertion that businesses should consider hiring veterans based on their qualifications, and not as an act of charity. Unfortunately, the one place Gudmundsson is wrong is in his claim there is no issue (para. 3). Gudmundsson staked his "non-issue" belief on the age differences between new veterans and the general civilian population. When compared against non-veterans of similar age, Gudmundsson claimed, veterans actually enjoy a lower unemployment rate. Other experts disagree. Senior economists R. Jason Faberman and Taft Foster (2013) examined veteran unemployment in a report for the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago. Faberman and Foster analyzed numerous possible causes of the veteran unemployment trend and found that regardless of age, veterans of the recent wars were having a harder time finding a job than the general public. "We find the demographic differences between new veterans and non-veterans account for only a small fraction of the unemployment rate," stated Faberman and Foster (p. 12). The Veterans Affairs 2015 Veterans Economic Opportunity Report echoes this, stating that when adjusted specifically for the factors Gudmundsson calls to question, the unemployment rate for veterans is higher than the rate for other Americans (p. 10).

The reality is more than half of all military men and women will face a period of unemployment within a year of leaving service, and the average period of unemployment for these veterans is 22 weeks, according the Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Economic Opportunity Report (2015, p. 10). For most of these transitioning troops, a Department of Defense-mandated program, Transition GPS, is the first step toward civilian life. This program is broken, according to the Pentagon's Report of the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission (2015). This commission, an initiative of the President and Congress, spent more than a year researching and analyzing ways to better prepare the military and its service members for the modern fiscal environment. "Inadequate preparations during the Transition GPS program may contribute to the relatively high unemployment rates among separated service members," states the commission report (p. 175). Having personally experienced Transition GPS in late 2014, I found that it is at best a missed opportunity, and at worst a disservice to America's military. Despite claims of specific training based on specific needs, the military transition program I experienced was a one-size-fits-all affair, a failed attempt to give Virginia's future veterans the tools to condense careers spanning decades into resumes and talking points into just a weeklong course. This, I believe, is the central issue with current military transition program. The process of equipping military men and women to succeed in civilian employment should begin much earlier in military careers. As Schwartz (2015) noted, veterans are highly sought by some employers because of the intangible skills they possess, yet these veterans could also leave military service with tangible qualities, like career certification or a college degree (personal communication, April 2, 2015). Granted, programs for tuition assistance and apprenticeship are available to military men and women, yet there is not a central tie linking the value of these programs to a good job after military service.

Instead, after 13 years of service and mere months before my release from active duty, I sat alongside nearly 100 other Marines in a cramped classroom aboard Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia, seriously considering, for perhaps the first time in my military career, what leaving the military meant for me. A cavalcade of experts from the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Labor, and others paraded before us detailing the many, many benefits their specific agency may offer some veterans, regardless as to whether or not any of us would actually qualify for them. Unfortunately, missing were local businesses interested in hiring veterans and looking for an opportunity to network. Actual in-depth training on how each of us could use our specific military experience to find a job was missing in action. A team from the Department of Psychology at the University of Southern Mississippi identified the benefit of this type of personal career counseling in veteran employment (Bullock, Braud, Andrews, & Phillips, 2009). In an analysis of unemployed veterans, the team was able to link difficulty finding a job with negative thoughts (p. 178). Providing positive career specialized counseling could help to improve veteran unemployment, according to the Southern Mississippi team (p. 179).

It is worth noting, though, that even when these programs exist, veterans do not always use them (Bullock et al, 2009, p. 171). As an example of a potentially beneficial program that is underutilized by veterans, the Department of Veterans Affairs' Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program provides veterans an array of career-finding support from resume writing to job training, according to the Veterans Affairs Economic Opportunity Report (2015). The program is split into two categories, one that offers basic assistance for military members transitioning to civilian life, and a separate program, VetSuccess, for disabled veterans and others requiring more significant support (p. 21). Of the 121,236 enrollees in 2012 in the

VetSuccess program, 9,949 finished (p. 82). That is a completion rate of about 8 percent. When veterans fail to use the programs in place to help them, then they at least share in the responsibility of the veteran unemployment issue. “Most often, there’s a disconnect between the employer and the veteran,” Schwartz said (personal communication, April 2, 2015). “A misunderstanding on the veteran’s side about how they can best market their knowledge, skills and experience, but also a disconnect on the employer’s side about how skilled today’s military really is, and how those skills translate directly to the civilian labor market.” For some veterans, learning to effectively communicate how their military service has prepared them for civilian employment could mean the difference between finding a good job and going unemployed.

Veteran unemployment is a national issue, and with the nation’s fastest growing veteran population, should be especially important to Virginians. Despite the challenges, it seems Virginia is doing something right. “According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Virginia’s veteran labor force has increased by 80,000 veterans since 2010,” Schwartz said (personal communication, April 2, 2015). “This is more than all other states combined!” he added. While Virginia has shown that proactive steps by businesses can reduce veteran unemployment, there is vast opportunity for continued improvement if the program continues to grow. However, the biggest gains for improving veteran employment lie in better preparing service men and women for civilian jobs earlier in their military careers. Finally, it is imperative that the veterans themselves are actively seeking ways to better communicate their value to businesses and grow their professional networks. “It’s not about who you know, it’s about who knows you,” said Schwartz (personal communication, April 2, 2015). While a period of adjustment should be expected for those leaving military service, the best time for military men and women facing transition to improve their resume writing, communication and networking skills is the moment

the thought occurs to them, and that is likely already too late. Veterans in need must take advantage of programs designed to help them. After all, the intangible traits like leadership are what businesses seek when they hire veterans, and a central tenet of leadership is the capability to know oneself and know when to seek self-improvement. Veterans know leadership. Veterans should know when to ask for help.

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