



Veteran underemployment - it's a minefield here at home

By Dr. Sudip Bose, opinion contributor — 01/17/19 07:00 PM EST 87

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When I returned home from the Iraq War, I was fortunate. As a medical doctor, I easily transitioned to the civilian workforce — in no small way because my military job title was clearly understood and my military medical skills were easily captured and readily translated to a non-military environment. Sadly, many of the men and women I served with had a much harder time.

While employment rates among veterans have improved markedly in recent years, veterans are far more likely to be underemployed than the general population. Many have hard time translating their military experience to the private sector; likewise, employers are often ill-prepared to understand and cultivate a veteran's unique skills and expertise. It creates a dual dilemma, resulting in an underrated candidate who becomes an underemployed veteran where the pay is too low, the skills are not used and the future's not very bright.

We need to do better.

For our national defense, we rely upon an all-volunteer military force. To recruit effectively, we must be able to tell young people that the military will provide them with the experiences and skills to excel when they return to civilian life. If young people witness our veterans struggle, they will think twice before signing up.

The good news is the [jobless rate for veterans](#) is now less than the overall U.S. jobless rate, standing at 3.7 percent at the end of 2017, compared to national job rate of 4.1 percent. The bad news is nearly one-third of veteran job seekers are underemployed, a rate 15.6 percent higher than non-veteran job seekers.

As I can attest as a soldier and a doctor, returning home from a war zone is challenging on a variety of levels. Psychologically, even though you're in a safe environment, your mind and nervous system remain attuned to the danger signals of war. Loud noises, sudden shouting, or even traffic patterns can trigger a memory of an attack.

For most veterans I know, the reactions diminish over time, but the transition turbulence they experience is very real.

Economically, veterans must quickly replace their military pay. Many are faced with significant family pressures. Understandably, they often jump at the first offer rather than holding out for a position that would make better use of their skills and experiences and bring happiness and fulfillment.

When they return from overseas deployments, veterans typically have few connections in the civilian workforce and limited experience with the process — applying for jobs, writing resumes and interviewing. Having been immersed in the military for several years, they often don't know a great deal about the domestic landscape and how to identify and pursue job opportunities.

Not surprisingly, veterans tend to leave their first job upon returning to the workforce faster than a typical employee, according to survey conducted by [ZipRecruiter and Call of Duty Endowment](#).

Moreover, more than half of veteran job seekers (54.2 percent) said they were either “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to change jobs in the next 6 months, compared to 43.9 percent of non-veterans.

The majority of veterans eventually settle down and stay at their second or third jobs longer than non-veterans. Clearly, this suggests that the veteran-to-civilian transition is currently a time-consuming process that involves acquiring knowledge and experience about the job market and determining where they best fit in. But once they find suitable employment, they tend to do well.

Veterans, as a group, possess qualities that make them great employees. They typically are disciplined, hardworking, loyal, courageous and team-oriented. A large majority of employers reported that veterans perform “better than” or “much better than” non-veterans and they display high levels of perseverance and leadership, according to the ZipRecruiter/Call of Duty survey.

It's important to point out that the employment situation of veterans has improved. In recent years, the federal government expanded the resources available to service members and their families before and after discharge and a number of private companies have developed programs to hire veterans.

Perhaps the most well-known effort, Veterans Job Mission led by JP Morgan Chase, has helped to hire more than 400,000 veterans since 2011.

Still, we need to tackle the underemployment problem because underemployment leads to job dropout and that begets higher levels of employee turnover and eventually reduced employer profits. Discouragement sets in and noble efforts wane or are abandoned. I suggest the following:

- Expand military partnerships with organizations that provide veterans with job-matching technology and personalized coaching to increase efficiency, reduce stress and improve assimilation.
- Expand military partnerships with private sector organizations that offer departing service members apprenticeships, training programs and licensing in areas related to skills they developed in the military.
- Encourage more employers to create recruitment and retention programs for veterans; train hiring managers on veteran recruiting and training; and provide transition support to newly-hired veterans. The nuances of hiring military talent need to be understood. Readiness is as crucial to employers as it is to the service members they seek to hire.

As someone who served, it pains me to see men and women — who performed heroically and displayed great leadership in stressful situations — struggle economically with a job that doesn't utilize their skills and experiences and offers little chance of advancement.

Our returning veterans are an untapped resource. Let's endeavor to give them better opportunities and a brighter future. We'll all benefit.

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