Translating Deployment to Employment: Assessment Differences in Veteran and Non-Veteran Job Applicants

Phase III Summary

Jennifer A. Griffith, PhD
Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior
Paul College of Business and Economics
Fellow, Prevention Innovations Research Center
University of New Hampshire

Jensen Mecca, PhD
Managing Associate
Modern Hire

Daly Vaughn, PhD
Account Director
Modern Hire

Overview
Each year, hundreds of thousands of servicemen and women make the transition back to civilian life as they leave their military careers behind. However, transitioning from military settings to civilian settings can be difficult. Much of the scholarly research in this area has focused on personal aspects of civilian life (e.g., social norms, developing & maintaining relationships, mental health care, etc.; Zogas, 2017), but recently, more attention has been paid to career aspects of civilian life for veterans, particular those involved in training and benefits of hiring veterans generally (e.g., Department of Veteran Affairs programs including Warriors to Workforce). Nonetheless, research exploring the barriers to hiring veterans that may emerge *during the selection process* is exceptionally scant. This project aimed to begin that work in earnest.

In Phases I and II, we established that veterans consistently outperform non-veterans with respect to pre-employment assessments across two roles – field technician and customer service representative. However, we also discovered that veterans were hired at a correspondingly increased rate for field technician positions but *not* customer service roles. In Phase III, we developed a survey to test one possible explanation for this hiring discrepancy – perceptions of veterans and how they would "fit" within a role as a mechanism that could override demonstrated competence.

Veteran-Job Fit Perceptions
Despite widespread agreement on the capabilities and value of veterans (e.g., leadership & teamwork skills veterans have gained would benefit their communities and workplaces), surveys conducted in partnership with veteran support groups (e.g., Got Your Six) have found that Americans also view veterans in stereotypically negative ways – less educated, less experienced, and "damaged" by PTSD. This suggests that individuals may make hiring decisions based on the most prevalent stigma of veterans – that they are likely to suffer from mental health concerns or commit suicide, making them unsuitable for a position in which they frequently interact with others and are expected to adhere to organizationally sanctioned positive emotional displays (e.g., customer service). Likewise, perceptions about veterans' communication style & personality characteristics (e.g., Jackson, Thoemmes, Jonkmann, Lüdtke & Trautwein, 2012), rather than competence or skill set, may drive placement decisions via fit perceptions.

Abbreviated Method
As a first step in exploring the potential impact of perceptions of veterans on hiring decisions, we set out to empirically establish that (1) individuals do, in fact, view veterans in line with the stereotypes purported by Got Your Six and other veteran support organizations and (2) those stereotypes overlap with the expectations of some roles (e.g., field technician) while creating the perception of a mismatch in others (e.g., customer service).

To do so, we compiled a list of descriptive adjectives from various sources, such as the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), the Adjective Checklist (ACL; Gough & Heilbrun, 1965), and the Big Five Inventory (BFI; Goldberg, 1999). Our intent was to intersperse adjectives that align with positive and negative stereotypes of veterans per general population polling with other adjectives that did not. In addition, we compiled images of prototypical male and female job incumbents in customer service (study 1)

and field technician (study 2) roles along with images of military serviceman and women. Across both studies, participants were asked to indicate, on a scale from 1-5, to what extent they agreed that the adjectives would be used to describe the person in the image. Those selecting "1" ("5") on the scale strongly disagreed (agreed) that they would use that adjective to describe the person in the image. In study 1, respondents were randomly assigned to view and rate photos of either a male or female matched sets of customer service associates and veterans. In other words, respondents viewed either (1) a male customer service representative and a male veteran or (2) a female customer service representative and a female veteran. Study 2 followed the protocol for field technicians.

In total, 108 respondents participated in study 1, and 124 respondents participated in study 2. Power estimates (>.70) indicate that this sample size is adequate for and allows us to interpret our statistical estimates with confidence.

Abbreviated Results

The table below includes a summary of the statistically significant differences (blue signifies veterans score higher, red signifies veterans score lower) in perceived characteristics from study 1 (descriptors used for customer service incumbents & veterans) and study 2 (descriptors used for field technician

Customer Service v. Veterans	Descriptor	Field Technician v. Veterans
blue	Capable	
	Friendly	
blue	Strict	blue
	Smart	red
blue	Caring	blue
	Creative	red
	Happy	red
	Individualistic	red
red	Easy Going	red
red	Formal	blue
blue	Loyal	blue
blue	Reflective	blue
	Uptight	blue
blue	Honest	blue
	Intelligent	

Customer Service v. Veterans	Descriptor	Field Technician v. Veterans
	Shy	red
blue	**Aggressive**	blue
	Inventive	red
blue	Dutiful	
blue	Cautious	
blue	Considerate	
blue	Genuine	blue
blue	Resourceful	
blue	Self-Confident	blue
blue	**Unstable**	
	Submissive	
blue	**Depressed**	blue
blue	**Rude**	
blue	**Angry**	
	Impatient	blue

incumbents & veterans). **Bolded** *descriptors denote wide-spread negative stereotypes of veterans.*

In reviewing the ONET work styles of each role, the two roles have substantial overlap (e.g., attention to detail, cooperation, integrity, dependability, stress tolerance, adaptability, independence) in the styles that work best for the roles. However, customer service roles also stress the need to have a *high concern for others & possess a social orientation,* whereas field technician roles require *analytical thinking & persistence*. This divergence maps onto what we find in our data as well. For instance, there is no difference in the perceptions of rudeness when field technicians and veterans are compared, but there is a significant difference – that disadvantages veterans – when customer service representatives and veterans are compared.

In Phases I & II, we found that veterans were hired for field technician roles more than 2:1 over their non-veteran counterparts, but the percentages of veterans who applied and were subsequently hired for a customer service role were slightly *less* (11.33%) than non-veterans (12.3%). Given that veterans consistently outperformed non-veterans on pre-employment assessments of all types for customer service roles, one would expect to see veterans hired at a *higher* rate for these positions.

In Phase III, our results were quite similar to non-scientific polling from groups like Got Your Six (e.g., positive & negative stereotypes of veterans), illustrating key differences in perceptions of veterans versus generic incumbents in both roles. Taken together, this pair of studies may help make the case that discrepancies in hiring rates are impacted by the stigmatized lens through which the general population views veterans. Positive stereotypes of veterans (e.g., smart, loyal, strict) may help to boost veterans' chances for field technician positions because they align with pre-employment assessment scores and match validated work styles; negative stereotypes of veterans (e.g., unstable, depressed, aggressive, angry), however, may significantly impede their ability to be viewed as a good "fit" for interpersonally intensive roles, such as customer service representatives, which place a high value on social orientation and concern for others.

References

Goldberg, L. R. (1999). A broad-bandwidth, public domain, personality inventory measuring the lower-level facets of several five-factor models. *Personality Psychology in Europe*, *7*(1), 7-28.

Gough, H. G., & Heilbrun, A. B. (1965). Manual for the adjective check list. Palo Alto.

Jackson, J. J., Thoemmes, F., Jonkmann, K., Lüdtke, O., & Trautwein, U. (2012). Military training and personality trait development: Does the military make the man, or does the man make the military? *Psychological Science, 23*(3), 270-277.

Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: the PANAS scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *54*(6), 1063-1070.

Zogas, A. (2017). US military veterans' difficult transitions back to civilian life and the VA's response. *Costs of War* report, Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs in conjunction with Brown University. Retrieved from: https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2017/Zogas_Veterans%27%20Transitions_CoW_2.1.17.pdf