

The Impact of I-O Psychology on Transitioning Veterans to Civilian Work

The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates nearly 360,000 service men and women transition out of the military each year, and they face a myriad of challenges in adjusting to work life and civilian life. In the workplace, the difficulties are evident, where practical obstacles, cultural changes, and societal expectations contribute to veterans' inability to adjust comfortably and utilize qualifications and skillsets acquired in the military. As federal and congressional policy makers consider programs and legislation regarding the transition of service members from the battlefield to the workforce, the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) urges the application of evidence-based methods in industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology to enhance veteran employment experiences.

Although veteran unemployment rates have fallen in recent years, more needs to be done to ensure a smoother transition to the civilian workforce. For instance, underemployment and retention remain challenging for veterans, as many transitioning out of the military struggle to obtain quality civilian employment that properly leverages their values and capabilities. I-O psychology takes a data-driven approach to identifying and alleviating a wide range of modern employment challenges facing veterans, including the translation of skills and decision-making capabilities to non-military environments, issues associated with shifting social support networks from military life, and difficulty for civilian employers in recognizing promising veteran candidates.

SIOP urges federal and congressional policy makers to engage I-O psychologists to help promote efficient and effective work-related veterans' assistance programs and policies. Below are some of the ways I-O psychologists can provide assistance:

- **Challenge:** Civilian employers struggle to translate a veteran's skillset and military experience into open positions, because military occupations often have titles that are not directly comparable to those in the civilian workforce.
I-O Impact: I-O psychologists are trained experts who apply well-established scientific methods for describing tasks, skills, and other job and worker characteristics; they also provide a common technical language for discussing similarities and differences between military and civilian jobs.
- **Challenge:** Veterans often experience difficulty transitioning to civilian work because the knowledge and skills they developed in the military are not always immediately transferable to civilian jobs.
I-O Impact: I-O psychologists have developed scientific means of classifying personnel based on skills, interests, and other characteristics; they design and evaluate training interventions; and they offer evidence-based insights on how best to close gaps based on the type of gap faced (e.g., via training vs. recruiting and hiring).
- **Challenge:** Once some veterans find civilian employment, they are met with unique stresses at home and in the workplace that they were previously unaccustomed to in the military, thereby impacting their health and well-being and complicating their ability to adjust to life outside the military.

The **Society for Industrial & Organizational Psychology (SIOP)** is a community of more than 8,000 members worldwide with the common interest in promoting the science, practice, and teaching of I-O psychology to enhance human well-being and performance in organizational and work settings. SIOP provides a platform for scientists, academics, consultants, and practitioners to collaborate, implement, and evaluate cutting-edge approaches to workplace challenges across sectors.

I-O Impact: Through the Study for Employment Retention of Veterans (SERVe), I-O psychologists have been examining effective ways to promote veteran job satisfaction, success, and retention in the civilian workforce, along with health and fulfillment at home. The program is funded by the Department of Defense, in partnership with Portland State University and Oregon Health and Science University (see <http://www.servestudy.org/>).

- **Challenge:** Veterans face challenges understanding how to gain employment in the civilian workforce. Compared to the more rigorous evidence-based selection, training, and placement systems in the military, the civilian employment experience is often driven by factors outside of a worker's knowledge, skills, and motivation (e.g., recruitment through social networks, hiring managers' intuition).
I-O Impact: I-O psychology is well suited to equip public- and private-sector employers with tools that enhance the recruitment of veterans and selection capabilities, to improve fairness in hiring, talent recruitment, and organizational effectiveness. Given the high skill levels obtained in military service, better employer decision-making tools will likely benefit veterans because they are more able to demonstrate their capabilities. Likewise, I-O psychology is poised to implement strong selection, development, and retention programs that help find the right fit between candidate and employer.
- **Challenge:** Veterans transitioning to civilian life leave their military networks that support them in life's everyday challenges, such as mentoring, dealing with relocation issues, social support, and child care. Additionally, veterans often find strong cultural distinctions between military and corporate life (e.g., materialism, individualism, maturity) which impacts performance, engagement and retention.
I-O Impact: I-O psychology recognizes and actively conducts research in work/family balance issues. I-O psychologists are often utilized by organizations to create wellness programs, assist in building professional and social support networks, and conduct on-the-job coaching. These efforts include SIOP's Veterans' Transition Initiative, which provides volunteer consulting services to universities and corporations to establish mentoring relationships between volunteer I-O psychologists and veterans to adapt their knowledge and skills to new work environments.

In addition to addressing the challenges outlined above, there are a number of other positive outcomes for veteran hiring initiatives that SIOP can help facilitate, including: tapping a large, qualified talent pool; identifying tax relief mechanisms to organizations that hire veterans through the *Vow to Hire Heroes Act*, among others; supporting a positive and inclusive culture which can be embedded into an organization's Employee Value Proposition (EVP); and reflecting best practices in hiring through mitigating biases and removing irrelevant data from the decision-making process.

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