CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR

Veterans’ Transitions to the Workforce
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KEY FINDINGS

Priority sector employer research

(1) Employers’ perceptions of veterans are overwhelmingly positive. Virtually all employers have positive perceptions of veterans, many perceiving them as well-organized, hardworking, and good leaders. A small number of employers were concerned about veteran applicants’ verbal communication skills or willingness to be creative and flexible, but the overwhelming majority viewed military experience as an exclusively positive asset.

(2) More guidance is needed to help veterans develop clear, concise, and relevant resumes. Across all sectors, employers complained that while veterans have resumes full of impressive skills and experience, they often do not adequately explain how those skills and experience relate to the civilian jobs for which they’re applying. Further, there is a tendency for veterans to list every skill and experience, even when they are irrelevant to the job in which they are applying.

(3) Veterans without direct experience in a sector may have trouble obtaining anything beyond entry-level jobs. Experience requirements are the crux of many employers’ hiring strategies. Employers in all sectors reward relevant experience and specialization during the hiring process.

(4) There is a perception that veterans are uninterested in jobs in some of San Diego’s priority sectors. Employers in sectors like Education and Human Development encounter few veteran applicants but said they would happily hire more veterans if they received more qualified applications.

(5) There are many jobs available to veterans, but jobs providing sufficient wages for our region’s high cost of living are scarcer and harder to obtain. Many employers stated that they have jobs available, but that veterans are often over-qualified for the open positions and hesitant to take entry-level roles with entry-level wages.

Veterans focus group research

(1) Focus group participants felt the military is too optimistic about their transition to the civilian world, not doing enough to help them prepare for this transition. These veterans wanted to see improved transitional support and greater emphasis on career navigation and networking.

(2) Participants were confident in their skills and abilities. Every participant felt they had the required technical skills needed to be successful in the jobs in which they applied. All but one indicated they had the nontechnical workplace skills (such as verbal communication) to get the job they desire. Focus group participants were concerned that employers viewed their interpersonal skills as lacking—a view confirmed by only a small minority of our employer respondents.

(3) San Diego is largely viewed as having a strong economy and providing many job opportunities. Focus group participants believed their peers would have no problem finding jobs in San Diego County, but finding a quality job that allows one to live comfortably in the area is more challenging. They note competition for these quality jobs is high, as the workforce is far larger than the supply of jobs.

(4) The internet is by far the most popular source of information for jobs. LinkedIn and USAjobs.gov (a website for federal jobs) are the two most popular. More than half of the 11 focus group participants had used Indeed, while about a third had used either Glassdoor, Monster, or ZipRecruiter.
ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) Senior management, specifically those within hiring roles, should be made more aware of the skills veterans possess. Often those involved in the hiring process have expectations relating to the skills veterans do and do not hold, for example, assuming a lack of interpersonal skills like verbal communication. Acknowledging and combatting these preconceived notions will help more veterans enter quality, higher paying jobs.

(2) Firms should actively seek veterans during their hiring process. Many employers interviewed noted they would be willing to hire more veteran applicants if they applied. While the onus to apply ultimately sits with veteran applicants, employers could expand the applicant pool by proactively disseminating job postings to veteran groups.

(3) Workforce development professionals should categorize veterans seeking civilian employment into three groups:
   1. Those who want to continue with the type of work they did in the military, building upon the career pathway they started in the military.
   2. Those who do not want to continue with the type of work they did in the military but have identified the type of work they want to transition towards in the civilian workforce.
   3. Those who do not want to continue with the type of work they did in the military and have not yet identified the type of work they want to transition towards in the civilian workforce.

Each of these groups will require different types of career planning services and investments as they transition to civilian employment.

(4) Skills crosswalks between military and civilian roles similar to those provided by O*NET should be revamped and better marketed. If more veterans are able to translate technical and nontechnical skills gained during service into language more commonly used in the civilian workforce, their resumes and job prospects will improve significantly. (See recommendation 6 for more information).

(5) The military must improve career planning for those recently or soon-to-be separated. A common stumbling block for those who did not want to continue in a role similar to the one they had in the military was that they lacked a specific career pathway or goal, or an understanding of what steps a successful transition would entail. This problem would be mitigated by the development of career-navigation tools and a process to expose all separating service members to those tools.

(6) Career preparation programs should teach service members to tailor their resumes and cover letters to specific civilian roles. Employees mentioned that veteran applications frequently lacked specificity to the role, resulting in the application being rejected. Employers want veteran applicants to explain how their experiences have given them the soft skills and technical abilities needed for a specific job.

(7) Programs should aim to connect recently or soon-to-be separated veterans with veterans who work in their field of interest and veterans who have extensive experience in the civilian workforce more broadly. Networking with veterans who have already undergone the transition process would facilitate career exploration and provide support, insights, and perspective on the civilian application process.
INTRODUCTION

The San Diego Workforce Partnership commissioned qualitative assessments and analyses of veteran employment and hiring in San Diego County. The Workforce Partnership’s commitment to building a more resilient labor market in the region motivated this research. This study sought to determine some of the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges that veterans in San Diego County face throughout the process of transitioning out of the military and into meaningful employment in the civilian labor market.

This research used executive interviews with employers in the region’s seven priority sectors\(^1\) and a focus group with San Diego County veterans to provide in-depth analysis and actionable insights for policy makers and veteran-focused nonprofits.

For this study, veterans are defined as individuals who have served (even for a short time) in the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, or the National Guard,\(^2\) but are not currently serving on active duty. More than 225,500 veterans were living in San Diego County in 2017, accounting for about 9% of the population ages 18 and older, which is higher than the national average of 7% of the adult population.\(^3\) For more information regarding San Diego’s demographics, see Appendix A.

Objectives of research

- Help veterans find meaningful and gainful employment within quality jobs.
- Help veterans understand and develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are in-demand with employers.
- Identify opportunities to provide better support services for San Diego County veterans looking for work and career pathways.

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1. The Workforce Partnership identified San Diego County’s seven priority sectors using the following methodology. First, we identified occupations with (1) greater than average annual openings, (2) greater than average growth, and (3) an entry-level wage equal to or greater than the county’s self-sufficiency wage for a single earner with no dependents ($15.99 per hour, according to the University of Washington’s selfsufficiencystandard.org). We then identified the sectors that employed at least 10,000 people in these priority occupations: Education & Human Development; Health Care; Advanced Manufacturing; Public Administration; Life Sciences & Biotechnology; Information and Communication Technologies & Digital Media; and Energy, Construction, & Utilities.

2. The U.S. Census Bureau only classifies former National Guard members as veterans if they were ever called into active duty, not counting the 4-6 months for initial training or yearly summer camps.

PRIOIRITY SECTOR EMPLOYER INTERVIEWS

Employer preferences, needs, and experiences vary across industries, so the research team held discussions with employers from each of San Diego County’s seven priority sectors. This section of the report summarizes the key findings from this qualitative research, and highlights some of the critical differences that exist across employers in different industry sectors.

Health care
Section highlights
- Certificates and credentials, particularly those for Registered Nurses and other types of nurses, are in high demand and essential for their respective roles.
- Veterans received primarily positive evaluations, with respondents citing their discipline, ability to follow through, and compliance with procedures.
- Some respondents provided lower-than-average ratings for veterans’ nontechnical workplace skills and their ability to verbally communicate with coworkers.

Respondents’ background
The nine health care employer respondents are human resources managers, human resources technicians or related HR personnel, and one office manager who worked with public and nonprofit entities. Four of the nine respondents represent firms with between 20 and 99 employees, the majority are employed at firms with more than 100 employees. Most of the respondents’ firms are headquartered in areas surrounding the City of San Diego, including National City, Poway, Escondido, Lemon Grove, and Carlsbad.

General employment preferences
Online jobs postings are by far the most common method of finding and recruiting applicants. Eight out of nine respondents use online job boards, five use person-to-person referrals or some other network connection, and one respondent uses internal HR tools. Of the websites mentioned, Indeed and LinkedIn are the most frequent, though CalJOBS was also mentioned.

Technical skills are overwhelmingly identified as the most important requirement when initially evaluating applicants. Five of seven respondents asked cited RN or other nursing certifications. Licensure with the California Department of Public Health and fluency in Microsoft Office were technical abilities mentioned. When asked about deficiencies in current applicants, punctuality was cited by a third of respondents, and many respondents also cited verbal communication and interpersonal skills. Respondents expect to train new hires on some internal intricacies on the job but expect candidates to have certifications and familiarity with a medical environment.

Veteran employment preferences and experiences
One respondent indicated they receive a lower number of veteran applicants than they would expect. Of those that have hired veterans with a four-year degree, the hires were usually Registered Nurses (RNs) or Licensed Vocational Nurses (LVNs). Only one respondent had experience hiring veterans without a four-year degree and stated that those roles were usually for surgical technicians who had received certificates.

Nearly all respondents stated they have had positive experiences with the veterans they hired, describing veterans as disciplined, able to follow through, and more likely to stay long term. One of the nine respondents said veterans excel at following policy and procedure but are less creative than their nonveteran counterparts.

Seven of nine respondents felt veterans had above-average interviewing skills. Conversely, no respondents felt veterans’ nontechnical workplace and communication skills were above average. (See figure 1.)
None of the respondents had experience with veterans who had left the military within one year. One respondent stated that it was typical for recently exited veterans to go back to school and then later apply for a role upon finishing school. When asked for any final comments, one respondent suggested veterans should be encouraged to attain technical skills and certifications for specific roles they are interested in.

**Education and human development**

**Section highlights**

- Many respondents said they receive few veteran applicants and would happily hire more.
- Two respondents mentioned that military (and specifically medical training provided during time in military) experience is a positive for an application.
- A grammatically correct and tailored application was cited as something that would help move an applicant along. Stable work history is also seen as a benefit.

**Respondents’ background**

The ten education and human development employer respondents work at a range of organizations; four are from public institutions, three from private, and three from nonprofit. Most organizations have been in San Diego for relatively long periods of time—four for more than 20 years. Half of the organizations represented have more than 100 employees, another four have 26-99 employees, and one has fewer than 26. Six out of ten businesses are headquartered within the City of San Diego.

Six of the respondents are directors, presidents, or assistant directors, and have been involved in hiring for an average of 19 years. Other respondents work in human resources and employment offices. This means there is a mix of hiring expertise; about half are directly involved in hiring while the other half have more managerial or supervisory roles while engaged in the hiring process.

**General employment preferences**

Person-to-person networks or referrals are the most popular method of finding candidates, though internet job boards, such as Indeed and LinkedIn, are also commonly mentioned. Teaching credentials and academic education are typical requirements, while skills such as the ability to be nurturing and teach effectively are the two most basic skills. Other skills include written and verbal communication skills and computer use. Most common deficiencies are applicants who are not committed to the job and do not continually learn and improve.

Complete, grammatically accurate, and tailored cover letters and applications are generally viewed as attributes that would move a candidate along in the hiring process. Evidence of a stable job history was also mentioned. **Two respondents indicated that military background or experience would aid in**
moving an application forward. Medical training was also explicitly cited. Prior experience, credentials if applicable, and good communication, interpersonal skills, and teamwork are generally required.

Veteran employment preferences and experiences

Two respondents said they receive a low or below-average number of veteran applicants. A third of respondents indicated they would like to hire more veterans than they do. Interestingly, a fourth respondent feels that some veterans only achieved their degree due to the relatively smaller financial burden, but that veterans were not interested in the line of work.

Medical training was a notable veteran advantage for two respondents. Respondents most frequently ranked veterans’ technical and nontechnical skills as above average. (See figure 2.) Most respondents feel there was no difference between veterans who recently (within a year) left the military and those that left more than 12 months ago though one respondent felt that younger veterans are better off because of their increased technological skills. Another respondent noted that recently exited veterans seem to feel less comfortable in a non-military environment.

Figure 2. Percent of education employer respondents who feel veterans’ abilities are above average

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resumes</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewing skills</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical skills</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontechnical, workplace, or soft</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic background</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nearly all respondents had no concerns about hiring veterans. When asked for final remarks, most respondents said they like hiring veterans and they would like to hire more. Two remarked that service members planning to separate should increasingly consider education as an opportunity for a great career. One respondent made comments about improving resumes and applications, while another mentioned that those planning to leave should spend more time looking into various industries and careers.

Advanced manufacturing

Section highlights

- More than half of respondents stated that experience is a factor that could propel an application forward or end it (primarily among non-entry-level jobs).
- More than half of respondents had no experience hiring veterans. Many employers cited relatively low wages for entry-level roles and high experience requirements for more skilled roles.
- Strengths of veteran hires included good work ethic, great attitude, and willingness to take on new opportunities. One weakness mentioned was flexibility.

Respondents’ background

Nine employer respondents from eight advanced manufacturing firms participated in this study. Three of the eight advanced manufacturing firms represented by respondents employ more than 100 individuals each, the remaining five have between 26 and 99 employees. Only two respondent firms are headquartered in the City of San Diego, with four being outside San Diego County, and two outside the state. Respondents include two company presidents, four human resources staff, one HR director, and
one office manager, all actively involved in the hiring process. Respondents averaged about 15 years of hiring experience. Over 70% of respondents expected their firm to increase the number of employees within the next year.

**General employment preferences**

Personal networking and referrals were the most common method for finding new talent, though more than half of respondents reported utilizing internet resources as well. Among internet resources, LinkedIn, Indeed, and Craigslist are the most popular.

A good attitude, strong work ethic, and effective speaking skills are most commonly mentioned as critical nontechnical or workplace skills. Technical skills varied by roles, and education is generally high school level, bachelor’s, or higher for engineering roles. Industry experience is considered necessary for any engineering role. Written and spoken communication skills and the ability to pass background checks are among the most commonly cited skills that are missing in entry-level roles. **Five respondents mentioned that experience was a factor that could often make-or-break an application for a higher-level position.** Experience is seen as mostly positive for entry-level roles, though not disqualifying if a candidate was lacking. Two respondents also mentioned that a lack of formal education is disqualifying for higher-level positions.

**Veteran employment preferences and experiences**

Over half of respondents stated that they have few or no veteran applicants. Of those that did have some experience with veterans, strengths mentioned were that veteran candidates typically have good attitudes and a strong knowledge base. One weakness mentioned was a lack of flexibility. The consensus is that, should more veteran applicants apply, many more would be hired. Advanced manufacturing respondents most frequently cited veterans’ nontechnical workplace, interviewing, and technical skills as above average. All respondents feel that veterans’ nontechnical workplace skills are above average. (See figure 3.) Additional commentary included that their teamwork and attitudes are superior to most other candidates, though their resumes often include irrelevant material.

**Figure 3. Percent of advanced manufacturing employer respondents who feel veterans’ abilities are above average**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resumes</th>
<th>Interviewing skills</th>
<th>Technical skills</th>
<th>Nontechnical, workplace, or soft skills</th>
<th>Academic background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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One respondent noted that more recently exited veterans tend to sound more jaded, as they believe they would get positions with better pay and status upon leaving the military. Half of respondents cited no concerns, while one respondent mentioned that they are concerned that the veteran applicants might not like the job and end up leaving relatively quickly. Another respondent noted that there may be some difficulties in transitioning out of the military environment and into a civilian one. When asked for final commentary, two respondents indicated that exiting veterans should build out skills and expertise in specific fields or areas that they are interested in. A third respondent said that workshops that help veterans with resumes and interviews would be helpful and discussed the potential of workshops that would teach technical manufacturing skills, such as soldering, assembling, and other mechanical skills related to manufacturing and technical assembly.
Energy, construction, and utilities

Section highlights

- Most respondents have had experience hiring veterans, and most of those experiences were positive. Most also feel they would like to hire more veterans if applications were more frequent.
- Either industry certifications or experience, preferably both, are necessary for specialized roles. They also provided an advantage during the application process when employers hired for more generalized roles.
- Two employers noted that recently separated veterans tend to move on from the company quicker than those that had more time in the civilian world. It was pointed out that many seem to be unsure of their career path.

Respondents’ background

Ten employer respondents participated in the energy, construction, and utilities sector of this study. Six of the ten respondents represent firms that employ between 26 and 99 employees. The remaining are from firms that have 100 or more employees. Eight firms are privately owned, and of those that responded, all have been in business for 20 years or more. Half of respondent firms are headquartered in the City of San Diego, while the others are in Vista, Oceanside, El Cajon, Spring Valley, and La Mesa.

Most of the respondents are in human resources, three are office managers with hiring responsibilities, and one is an owner, averaging over 11 years of hiring experience. About half are expecting to hire more employees and the other half are planning to maintain the current number of employees for the next 12 months.

General employment preferences

Six respondents reported using online job boards. The most frequently mentioned were Indeed, Craigslist, and their company’s website. More than two-thirds of respondents stated that recruiting is done by person-to-person networking or getting referrals from those in their industry.

Customer service and a willingness to work are the two most common general attributes that employers are looking for in this sector. Specific skills include:

- Journeyman certifications,
- Plumbing and HVAC experience,
- Good work ethic,
- Communication and customer service skills,
- Computer skills.

Work experience or demonstrated ability (through certificate(s)) are generally sought. Most stated that there are no general trends with deficiencies among applicants. Inconsistent work history with short durations or long gaps, refusal to look into interviewers’ eyes, and criminal records are red flags. A complete application, right attitude, and experience are all strong positives for those that are applying to work in this sector.

Veteran employment preferences and experiences

Three respondents stated that they have not seen a lot of veteran applicants, with two citing relatively low wages as reasons for fewer applications. Some positive attributes for veterans include their discipline, their willingness to work hard, and their increased levels of maturity and experience than “kids off the street”. Two respondents stated they do not believe there is a difference between veterans with and without a degree. Eighty percent have had some experience hiring veterans. Only one stated that the experience was mixed, saying that the veteran hires are sometimes reliable and sometimes “conflicted in personality”.

Respondents generally feel that veteran applicants have above average resumes and nontechnical workplace skills, such as punctuality, appearance, and listening. (See figure 4.) No respondents in this industry sector feel that veterans are below average in any aspect. Two respondents commented on differences between recently transitioning veterans and those who have been out of the service for more
than a year. One noted that newly separated veterans seemed less likely to follow up on an application or interview—even after scheduling one. Another commented that many who are recently separated are unsure of their career path, often leading to retention issues.

**Figure 4. Percent of energy, construction, and utilities employer respondents who feel veterans’ abilities are above average**

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>100%</th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>67%</th>
<th>83%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resumes</td>
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**Information and communications technology (ICT) and digital media**

**Section highlights**
- Industry experience, right attitude, and ability to interact and communicate with others were frequent requirements to move an application along.
- Veterans were generally well regarded, though it was expressed that many applicants lacked the experience required unless they had done similar work in the military.
- Resumes and nontechnical workplace skills received the lowest rankings (which were overall still regarded as average).

**Respondents’ background**
All nine of the respondents from the ICT and Digital Media sector represent privately-owned companies. The firms are also primarily in the City of San Diego—only two are headquartered elsewhere. Most respondents represent firms with 26 to 99 employees. Three respondents are C-level, three are office or HR managers, and one is a senior hiring manager. They have an average of seven years of hiring experience. There was nearly an even split among firms that expect to hire, downsize, and remain the same in terms of employees.

**General employment preferences**
Online job sites are the most frequent choice for finding candidates. The most popular sites are Craigslist, Indeed, and LinkedIn. Four respondents indicated that they also hire through personal networks or referrals, and three stated they use internal HR programs for recruiting and communicating with applicants.

Among general abilities, work ethic, communication, and teamwork are the most commonly mentioned as general attributes employers are looking for in this sector. Among deficiencies, people skills and spoken communication skills are most often identified, as well as honesty and industry experience. Two respondents also mentioned the lack of availability of candidates with a security clearance. For the same two respondents, security clearances are aspects that would either push a candidate forward or end their application. **Two respondents also mentioned that the lack of industry experience would likely lead to a candidate’s rejection.** Having a right attitude, a solid ability to communicate and interact with others, and industry experience were characteristics that are often required of applicants before they could receive an offer.
Veteran employment preferences and experiences

Employers in ICT and Digital Media generally seemed to associate positive characteristics with veterans, but experience and specialization appeared to be a deciding factor. Two respondents stated that they typically do not see many veteran applicants. One firm, which is heavily involved in cybersecurity, mentioned that veterans are above average in terms of quantity and quality of applicants. Two respondents view veteran applicants as generally more knowledgeable and disciplined than their nonveteran counterparts and also more reliable. One respondent also mentioned their military training makes them easier to train on other tasks in which they may not have experience.

Half of ICT and digital media employers feel that veterans’ interviewing skills and academic background are above average. Conversely, no respondents feel that veterans’ resumes and nontechnical workplace skills are above average. (See figure 5.)

Figure 5. Percent of ICT and digital media employers respondents who feel veterans’ abilities are above average

One respondent from a small market research firm provided greater detail suggesting that if the military training was in a skill related to the job, then it was a huge benefit. However, if the required expertise was outside previously trained skills, some veterans may be “stuck in their ways”. Opinions on veterans’ nontechnical workplace skills, such as the ability to work with others, spoken communication skills and punctuality are mixed, with some respondents giving them above average rankings and others rating below average. Only one respondent expressed a concern when hiring a veteran, highlighting higher probability of PTSD. When asked about any final thoughts, two suggested that veterans should be more targeted in skills development and work experience, focusing on occupations in which an interest exist.

Life sciences

Section highlights

- Written and verbal communication, along with teamwork, integrity, and work ethic were critical factors for applicants in this industry.
- Education (Bachelor’s degree or higher) and industry experience were two strict requirements that nearly every respondent cited.
- Grammatical errors as well as irrelevant information in applications and resumes were generally grounds for rejection.

Respondents’ background

Four of the nine respondents in Biotechnology and Life Sciences are employed at firms with more than 100 employees. The remaining five employer respondents work at medium (26-99 employees) sized firms. All the firms are privately owned, and all but one is headquartered in the City of San Diego. Among the respondents, five are presidents, vice presidents, founders, or CEOs, and the remainder are representatives from Human Resources and/or hiring managers. Respondents averaged 15 years of hiring experience and represent a mix of those who are involved throughout the hiring process and those
that oversee through a supervisory role. Two-thirds of respondents expect their firms to take on additional employees within the next 12 months.

**General employment preferences**

Only one respondent stated their firm did not use online job postings to hire potential new employees. LinkedIn was mentioned explicitly by four respondents, while only two cited Indeed. Craigslist was not referenced. Two-thirds indicated their company also utilizes personal references or networks during the hiring process.

**More than half of respondents emphasized that communication skills, both oral and written, are essential for qualified applicants to be successful.** Teamwork, integrity of character, work ethic, and professionalism were also commonly mentioned. **Bachelors and advanced degrees are required by nearly all respondents’ firms**, with two respondents’ firms explicitly requiring advanced degrees. **Experience is expressly required by all but two respondent firms.**

Nearly half of respondents stated that applicants frequently lacked proper communication skills. The importance of work experience and the continuity and duration of employment history was emphasized. **Applications with grammatical errors or irrelevant information are generally grounds for a candidates’ rejection.**

**Veteran employment preferences and experiences**

All respondents either reported very few veteran applicants or no experience hiring veterans. One respondent, who works at a research lab, stated that veterans’ workplace skills are exceptional, along with their work ethic. Another respondent, whose firm is involved in professional and technical services, indicated that their abilities are usually insufficient for the level required of their firm. All respondents reported no or limited exposure to veterans without a four-year degree since most of the roles require higher education. Forty percent of respondents feel that veterans’ interviewing skills are above average. A notably lower 20-25% of respondents think that veterans’ other skills are above average. (See figure 6.)

**Figure 6. Percent of biotechnology and life science employer respondents who feel veterans’ abilities are above average**

![Figure 6](image)

Assimilation and integration were aspects which some employers were aware of and potentially concerned about. Only one respondent acknowledged a difference between recently and not-recently departed veterans, mentioning that recently exited veterans still need time to adjust to the civilian world. Two respondents expressed concerns in potentially hiring veterans; one cited potentially inadequate interpersonal abilities and another mentioned a lack of ability to think creatively. Generally, respondents felt that veterans need additional support in translating their military experience into civilian skills.
Public administration
Section highlights
- All respondents had experienced hiring veterans, and nearly all were positive experiences.
- Grammatical errors and irrelevant information on resumes were common complaints for veteran and nonveteran applicants alike.
- Veterans’ strengths regularly include maturity, dedication, great at understanding hierarchy, and strong technical skills.

Respondents’ background
Six out of eight public administration employer respondents are from institutions that employ 100 or more people. Only one respondent is from the City of San Diego, the rest are spread across San Diego County, including Oceanside, Vista, Carlsbad, Escondido, Alpine, Poway, and El Cajon. All respondents, with exception of one director, are staff within their human resource departments, averaging nearly seven years of hiring experience. Five respondents represented city-wide human resources departments.

General employment preferences
All but one respondent noted that their employer uses online resources to recruit candidates. Most internet resources are the city’s website or a specialized site, though some utilize Indeed. More than half of respondents reported using personal networks or referrals. Career fairs are most common among these responses.

Requirements are specific to roles, and since public institutions hire a broad range of workers, it is difficult to generalize what is most important. However, in most cases, the education and experience outlined in job descriptions are requirements that must be met to advance in the application process. **Multiple respondents cited incomplete or grammatically incorrect applications, resumes, and cover letters as immediate disqualifiers for positions.** Nearly all positions require some level of customer service skills, with employers emphasizing an employee’s ability to adequately assist customers as well as engage coworkers appropriately and professionally.

Veteran employment preferences and experiences
Respondents generally feel that they receive a reasonable number of veteran applicants. Some strengths mentioned include that veterans are mature, dedicated, great at understanding hierarchy, and have strong technical skills. A few respondents commented that veteran applicants will often put all their experience on a resume, including material that is not relevant to the advertised role.

Finally, all respondents reported experience hiring veterans, and nearly all cited having generally great experiences. More specifically, many respondents within this sector generally felt that veterans’ possessed above average skills in many regards. (See figure 7.)

**Figure 7. Percent of public administration employer respondents who feel veterans’ abilities are above average**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resumes</th>
<th>Interviewing skills</th>
<th>Technical skills</th>
<th>Nontechnical, workplace, or soft skills</th>
<th>Academic background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>57%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
VETERANS FOCUS GROUP

Participant demographics and background
The focus group consisted of 11 participants who had:
- previously served in the military,
- were no longer active duty, and
- had left the military in the last 36 months (10) or were still in the reserves (1).

The ages of the group ranged from 26 to 46, while the average was 34.6 and the median age was 33. Of the 11 participants, two were females. Six respondents were currently enrolled as students, with two of the six being full-time students. Only two respondents were presently looking for new employment opportunities. The average time lived in San Diego was 11 years, with three years being the minimum and 20 years being the maximum.

Respondents represented a range of the services. Six respondents were veterans of the Navy, two were in the Marines, two were in the Army, and one was in both the Army and the Marines. The minimum time served was four years and the maximum were 22 years. The average and median time served was 12 years.

Where do respondents get information?
The internet was the definitive source of information for the focus group. Every respondent mentioned using the internet as a resource. Specific sources varied, though websites like usajobs.gov, LinkedIn, and Indeed were common mentions. Nine of the eleven respondents indicated that they had used usajobs.com and the same number affirmed that they had used LinkedIn. (See figure 8.) LinkedIn was the preferred source for most of the group as it related to finding new employment opportunities.

![Figure 8. Respondents who use specific online resources](image)

When asked if they would prefer online or in-person education for developing new skills and areas of expertise in the future, 10 out of 11 reported that they would prefer in-person education over an online opportunity. Only one respondent preferred online education.

The veteran experience
The focus group respondents generally felt confident that they had the skills and abilities for the jobs they desire. All respondents indicated they had learned how to learn. Every participant except for one, a 22-year veteran of the Navy, felt they had the nontechnical workplace skills (such as the ability to communicate well and fit in into different work environments) to get hired at the type of jobs in which they were most interested. All respondents stated they had the technical skills to get the kind of job they want. When asked where they got these technical skills, four stated it was primarily from their military experience, and five said it was a combination of military and schooling. One respondent noted all of the skills for the job they want were from academic institutions, and one respondent felt that they were not currently utilizing skills learned from either of these institutions. (See figure 9.)
Seven of the 11 respondents felt that being a veteran helped their job prospects in the civilian world. (See figure 10.) Respondents who had mixed feelings mentioned that it depended on the person and their particular career goals. More specifically, those who went on to do similar work in the civilian work to their jobs while in the military benefited from their veteran status. However, those veterans who wanted to change career paths were not much better off, if at all. One respondent, a veteran of the Army who served for 12 years, mentioned that as veterans, they were often “overqualified for a lot of roles”. Another respondent, who served ten years in the Navy, stated that many skills are not transferrable into the civilian world. They noted that there are many technical skills developed in the military but, to the detriment of veterans, civilian equivalents do not exist.

When asked to identify the most significant challenge faced upon exiting the military, the group was again split. (See figure 11.) Three respondents felt “the stars had aligned” for them when exiting and few challenges existed. Six out of the 11 respondents mentioned that their skills either did not translate to a civilian role or did not translate to a civilian position in which they were interested. Respondents mentioned difficulties transitioning being related to “institutionalization” and the lack of a network in the civilian world.
When asked if they had heard of the O*NET military-to-civilian crosswalk, nearly all respondents were aware of its existence, though few knew its name. Of the five respondents that had used it, only one felt that it was useful; the remaining four thought that it was a waste of time, did not apply to their position in the military, or that it was too broad.

Life in San Diego
It is no surprise that nearly all respondents reported that the weather played a significant role in the quality of life in San Diego. Five out of 11 also mentioned the job market as a strength of the region. Ten out of eleven respondents felt that San Diego was a good place for economic opportunity. (See figure 12.) However, every respondent cited the cost of living, specifically housing prices, as the most significant challenge in living in the region.

This brought about an interesting conversation when respondents were asked if it was easier or harder to get the type of job they wanted in San Diego relative to some other location. The consensus among respondents was that there are a lot of opportunities and employers in the area but that competition for specific jobs—primarily those that are directly related to military—was more significant in region because of the number of veterans in the area. One participant stated that veterans in San Diego were “a dime a dozen”.

Most respondents also felt that the high cost of living meant that there was greater competition for higher-paying jobs. One respondent, a 22-year veteran of the Navy, summarized the group sentiment well by
stating that “San Diego is a good jumping-off point for leaving the military. You can find a job on jobsusa.com. It might suck, but a job is a job. That’s not the case everywhere”.

**There was also the belief that the military did not do enough OR was too optimistic and positive about their preparation for transition veterans to civilian employment.** This was a consistent theme across participants of the focus group. Preparation should be segmented into three groups;

- **Group 1** Those who want to continue with the type of work they are doing in the military in the civilian world.
- **Group 2** Those who do not want to continue with the type of work that they are doing in the military, but they have a plan and/or know the type of work that they want to move into.
- **Group 3** Those who do not want to continue with the type of work that they are doing in the military AND do not know the type of work that they want to move into.

**Final considerations**

When the focus group was asked what steps should be emphasized to help veterans in San Diego get meaningful employment and grow sustainable careers, improving career navigation and the transition process out of the military was most important. (See figure 13.) Three respondents directly mentioned the Transition Readiness Programs (TRP) with others alluding to its deficiencies. Suggestions for improvements included program extension, flexible scheduling for working individuals, and include expanded career counseling. Increased networking opportunities were also highlighted as essential to smoothing the transition period. There was consensus regarding increased attention paid to resume and interview training, career pathway development, as well as promotion of relevant certifications and educational qualifications.

**Figure 13. What should be the areas of focus to improve veterans dealing with the transition?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adjustments to Transition Readiness Program (TRP)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase networking</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater emphasis of military skills translation to civilian roles</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving the transition (workshops, counseling, etc.)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15 Respondents could mention more than one category. This tally is based on an individuals’ response when called upon. Also, many respondents nodded in agreement to other’s statements as respondents went around the table.
APPENDIX A

Background statistics

For this study, veterans are defined as individuals who have served, even for a short time, but are not currently serving on active duty, in the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, or the National Guard\(^\text{16}\). More than 225,500 veterans were living in San Diego County in 2017, accounting for about 9.1\% of the population ages 18 and older, which is higher than the national average of 7.3\% of the adult population.\(^\text{17}\) (See figure 14.)

Figure 14. Veteran population in San Diego County\(^\text{18}\)

A majority of veterans in San Diego County are over the age of 35. Specifically, more than a quarter (27\%) are between the ages of 35 and 54 and about four in ten are 65 years of age or older. Only 16\% of veterans countywide are between the ages of 18 and 34. (See figure 15.)

Figure 15: Age distribution of veterans in San Diego County\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{15.9}\%\)\(^{26.8}\%\)\(^{17.4}\%\)\(^{20.4}\%\)\(^{19.4}\%\)

\(^{16}\) The U.S. Census Bureau only classifies former National Guard members as veterans if they were ever called into active duty, not counting the 4-6 months for initial training or yearly summer camps.

\(^{17}\) U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

\(^{18}\) U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

\(^{19}\) U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates
Veterans in San Diego County have higher rates of educational attainment relative to the nonveteran population. While about 15% of nonveterans ages 25 or older have not received a high school diploma, less than 4% of veterans in San Diego County have not. Veterans also have notably higher rates of those with some college, no degree or an associate degree. (See figure 16.)

Figure 16. Educational attainment by veteran status (adults 25 years of age and older)

Veteran populations in San Diego County have slightly higher proportions of White and Black or African American individuals and have lower proportions among Asian, some other race, and Hispanic or Latino individuals in comparison to their nonveteran peers. (See figure 17.)

Figure 17. Race and ethnicity of veteran and nonveteran populations in San Diego County

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20 U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates
21 U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates
22 Percentages add up to more than 100%, as the U.S. Census Bureau reports Hispanic or Latino as an ethnicity and not a race.
Veterans in San Diego County under the age of 55 generally have higher labor participation rates than their nonveteran counterparts. (See figure 18.) Veterans also have typically similar, if not lower, unemployment rates compared to the nonveteran population. However, one demographic where this is not true is younger veterans between the ages of 18 and 34; in 2017, unemployment was 0.6 percentage-points higher for veterans in this age group than the comparative nonveteran population. (See figure 19.)

Unemployment rates among veterans of all ages are highest around Pauma Valley, Spring Valley, Carlsbad, Oceanside, and El Cajon. The areas with the percentage of unemployed veterans ages 18-34 are El Cajon, Oceanside, and Mission Valley in San Diego. (See figure 20.) When viewed in comparison to the concentration of veterans in a region, it is evident that areas such as Spring Valley, Ramona, Fallbrook, and northern San Diego, which have a relatively high concentration of veterans, need to be targeted by programs providers who are looking to serve veterans by minimizing their unemployment rate.

Figure 18. Labor force participation by age and veteran status in San Diego County (2017)

Figure 19. Unemployment rate by age and veteran status in San Diego County (2017)

Unemployment rates among veterans of all ages are highest around Pauma Valley, Spring Valley, Carlsbad, Oceanside, and El Cajon. The areas with the percentage of unemployed veterans ages 18-34 are El Cajon, Oceanside, and Mission Valley in San Diego. (See figure 20.) When viewed in comparison to the concentration of veterans in a region, it is evident that areas such as Spring Valley, Ramona, Fallbrook, and northern San Diego, which have a relatively high concentration of veterans, need to be targeted by programs providers who are looking to serve veterans by minimizing their unemployment rate.

23 U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates
24 U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates
Figure 20. Unemployment rate among veteran population by zip code (2017)\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{25} U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates
ON THE COVER

Richard Clinton, a U.S. Navy veteran, was laid off in 2012 and again in 2017. In 2012 he remained unemployed for a long time; in 2017 he found a job within six weeks. Richard says the biggest difference between these two experiences was his discovery in 2017 of the San Diego Workforce Partnership’s South County Career Center, where he went every day as the headquarters of his job search—meeting with his career agent, getting funded job training, and attending workshops on resume writing and interview skills. He set goals for himself and checked them off one by one. “You want to go there with the mindset like ‘this place is here to help me,’” says Richard. “I’ve got lots of resources and tools to use. If I don’t have the internet, if I don’t have a computer or a printer, it’s not a problem.” The job Richard found in 2017 was a game-changer. “I was able to go from renting an apartment to paying a mortgage. It allowed me to take trips with my family, to be able to provide for my family.”

See more stories at: workforce.org/facesofworkforce

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