

Retaining military veteran employees is all about the right fit

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The University of Cincinnati is home to one of the largest populations of student veterans in Ohio. New research shows how the US Department of Veterans Affairs is studying how to better retain its veteran employees. Credit: Ashley Kempher, UC Creative Services

It's a difficult career transition that can lead to more professional frustration and shorter tenure on the job for many of the newest

generation of veterans employed with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) compared to their non-veteran co-workers.

New research from the University of Cincinnati is helping VA analyze the process of reintegrating [veterans](#) into civilian careers and evaluate methods for easing that transition. That's good news for all veterans as the nation prepares to observe Veterans Day on Nov. 11.

"This period of time within our labor force is really interesting because we have an unprecedented influx of veterans who are leaving the military and looking for civilian jobs," says Stacie Furst-Holloway, an associate professor of psychology at UC. "That presents some challenges and opportunities for employers in the private and the public sector, in terms of taking veterans who are coming from a very much non-civilian type of work and reintegrating them into the workforce."

The research led by Furst-Holloway under a contract with the VHA National Center for Organizational Development (NCOD), "Understanding the Veteran Employment Experience: Data from the Veterans Administration," was presented at the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) annual conference to be held in May in Honolulu. SIOP is a division of the American Psychological Association and an organizational affiliate of the Association for Psychological Science. In general, industrial and organizational psychologists study human behavior in order to improve the workplace for employees.

Improving the Transition

A tremendous number of veterans are returning home and looking for civilian jobs as U.S. military involvement overseas scales down after years of prolonged conflict. To assist in this adjustment, VA recently established the Veteran Employment Services Office to support and

retain veterans in their job search and transition into VA or other federal workforce opportunities. Organizations in the private sector are also targeting this unique and large population of veterans.

Hiring veterans is one thing, but keeping them on the job is something different altogether.

"We can focus on hiring, but if we don't tie that to the bigger picture in terms of retention as well, then we're missing half the picture," Furst-Holloway says.

After assessing employment data within VA, Furst-Holloway found that once veterans start with the agency, they tend to stay for slightly less time - about four years less - than their non-veteran colleagues. This likely occurs for a number of reasons.

One explanation for the lower veteran retention rates concerns finding the right job fit. For example, although the data indicates that while veteran staff tend to have stronger feelings of commitment to VA, its values and its mission than their non-veteran colleagues, veteran employees also report slightly lower perceptions of their jobs.

Furst-Holloway says these perceptions may be attributed to veterans being "far more likely to be hired into lower-level positions in the VA, despite the fact that they have as much [work experience](#) as non-veterans. Our thinking there is that a lot of that experience is military experience that does not necessarily translate into the civilian sector."

This may be particularly true in the health-care sector, or VA's largest division the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), where professional occupations may be restricted by education- or credential-specific criteria. In VA's other divisions of benefits, cemeteries and Central Offices, greater professional opportunities based on work experience

(vs. educational credentials) are possible, and thus improved job fit.

Other reasons for lower veteran retention in VA may involve earlier retirement opportunities for veteran staff who accrue military and civilian workforce tenure, as well as opportunities to transition out of VA into other federal worksites and veteran-employment partners. The study by Furst-Holloway found that 34 percent of veterans who leave VA report transferring to another federal agency compared to 19 percent of non-veterans; the latter being more likely to leave VA for the private sector (23 percent vs. 13 percent veterans) or to attend school (19 percent vs. 12 percent veterans).

VA's next challenge is to find ways to retain a veteran worker who's been hired into a position that doesn't necessarily meet his or her skill set. Furst-Holloway says a potential solution is developing interim vocational training that can be incorporated into the VA's existing reintegration programs. She says her research team offers analysis to help develop such enhanced reintegration programming.

"You want to hire veterans into jobs where they will be successful and happy with the work they're doing. That's the golden ticket," she says.

Unique Insight on Veteran Employment

The researchers on this project primarily analyzed VA's Personnel and Accounting Integrated Database and the VA All Employee Survey database. The researchers were able to track data points such as employee advancement and movement, and changes in attitude toward work. They studied differences between veteran and non-veteran employees along each stage of the work experience, from entry to departure.

Furst-Holloway says this research is among the little that exists on the

veteran employment experience.

"There is very robust literature in the management sector and in health care that looks at why people join organizations," she says. "Very little research has been done about how veterans experience that transition and what factors we can tie to their attraction to different organizations and the reasons why they might stay."

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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