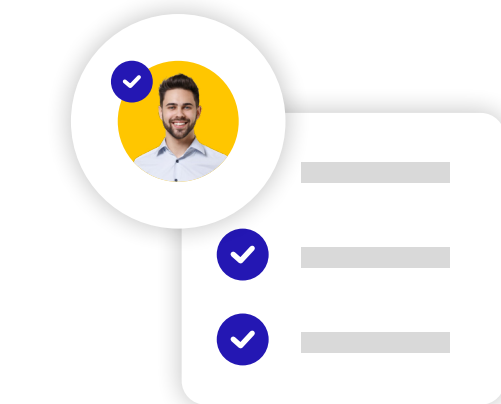




# Building a World-class Military Hiring Program

Everything you need to know about hiring military-affiliated employees and setting them up for success





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# Introduction

According to [USA Facts](#) and the [Pew Research Center](#), approximately 33 million people are part of the United States military community—those who are serving, reservists, civilian Department of Defense employees, veterans, and the spouses of all of the above.

The country's 18 million veterans are by far the largest group in that community. Around 200,000 military members separate from the service annually, providing a replenishing pool of skilled, trained, and disciplined individuals, many seeking to transition into civilian employment.

Supported by favorable tax incentives, many employers are stepping up to take advantage of this talent group. Right now, veterans have a lower unemployment rate than non-veterans—only 3.4 percent as of August 2024, compared to 4.1 percent for non-veterans, according to the [Department of Labor](#). Numbers like this prove there is no shortage of enthusiasm or hiring potential.

## However, finding jobs is only half the battle. According to polls:

- ✓ Veterans are more than five times more likely to have no satisfaction at their current job than non-veterans (source: [Hill & Ponton](#)).
- ✓ Veterans are almost twice as likely to be making a salary of less than \$50,000 compared to non-veterans (50 percent vs. 28 percent) (source: [Hill & Ponton](#)).
- ✓ 80 percent of veterans leave their first civilian before the end of their second year, citing a lack of opportunity for career advancement and personal development (source: [Korn Ferry](#)).
- ✓ Veterans are very likely to report feeling “underemployed” and working in a position that is below their skill level (source: [CareerBuilder](#)).

Why the discrepancy? While there are many possible reasons, one of the main factors may be a lack of understanding around military career structures and how they relate to civilian jobs. Hiring teams are only human—they hire what they know, and they can only



judge what a candidate shows them. There's work to do on both sides to bridge the gap and find a better fit for all.

In writing this playbook, we spoke with two experts who know these challenges well.

[Chris Miles](#) is the Military and Veteran Relations Manager at [Sonepar USA](#). After 26 years in the US Army, he “accidentally fell into the military recruiting space.” Miles is a Certified Associate in Project Management and a Certified Diversity and Inclusion Recruiter with a passion for creating inclusive and supportive work environments for military-affiliated employees.

[Steve Janke](#) is the Founder of [Semper Forward](#), an organization that helps companies build their military, spouse, and veteran talent pipelines with a focus on facilitating smooth transitions and fostering connections between the military community and career opportunities. Janke spent his early career as a US Marine before joining the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs, where he built an internationally recognized talent attraction initiative to bring veterans and their families to the state.

Both experts have successfully helped veterans transition into the workforce and have valuable insights, awareness and responsible business practices to share. This playbook is the culmination of their combined learning. It shows how businesses of all sizes and sectors can proactively support military community members to successfully transition into civilian employment—and reap the rewards.



## Military demographic data:

~ 18m

veterans in the United States

~ 6%

of the US adult population

~ 200k

members separate from service every year

~ 1m

spouses of active-duty service members

~ 11m

spouses of veterans

# The Business Case for Hiring Military Talent

## 1 Veterans fill critical skills gaps

In sectors such as healthcare, construction, manufacturing, utilities, hospitality, technology, and transportation, organizations continue to face one of the toughest labor markets in history. The number of open jobs far exceeds available workers, and businesses are struggling to find the right candidates. Yet, there is a clear overlap between the areas of highest skill shortages and roles within the military. Veterans represent an untapped source of talent—ready-to-go, with little training needed.

## 2 Veterans have strong technical and soft skills

The military workforce is educated. With over 160 [Military Occupational Specialties](#) in the US Army alone, many veterans are trained and experienced in various technical roles, including engineering, logistics, translation, mechanics, healthcare, and IT. Nearly all enlisted service members have traditional high school diplomas, 9 percent have earned college credits, and 79 percent test above the 50th percentile in aptitude tests, according to the [Department of Labor](#).

Leadership, teamwork, adaptability and problem-solving skills also come with the package; skills gained from the experience of working across geographies and diverse environments. These qualities and skills are highly transferable to the civilian workplace.





“Veterans, on average, have a higher postsecondary degree rate than their civilian counterparts. So do military spouses. From their mental toughness to their work ethic, companies should hire military talent and military spouses because they’ve proven themselves time and time again in a way that most of the population never will.”



**Steve Janke**

Founder of Mission Wisconsin &  
Semper Forward

## 2 Veterans are highly trainable and have a strong work ethic

Veterans bring valuable attitudes and behaviors to the commercial workforce, including loyalty, mission focus, willingness to accept responsibility, strong work ethic, resilience and a positive ‘can-do’ attitude. They are accustomed to working in highly pressurized environments and know how to act decisively and calmly. Learning and upskilling is second nature to them—they’ve had plenty of experience in military training and are very capable of learning new skills in the private sector.

## 2 Federal tax credit programs

In addition to their strong skill sets and personal characteristics, veterans can bring direct financial benefits to their employers via the [Work Opportunity Tax Credit](#) (WOTC). WOTC is a federal tax credit available to employers who hire veterans and individuals from other eligible target groups with significant barriers to employment. The program can reduce an employer’s federal income tax liability by as much as \$9,600 per eligible hire.



# Barriers to Hiring Ex-military

Hiring military-affiliated employees is popular in theory, and the low unemployment rate proves it. Yet, in practice, military hiring initiatives can have more splash than substance. The issue of underemployment is concerning. For veterans, underemployment signals that their skills are undervalued, which is demotivating for anyone. For employers, making only fractional use of a veteran's skillset is tantamount to wasting the nation's and taxpayers' investments in their military training. It leaves significant value untapped.

But why is underemployment so high?

## Employers do not understand military culture

Unless a business is part of the military supply chain, or talent acquisition professionals have close affiliation to someone who has served, the values, skills or language of the military can be baffling.

How would you respond if you heard someone say, "I'm a 42A, and I just PCSed to be the NCOIC of the S1 shop at the brigade level. I'm responsible for managing all personnel actions, including DTS, leave forms, and coordinating with finance for pay issues. We're also gearing up for the upcoming UMR and ensuring all the URs are squared away before the next command and staff."? Within the military, that's someone telling you they are a Human Resources Sergeant, responsible for managing administrative tasks and personnel records at the brigade level. Outside the military, it's gobbledygook.

The language barrier is a significant problem. As Steve Janke points out, "80 percent of the United States population has no direct connection to anyone who has served in the United States military. They are not going to have an affinity for military hiring, or relate to it."





“When we interview and hire, we gravitate towards people that have shared experiences with us. But 80 percent of the United States population has no direct connection to anyone who has served in the United States military.”



**Steve Janke**

Founder of Mission Wisconsin &  
Semper Forward

## Veterans do not understand the commercial world


Lack of knowledge, Janke says, is “a both sides problem, not just an organizational entity problem.” Many veterans join the services from school and have little knowledge and understanding of the commercial world.

How does a combat engineer articulate the lifetime of skills they learned in surveying and mapping, project management, design, or quality assurance when they have no experience of civilian job descriptions and performance outcomes? How do they prove their value using language that non-military hiring managers understand? “Candidates need to understand how their skills translate to the civilian world, and they have to be able to speak to it and articulate it on a phone screen; otherwise they can’t get hired,” Janke says.

While programs exist to help veterans translate their skills, both sides need to take responsibility for bridging the civilian-military divide. Employers that actively help their teams understand the commercial value of the veteran community will be able to most effectively capitalize on this talent opportunity.

## Preconceptions about mental health issues

People who serve in the military may see active combat. They may be exposed to traumatic and life-threatening experiences that non-veterans cannot comprehend. Employers may be hesitant to hire someone who they perceive as high risk for Post



Traumatic Stress Disorder and other mental health problems—stigma still exists around mental health despite the strides being made to remove it.

In reality, PTSD is only slightly more common among veterans than civilians, and the numbers are far lower than many employers assume. [Only 7% of veterans will have PTSD](#) in their lifetime, compared to 6% of the general population.

Risk factors vary by military occupation, location, and time spent in a combat zone, but the vast majority of veterans do not have mental health issues that would affect their job performance.

## **Spouses are overlooked**

Military hiring programs can miss an important pool of talent—the civilian spouses of both veterans and active-duty military members. This group is not included in the [Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs](#) (OFCCP) annual veteran hiring benchmark of 5.2 percent.

The [unemployment rate](#) among the civilian spouses of active-duty service members is incredibly high at 21 percent, around four times the overall unemployment rate at the time of publication.

This group faces long-term employment challenges because of their spouses' change-of-station moves, which happen every two to three years. Employers may look warily at the prospect of hiring someone who will quit in a few years. And yet, this tenure is not radically lower than the [4.2-year median tenure](#) in a job for all workers, and it is almost identical to the typical [2.8 year tenure](#) of young (25–34 years old) job hoppers, a group on which employers have bet much.

This feels like a missed opportunity, particularly at a time when companies are finding it hard to recruit.



# Building a World-class Military Hiring Program

So how do we take the learnings from this data and apply them to our workplaces? Our experts suggest the following strategies to help organizations attract, hire and retain veterans and members of the military community.

Best of all? You need education, not budget, to get started. “Start by spending no money on this program,” Miles advises. “Take the [SHRM Veterans at Work Certificate Program](#) and get the basic understanding of what is going on. I watch a lot of companies try and spend money on their military hiring problem. That’s a way to fail.”

## **#1: Get military-friendly. Adjust your mindset.**

Getting “military-friendly” inside your organization sounds simple enough—once you have made the decision to recruit from this candidate pool, you are already halfway there. Yet, our experts say that employers don’t always come at a military hiring initiative from the right angle. There’s often an over-focus on the compliance aspects that come with hiring a veteran, and an underfocus on the value that hiring veterans can bring.

“People say, ‘5.2 percent for OFCCP compliance is our goal, so we need to hire 300 veterans this year,’” Miles says. “That’s going to be a measure of failure. You will be trying to hire simply to meet that benchmark, without putting a program in place to make sure the training, education and career goals align with what the service member can do and what the employer is looking for.”

For Miles, the starting point for any military hiring program is to fully articulate the business value these service members bring. “It is critically important to talk about the soft skills and transferable skills they bring into the workplace, and also to realize that you are not just hiring for entry-level roles. You’re hiring for every single role inside the organization. Because if you don’t have managers, directors, or VPs that are veterans inside the organization, nobody is going to be championing those roles. The program has to be created and developed inside an organizational structure.”



If you already have a developed or semi-developed veteran-hiring program, take an audit to determine whether you have a high concentration of functions or roles among your veteran employees, or in hourly vs salaried roles, seniority, etc. That's a sign that you have "jobs for veterans" rather than "jobs for people who happen to be veterans."

Challenge your mindset: Military hiring is about building a program that will be sustainable and successful in the long run, not just about filling seats.

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**Chris Miles**

Military and Veteran Relations  
Manager at Sonepar USA

## **#2: Get military-ready. Crosswalk military titles and civilian job titles.**

Lack of knowledge about the skills and attributes of someone transitioning out of the service is a primary blocker to hiring veterans. The candidate may have been a company commander, squadron leader or platoon sergeant, but what does that mean? What did they do on a day-to-day basis? How were they responsible for people? What level of decision-making were they responsible for?

Since few military career paths map directly to civilian jobs, internal team members (including TA leaders, recruiters and hiring managers) need to take some form of training to get up to speed. The Department of Labor's [Civilian-to-Military Occupation Translator](#) is a good place to start.



For a deeper understanding, our experts recommend partnering with organizations that specialize in military recruitment. Some job titles don't have a civilian corollary but there are many experience parallels. Specialist organizations with subject matter experts and military recruiters on staff can help talent professionals understand rank structure, MOS dictionaries, etc., to bridge the divide between civilian and military skill sets.

They also know who has succeeded in roles like yours in the past and can help guide your talent placement.

### **#3: Get military-educated. Educate and train your internal teams.**

Piggy-backing off of strategy #2, ensure your team is fully trained in understanding military titles and skills and know the right questions to ask during the hiring process. A specialist partner can help with this—Janke says his organization, Semper Forward, “Sends employers the fish, but also teaches them how to fish.”

“We encourage employers to listen to candidates as they come through so they can say, ‘Oh, I understand now what that [skillset] means to me and the value to our organization. So I’m going to give you grace when you put in your resume that you’re a platoon sergeant versus a program development leader or some other civilianized term.”

Miles recommends [LinkedIn Learning Courses](#) as a fast and cost-effective way to train teams that do not have a military background, especially in the art of military interviewing. “You’re trying to put the most professional product out front to be able to attract the most talent,” he says, noting that military recruiting is not that different to graduate recruiting in terms of understanding what motivates different candidates.

If vets have applied to your organization but haven’t been hired, audit your processes to identify where they were most likely to be removed from the hiring funnel. These are the points where it’s sensible to address any systemic issues.



## #4: Hire one veteran. Then gather momentum.

“Military hiring is like boiling the ocean. There are so many ways to get lost in what you want to do, that you never start anything because it becomes so overwhelming,” Janke says. “When companies approach us about building a veteran pipeline, and doing it correctly, we say, start with one. Hire one veteran and then hire another one, and then hire one after that. Eventually, you’re going to be hiring veterans.”

It is sound advice. Taking it slowly and learning from each new hire, you will get to know what works best for your organization. Pause after you have made a few hires and assess what could be done to improve the process—the experiences of employees who have made the transition can be a valuable source of insight for future recruitment. “It’s really like throwing a rock in the pond and seeing the ripples expand outwards,” Janke says. “But the key to starting the military hiring program is to hire.”

Miles agrees. “Hire one veteran. Bring on one [DOD Skillbridge](#) candidate. Bring on one military spouse. Then everybody understands what the process is, how to move forward with the process, and the value that the veteran community actually brings to an organization. That one hire could be a baseline goal.”

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Military and Veteran Relations  
Manager at Sonepar USA

## **#5: Create a spousal program. Hire the force behind the force.**

Military spouses are a separate but no less valuable part of the military community. Still, they often are confusing to employers: “The majority are very well educated, more so than their civilian counterparts, but they are transient and lack experience,” Janke says. “So when companies are looking to hire, they see an overqualified candidate and an under-experienced candidate at the same time.”

Miles’ advice is to focus on finding military spouses who would be great additions to your organization, even if they don’t have the years of industry or role experience you are looking for. Hire for potential and learning aptitude, and give them the opportunity to quickly learn the nuances of your particular company, industry, or role. “The fact that military spouses pick up and move with their family, change schools, households, homes, everything, every two or three years shows me they’re resilient,” he says. “They can change and adapt quickly.”

Another tip is to recognize that there is no “one size fits all” regarding career transitions for this talent group. Yes, some will move within a few years of starting a position, but others will not. The spouses of Reserves, National Guardsmen, and retired service members who are established in their communities are less likely to relocate. That could be a safe place to start if you are concerned with high turnover rates.

For organizations with multiple locations, could a relocating spouse transfer to another division? “If it’s the right person and the right fit, organizations can be flexible for them,” Miles says.



## #6: Put support programs in place. Partner up.

All employees thrive when they have a support system in place. However, for veterans who are transitioning back into civilian life, good support can mean the difference between a successful career and one that ends abruptly.

Military people will tell you they love being in the military because it is structured and mission-driven. They know exactly what their job is and what their progression looks like. When they get out, they want a similar feeling. Tailored onboarding, mentorship programs, and career path planning are essential to this group.

In the longer-term, Miles says that employers “must have support programs and supporting partnerships in place to continue to build growth inside the organization.” By that he means a continuous and collaborative process whereby veterans and employers come together to ensure that the education and career progression on offer aligns with the individual’s goals. Veterans Employee Resource Groups, representing veterans at every level in the company, can help keep everyone aligned and help military hires make impactful contributions to the company.

“The maintenance phase of your military program is the most important. You have to continually keep maintaining,” Miles says.



# Final Words

Military skills are transferable skills. It takes time for ex-military members to learn to tell their transferable skills' story, and for employers to learn how to listen. But once that happens, the future for both veterans and employers is bright.

As with most talent acquisition initiatives, creating a framework to bring military-affiliated talent into your organization can benefit you in so many ways. For the best chance of success, take it slowly, hiring one veteran or military spouse at a time. Access the resources and organizations available; they are there to support you. Commit to the mission—Nurturing a military-friendly company culture will give your plans a solidity that compliance and benchmarks alone cannot.

