

Creating “Veteran-Friendly” Workplaces: A Dual Perspective Study

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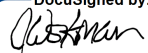
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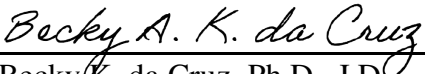
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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the concept of “veteran-friendly” workplaces from the perspectives of military veterans and civilian employers. The study uses a phenomenological design and narrative inquiry approach. It explores how veterans define and experience employer support and transition strategies. It also investigates how hiring managers and recruiters interpret and implement these practices. The research draws on Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (1981) and Military Transition Theory (Pedlar et al., 2019) to analyze in-depth interviews with veterans and organizational representatives from public and private sectors. Veterans prioritize introduction to workplace culture, mentorship, recognition of transferable skills, work-life balance, and community. Organizations focus on hiring incentives, employee assistance programs, and career development, but often lack standardized definitions or consistent practices for supporting veterans. The study finds discrepancies between veteran and employer perspectives, especially in onboarding, mentorship, and skills translation. It highlights the need for clearer standards and comprehensive support systems. These results enhance the understanding of “veteran-friendly” practices and provide actionable recommendations for organizations to improve veteran integration, retention, and well-being in the civilian workforce.

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## DEDICATION

*To my Dad*, you left us soon after I was accepted to the program, but your love and belief in me still inspire me every day. This achievement belongs to both of us. I miss you always.

*To the service members and veterans lost to war, and to those lost to the war at home—* Your courage, sacrifice, and struggles will never be forgotten. This work is dedicated to your memory, your battles seen and unseen, and to the hope this research inspires greater understanding, compassion, and support for all who serve.

## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction to the Study**

Picture being thrust into an environment you have readily chosen, yet you are filled with fear and disoriented because you have no idea how to behave or speak under the authority figure present. Overwhelmed by a rhythm that feels intentionally chaotic and you must rely heavily on those who have joined the same organization. Upon completing the mental and physical challenges of military entrance, a collective has formed, comprised of members who share a common mission and vision. The military environment differs from civilian workplaces, as the community is self-sustaining. The culture encompasses a distinct language, attire, grooming standards, hierarchy, and protocols for events, ranging from training to celebrations. The reach of this unique culture extends beyond standard working hours, encompassing not only living arrangements and family dynamics but also personal relationships and social interactions.

Preparing to leave military service also means leaving a community. A familiar lifestyle with security in norms, despite geographic location or economic factors. Leaving a career you have spent countless hours perfecting or a lifetime career goal you achieved, to now face uncertainty in how to find a purposeful and gainful second career. The support system you have come to rely on is no longer readily available, and the rank on your collar is no longer in daily view as a reminder of your identity and role. Where do you belong in your new community? How will you take your experiences and skills and contribute to your next career field? How do you decide which company will be the best

fit? These are a few of the questions service members often face as they transition from the military to civilian life.

The Department of Defense reported that in 2018, 90% of eligible service members, 138,256 personnel, participated in transition readiness seminars to prepare for leaving the military (GAO, 2019). Although the current transition curriculum focuses on valuable topics, reliance on veterans to educate civilian employers continues, as the veteran population has decreased to 5.2% of the workforce, making it less likely for hiring managers and supervisors to have a military understanding (Department of Labor [DOL], 2022).

The military's specialized training and induction process fosters an identity and sense of belonging that is difficult to recreate in the civilian world (Doe & Doe, 2013). This transformation and the complexities of the experience are referred to as “reverse culture shock” when service members depart from their respective branches (Cooper et al., 2016; Opengart, 2021). Transitioning from military to civilian life is a unique journey for every veteran. Their experiences, skills, and challenges are distinct, making their reintegration into society a unique and distinct path. This requires a deeper understanding of the veteran transition's uniqueness and needs, with a thoughtful and tailored approach to support their transition to the civilian workforce. Service members preparing for transition can feel unprepared or overwhelmed when translating their skills into civilian terms, and many experience unemployment for a period after separating from service (Alonso et al., 2021). Personal and professional networks can help fill the void left by government-sponsored transition seminars since these programs cannot be tailored to the individual (Alonso et al., 2021). Former personnel may feel the loss of a support network

that helped them adapt to military life and now must seek new resources to fill that gap (Krigbaum et al., 2020).

Companies and organizations use the term “veteran-friendly” to attract and support uniquely qualified individuals who can fill vacancies and take on roles ranging from entry-level to senior leadership. Veterans searching for their next career may be drawn to these companies because the organizations understand and appreciate their skills and experiences. Keeling (2018) has highlighted the importance of feeling valued and being part of something greater than oneself, a characteristic that veterans desire. Kumar (2021) finds that meaning and purpose correlate with identity and an individual’s self-esteem, contributing to overall well-being (Kirchner et al., 2021; Kumar, 2021).

Transitions such as entering the workforce, pursuing higher education, relocating, or making a career change occur throughout life. To ensure a seamless transition, considerable time and effort are required to develop a strategy for navigating the process. Transition programs often lead to employment, but each service member’s transition is unique. Transition Theory, introduced by Schlossberg (1981), explains that individuals can experience a loss of identity, a lack of purpose, and uncertainty in relationships during times of transition. Service members preparing to transition into the civilian workforce participate in classes that prepare them for college, employment, and financial readiness (Whitworth et al., 2020). Congress mandated transition programs, placing service members responsible for translating their skills and adapting to a civilian workforce environment or higher education (Department of Defense [DoD], 2019). These programs follow Schlossberg’s model, educating service members on career search strategies, acknowledging the impending role change, and recognizing the varying

degrees of mental and emotional stress associated with transition—all areas that Schlossberg's model addresses (Schlossberg, 2011). Continuation of this support within the civilian workforce can promote the assimilation process, help reshape the veteran's identity, and educate them on career development pathways, facilitating purposeful and gainful employment as they transition.

Although veteran unemployment rates have declined, Kirchner et al. (2021) examined veteran turnover rates. Despite companies claiming to be “veteran-friendly,” they found that 50% of veterans left their first job after military separation within a year. Kirchner et al. (2021) further pointed out that no standard definition of “veteran-friendly” is utilized, leaving it to the company's discretion. There is a lack of accountability for their claims and no clear standard or badge exists to validate a company's understanding of “veteran-friendly” practices. The civilian workforce could examine strategies colleges and universities use to set a level of expectation for student veterans.

After years of institutions of higher learning employing predatory practices when recruiting veterans to attend school, in 2012, President Obama signed an Executive Order titled Principles of Excellence (Executive Order No. 13607, 2012). The order was a mandate for all new institutions of higher learning wishing to benefit from the G.I. Bill, and schools previously enrolled with the Veterans Administration were strongly encouraged to sign the agreement (Executive Order No. 13607, 2012). Colleges and universities that signed the document agreed to provide clear policies and accurate reporting on graduation and job placement rates. Schools demonstrate support by excusing absences for military service and ending aggressive recruiting practices that target military-affiliated students. The policy protects veterans, allows them to use the

standard in the selection process, and holds institutions accountable (Executive Order No. 13607, 2012). However, there is a need to protect the well-being of veterans and place the same reverence on civilian employers. To date, training opportunities are available for companies to participate in, as well as tax incentives for hiring veterans. Still, no policy exists for companies to sign, holding them accountable for marketing themselves as “veteran-friendly” and leaving transitioning service members and veterans unsure of what to expect in those environments. There may be a gap between the expectations a veteran has about what they perceive as a “veteran-friendly” workplace and a company’s perspective. A policy like the executive order could help to set clear expectations for both parties.

Some companies have training programs and stand out for their business practices of “softening the landing” for veterans (Opengart, 2021, p. 5). Companies like Amazon and GE have specific practices for hiring and retaining veterans (Opengart, 2021). These companies use language familiar to veterans in job descriptions and mentorship programs (Opengart, 2021). Human resource professionals can provide valuable information as veterans integrate into the civilian workforce. They can explain employment-related benefits, review organizational policies and procedures, present information using military jargon to clarify meaning, and share additional resources the company offers, such as formal training programs or mentorship opportunities (Alonso et al., 2021). Companies typically provide onboarding to all employees; human resource professionals may find understanding military culture and experience useful in creating a supportive environment and adapting more smoothly to their new career. The onboarding process can reinforce Schlossberg’s (2011) components of transition: situation, self, support, and

strategies (Carpenter & Silberman, 2020). Ensuring that veterans understand the organization's desire to have them as part of their workforce, that their experiences and skills are valued, and that the company provides resources for support is crucial. This allows veterans to continue growing professionally and personally within the organization (Carpenter & Silberman, 2020).

Outside of companies' internal systems of "veteran-friendly" strategies, there are outside avenues companies can participate in to validate their "veteran-friendly" status. American Job Centers provide information and training to businesses, assist with writing position descriptions, and offer job fair locations and skills translation (DOL, 2022). The training is a valuable tool for companies to leverage their knowledge in recruiting and retaining veteran employees. Still, the training is not a requirement for the company to market itself as "veteran-friendly." Veteran Jobs Mission has collaborated with over 300 companies to provide resources and toolkits to establish or enhance veteran employment programs (Veteran Jobs Mission, 2024). The program is optional, and although the number of participants has significantly grown, the training to market the company as "veteran-friendly" is not required. The non-profit organization VETS offers workshops for transitioning service members and veterans, as well as low-cost seminars for employers at various levels of designation. The organization offers a three-tier designation based on education and continued support provided to employees. Organizations can be designated as "veteran-friendly," "veteran-ready," and "veteran-focused," allowing career-seeking veterans to use these designations to understand the level of military cultural competence and training the organization has completed (VETS, 2022).

Companies recruit and hire veterans for various reasons, but what practices are they employing beyond the hiring process to be considered "veteran-friendly"? A sense of value can be derived from the organization's ability to translate the veteran's military skills and assist in building civilian career goals for the veteran to work towards (Carpenter & Silberman, 2020). Recognizing veteran employees on Veterans Day or other military-related celebrations is one practice companies use to show appreciation and reinforce positive perceptions of military service (Agard, 2017). Hiring practices that align veterans with roles based on their experience, skills, and education contribute to identity reform and a sense of belonging, as veterans can confidently engage in the new environment (Agard, 2017; Kirchner et al., 2021). Placement in appropriate roles requires vacancy announcements to be written clearly, and HR professionals to be familiar with translating skills to tailor programs that meet the needs of veteran employees (Kirchner et al., 2021). Since the increased use of technology in reviewing applicants, the use of action-oriented language, clearly defining preferred versus required qualifications, and recognizing transferable skills like leadership align with "veteran-friendly" practices. Defined career development plans and objectives benefit all employees; veterans may still need additional support when developing career goals due to their unfamiliarity with civilian career pathways or credentialing opportunities within the organization (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2020).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The veteran population has continued to decline, and in 2022, the percentage of veterans in the workforce dropped to 5.2% (DOL, 2022), resulting in a smaller segment of the civilian workforce with military experience and a unique understanding of

skillsets. The veteran population continues to decrease, but companies use “veteran-friendly” terminology in their recruiting practices. In that case, it is essential to understand more about veterans’ needs as they navigate this transition. Organizations may invest in resources and strategies they perceive as “veteran-friendly,” yet which may not be regarded as such by the employee or potential candidate. Changes in training opportunities, experiences, military occupations, and technology that impact the skills acquired from military service will necessitate an evolution of “veteran-friendly” practices. If there is a gap between veteran and organizational perspectives, time and money could be misappropriated and talent acquisition could be hindered. Investigating varying perceptions of “veteran-friendly” practices is crucial for organizations to offer more practical and meaningful approaches to potential veteran employees, fostering a truly inclusive workplace, and supporting all employees.

Tao and Campbell (2020) suggest several steps in creating a “veteran-friendly” environment: clear communication, role clarity, and career development. This study aims to define “veteran-friendly” practices from the veteran’s viewpoint, in comparison to a “veteran-friendly” company culture. Breaking down military stereotypes could promote the acculturation process and increase veteran employee retention. Veterans enter the civilian workforce with unique experiences. Companies that understand the skills and military culture of these new employees can positively impact the well-being of veterans and the retention of these uniquely qualified employees (Kirchner et al., 2021).

Human adaptation has been extensively researched in various contexts, including typical life milestones, unexpected loss, and career change (Schlossberg, 1981). This body of research provides a valuable framework for defining “veteran-friendly” and

identifying best practices within civilian workplaces. A strong sense of belonging among service members is crucial for reinforcing the military's strength and cohesion (Misca et al., 2023). Kintzle et al. (2018) discussed the importance of social connectedness and overall well-being, which is even more significant for the veteran population. Veterans may feel disoriented and uncertain about their place among civilians, as they are accustomed to a structured environment and a built-in community. This unfamiliarity, even in environments they encountered before their service, may amplify mental health issues and feelings of uncertainty about their purpose. These research questions are essential to getting to the root of what it means to be "veteran-friendly" on the broader spectrum.

Although demographic information such as discharge characteristics, time in service, and gender will be collected, these factors will not be the primary focus of the study. The identification of dominant factors from the veteran perspective, related to their lived experiences compared to company practices identified as "veteran-friendly," will be at the center of the study, utilizing Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 2011) and Military Transition Theory (Pedlar et al., 2019) to understand the process. An individual's transition trajectory is unique because various external and historical factors may influence the trajectory of a transition. This study will focus on the broader scope of the phenomenon and compare firsthand perspectives of those experiencing the transition with those involved in the transition process.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study examines the assimilation process that veterans experience as they transition into civilian work environments. The primary objective is to reveal the true

meaning of being "veteran-friendly" through compelling, in-depth narratives from veterans and civilian employers who identify as "veteran-friendly." The aim is to provide an extensive guide to impactful practices and strong support systems to enhance company onboarding, professional development, and retention programs—ultimately enabling veteran employees to thrive in their new careers.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will guide this study:

1. How do veterans define "veteran-friendly" employer support and strategies based on their experiences with employers during their first year of civilian employment?
2. How do hiring managers and recruiters in civilian work environments understand specific practices and strategies as being "veteran-friendly"?
3. In what ways does the vision of "veteran-friendly" reflecting the viewpoints of both veterans and companies look like?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The phrase "veteran-friendly" can have multiple interpretations depending on the stakeholders' different perspectives, and grasping its meaning requires a systematic approach that connects fundamental ideas to a theoretical basis. This framework guides the evaluation of best practices within "veteran-friendly" organizations, clarifying what the term encompasses. Established theories and pertinent literature shed light on the significant connections between the views of veterans and civilians.

This framework integrates Schlossberg's transition theory (2011) with military transition theory (Pedlar et al., 2019), contributing to the existing body of research and providing a comprehensive methodology for creating a "veteran-friendly" work

environment that supports the retention of veteran employees. It highlights the necessity for data collection and analysis, linking theoretical concepts and practical applications. The aim is to communicate specific “veteran-friendly” strategies and foster broader discussions about the impact of civilian employment on the transition process.

### **Theoretical Premises**

Schlossberg’s transition model explains the interaction between the factors influencing a person’s transition. Based on the process of “moving in, moving through, and moving out” (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). The 4S system can connect to the process and other factors impacting major life transitions. Situation: relates to the stressors and timing of the transition. Self refers to the mindset and past experiences related to the transition. Support: Peer, family, and professional support can play a part in the transition. Strategy: connected to coping mechanisms and perspective on the transition. Strategy and support are related to company training/initiatives as well as family and peer interaction, while self and situation are related to defining “veteran-friendly.” All four S’s are related to secondary factors potentially impacting how a veteran navigates the four strategies.

Beginning with the first “S” situation, the military provides a specific environment where each service member lives, works, and often socializes. Service members also have limited control over when they prepare for transition, especially those who are medically separated or released due to legal reasons. The limited control and unknowns of no longer living in a structured environment can add stress and a sense of uncertainty about one's place. Regaining a sense of belonging within civilian culture has been correlated with overall well-being and agency (Keeling et al., 2019; Minnis, 2020).

The strategy of self begins with understanding how individuals view themselves and their interpretation of their experiences. When service members transition, they are also ending a chapter in their lives, which may cause uneasiness about their sense of belonging or the feeling of being viewed as less than valuable (Barclay, 2017). Companies can support a successful transition by setting clear expectations and understanding the needs of veterans who may need support resources to adjust (Carpenter & Silberman, 2020).

The servicemember does not always select military occupations upon entry; not every occupation has an identical civilian counterpart. The transitioning service member must educate civilian organizations on how to translate their skills for their desired career field. The shaping of identity becomes significantly meaningful when many service members enter active duty, the transition from adolescence to young adulthood (Carpenter & Silberman, 2020). Suppose the service member seeks a post-separation career unrelated to their military occupation. In that case, the veteran may struggle to translate their training and experience into civilian terms, and human resource professionals risk overlooking a potential candidate or misplacing the veteran in a role that is not ideally suited for their goals. If an employee is placed in a role for which the veteran is not well-suited, either overqualified or underqualified, their self-identity could psychologically impact their well-being (Carpenter & Silberman, 2020; Keeling et al., 2019; Susanto et al., 2024). Organizations should avoid stereotyping veterans based on misinformation or past negative interactions. Grouping all service members in categories of being angry or claiming all veterans have some form of mental health challenges could bias the hiring process. Appropriate questioning, focusing on skills and relevant

experience during the interview process and onboarding, conveys that the company values the candidate and reinforces the veteran's self-worth.

The timing and experiences before and during military service can impact the transition, influencing the veteran's self-perception and their place in their worldview. Medical and legal separations can disrupt the natural progression of a military contract, leaving the service member with an unknown timeline (Castro et al., 2019). This barrier can be overcome with adequate support; the third "S" in Schlossberg's model (2011) can help address this barrier.

Support is a plentiful resource found within the military community. Military installations provide comprehensive support for every phase of life. Mental, financial, spiritual, physical, and professional support is consistent and readily available to service members and their families. When a service member leaves service, access to these systems is either revoked or limited. The support strategy can meet the needs of veterans as they transition through the process. Veterans may have received support from their peers and leadership while in service, a system they may no longer have or are now distanced from (Carpenter & Silberman, 2020). Organizations hiring veterans need to evaluate veteran experiences related to the civilian position and explore cultural competency training, especially for human resource personnel (Minnis, 2020). Mentorship or peer-to-peer programs can help veterans adapt to accepted behaviors and language, and increase socialization within civilian organizations (Cluff, 2022; Minnis, 2020). Understanding the expectations of veterans can be beneficial in designing relevant programs and resources (Susanto et al., 2024). This practice would not only benefit

veteran employees but also the entire organization, with the potential to increase talent retention.

The final “S” represents strategies. Strategies can relate to professional and career development within the new company or organization. If a company can recognize transferable skills, there is an opportunity for the veteran to begin re-identifying and positively impacting their well-being with a newfound role in the civilian environment (Carpenter & Silberman, 2020). Civilian organizations must recognize that service members will leave the military at various stages in their lives and may differ in their career goals and confidence in civilian employment processes, such as resume writing (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2020). Opportunities for training, coaching, and individual career counseling can help veterans explore their careers and develop skills within the organization (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2020). The identification of strengths and interests could be uncovered during career counseling. Companies can utilize this information to place veterans in positions where they can leverage their military experiences, encouraging them to transition into civilian culture (Minnis, 2020). A formal career development plan is familiar to veterans, allowing them to see a clear path to a civilian career.

Schlossberg’s theory laid the foundation for understanding the transition process and contributed to the development of a second theoretical framework that will inform the study. Military Transition Theory (MTT) (Pedlar et al., 2019) focuses on the uniqueness of, or provides a more profound understanding of, the social identity shift experienced by veterans. The MTT theory and Schlossberg’s theory explain the military-to-civilian transition experience. MTT builds from Transition Theory, expanding on the

role of connectedness and sense of purpose (Kintzle et al., 2018). The expansion of the Transition Theory solidifies that the military-to-civilian transition is a process every veteran navigates, not reserved for only those with combat experience or traumatic events (Kleykamp et al., 2021).

The focus of MTT highlights the importance of service members' pre-planning for the transition and the significance of socializing in their anticipated civilian environment (Kleykamp et al., 2021). The veteran may feel alienated if the military service environment is no longer an option and the new civilian culture does not provide sufficient support (Cooper et al., 2016). The military structure uses rank and occupational expertise to determine value. Opportunities to learn skills related to civilian norms, while employers and veterans understand how to leverage military skills to gain civilian competence, prepare the veteran for successful integration (Cooper et al., 2016).

Schlossberg's Model of Transition (Schlossberg, 2011) and Military Transition Theory (Pedlar et al., 2019) are comprehensive and detail the transition process from the initial phase to the final one. Other transition theories focus more on human development. In contrast, these two theories emphasize the transition to a new career. The MTT explicitly addresses the nature of military transition, leading to an updated curriculum for service members and the development of the Success in Transition model (Whitworth et al., 2020).

Although there are many evolving efforts to promote successful military transition at the company level, a consistent standard across states is needed, which leaves relocating veterans at risk of misunderstanding the standards used and misinterpreting any badges employed by the company. Therefore, this study aims to identify factors and

develop a standard of best practices that address each phase of the theories presented. The two theories have been studied extensively within the higher education environment; however, further examination within the workforce context could provide opportunities for intervention and foster a more accurate, “veteran-friendly” environment, along with a revised curriculum based on lived experiences and in-depth narratives.

### **Epistemological Premise**

Perception is reality, and this study is grounded in a constructivist epistemology, which posits that knowledge is constructed through lived experiences and interpretations (Maxwell, 2013). This viewpoint challenges the idea of fixed reality and acknowledges the existence of multiple realities shaped by personal perspectives and influences. Knowledge is created through meaning-making, and the reality of any organization represents just one of many interpretations.

This study extensively uses qualitative methods to explore participants’ lived experiences, emphasizing their insights and perspectives. Using a phenomenological design with a narrative inquiry approach yields detailed, descriptive data through interviews and policy analysis, facilitating the interpretation of meaning from these conversations. The researcher’s positionality is recognized as crucial for knowledge production, grounded in extensive experience within the veteran community and interactions with civilian workforce recruiters. By adopting a constructivist approach, this study aims to illuminate the phenomenon by focusing on lived experiences rather than broad generalizations. The military transition process is unique to each individual and is influenced by external factors, some of which are beyond their control.

## **Methodological Premises**

The theoretical, practical, and individual experiences form the methodological premise for this study. Transition experiences will vary based on various external factors, some of which are beyond the participants' control. A foundational characteristic of phenomenology is its subjectivity (Kim, 2016, p. 55). A person with military experience may have a different understanding of reality, and their worldview may have been shaped by experiences, highlighting the need for a more in-depth and thorough investigation from the veteran's perspective (Fossey et al., 2019; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Kintzle et al., 2018). Employing a phenomenological framework with a narrative inquiry approach examines the influence of "veteran-friendly" practices within organizations on the lived experiences of veterans during their transition from military to civilian life. Capturing the essence of the transition experience through the lens of narrative inquiry facilitates the gathering and analysis of a veteran's perception of reality.

The existing literature gap highlights the necessity for a more comprehensive understanding. This study combines insights from various organizations that use "veteran-friendly" language in their marketing to gather the viewpoints of human resource professionals tasked with developing and implementing policies and procedures. By comparing narratives, this research aims to reveal how "veteran-friendly" practices are both intended and perceived, as well as the associated experiences. By employing a phenomenological approach, the focus shifts from the specific meaning a veteran derives from their experience to a broader examination of the phenomenon (Kim, 2016). Examining the broader phenomenon offers an opportunity to apply new knowledge beyond the veteran community.

Incorporating perspectives from both organizations and veterans sheds light on how closely initiatives labeled “veteran-friendly” align with the real transition experiences of veterans. By comparing narratives, we aim to highlight themes of consensus and divergence, ultimately crafting a guide of effective best practices to enhance retention and support veteran well-being.

By comparing two data sets, we can better contextualize how organizational practices shape veteran identity, foster a sense of belonging, and facilitate smooth reintegration, while considering the structures and intentions of organizations during onboarding and long-term career development.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to a comprehensive understanding of the term “veteran-friendly,” derived from a comparative analysis of two narratives: veteran perspectives and those of civilian human resource professionals. This research addresses a critical gap in the existing literature by clarifying the operational definition of “veteran-friendly” and outlining best practices for civilian organizations that promote themselves to the military community as such. Furthermore, it compares the perspectives of veterans and hiring managers, aiding in the development of a standardized protocol for onboarding and professional growth that can be tailored to individual needs. As veterans enter the civilian workforce and a generation begins to retire at a high rate, it is imperative to accurately identify the skills they possess and implement effective strategies for their placement and retention, particularly in light of the current economic climate.

The term “veteran-friendly” holds significant weight; however, its meaning varies widely across organizations and veterans. Many companies proudly label themselves "veteran-friendly" in their marketing and recruitment efforts, but this term can be misleading without a clear, standardized definition. Identifying an organization that supports veterans is crucial for service members transitioning to civilian roles. However, the perceptions of being “veteran-friendly” can differ significantly from those of the companies. This disconnect affects service members' job searches and can have lasting repercussions for organizations that may fail to deliver on their promises. While current studies primarily focus on the veteran’s perspective, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the military transition process and veteran-friendly practices by examining both the veteran's and employer’s perspectives. To bridge this gap, companies must offer genuine support and clarity in their veteran initiatives, ensuring that veterans and organizations reap the benefits.

There is a lack of empirical research on this topic. This study will provide valuable empirical evidence on the military-to-civilian workforce transition, particularly regarding veteran-friendly practices. It emphasizes the importance of a broader understanding of the military-to-civilian transition, encompassing the entire process, from initial employment to long-term adaptation.

### **Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

#### ***Assumptions***

The first assumption throughout this study is that gathering veterans' narratives will enhance our understanding of their need for support and career development. I believe that veteran-friendly practices have a significant influence on military transition

and integration into the civilian workforce. Once analyzed, these lived experiences will create an outline that organizations aiming to recruit and retain veterans can use to develop their recruitment and retention strategies further.

The second assumption is that interviewing human resource professionals will provide perspectives reflecting organizational policies and initiatives focused on recruiting, developing, and retaining veteran candidates. Both data sets are expected to complement each other, forming a comprehensive understanding of organizations' roles in the transition process and clearly illustrating the meaning of being “veteran-friendly”.

### ***Delimitations***

This study focused on the organizational use of “veteran-friendly” as a recruitment tool and its implied meaning in comparison to veteran expectations—the research questions centered on characterizing “veteran-friendly” and best practices within the organization. The research problem was chosen because there is very little literature comparing the two perspectives, aiming to get to the root of the problem from an undefined phrase.

Veteran participants were not limited by location. Still, diligence was taken to ensure an even distribution of participation among veterans who served one period of service (4 years) and those who retired from military service after 20 years or more. Participants were not limited by their occupational field, discharge status, or branch of service.

Organizational selection encompassed the private and public sectors. Recruiters, onboarding specialists, and career development professionals represented their organizations. Selection was limited to these professionals, as they are the subject matter

experts on veteran initiatives and policies within their companies and are directly involved in hiring, onboarding, and company acculturation. These professionals are responsible for implementing these programs and understanding the design of any initiatives or career development processes. The study's findings may be relevant to any organization seeking to employ and retain veteran employees across various career fields.

### ***Limitations***

Purposive sampling may present issues with generalization. The selected sample may not accurately represent specific geographic, cultural, political, or racial populations, which could result in an incomplete understanding of the diversity within the broader veteran or employer groups. A purposive sample will be used, and although efforts will be made to minimize sampling bias, this sampling method poses challenges for generalizing the findings to a larger population. Collecting data through interviews may introduce biases, as data reported by an organizational representative might be skewed to reflect a preferred status.

Given the specificity of the military to civilian transition, the validity may be at risk, findings may not generalize to other populations, and additional variables could limit the ability to conclude. The potential for researcher bias must be acknowledged, as it may affect the interpretation of results. Constraints may also be placed on organizational representatives, limiting their ability to speak freely and thereby reducing the sample size.

### **Definitions**

For this study, operational definitions are provided for the following terms.

*Military Transition:* refers to the process by which an active-duty armed forces member prepares to depart from their contractual obligations with the Department of Defense. This departure may occur due to planned or unplanned circumstances, and the individual may be leaving to pursue another career, seek education, or retire.

*Servicemember:* Any individual who is currently serving in the armed forces in any capacity.

*Veteran-friendly:* This term refers to policies, environments, or organizations that accommodate the unique needs of service members.

*Veteran:* Any individual who served in the armed forces for any period, receiving an official discharge document.

*Civilian Workforce (Employment):* refers to full-time employment outside of military service, within any career field, and any ownership classification (public, non-profit, private).

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter highlighted the necessity for organizations to understand the definition of “veteran-friendly” and support veterans transitioning to civilian life. Bridging the gap between the two cultures can enhance veteran retention with companies and the veteran’s well-being. Standardizing protocol for onboarding and professional development can be customized to meet the unique needs of veterans. There is value in connectedness and aiding the reintegration process. Aligning the two perceptions and accounting for the term’s use can help prevent misunderstandings and unmet expectations.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of the Literature**

This section reviews key transition theories to identify the challenges and needs of veterans during the workforce transition and inform veteran-friendly practices within companies. Specifically, it introduces Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a framework for understanding career transitions across the human lifespan and explores its relevance to the military-to-civilian shift. Additionally, this chapter examines Military Transition Theory (Pedlar et al., 2019) to offer a deeper understanding of the unique aspects of veterans' workforce integration. The review concludes with a discussion on organizational awareness of veteran-friendly practices and the impact of company culture on the retention and well-being of veterans.

#### **Transition Theory**

Few things are guaranteed in a person's life, but one certainty is that everyone will undergo transitions. The fundamental idea behind any transition is recognizing that change can affect many areas of an individual's life (Schlossberg, 2011). These moments are independent of factors like chronological age and identity (Schlossberg, 1981, 2011). A transition is characterized by letting go of familiar things and embracing a new role (Schlossberg, 2011). Support strategies, resources, and programs can be developed with a clear understanding of the transition process and related experiences.

Life is filled with transitions: the first day of school, graduation, career changes, and death. Research on human adaptation concludes that the transition process and timing

are not always determined by chronological age but are more influenced by life stage (Schlossberg, 1981). Experts define transition in various ways, whether it is marked by the establishment of new assumptions (Parkes, 1971) or the formation of a new identity (Weiss, 1976). This shift can be viewed as positive or negative, depending on the balance between resources and deficits (Schlossberg, 1981). Since individual experiences can vary, a closer examination of the process enhances our understanding of transition.

The challenge in examining transitions is that no two transitions are identical due to the numerous factors influencing the process. The start of a transition begins with an ending, which can cause disruption but also offers an opportunity for growth (Barclay, 2017). Researchers have studied transitions, applying concepts to various life events. Schlossberg's theory provides a general framework that can be used for specific populations. First, a review of Schlossberg's 4S model will be presented. A focused examination will follow, discussing the Military Transition Theory (Pedlar et al., 2019) and, finally, addressing the role of the civilian workforce and organizations in the transition process.

### ***Schlossberg's Transition Theory***

Understanding life experiences and how humans cope with and adjust to these experiences forms the foundation of Schlossberg's transition theory. The model illustrates how people navigate these shifts and the factors influencing their adaptation. Life transitions can stem from career changes, educational milestones, and the loss or gain of personal relationships. These developments have a singular impact and shape multiple areas of life. The examination of transition characteristics flourished in the 1970s, with researchers concluding that three main categories influence human

adaptation to transitions (Schlossberg, 1981). Transition characteristics—including changes in role, timing, stress, available support, and the individual’s traits—contribute to the transition process (Schlossberg, 1981).

As the population ages, research has increasingly focused on how people navigate the changes that occur beyond adolescence to adulthood (Schlossberg, 1981). There are conflicting viewpoints on whether transitions are connected to chronological age; however, Levinson (1978) found that individuals experiencing specific transitions tend to encounter them at relatively similar ages. This follows the psychosocial development theory, which states that stages occur in a sequential order and can be predicted based on biological age and cultural expectations (Levinson, 1978). Other researchers see transitions as shaped by life events, independent of chronological age, with each stage of life building upon the next to guide the process (Schlossberg, 1981). Considering the many transition theories and the reasoning behind each, Schlossberg developed a transition model that incorporates the variables presented in each theory and does not limit what defines or characterizes a transition. Schlossberg (1981) describes the shift as an existing or non-existent event that alters how individuals perceive themselves or their worldview, necessitating adjustments in their behavior and interactions. Regardless of whether one aligns with the idea that transitions are tied to chronological age or believes that critical life events shape significant points in a person’s life, individuals experience transitions. Understanding these experiences is crucial for developing practical resources and informing decisions on social service funding.

Schlossberg began researching the theory after viewing a case of a spouse who had moved with their partner over several years and reached the point where the spouse

was no longer open to relocating (Schlossberg, 1981). What variables contributed to the change in mindset? How can we make sense of the experience or support the individual? What is different between a person who has been passed over for a promotion and a person who is grieving after losing a loved one? Both have decisions to make and variables that will contribute to those decisions, and both people will navigate through stages as they process their experiences (Schlossberg, 1981). These shifts in mindset, whether to grow or remain stagnant, a departure from one set of assumptions, and the development of a new set, can be applied to a vast array of life events and non-events. Once Schlossberg (1981) developed the broad theory of transition, it could be used with special populations. A group of employees undergoing a career change due to downsizing, widows of loved ones who battled terminal diseases, or military personnel preparing to transition to the civilian world.

The transition of military personnel to civilian life can occur, planned or unplanned, at various chronological ages and across a range of life stages. The nature of the transition and diversity of military culture provide an opportunity to explore how transition models can be applied and precisely how external resources contribute to the process, both successfully and unsuccessfully.

The period during which a military service member reintegrates into civilian life upon the end of their service is defined as transition (Forces in Mind Trust, 2013). Schlossberg's transition theory (2011) is essential because it provides a lens through which to understand the transition and the strategies used to navigate it. Everyone experiences a time of transition during their life, and these transitions vary by type. An anticipated transition is an event that the person prepares for (Schlossberg, 2011).

Sometimes, an unanticipated transition occurs, such as becoming ill or losing a job due to downsizing in a company. The third type of transition Schlossberg discussed is a non-event transition, which occurs when preparation for a transition takes place, but the transition never actually happens. The theory (Schlossberg, 2011; Ward, 2021; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015) provided factors considered when explaining how a service member transitions.

The first consideration in transition is the situation and the degree to which the service member feels they can control it (Ward, 2021). How a service member perceives their transition directly impacts the process. Timing, past experiences, and the duration of the service member's transition are all factors related to the situation (Ryan et al., 2011; Whitworth et al., 2020). Personnel who have an abrupt departure from service, whether it is due to lack of conformity or medical reasons, can have adjustment issues, perceive their situation as a failure, and can become "culturally disoriented" (p. 44), adding to an already burdensome process (Cooper et al., 2016).

The mindset of the service member is what Schlossberg (2011) deemed as the second "S" in the theory, standing for self. The way a person negotiates a situation reveals their state of mind and the coping strategies they will employ. Past experiences, demographics, and health all contribute to the transition response (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Whitworth et al., 2020). There has been a vast amount of research on the military-to-civilian transition focused on the psychological factors, such as post-traumatic stress (PTSD), that influence the viewpoint of the service member (Grimel, 2019). The culture of the military is mission-oriented, and when a veteran is unable to find employment or is underemployed, the result can be an identity crisis and adjustment issues (Ainspan et al.,

2018). The indoctrination processes a service member endures as they enter the military culture are transformative, and the formation of identity revolves around rank, job specialty, awards, and unity (Doe & Doe, 2013). Transitioning out of the service is compulsory and abbreviated compared to intake (Doe & Doe, 2013). Service members receive instruction on all aspects of their lives while under contract, but are released to navigate an unfamiliar environment and culture. Although mental health illnesses, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, have been researched, little is known about the impact of identity loss on the well-being of personnel.

The third factor in Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory belongs to support. Support is presented in various ways, and veterans perceive it as a sign of being cared for (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Several days of the current transition curriculum focus on employment, veteran support services, and education-related resources (Fossey et al., 2019; Whitworth et al., 2020). Institutions of higher learning have expanded veteran support services since the creation of the Post-9/11 education benefit, resulting in increased student veteran enrollment (Krigbaum et al., 2020). The military is a community built around mechanisms of readily accessible support, and service members have a defined purpose within the community. As the member transitions and works to regain meaning in their life, support to reconnect with the civilian world will support the creation of their new identity (Grimell, 2019). Employers could look to policies and practices within the education environment to build similar support systems.

The last aspect of Schlossberg's (2011) theory relates to the strategies available to service members as they transition. Student veterans can often receive assistance with stress management or support from a veteran liaison to overcome obstacles while

pursuing their education (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Campus organizations for veterans offer a sense of community that can be lost during the transition from military to civilian life and provide an environment that resembles military culture (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Again, the systems in place could be replicated inside the company environment. The current DoD curriculum offers a brief, generalized module on the cultural shift from a highly structured environment to a more individualistic one, along with the resources available for guidance (Duel et al., 2019; Whitworth et al., 2020). The module serves as a great starting point in preparing service members for the mental challenges that may arise, and it can be adapted to provide employers with valuable insight into this aspect of the transition process.

The four S's in Schlossberg's (2011) theory of transition individually impact one another and the transition process. If one area is less favorable or perceived as such by the service member, it may potentially influence the remaining categories (Schlossberg, 2011). Civilians unfamiliar with military culture may find it challenging to comprehend the transition from military to civilian life (Truusa & Castro, 2019). Still, Truusa and Castro (2019) used the "immigrant experience" (p. 14) as a metaphor for the experience a service member undergoes as they transition out of service. The service member must decide on employment, housing, and healthcare, and learn how to acclimate to civilian life. The experience can feel like entering an unfamiliar environment and trying to understand a language and culture foreign to them. Schlossberg's theory can be tailored for special populations, such as the veteran community.

### *Military Transition Theory*

Pedlar et al., (2019) introduced the Military Transition Theory (MTT), which is centered on identity and social connectedness among military personnel. The theory of military transition was introduced, building upon Schlossberg's framework. The new theory evolved from focusing on the population that experiences planned and unplanned transitions, immersed in a culture rich in identity formation, community, and diverse demographics. The need for a theory targeting the veteran population is valuable in improving the overall transition process, retaining highly skilled employees within organizations, saving companies time and money, and improving the overall well-being of our veteran community. A customized approach to understanding military transition is needed. Although generalized theoretical approaches can be applied, the veteran community is unique in lived experiences and timing, requiring a more tailored theoretical framework.

Using the MTT as a basis for their study, Flack and Kite (2021) investigated how social identity affects veteran well-being. The MTT shares similarities with Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory, as it consists of phases, and each element impacts the next. As service members transition out of the military, changes in their environment, identity, and even relationships can occur (Castro & Kintzle, 2014). It is essential to recognize that service members have formed trusting bonds with their fellow service members and developed an identity within the military culture (Flack & Kite, 2021). As a service member transitions from the military to civilian culture, creating a civilian identity is integral to the process (Flack & Kite, 2021).

Flack and Kite (2021) reported that social identity contributed to the overall well-being of the service member. Increased connections and social networking within the new civilian environment were predictors of a lower prevalence of mental health issues and a smoother acculturation process (Flack & Kite, 2021). They continued to assert that even when a service member had available ways to connect with resources, if they did not identify with their new culture, they could still feel isolated because they would not utilize the available networks (Flack & Kite, 2021). Approximately 5% of the nation has served in the military, making it an uncommon characteristic among people, which only widens the gap between the two cultures (Doe & Doe, 2013).

Culture stems from environmental context, and the military culture centers around the service members' occupation, rank, language, and structure (Aronson et al., 2019). Keeling's (2018) qualitative study highlighted the transitions of six service members who all discussed challenges with their movement to a civilian set of norms. Regaining a sense of autonomy proved to be the most taxing. Programs that provide training while the service member is still serving offer a safety net, allowing the military member to explore a new career, obtain civilian credentials, and intentionally rebuild their identity, making the transition between cultures less disconcerting (Keeling, 2018).

The cultural shift is only one of many challenges in the military-to-civilian transition. Still, it is an area that needs deeper exploration to unpack how the loss of cultural identity and the reforming of another contribute to or hinder the well-being of the nation's veteran population. Facilitators briefly reflect on the differences between civilian and military culture, providing a snapshot of available ways to bridge the two in the current curriculum (Kamarck, 2018). Updates made in the seminars provided to service

members include talking points on finding civilian career mentors, finding purposeful employment, and activities that help individuals define themselves separately from their military identities. Some states have adopted programs to train companies and organizations on creating “veteran-friendly” environments; however, these programs are optional, and the curriculum varies from state to state. A gained understanding of the phenomenon could have applicability to transitions during various milestones in life, outside of the military-to-civilian transition.

## **Military Transition and Veteran-Friendly Practices**

### ***Military and Civilian Workforce Culture Conflict***

The concept of acculturation has been in existence for years, primarily focusing on the changes that immigrants experience as they enter a new society (Berry, 2005). The veteran transition process examines factors beyond socioeconomic status, and service members may be transitioning to a workplace environment comprised of multiple individual cultures, as well as an accepted subculture within the workplace. When discussing the transition of service members to the civilian workforce, acknowledging subcultural differences is of significant value. The contextual meaning of military culture encompasses identity, a dynamic and robust structure that includes social control and strongly enforced disciplinary systems. The military is a unique subculture, but this research will focus on aspects of the transition experience related to identity reconstruction and role adaptation as service members transition to an environment not necessarily dominated by a single, specific culture.

On average, a person spends 90,000 hours of their lifetime at work (Neilson & Dunn, 2023). With such a significant amount of time spent in an environment shaped by

a core set of values, beliefs, and attitudes, it is unsurprising to recognize the impact this has on employees' attitudes and beliefs. A strong, positive organizational culture can guide employees by instilling values and shaping their interactions with peers and clients (Tsai, 2011). Embracing the culture fosters consistent behavior among its members, reduces conflict, and creates a healthier work environment, leading to higher job satisfaction (Tsai, 2011).

Organizational effectiveness is influenced by a company's values, leading to lower turnover rates and higher-quality outcomes (Sheridan, 1992). Finding satisfaction and purpose in a career leads to a job that goes beyond merely collecting a paycheck (Cluff, 2022). Developing and investing in people often transcends monetary rewards, focusing instead on community-building (Cluff, 2022). Fostering a sense of belonging and community has a positive impact on talent retention (Cluff, 2022). Some research has identified strong correlations between employee and organizational values. When these values align, additional factors, such as a higher level of commitment, have also been shown to influence retention (Sheridan, 1992). Both arguments support the same hypothesis: workplace culture is critical to an organization. Factors such as the desire for formal career development plans, work-life balance, appropriate employee placement, and collaborative work culture are not just veteran-specific needs related to organizational loyalty; they are essential for all employees within an organization (Gomathy, 2022; Susanto et al., 2024). Organizations wishing to retain key employees must develop and implement a multi-faceted retention strategy that may enhance their “veteran-friendly” status.

Securing employment is one of the most critical and challenging aspects of the transition process (Kintzle et al., 2018; Kirchner et al., 2021; Shue et al., 2021). Veterans often undergo a significant life change, experiencing a profound loss—the loss of a community and culture rich in history and highly structured (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). The veteran population is currently at an unprecedented low, resulting in a diminished understanding among organizations of the lived experiences, skills, and abilities of service members (Kirchner et al., 2021). Terms like “military-friendly” or “veteran-friendly” have become marketing strategies for many organizations, often used without a thorough consideration of what these terms mean to veterans seeking their next career opportunity (Kirchner et al., 2021). While organizations may consider hiring veterans a good practice, there is a lack of knowledge about how they define “veteran-friendly” (Kirchner et al., 2021).

Since the terrorist attacks in 2001, organizations have increased veteran hiring initiatives, adopting a self-declaration of being veteran-friendly without necessarily engaging in intentional, purposeful support of veteran employees and without a standard for the declaration (Kirchner & Minnis, 2018). Unemployment rates among veterans have continued to decrease. Still, a job retention survey conducted in 2014 (Maury et al., 2016) found that out of 1,284 participants, more than half had left their initial careers after separation. The most significant percentage, 27.54%, remained for no longer than 6 months (Maury et al., 2016). This low retention rate is costly not only to the organization but also to the veteran's well-being. The cost to a veteran can lead to identity loss, a lack of understanding of where they belong, and displacement (Ahern et al., 2015; Shue et al.,

2021). Over time, the impact of culture shock could lead to harmful behaviors (Shue et al., 2021).

A 2017 U.S. Office of Personnel Management survey revealed that veteran employment continues to grow within the federal workforce. However, newly hired veterans face a significantly lower retention rate than their civilian counterparts. Understanding the reasons behind this higher turnover rate is essential for organizational budgets, operational effectiveness, and the overall well-being of veteran employees. A literature review by LePage (2020), which examined 22 research articles, identified several themes related to the transition from military to civilian life. Six prominent themes emerged, particularly those linked to retention; culture clashes and skills mismatches were highlighted as factors affecting employee retention. Culture shock and miscommunication in translating military skill sets to civilian environments are common themes in studies on veteran integration into the civilian workforce (Kirchner et al., 2021; Maury et al., 2016; Shue et al., 2021).

Shue et al. (2021) found that veterans emphasized the need for adequate preparation time during their transition, expressing concerns that the transition program was too broad and insufficiently focused on individual circumstances. Most participants reported that their leadership did not adequately support their preparation needs or provide sufficient time for adequate planning during their pre-transition phase. The reshaping of identity and the search for a new purpose through a meaningful career were significant themes in Shue et al.'s research (2021). A recurring theme highlighted a misunderstanding between civilian and military cultures regarding lived experiences and the skills acquired through military training (Shue et al., 2021). The research draws an

analogy to the understanding of grief; veterans often confront the loss of a familiar life that offers embedded support and safety within their community. While numerous accounts of transition experiences have been documented, and the process varies among individuals, themes of support, identity, and structure consistently emerge in studies (Ahern et al., 2015; Elnitsky et al., 2017; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981). These three areas exist within the framework of civilian workforce culture. If there is potential for the transition timeline to be expedited or support is lacking while on active duty, employer support and structure will be invaluable.

A paper published by Optum in 2015 suggested that support systems for the civilian workforce could help address various barriers faced by veterans, including concerns related to mental and physical well-being, housing insecurity, and unemployment. However, as the veteran population declines, companies must understand the needs of the veterans they recruit and strive to retain them. Gaining this crucial insight starts with defining what it means to be veteran-friendly based on veterans' perceptions and experiences (Kirchner et al., 2021). Additionally, companies must clearly articulate the factors that make them veteran-friendly beyond simply hiring veterans (Kirchner et al., 2021). The study, conducted over three months, revealed several themes; however, the underlying challenge remains a lack of veteran-specific programs. While organizations seek to be perceived as veteran-friendly, a significant gap exists in understanding what that entails (Kirchner & Minnis, 2018; Kirchner et al., 2021).

The support systems that the military provides are easily accessible and integrated into the community. Support programs are offered through agencies such as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. However, systems within a veteran's chosen civilian

work environment may offer a tailored approach that specializes in the new career field and closely resembles programs familiar to the veteran. Internal programs would not only assist the veteran during onboarding but could also improve organizational retention. Understanding veterans' perceptions of what constitutes being "veteran-friendly" may ensure that civilian human resource programs are cost-efficient and effective.

### ***Veteran-Friendly Practices in the Workplace***

There has been minimal research defining employer-based "veteran-friendly" practices, and current studies focus on either the organization's viewpoint or the veteran's perspective, leaving the term with unclear expectations. Although research is limited, there is no shortage of organizations self-identifying as "veteran-friendly." Veteran unemployment continues to fall below that of their civilian counterparts (Kirchner et al., 2021), but veteran first-year attrition rates indicate a need to examine current practices for effectiveness and accuracy (Maury et al., 2016). We need to understand the existing landscape of practices and initiatives further to develop meaningful and effective "veteran-friendly" practices.

Kirchner and Minnis (2018) examined organizational websites to investigate how companies view veteran-friendliness. Four prominent recurring themes emerged from the studied companies: recruitment and hiring practices, career development and training, community involvement, and documentation of veteran hiring statistics (Kirchner & Minnis, 2018). These themes lay a strong foundation for defining veteran-friendliness. However, there is a need for more details regarding program initiatives, ongoing formal professional development, and actual support available beyond demographic data.

Although the study was small compared to the number of organizations that use military- or veteran-friendly language, the findings offer a framework to guide organizational efforts. The limited research on companies' views regarding veteran-friendly practices justifies this study. Veteran retention has a significant impact on a company's financial performance, and implementing a robust overall retention strategy for all employees is a sound business practice.

The interaction between human resource professionals and employees, including veteran candidates, exemplifies Schlossberg's transition theory, which identifies three distinct phases: anticipation, maintenance, and sustainment (Ford, 2017). All three phases contribute to employee retention; however, several studies conclude that nearly 50% of veterans leave their first job after service (Maury et al., 2016). Organizations face financial repercussions due to the high turnover rate and may also encounter potential mental impacts on veterans (Maury et al., 2016). Structured and effective human resource practices can result in positive outcomes, higher retention rates, and a more efficient workforce (Bauer, 2010; Ford, 2017).

Once recruiting is complete and the employee transitions to maintenance, practices have been identified that benefit veterans and can also be applied to traditional employees (Ford, 2017). Teams or partnerships of veterans, peer resource groups, and mentorship programs have been recognized (Ford, 2017). This part of the process aligns with Schlossberg's (2011) and Military Transition Theory (Pedlar et al., 2019) by gathering support to transition into a civilian workplace culture and reshape identity from a servicemember to a new team member. Employees who gain tenure with a company enter a phase of sustained employment (Ford, 2017). The final segment should include

ongoing employee support activities focused on career development and initiatives that take a more holistic approach, extending beyond regular working hours and environments. These programs and activities can cater to veterans and non-veterans (Ford, 2017).

Some veterans avoid pursuing careers with organizations that label themselves as “veteran-friendly.” They have expressed reasons for avoiding handouts or preferential treatment and strongly desire to be hired through non-veteran pathways (Ford, 2017). Nevertheless, retention issues persist regardless of whether veterans work for organizations that promote themselves as “veteran-friendly” or those without such branding (Kirchner et al., 2021; Maury et al., 2016). A common reason veterans leave is a lack of support, career development, and skills mismatch (Dexter, 2020). Organizations must recognize that the needs of their veteran employees can vary and are influenced by multiple external and internal factors (Dexter, 2020; Ford, 2017). Therefore, organizational practices must remain flexible and subject to evaluation to ensure that needs are addressed (Ford, 2017). Often, companies worry about limited funding; however, organizations do not need to disrupt their current human resources practices systematically. Insight into skills translation and military culture will allow veteran-specific customization within budgetary constraints (Dexter, 2020; Hammer et al., 2019; Hunter-Johnson et al., 2020). Through training and evaluation, organizations have the potential to bridge the gap between their definition of “veteran-friendly” and how veterans define the term.

The gap between the veteran and civilian workforce is not just a concern for veterans. It affects the community's well-being, and addressing it will benefit everyone,

regardless of their military ties. Employment is directly linked to individual health, while unemployment or underemployment can lead to health disparities (Keeling et al., 2019; Kintzle et al., 2018). Mental distress and financial insecurity can generate stress within families and social circles (Keeling et al., 2019). Although organizations take pride in their veteran demographics, they must also consider the implications of underemployment. Keeling et al. (2019) indicated that this status is as harmful as unemployment. Ensuring military cultural competence is crucial for organizations that effectively employ veterans. Organizations must have a strategy to avoid potential culture clashes and recognize the intrinsic differences between the two environments: one that is autonomous, individualistic, and open to creativity (Keeling et al., 2019) and the other rooted in collectivism, structure, and protocol (Atuel & Castro, 2018).

Cultural competence is crucial in mental health, with models developed and researched for providers to implement in their practice. This approach has become standard in the field as it establishes a clear path for assessment validation and fosters a stronger rapport between counselor and client (Atuel & Castro, 2018). Military cultural competence involves understanding that this group has undergone indoctrination, which includes adherence to a strict set of standards, specialized language, and a mindset shift that diminishes individualism to create a highly structured and effective collective (Atuel & Castro, 2018). Understanding this culture also enables organizations to reflect on their beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions about veterans, thereby transforming biased misconceptions and reframing perceptions to achieve positive outcomes (Hammer et al., 2019). Reviewing the company's mission, vision, role descriptions, and training plans for clarity and structure can help prepare veteran employees for a smoother transition,

yielding positive results for all staff. Supervisor training that familiarizes staff with military culture and promotes stereotype reduction can contribute to positive attitudes toward the veteran community and could also be applied to any marginalized population, leading to more effective training, a more supportive environment, and reduced stress for the employees (Hammer et al., 2019).

### **Chapter Summary**

The review explores the challenges and importance of hiring and retaining veterans within organizations. Despite the expansion of veteran hiring initiatives, many veterans leave their initial post-service careers prematurely due to a lack of support, limited opportunities for career advancement, and cultural misunderstandings between the military and civilian sectors. Key issues encompass high turnover rates, identity loss, and the need for adequate transition preparation among veterans. Effective support systems, mentorship programs, and cultural awareness are essential for enhancing veteran retention. Hiring practices and attrition are not issues exclusive to veterans; they reflect a more significant organizational concern closely tied to fiscal health and long-term success. Continuous research and a greater understanding of veteran-friendly practices can also benefit other groups and yield substantial returns on investment. Additionally, organizations must acknowledge and address the unique needs of veteran employees to bridge the gap between military and civilian work cultures, thereby ensuring benefits for veterans and the broader community.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

In this chapter, I will present a research design that highlights the importance of gathering and analyzing qualitative data from the narratives shared by veterans. By exploring their personal experiences and comparing them with organizational initiatives and perspectives, I aim to construct a framework that defines what it truly means to be “veteran-friendly.” This study will serve as a foundation for establishing standardized company training and badging, transforming the workplace into an environment that can identify and place veterans in appropriate roles while supporting their career development. The precise translation of skills and meaningful initiatives can enhance retention and integrate veteran insights into corporate culture.

#### **Research Design**

Using the theoretical lens of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (1981) and Military Transition Theory (Pedlar et al., 2019), this study employs a phenomenological design with a narrative inquiry approach. The intent was not to generate a new theory, but to gather detailed and in-depth descriptions from veterans and organizations to construct an understanding of the phenomenon of how military veterans experience the transition into civilian workplaces and how both veterans and employers perceive, define, and implement “veteran-friendly” practices during this process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The inquiry broadly encompasses veteran and organizational perspectives through interviews, thereby enhancing the study's breadth (Patton, 2015). I used an interview guide (Appendix A), but to deepen the exploration, the questions served as a starting point, allowing for follow-up questions (Patton, 2015). I used an emergent line of questioning because it is crucial to the study that the perspectives of veterans and employers were represented, rather than my own viewpoint (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although the interviews elicited factors specific to the individual, the analyzed data focused on the phenomenon. I conducted interviews online or via telephone to provide flexibility. I recorded all interviews for accuracy and transcription purposes.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do veterans define “veteran-friendly” employer support and strategies based on their experiences with employers during their first year of civilian employment?
2. How do hiring managers and recruiters in civilian work environments understand specific practices and strategies as being “veteran-friendly”?
3. In what ways does the vision of “veteran-friendly” reflecting the viewpoints of both veterans and companies look like?

### **Site and Participant Selection**

I used a purposive sample to reduce researcher bias and collect data from various service branches, discharge characterizations, time in service, and rank. Even with a small sample, I applied a maximum variation strategy (Patton, 2015). The variation among veterans is significant; maximum variation sampling enables the researcher to select enough participants with different characteristics within the population of shared identity, thereby allowing for the generalization of the findings to the population (Patton,

2015). Once IRB exemption was received (Appendix B). I recruited veteran participants through an open call on my professional social platform, and I leveraged my professional network to gather enough participants to achieve saturation (See Table 1). The perspectives and experiences of female service members are an essential demographic I represented in this research. Recruitment efforts intentionally included outreach to this specific population to address the underrepresentation of this demographic in veteran research.

I selected employer participants (See Table 2) through homogeneous sampling, as the group consists of human resource professionals or recruiters (Patton, 2015). I leveraged the professional network I have developed over 25 years of collaborating with military and veteran organizations to gather points of contact for employers seeking veteran participants. I posted an open call on professional social platforms to broaden participant opportunities. The organizations represented in the group are self-proclaimed “veteran-friendly” companies, including private and public sectors. The aim was to include companies employing the veterans who volunteered for participation in this research. Two companies that participated also had veteran participants in the study. The breakdown of participants is shown in the chart below.

**Table 1**

*Veteran Participants*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Time In Service</b>	<b>Discharge Status</b>
Anne	4 years (1 contract)	Honorable
Brad	5 years completed	Legal Separation
Charlie	20+ years	Retired

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Time In Service</b>	<b>Discharge Status</b>
Dana	10 years	Medical Separation
Evan	22+ years	Retired
Frank	11 years completed	Honorable

**Table 2**

*Organizational Participants*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Identifier</b>
Public	Approx. 200 Employees	Public Organization 1
Private	Approx. 1 million Employees	Private Organization 1
Public	Approx. 200,000 Employees	Public Organization 2
Private	Approx. 200,000 Employees, 5% veteran affiliated	Private Organization 2

**Data Collection**

Veteran semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source for one perspective. In contrast, I collected data from organizational semi-structured interviews with human resource professionals, recruiters, and onboarding specialists from various companies to gain insight from an organizational perspective. I gathered company policy and training documents referenced for current onboarding practices, resource availability, and career development programs to validate the data obtained from the employer interviews. Although I was the sole person conducting the interview process, I created an interview guide to help maintain integrity (Appendix A).

I completed data collection using video recordings via Microsoft Teams to ensure accuracy during transcription. Once I reviewed the transcription, I provided each participant a copy for validation. Participants had the ability to retract any information they chose not to be included in the study. None of the participants elected to retract data.

I collected organizational and public documents to validate the data obtained from employer interviews. I documented mission and vision statements available on organizational websites. I requested copies of documents related to hiring practices, onboarding, and resources from the organization and confirmed information provided during interviews from company websites.

### **Data Analysis**

I used open-ended questions during the interview. I was able to gather a rich, in-depth narrative of their onboarding experience with the company, especially during their first year of employment. Statistics indicate that over 50% of veterans leave employment within the first year after separation (Kirchner et al., 2021). I conducted interviews with individuals to gather data on their perceptions, experiences, and behaviors. The employer group included public and private organizations with documentation on the company's structures, cultures, and practices.

I examined company policies, transcribed responses gathered during discussions with company representatives, and documented what companies consider “veteran-friendly.” The data encompasses what is available, why the company implements the program, and the rationale behind its decisions.

I analyzed the data thematically to identify norms or variations (Saldaña, 2021) in “veteran-friendly” practices. After transcribing the interviews, I wrote each relevant

quote on a separate note card and ensured each note card was linked to a research question. The cards were physically grouped by commonalities, allowing patterns and recurring themes to emerge naturally from the data. I examined each set of note cards for similar language, experiences, and ideas. Once themes were identified, they were categorized based on the two theoretical frameworks. Categorization allowed me to map each theme to the elements of each framework. Some cards were placed in multiple element categories. I used a visual representation to help clarify the interaction between the variables influencing military transition. The process of writing quotes on cards, connecting them with the research questions, and grouping by commonalities maintained the transparency of the research, offered the ability to replicate the study, and provided an opportunity to reflect.

My informal coding experience stems from my role as a professional development advisor. I conduct daily interviews with service members preparing to transition back to civilian careers or continue their service. Each interview necessitates documentation to identify trends among service members. Identifying potential conflicts or barriers to a smooth transition can mitigate adverse impacts on the service member's well-being.

### **Trustworthiness**

Unlike quantitative research, which follows a specific structural protocol and can be replicated to validate findings, qualitative studies are more subjective and often cannot be independently validated through replication (Stahl & King, 2020). Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined four criteria that qualitative researchers can use to establish a trustworthy study: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Establishing

dependability and confirmability involves maintaining all notes and data used to make decisions and documenting research activities (Connelly, 2016; Stahl & King, 2020). I utilized data and theoretical triangulation to help identify themes and their applicability to other environments and populations beyond the veteran community (Stahl & King, 2020), thereby enhancing the transferability and credibility of the study.

Building quality, authenticity, and rigor into a study begins with clearly defined and measurable research questions (Maxwell, 2013). Producing a study worthy of synthesis requires diligence throughout the entire process. Choosing a methodology that aligns with the research questions and ensuring that the sample selection is representative and sufficient will contribute to constructing a high-quality study (Maxwell, 2013). I used member checking and guidance from my highly qualified methodologist throughout this process to enhance the confirmability of this study (Connelly, 2016). Member checking was completed by providing each participant with a copy of their interview transcript, video, and narratives for review. Participants were able to remove any information they did not want to share.

### **Reflexivity Statement**

Recognizing and revealing my role within the population is essential for reflexivity. I reflected on my perceptions and experiences regarding my career and my active involvement in the transition process for hundreds of service members. I used journaling before and after interview sessions to acknowledge my feelings and attitudes throughout the process. Consistent data analysis and collection procedures ensured the study's authenticity. The trust built with participants cultivated a deeper understanding, and I found balance to maintain empathetic neutrality (Patton, 2015). Although I am

passionate about the people I serve and the connections I initiate for them, I focused on emerging themes and the first-hand narratives gained through each interview.

Since 1999, I have built my career by serving military personnel in higher education, quality of life programs, professional development, and transition. I have had direct professional contact with many veteran and employer study participants, making peer review and member checking during this process even more critical. Reflecting on my previous interactions with each participant, both before and after the interview, and noting my feelings about those interactions, helped maintain self-awareness and address potential bias in the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Recognizing and acknowledging my long-standing career in the military community is essential to the research. Although I have never served in the military, I grew up in a traditional working-class family. In all documentation and interview guides, I disclosed my military affiliation and provided a disclaimer stating that I am in clear separation from any endorsement by the Department of Defense.

Ethical considerations ensured that the rights of each participant were protected and that the well-being of those involved was not negatively impacted. The use of pseudonyms was used to conceal the personal identities of participants. Reflection on the rationale behind decisions related to design selection, methodological choices, and research questions was essential to the process. The practice of reflexivity was ongoing to produce a credible study, thereby contributing to the body of knowledge.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter outlines the design and methodology used to examine “veteran-friendly” practices from the viewpoint of veterans and civilian organizations. It employs a phenomenological design with a narrative inquiry approach, guided by Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (1981) and Military Transition Theory (Pedlar et al., 2019). I used interviews with veterans and organizational representatives who are subject matter experts in human resource activities as the primary source of data. I gathered detailed and in-depth descriptions from both populations to construct an accurate understanding of what constitutes a “veteran-friendly” environment and develop standardized company training and recognition programs.

I minimized research bias through purposive and maximum variation sampling, ensuring a representative sample. Data collection involved recording interviews, transcribing them, and conducting member-checking for accuracy. I used open-ended interview questions to gather rich narratives of veterans’ onboarding experiences and organizational perspectives. I employed thematic analysis to identify norms and variations in “veteran-friendly” practices. I collected documents for validation, emphasizing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability to ensure trustworthiness in the findings. I practiced reflexivity throughout the study to maintain authenticity and mitigate potential bias.

Understanding “veteran-friendly” practices from both the veteran and employer perspectives is crucial for improving the retention and support of veteran employees through meaningful initiatives and career development programs.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Findings**

This chapter presents key findings from interviews with veterans and organizational representatives regarding the transition from military service to civilian employment. The chapter examines veterans lived experiences and explores current organizational practices that are considered “veteran-friendly” as they navigate transitions in both public and private sectors. Through analysis of participant narratives and thematic patterns, the chapter identifies challenges and defining features of “veteran-friendly” workplaces. By considering both veteran and organizational perspectives, these findings offer insights into the factors that support or impede successful transitions, providing a framework for enhancing veteran integration, support, and retention in civilian employment.

Presented in this chapter are the detailed narrative accounts of the lived experiences of both veterans and organizational representatives. Each veteran’s story is introduced individually, highlighting their unique experience transitioning from military service to civilian employment and their perceptions of what constitutes a “veteran-friendly” workplace. The personal narratives capture the challenges, expectations, and successes. Following the veterans’ narratives, the study shifts to the organizational viewpoint, presenting interviews with public and private human resource representatives.

The findings offer a dual-perspective analysis, allowing the reader to compare the realities faced by veterans (See Table 1) with the best practices of employers (See Table 2). This type of analysis identifies areas of alignment and gaps in understanding. A breakdown of participants is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Veteran Participants*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Time In Service</b>	<b>Discharge Status</b>
Anne	4 years (1 contract)	Honorable
Brad	5 years completed	Legal Separation
Charlie	20+ years	Retired
Dana	10 years	Medical Separation
Evan	22+ years	Retired
Frank	11 years completed	Honorable

**Table 4**

*Organizational Participants*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Identifier</b>
Public	Approx. 200 Employees	Public Organization 1
Private	Approx. 1 million Employees	Private Organization 1
Public	Approx. 200,000 Employees	Public Organization 2
Private	Approx. 200,000 Employees, 5% veteran affiliated	Private Organization 2

## **Veteran Interviews**

### ***Anne***

Anne was on active duty for one enlistment (four years) before separating from service. She transitioned to a position with a public organization and remained with the company for approximately four years. She then transitioned to a private organization in a position that directly aligned with her career goals. Anne's experiences with the public organization during onboarding were significantly different than what she expected.

Anne's first civilian employment experience was one of unstructured onboarding, focused on paperwork, with little information from current staff on how to establish basic information, such as organizational email access and introduction to the hierarchy. Anne recalled one interaction with a colleague, only to find out later she had been speaking with a senior executive in the organization:

I had no idea who I was talking to, and I could have really embarrassed myself and made a horrible first impression. I expect a certain level of professionalism from myself because when I was in, if I had talked to a person in leadership incorrectly, I would have been strongly reprimanded. (Interview, Anne, August 15, 2025)

She held herself to a higher standard because of her military experiences but quickly discovered that her company didn't expect the same level of commitment. "They just said here is your desk and your space, so get to work. There was no information on deadlines, tasks, or expectations." She shared a feeling of being unsettled because she didn't feel the same purpose-driven motivation that she had felt while on active duty.

Before Anne's end of service, when asked how she would define the term "veteran-friendly" she described an organization that understood her military experiences with high levels of responsibility and work ethic while providing the balance between work and life she desired. Anne didn't want to prioritize work any longer but wanted "structure with flexibility," so she could take care of her family. When asked the same question after her civilian work experiences, Anne stated, "It means nothing." Anne described her first civilian work experience:

I felt like I was in the deep end, trying to swim out. I wasn't motivated to be at work and was just going to collect a paycheck. I had no purpose and felt like it wouldn't matter what I did there. (Interview, Anne, August 15, 2025)

She described herself as feeling anxious and lost as to where her place was in the organization and what her purpose was there. She lost her desire or excitement about going to work.

Anne had a different experience with her second employer after separating from service. The onboarding process began with a warm introduction to staff in an informal manner, where she had an opportunity to get to know the people she would be working with. The interview process was both her interview and allowed her to interview the staff, determining if the organization would be a good fit. The human resource professionals walked Anne through each step of her onboarding paperwork:

They were phenomenal, and it felt like the check-in/check-out process the military has. I got to meet everyone, and the manager kept telling me he wanted me to feel comfortable there and ensure I felt supported. He prioritized my family and made sure I understood my role and responsibilities in the office. I had clear direction,

structure, and knew who to go to about specific questions. (Interview, Anne, August 15, 2025)

Anne had just recently made the employment change at the time of our interview but already had seen differences in career development opportunities. She was encouraged to work towards an industry certification, and Anne stated, “I feel like I have a reason to go to work again, like I am excited about going there. I now have something to look forward to each day.”

Although Anne expressed feeling challenged with her first civilian employment experience, she did highlight a positive impact from the unstructured onboarding. Anne’s supervisor was also new and had a similar entrance experience and welcomed Anne:

We found camaraderie with one another and figured things out on our own. We were both in the same boat and bonded over the lack of clarity. Neither one of us knew how to gain access to our email and stuff like that, so as we would learn something we would share it. (Interview, Anne, August 15, 2025)

Anne made note that it was familiar to learning how to adjust to her first assignment after her technical training:

It reminded me so much of my first few months at my first work center when on active duty, when you would bond with other new people because you were scared about messing up and didn’t want to ask people over you any questions. (Interview, Anne, August 15, 2025)

### ***Brad***

Brad encountered an unplanned separation from service during his second contract (approximately 5 years). An unplanned separation can add additional factors to

the civilian workforce transition, mainly related to an unknown separation date and the potential impact of discharge characterization. These factors were not discussed for this research.

Brad transitioned into a role in the civilian workplace, like the career field he held while on active duty. His transition was also unique because he accepted a position with a startup, allowing him to immediately contribute significantly. When asked what “veteran-friendly” meant to Brad, he stated:

You have a veteran who has been in the civilian field for a bit and understands the ins and outs of the corporate world. Someone who can walk me through things like understanding corporate emails and how to talk with my supervisor or colleagues. You can’t say things the way you would say to them in the military. Our humor is different and the language we use isn’t always appropriate for the civilian world. (Interview, Brad, August 21, 2025)

Brad discussed having a mentor but also stressed that he didn’t want to be singled out or treated differently simply based on veteran status. Brad also mentioned that having a group created for veterans within the company would be a nice benefit. A place where “we could get together outside of work. People who have walked in your shoes or understand what you are used to or coming from would be helpful.” He mentioned seeing a colleague and noticed he walked differently, reminiscent of his military colleagues, only to find out the colleague was also a veteran. Brad described the moment:

I picked up on his posture and walk and identified it quickly as a military posture. I asked him about it, and we now have a different relationship at work because of that bond. (Interview, Brad, August 21, 2025)

Brad's onboarding experience was unstructured, and he referenced a high value was placed on on-the-job training since the civilian position was aligned with his military occupation. He expressed a feeling of uncertainty and being overwhelmed when it came to understanding his paycheck and adjusting his budget for items like insurance and taxes. He expressed that this was his first job outside of the military and although he had classes related to budgeting for post-separation, having personalized guidance in the organization would have been helpful. Brad explained:

I had no clue how much was going to be deducted from my check for healthcare or taxes, I was so shocked, and it really caught me off guard. If someone had explained that to me when I was filling out all the forms, I would have been more prepared. The only experience I had was through examples and not my actual pay situation. (Interview, Brad, August 21, 2025)

Although not offered when Brad joined the organization, the company now offers the Skillbridge program. Skillbridge is an opportunity for transitioning service members to intern with an organization while still on active duty. At the end of the program, the company has the option to present the service member with a career opportunity. The program enables service members to experience the civilian workforce, gain valuable training, and offers some programs with credentialing opportunities. Brad expressed excitement that his company now participates in the program, creating an opportunity for other veterans to become part of the organization:

I was really excited to see the company has offered that and I hope it means more service members will join the company. I wish I had the chance to have done it, but I am glad it's there now for the future. (Interview, Brad, August 21, 2025)

As Brad spoke, his tone was upbeat and overall conveyed pride in his transition and where he is with his organization. “I am happy where I am. I was able to purchase my first home and am starting to feel settled in. I didn’t want to leave service, but here I am.” He stressed how his transition was unplanned and overwhelming at times, but moving to a civilian career like his military occupation was beneficial. Brad emphasized that his transition classes helped prepare him for the civilian environment, but he would have felt more at ease if his company had a mentorship program or if he had been more equipped to handle the financial differences between military and civilian employment. Brad shared:

More time focused on the financial aspect would have made me pay more attention to that, and because the company was new when I came on, there wasn’t really anyone around to explain some of the benefits or cost share to me. I think that’s changed now, but that part was super confusing. (Interview, Brad, August 21, 2025)

### ***Charlie***

Charlie is a retired service member having served 20 or more years on active duty. Charlie transitioned to a company immediately after retirement but parted with the organization four months after onboarding. He then reestablished a career with a federal organization for four years before transferring to another federal organization.

Charlie began his transition with what he described as a “desperate situation.” He was drawn to a company he had previously rejected for financial reasons. Charlie said he had researched the company extensively and was willing to accept their offer of employment. Charlie clarified:

I was in a situation financially, so I did what any parent would do: I found employment that would provide the funds I needed, despite my initial instincts not to take the position. (Interview, Charlie, August 22, 2025)

Charlie reflected on his onboarding experience with the company as informal and fully online. “My training before my start was hands-off and impersonal.” The company would send him links for various training related to computer regulations and basic protocols. Although Charlie stated he was very clear on his role with the company and what his job would include, he did not receive any introductions to staff or a supervisor before his first day. This would later impact Charlie and lead him to leave the company soon after. “I interviewed with an HR person and another senior person in the company but had no clue who my supervisor was and had no interaction with them.”

When asked about his experiences and reasoning for leaving the company, Charlie sat back a little and chuckled. He stated:

Culture shock. Not from the work, but when I met my supervisor, I realized they were as young as my child and still in college. This was an eye-opening moment and I realized I was not as desperate as I thought. (Interview, Charlie, August 22, 2025)

Charlie left the company four months after his start and was never able to access any additional support programs. Company policy for access to programs required employees to be with the organization for a minimum of 6 months. “I didn’t stick around long enough to see what they had to offer employees. I just knew I needed to move on.”

When asked how he would define “veteran-friendly,” Charlie associated the term with being sought after by a company:

They are seeking me out for the knowledge, experience, and work ethic. I think companies hire veterans because they don't want to have to hold their hand or poke and prod them to finish their assignments. (Interview, Charlie, August 22, 2025)

He also linked counseling resources to an organization being viewed as “veteran-friendly.” Charlie quickly added:

The counseling services should be capable of handling veteran-specific needs and that counselors should have experience working with military-affiliated individuals or be veterans themselves. You want someone who really knows what you experienced and that life. I don't want to talk to someone who has never dealt with the environments I have, someone who has never been in a combat zone or lost people they live and work with. The bond that exists in the military doesn't really exist in the civilian world. I don't want to share stuff with someone who has just read about it or studied it, I want someone who can relate. (Interview, Charlie, August 22, 2025)

Charlie explained that some organizations may identify as “veteran-friendly” because they recognize the value of hiring veterans but might not offer salaries that reflect that worth. He mentioned that veterans often end up being underemployed because of this mindset, which can leave them feeling out of place or unappreciated within the organization. He shared this feeling as it related to his own first job experience. Charlie described:

I think it's normal for a company to want to get the most for its money. They will hire someone with a military background because they know or assume that

person is a hard worker and has a good work ethic. I think the job seeker can get taken advantage of in some situations because they don't know what a civilian should be making, they are scared and just want a job. The veteran just sees the company saying they are veteran-friendly, and the veteran thinks that means the company knows the benefits and salary the person makes when in service, but they don't, and honestly, the company just knows what their bottom line is. Why would they pay top dollar if they can get away with saving some money?

(Interview, Charlie, August 22, 2025)

Charlie ended the interview by adding that his biggest challenge throughout his transition was translating his skills and understanding how they applied to the new environment or careers he was seeking. He emphasized the importance of hiring managers and recruiters understanding how military skills and experiences apply to their respective organizations to ensure appropriate role placement of veterans. Charlie stated:

If a veteran leaves service with an extensive amount of leadership experience and responsibility, then they are in a civilian role with little to no responsibility, which may be rough for the veteran. I mean, some, especially retirees, may not want a lot of responsibility or may not want to be a supervisor, but I don't think they want to be at the bottom either. I don't want to oversee the whole company, but I also don't want to answer to a kid who is the same age or younger than my own.

(Interview, Charlie, August 22, 2025)

## *Dana*

Dana transitioned from active duty through a medical separation after about 10 years. Although unplanned, her separation took over a year due to necessary medical appointments and surgery.

Dana started the interview feeling excited and showed a strong interest in the research, expressing happiness to be a part of it. She mentioned that her transition was “easy” because she began working with a federal contractor in a role aligned with her military occupation. She discussed her onboarding experience with the company, saying it mainly involved paperwork and benefits options, but she did get staff introductions and a brief overview of basic organization protocol:

I was pretty comfortable with my role in the company because it was in the same location as my military role. I literally went home one day and took off my uniform, then woke up the next morning, put on civilian clothes, and went back to the office. (Interview, Dana, August 16, 2025)

Dana laughed a bit and said, “It was such a weird feeling.”

When asked how she defined “veteran-friendly” in relation to civilian employment, she initially laughed and mentioned paid time off for veteran-associated holidays and discounts:

You really don’t realize how many days we get off when in. They always give us an extra day to make sure we are safely traveling and not trying to stay up all night to get back. (Interview, Dana, August 16, 2025)

Dana then shared that it was about the organization finding value in her experiences and equating them to a formal degree. “Just because you haven’t been to

college doesn't mean you don't have anything to contribute or aren't worthy of roles beyond entry-level." She shared that she had not finished her degree prior to transition, which kept her from qualifying for a position at the federal level. As the researcher, I noticed some non-verbal cues when she spoke of this during the interview, and from my perspective, she seemed frustrated or disappointed reflecting on the time. This perception was confirmed through member checking. She spoke highly of the original employer and stated she found them "helpful," but was anxious to obtain federal employment. She shared, "I really wanted to be in the system mainly for retirement. I didn't get a chance to earn that in the military, and being a single parent knew I wanted that security."

Dana spent a year with the employer and was able to complete her degree and apply for the federal position she wanted. She shared that after a lengthy application/interview process, she received an offer of employment, which she accepted. Dana's onboarding experience with the federal entity was like the contractors', and again, she was in a familiar environment because she would continue to work in the same space. She stated the introduction to the organization was paperwork-centered and consisted of a day before she was in her role. Dana laughed at this point as she reflected on how humorous it was that it took the organization several weeks to update her security status and provide permissions for her to access specific sites needed for her role, even though she had access as a contractor:

My experience was odd, I guess, because I didn't really need an introduction to anyone, and I understood the environment because I was only changing who paid me. I could see though, if I were someone brand new, I would have been lost completely. (Interview, Dana, August 16, 2025)

As we continued our conversation, we discussed how she viewed the term “veteran-friendly”. Dana thought about the question for a little longer and responded with a single word, “understanding.” She continued with clarification and stated:

Being “veteran-friendly” should go beyond just hiring military. It should mean you understand what we have experienced and how hard figuring out who we are can be, and the support we need. I don’t want a handout, but I want an organization that wants to keep me with them for a long time and really cares about me as a person. (Interview, Dana, August 16, 2025)

She shared she didn’t think she had transitioned yet because she is still in the same environment she was in as a service member and felt odd at times not using her rank or handling issues the way she would have while in service. Dana recalled:

I do have to watch myself a bit because I can’t just raise my voice at my colleagues and I can’t demand things of the people on my team the way I could when I was in a leadership role on active duty. (Interview, Dana, August 16, 2025)

Dana was quiet for a moment, and my interpretation of her body language and facial expression was one of reflection on her time on active duty.

The conversation shifted to discussing any other opportunities Dana has had with her current employer or with her previous employer. She explained that she couldn’t participate in Skillbridge because of the timing of her separation, and she felt overwhelmed with medical appointments and planning. She mentioned that the program was valuable, and she would have loved to have taken part. Dana also said she was looking forward to working on career-specific certifications and planned to return to

graduate school once she felt more “settled” in her role within the organization. She noted that the organization offers some assistance with tuition and encourages outside professional and personal development:

My supervisor always talks to us about what we want to do in the future or where we see ourselves. I don’t want to do this forever. I would love to do something to help others, maybe social work. (Interview, Dana, August 16, 2025)

Overall, Dana shared that she felt her transition wasn’t overly challenging, but she admitted she didn’t stray far from her military identity, and she was uncertain what challenges might arise if she shifted to a new career field.

### ***Evan***

Evan retired from active duty, completing 22 years of service. As he transitioned, he was able to participate in on-the-job training through the Skillbridge program and secured a position with a large, global company.

The interview with Evan started with a brief discussion about the challenges he faced during his transition. He had a big smile as he talked about being allowed to participate in Skillbridge with a major corporation and how surprised he was to receive the offer, even though it came with some logistical concerns:

I was really blessed with strong family support and understanding because I had to complete my program several hours away from my family, and once I finished, I wasn’t guaranteed a spot with the company closer to home. (Interview, Evan, September 11, 2025)

He mentioned that he didn’t want to look for another job because he had a hard time getting companies to understand what he had done in the military and how his

experiences could be valuable. Unlike most, Evan completed a graduate degree while in service, but his work experience was military-related:

I was so relieved when I got the offer to be an intern and didn't want to keep searching. Interviews were grueling because even though I had prepared for them, military jargon was second nature to me, and I would fumble my words at times during interviews. (Interview, Evan, September 11, 2025)

Evan explained that other offers were for entry-level positions, but this internship would place him in mid-level management, closer to the level he had held in the military.

We continued discussing his experiences while searching for career opportunities. Evan mentioned that there were many "scams" on job boards, and he felt "very vulnerable" during and right after leaving the military:

I felt a lot of pressure because I was always the breadwinner for my family. I kept looking for an organization that shared the same leadership principles I knew from military service. Communication in the corporate world also posed a challenge. I wanted responses quickly when I submitted applications because I needed to know I was going to have a source of income when I retired, and I had something to look forward to. The major companies didn't move at a pace I was used to, which affected my family and myself. I was impatient and it really messed with how I felt about myself and I would doubt whether I made the right decision by retiring. (Interview, Evan, September 11, 2025)

As we discussed what it means to be "veteran-friendly," Evan defined it as everything his current company provides. Evan recalled:

My onboarding experience was a team-oriented training filled with information on workplace culture and the jargon used inside the organization. It is a community within itself. We have our own language and way of doing things. It really reminds me of the military in some ways because it's that type of family bond. (Interview, Evan, September 11, 2025)

He mentioned various resources and mentorship opportunities. Evan explained that he was able to start in a role related to his military occupation, but later cross-trained and moved to a higher position more suited to his family dynamics. Evan stated:

Everything is structured and clear as to what roles are responsible for what area. There aren't any questions about responsibilities and what our goals are. I knew exactly what training I had to do and what I would have to show I could do to move up. (Interview, Evan, September 11, 2025)

Evan concluded our interview by expressing that he was pleased with his time at the organization and felt that, although the hierarchy seemed familiar and the environment was family oriented. "I don't feel torn between my family and work ever. Supervisors will often remind you to take leave or let you know you haven't taken a vacation in a while." He described how attentive his supervisors were in reminding him to take paid time off and prioritize his family. Evan shared that the company had many opportunities for him to train or shift into if he wanted to work in a different area or even remotely.

### ***Frank***

Frank completed 11 years of military service before making the difficult decision to separate. Although he enjoyed his military occupation and had earned numerous career

certifications that accelerated his advancement in rank, he ultimately chose to transition. The opportunity to work in diverse locations and continue progressing professionally was appealing, but Frank felt it was time for a new chapter. Upon separation, he joined a small private company that managed several government contracts. After approximately two years, he transitioned to a globally recognized organization, further advancing his civilian career.

The conversation began with discussing any challenges faced as the transition evolved with Frank's first company. Frank described a smooth process because he was familiar with the company, and they held a contract at the same work site where he was stationed during active duty. His story was similar to Dana's, as the main change he experienced was where his paycheck came from and who his supervisors were. When asked why he chose to pursue the opportunity since he felt drawn to leave the military, he stated, "It felt comfortable and less risky. I knew the people I would be working with and reporting to." Frank described that he was rushed to transition because he waited until the last possible moment to make the decision. "Had I planned a little better and spoken up, I would have had more time to really think about who I wanted to work for and what environment I wanted to be in.

Realizing the environment was not what he really desired, Frank shared that he spent his time networking with other professionals and various platforms until he found his "dream opportunity" with a large global company. "The opportunity presented itself, and I struggled with staying loyal to the current organization, but the monetary and benefit incentives were just too great to pass up." Frank transitioned to a departmental lead position and was able to work in the office or remotely. "I was quite nervous initially

because I second-guessed whether I was prepared for a role of this magnitude, but I got settled in with my team and pushed forward.”

The interview shifted to discussing what “veteran-friendly” means to Frank, the characteristics that would qualify an organization to use that term:

For me, it means work stays at work and doesn’t bleed into my personal life.

Clear roles so I know what my goals are and able to also set my own goals for my team. The military had several benefits I never thought much of until they were gone, so “veteran-friendly” would mean the organization offers a range of benefits and resources. (Interview, Frank, August 26, 2025)

Frank described, he viewed the term as a marketing tool that companies use, but don’t always understand what it should mean. “My first company focused on hiring veterans, but I think it’s because they would hire quite a few who had worked in the section, so it was an easy training process.” Frank expressed the importance of feeling valued within the organization:

As a military member, you were always being told how important you were. Not necessarily from your supervisors, but people in town or business who give discounts to military or post on social media how much they appreciated what we do.

My onboarding with the second company was quite different from my first civilian experience. We completed online and in-person training. The in-person training primarily centered around paperwork and reviewing benefits. The online training went in-depth into company culture and what I would consider the perks of the company. We have access to wellness programs and stipends to offset

equipment or gym memberships. These aren't veteran-associated, but I am not near a base so having access to these are equivalent to what I had when on active duty. (Interview, Frank, August 26, 2025)

Frank continued describing career opportunities within the company with a clear path to follow if an employee wanted to move up or into another area. Frank continued sharing he has been able to travel and work internationally and changed his home site location a few times during his tenure with the organization. He shared the sense of community he has gained from the organization:

We have access to peer groups if we choose. Groups are formed based on interests or demographics. There is a large one for veterans, but I could find a group for just about any sort of interest. If one doesn't exist, the company encourages employees to start one. (Interview, Frank, August 26, 2025)

Frank described the work as fast-paced and at times, high stakes, but found enjoyment in the environment, describing it as "an adrenaline rush" when a big project was successful. "I see the company fulfilling the goal of being veteran-friendly because it's not just one thing, but it's really a community. That's something I really missed when I left service."

The interview closed with examining if Frank experienced any challenges with his transition. He explained the timing for him was a challenge because he waited to make the final decision with only a few months remaining on his contract. "I didn't really have a network yet, and after a few resumes were sent out with little return, I kind of panicked." As I observed his physical response when describing that decision, I interpreted it as a time that was stressful and uneasy for him. "Most companies I applied

initially said I was qualified because of my certifications but weren't sure of what my experience level was because it was with the military". Frank shared that he had done some basic research and it was beneficial because he had a good understanding of the salary range he should be making in the civilian workforce. "I knew my worth or felt like I did. I was uneasy talking with some organizations because it was like recruiters didn't know anything about my role in the military or the level of responsibility I had."

## **Organizational Interviews**

### ***Public Organization***

The organization is a government entity that employs approximately 200 personnel, per the latest information provided by the interviewed human resource associate. The participant has been with the company for approximately 1 year, and her primary role is recruiting and onboarding for the law enforcement department.

The interview focused on programs and initiatives the organization classifies as "veteran-friendly" or general initiatives the department employs for recruiting and retention. The organization prioritizes veteran hiring through incentives and actively promotes higher entry-level pay for those with a military background. "Once they complete training, their pay is one step higher if they are a veteran compared to non-veteran employees. This is specific to the law enforcement division." A second program the organization has relates to the retirement program. Veterans can "buy back their service time" and use it to count towards their retirement years with the organization.

The human resource associate continued the conversation, covering programs that were not isolated to veteran employees, but programs/incentives open to all personnel:

The organization offers an employee assistance program. The program makes available counseling services for mental or financial concerns, and we offer legal services for staff.

Counseling services are free for the first 8 sessions unless it's mandated. Mandated counseling is free for as long as it is needed or required. Everything is confidential and the law enforcement section has an app specific to their field. (Interview, Public Organization 1, September, 2, 2025)

The interview shifted to onboarding, and the participant said they were planning a process overhaul. Currently, new employee orientation involves completing paperwork. A revised orientation program is being developed to place greater emphasis on daily operations and protocols. The new training would be identical for all employees, but more about meeting people on the team and viewing the various facilities. One aspect reviewed during onboarding the participant was eager to discuss was a homebuyer assistance program:

The program isn't veteran-specific, but if an employee has the use of their VA loan, this will qualify them. The program assists with closing costs or a down payment for employees. The organization recently started a job shadowing program in the law enforcement department. (Interview, Public Organization 1, September 2, 2025)

The associate shared the program allows for those interested in a law enforcement role to spend time alongside an employee and participate in physical training aspects to better prepare them for their training. "A Skillbridge program is also being vetted, and the organization anticipates full participation in the program in the coming year." We

discussed career development opportunities employees are offered. The representative stated:

The organization encourages career development, but outside of required training, employees must be self-motivated and show interest in additional training or participation in opportunities. Some departments have required certifications the employee needs to have and maintain, but outside of those scenarios, the employee must show a desire to obtain additional credentials/training or a desire to move within the agency. (Interview, Public Organization 1, September 2, 2025)

Each organization was asked how they define “veteran-friendly” and when they interview or hire veterans, what motivates them to bring them into the company. The participant stressed the presence of the organization on military installations and at hiring events:

We have partnered with local bases and do our best to be at the different career fairs in the area. We want to make sure our departments reflect the demographics of the area and we have many veterans in the area so hiring them is important. Both my supervisor and I come from military-affiliated families, so we have a good idea of what kind of employee we are getting when we hire a veteran. Someone hard-working, stays on task, and overall is used to following instructions. (Interview, Public Organization 1, September 2, 2025)

We discussed how skills acquired during military service easily translate to law enforcement, project management, and the watershed facilities. “We have quite a few employees in those areas who are veterans. I would say those are the dominant career fields where we hire veterans.”

### ***Private Organization***

The organization is globally recognized and according to the Talent Acquisition Team Member interviewed, the company employs 1 million people. The specific number of veteran employees was unknown at the time of the interview.

The interview began with gaining an understanding of the onboarding process and whether there were any programs specifically designed for veteran employees:

There are no standalone programs for veterans during onboarding; however, all new employees receive extensive training before their first day in the work area, which continues through the first year. Normal employment documents are completed with a member of the benefits section, where the employee can ask questions and select the package best suited for their needs. Training then moves to a self-paced online format that covers safety, leave process, and items such as grievance process. Upon completion, the employee moves to in-person training within their respective work area and learns work-related terms, introductions, and work processes. The new employee is also assigned a mentor who will help the employee acclimate and be there if they should have any questions.

(Interview, Private Organization 1, August 27, 2025)

The team member explained one of the organization's strongest attributes to attracting veteran employees is through their Skillbridge program and partnerships with veteran-focused non-profits:

We offer internships in just about any career field you can think of.

Administration, management, supply, I.T., transportation...I could go on for a minute. The program is a good opportunity for us to see if the person fits in and if

the work area is a good fit for them. (Interview, Private Organization 1, August 27, 2025)

The team member described services available not just to veterans, but to all employees. They went on to share information about mental health counseling, financial counseling, relocation assistance, and tuition reimbursement programs:

We have spent a significant amount of time working with a few non-profits that target the veteran community, but the organization has a team of people dedicated to veteran hiring and recruiting. The organization takes pride in hiring veterans, but the focus is on the entire workforce, and a community is what the company has built. (Interview, Private Organization 1, August 27, 2025)

The discussion continued about the community aspect of the organization and the team member described opportunities to participate in various networking groups and opportunities to volunteer:

The organization has a variety of groups that get together to play sports, participate in outreach events, and some that focus on a person's background, like culture or military affiliation. Participation isn't monitored nor is it mandatory, but a way to learn more about your colleagues and find balance. The organization values education beyond the walls of the corporation and offers tuition reimbursement for employees. It is highly encouraged for employees to pursue education even if it isn't directly related to their position. We don't have a formal mentorship program, but we do have programs set up for employees who want to move to management or leadership roles. Supervisors are versed in the steps

employees can take to obtain promotions or move into different areas of the organization. (Interview, Private Organization 1, August 27, 2025)

When discussing how the organization defines “veteran-friendly,” the team member shared that the company is intentional with its approach to being “veteran-friendly”:

The organization is transparent about its veteran-centered programs and extensively markets them, including fellowships, training opportunities, support groups not just for veterans, but for any military-affiliated employee, training for hiring supervisors to enhance their knowledge of military skills and principles, long-term support addressing housing insecurity, support for disabled veterans, and clear non-discrimination policies. The company’s approach to being “veteran-friendly” isn’t about a clear, direct policy, but more about a holistic approach, not just a singular initiative or program. (Interview, Private Organization 1, August 27, 2025)

### ***Public Organization***

The organization is global with approximately 20,000 employees and close to 300 site locations, per the human resource specialist participating in the study. The participant shared that approximately 25% of the organization’s workforce is comprised of veterans. The data is not exact, as veterans are not required to self-identify.

The interview began with discussing “veteran-friendly” hiring practices or initiatives the organization prescribes:

Although we don’t have specific veteran initiatives, we have opportunities for veterans to receive consideration for positions that may not be open to non-

affiliated applicants. The organization doesn't really advertise these hiring practices, and many veterans don't understand or know the practice. The hiring managers aren't trained on it. So, a lot of them don't know about it or they had the same misconception as some of the veterans. There are several types of preferred hiring practices for the organization, and each has eligibility requirements. The challenge of the practice is the need for understanding eligibility and identifying the qualifying factors.

The onboarding process doesn't include specifics for veteran employees, but staff have been trained to review veteran applications to ensure veterans are not overlooked and skills are translated correctly. However, because of attrition and funding, there may be a gap in trained personnel, resulting in veterans potentially not being deemed qualified. The organization completes onboarding without differentiating between veterans and non-affiliated employees.

There's not a lot of help in helping them transition from that complete military mindset to a corporate or federal mindset. Most agencies like the skills and the mindset, the work ethic that they come with. The responsibility of discussing workplace culture kind of falls on the supervisor. (Interview, Public Organization 2, August 22, 2025)

We further discussed support programs the organization may offer to veterans and what other types of programs may be in place to assist veterans. The organization offers an employee assistance program for any employee to utilize, not just a veteran:

I do recall there being at least one person in that department who's able to help veterans, get them kind of counseling, coaching, mentorship to help them

kind of ease the transition or to help them assimilate coming from the military.

(Interview, Public Organization 2, August 22, 2025)

The organization also offers a mentorship program, and a veteran can request to be mentored by another veteran:

Most career development programs rely on funding, but there are trainings available through a learning management system. Supervisors can take training that covers working with veterans and training veterans on communication skills for the workplace. Both were offered in a classroom, but with a lack of funding, they are working on putting them online. (Interview, Public Organization 2, August 22, 2025)

When we discussed whether any training was made available to help identify mental health crises in employees, the participant replied, “I haven't seen that level of training offered, and I think that's where the organization falls short.”

We closed out our interview by discussing how the organization defined “veteran-friendly”:

I think they do a decent job of hiring veterans, but could be better, as in any organization or with any program. There is always room for improvement, and I think the organization has some good programs and support not just for veterans, but for all employees. I think using the term needs to exceed just hiring veterans. (Interview, Public Organization 2, August 22, 2025)

### ***Private Organization***

This large, global organization employs over 200,000 people, and approximately 5% are veteran affiliated. Their staffing is split, with half employed within the United

States and the other half employed internationally. The team leader who agreed to participate in the study is responsible for hiring within their department. The organization has a team dedicated to veteran hiring.

When discussing whether the organization has any veteran initiatives or hiring programs, the participant highlighted the dedicated team:

The team responsible for veteran inclusion has a goal to provide services to transitioning service members and veterans, primarily focused on technical skills and translating them to careers within the organization. Skills like resiliency align quite well with our industry. (Interview, Private Organization 2, September 12, 2025)

The organization uses a certification program approved for Skillbridge to recruit transitioning service members. The program “has been quite successful,” and veterans can participate if they didn’t while on active duty:

The program the organization provides is free, and it opens the door to hiring the participant, or one of our partners will hire them. We also have a student program for veterans who are attending college, and they can intern for us. (Interview, Private Organization 2, September 12, 2025)

Support found outside of hiring initiatives was briefly described and primarily focused on peer groups based on service connection:

The company has resource groups, and we have one specific to veterans and military-affiliated employees. You can find a group for other interests or other demographics. An employee can belong to more than one group, which provides support, mentoring opportunities, and social connections. We also offer mental

health support and wellness programs to all employees and their family members. Since the company exists around the world, they also offer training opportunities to a few military services from other parts of the world. (Interview, Private Organization 2, September 12, 2025)

Outside of the support and mentorship programs, the team leader stated that the organization offers discounts on some merchandise for veterans and employees. The participant described, “There are also some opportunities for relocation allowances for veterans participating in the internship program or if an employee is selected for an internal position requiring relocation.”

When it relates to the organization’s definition of “veteran-friendly”, marketing materials and the participants’ statements reflect recognizing the training service members receive is career training:

Service members and veterans bring foundational skills to the workplace, being adaptable and teamwork experience easily translates to our environment. We have clear pathways to promotion and training opportunities. We don’t guarantee employment, but the company welcomes veterans and treats them fairly and respectfully. The organization recognizes the value veterans bring to the workplace. The company prefers to use the statement veteran-ready, not just veteran-friendly. (Interview, Private Organization 2, September 12, 2025)

## **Themes**

Analyzing the interview data from the veteran perspective, there are 5 dominant themes present: workplace culture onboarding, mentorship, recognition of translatable skills, work/life balance, and community.

## **Veteran Themes**

### ***Workplace Culture Onboarding***

Veterans were clear about feeling lost or confused with onboarding when it wasn't structured or when a lack of introduction to the civilian workplace culture was not provided. The experiences veterans explained are described through the following quotes:

I felt like I was in the deep end, trying to swim out. I wasn't motivated to be at work and was just going to collect a paycheck. I had no purpose and felt like it wouldn't matter what I did there. (Interview, Anne, August 15, 2025)

My training before my start was hands-off and impersonal. (Interview, Charlie, August 22, 2025)

I interviewed with an HR person and another senior person in the company but had no clue who my supervisor was and had no interaction with them. (Interview, Charlie, August 22, 2025)

Culture shock. Not from the work, but when I met my supervisor, I realized they were as young as my child and still in college. This was an eye-opening moment, and I realized I was not as desperate as I thought. (Interview, Charlie, August 22, 2025)

Structure and importance of workplace culture training align with the structure and support found in the military. The element of a holistic approach to onboarding, including introductions to personnel and workplace culture expectations, connects to several transition theory elements. A sense of self within the company begins with those first days and experiences, addressing the characteristics of the situation. The veteran, when provided with a structured introduction, could have a clear picture of hierarchy, company

protocols/language, and may provide a stable foundation for their start. Positive experiences were documented through veteran narratives:

They were phenomenal, and it felt like the check-in/check-out process the military has. I got to meet everyone, and the manager kept telling me he wanted me to feel comfortable there and ensure I felt supported. He prioritized my family and made sure I understood my role and responsibilities in the office. I had clear direction, structure, and knew who to go to about specific questions. I feel like I have a reason to go to work again, like I am excited about going there. I now have something to look forward to each day. (Interview, Anne, August 15, 2025)

I was really excited to see the company has offered [Skillbridge] and I hope it means more service members will join the company. I wish I had the chance to have done it, but I am glad it's there now for the future. (Interview, Brad, August 21, 2025)

The onboarding process may provide a stronger strategy for the transition process with understanding requirements and accessing training opportunities. The last characteristic connected with onboarding is the veteran's social identity and redefining themselves in the work environment. Given that onboarding and introduction to the company is the veteran's first experience with the organization, it has the potential to impact each characteristic of transition theory on some level:

My onboarding experience was a team-oriented training filled with information on workplace culture and the jargon used inside the organization. It is a community within itself. We have our own language and way of doing things. It

really reminds me of the military in some ways because it's that type of family bond. (Interview, Evan, September 11, 2025)

### ***Support Programs: Peer Support/Mentorship***

Veterans spoke of the importance of mentorship, especially when it's mentoring from other veterans. Mentorship can be connected to social identity, situation, support, and strategy. A well-matched mentor or peer group can assist veterans with acclimating to the new environment and workplace expectations. Sharing experiences with peers can build a sense of community familiar to veterans. All participants spoke about the importance of having other veterans in the organization who understood what the new employee was experiencing and had an idea of the environment they left:

You want someone who really knows what you experienced and that life. I don't want to talk to someone who has never dealt with the environments I have, someone who has never been in a combat zone or lost people they live and work with. The bond that exists in the military doesn't really exist in the civilian world. I don't want to share stuff with someone who has just read about it or studied it. I want someone who can relate. (Interview, Charlie, August 22, 2025)

My onboarding experience was a team-oriented training filled with information on workplace culture and the jargon used inside the organization. It is a community within itself. We have our own language and way of doing things. It really reminds me of the military in some ways because it's that type of family bond. (Interview, Evan, September 11, 2025)

We have access to peer groups if we choose. Groups are formed based on interests or demographics. There is a large one for veterans, but I could find a

group for just about any sort of interest. If one doesn't exist, the company encourages employees to start one. (Interview, Frank, August 26, 2025)

The support programs referenced by veterans are aligned with the mentoring process often found in internship programs and networking groups found within private organizations.

### ***Skills Recognition/Translation***

Understanding how to translate military skills and apply them to civilian workspaces was of high importance to veterans. Appropriate role placement based on current skills can be related to the veteran's sense of self, placing value on their military experiences and supporting their confidence in the ability to perform well in their new role:

If a veteran leaves service with an extensive amount of leadership experience and responsibility, then they are in a civilian role with little to no responsibility, which may be rough for the veteran. I mean, some, especially retirees, may not want a lot of responsibility or may not want to be a supervisor, but I don't think they want to be at the bottom either. I don't want to oversee the whole company, but I also don't want to answer to a kid who is the same age or younger than my own.

(Interview, Charlie, August 22, 2025)

The theme can also be correlated to how the veteran feels about their situation. The ability to use their skills in the new environment may assist in easing anxiety and decreasing reverse culture shock as the veteran transitions. Although not a part of this study, appropriate hiring and placement may also impact employee retention.

### ***Work/Life Balance***

One theme presented related to finding more balance than veterans had felt while in service. Each veteran spoke of “veteran-friendly” organizations recognizing the veteran has often previously prioritized their military obligations and desires the ability to prioritize family. Seeking this balance directly relates to the element of transition support:

I don't feel torn between my family and work ever. Supervisors will often remind you to take leave or let you know you haven't taken a vacation in a while.

For me, it means work stays at work and doesn't bleed into my personal life. (E)

Clear roles so I know what my goals are and am able to also set my own goals for my team. (Interview, Frank, August 26, 2025)

The theme correlates with the desire for structure to be present in the workspace, providing distinct boundaries between work and personal life. Veterans are familiar with those lines being blurred as they are “on call” 24 hours a day. Veterans emphasized being able to take vacations more freely and being present with their family and loved ones.

### ***Community***

The theme of community was present in all interviews, even when the veteran hadn't experienced a sense of community in civilian workplaces. The presence of community or a sense of belonging correlates with social identity, support, and purpose in transition theory. The military is a collective and driven by a singular purpose, identified by rank and uniforms, and a community of support and resources within the work environment:

I see the company fulfilling the goal of being veteran-friendly because it's not just one thing, but it's really a community. That's something I really missed when I left service. (Interview, Frank, August 26, 2025)

We have access to peer groups if we choose. Groups are formed based on interests or demographics. There is a large one for veterans, but I could find a group for just about any sort of interest. If one doesn't exist, the company encourages employees to start one. (Interview, Frank, August 26, 2025)

Access to peer groups or interest groups is one way that veterans see being a "veteran-friendly" practice inside organizations. Veterans discussed that being able to relate to other veterans and have someone understand their experiences helps ease transition stress. Veterans who had experienced workplace culture training or personal introductions spoke highly of the experience and they had a clear picture of company expectations. Veterans talked of their company having its own workplace language/jargon, which helped establish a strong sense of community.

A few sub-themes were present throughout the interviews. Discussion of anxiety and uncertainty was mentioned in veteran interviews when the topic of challenges with transition was asked. Fair compensation was briefly discussed and the importance of veterans understanding their respective job markets, salary ranges, and the value of military skills could help with negotiations and circumventing a risk of being underemployed.

### **Organizational Themes**

Analyzing organizational interview data, there were 2 themes present in both public and private agencies and 2 that were present but varied between the two

categories. Themes present in all organizations were hiring incentives and employee assistance programs. Career development and skills translation were present in all agencies but had distinct differences worthy of recognition.

### ***Hiring Incentives***

All agencies had some form of hiring incentive or prioritization for veteran applicants. Higher entry-level pay, buying back time towards civilian retirement, and preference for hiring over civilian applicants were discussed throughout interviews. Hiring incentives and prioritization can be related to the situation within the transition model. Veterans may have experienced an unplanned transition or feel a loss of control. Agencies recognizing military service as a way of prioritizing hiring could help instill a sense of control back with the veteran and help rebuild their confidence in the skills acquired while in service. There is a difference between public and private agencies. Public organizations emphasized hiring incentives as their primary mode of qualifying the company as “veteran-friendly” whereas private organizations offer incentives but focus more on other programs/benefits when recognizing their “veteran-friendly” status.

### ***Support Programs: Peer Support/Employee Assistance***

Both public and private organizations offer employee assistance programs, including counseling programs, legal services, and wellness programs. None of the organizations separated these programs as veteran-only programs and offered them to all employees. Private organizations offer additional support systems through peer groups categorized by demographics and agencies added that there were veteran-specific groups if the veteran chose to participate.

Employee assistance programs and peer support groups relate to support and may also relate to social identity. Veterans are familiar with free support services available during active duty and the services are embedded in the workplace environment, eliminating access barriers. Continuation of these services can assist in providing support during and after transition and be tailored to the veteran's needs. Social identity may be impacted by the presence of these peer support groups, specifically when workplace culture training is not part of the onboarding process. Groups would provide a safe space for veterans to learn acceptable workplace practices and agency acronyms/jargon. Peer groups could also provide an additional way for veterans to identify themselves.

### ***Career Development***

All agencies stated that career development was valuable to being identified as a “veteran-friendly” organization but varied in structure. Public agencies relied on employee-driven career development. Training is available, but it can be impacted by funding restrictions and agencies are not always clear about a pathway to promotion. Private organizations have accessible plans and are often encouraged by supervisors. Tuition reimbursement was mentioned in all agencies and private and public entities placed value on internship programs like Skillbridge. Public organizations clearly have more limitations on training opportunities due to the mechanism of funding.

### ***Skills Recognition/Translation***

All agencies recognized the importance of translating military skills accurately when defining “veteran-friendly”. Agencies described personnel trained in skills translation when reviewing applications. Hiring managers’ understanding of military backgrounds is an important part of the appropriate placement of veterans. As with career

development, funding plays a critical part in maintaining trained personnel. Private organizations have created entire teams focused on translating military skills and intentionally recruiting veterans. The teams are predominantly made of veterans:

Service members and veterans bring foundational skills to the workplace, being adaptable and teamwork experience easily translates to our environment. We have clear pathways to promotion and training opportunities. We don't guarantee employment, but the company welcomes veterans and treats them fairly and respectfully. The organization recognizes the value veterans bring to the workplace. The company prefers to use the statement veteran-ready, not just veteran-friendly. (Interview, Private Organization 2, September 12, 2025)

Skills translation can impact a veteran's situation, determining if the veteran is offered an opportunity to interview or placed in an appropriate role. The process can also overlap to a veteran's self-perception when there is uncertainty of how to explain their military experience in civilian terms. Finding suitable employment may also impact the veteran's purpose when feeling the loss of a higher purpose serving their country:

The team responsible for veteran inclusion has a goal to provide services to transitioning service members and veterans, primarily focused on technical skills and translating them to careers within the organization. Skills like resiliency align quite well with our industry. (Interview, Private Organization 2, September 12, 2025)

Whether analyzing veteran or agency data, all participants recognized that most organizations do well when hiring and supporting veterans but acknowledge room for improvement. Mental health support was important to veterans and companies,

recognizing the need to support all employees. Ensuring veterans are not overlooked due to a misunderstanding of military experiences and gaps in training on skills translation was also of notable importance.

Figure 1 depicts the defining characteristics of “veteran-friendly” organizations from the veteran and agency perspective. The overlap reflects shared priorities, while exterior circles reflect the perspective gaps present between the two. The two perspectives have shared definitions of “veteran-friendly” with skills translation and peer support recognized as important aspects of defining the term. Skills translation is recognized as a challenge for veterans in understanding their qualifications and how they apply to the civilian environment. Organizations view skills translation as a challenge with respect to the availability of trained personnel who can recognize applicable skills and appropriate role placement. The challenge was prominent in the public sector because of funding limitations.

**Figure 1**

*“Veteran-Friendly” Perspectives*



Hiring incentives are impactful in helping veterans gain access to meaningful employment; however, veterans place a stronger value on onboarding that includes introductions to workplace culture, mentorship, community, and work/life balance. The value in prioritizing veterans decreases after the veteran is within the workspace and must navigate their place in the unfamiliar environment.

Support programs are valued among veterans and organizations, but there are distinct differences in the perspectives. Veterans speak of wanting support within the organization through veteran mentorship programs, whereas organizations prioritize need-based programs such as homebuying assistance.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has shown that moving from military service to civilian work is a complex process shaped by both personal experiences and how organizations operate. Veterans and organizational representatives agree that, although there has been progress in helping veterans adjust, important gaps remain. These include the need for better onboarding, mentorship, skills translation, and building a real sense of community and work/life balance. The findings add to what is already known in the field, showing the detailed challenges veterans face and how the idea of a “veteran-friendly” workplace is changing. The final chapter will look back at the literature considering these results, connect theory with real experiences, and suggest areas for future research to improve support for veterans and organizational practices.

## **Chapter V**

### **Discussion**

The research intended to explore the operational definition of “veteran-friendly” in civilian workplaces from veteran and organizational perspectives. Using a phenomenological design and narrative inquiry approach, the study highlighted the lived experiences of veterans during their first year of transition to civilian employment and the organizational practices used to support them. By drawing on Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981, 2011) and Military Transition Theory (Pedlar et al., 2019) the research provided a deeper understanding of the post-separation transition process, the gaps between veteran and employer expectations, and the fluid definition of “veteran-friendly” in current civilian workplaces.

#### **Summary of Key Findings**

Veterans and organizations value the “veteran-friendly” workplace concept, but at times, their definition and priorities differ:

##### ***Veteran Perspective***

Veterans placed importance on structured onboarding with an introduction to workplace culture, mentorship, recognition of transferable skills, work/life balance, and a sense of community. These elements were seen as beneficial in easing the stress of transition, regaining a sense of belonging, and supporting professional growth in the civilian environment. Veterans also reported experiences of unstructured onboarding and

lack of role clarity led to feelings of anxiety, loss of purpose, and decreased motivation. Descriptions of “culture shock” when entering civilian workplaces particularly when expectations and communication differed from military norms.

Mentorship programs, specifically those that connect veterans with others who understand their experiences was highlighted as a key factor in successful transition. Veterans placed a high value on organizations that supported and offered opportunities for professional development, encouraged community building, and recognized the challenges of military to civilian transition. Additionally, emphasis was placed on work/life balance and the ability to prioritize their family role given they were unable to during military service. Being able to access peer groups based on demographics and interests along with a supportive community contributed to a more seamless transition and increased job satisfaction.

### ***Organizational Perspective***

Public sector employers focused on hiring incentives, employee assistance programs, and career development opportunities. These organizations often prioritized recruitment and benefits packages as indicators for being “veteran-friendly”. Private sector organizations offered a more holistic approach using support/peer networking groups and workplace culture training. Some organizations had dedicated teams focused on veteran hiring and skills translation, as well as partnerships with veteran-focused non-profit organizations and transition programs like Skillbridge.

Public and private organizations placed significant value on the skills and work ethic of veterans, but the depth and consistency of support resources varied. Private organizations were more likely to offer mentorship opportunities, community building

programs, and clear pathways for career progression. The additional support may be connected to funding availability and worthy of future examination.

### ***Shared Perspective***

Both groups recognized the value in accurately translating military skills into civilian roles and peer support. However, veterans placed greater emphasis on workplace culture training and community, while organizations prioritized recruitment, benefits, and hiring incentives.

Persistent challenges with unstructured onboarding, lack of clear role expectations, and risk of underemployment or misplacement due to inadequate skills translation were highlighted within the research. Effective skills translation and mentorship are essential for successful veteran integration. The findings reflect both groups of participants agree on this area, but organizations often lacked in consistent practices for supporting veterans passed the initial hiring phase. Veterans were susceptible to loss of identity and purpose, particularly when organizational support did not extend beyond this phase.

### **Discussion**

The study aimed to explore the operational definition of a “veteran-friendly” workplace by comparing organizational practices and the lived experiences of veterans. Examination of the findings confirms the existing literature reviewed and expands the body of knowledge by identifying areas of alignment between the two perspectives, as well as highlighting notable gaps.

The experiences of veterans and organizational best practices show several areas of alignment with previous literature presented in Chapter 2 of this study. Veterans spoke

of confusion, anxiety, and lower motivation levels when onboarding was unstructured and an introduction to workplace culture was not present. For example, Anne described her first civilian job as lacking direction and purpose: “I wasn’t motivated to be at work and was just going to collect a paycheck. I had no purpose and felt like it wouldn’t matter what I did there.” However, when her second employer provided a structured onboarding process and clear expectations, Anne regained her sense of purpose and excitement for work. The experiences are consistent with prior research and align with studies highlighting the challenges of “reverse culture shock” and the need for tailored onboarding to facilitate smoother transitions. Findings by Keeling (2018) and Carpenter and Silberman (2020) associated an increase in job satisfaction and a sense of belonging with practices that involved positive onboarding experiences, introductions to staff, and clear role expectations.

Schlossberg’s Transition Theory provides a lens for interpreting the findings. The “Situation” element is evident in Brad’s narrative, who navigated an unplanned separation and felt overwhelmed by the financial and cultural realities of civilian employment: “I had no clue how much was going to be deducted from my check for healthcare or taxes. I was so shocked, and it really caught me off guard.” This reinforces the importance of organizational support in managing the stress of an unexpected military-to-civilian transition.

Mentorship was a dominant theme, and veterans placed high value on mentor programs, specifically when they were veteran-to-veteran experiences. Charlie emphasized the need for counselors who truly understand military experiences: “You want someone who really knows what you experienced and that life. I don’t want to talk

to someone who has never dealt with the environments I have.” Veterans consistently valued mentorship, especially from other veterans and peer groups as important sources of support. This finding reinforces literature that establishes peer support as a critical piece in successful adaptation to the workplace. Griffin and Gilbert (2015) and Flack and Kite (2021) presented a compelling argument that social identity and connectedness to community reduced the risk of mental health risks and positively impacted acculturation.

Military Transition Theory (Pedlar et al., 2019) established the importance of social identity and connectedness. Frank found that his new employer’s peer groups and community building opportunities helped him regain a sense of belonging: “I see the company fulfilling the goal of being “veteran-friendly” because it’s not just one thing, but it’s really a community. That’s something I really missed when I left service.” Evan’s positive experience with the company’s Skillbridge program, which provided workplace culture training and mentorship, helped him feel part of a community and set him up for advancement into a role that matched his skills and family needs.

Kirchner et al. (2021) and Maury et al. (2016) highlighted challenges and risks of underemployment or misplacement because of inaccurate skills translation. Charlie noted the challenge of being placed in a role with little responsibility after years of leadership experience: “If a veteran leaves service with an extensive amount of leadership experience and responsibility, then they are in a civilian role with little to no responsibility, which may be rough for the veteran.” Organizations and veterans identified this as a challenge and the struggle of translating military skills to civilian roles continues to be discussed in the literature. Funding for training human resource professionals within organizations seems to be a contributing factor.

Meaningful employment and acquiring a social identity within the new workspace are identified in previous research and align with veterans' desires to maintain work/life balance within their new civilian roles. Evan described how attentive his supervisors were in reminding him to take paid time off and prioritize his family, stating: "I don't feel torn between my family and work ever. Supervisors will often remind you to take leave or let you know you haven't taken a vacation in a while." Sheridan (1992) and Cluff (2022) presented literature indicating that when organizations foster these elements, the return is lower turnover and higher employee satisfaction.

While the alignment between organizations and veteran perspectives shows meaningful progress in supporting these unique transitions, the findings also present notable gaps within current practices. Understanding where current practices fall short will provide an opportunity to identify opportunities for more effective and holistic support for veterans entering the civilian workforce. One gap, found predominantly within the public sector, was a primary focus on hiring incentives and employee assistance programs, while veterans placed a higher value on workplace culture introduction, mentorship, and community. Shue et al. (2021) and LePage (2020) raised concerns about organizational misunderstanding of veteran needs and programs that do not fully address their challenges.

There were two areas where veterans and organizations aligned, but there were significant differences in prioritization. Both groups valued career development opportunities, with public organizations relying on employee-driven initiatives, which could disadvantage veteran employees unfamiliar with civilian career pathways. Private organizations offered more structured support, but gaps remained in ensuring that

veterans were aware of and had access to the resources that were readily available. For instance, one private organization described its approach: “The organization is transparent about its veteran-centered programs and extensively markets them, including fellowships, training opportunities, support groups not just for veterans, but for any military-affiliated employee...” The second area of divergence relates to mental health and general support. Organizations described employee assistance programs as being widely available and included counseling services. Support tailored to veterans’ unique experiences is still missing in many organizations. The emphasis on the importance of culturally competent support was evident in the findings of Ahern et al. (2015) and Misca et al. (2023). Veterans expressed a desire for additional veteran-to-veteran mentorship opportunities and to connect with individuals who have firsthand military experience.

The major gap identified in previous research and this study is the lack of a standardized definition of “veteran-friendly” workplaces. Kirchner and Minnis (2018) emphasized the need for clearer standards and accountability when using the term. Organizations continue to use the term, often as a marketing tool. When examining veterans’ experiences, if an organization is not rooted in best practices, the label of “veteran-friendly” alone is insufficient.

By integrating both theories with these findings, it becomes more evident that authentic, evidence-based “veteran-friendly” practices must address both the practical and psychological aspects of transition. Effective organizational practices: structured onboarding with workplace culture training, mentorship, skills translation, and community-building directly address the characteristics of transition and social identity within these theoretical frameworks. When these practices are not present, veterans

experience anxiety, loss of purpose, and underemployment. These insights strengthen the need for organizations to move beyond surface-level initiatives and marketing and invest in holistic practices that genuinely support veterans throughout their civilian careers.

### **Theoretical Implications**

When examining the findings in relation to the theoretical framework, each model characteristic is present. Starting with Schlossberg's (1981) model's element of "situation," which refers to veterans' timing and control over their discharge, as well as the context of their entry into the civilian workforce. Veterans who experienced an unplanned discharge, whether through legal or medical separation, tend to have less control, which can affect their adjustment. Organizations that provide tailored support and clear communication can help facilitate smoother transitions.

The second element, "self" involves the veteran's mindset, past experiences, confidence, and readiness for change. As discussed in Chapter 2, service members form an identity shaped around their military service. Veterans can feel a diminished self-worth or uncertainty about where they fit in their new environment. When organizations understand military experiences in relation to civilian roles and encourage personal growth, they help veterans rebuild confidence and identity in civilian settings.

When discussing the third "S", support systems and resources available, including peer, family, and organizational programs, the military offers a strong array of options to meet any need. However, once a service member separates from active duty, this built-in network is often lost or difficult to access. Employers can replicate this system through mentorship programs, resource groups, and easily accessible assistance services. These initiatives can reduce feelings of isolation and foster a sense of belonging. Veteran-to-

veteran mentorship is especially meaningful, as it can bridge gaps in understanding cultural changes and provide guidance from someone who can relate.

The final element from Schlossberg's (1981) model, "strategies," relates to the transition process through the veteran's ability to use and seek out resources, their problem-solving skills, coping mechanisms, and their action plans. Service members are familiar with structured and clear pathways for promotions and skills training. Veterans will benefit from similarly structured programs in the civilian environment. Clear career development plans and opportunities to leverage their transferable skills will benefit both parties. Organizations that provide transparent promotion criteria, skills or credentialing opportunities, and tailored career coaching will empower veterans to strategize their new civilian career path. Appropriate role placement and reducing the risk of underemployment can be circumvented through skills translation training for human resource professionals.

Although not on Schlossberg's (1981) model, Military Transition Theory (Pedlar et al., 2019) extended the model with the addition of social identity and connectedness. The military emphasizes a strong sense of community and a collective purpose. The loss of identity when a service member transitions to veteran status can lead to feelings of alienation in a civilian workplace. Intentional acts of community building through onboarding that includes workplace culture and peer groups help veterans regain a sense of belonging. Regaining the feeling of connectedness is linked to higher retention and improved well-being.

The final aspect of "identity" is an area where veterans often struggle with as they navigate redefining themselves outside of the military context. Misalignment between the

civilian role and a veteran's previous role or skills may lead to a veteran feeling undervalued or misplaced. Enhancing engagement and satisfaction can be accomplished through positive identity reconstruction. Organizations can facilitate this through meaningful work, recognizing the veteran's experiences, and avoiding stereotyping. Each of these elements is interrelated; a supportive environment can enhance self-efficacy enabling a veteran to develop positive coping strategies and foster a sense of belonging and identity.

The research strongly confirms the applicability of Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981, 2011) and Military Transition Theory (Pedlar et al., 2019) to the workforce context and as frameworks for understanding the military transition process. Veterans in this study described experiences of identity loss, uncertainty, and a need for structured support, characteristics that are present in Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) model. The "4S" model, which is structured around situation, self, support, and strategies, influenced veterans' sense of self and support through workplace culture training and mentorship. The findings also reinforce the importance of connectedness, purpose, and social identity as established in Military Transition Theory (Pedlar et al., 2019) for successful transition and overall well-being. Theoretical frameworks show the need for organizations to move beyond surface-level initiatives.

### **Recommendations for Organizations**

Based on the findings, several recommendations emerge for organizations seeking to enhance their "veteran-friendly" status.

1. Holistic Structured Onboarding with Culture Orientation: Onboarding programs should include an introduction to workplace culture, clear position descriptions, a

review of organization structure and protocol, and early mentorship, ideally pairing new hires with seasoned veterans. Include training on workplace language, norms, and available resources to help veterans acclimate more smoothly. The recommendation would help veterans understand expectations, reduce anxiety, and could accelerate their adjustment to civilian workplaces. This could also lead to higher engagement and reduced turnover rates.

2. Foster Community and Peer Support: Develop and support employee resource groups and peer mentorship programs, including veteran-specific groups, to build community and facilitate social integration. Pairing new veteran hires with mentors, ideally other veterans, can extend the knowledge veterans gained during their pre-separation curriculum by guiding them through acclimation to the new workplace and answer questions about workplace culture and expectations. Supporting or encouraging the creation of employee resource groups helps develop a sense of belonging and community.

Providing veterans with relatable guidance and helping them reestablish a sense of community has proven to ease the transition and encourage long-term retention. The organization can be viewed as more attractive and supportive to veterans when veterans are recognized for the sacrifices they made. Turnover can be positively impacted by addressing the unique mental health needs and adjustment needs of veterans. Encouraging the use of paid time off, flexible scheduling opportunities, and family-friendly policies can demonstrate the importance of work-life balance and support overall well-being.

3. **Enhance Skills Translation:** Invest in training for human resource professionals, supervisors, and hiring managers to accurately interpret military experience and applicability to their respective organizational roles. Using standardized tools or partnering with veteran organizations to ensure veterans are hired for roles that match their skills and experience can facilitate appropriate role placement and reduce the risk of underemployment. This function will not only reduce the risk of underemployment or unemployment but will help organizations fully leverage the unique skills veterans bring and increase job satisfaction among veterans.
4. **Ongoing Structured Career Development:** Provide clear pathways for professional growth, including credentialing support, tuition reimbursement, and transparent promotion criteria. Supervisors should be encouraged to discuss career goals with veteran employees and support their pursuit of training, education, or certifications. A key factor in retention and employee motivation is connected to supporting the veteran's professional growth. The interaction also cultivates the idea of a future with the organization.
5. **Evaluate and Communicate "Veteran-Friendly" practices:** Adopt clear standards, seeking external certification from subject matter experts, and clearly communicate available support to prospective and current veteran employees. Organizations should move beyond the use of "veteran-friendly" as a marketing term and adopt evidence-based standards for what this means in practice. Moving beyond the marketing scheme will build trust with veterans and ensure the support is meaningful and transparent.

Veteran employees should be asked for feedback on their onboarding, mentorship, and support programs. The feedback should be used to continuously update and refine the organization's practices and address any gaps present between the intent of the organization and the veteran perspective. Adapting to the evolving needs of veterans and the organization will ensure programs remain relevant and effective.

By implementing these recommendations, organizations can move toward a more authentic "veteran-friendly" workplace. Effective and supportive practices will not only attract veteran talent, but it will also help them succeed and remain in the civilian workforce. The recommendations target the most critical gaps and align both veteran and organizational high-priority items identified as essential for a successful military-to-civilian transition.

### **Limitations**

Although the study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The use of purposive sampling and a qualitative approach can place limits on the generalizability of the findings. Organizational participants may have presented their practices favorably, and veterans' experiences may not be representative of the full spectrum of diversity in the veteran community. The study focused on the experiences within the first year of civilian employment and may not reflect long-term adaptation or retention outcomes. Career advancement, long-term career satisfaction, or delayed adjustment challenges are not addressed.

The study included public and private sector organizations, but the findings may not be equal across all industries or organizational sizes. Government agencies may encounter varying challenges different from a small business or a large corporation.

Some organizations may have been limited in what they could share or participate in due to company policy or fear of repercussions, limiting responses. Employers may have also described their organizations more favorably, while veterans may have emphasized challenges or successes based on their own experiences.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research could employ quantitative methods to measure the impact of specific "veteran-friendly" practices on retention and well-being. This research would help organizations identify effective strategies, justify funding, and pinpoint areas that may need improvement or redesign. It provides data to establish a baseline for analyzing outcomes such as retention rates and job satisfaction, helping determine which initiatives have the greatest impact. Organizations can compare their current practices against the findings to identify gaps and explore new approaches. Ongoing research and feedback enable organizations to adapt in real time, ensuring systems remain relevant to changing demographics and workplace environments. Additionally, research can reveal unintended consequences, such as underemployment or feelings of isolation.

A longitudinal study following veterans' experiences over several years in civilian employment could determine the average time required for a successful military-to-civilian transition. Knowing this timeframe might help in designing programs and resources, as well as determining how long these supports should be offered. Additionally, broadening the research sample to include more industries, regions, and veteran demographics would increase its generalizability.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter synthesizes the findings of the research, pulling together the lived experiences of veterans and organizational best practices to define the true meaning of “veteran-friendly” workplace. The chapter showcases that while both groups value the concept of “veteran-friendly”, their priorities often differ. Veterans place value on structured onboarding, culture orientation, mentorship, work/life balance, sense of community, and transferable skill recognition. Veterans view these as critical factors to a smooth transition to civilian workplaces and long-term retention. In contrast, organizations, specifically public organizations, lean towards prioritizing hiring incentives, career development, and employee assistance programs. Private sector organizations are more likely to offer holistic support and community-building initiatives. Both groups placed value in accurate skills translation and peer support, but challenges remain with unclear expectations, unstructured onboarding, and underemployment.

The chapter discusses the gaps, connects the findings to the theoretical framework, and offers recommendations for actions organizations can take. The need for a standardized definition, structured support systems, and veteran feedback is shown. Limitations and future research recommendations were presented, emphasizing the need for authentic practices and policies that go beyond marketing to genuinely support veterans throughout their civilian careers.

## **Final Reflection**

Transitions are highly personalized, influenced by personal history, organizational culture, and the availability of tailored support is reflected in veteran narratives. Veteran narratives in this study show that successful reintegration depends not only on personal

resilience but also on cultural orientation, mentorship, and ongoing career development. The absence of a standardized definition and best practices for “veteran-friendly” workplaces calls attention to the need for a more comprehensive, evidence-based approach to helping veterans succeed in civilian jobs.

This study contributes to a deeper and more operational understanding of what it means to be a “veteran-friendly” workplace. By focusing on the lived experiences of veterans and comparing them to organizational perspectives, a picture of progress and gaps in supporting veterans’ transitions is revealed. The findings show progress in some areas, such as increased awareness of veterans’ needs and implementation of support programs, but also show gaps in skills translation, the cultivation of community, and work/life balance. Bridging these gaps requires intentional, evidence-based practices that honor veterans’ experiences, cultivate a sense of belonging, and enable continued career development. These factors are related to the nature of work. As the nature of work and the work environment continue to evolve, veteran-friendly practices should provide appropriate support that responds to these changes. The study shows the importance of extending beyond marketing and implementing authentic and measurable practices that address the priorities of both groups. Veterans should not only be hired but truly supported throughout their civilian careers.

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## **Appendix A:**

### **Interview Guide for Veteran Participants**

The following questions have the potential for use in data generation:

1. Detail the skills you developed during your active duty and how you have applied them in your civilian career.
2. What drew or deterred you from choosing a company after the transition?
3. How long have you been with your current company, or how long did you remain with your first company after the transition?
4. Please describe your onboarding experience with the company.
5. What values and beliefs do you adhere to?
6. What is your perspective on your role within your company?
7. What resources or career development programs does your company offer, and are there any programs specifically for veterans?
8. Describe the support you received during onboarding with the company and highlight what you found most helpful in adapting to the civilian environment.
9. What characteristics do you visualize or think of when you read or hear the phrase “veteran-friendly “?
10. What challenges, if any, did you face during the transition period?

### *Interview Guide for Employer Participants*

The following questions have the potential for use in data generation:

1. What programs or initiatives does your company have to support veteran employees?
2. Are there any customized onboarding or training programs for veterans?

3. How does your company assist veterans in transitioning from military to civilian roles within your organization?
4. How do you inform your workforce about military culture and the skills veterans offer?
5. Do you provide any benefits or support services to address issues that may be significant to the veteran community?
6. What partnerships or affiliations do you have with organizations or initiatives focusing on veterans?
7. What career development or mentorship programs does the company provide?
8. What is the organization's definition of a "veteran-friendly" workplace?

## Appendix B:

### IRB Exemption Report



## ***Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants***

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**Protocol Number:** 04620-2025

**Responsible Researcher(s):** Diane Gillaspie

**Supervising Faculty:** Dr. Jieun You

**Dissertation Research Members:**  
Drs. Jamie Workman and Shannon Perry

**Project Title:** *Creating Veteran-Friendly Workplaces: A Dual Perspective Study.*

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#### **Institutional Review Board Determination:**

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

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#### **Comments:**

- *Prior to distributing the Qualtrics link the signature line must be removed from the Qualtrics survey.*
- *The IRB approval number (IRB-04620-2025) must be included in all research related correspondence (Consent statements, social media posts, emails, letters, etc.).*
- *Per exempt protocol guidelines, it is permissible to record interviews for the specific purpose of creating an accurate transcript to be utilized for documentation or analysis. Once the transcript has been constructed, all recorded interview sessions must immediately be deleted from all devices, including electronic files used to store recordings. This measure is in place to uphold confidentiality and ensure that information contained in the recordings is adequately protected.*
- *To comply with consent guidelines, audio/video recordings must capture the researcher reading the consent statement aloud, ensuring the participant's understanding and willingness to participate. **Each transcript must document the researcher's reading of the consent statement and the participants' consent.** A copy of the consent statement must be provided to participants.*
- *To ensure confidentiality, pseudonym lists must be kept in a separate secure file from corresponding names, email addresses, etc.*

- *Upon completion of the research study all data (e.g. data, pseudonym/email lists, transcripts, etc.) must be securely maintained (e.g. locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a **minimum of 3 years**. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*

**Proposed modifications must be submitted to the IRB Administrator at [tmwright@valdosta.edu](mailto:tmwright@valdosta.edu) for review and approval. Implementing modifications without written approval from the IRB is strictly prohibited.**

*Elizabeth W. Olphie                      07.15.2025*

**Thank you for submitting an IRB application.**

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator                      Date

**Please direct questions to [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu) or 229-259-5045.**

Revised: 06.02.16