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Assessing Workplace Perceptions of Military Veteran Compared to Nonveteran Employees
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Abstract

Qualitative methods were used to examine differences in workplace perceptions between military veteran and nonveteran employees at the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). Prior research using employee satisfaction survey data found veteran employees reported a stronger connection to the organizational mission yet were overall less satisfied than nonveteran employees. The authors examined the open-text comments from that same survey to determine whether veteran employees identified the reasons for their discontent and whether these were similar to nonveterans' concerns. They found that in cases when veteran employees indicated dissatisfaction or concerns, *favoritism/unfairness* was an overarching theme in their comments, more so than for nonveterans. Pragmatically, given these findings, enhanced vocational strategies for veterans transitioning into civilian employment is one way to socialize them into the new requirements and thus improve veterans' workplace perceptions. Another approach is to develop organizational leaders' understanding of military skills and culture to enable a better use of veteran employees' strengths at civilian jobs.

Keywords: Job Satisfaction, Job Selection, Leadership, Promotion, Veterans

Introduction: The Importance of Veterans' Workplace Perceptions

In 2016, there were over 10.6 million veterans employed in the U.S. civilian labor force, of which 3.2 million had served on active duty since September 2001 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017). Veterans bring to the workplace their experience with military culture, training, and combat, to which civilians are not exposed. Veteran employees also sustain protected work flexibility if called back to service or for routine training (Reserve or National Guard), which also can affect the continuity of their workplace and coworker experiences. Combined, this experience may influence veterans' perceptions and expectations of the work environment. If veterans perceive the workplace differently from nonveterans, this may impact their satisfaction on the job and ultimately affect veteran recruitment and retention policies or practices.

For adults, work plays a critical role in individual identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), regardless of that work stemming from a civilian or military career. We spend more time at work than in other life-aspects, such as with family (Gini, 1998). In fact, it is proposed that we experience some work-related identity loss when work ceases or is terminated (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). Because work is central to the core sense of self, it is important that work is a satisfying and fulfilling experience. For veteran employees, this may require merging two frames of reference (military and civilian) in determining what constitutes workplace satisfaction.

This paper compares veteran and nonveteran employee perceptions of workplace characteristics in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). Using qualitative methods, the authors of the current study expanded upon previous quantitative work (Teclaw, Osatuke, & Ramsel, 2016) that examined differences in workplace perceptions between veteran and nonveteran employees in VHA, and found veterans were overall less satisfied with their work environment. Organizations can the findings of the current study to improve their recruitment and vocational approaches to better transition veterans into civilian employment. This study also highlights the importance of collecting

qualitative (open comment) data in workforce surveys to allow for monitoring of employee, particularly veterans', perceptions to promptly notice workforce changes and respond with organizationally supportive actions.

Review of Previous Research

Veterans' issues have received much attention in the recent decade. This literature includes physical and psychological effects of war (Black & Papile, 2010; McFarlane, 2009; Spelman, Hunt, Seal, & Burgo-Black, 2012) and challenges of re-joining civilian life — such as work opportunities and impact of unemployment, recruitment issues, military skills applied to civilian jobs, veterans' employment preferences, consequences of psychological and physical impairments, and vocational counseling needs (Adler et al., 2011; Bullock, Braud, Andrews, & Phillips, 2009; Clemons & Milson, 2008; King, 2012).

Overall, reintegration of veterans into civilian society is acknowledged as highly important, and civil employment is a reintegration milestone. Research on veterans' reintegration into the workplace details the difficulties that nearly 44 percent of veterans face as they return to civilian employment (McAllister, Mackey, Hackney, & Perrew, 2015). These employment difficulties can arise from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Kukla, Bonfils, & Salyers, 2015), from comorbidity of medical and mental health challenges (i.e., anxiety disorders), and from substance abuse problems (Humensky, Jordan, Stroupe, & Hynes, 2013) — conditions that have been documented as more prevalent in veteran than nonveteran populations. Importantly, these challenges do not have to amount to levels high enough to constitute clinical diagnoses or severe psychological impairments for these issues to still cause negative impact on veterans' search for civilian jobs and, once employed, on their perceptions of civilian workplaces (e.g. Redmond et al., 2015; see Teclaw et al., 2016, for an overview).

Different types of vulnerabilities create different kinds of employment challenges. In a mixed method study about veterans' perceptions of the workplace, Kukla et al., 2015 compared employed and unemployed veterans with PTSD or other severe mental illness (SMI) who provided survey information and narrative accounts of their successful and challenging work experiences. Results showed that veterans with PTSD experienced more barriers to success at work relative to veterans with SMI. Veterans with SMIs had a greater likelihood of receiving VA vocational services and considered this support as helping with work success.

Yet other challenges in rejoining the civilian workforce may reflect disability-related issues. In a focus group study (Lee, VanLooy, Young & Stern, 2016), disabled veterans revealed the difficulties they faced related to community reintegration and transition to employment. The primary challenges revolved around system fragmentation and issues associated with identity, such as being a veteran in a civilian environment and also being newly disabled. Overall, Lee et al.'s (2016) participants felt they were not equipped to re-enter the civilian workforce, whether because of poor computer skills required for finding jobs, or because transition classes were taught by military personnel who lacked private sector experience. The participants also perceived the civilian workforce expectations as being unclear, which enhanced the complexity of transition.

The selection and hiring of veterans into the civilian workforce may also be difficult for both veterans and employers. Research shows that veterans may negatively perceive civilian employers. According to Castro, Kintzle, and Hassan (2014), post-9/11 veterans reported beliefs that civilian employers did not understand military veterans' needs, did not think military veterans have necessary skills, considered veterans to be dangerous and physically broken, and did not want to hire veterans. On the other hand, civilian employers may misunderstand or misperceive potential veteran employees. Stone and Stone (2015) reported that civilian employers may stereotype physically

disabled veterans as also having psychological disabilities and few private-sector job skills. A study by Stone, Lengnick-Hall, and Muldoon (2017), found that the stereotyping of veterans in the hiring process was more complex than previously considered. Results of that study showed that, in general, veteran status was positively related to human resource professionals' perceptions of job suitability. However, although veterans were perceived as having greater leadership and teamwork skills, they were also viewed as having poorer social skills. These variables interacted with veteran status such that leadership skills indirectly, positively impacted job suitability rating whereas social skills had an indirect, negative effect. The findings suggest that veteran status is not automatically perceived negatively in the hiring process and that other factors play a role.

There are additional issues that can impact veteran employment. Stern (2017) reported on research that suggests civilian employers may not know how to translate military skills into civilian jobs. Specifically, in terms of training and transfer of skills, Dirani (2017) found that traditional training models are applicable to veterans but with some caveats. Veterans reported needing to unlearn certain skills and learn new ones. Veterans also needed to be engaged at the organizational level for transfer of training to occur. Greer (2017) proposed that as women veterans return to the civilian workforce, human resource and development professionals need to support in four categories: situation, self, support, and strategies. These areas of transition, which are applicable to general adult careers, may be more exaggerated among women veterans and might warrant greater attention through program development. In summary, there appears to be a certain amount of distrust, confusion, and uncertainty coming from both veterans and civilian employers about hiring veterans, which may impede veterans' successful transition into this important aspect of civilian life.

While past research reveals the challenges that veterans face upon reintegration into the civilian workforce, it stops short of describing or reporting on their actual perceptions of the workplace (i.e., what makes them satisfied/dissatisfied with it). Numerous anecdotal accounts in non-scientific literature exist, but empirical evidence of these perceptions is lacking. Personal accounts provide valuable illustrations of individual veteran experiences at civilian workplaces, however, they help little in building reliable and systematic knowledge — e.g., exposing *typical* needs, *frequent* struggles, and *probable* working solutions. These tasks require large, statistically informed studies, currently missing. Their absence limits the understanding and due diligence on workplace challenges relevant to veterans *as a group*.

Differences between Veterans' and Nonveterans' Workplace Perceptions

Aside from much anecdotal information about veterans and the workplace (e.g., King, 2012), empirical research comparing veteran and nonveteran employee workplace perceptions remains sparse. The authors of the current study located only a few empirical studies comparing veterans' and nonveterans' perceptions of work. One study (Mackey, Perrewé, & McAllister, 2017), looked at differences in perceptions of organizational fit and the relationship to stress and the stress process, using veteran and nonveteran employees in their sample. Results showed across all samples that organizational fit was perceived as a resource that helps to offset stress. This study is generally informative, but it does not specifically address differences in levels of job satisfaction between veterans and nonveterans.

Olmstead (2011) examined veteran perceptions of the civilian job environment in a sample of 120 veterans and 118 nonveterans employed in a private communications company. After considering several demographic characteristics (age, years in the military, years at the company, and type of work), Olmstead (2011) found that veterans had higher levels of satisfaction with job overall and with specific job aspects. Veterans with and without prior combat experience had similar levels of job satisfaction. These findings used plausible, systematic methods, but were limited by the small sample

size; Olmstead's (2011) conclusions may not apply to veterans who do not work in communications, for a different company, or in a different geographic location.

Teclaw et al. (2016) compared workplace perceptions of veterans and nonveterans within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) (Teclaw et al., 2016). These authors examined all VA respondents to a 2013 organizational census ($N=179,271$; 56% response rate), studying job satisfaction and workplace climate. Respondents' demographics were similar to the U.S. Census, and within the VA 2013 employee population, 32.3 percent were veterans. Teclaw et al. (2016) found, After controlling for demographic differences, that veterans differ from nonveterans in workplace perceptions on 48 out of 49 examined work climate and satisfaction aspects; on 47 of these, veterans were less satisfied than nonveterans, and one, connection to the organizational mission, was consistently rated higher by veteran employees. Unlike Olmstead (2011), this study used an extremely large and diverse group (representing over 200 specific occupations across 271 major U.S. geographic locations), and used highly systematic statistical methods. This lends credibility to their conclusions: veterans are consistently less satisfied with different aspects of their workplace than comparable nonveterans, though the size of these differences is small.

Current Study

Results from Teclaw et al. (2016) are particularly relevant to the current study. Veterans and nonveterans alike are drawn to work for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs because of its mission—that of serving other veterans. Expectedly, veteran employees report stronger connection to this mission than nonveterans do; but veteran employees' satisfaction on numerous work climate indices is consistently lower than those of nonveterans (Teclaw et al., 2016). Thus, the research question is: what factors in the civilian work environment affect veterans' job (dis)satisfaction?

Satisfaction with work is a key determinant of a good quality adult life, which makes finding an answer to this question conceptually and pragmatically important. For example, understanding veteran employees' workplace perceptions should inform human resources, recruitment, and retention policies, and, the authors of the current study suggest, also national labor and workforce planning policies. The follow-up investigation sought to explore *why* the disparities described by Teclaw et al. (2016) are in place. To do this, the current authors examined the meaning of lower workplace ratings by VA's veteran employees by, first, systematically considering verbatim comments made by veteran respondents and, second, comparing comments made by employees with particularly high and particularly low workplace perceptions. Third, the verbatim comments were examined to determine whether there were differences in *themes*, as derived through content analysis, between the veterans and nonveterans. Fourth, the authors also reviewed what veterans and nonveterans said, in their own words, to provide support and deeper context for the conclusions we drew from thematic findings. This method afforded us insight into how veteran and nonveteran employees themselves described the factors that impacted their satisfaction with their workplace.

Method

Data Source

The data source was the 2015 VA All Employee Survey (VA AES: Osatuke et al., 2012), a voluntary, annual, census survey with a 61 percent response rate (210,372 total responses). Of these, 80,115 responded to two open-text questions: *Please share any strengths about your workplace or aspects your workplace should keep supporting; Please share any areas of improvement about your workplace or aspects your workplace should correct.* Responses were captured verbatim with a 400-character limit per item. Of those open-text comments, 27,732 were from veterans. The analyses included comments from both veterans and nonveterans who gave either very high or very low numeric ratings on the survey item

measuring mission connection (e.g., “I feel a strong personal connection with the mission of VA.”) The authors randomly sampled 200 comments per each group (four groups total: N=800).

Since the comments used for analyses came from a larger data set, a selection method was used that mitigated the possibility of a potential bias (i.e. experimenter bias) in selecting the comments to analyze. Using a single-blind design, a person naïve to the purpose of the study randomly selected the requisite number of comments from the larger dataset using a computer program. The program used simple random sampling methodology where each person had an equal chance of being selected into the sample.

The authors of the current study also sought to determine whether they coded enough data — since the sample sizes were much smaller than the entire dataset — therefore by assessing numeric saturation in addition to thematic saturation (reported below). Numerical saturation was tested by coding additional data in increments of 100 per group and evaluating, at each increment, whether frequencies of themes changed as the sample size increased using a Chi-square goodness of fit test. Results showed that the additional coded comments did not significantly change the distribution of the frequency of the themes for “Connection to Mission.” The chi-square results showed no difference for: nonveterans with low connection to mission, $\chi^2(61) = 66.17, p = .30$; veterans with low connection to mission, $\chi^2(61) = 38.94, p = .99$; nonveterans with high connection to mission, $\chi^2(58) = 43.59, p = .92$; and veterans with high connection to mission, $\chi^2(58) = 35.27, p = .99$. Thus, additional coding did not redefine the results. In conjunction with thematic saturation, this provides evidence that coding more data would not meaningfully change the findings.

Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to code the data in NVivo 10.0 (QSR International, 2012), followed by an assessment of the frequencies from the emergent themes. For the thematic content analysis, the authors used an iterative process (reading the data multiple times to identify emerging themes, to define and refine their understanding in broad and specific contexts). This process continued until saturation was achieved (i.e., no new themes emerged from additional data; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The frequencies of the themes were then assessed (see Tables 1 and 2). The authors chose to only report the most frequent themes and, also, maintain a granular level of themes instead of collapsing them into broader themes. This granularity facilitated the authors’ interest to learn about the aspects of the workplace on which veterans and nonveterans might differ, and collapsing first-order themes into second-order themes could mask some of these differences.

Table 1

Top Themes for Veterans and Non-Veterans with Greater Connection to the Mission

Veterans

Theme	Frequencies	Percentages*
Positive - teamwork	73	6.04%
Positive - dedication	54	4.47%
Improve - staffing	40	3.31%
Improve - executive leadership	38	3.14%
Improve - accountability - performance	36	2.98%
Positive - supervisor	35	2.89%
Improve - communication	35	2.89%
Improve - training – continuing education	34	2.81%

Improve - HR general and hiring process	34	2.81%
Improve - fairness - favoritism	34	2.81%

*Out of 1209 references

Non-Veterans

Theme	Frequencies	Percentages*
Positive - dedication	73	5.84%
Positive - teamwork	73	5.84%
Positive - patient care - patient safety - customer service	45	3.60%
Positive - supervisor	38	3.04%
Improve - morale - engagement	37	2.96%
Positive - communication	37	2.96%
Improve - communication	32	2.56%
Improve - patient care - patient safety - customer service	31	2.48%
Improve - staffing	30	2.40%

*Out of 1249 references

Note: Positive = perceived as a strength; Improve = perceived as needing improvement

Table 2

Top Themes for Veterans and Non-Veterans with Less Connection to the Mission

Veterans

Theme	Frequencies	Percentages*
Improve - fairness - favoritism	95	6.55%
Improve - management	71	4.89%
Improve - executive leadership	59	4.07%
Improve - managerial skill	57	3.93%
Improve - civility	57	1.03%
Improve - patient care - patient safety - customer service	54	3.72%
Improve - supervisor	49	3.38%
Improve - accountability - performance	48	3.31%
Improve - communication	47	3.24%

*Out of 1451 references

Non-Veterans

Theme	Frequencies	Percentages*
Improve - fairness - favoritism	72	4.64%
Improve - supervisor	69	4.45%
Improve - morale - engagement	68	4.38%
Improve - staffing	68	4.38%
Improve - management	67	4.32%
Improve - managerial skill	57	3.67%
Improve - patient care - patient safety - customer service	56	3.61%
Improve - civility	53	3.41%
Improve - executive leadership	50	3.22%

*Out of 1552 references

Note: Improve = perceived as needing improvement

The method of *compound queries* in NVivo 10.0 (QSR International, 2012) was used to investigate co-occurring themes within the data. The compound query process permits assessing how frequently two themes occur simultaneously in the data. In the current study, the authors selected the most frequently occurring areas for improvement (for veteran and nonveteran employees,

respectively) as one of two themes to assess together, and then examined the remaining areas for improvement themes in conjunction with it. Therefore, for veterans who reported greater connection to the mission, the compound query was composed of the theme, *staffing*, and then its co-occurrences with all other areas for improvement themes were individually assessed. For example, in the first compound query, the authors paired *staffing* with *accountability — behavior*. In the second compound query, *staffing* with *accountability — performance* were paired, and so forth, until *staffing* had been individually paired with each areas for improvement theme. With each pairing, the frequency count of their co-occurrence was recorded. Importantly, when two themes occurred simultaneously, it was found that a causal relationship between them was drawn by the commenters. For pairings that co-occur more frequently than others, these connections between the two themes are more salient for employees as a group.

Results

Greater Employee Connection to VA Mission

The authors first examined the frequencies of themes derived from comments from veteran and nonveteran employees who felt a high connection to the mission of the VA. Discussing strengths of the workplace, both groups strongly endorsed dedication to the mission and a sense of teamwork. For example, one participant expressed their dedication to the mission by stating: “Most of the personnel working in this facility are hardworking and Veteran-centric going beyond [the] call of duty to make things right for the Veteran.” Another participant stated: “I have found that the vast majority of the departmental staff are hard-working, dedicated and conscientious and put the veterans and mission first.”

Quotes emphasizing teamwork in the organization also included a focus on the organization mission (i.e., care for veterans); a notable relationship because it suggests that, in employees’ perception, this connection to the mission is what helped foster strong teamwork. One employee noted: “On our floor, we work as a team, the MD, social worker, Pharm D, Nurse, etc., which provides a better outcome for our patients and our team.” According to another employee: “Teamwork I feel is our strongest asset. With a new admission or a veteran in distress, all available Staff Members come together and put all hands-on deck. Working together providing the best care for our veterans.”

Some comments referenced a need for improvements, revealing differences between veterans’ and nonveterans’ perceptions of the workplace. Among staff expressing high connection to mission, veteran employees desired staffing improvements which (in compound queries) were linked to concerns about job demands/workload, patient care, morale, and accountability. As one veteran employee commented: “The ‘more for less’ mentality needs to stop. This is a hospital our main concern should be patient care, safety, and facility infrastructure. We cannot continue to provide the best care for patients with under staffed and over worked direct and indirect patient care.” Another veteran employee stated: “Manning. My section is currently operating at slightly above 50 percent manning but has experienced a sharp increase in overall duties due to new programs being implemented. While it has not had a strongly detrimental effect, this, at times, has affected morale and, I feel, an increase in call-offs.”

In contrast, nonveteran employees who needed improvements made references largely about greater staff morale, and, in compound queries, this was related primarily to job demands/workload. One nonveteran employee expressed their concern about morale by saying: “Morale is low because we are a very busy and understaffed clinic with no REAL long-term solution in sight.” Another nonveteran employee commented: “Staffing issues abound when [supervisor] is out of the office. Mandation is used as a staffing tool and is detrimental to the health, welfare and morale of staff.”

These quotes show that among veteran and nonveteran employees who rated high connection to the organizational mission, differences emerged where veterans largely referenced a missing facet of organizational resources — staffing — and its negative effects, whereas nonveterans largely referenced how staff feel at work — morale.

Lesser Employee Connection to VA Mission

Among staff who felt less connected to VA's mission, veteran and nonveteran employees both cited the theme, *favoritism/unfairness*, as an area for needed improvement. Veteran employees endorsed this theme considerably more strongly than did nonveterans. To better understand these differences, compound queries were used to see whether the *favoritism/unfairness* theme meant the same thing to these groups. In other words, did the same themes co-occur with *favoritism/unfairness* at similar frequencies for both groups. Results showed that veteran, compared to nonveteran, employees perceived greater differences in the *favoritism/unfairness* theme associated with diversity and promotional opportunities. One veteran employee expressed their concern by saying: "I have served in the VA for 27 years, sixteen of them at this institution and have been discriminated against as [a] veteran, military reservist and was stripped of my supervisory role when involuntary activated for the Global War on Terrorism. No one seems to care." Another veteran employee commented: "At this job the civilian sector is the decision-making sector so the Veterans are the lowest ranking working. The civilians are the ones that are getting promoted. The veterans are being kept down here. It is really a sad situation for the vets." In the workplace, diversity and promotional opportunities are influenced by leadership (organizational culture) and policy. These comments suggested a concern around leadership, and a follow-up compound query showed that veteran employees in fact perceived greater concern with leaders showing favoritism and unfairness than did nonveteran employees.

Favoritism/Unfairness

The authors further examined the theme *favoritism/unfairness*, by doing additional coding for this theme, and again using thematic content analysis, to determine specific differences between veteran and nonveteran employees regarding what they perceived as unfair at the workplace. Results appear in Table 3. Overall, veteran and nonveteran employees referenced some similar concerns: e.g., with leadership, scheduling/telework opportunities, and performance evaluation. There was, however, a notable difference between the groups' perceptions of the theme of *favoritism/unfairness* around selection/hiring and promotion. Results of a Chi-square analysis ($\chi^2 = 6.802, p < .05$) indicated that veterans, compared to nonveterans, were significantly more likely to perceive these two processes as unfair or attribute the outcomes of these processes to favoritism. Comments by veterans, presented below, illustrate this finding. The comments reflect two categories of concern: leaders selecting/promoting favored individuals (i.e., friends), and unfair policies around hiring and promotions.

Table 3
Thematic Analysis Comparing Non-Veterans and Veterans on *Favoritism – Unfairness* Themes

Theme	Non-Veterans		Veterans	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Accountability – unequal expectations	2	1.02%	7	3.55%
Discrimination	10	5.08%	14	7.11%
Executive leadership	6	3.05%	2	1.02%
General favoritism - unfairness	19	9.64%	18	9.14%
Management	11	5.58%	11	5.58%
Performance evaluation	3	1.52%	4	2.03%

Racism	4	2.03%	1	0.51%
Rewards - recognition - praise	6	3.05%	2	1.02%
Schedule - telework	7	3.55%	4	2.03%
Selection - promotion	13	6.60%	29	14.72%
Sexism	1	0.51%	0	
Supervisor	5	2.54%	9	4.57%
Workload distribution unfair	3	1.52%	6	3.05%

Note: Percentages = within group frequency / total number of references (197)

Leadership

Veteran employees expressed concern about leadership as it related to favoritism and unfairness in selection and promotion. In the following quotes, veteran employees state that practices such as pre-selection of certain individuals and, also, opportunities extended to a few for advancement are problematic. As one veteran employee said: “Improve hiring practices by removing pre-selection (yes, it does happen more than you think) because this will help improve promotions for those that deserve it and not just because they have buddies that want someone in a role by doing favors or they owe someone.” Another veteran employee commented: “The Upper Management supports unfair treatment of bargaining unit employees. Specifically, a select few bargaining unit employees are given opportunities outside of the normal scope of their employment so that they are promoted in the future. This selection appears to be based on which bargaining unit employee(s) associate with supervisors and upper managers outside of the workplace (friendship or romantically). As a veteran, I’m disgusted with my employment here.”

Both quotes suggest that leadership bears some responsibility for problems with favoritism and unfairness relative to selection and promotion. Although suggestions for resolving these issues are not provided, the authors believe it is important that employees can express their basic concerns and, in the second quote, express their reaction to their perceptions of favoritism and unfairness (“As a veteran, I'm disgusted with my employment here”). Giving employees an outlet for expression, such as through survey text comments, provides them with a voice in letting leadership know how they are performing and what might need improved.

Policies

Veteran employees also expressed concern about unfair selection and promotion policies within the organization. One veteran employee strongly voiced this perception: “Stop treating veteran employees as if they are not important in the VA. Stop degrading veteran positions to the lowest grade levels within the workgroup. Stop treating veterans as outsiders because without the veterans the VA would not exist.”

This quote shows that veteran employees perceive trouble in the organization regarding policies related to fair promotion and selection. The issue of greatest concern is that of position ranking, or in VHA, what is referred to as position grades. Lower graded positions pay less than higher ones, and veteran employees’ perceptions that they are not placed in better jobs are troublesome to hear given that VHA is well-known for supporting veteran employment. While VHA as an organization has policy to prioritize hiring veterans, it also faces practical barriers in matching military skills with civilian healthcare jobs, as many healthcare positions require educational or licensure standing. Taken together, these results suggest that veteran employees perceived greater obstacles, in the form of unfairness and favoritism, to getting selected for and promoted to open positions. The implications of these findings and practical implications, in VA and beyond, are now discussed.

Discussion

The findings of the current study reflect veteran employees' first-hand experience of the civilian workplace within VHA, an organization that explicitly serves U.S. veterans. Reflecting this emphasis, the organization also promotes ways to attract, hire, and retain veteran employees. This context makes the reported results particularly informative as they reveal the perceived realities of the workplace and gaps in veteran employees' satisfaction, despite the organization's good will efforts to improve its veterans' workplace experience. The authors described these gaps from veteran employees' own standpoint, which translates into useful indicators of changes needed to achieve a better veteran employee experience.

When veteran employees made comments about needed improvements, the primary concerns they discussed included issues of favoritism or unfairness, which they perceived as affecting job selection and promotion opportunities. Several conclusions can be drawn from this finding. First, as past research suggested, some veterans hold negative beliefs about civilian employers (Castro et al., 2014). This includes, but is not limited to, the view that civilian employers do not want to hire veterans. Efforts are being made by both the private sector and federal government to prioritize the hiring of veterans (Peralta, 2014; Rein, 2016). This includes the 100,000 Jobs Mission — an alliance of private businesses pledging to hire more veterans, and an Executive Order signed by former President Barak Obama in 2009 to encourage hiring of veterans in the federal government. It appears that veterans' perceptions that their employment is not sought after by civilian employers may result from an incomplete understanding of the efforts being made to hire veterans. To address this issue, both private sector businesses and federal agencies could publicly advertise both broadly nationwide and specifically to veterans about their commitment to hire veterans. Veterans might also consider seeking out career counseling to assist with their employment search. This resource would likely provide veterans with an extensive list of businesses and organizations hiring veterans. While veterans might hesitate to seek out career counseling due to concerns that their military background and experiences might not be understood, Miles (2014) suggests that career counselors can adapt the basic concepts and strategies of career counseling to meet veterans' needs. Therefore, this is a potential outlet for veterans as they seek reintegration into the civilian workforce.

Unfortunately, justified or not, concerns about favoritism and unfairness in selection and promotion are inevitably linked to organizational leadership and to human resources. These results suggest that veterans place a great deal of blame on leadership for perceived favoritism and unfairness in the selection and promotion process. Some of veterans' frustration might result from the contrast between how this process works in the military compared to the civilian sector, and the resulting clash between veterans' and civilian employees' expectations. In the military, a stair-step process of meeting specific job requirements results in predictable career advancements. It is also likely that merit rises above personal preferences if only for the sole purpose of ensuring that those with the best skills are in critical positions on the battlefield. Lives depend on others' skill sets and competencies. Advancement contingencies in the civilian workforce are different. For example, civilian organizations certainly recruit and promote top talent, but knowing how to network and make personal connections may offer advantages above technical skills. Veterans may be less attuned to or skilled in these areas, putting them at risk of being overlooked when job or promotional opportunities arise. Again, career counselors might assist veterans in adjusting to the realities of the civilian workplace, teaching them the necessary skills to navigate an unfamiliar territory.

Those making hiring decisions (leadership, human resources), are also at risk for showing a bias against veterans. Biases can be explicit or, more often, unconscious (outside of a person's awareness). A theoretical model by Stone and Stone (2015) proposed that several factors come into play when selection decisions about veterans are made. These are: veterans' attributes (e.g.,

disability, aesthetic qualities), observer characteristics (e.g., personality, values), the job itself (e.g., stereotype job-fit), transferability of skill from the military to civilian workplace, and differences between military and civilian cultures (e.g., veterans' perceived role expectations and behaviors). Veterans' attributes and observer characteristics can lead to pigeon-holing, stereotypes, and stigma, which can impact perceptions of stereotype job-fit (i.e., that veterans cannot perform a job because of their attributes, such as having a disability) and actual job-fit (i.e., that veterans can perform a job because of certain skills, such as leadership ability), which then leads to job-related expectancies and job suitability hiring decisions. The nature of the job can lead to issues around transferability of skills. These can influence perceived differences between military and civilian organizational culture which, in turn, also influence perceived and actual job fit. Stone and Stone (2015) offered several suggestions for civilian organizations on how to combat biases that might exist. These include modifying beliefs about veterans, hiring and training decision-makers, increasing knowledge of military job-related tasks and knowledge, skills, and abilities, and socializing veterans into the norms and role requirements of civilian organizations.

Overall, it appears that there is more to favoritism and unfairness in terms of selection/promotion than may be immediately obvious. Obtaining veterans' perceptions of this process is vital to learning how to address concerns both among veterans themselves as well as within organizations that prioritize hiring veterans (i.e., VHA). This conclusion is based on the authors' systematic analysis of veteran employees' verbatim comments. Further, not only does this conclusion summarize veterans' first-hand perceptions, but it makes intuitive sense once reminded where these perceptions come from. The comments express perspectives of veterans for whom their counterparts' skill and ability can, and often did, impact survival on the battlefield. Likely reflecting these experiences, veterans take the hiring and promotion processes seriously and apply high standards to them. In other words, veteran employees likely expect more of fairness and equality in the hiring/promotion process than do nonveteran employees. While this higher expectation may at least partly reflect the difficulty transitioning back to civilian work where fair process matters in different ways than it mattered on the battlefield, helping veterans readjust their expectations in order to successfully integrate into civilian jobs is only a part of the answer. A potentially more critical part of meeting the presenting need must do with training and orienting decision-makers to both military job skills and military culture.

Limitations

The authors used a cross-sectional design and a mainly qualitative approach (i.e., beyond creating comparison groups based on quantitative ratings). These methods allow an in-depth study and comparison of employees' direct experience by specific topics of interest, but do not afford studying directional relationships between these topics or how these relationships change over time. Given that the dataset included veterans and nonveterans in the same large organization and that the authors could compare comments across these groups within similar levels of feeling connected to VA's mission, it was still possible to systematically examine connections between workplace aspects as drawn by employees themselves, and also note how these connections were reflected in quantified associations (frequency of co-occurring themes).

Another limitation is that there was no way to segment veterans by the specific war or conflict in which they served (e.g., Gulf War veterans, etc.). This distinction may influence how a veteran experiences the workplace, but it was not included in the dataset; the authors could have separated veteran participants by age (as a proxy for this), but chose not to, and instead considered veterans as a whole. While this approach is plausible given the goals of this study, it is not to be used as the only

approach – and future studies should include an examination of workplace perception differences while paying attention to veteran participants' specific service cohort.

Conclusions

The authors sought to understand how veteran and nonveteran employees differed in their perceptions of the work environment. Several overarching conclusions can be drawn from the current study. First, it is worth noting that veteran and nonveteran employees were similar in their perceived strengths of the workplace. These common themes included dedication and teamwork. The emphasis on dedication by each group of employees suggests that, among VHA employees, there is a strong sense of commitment to those who have served our country. This shared mission positively influences the employee work environment and likely spills over to positively affect the quality of care that patients receive. The joint endorsement of teamwork as a strength of the workplace further encompasses a strong skill among veterans and an important element of healthcare.

Second, the comparisons of open-text survey comments revealed that veterans, compared to nonveterans, raised more concerns about favoritism and unfairness related to job selection as well as to hiring and promotion opportunities. Because work is a core facet of identity, veterans likely feel strongly about perceived obstacles that limit employment opportunities. Hearing veterans say, in their own words, that they perceive issues with hiring and promotion opportunities within VHA is a motivating force to work towards ameliorating the situation. Vocational approaches to better transition veterans into civilian employment and, in particular, to clarify rules and expectations about promotions can help to address this issue and should be explored to improve veteran employees' satisfaction with civilian jobs. Training leadership and human resource professionals about military skills and culture can assist with this process as well.

Finally, with respect to the method, the study raises awareness of the importance of open-text comments in organizational surveys as a medium for providing an employee voice about the workplace; for this study, the veteran employee voice. Closed-question format surveys with Likert-type response scales, while more often used in organizational research, provide limited information about employees' diverse perspectives. By looking behind the numbers, the open-text narratives allow employees to directly speak to issues of concern and offer possible solutions in richer detail that, in turn, can inform organizational processes and policies.

Going forward, it is important to continue to monitor veterans' perceptions to make certain that changes are quickly noticed and met with organizationally responsive actions. In VA, these actions continue to include providing human resource and supervisory training on veteran employment issues, developing career mapping processes that leverage veteran employees' prior military experience, and proactively recruiting veterans in their transition from the military.

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