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Engaging Military Friendly in Organizations: An Empirical-based Definition

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Abstract

Employers interested in hiring military veterans are increasingly using the “military friendly” or “veteran-friendly” labels to promote their organizations to job-seeking veterans. The terms, while inviting to veterans, lack definition and consistency across organizations, leading to ambiguity about what it means to be military or veteran friendly. This research sought to understand how the labels are being supported through corresponding initiatives and, more generally, identify commonalities across employers. A thematic analysis of programs and services used by 31 employers—recognized as being military or veteran friendly by an external agency—revealed four themes. The themes suggested an emphasis on early career transitions for veterans entering the job market. Combined, these findings offer a starting point for understanding how organizations demonstrate their friendliness toward military veterans. Employers interested in formalizing or advancing their support of veteran hires can look to the study’s findings as a reference for currently-recognized military friendly organizations. This paper offers an introduction into veteran transition issues, explores foundational descriptions of military friendly, outlines the study’s methodology and findings, and provides a series of implications. Additionally, based on the findings, the authors provide a model and working definition of military friendly organizations.

Keywords: military friendly, veterans, career transitions, veteran support programs, recruitment and hiring

Introduction

A significant increase toward supporting U.S. military veterans in civilian business organizations has occurred since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. In fact, veterans may be more favorably viewed than at any other time in history. With the positive perception, many business organizations have established initiatives that are intended to make them “friendlier” toward veterans. Business organizations are autonomous to develop their own definitions and services to provide support for past and current service members. Business organizations are free to self-declare their military friendliness without engaging purposeful veteran support initiatives which highlights the need for clear standardized guidelines.

Numerous organizations, from Fortune 500 conglomerates to local businesses, currently promote employment opportunities using a military friendly distinction, though few clearly outline what makes them “friendly.” Whereas some business organizations report veterans have the technical and soft skills they seek in new hires, others may use military friendly more as a public relations attempt than a true investment in supporting military veterans they recruit and employ (Bertilsson & Rennstam, 2017; Hardison, & Shanley, 2016; Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Monster, 2016).

Additionally, with significant tax incentives being afforded to companies that hire veterans, recruiting practices using military friendly language has become increasingly popular, yet substantive articulation regarding how military veterans will benefit by selecting such business organizations for employment over others is lacking (U.S. Small Business Association, 2018). These issues, combined with a general lack of awareness regarding military culture and training, warrant a need for

understanding how and why business organizations offer support for past and current service members. More pressing, the lack of a standardized definition for military friendly is particularly concerning as business organizations freely use the term as a recruitment tool without critique from veterans, human resource (HR) practitioners, or researchers.

Restating, military friendly standards regarding policies, practices, or characteristics do not currently exist for business organizations supportive of military veterans. The lack of consistent application across businesses and industries creates a schism for job-seeking veterans who are unable to reliably compare organizations. Additionally, the lack of regulation for using the military friendly label puts veterans at a disadvantage for holding business organizations accountable to any set standards or expectations regarding their treatment as military-affiliated employees. As such, it is vital that business organizations have more clearly defined terminology, expectations, and understanding about how the military friendly label is applied to attract and retain military veterans. The purpose of this thematic analysis was to examine how the labels military friendly and veteran friendly are supported by employer initiatives. Across the literature, the terms military friendly and veteran friendly are used interchangeably within the civilian employment sector. Though the researchers do not suggest the terms are one and the same, for the purposes of the data analysis and findings, the encompassing term military friendly is used for consistency. A review of existing literature on the terminology is presented, followed by an explanation of the methodology used and findings reported. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings, implications for business organizations using a military friendly indicator, and recommendations for future research.

Study Significance

The terms military friendly and veteran friendly have been used liberally and interchangeably in the higher education literature for nearly ten years, with a variety of best practices identified for implementation on college campuses (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009; Minnis, 2015). Although several definitions and descriptions of military friendly universities are available and similar critiques shared (see Dakduk, 2014; Harrison, n.d.; Minnis, 2014b; Prah, 2014), far fewer attempts have been made to define the term in business organizations, despite heavy and increasing emphasis toward hiring and supporting military-affiliated employees.

Ferraro (2016) stipulated that veteran friendly business organizations have support from executive leadership as well as established objectives centered on (a) military veteran hiring initiatives, (b) community outreach programs, (c) unique programs for military veteran communities at large, and (d) a shared understanding the value of veterans to civilian business organizations. Military Friendly (n.d.) suggests veteran friendly is the standard that measures an organization's commitment, effort, and success in creating sustainable and meaningful benefit for the military community. Dumler (n.d.) did not define the term, but offered that companies can be more military friendly by (a) communicating with service members, (b) establishing company policies as they relate to veterans, (c) offering specific training and salary differential for activated employees, (d) supporting military family members, and (e) providing post-military transition assistance as service members move into civilian business organizations. These definitions offer few specifics about how business organizations can and perhaps should be supporting military-affiliated employees.

Although the term military friendly is undefined in civilian business organizations, numerous efforts have been made to implement policies designed to hire military veterans. In fact, more business organizations than ever before have an established veteran recruitment and hiring program (Monster, 2016). During the past 10 years, over 1,000,000 jobs have been pledged to veterans by companies such as Home Depot, McDonalds, Starbucks, and Wal-Mart (Jaffe, 2014), and a majority of companies (93%) indicated experience with hiring veterans, along with 57% maintaining

recruitment initiatives (Burton Blatt Institute, 2013). These programs often include mechanisms for identifying veterans and translating military experience into civilian jobs (55%) (2013).

According to the 2016 Veterans Talent Index, 69% of business organizations in the study had an established veteran retention program—a significant increase from the 32% in 2014 (Monster, 2016). Veteran mentoring programs were also used by 43% of respondents, as well as development of employee resource groups, extended benefits for activated employees, and tailored training as part of the former service members' transition (Burton Blatt Institute, 2013; Monster, 2016). Each initiative is designed to assist veterans, though an all-encompassing description and understanding of their transition issues requires additional attention.

As Minnis (2014a) noted, literature on veteran career transitions is somewhat limited. However, a great deal of attention toward veterans has emphasized the broad skills and technical capabilities they have acquired (Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Kirchner, 2018; Kirchner & Akdere, 2017). Of responding business organizations, 87% indicated that skills acquired through military service are applicable in civilian careers (Monster, 2016). Veterans' communication skills, attention to detail, self-discipline, teamwork, dependability, and leadership are all factors considered by business organizations when hiring former service members (Hardison & Shanley, 2016; Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Monster, 2016). The added attention does not mean business organizations are blindly willing to hire any veteran. "Veterans must market themselves aggressively to find or create employment opportunities" (Timmerman, Hepler, & Orient, 2014, p. 71). Business organizations seek to fill positions with people that have the knowledge, skills, attributes (KSAs), and competencies required to successfully perform the job (2014). Perhaps the most significant challenges relate to some veterans' inability to describe on their resumes the KSAs acquired through service and alleviate employer concerns (Monster, 2016).

While business organizations often identify as being military friendly, perceptions about veterans persist across society which may impede prior service members' career paths (Stone, Lengnick-Hall, & Muldoon, 2017). Morin (2011) found that nearly half of Americans without a family member who had served would not recommend military service. One likely contributing factor is the numerous stereotypes related to military service. Whereas the Department of Veterans Affairs (2016) estimated 11-20% of Post-9/11 veterans have some form of mental illness from their service, 53% of surveyed civilians believe most veterans have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (The Mission Continues, 2012). Additional concerns include traumatic brain injuries, hidden disabilities, future deployments, and veterans' inability to adjust to a new culture can all impact employer hiring decisions (Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Lewis, 2013). Overall, 84% of veterans surveyed claim civilians do not understand the problems faced by service members and 71% of civilians agreed (Pew Research Center, 2011). These knowledge gaps strongly contribute toward the need to better understand how business organizations are being friendly toward veterans.

Study Methodology

A thematic analysis was conducted to examine how business organizations identified as military friendly promote their support for military-affiliated employees. This qualitative study allowed the researchers to identify similarities, develop themes and establish a list of current military friendly strategies used by business organizations. Thematic analyses can be used in a variety of contexts, as it allows for further examination and understanding of existing data and serves as a valuable tool capable of providing rich, detailed, and complete accounts of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To begin advancing scholar and practitioner understanding of what it means for business organizations to be military friendly, an analysis of organizational websites—which provides the most comprehensive data currently available to job-seeking and employed veterans—was performed.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide to completing a thematic analysis, the researchers sought to understand what business organizations are doing to support their veteran employees. Thematic analyses are a "method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). The method organizes, describes, and allows for interpretation of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clark, 2006). To that end, the researcher plays an active role in the identification, selection, and reporting of themes to readers, going beyond simply giving data a "voice" (Fine, 2002; Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Findings allow the researchers to both present and discuss the data, while offering implications for future research.

In qualitative research, the researcher must interpret data and holds personal assumptions and biases toward the subject matter. Braun and Clarke (2006) highlighted that any theoretical framework includes a number of assumptions and a good thematic analysis makes them transparent. The researchers hold multiple assumptions related to being military friendly.

With the passing of the government-sponsored Forever G.I. Bill and the White House's Joining Forces employment initiative for veterans, support for the military in the U.S. is perhaps as high as it has ever been; however, we believe the term remains overused and vastly under-supported through research and practice. Business organizations have only recently prioritized the hiring of service members, and we question to what extent the military friendly term is more of a public relations attempt, as opposed to a committed investment. This study allows for greater understanding of the language around changes in employing veterans in the civilian workplace.

Data Collection: List Selection

Data was collected from an examination of current military friendly lists. In total, six organizations offered a "military friendly" or "veteran friendly" list: *GI Jobs*, which is owned by Victory Media; *Forbes*; *Military Times*; *U.S. Veterans Magazine*; *Military.com*; and *Vet Jobs*. Of the six business organizations and corresponding lists, three prospective data sets were removed from inclusion in the data analysis due to lack of clarity in methodology. *U.S. Veterans Magazine* listed hundreds of business organizations that completed a self-report survey about their own policies.

Military.com was removed because their list only offered veterans a compilation of business organizations expressing interest in hiring veterans, as opposed to identifying why the employer is considered military friendly. *Vet Jobs* was also excluded because the methodology was not provided, while three quarters of the business organizations identified did not offer any information regarding their support for veterans. Although these business organizations may in fact be military friendly, the lack of available data made it difficult to justify inclusion in the study.

Four lists were ultimately selected and contributed toward the thematic analysis. As outlined in Table 1 (below), three military friendly employer lists from *GI Jobs* were included—one for companies with more than one billion dollars in annual revenue and a second for companies with between \$500 million and one billion dollars in revenue in 2017 and a third list from 2013.

The other list selected was chosen based on a disclosed methodology and identification of approximately the top ten Fortune 500 companies who are veteran friendly. Three lists were from 2017, while a fourth was from 2013. The lists offered diversity in industries and sizes which allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of military friendly application. In total, 31 companies identified as being military friendly—some represented on multiple lists—were examined for their programs and services aimed specifically at military-affiliated employees. Table 1 (below) is a chart of the four lists and corresponding companies.

Table 1. *Military Friendly Lists and Business Organizations*

<i>GI Jobs</i> 1B+ Revenue	<i>GI Jobs</i> (\$500-\$1B)	<i>GI Jobs</i> (2013)	<i>MilitaryTimes.com</i>
Marsh & McLennan Companies	Cajun Industries	USAA	First Data
Aviall Services, Inc.	Combined Insurance Comp.	CSX Corporation	BAE Systems
Hilton	YRC Freight	Deloitte	Booz Allen Hamilton
Comcast NBCUniversal	TMC Transportation	Booz Allen Hamilton	General Motors
Union Pacific Railroad	Sundt Construction	Burlington Northern Santa Fe	Hilton
BAE Systems	Patterson-UTI Drilling, LLC	ManTech International Corporation	USAA
Humana	Motel 6/Studio 6	Southern Company	Intuitive Research and Technology Corp
Charles Schwab	PennyMac	Combined Insurance Company of America	Comcast NBC Universal
J.B Hunt Transport Inc.	Celadon Trucking Services	General Electric	Lockheed Martin Corp.
ManTech		J.B. Hunt Transport	Marsh & McLennan Companies
Amazon.com			

Once business organizations were identified, researchers scrutinized employer websites for information related to the military and/or veterans. Websites were browsed for content to include the examination of all website menus and tabs. In addition, researchers examined all content affiliated through a search of both “military” and “veterans” in the organization’s online search bar. Sections related to job openings, veteran services, community support, employer recognition, and company background information contributed most of the study’s data. All military-affiliated content was transferred to a separate spreadsheet for coding and analysis.

Data Analysis

Data collected from each organization’s website was transcribed in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The data was organized into separate columns representing companies from each military friendly employer list. All data related to military friendly was put in the spreadsheet prior to examination. Researcher one conducted the data analysis by reading through each organization’s military friendly information to become familiar with the available data. During a second and third read-through, short statements were prepared to begin sorting through data as part of the coding and theme development process. This process of repeated reading allowed the researcher to more clearly understand the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding phase began during a fourth reading, where codes were introduced and used to identify features of the data pertinent to the research question (Fielden, Sillence & Little, 2011). Researcher judgement was a necessary part of this process, as there are no hard-and-fast answers to what constitutes a code or theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the coding stage, keywords, repeated phrases, and distinguishing types of support were highlighted and prescribed a code. In total, 19 codes were created, along with a coding dictionary

that identified how business organizations present themselves as being military friendly. The coding dictionary is provided in Table 2 (below).

Table 2. *Emergent Themes from Coding Dictionary*

Codes	Categories	Themes
Legal Assistance	Programming for Veteran Employees	Professional Development and Learning
Improved Transition Experiences		
Veteran ERGs		
Internships/Apprenticeships	Professional Development	
Peer-to-Peer Support		
Development Opportunities		
Company-wide Training	Company-wide Training	
Little Offered		
Spouses	Spousal Support	
Senior Leadership Appointees	Senior Leadership	
Current Employee Demographics	Current Demographics	Demographics
Placement	Recruitment/Hiring	Recruitment & Hiring
Skills Translator		
Recruitment/Hiring		
Partnerships	Community Outreach	Community Outreach
Service Opportunities		
Sponsorships/Donations		
Paid Time Off for Service	Support for Active Service Members	

Once coding was complete, researcher one assessed how the codes could be condensed into a smaller set. As Creswell (2007) noted, data analysis consists of organizing then reducing data into reportable themes. Through the process, codes relevant to the research question were reduced through sorting, organizing, and reflecting on the data (Fielden, Sillence, & Little, 2011). The process condensed 19 codes into nine distinct categories. The final stage of data analysis consisted of further reducing the categories into pertinent themes. Through reflection, a set of four themes, represented by at least 29% of the identified business organizations, contributed toward understanding the term military friendly.

Data quality control was enhanced by the second researcher, who scrutinized the websites, Excel spreadsheet, and coding dictionary. After initial codes were identified, researcher two provided feedback about the dictionary and corroborated the identified categories. The themes were re-applied to military friendly organization websites for alignment, while being used to identify any missing, critical components. An outline of the study’s methodology has been produced to allow for replication.

The analysis and themes identified through the study were revealed through a thematic examination of the entire data set — namely, how business organizations identified as military friendly promoted the types of services and support they offer (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The four themes: *Recruitment and Hiring; Professional Development and Learning; Community Outreach; and Demographics,*

represent the identified strategies and values of business organizations classifying themselves as military friendly. Although numerous other strategies or approaches were included as part of business organizations' military friendly presentation, many were not included in the findings because of overall limited representation. The themes are listed in order from most to least prevalent and discussed in the findings.

Findings

Business organizations identified as military friendly shared four similarities in their approaches. Though numerous methods were discussed, most fell under one of the four themes in the findings. The prevalent themes ranged from hiring initiatives to assistance offered in the community.

Recruitment and Hiring

Organizations like Amazon and General Electric have implemented a variety of recruiting and hiring practices designed to more effectively identify and employ military veterans. Twenty-five business organizations (81%) reported using at least one of the following (a) internships and apprenticeships to connect with transitioning veterans, (b) referrals of current veteran employees, and (c) military veteran job fairs to identify candidates and promote openings. Veteran job fairs occur across the country and offer business organizations a chance to meet face-to-face with both current and former service members. At the same time, veterans often know others who have or are about to transition from the military, which can be an essential recruitment tool. Although internships and apprenticeships may pay less than other job openings, organizations can leverage the positions to indoctrinate veterans into both the profession. Other businesses reported making use of skills translators to help veterans align their military work with civilian positions in hopes of then identifying similar jobs with their organization. Once veterans were hired, about half of the companies outlined an investment in professional development.

Professional Development and Learning

Professional development for both veteran hires and non-military employees was a significant component of military friendly programming. In total, 16 companies (52%) highlighted professional development and learning for their military-affiliated employees. Business organizations cited various examples of their commitment to developing veteran employees, including mentorships. Mentoring programs were one of the most commonly-reported professional development initiatives. The mentorships often pair currently-employed veterans with new military-affiliated hires. Additional professional development and learning offered included leadership development programs (BAE Systems, Amazon, Bank of America, USAA), workforce transition training (Amazon, General Motors, Patterson UTI Drilling LLC., Motel 6/Studio 6, Deloitte, Hilton, Lockheed Martin, Capital One, First Data), and personal development, i.e. money management, communication and business skills, financial education, interviewing, resume writing (Bank of America, Lockheed Martin, U.S. Bank). At the same time, business organizations discussed the importance of providing military cultural competency training for other employees within the company.

Military cultural competency training is another professional development and learning resource provided to employees without a military-affiliation. Only a small percentage have served in the military since September 11, 2001, and few civilians receive exposure to armed forces training. In response, military friendly organizations, like First Data (n.d.), integrate cultural competency training to help employees better understand military service—particularly service in the Middle East—in a very realistic way. This aspect of creating a military friendly organization emphasizes the role other employees have in contributing to service members transitions. Similar training programs

also address the variety of valuable soft skills that military veterans bring to civilian organizations. By learning about veterans' soft skills, transition issues, and military culture, hiring managers and organization leaders can improve their understanding of veterans, as well as enhance perceptions of their friendliness toward veterans.

Community Outreach

Twelve organizations (39%) with military friendly status also demonstrated support through community contributions. Monetary or product donations and volunteer hours for veteran service organization (VSOs) were outlined by companies, such as Hilton, Starbucks, and BAE Systems. The efforts have led to millions of dollars raised, homes provided for veterans in need, and scholarships for prospective and current student veterans. Though not directly related to their military-affiliated employees, business organizations have made significant contributions to local and national VSOs. Additionally, their employees have opportunities to engage with their local community. In recognition of employer efforts, organizations beyond the providers of military friendly lists provide their own recognition.

Other business organizations commit to volunteerism in the veteran community and proudly display recognition from the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) for their military friendly practices. ESGR is a program run by the Department of Defense that recognizes organizations that create a culture of support and value for employees' ongoing service in the National Guard and Reserves. ESGR provides organizations with information and resources to be better equipped to be military friendly to National Guard and Reserve service members (Department of Defense, 2018). Because citizen-soldiers make a commitment to military service in addition to their regular employment, it is incumbent upon their organizations to understand the impacts of military service. The last finding depicts perceived value in promoting the number of military-affiliated employees within organizations.

Demographics

Though less prominent than recruitment and hiring, nine military friendly organizations (29%) reported data on their employment of veterans prominently on their website. For example, Union Pacific, Booz Allen Hamilton, ManTech, TMC Transportation, and General Electric are companies that promoted percentages of employees who are military veterans. Others such as Hilton, Comcast NBC Universal, and JB Hunt Transportation instead chose to highlight the number of positions designated for military-affiliated job seekers, while a third set of companies (ManTech, Waste Management) promoted the number of recently hired veteran employees. The percentage of veterans and dependents in each organization varied greatly but represented a higher percent when compared with the number of U.S. citizens who have served in the military. These findings outline veteran programming consistencies amongst military friendly organizations.

Discussion

Findings from this study offer early empirical research toward understanding how business organizations portray themselves as military friendly. The unregulated term has allowed organizations to promote themselves as supportive of the military and its members without guidance or restriction. As a result, many organizations freely claim to be friendly with little consistency in practice. Two areas of emphasis were more prevalent than the others: *recruitment and hiring* and *professional development and learning*. The findings suggest organizations are primarily focused on early transitions for veterans.

Business organizations appear to be prioritizing support for military-affiliated employees within the first months of their workforce transition. As Minnis (2014a) noted, veterans identified finding civilian employment as one of their greatest transition issues. Recent hiring initiatives have, in fact, reduced the unemployment rates of veterans by a substantial margin over the last ten years (Batka & Hall, 2016). Thus, the findings suggest one of the greatest stressors of veterans is being directly addressed by military-friendly organizations. Beyond recruitment, training and development for veterans appears to be a significant priority.

Professional development and training were also highlighted as a key to military veterans' transition to the organization. Training may begin in the onboarding process, with veterans learning about organizational history and culture, and extend to task- or role-specific training. Mentorship programs were considered an important contributor toward the transition experience of new hires in their adjustment to organizational culture. USAA's Military Relations Director, Maggie Hahn, argued mentoring programs help with the transition by connecting new veterans with others who can answer questions and share what employees need to know (McLean, 2016). As mentioned, some organizations also use military cultural competency training to educate the entire organization in understanding and welcoming military veterans. Less obvious from the review, is whether business organizations are engaging veterans in broader organizational culture training to help them more effectively transition to the civilian role in employment. While important for employees to have an understanding about their military-affiliated coworkers, ultimately the veterans need to know their respective organizations' expectations and cultural boundaries.

Business organizations in the study appeared to overlook long-term support for veterans after they completed their workforce transition and training. Comprehensive details about how veterans are supported once they have transitioned were limited and, in most cases, omitted from the information provided online. This may suggest businesses—and perhaps veteran employees—do not consider long-term support an organization's responsibility. In addition, the type of services that would benefit both the veteran and organization may vastly differ and not be an appropriate investment. Regardless, military friendly organizations do not appear to prioritize veteran employees' wellbeing, and instead emphasize the hiring and first months of employment.

Whether through fundraising or volunteerism, community outreach projects are considered an important aspect of being friendly toward veterans. As seemingly all business organizations self-identify as military friendly, introducing programs that demonstrate friendliness in the community would be understandable. These initiatives allow veteran employees and the organization to positively impact the community in which they reside, while also enhancing the business' visibility. At the same time, community outreach can be leveraged to highlight employment opportunities and promote the organization's goods and services.

Though most companies on the military friendly lists had hiring initiatives or professional development opportunities for their military-affiliated employees, only seven reported additional support offered to employees activated for duty. Salary differentials, uninterrupted benefits, and additional paid leave were programs mentioned by the organizations specifically for activated employees. Each initiative can assist veterans by removing unnecessary financial burdens that can result from service obligations. Still, the majority of organizations did not report information about employees called up to service, suggesting these initiatives are either (a) relatively new, (b) less important to the veteran or employer, or (c) an unnecessary expense.

Reporting the number or percentage of employees who have veteran status within an organization is a tangible and obvious way to demonstrate an organization's commitment to being military friendly. Businesses recognize the impact of social responsibility on consumers' perception of the organization. At the same time, veterans may be more likely to trust an organization that has a

strong history of hiring them. While the demographics alone may not be enough to convince veterans to apply, the numbers may be persuasive enough to influence some to accept an offer of employment. Reports of job openings, recent hires, or a percentage of the workforce that have a military affiliation continue to suggest that once hired, additional services may no longer be considered essential.

Implications

The themes from this research should not be generalized or applied as a “best practices” list for business organizations. As previously noted, most organizations would identify as being military friendly and a small sample was used for this study. Other organizations may be utilizing vastly different strategies to be friendly to their military-affiliated employees. Regardless, the findings challenge both organizations and researchers to clarify why being friendly towards past or current members of the military is important.

Usage of the terms military friendly and veteran friendly has grown since 2001, and a great deal of attention has been given toward those with military service. Findings are based on self-reported information by the business organizations with little evidence offered to the impact each program has on the successful transition of service members or the associated benefits for the employer. Data collected was from organization websites and thus presents a limited scope of how business organizations may in fact be supporting their military-affiliated employees and community members. Still, the findings offer a path forward in pursuit of understanding how to be a military friendly organization.

With the high number of military veterans entering the non-military workforce, numerous companies are adopting the military friendly label in an effort to distinguish themselves from their competitors. Until now, scholars and practitioners have not examined or defined military friendly as part of understanding how business organizations support military-affiliated employees. The themes identified through this study provide the beginnings of a potential framework for recognizing and categorizing organizations by their friendliness, which would serve military and civilian populations.

Defining Military Friendly

An inquiry into unfriendly organizations for veterans will likely yield zero results. Elected officials, higher education institutions, and businesses all frequently claim to be friendly to veterans but are rarely challenged to support the assertion. These themes offer a research-supported opportunity to define military friendly while providing guidance to non-military business organizations. Based on the research and uncovered themes, a working definition of military friendly is put forth as: **a process of providing transition support to military veterans through four pillars: (a) recruitment and hiring; (b) personal, professional and career development; (c) community outreach; and (d) promotion of veteran hiring practices.** This definition offers business organizations a loosely-structured framework toward implementing and improving current military friendly practices.

Figure 1 (below) depicts the four themes identified through this study. Each of the themes (pillars) outlines the current expectations of business organizations as it relates to the term, military friendly. Pillars were applied as they suggest a foundation for building military friendly programming. In addition, the structure’s roof highlights additional support services currently being utilized by business organizations, though promoted to a lesser extent. Although the pillars are not a requirement before the added supported services can be established, findings from the study suggest the most commonly-used practices are considered more significant to business organizations’ current understanding of military friendly. However, the diagram does not intend to outline employer

requirements to being friendly toward veterans, and instead describes how business organizations from the study currently portray themselves.



Figure 1. Pillars of military friendly business organizations

Practice

Service members transitioning out of the military are exposed to various lists indicating organizations’ level of friendliness toward veterans. Institutions who create these lists hold significant influence on both veterans and business organizations. Whether searching for employment on their own or working with professionals, veterans benefit from receiving reliable guidance. An established set of military friendly standards would provide an objective level of measure that may build veterans’ trust and confidence in their search for civilian employment. For business organizations, the structure outlined in Figure 1 (above) offers direction and clarity in how to improve programming as part of an effort to enhance veteran hiring and community impact.

None of the themes specifically outline how business organizations strive to retain veterans. While professional development was a resounding theme, the programs emphasized early career transitions. About 50% of veterans leave their first non-military job within one year and another 15% move to a new position within two years (Maury, Stone, & Roseman, 2017). The high rate of turnover follows substantial investments from business organizations recruiting veterans to their company, thus suggesting a disconnect after being hired. Through the Syracuse Institute for Veterans and Military Families, nine of ten veteran respondents on a study of past servicemember employment reported the opportunity to use their skills and abilities as the most important aspect of civilian employment (Maury et al., 2017). Perhaps more important, new employment opportunities, lack of career development opportunities, and quality of work were the top three reasons veterans leave their employer (2017). The reasons identified appear to suggest a disconnect between military friendly initiatives (see Figure 1) and the priorities outlined by veterans.

Business organizations may benefit from engaging military veterans in developing and defining a military friendly culture. As Corona & Godart (2009) noted, “identities emerge and evolve according to their position in networks of social ties and cultural domains embedded in business organizations” (p. 284), suggesting employees play a vital role in the development of organizational culture. At present, business organizations remain free to create their own military friendly programming without the benefit of external guidance. The lack of guidelines, either internal or external, leaves organizations with limited resources to establish best practices, while simultaneously

empowering employees to create initiatives that make a lasting impact. By involving military-affiliated employees in the development process, organizations may yield a positive return on investment—particularly on retention of veterans.

Research

This initial study offers an opportunity to further the research and understanding of how military friendly is applied by business organizations. As scholars seek to understand how organizations are best serving military veterans by identifying impactful strategies, it is important that recommendations are based on empirical findings. Studies identifying ways military veterans can be better served has the potential to impact long-term organizational success, veteran employee retention, and veteran unemployment and underemployment. The authors recommend further studies on the impact identification as a military friendly organization has on employees with prior military service—particularly employee satisfaction and retention when compared with veteran employees in other businesses. A more clearly articulated definition of what it means to be military friendly may improve the quality of military friendly programming offered within organizations and reduce turnover of military-affiliated employees. Researchers may benefit from interviewing HR personnel and senior organization leaders about their understanding of the terms and how the programs are assessed.

Limitations

Several limitations influenced this study. The methodology of military friendly employer lists is often both obscure and inconsistent. As such, a military friendly employer in one industry or region may not be perceived as being equally friendly in another. A universal definition of military friendly may also not be practical in all business organizations. In addition, data was gathered exclusively from the websites of Fortune 500 companies, who were recognized as being military friendly in recent years. Though unlikely organizations would falsely report information on their website, there may be programs that are overstated, underutilized, or perceived as less important to report. For example, veteran employee resource groups (ERG) were not extensively discussed on company websites, though many business organizations have invested and supported their development. Further, information about family support, as well as long-term support for veteran employees, may be offered but was under-represented in the data. A final limitation is the military friendly lists themselves. Some business organizations may promote their friendliness more than others, while others may use influence, i.e. capital and personal networks, to increase the likelihood of being recognized. Thus, the limitations outlined should be considered and findings used as a guide toward advancing dialogue on military friendly business organizations.

Conclusion

Human resource scholars and practitioners are uniquely positioned to evaluate, recommend, and implement programs that make business organizations more effective. Although hiring veterans is a priority today, political agendas and societal obligations shift. Research on how veterans are positively contributing to the workforce could help to retain current programs and spur development of additional employer support. This study begins the process of understanding how business organizations apply military friendly and establishes a starting point from which further research can evolve to more-finely decipher the qualities and impact of supportive programming.

The business organizations included in this study have implemented a variety of military friendly strategies that were distilled into four themes. Though the current research is an early effort to understand what qualifies business organizations as military friendly, few researchers have sought

to understand how veterans perceive companies to be supportive of their transition and work experience. Gaining such insight could benefit military veterans seeking civilian employment using the military friendly moniker as a benchmark for their interests. Additional research is required to ensure alignment between veteran needs and military friendly programming in non-military business organizations. With this thematic analysis in hand, further research should work toward meeting the need for a universally-agreed upon definition and description of military friendly business organizations to aid both veteran job seekers and the organizations hoping to hire them.

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