



Armed Forces Veterans: A Nation's Untapped Resource

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ABSTRACT

Armed Forces Veterans usually do well in civilian life, a small minority sadly do suffer, but those that do well adjust their military skills, knowledge, and technical expertise to benefit the civilian organizations that employ them. However, in the media and in general usage, the term “veteran” does not necessarily conjure up a valuable, potential resource trained and paid for at the taxpayer’s expense, but rather, if at all, someone who has been removed from civilian life and returned to it with a different outlook, and as a person not understood by those who have never served. This conversation argues that more needs to be done to identify the benefits of employing armed forces veterans.

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According to the Office of Veterans' Affairs (2020), the United Kingdom's (UK) definition of a veteran is someone who has enlisted and received one day's pay. The Armed Forces of other countries use different criteria.

The term veteran now seems to be in more common usage than the more explicit terms of ex-armed forces, ex-Royal Navy, ex-army, or ex-Royal Air Force. The description "veteran" is often used in the press and media when, for example, an elderly person is physically assaulted, or, despite their usually advanced age, save someone's life or thwarts a burglar. The fact that such individuals are identified as veterans would of course be gleaned by a reporter when interviewing the "hero"; veterans do not otherwise look any different to the rest of the population, but it makes for a better story perhaps. The veteran in such a situation is seen as brave and heroic because they fought back, the inference being that they tackled their assailant and were thus courageous because they had served in the armed forces. In other words, the status of veteran in such a situation is seen as positive. But surely a veteran should more clearly be described as a veteran of a war, a campaign, or a specific battle. A veteran of the Falklands war, a World War II veteran perhaps?

Given the very minimal requirement to earn the description "veteran" in the UK, having received just one day's pay; describing someone who has served a 22-year-plus career and has seen active service, in say the Royal Navy as a veteran, and applying the term "veteran" also to an individual who enlisted and then found he or she did not like the life and departed after a few months, seems to not do justice to those who have served their country for many years. Yet use of the term veteran persists and is applied broad brush to anyone who fits the government's description.

As is well known on leaving the armed forces, individuals leave behind the trappings of uniform, badges of rank and status; they must make the transition from military to civilian life to fit in and to enable them to get on (Williams et al., 2018). Veterans are of course identifiable to other veterans, especially in conversation when a specific phrase or approach to an issue marks them out as having experienced life in the military. However, it is more generally the case that despite what was said by a UK government minister, that "veterans are not mad, bad, or sad" (UK Parliament, 2018), the description of a person as a veteran seems, more often than not, to be attached to those who are in need.

Of course, some veterans do need help, advice, support, and care, but, according to Iversen et al. (2005), most, on leaving the armed forces, do well. In the UK then, there would appear to be an image problem: Those who have served in the armed forces receive in-depth training in a

range of skills, perhaps learn a trade and generally gain a wide breadth of experience of the human condition whilst serving overseas. On leaving the armed forces, such well-trained and experienced people should surely be considered as potentially valuable candidates for employment in civilian life.

I contend that a lot more needs to be done with respect to the image of armed forces veterans in the UK to promote the identifier of a person as a veteran as a good thing. The word veteran should conjure up in the minds of potential employers an image of someone who can act on their own initiative as well as work as part of a team; take the lead, when necessary; solve problems; get things done; come up with solutions and not reasons why something cannot be done. But also, an image of someone who can adjust their attitude to work from military to civilian ways, not by becoming a clock watcher, but by adapting their military skills and knowledge to the benefit of the civilian workplace.

There is a notion that ex-soldiers, for example, are only capable of taking up employment in low-skilled work as security guards or prison staff. In my own research I found this not to be the case. For my doctoral research I carried out interviews with 50 individuals who had all worked in a wide range of employments, not all of which had a direct link to what they had done in the army (McDermott, 2007). In more recent research into the UK's Armed Forces and Veterans Breakfast Clubs organization (McDermott, 2020) my findings were very similar—ex-armed forces folk take up a whole range of employments and the vast majority adapt well to civilian life. I have also found (from speaking to many veterans) that there is a general feeling that despite extensive cover of military operations in the media, ex-armed forces folk feel strongly that civilians generally just do not understand the ex-military man or woman.

I am not in any way advocating for veterans with problems to be forgotten, but rather that the benefits ex-military people can bring to civilian life and work need to be clearly identified and more intensively promoted to potential employers. After all, the nation's population pays for the training of the military through taxation, from basic skills right up to advanced levels in areas including management, leadership, and a wide range of technical occupations, which, with a bit of effort and ingenuity, are capable of adaption to the civilian world of employment.

An online comment by the Union of Auto Workers (UAW) nicely sums up the somewhat-different attitude to veterans that pertains in the US: "In addition to their brave actions, defending our country and others, these men and women are a valuable resource to the entire labor movement" (UAW, 2021).

I believe a great deal of useful information could be gained from finding out what employers think about the UK

armed forces and about UK armed forces veterans leading, perhaps to the development, as necessary, of resources to correct any misconceptions about veterans and to promote this potential source of employees as they clearly do in the USA.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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