

## Research Article

# Transitioning Veterans with Service-Connected Disabilities Seeking Employment: A Qualitative Study of Barriers and Strategies

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## Introduction

Approximately 200,000 US military personnel transition to civilian life annually [44] (GAO), with 27% of veterans transitioning to civilian life facing difficulties during this process. This percentage increases to 44% accounting only for post-9/11 veterans [31]. Unlike commissioned officers, who may have an easier time with reintegrating into civilian life [31], post-9/11 enlisted service members have consistently reported that one of the greatest challenges to community reintegration is finding permanent, meaningful employment [1,12,22,35,36,46]. In addition to universal challenges, such as losing healthcare and housing allowance [13], post-9/11 veterans are more likely than previous cohorts to have survived trauma during their service and to leave the military with service-connected disabilities [45,49].

## Abstract

Finding meaningful employment is one of the greatest challenges when transitioning from the military and reintegrating into civilian life. The purpose of this study was to assess the challenges and facilitators that transitioning post-9/11 veterans with service-connected disabilities experienced when seeking civilian employment. We interviewed 34 young formerly enlisted men and women who had recently transitioned from the military and were receiving vocational support about their experiences looking for a civilian job during their reintegration. Using thematic analysis, we identified key themes related to barriers and facilitators of civilian employment. Veterans spoke about challenges related to both their disabilities along with other challenges experienced by the general veteran population. Some barriers included *inadequate job-seeking skills*, *disconnects between military and civilian job experience*, and *culture clashes*. Mental and physical health conditions associated with service-connected disabilities compelled many to rethink new career trajectories. Facilitators included *planning ahead of the transition*, *pursuing educational opportunities*, *receiving practical and emotional support*, and *encountering employers who valued military experience*. As opposed to being disincentives to work, veterans used disability benefits to obtain better job matches. Veterans with service-connected disabilities are motivated to work despite considerable challenges. They need time and support to adjust to civilian life and find suitable employment. Employment programs and interventions should account for the variability in experiences and conditions among veterans by tailoring aspects of their program, such as the timing of these supports, job matching, the intensity of services, and the use of benefits to the specific needs of veterans.

**Keywords:** Civilian employment; Employment barriers; Employment facilitators; Military veterans; Post-military transition

Service-connected disabilities involve injuries or diseases incurred or worsened due to military service, which also cover combat injuries and military occupational hazards [3]. In 2022, around 41% of post-9/11 veterans reported a service-connected disability [42]. Having an emotionally distressing experience or suffering a severe injury significantly reduces the chances of an easy reintegration into civilian life [31]. While veterans with service-connected disabilities are transitioning to the civilian workforce, these veterans report a higher rate of unemployment than their counterparts who did not report a disability [42].

Previous studies have examined barriers to employment in the general veteran population but not specifically among re-

cently transitioning veterans with service-connected disabilities [14,15,23-25]. Among those employed, post-9/11 veterans say that while their military experience helped in obtaining a job, the civilian job they obtained was not a great fit [34]. For those with service-connected disabilities, the challenges are even greater due to physical and mental health conditions, especially as the severity of these conditions increases over time [47,48]. Furthermore, service-connected disability benefits are commonly believed to be disincentives to employment [40].

Various supports are available for transitioning veterans, such as the Veterans Affairs vocational and education services [38]. However, many of these programs do not offer the specific services veterans value, including assistance with obtaining benefits and increasing veterans' motivation to change (Morgan et al., 2020). Studies identifying helpful strategies and support for veterans with service-connected disabilities seeking civilian employment are uncommon [2,15]. While the Veterans Administration (VA) has overemphasized PTSD as the primary mental health outcome of military service, there is a need to better understand and distinguish the challenges veterans face in their reintegration, especially the stresses related to the transition, to develop more suitable interventions and services [29].

As part of a randomized controlled trial, we sought to evaluate a specific model of vocational support with several elements for this population. This qualitative sub-study identified the civilian job search experiences of post-9/11 veterans who recently transitioned out of the military and received or sought service-connected disability benefits. Through this lens, we distinguish the effect of service-connected disabilities and other challenges they experienced while searching for a job and the strategies that helped them obtain civilian employment.

**Methods**

**Sampling Procedures**

Participants were enrolled in a randomized controlled trial evaluating employment programs for veterans and followed for three years. We included participants from both study conditions in the randomized trial. Inclusion criteria for the parent study were: aged 45 years or younger; enlisted members who completed 6 months of active military service with an honorable or general discharge, discharged within the previous 12 months or were about to be discharged within the next 6 months, was an unemployed veteran or was not about to start a civilian job for those yet to be discharged, and receiving or applying for a service-connected disability rating from the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA).

For this qualitative sub-study, we obtained a volunteer sample who had completed at least one year of follow-up in the parent study. We invited participation in the qualitative interview after completing regularly scheduled follow-up interviews for the parent study. Recruitment continued until we reached saturation [19]. The final sample consisted of 34 participants.

**Participant Characteristics**

The final sample consisted of enlisted veterans honorably or generally discharged from the military between 2018 and 2019. Participants were dispersed across the US and, on average, completed the interview 2.82 years (*SD*=0.82) after their discharge from the military. Table 1 shows the participant background characteristics of the qualitative sample: 73% were male, age ranged from 22 to 44 years (*M*=33.5, *SD*=6.71), 56%

**Table 1:** Characteristics of the Participants Interviewed (N=34).

Characteristic	n / M	% / SD
Gender, n (%)		
Male	25	73.5%
Female	9	26.5%
Age, M (SD)	33.53	6.71
Race, n (%)		
White	19	55.9%
Black	9	26.5%
Other	6	17.6%
Hispanic/Latino Ethnicity, n (%)	8	23.5%
Marital status, n (%)		
Married/Cohabiting with a partner	21	61.8%
Unmarried	13	38.2%
Education, n (%)		
High school diploma/GED	1	2.9%
Technical certificate and/or some college	15	44.1%
Associate's degree or higher	18	52.9%
Worked a civilian job before the military, n (%)	26	76.5%
Years worked (n=26), M (SD)	3.37	3.51
Military Branch, n (%)		
Army	19	55.9%
Air Force	6	17.6%
Navy	5	14.7%
Marine Corps	3	8.8%
Coast Guard	1	2.9%
Military Rank, n (%)		
E4 or lower	13	38.2%
E5 or higher	21	61.8%
Served in a combat zone	20	58.8%
Years served in the military, M (SD)	11.40	7.72
Disability Rating (N=33), M (SD)	72.4%	25.0
PHQ-9, <sup>a</sup> M (SD)	7.21	5.94
PCL-5 with criterion A <sup>b</sup> (n=29), M (SD)	19.97	16.98

<sup>a</sup>Patient Health Questionnaire-9: 1–4 = Minimal depression while 20–27 = Severe depression

<sup>b</sup>PTSD Checklist for DSM-5: 33 or higher = PTSD

were White, 24% were of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity, and 63% were married or cohabiting with a partner. Less than half (41%) of the participants had a bachelor's degree or higher, and most (77%) had worked a civilian job before joining the military. Over half (56%) had served in the army, and over half (59%) had also served in a combat zone. Thirty-Three participants reported a disability rating (*M*=72, *SD*=25.4). It is important to note that we did not ask for the specific conditions that contributed to the disability ratings. However, of the 33 participants, 32 (97%) reported receiving a rating for physical conditions and 20 (61%) for mental conditions.

Based on standardized self-report measures, participants were experiencing high levels of emotional distress. For example, 32% had moderate to severe depression and 24% had symptoms of PTSD. Compared with a nationally representative sample of veterans, participants in this sample had four times the rate of moderate depression [5].

Although this is a volunteer sample, the characteristics of participants in this sample resembled the overall sample in the parent study with a few exceptions. The sub-study participants were older: *t*(227)=3.10, *p*<0.01, served in the military longer: *t*(41)=2.36, *p* = 0.02, and experienced fewer symptoms of PTSD: *t*(164)= -2.37, *p*=0.02.

## Data Collection

We conducted semi-structured telephone interviews using an interview guide designed to elicit detailed information about participants' reasons for entering the military, their employment history, how the military had influenced their career and education goals, whether their service-connected disabilities had any effect on their career plans during the job search, the challenges and successes in gaining employment and education, and program-specific experiences. This study did not include responses that referred to a specific employment model. A medical anthropologist with experience in mental health services research trained and supervised the study interviewers. Interviews were 45-60 minutes long and were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

## Data Analysis

We used Dedoose (Version 9.0.54, 2022), a qualitative analytic software program to manage and code the data. Qualitative coding is a method used to reduce large volumes of text-based data into manageable units for interpretation [8,9]. Codes are words or brief phrases that describe or summarize interview excerpts. For this study, we developed codes that aligned with the interview domains and questions. Additional codes were added over time by reviewing the transcripts to capture nuances emerging in the data. Codes were developed collaboratively, with one team member leading the coding process. To check on quality and rigor, two team members audited a selection of coded transcripts to assess how codes were applied and to identify alternative interpretations or missed coding. We sought consensus on codes to ensure that analytic categories were reliable [37]. The team met to discuss and resolve disagreements, and one team member subsequently re-coded the dataset to reflect these discussions.

Following coding, we aggregated text excerpts by code to produce reports for the following categories: barriers to employment, facilitators to employment, job search experience, and reasons for joining. All authors reviewed code reports and met to discuss the main themes that emerged from the code reports. One author wrote analytic memos as a technique to synthesize core meanings and patterns in the data [33]. The team discussed the analytic memos to refine provisional themes, and then developed them into thematic statements and narrative summaries.

## Results

### Participant Employment Backgrounds

In explaining their reasons for enlisting in the military, participants often noted that they lacked the opportunity to get ahead, and many reported they could not afford college. Some participants came from rural areas with few prospects, and joining the military was a way out of their dilemma. Most participants in this sample had civilian jobs prior to joining the military; however, most were temporary or entry-level jobs that were not sustainable. Others worked jobs that did not provide the prospects they were seeking. Even those with more job experience hoped to gain a more fulfilling career after joining the military.

While in the military, participants intentionally opted for Military Occupational Specialties (MOSs) that would directly translate to the civilian workforce if they were to leave. Although some participants sought an occupational specialty for added

benefits, such as a bonus offered to recruits who joined the infantry specialization, others discovered potential civilian job pursuits while in the military. Participants thought they would make a long-term career out of the military but were instead medically retired. When faced with an impending retirement, some of those participants experienced "a lot of panic," as they "didn't know what [they] were going to do." Of those who chose not to re-enlist, some did not "think [they] could have mentally done it for much longer" (Participant 13), while others "felt confident enough that [they could] do things outside of the military" (Participant 21).

### Barriers to Civilian Employment

#### *Theme 1: The Search for Civilian Employment Was More Difficult Than Expected*

Transitioning from the military was a pervasive life transition. Some participants expressed that the transition posed a challenge for establishing a new identity outside of the military, and the lack of job prospects only exacerbated feelings of hopelessness. As one participant described:

I guess I had tied so much of my identity to the military that I just didn't know who I was or what I was doing. And the longer I went without a job, some days it was just – it took everything just to get out of bed. (Participant 1)

While a few participants obtained employment quickly and easily following their transition from military service, most experienced challenges. Several noted that finding a civilian job was much more difficult than they had expected. For example, one participant stated:

It wasn't straightforward. I was thinking, 'Oh, because of my experience [and] my veteran status that it was just gonna be a piece of cake for me,' but it wasn't the way I thought. Actually, I think I stayed almost two years after I left the military before I started working. I left in February, 2018, and I didn't get a job until, I think, November, 2019. So, it wasn't really straightforward. It was a very difficult time. (Participant 10)

Participants described applying for hundreds of jobs and facing numerous rejections. In some cases, the challenges faced by participants were related to structural barriers, such as limited opportunities in the local job market. Other challenges included being older than other job applicants for the types of jobs they qualified for. One participant described difficulty with the expectation of applying for jobs online:

Have you ever tried to get work through some of these websites when you're not a computer guy? It's insane, like it's undercutting. We don't do anything like this in the military, and all of a sudden, you're thrown into the civilian market, and they go, 'Oh yeah, we only accept jobs through this.' And then, it's another portal and you gotta follow these links. And you gotta do this, dot twice, and spin around three times. (Participant 23).

#### *Theme 2: Mental and Physical Health Conditions Related to Service-connected Disabilities Affected Veterans' Search for Employment*

While physical and mental health-related challenges did not prevent participants from wanting to seek a job, a few participants described how the symptoms they experienced interfered with their efforts to gain civilian employment. For example:

Certain things I'm unable to do. I've been diagnosed with



chronic arthritis in my hip and also with PTSD, and I'm unable to climb anymore. It starts hurting. My PTSD, sometimes it acts up once I'm around large crowds and stuff, certain large crowds. I'm typically okay with regular crowds, but sometimes I do get a little overwhelmed. But those two are the main things that hindered my job search, just trying to find something that didn't trigger any of my injuries or things like that (Participant 7).

For most participants, and especially in cases where participants' past job experiences were physically intensive, their service-connected disabilities compelled them to search for a new career path. As one participant described:

I was training for deployment, and the car that we were in flipped. I got injured, and eventually, that led to me being medically discharged from the military. So, that definitely changed a lot of my trajectory because I couldn't do the military anymore, but I also am not physically capable of going back and doing construction. So, finishing that degree, which I didn't have when I left the military, I finished it right after, became very, very important (Participant 17).

One participant also described how their service-connected disabilities affected them while interviewing for a job, "I just took it, but I knew I could not make it, because even when sitting in front of the computer, I already had headache—I couldn't even understand anything, so... I just took the test. I failed it" (Participant 11). Even the few participants who did not view their service-connected disabilities as having any effect on their job related how they would still be in need of some accommodations. As one participant mentioned in response to whether their service-connected disabilities affected their career plans at all, "No, not really. I'm 100%, permanent and total, but I'm still able to work. I just have to frequently stand, I can't sit for long periods of time" (Participant 3).

The difficulties participants experienced looking for a job due to their disabilities also affected some with their mental health. For instance:

The transition was a lot harder for me because I got out with a disability. And the transition of going from military and going through my physical therapy and then going through my mental health – having to do that in while in the military and then getting out and having to find a doctor and all that stuff was kind of what made the transition for me a lot harder, a lot more stressful. And it made me realize that it's gonna be a lot harder to find a job. So then, I went into a depression 'cause it was nothing like what I was expecting (Participant 14).

### ***Theme 3: Military Experience Did Not Translate Easily Into Civilian Employment***

For some, the skills they had gained in the military did not translate into civilian life. This was especially the case for combat-related skills: "I have a skillset that involves shooting people. I don't have a degree...So, I felt very stuck, very stuck" (Participant 18). Others noted that job experience in the military was not considered equivalent to corporate experience. Even among those who had relevant skills and experience for civilian jobs, some found that military and civilian standards differed. As one participant explained:

Even though I've been in the IT field for 20 years and I had the baseline certification that I needed, I felt like civilian-wise I was still missing a big chunk of what they're looking for. [By] military standards I'm advanced, but [by] civilian standards I'm

still basic. So I felt like it would be harder for me to get a job and to get a job at the pay that I deserved that matched the pay I was receiving in the military. (Participant 3)

The misalignment of skills, experience, and standards meant that some had to accept low-paying, entry-level jobs. Yet others noted that low-wage jobs did not pay enough to support a family. Seeking higher-paid jobs was necessary because of the added expenses of housing and healthcare outside of the military.

### ***Theme 4: Military Culture Clashed With Civilian Culture***

Beyond the misalignment of skills and standards, many participants noted stark differences between military and civilian culture. Several contrasted the highly structured environment of the military with the lack of structure in civilian life. As one participant related:

I believe most veterans are not prepared for the life after the military. We are not prepared at all. 'Cause the life in the military is kinda like programmed. You know what to do, you know where to be. Somebody tell you what to wear, somebody tell you what to eat. It's like, someone is running your life for you. So, you just have to do it. You don't care [whether] what you're doing is right or wrong. But, when you get out of the military, you start making decisions by yourself, and I feel a lot of veterans are not prepared for that (Participant 10).

Among others, the differences between military and civilian cultures manifested in difficulty communicating in the workplace. One participant described how an employer had appreciated that veterans had a strong work ethic and were "straight shooters." However, the military work style became problematic in terms of team dynamics in the workplace.

Styles of direct communication that were expected in the military could be seen as intimidating in the civilian workplace. Relatedly, the interpersonal skills necessary in some jobs, such as retail or customer service, were not a good fit for some participants.

### **Facilitators to Civilian Employment**

#### ***Theme 1: Planning, Persistence, and Furthering Education Facilitated Employment Opportunities***

Some participants had prepared for their eventual transition from the military. They described being intentional about the opportunities they pursued during their service, selecting training that would translate more readily into civilian employment. As one participant explained:

I knew I wanted to be a paralegal, which is why I cross-trained to become a paralegal because I wanted something that would translate well on the outside that I could be successful in... The military offered me an opportunity to do—I can't remember the exact name or term of the [program], but I was basically able to become a civilian six months prior to separating from the military and actually working in the job that I wanted to do as a civilian for some months. So, I was more confident and equipped by the time I was done with my internship to leave and actually do the job that I do now (Participant 21).

Others noted the importance of persistence in the job search stating, "It was kind of hard. I started at low-pay jobs and worked my way up. So, it was tough, I had to take any kind of job I could get. I was taking \$15-an-hour jobs for a long time." (Participant 28).

The challenges veterans experienced transitioning to civilian jobs motivated several to pursue further education in order to broaden their employment prospects. As one participant stated:

I'm actually going back to school so I can get a degree [for this field] because a lot of places here that hire for that, they want you to have a degree. If not, they want you to start from scratch, and that's something I refuse to do at this time (Participant 26).

### **Theme 2: Veterans Valued Practical and Emotional Support**

In the context of substantial challenges transitioning from military life, participants appreciated the resources and employment supports available to them as veterans. For instance, this participant identified these practical supports as being helpful:

Well, the military opened a lot of resources for me, but I guess you could say it helped shape my future because, as a civilian, you only have so much resources. But coming from the military, there's a lot of organizations that are willing to support you, help you get back to your feet. So that really, really, really helped. [Interviewer: In what way?] Financially and psychologically, too, because even though I got out, I couched surfed for a few months. I know that there's a lot of organizations who are willing to help me... I got gift cards for clothes for [an] interview, some gift cards for food, I got some notebooks, pens. So, knowing that somebody is there to help me out whenever I need it, it helps a lot, too. Not giving up – not to say, 'My life sucks. I cannot find a job.' (Participant 29).

One participant described an apprenticeship program for veterans in the field of information technology that provided training in writing resumes and interviewing. Many other participants spoke to the importance of support for practical aspects of job searching, including help with resume writing, assistance with online applications, and opportunities to practice interviewing skills. Participants identified specific aspects of employment programs that were useful: "What I found helpful is the revamping of the resume, branding yourself to make yourself marketable to employers, the mock interviews – that helped me out tremendously" (Participant 2).

Outside of the support of formal employment programs, some participants also noted the importance of family support during their transition.

### **Theme 3: Service-related Disability Benefits Occasionally Facilitated Career Development**

Participants overwhelmingly expected to work despite service-related disability benefits. Most of the participants who mentioned their service-connected disability benefits described how these regular payments helped pay for necessities, and a couple of other participants described how these benefits helped keep them afloat immediately after leaving the military. As one described: "Well, to be honest, with due disability compensation that I get now has been the only thing that has been keeping me afloat for a while" (Participant 25).

Beyond the practical supports that most veterans are able to access, participants spoke to how their disability benefits enabled them to exercise job preferences and to look for jobs that would be a better fit. For example:

The disability stuff is huge because that allowed me the wiggle room to be able to not be picky, right? Otherwise, I would

have been pressed into doing something leadership-wise, which is not something that I'm interested in these days, something high-stress, either project management, leadership stuff, or even again, like I said, going back over as a civilian contractor with a rifle in my hands, because they get paid a lot of money. So, the fact that I was able to just shop around as much and try to take advantage of all of these other opportunities was due to the fact that I had the payments from the VA (Participant 18).

One participant related how the disability benefits allowed for less conventional career goals:

Once I realized that because of my injuries, I would probably be relatively high on the disability spectrum according to the VA, I became a little less worried about it. So, I kind of took a weird trajectory at first that's different than what most people would've done. Instead of saying, 'Okay, I want to come out, and I need to find what I can do and just live off the job,' and the disability is tangential, what I wanted to do was start a business... So, initially, we bought some land with a small cabin on [it]. It had electricity but no plumbing and we were planning on living out there and kind of homestead, and just live as cheaply as possible while I got a wood shop off the ground (Participant 17).

### **Theme 4: Employers Who Valued Military Experience Offered Opportunities for Transitioning Veterans**

Although some participants described clashes between military and civilian cultures that posed barriers to employment, as described above, other participants found opportunities with employers who valued military experience: "Once I got out of the service and I started applying, everyone always mentioned military service on my resume, so that's always a plus and I'm super grateful for that" (Participant 24). In some job sectors, veteran status may even confer preferential status, such as for federal jobs.

Similarly, some participants described being hired by a veteran, which presented an advantage. As one participant stated, "The hiring manager that interviewed me was a veteran and he was a former recruiter. So, he was like, 'Yeah, if you really want this job, you can take it.' I was like, 'Wow! That was super easy'" (Participant 33).

## **Discussion**

The study sample consisted of 34 mostly young military veterans who recently transitioned from military to civilian life and obtained, or intended to obtain, a disability rating from the Veterans Benefits Administration. Most of the participants had multiple service-connected disabilities, including mental health symptoms. While participants came from various backgrounds, they all joined the military to better their prospects, and many thought of pursuing a long-term career in the military. Although some participants were prepared to leave, the impending medical retirement placed others in challenging situations. The sample included veterans who had successfully gained employment, veterans who were struggling to find a job, and veterans who were looking for work in their retirement to be productive.

When asked about their experience searching for civilian employment after leaving the military with service-connected disabilities, participants related difficulties directly related to their service-connected disabilities as well as challenges associated with transitioning from the military. Some of the general challenges reported by these veterans with service-connected

disabilities support the challenges faced by the general population of transitioning veterans [2,22,23,40]. In contrast to many studies of barriers to employment, the literature provides minimal guidance on successful strategies to gain civilian employment [15,40]. Of those that have provided some guidance, one study found that planning, managing expectations about the job search process, and tailoring resumes were facilitators to employment [26], which was also supported by the participants in this study. New findings in our study involve the challenge of online job applications and how the compensation for service-connected disabilities was able to support a veteran's job search. While recently discharged veterans are likely to be as well-versed in using technology as the general population (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics [NCVAS], 2018), some of the veterans in our sample mentioned difficulties searching and applying for jobs online due to not having learned the required skills and strategies needed.

Mental health issues and substance abuse are barriers in several studies [2,23,40]. While most participants in our sample did not report their mental and physical health conditions as preventing them from employment, most did, however, say their service-connected disabilities affected the types of jobs they could pursue. Although one study found that veterans with both mental health conditions and combat exposure experienced more difficulties reintegrating into civilian employment than those without combat experience [24], transferring skills was more of a challenge to reintegration than combat experience in our sample.

The compensation provided to veterans based on their service-connected disabilities remains a cornerstone of the support provided by the VA [28]. Some studies have found that service-connected disability benefits discouraged veterans from pursuing civilian employment [27,41]. However, we found that the level of disability rating and increase in disability payments did not correlate with employment outcomes, which aligns with findings in a few other studies [6,7,43]. Some of the participants in this study expressed that these benefits helped them take more time to find a civilian job that best suited them. In some cases, the participants were able to be more selective in the jobs they obtained, and in others, they were able to have employment goals and plan for these pursuits. Even those who said the disability payment alone would not be enough to support their family found that the disability payments helped during the transition period. This discrepancy in research findings suggests the need for further study.

As is evident in this study, veterans with service-connected disabilities experience challenges related to both the conditions of their disability as well as the transition process from the military. So, both types of challenges should be taken into consideration when addressing these barriers. While we report challenges and facilitators to civilian employment separately, taken together: veteran preparedness, skills transferring, new career trajectories, job search strategies, and maintaining employment support the need for employment programs that enable job matching. As one study found, accounting for veterans' skills, previous experience, and goals would foster a greater career fit [16]. Based on the narratives participants presented, employment programs need to increase awareness of their existence, as veterans may be unaware of these services [20]. Timing of these services is also crucial, as while all veterans go through the mandatory Transition Assistance Program (TAP), which occurs within one to two years prior to leaving the military, pro-

viding too much information about civilian employment while veterans are more focused on more immediate concerns with their transition could be unhelpful [20].

These programs should also provide veterans with training in searching and applying for jobs online and strategies for networking virtually. As some of the veterans in our sample lived in areas with minimal job prospects, opening the door to opportunities online would broaden their choices. Additionally, tailored services to veterans that account for exploring their military identity, such as physical activity and wearing uniforms, and how these could be translated to their new life could be helpful [18]. Employing veterans who have transitioned successfully into such support services may also help bridge the cultural gap between the military and civilian worlds.

Our sample was variable in how their service-connected disabilities affected their search and maintenance of employment, necessitating variability in the intensity of employment services they needed. For those who incurred trauma associated with obtaining an injury while in the military, services would do well to focus on emotion-focused coping strategies and then move on to problem-focused approaches, thus engaging veterans in personal development and having them construct a career that meets their goals and needs [21]. Evidence-based supported employment, such as Individual Placement and Support (IPS), engages people with disabilities in community job development to obtain competitive employment suited to their preferences and has been shown to be an effective employment model for veterans experiencing PTSD symptoms [10]. However, not all veterans with mental illness receive treatment, and some of those with service-connected disabilities only experience physical conditions. So, employment programs need to account for these varying groups.

Some of the veterans in our sample highlighted the practical support and benefits they received for their veteran status and especially for their service-connected disabilities. These veterans made use of their disability payments to either support their employment goals or bridge the gap until they obtained employment in creative ways. Employment programs could also be another source for information on not only the benefits veterans are eligible for [20] but also how they could make use of the benefits they receive to support their job search in untraditional avenues. Veterans have also made use of benefits to further their education, which could enhance their employment mobility [4]. Given how veterans may face additional challenges related to educational culture [17], employment programs could assist by explaining benefits, locating campus support for veterans [38,39] and finding a course of study that would be suitable for their employment goals.

Future studies should account for the heterogeneity of experiences and conditions of veterans, especially those with service-connected disabilities. Since the entirety of our sample consisted of formerly enlisted service members, a comparison to officers might provide additional insights into their experiences with reintegration. As mentioned previously, the discrepancy in research findings regarding the effect of service-connected disabilities on civilian employment also warrants further study.

### Limitations

Several caveats deserve mention. The interviews conducted in this study were retrospective, typically covering around three years after discharge from the military, and the accuracy of self-



report decreases with time. The current study sample joined a program that would help them gain employment. The education and employment outcomes suggest that the study may have attracted a highly motivated group, who are, therefore, not representative of the target population of young veterans with service-related disabilities [6,7]. Those who have never accessed such programs other than TAP through the military may experience additional barriers or facilitators that were not mentioned by participants in this study. While our sample included participants with various backgrounds, the interview questions were not specifically designed to elicit experiences based on race, ethnicity, or gender, and we did not find any differences in experiences looking for a job based on these characteristics.

## Conclusion

Veterans in this study faced limitations in the types of jobs they were able to pursue due to their service-connected disabilities, and some had to forge new career paths. Nearly all veterans felt unprepared for the search for a civilian job, and the reality of the job search defied their preconceptions. Rather than discouraging veterans from pursuing employment after leaving the military, service-connected disability benefits helped veterans pursue unconventional career paths or bridge the gap between discharge from the military and finding civilian employment.

The facilitators to civilian employment mentioned by veterans, such as providing better preparation, transferring skills, forging new career trajectories, job search strategies, and support maintaining employment could be incorporated into employment programs and services for veterans. These employment services could help with realistic job matching and account for a veteran's unique shifting identity and situation.

## Author Statements

### Ethics and Consent

All research activities involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Westat Institutional Review Board. The study was performed in accordance with the ethical standards as laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. All participants provided consent to have their data used in this study in accordance with the Westat Institutional Review Board guidelines.

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### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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