

# Military to Civilian Career Transitions

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## **Abstract**

Upon release from the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), military Veterans can face multiple barriers to employment. Having worked with members of the military population, we have found that in some cases, this is a first attempt to find civilian employment after decades of dormant job search skill development. It can be likened to that of an expatriate plunged into a new country. For these CAF members in career transition, they strive to establish workforce commonalities of language, culture, identity and community. Simultaneously, they face perceived stereotypes from those unaware or misinformed about military roles, culture, and experiences. Despite numerous third party agencies and military organizations seeking to address the issue of career transition, the current infrastructure lacks the cohesion, structure and consistent credentialing required to properly support releasing CAF personnel. This article includes survey data, client conversations and secondary research, and is based on the professional experience of the two authors: a military spouse and certified career professional; and a former serving mem-

ber (veteran), military spouse, military mother and leading authority on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the military community.

*“Each year, approximately 5,000 new, highly skilled Veterans enter the competitive job market, and one in four will have difficulty transitioning to civilian life, despite bringing unique skills and experiences to potential employers.”* Canadian Education and Research Institute for Counselling (CERIC)

Despite vigorous training in hostile and combat situations, the semi-ambiguous task of civilian job search can prove daunting for even the most resilient member of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). “Service members indoctrinated into such an influential culture can experience adjustment problems upon reentry into the larger society, and thus professional counsellors and social workers must be ready to address the reintegration process with veteran clients.” (Coll, 2011) Members receive top-notch training, tools and skills to complete assignments throughout their military career. As the member plans to ‘release’ or retire from military duty, top-notch training resources, tools and skill develop-

ment are sourced and funded by non-CAF departments and third party agencies. The path to career success is less clear-cut and less organized than the level of training previously provided to the Member. “52% of Veterans reported an easy adjustment to civilian life, while 32% reported difficulty...Veterans with recent releases (between 2012 and 2015) had a higher rate of difficult adjustment (42%), compared to earlier releases between 1998 and 2012 (29%). (LASS Executive Summary, 2016)

The Canadian Senate identified the need and value of strengthening both CAF and Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) career transition programs and services. (The Transition to Civilian Life as Veterans, 2014) In the 2017 budget announcement, the Government of Canada allocated “\$74.1 million over six years to enhance the Career Transition Services program to help Veterans gain the skills to successfully transition to the civilian workforce.” (Veterans Affairs Canada, 2017) Currently, members seeking career transition support find various options or pathways that can be any combination of private or public and funded or non-funded employment-support services. Much is being learned about the specific needs of those military



members in transition, and their families. "...People now serving and supporting need to be versed in military literacy; [and] require a thorough understanding of their unique lifestyle, perspectives and needs in order to provide these families with effective and equitable programs and services." (Family, 2016)

A solution to this situation would require aligning support services, implementing a solid infrastructure, and addressing the lack of quality control in the support offered to Military Veterans after release.

Veterans can experience a grief reaction, which may stem from having simultaneously lost their rank, professional and personal identity, financial stability and support of their military community (Thompson, Sweet, Van Til, Poirier, & MacKinnon, 2016). For the military member the military is not just a job but a way of life – the culture extends to the individuals' personal life and family. There are some instances where members reach the compulsory retirement age of 60, and for the first time realize the steady income, career path and professional identity that was counted on, abruptly ends when they hand in their uniform. (Thompson, Sweet, Van Til, Poirier, & MacKinnon, 2016)

Career Development Practitioners (CDPs) are trained professionals who help Canadians navigate the complexity of job search. They can listen, analyze, recognize, sympathize and advise Veterans experiencing career transition difficul-

ties. CDPs adhere to a Code of Ethics and a set of Standards & Guidelines (The Canadian Standards & Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners, 2017) that ensure they provide the best level and quality of service to those seeking employment assistance. These organizations exist to assist military members transition from military to civilian careers, however greater emphasis needs to be placed on leveraging credentialed career development professionals advice and expertise to ensure Veterans are well-served. Trained CDPs listen to and reassure individuals by validating feelings, providing a structured path and educating members about next steps in a successful career transition.

Conversely, CAF 'career managers' are tasked primarily to 'put people in seats' and to 'fill billets' rather than assisting members in making career decisions. In this environment, members follow programs outlined by career managers, branch, or commanding officers, giving the member limited influence over their own career trajectory. Having little ability to set their own career waypoints, members are disadvantaged with underdeveloped career management skills. When combined, these three elements: limited civilian experience, lack of career management and a lack of confidence in their abilities to direct a civilian career transition, expose members to greater risk of underemployment and/or unemployment. (Brand, 2015)

In addition to the angst around leaving their military career, unspoken and unconscious attitudes and misperceptions toward the military (and ex-Military) exist. Some of these attitudes can arise from negative feelings about war generalized to negative feelings about those who served in the military, or a conflating of ideas about violence with ideas about members of "the Profession of Arms." Veterans may face these negative attitudes as they enter the civilian workforce. The fact that CAF members go to war or use force when directed to by their government and leadership, may cause those unfamiliar with the nature of military training, doctrine and rules of engagement to assume that Veterans are personally aggressive, or even violent people. Negative press can contribute to Veterans feeling discouraged, and can indirectly affect their employment. (Heber, 2014) Reports in the media about military members with PTSD and other mental health conditions who behave in an angry or destructive manner can also lead the public (and potential employers) to assume that all Veterans have mental health issues and behaviour problems. These assumptions and beliefs are far from accurate. Regardless of perceived bias, the majority of military members who release are healthy. "As of March 2013, there were about 700,000 Veterans living among the general population in Canada." (Thompson JM, 2014) "Veterans in Canada may apply to Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) for benefits, with



eligibility governed by 16 Acts and their regulations. Eligibility generally requires the presence of a health condition related to service. As of March 2013, about 66,500 of CAF Veterans were in receipt of VAC benefits. Almost all of those were in receipt of a disability benefit.” (Thompson JM, 2014) It is of interest to note that a number of the participants in the survey were surprised to learn that VAC supports only those Veterans eligible to receive benefits due to a service-related injury or disability. A number of Members and their spouses were surprised to learn that VAC does not represent all former serving members of the Military.

Some Veterans may experience difficulties making inroads with civilian colleagues because they hold an unexamined expectation to be treated as they had been during their military career. In one example, a formal naval Captain (a senior ranking officer often charged with command of a ship) newly entrenched in a civilian environment insisted those around him respect the rank earned whilst in the military. This proved difficult to the civilians around him as they were unfamiliar with the merits of his rank and why he expected to be treated differently from other colleagues.

Translating military skills to civilian terminology can prove challenging to the most effective military communicators. Members immersed in military culture have expressed concern about being unable to express military skills in a civilian context. The military has developed a robust

arsenal of acronyms. “They may be articulating in their own military jargon a high level of skill that would be perfect for roles that they’re applying for, but it’s not understood at all because they’re speaking in military acronyms that mean nothing in the corporate sector.” (Shelly White, 2017) When deploying their talents in a civilian context, many members we spoke with report they have not developed the skills or language to convince a civilian employer to hire them.

## Methodology

### Participants

A survey was administered to a select group of ten Canadian military members serving overseas at the time. The members represented each element of the Canadian Armed Forces (Army, Navy, Air Force and Special Operations Forces). The response rate of sixty percent included two medical professionals, three administrative professionals, and one law enforcement professional. Two members were in the final stages of successfully transitioning out of the military. One member was in the midst of a transition and three were planning to retire from the military within the next 12-24 months. Participants included four men and two women, officers and non-commissioned members. Five of the participants were over the age of 45 and one was under the age of 45.

Participants were invited to answer questions in the sur-

vey via a questionnaire, a telephone interview or an in-person interview. Surveys were sent via email to the personal email accounts of ten individuals. Three participants completed the survey and returned it electronically via email. Three participants opted to conduct an interview and discussion based on the survey questions. Four participants did not respond (two were relocating at the time; one was unable to reply due to time constraints and one chose not to return the survey and participate). In the questionnaire, participants reported on their own findings based on personal experiences. The questions focused on five main areas: Initial decision making (when to retire from the military); First steps in career transition; Interaction with Veterans Affairs Canada; Implementation of career transition and developing a new civilian role.

### Results

Throughout the survey and interview process, insight into the perspective of each respondent was gained and patterns began to emerge. In each case, members shared concerns and apprehension about transitioning to a civilian career.

“I was really anxious about the civilian world. I was leaving a strong identity where I was well known and it felt like I was starting over.”

“I have mixed emotions: nervous, excited, but I am not sure



I will find a job in the civilian world.”

“In the military, I am very confident and I know exactly what my strengths and my weaknesses are. Not so in the civilian world.”

Of note was the use of the term “world” in each of the three examples. Each participant identified a significant sense of separation between their military work and their civilian work environment.

Participants were asked to report on their personal experience in career transition and to offer advice or recommendations to individuals about to undergo a career transition. One consistent theme arose. “Get some professional help. Take full advantage of career professionals.” Participants who worked with a career professional noted an improved personal outlook and results as they integrated into the civilian world of work. Of the transitioning members who participated in the survey, the two who were in the midst of career transition and being supported by a career professional were successful in securing long-term employment within a short time (less than three months) of their partnership with a career professional. Topics for future research might include the specifics impacts a career professional has in helping a participant gain clarity on designing a career path.

“The challenge was understanding where my skills would be best applied, in what

type of industry and at what level, so [I] hired a career coach and began making connections... Tapping into networks was vital for me to really understand how I could work in the private sector.” [My] preparation helped [me] successfully transition out of the military and into a robust private sector career.” (White, 2017)

Whether helping Veterans feel supported, encouraging active listening or improving feelings of support during this time of transition, further targeted study may begin to reveal the ways in which certified career practitioners can positively influence successful career transition outcomes for Canada’s military Veterans.

### Strategies for Success

Understanding the common shared values of military members is a vital step in assisting members to transition successfully. These common shared values—honour, courage, loyalty, integrity, stoicism, commitment and self-sacrifice—provide the standard of conduct for members and regulate their lives on a day-to-day basis. (Coll, 2011)

The process of going from being a full-fledged Canadian Armed Forces member to a Veteran can be administratively cumbersome and taxing to both the Veteran and the Veteran’s family. In an article from Legion Magazine (an award-winning magazine that offers stories on Canadian military history, veterans issues and the Canadian

Armed Forces) it states: “These are career sailors, soldiers and air personnel who do not have civilian lives to which they can return. They are integrating into civilian life for the first time as adults.” (Legion Magazine, 2017). The individual must navigate unfamiliar territory whilst feeling the loss of their professional identity, managing concerns about family, employment, and financial stability. Numerous administrative processes compound this period of transition (release protocols, relocation requirements and Veterans Affairs Canada processes if benefits are required). Each process demands the Veteran’s full attention, while his or her personal and professional life is in flux. At the apex of this transition period, members are expected to find a civilian job. But how are they to do this? The 2014 Life After Service Study (a comprehensive research program to understand the effects of the transition from military to civilian life on the health and well-being of Canadian Armed Forces Veterans) reported 48% of releasing Members have served for 20 years or more. (Thompson, 2014) These people are not returning to a civilian job, rather they are entering into a new and unfamiliar work environment after more than twenty years of experience in a single “workplace.” In one example, a member reported to the National Defence Ombudsman he had never worked in the civilian world; the military was the only career he had ever had. It was not a matter of “reintegration,” but rather of introduction.





## Conclusion

Career development practitioners can help alleviate some career-related concerns facing military members as they transition out of the military and into the civilian world of work. Certified practitioners are trained to assist individuals in considering and attaining career objectives. This training may include Canadian legislation, labour market information, emotional intelligence, psychometric assessments, job search stress, self-discovery and value proposition, job search strategy, resume and written job-related communications, interview strategies, reputation management, social media and social networking, to name a few. Career development practitioners educate members about the latest trends in job search, the importance of understanding the local labour market and they encourage members to talk to business professionals and civilians within their networks well in advance of any official job search. Career development practitioners can also help members gain a better understanding of the civilian world of work in the hopes of lessening fears or apprehension.

As both the career professionals and the military communities seek to define the best strategies to support transitioning military members, a collaborative approach to member's professional success beyond the military is needed. As new organizations secure funding to assist members of the military community, it is incumbent upon

those organizations that they retain career practitioners who are qualified to deliver quality programs.

The current model composed largely of competing service providers and little structure or organization can be harmonized to focus on building rapport with military members and Veterans. We need to cultivate positive relationships and take a strengths-based approach to help members and Veterans feel comfortable and empowered as they move through a career transition. Career transition success can play a role in the quality of life of a Veteran. Certified career professionals can support members, instill confidence in them and help navigate the path towards career success in the "civilian world." Members working one-on-one with certified career development practitioners stand to gain tremendous support, direction and understanding from professionals trained in career development.

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