How Battlefield Skills Translate to Business

Veterans who reenter the workforce may need a refresher on some skills, but they come equipped with valuable experience that can motivate and align fellow employees.

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Uncle Sam wants companies to hire veterans.

In March, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported the jobless rate for veterans in 2013 was 6.6 percent. When looking at Gulf War-era II veterans — those who had served overseas since September 2001 — 9 percent were unemployed.

Why aren't veterans being hired? To Nick Swaggert, director of Veterans Programs for business consultancy firm Genesis10, it's a matter of misunderstanding. Businesses don't understand the skills post-military employees can bring to a company, and veterans don't know how to communicate those skills in ways that clarify how they can affect a business. However, with the right attention, learning leaders can identify and mediate both.

For starters, veterans come in with a large array of technical skills, such as cyber security, using the newest types of GPS technology, satellite communications and general information security.

"You've got to look past the guns and bombs and look at some of the technology each individual service member has to use," Swaggert said.

But as much as technical competency is an asset that can be easy for learning leaders to define, military experience also comes with business acumen that's more complicated to point out on a chart.

[James Murphy,](#) CEO of Afterburner Inc. and author of "Down Range: A Transitioning Veteran's Career Guide to Life's Next Phase," said veterans are engrained with military culture that relies on concrete planning, execution and accountability. Organizations have a hard time following through on plans because their vision is too vague or they don't hold everyone in the team accountable. That's not an option in the military, so veterans re-entering the workforce bring these practices with them.

They also bring a personality that's familiar with loyalty. Jack Chirrick, executive director of veteran resource group Operation Homefront's California branch said the discipline ingrained over time makes post-military employees more apt to pick up technical skills because in their experience, they need to learn how to do complex tasks fast to meet the challenges of the battlefield.

Loyalty is another asset veterans bring, as well as interest in developing their own skills. "These are people who walked down to the recruiter at some point in their life, raised their right hand and said 'I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States,' without question," Chirrick said. "If companies start thinking about it in that way, they're going to gain very valuable assets that will be with them for the long haul depending on whether they nurture it and feed back into it."

That development starts with teaching culture. Post-military employees can have trouble getting acclimated to an environment where work gets done on a more casual basis, Swaggert said. For example, when he left the military he was used to having to be 15 minutes early to everything. When he started working for Target Corp., he would show up to meetings 15 minutes early and wonder where everyone was, and at 5 minutes before the meeting he'd start worrying he had gotten the day or time wrong.

"No one had taught me some of the softer sides of things," Swaggert said. "I learned from my boss how to understand leadership, but I wish someone had taught me some of the cultural nuances that existed in the corporate world."

Other culture changes for veterans include how they interact with coworkers, from giving direction to even how they address one another. The military enforces a very formal, on-demand setting where orders are given directly and bluntly and there's a clear rank. The corporate world isn't so black-and-white.

One thing that would help is the military is a hierarchical organization. In reality, a lot of businesses are too, but it's not always apparent to military member, Murphy said. That's a simple

fix, however; learning leaders need to make sure veterans understand the company's culture and structure from the time they start.

They also need to understand the transition from duty to cubicle is not a quick one. "It takes a while to reintegrate — longer than a week," Swaggert said. "You're slowly transitioning, taking off one article of uniform at a time. There's more of a key transition in understanding."

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