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Tales of Transition

Reformulating the Challenge



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Our Research: Why Now?

As we approach the 100th anniversary of the ending of World War I, it is a little-known fact that its aftermath required a strategy for re-entering soldiers into the workplace on a scale that had never been seen before. By 1918 the British Army comprised of four million serving people (War Office, 1922). On leaving veterans were issued a 'Certificate of Employment', a document detailing what they had done during the war effort and what their conduct had been. While it was not perfect (unemployment was 11.5% during 1921-22) (Crafts, 2014), one could be forgiven for thinking support was better then for military veterans than it is now.

While a considerably smaller number of men and women leave military service annually (it is around 16,000), and despite them having significant interpersonal, leadership, team working, information security, project management and decision-making skills, research suggests these people face significant barriers during their Military to Civilian Transition (MCT) (APS, 2015; Deloitte, 2016). Even though there is a clear business case for veterans to be integrated into civilian employment, ex-forces personnel can face issues including stigmatised perceptions of army life or fears they might develop post-service trauma, both of which damage veteran's prospects. The Royal British Legion finds working age veterans are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed as their equivalents in the UK general population (Pike, 2016).

Our own recent report 'Leadership Redeployed' (The Institute of Leadership & Management, 2018), identified some of the challenges facing military veterans at all ages and experience entering civilian employment. This report builds on the earlier findings, drawing together perspectives (based on face-to-face focus groups), from a variety of representatives, including those in military service now, veterans and leaders of civilian workplaces. This report, drawing on the analysis of these focus groups forms a part of previous and ongoing research by the Institute of Leadership and Management. This research does not aim to represent the whole veteran population of 2.6 Million, but analyses informed insights into the experiences of those transferring leadership and management skills from the military to business.



Context of Our Study:

The UK's working age veteran population (around 900,000 people) cuts across age ranges, service lengths and personal circumstances. They include those who left after basic training level, to those leaving after completion of their service and everything in-between. Some are already trained professionals (e.g. medics, pilots, and barristers). Some are qualified tradespeople, while others may have mostly combat skills (Deloitte, 2016).

What unifies veterans, is that the majority are highly trained in soft, transferable skills, such as leadership, coaching, team working, project management, strategy and analysis.

Our interviews have begun to uncover that what appears to hold forces leavers back are fears around their so called 'transition' to civilian life again. With phrases like 'institutionalisation', 'culture shock' or 'reverse culture shock' (FiMT, 2016; St George's House, 2014; and Bergman, 2014), the language associated with service leavers often implies they have experience of traumatic events that negatively impact them. Even though many transition smoothly, there is a perception veterans are damaged, or broken, or 'mad, bad or sad' (FiMT, 2016). This research identifies what these barriers are and what steps leaders can take to support transition.



Report Highlights

Focus groups discussed a number of topics, ranging from the nature of military life itself (including the features of this type of employment and employability of service leavers within civilian contexts), to barriers experienced and suggestions for better transition from military to civilian employment.

Military Life:

Participants unanimously felt the moment individuals entered military service they became embedded in, and supportive of, a strong culture of learning (they spend 30% of their time in training), that gives them competence in a range of leadership skills. Because military personnel are thrust into an environment where they have to immediately adjust to being part of a team (being a 'small cog' in a much 'larger machine'), it was felt they have a high propensity to want to work well with others, and have become adept at utilising their soft and transferable skills.

It was also noted military servers have a tendency to put their teams before themselves, a valuable commodity in modern civilian business, and also that they have a willingness to take on new challenges.

Barriers:

Much of the conversation in this area focused on barriers preventing successful transition. While it was recognised many service leavers do gain employment quickly, it was noted these were often in positions significantly below their equivalent military skillset or with lower responsibility than they are capable of. Biased civilian perceptions of service leavers was identified as a major barrier, particularly around service leavers being damaged (mentally or physically), although there were also perceptions that leavers were autocratic and 'barky'.

Some noted how moving from a highly collaborative team environment (where the outcome of the mission takes priority), to a civilian work environment can feel alien, especially where colleagues are much more self-promoting. Despite their numerous skills, confidence and ability to 'sell oneself' to civilian employment was also reported as difficult, even unknown.

Better Transition:

A clear observation was that, while participants praised the range of services available to support transition, often the most vulnerable service leavers failed to access them. Many felt swamped by the range of support services, including knowing which ones best addressed different elements of transition.

Initial Conclusions:

- While services do exist to help ex-service personnel, it would be helpful if more information about their purpose, function and how to access different offerings could be drawn together into one central resource.
- Earlier action must be taken to support the transition process, by preparing service leavers for succession planning earlier in their military careers.
- The common misperceptions and biases of civilians, particularly potential employers, that prohibit service leavers from transitioning effectively into civilian employment must continue to be challenged.
- There is work to be done to reduce the erroneous public perceptions.

Our Findings: High Level Themes

What Participants Said About Moving Into 'Civvy Street'

We know veterans hone a range of soft skills during their military tenure. We also know respondents to our previous research have expressed disappointment when moving from military to civilian employment. In particular, veterans feel their experience of working in a supportive environment and as part of a connected team is not matched in the civilian world.

Figure 1 reveals discussion themes graphically, by showing the words that most dominated the focus group discussion about the transition from military to civilian employment. Words were sized proportionately to their frequency. It clearly shows much of the discussion was framed around the military, while teamwork, leadership and skills also featured highly.



Figure 1: Word cloud illustrating the words most often used during the Institute focus group research.

Differences between military and civilian life was just one observation from these discussions. Other themes, what we call mid-level themes also emerged (see later), including those around being in the 'military machine'.

We analysed how the three core, top level themes were discussed. These three themes were:

- **Enablers:** What advantages service leavers had over their non-veteran counterparts and resettlement resources that support transition to civilian employment.
- **Barriers:** What barriers made it more challenging to transition from military to civilian workplaces.
- **Military Life:** The military context and culture.

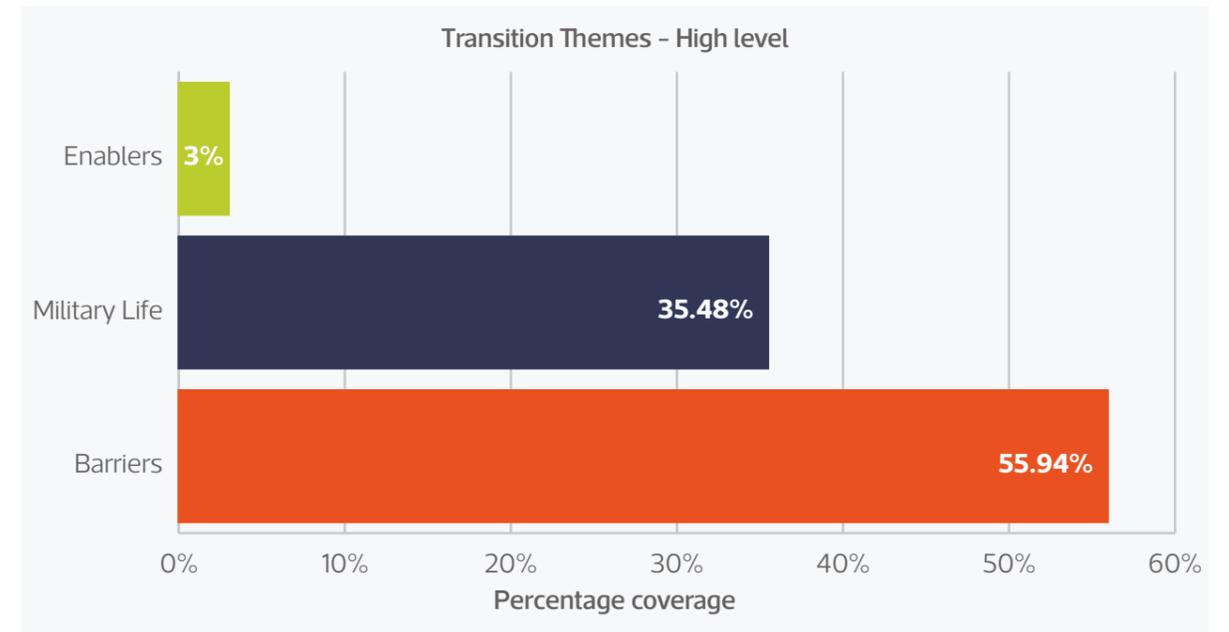


Figure 2: Top level themes used for thematic analysis of focus group discussions; demonstrates the proportion of discussion spent focused on each of the three top level themes

The proportion of time spent discussing each top level theme is revealed in Figure 2 (above), which quite clearly shows barriers was the dominating topic. It was notable that discussion about enablers of transition tended to turn into dialogue about barriers. Participants said that enablers (the capabilities service leavers bring), are not well understood beyond the Armed Forces. Of note, having accredited qualifications and inherent military skills were deemed not to be the whole answer when transitioning into civilian employment. Talk centred on the need for awareness from civilian businesses, around the soft skills veterans can bring to the workplace.

The next most dominant topic, taking up around 35% of the discussion, was around military life. This element of the discussion often had a neutral focus, and rather than raising issues of barriers or enablers it tended to provide context with no reference to whether this had a positive or negative impact on gaining civilian employment. However, this theme was very helpful for understanding the importance of the change of identity when transitioning from military to civilian employment.

Here are some of the things participants said:

'Military service personnel have very good interpersonal skills because they are taught to. During deployment it is be part of our duties to build up a strong rapport and relationship with individuals on the ground'.

Institute focus groups contributor

'In commercial life, it's not the same, because people have all come from different backgrounds, from different firms, and have different ways of doing things'.

Institute focus groups contributor

'I thought everyone could do [what I can]. I was quite shocked when I moved into an environment where I found standard skill-sets in the military were not necessarily prevalent in industry'.

Institute focus groups contributor

What We Found:

Focus group participants were unanimous in describing the military environment as pivotal in developing essential leadership and relevant skills that enable high performance within civilian workplaces. They felt these skills were core people skills related to leadership, coaching and social intelligence.

This outlook supports a strong business case and a proposed moral contract for civilian organisations to employ more veterans. It also substantiates other research (such as Deloitte's 2016 'Veterans Work' report).

However, many participants also felt some civilian organisations had an unrealistic and biased perception about service leavers.

They felt leaders did not understand that veterans did not 'bark orders'. There was considerable discussion around the theme 'the military machine' (see later), which provides insights around the investment the Armed Forces places on developing confident communicators, strategic thinkers and 'servant leaders'.

Mid-Level Theme Analysis

As well as the three overarching themes described previously, participants were also analysed in much more detail to draw out mid-level themes.

Figure 3 shows the number of topics and proportion of time spent discussing each mid-level theme was much more varied.

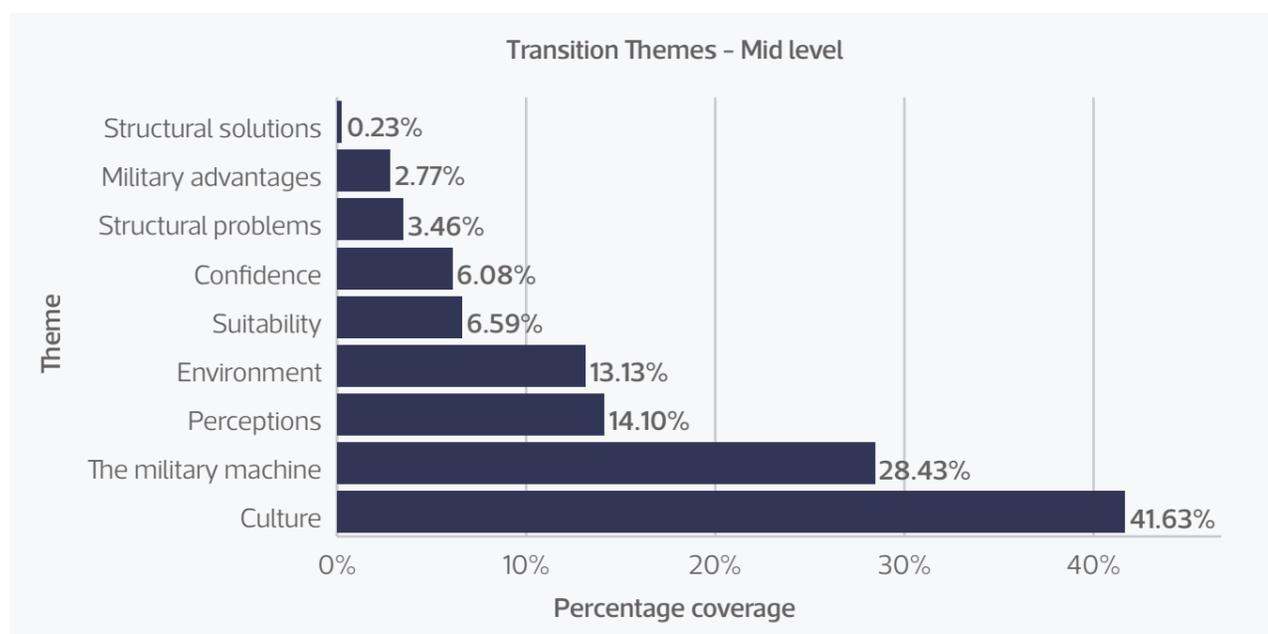


Figure 3: Mid-level themes; proportion of discussion focused on mid-level themes (the second level of analysis)

Soldier On!

Soldier On! is an education charity that teaches members of the British armed forces, who have been made redundant on medical grounds, to plan and manage their own career transitions. In addition to those who were wounded in Afghanistan and Iraq, more than 2,000 people are, in effect, made redundant on medical grounds, often for reasons that would never see a civilian with an equivalent illness or injury lose their job. We work with both service leavers and veterans who have been wounded on operations, sustained injuries whilst serving or have been discharged through any other forms of ill health.

The charity is an authorised education provider of Transperformance™, a training that helps people to take over their own job search and professional development as quickly as possible. Far too much 'telling' goes on in life and it is the same whether you are a service person or a civilian, some people want to be 'told' and some people wish to find things out for themselves; To 'explore', 'discuss' and 'discover'.



It is often far better to teach individuals how to identify for themselves what capabilities they possess, where they may find suitable and sustainable employment and how they can best position themselves to secure not just 'a job' but the right career path for them.

Nicholas Harrison, CEO, Soldier On!

Initial Observations:

- The dominant theme was Culture (comprising more than 40% of the discussion), where dialogue here predominantly focused on cultural barriers to transition; aspects like differences in language, values and beliefs between military and civilian contexts.
 - The Military Machine theme (illustrating the nature and context of military life), omitted value-weighted discussions on either barriers or enablers.
 - The Environment theme also provided neutral descriptions of military life with no value weighting.
 - The only mid-level themes focusing on enablers were Military Advantage and Structural Solutions (which covers topics such as resettlement), and made up less than 3% of the discussion.
- As noted in the top-level themes, barriers were the dominant topic making up over 50% of the dialogue. However, we can now show barriers specifically consisted of many more sub-topics: Culture (41.2%), Perceptions (14.1%), Suitability (6.08%), Confidence (6.08%) and Structural Problems (3.46%).

Detailed Analysis of Each Theme:

1) The Intrinsic Link Between Military Culture and Individual Identity

Participants clearly see culture (41.6% of the discussion), as the main barrier for transitioning smoothly into civilian employment.

As one participant said of their military life:

‘Doing things over and over (and over) again, with the same people, maximises the functionality of that team. What I don't really understand is how that works in the civilian world’.

Common language use was reported to be different between military and civilian employment contexts, at times creating a language barrier.

Veterans reported this can lead to them becoming both disorientated and dislocated from their more familiar military culture. Academic literature corroborates this finding and looks more deeply into the impact of the changing identities of military leavers (See Bergman, 2014; Binks, 2017; and Warren, 2015). It is unclear the extent to which this creates a problem, although the dominance of the topic suggests that many experience this.

What this means: This finding supports the need for planning and resilience support for service leavers, the same sort of support that was recommended by the ‘Life Transitions Report’ (FiMT, 2016). It further suggests that transitioning into civilian employment is not necessarily easy.

2) The ‘Military Machine’

The next most dominant element focused on the ‘Military Machine’, the element of being a ‘small cog’ in a ‘bigger machine’. It was reported that military recruits suspend individual motivation to allow for teamwork and an ability to swap and adapt into different roles quickly, and as needed.

As one participant said:

‘If you're a leader of a military team, you know what everybody is trained to do. You can be pretty confident things will operate in a certain way’.

Participants also discussed the significant amount of time they spend training, stating its importance for ensuring the team meets operational aims in combat.

What this means: One might, therefore, view service leavers as individuals that are likely to be adept at putting the team above themselves within a work environment and having capability, propensity and willingness to learn and adapt to new environments.

3) The Impact of Perception of Employers on the Transition

Perceptions of civilian employers as a barrier to civilian employment drew approximately one seventh of the discussion (14.1%). Of note were false stigmatised perceptions that service leavers are ‘broken’ and ‘barky’ and only able to exercise a command-and-control style leadership. As one participant said:

‘The public as a whole has a high regard to the armed forces, but 92% of the public think people who leave the forces are damaged, mentally or physically. This is a barrier because it means everybody who turns up for an interview and has ‘military’ on their CV is tainted’.

What this means: Even though military leadership training within the UK is reported to be amongst the best in the world, the negative perception of service leavers is both misleading and highly pervasive, having negative impact on service leavers employability.

4) Differences Between Military and Civilian Work Environments

The military environment comprised 13.13% of the dialogue. The identity of service members is drawn from their environment, as is their approach to working. One participant stated:

‘My view would be a service leaver is probably hard-wired to expect to work in a team environment’.

One of the main topics discussed was the degree to which teamwork is practised in military and civilian employment. It was felt employers of veterans would have strong team players. However, it was also observed this may lead some service leavers feeling lost if their new role does not focus heavily on team activity. This might be described as a ‘dependency’ service leavers need to overcome to become more autonomous when they enter the civilian workforce.

What this means: Many service leavers expect to both practice and be the recipient of deep leadership training. However, veterans who are accustomed to what may be a high level of supportive leadership report that they do not experience this to the same extent when they enter civilian work places.

5) Suitability for Civilian Roles: Perceptions of Service Leavers Fitting-In

One of the more challenging barriers was leavers' suitability for civilian roles. As a barrier to civilian employment this topic drew 6.08% of the dialogue. Although a wide range of programmes exist to support transitions, it was found employers face challenges providing specific resettlement packages. Most service leavers, for example, have very limited experience of profit and loss, even if they have made an effort to learn the skill. By contrast participants also spoke about capabilities they viewed as normal in military employment, not possessed by the general civilian population. As one said:

'One of the things that has really struck me, working with others, is the ability to do analysis, and plan and develop a project. It is not an inherent skill.'

What this means: It is worth considering that many veteran capabilities, such as project and programme management, are generic and translate well between different sectors and work contexts.

6) Putting on Your 'Game Face'; Confidence to Self-Promote

Despite the perception that service men and women are assertive and confident, civilian employment can be unnerving. The topic of confidence being a barrier comprised 6.08% of the dialogue, with there being fear of knowing how to promote oneself and going beyond comfort zones to start a second career. As one participant said:

'Talking about yourself, negotiating your salary or networking is quite, quite, scary'

What this means: The civilian approach to business, discussing one's own capabilities and negotiating better salaries can feel new for many service leavers. Members of the focus groups concluded their lack of confidence in self-promotion, negotiation and networking, coupled with a lack of knowledge about how transferable their own skills are, often leads to under-selling and potentially unsatisfactory jobs.

7) Help or Hindrance? The Challenge of Structural Barriers

Structural issues (resettlement arrangements and/or policy/functional elements), that are deemed to get in the way of transitioning made up 3.48% of the discussion. Focus groups highlighted the challenge and complexity of access to resettlement facilities using the military pay system. While all the contributors agreed that the MoD's Career Transition Partnership (CTP) is achieving its aims (and is an improvement on what came before), many still felt the most vulnerable leavers were less likely to get help.

8) Advantages of Military Experience

When discussing what gave military leavers an 'advantage' (2.77% of the dialogue), focus group members emphasised the investment in training given to Armed Forces personnel. Yet, many thought employers frequently overlooked this.

Participants also reported veterans' 'inherent loyalty' and ability to learn were key characteristics, especially in the context of rapidly changing military technology.

What this means: The common misconception that veterans lack the soft-skills that enable them to integrate and work well with others is a major challenge; Actually, the interpersonal skills service leavers have typically offer significant advantage to employers (Institute of Leadership & Management, 2018).

9) Friendly Forces; Structural Support Moving to Civilian Employment

Structural solutions and facilitators that act as enablers to transition only made up 0.23% of the focus group discussion. It was notable that participants felt solutions were limited to the resettlement process, and even though there was approval of the CTP, the level of bureaucracy required to access these services was deemed excessive.

Support for other Third Sector organisations (like the Officers' Association, Forces in Mind Trust, Salute My Job and many others) was also apparent. Contributors also recognised the 'conspicuous enthusiasm' of a number of trailblazer firms to employ veterans, through their signing of the Armed Forces Covenant (such as Jaguar Land Rover and Deloitte). Despite this, others felt some organisations appeared to be 'ticking boxes' rather than changing their cultures.

Due to the multiplicity of avenues there was a consensus that support services need to be better integrated. Similar recommendations have previously been made (Deloitte, 2016; and FiMT, 2016). Although this topic was short, there was considerable desire for better service leaver planning, to prepare personnel earlier for transitioning into the civilian workplace.

What this means: A clear case has been made for the better alignment and collation of information about resources available to support service leavers.

Conclusions

Former military employees make a huge contribution to the civilian workplace. But, our findings suggest service leavers are frequently not afforded opportunities to enter the civilian workforce at a level corresponding to their equivalent military skill sets. This not only limits people's individual capacity to leverage their skills, it limits corporate potential and ultimately UK productivity too.

Our research finds service leavers feel disadvantaged when entering the competitive civilian job market; moving from a world where they have defined training and skills, to cultures where they are competing to demonstrate their value and are having to 'self-promote' in order to gain appropriate employment. Another challenge is the frequent civilian perception of Armed Forces leavers being 'damaged goods'.

For this to change an approach building on existing programmes is needed. If done well it has the potential to improve the transition. This can be achieved through providing greater awareness amongst civilian employers of the opportunities and business case for employing veterans; through to modelling success through case studies in supportive organisations; and through addressing perceptions of military life and military service leavers. It is vitally important all military service leavers have the support they need at an individual level to transition into the civilian work place, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

Recommendations: What next?

- Greater integration between charities, contractors and organisations who already deliver support and 'hiring pipelines'.
- Curate the wealth of support available from different agencies to enable easier access to information and support. This should also include a glossary of 'military language' translated into 'business language'.

- Transition organisations should engage more widely with potential employers to address stigmatised perception of veterans and promote awareness, not only of their extensive transferable leadership and teamworking skills but also their propensity to learn new skills rapidly.
- Increased provision of support for younger leavers at lower ranks, and those with lower literacy and numerical skills Earlier engagement with the resettlement process for both service leavers and potential employing organisations.
- More attention given in the resettlement package to provide veterans with greater support in understanding the culture of civilian work places, and how their skills translate
- Encourage potential civilian employers to develop 'military pipelines' and be inquisitive about understanding what veterans have to offer through establishing communications with the MoD.
- More creative use of work placements and shadowing opportunities.
- Establish mentoring networks from the community of veterans who have transitioned successfully.

The Institute of Leadership & Management's Contribution:

- Curate resources from across the sector to provide a comprehensive tool kit for service leavers.
- Develop a LinkedIn group as a source for mentors and requests for advice.



Methodology

The research was undertaken using focus groups. The discussions followed a semi-structured design. Themes for discussion within the focus groups were iteratively developed among the research team, based on literary review and expert consultation.

Focus groups participants included representatives from all three military services, individuals who had left or were in the process of leaving military services and civilians with experience of employing service leavers. Participants were 25% female, 75% male, and the average age was 49 years.

Focus groups were moderated by Institute staff, recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were coded to top level themes and iteratively re-coded using emergent themes as they arose in the data.

Respondent's contributions were anonymised and identifiers were omitted from the transcripts. Research was undertaken in line with the Market Research Society (MRS) Code of Conduct.

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Published by the Institute of Leadership & Management June 2018 © The Institute of Leadership & Management

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