Let's Connect: Diversity, Inclusion and Career Development of Veterans Within the Civilian Workforce

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Abstract: Career transition can be stressful. This stress level is intensified for veterans who are transitioning between not only careers but also, what is perceived to be, transitioning between worlds, military world to the civilian world. Within a civilian workforce, veterans are often misunderstood and stigmatized, that results in misconceptions and misinterpretation regarding transfer of professional experience and training. Subsequently, creating employment challenges, exclusion, and minimal career development of veterans within the civilian workforce. On this premise, this theoretical paper, utilizing the workforce adjustment theory as an underpinning, discusses: (a) transitional challenges of veterans to the civilian workforce,(b) strategies for promoting diversity and inclusion of veterans, and (c) career development of veterans within the civilian workforce.

Keywords: transitional challenges, diversity, inclusion, career development, veterans

There has been a rapid increase in the number of veterans in the United States of America. As of 2018, there were approximately 18.2 million veterans in the United States of America, with an anticipated increase each year (The Department of Veterans Affairs Fast Facts, 2018). Stern (2017) projects that by the year 2020, more than five million veterans are expected to reintegrate into the community and, by extension, the civilian workforce. Stern (2017) also suggest that veterans' connections to the labor force, which in this instance is a civilian labor force, affords the quickest opportunity for transition. However, veterans, in comparison to their civilian counterparts, encounter a multiplicity of transitional challenges that can impede or limit their employment opportunities within the civilian sector. Holland, Malott, and Currier (2014) echoed this sentiment and concluded that veterans often battle stressors as they attempt to gain marketable skills required by employers. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) report (2015), 53% of veterans separating post 9/11 encounter unemployment when initially discharged from the military. To secure what is considered suitable employment by the veteran after separating from the military often requires time and a great effort on the part of the veteran (Loughran, 2014). To counteract this unemployment and in an effort to better equip themselves for the civilian workforce, veterans often utilize higher education as a transitional tool (Hunter-Johnson, 2018). This coupled with transitional programs, whether extended by the military, federal, or at the state level, provides an opportunity for a smoother transition of veterans. However, veterans still encounter transitional challenges when seeking employment within the civilian workforce despite such personal initiatives but encounter negative stereotypes, misconceptions, exclusion by potential employers and colleagues. On this premise, the purpose of this paper is three-fold. First, the paper will discuss the challenges that veterans encounter when transitioning from the military to the civilian workforce. Second, it will suggest strategies

and best practices that can be adapted by Human Resource Development (HRD) Specialists within the civilian workforce, specifically regarding veterans. Third, it will suggest best practices and strategies that can be adhered to by HRD specialists with the career development of veterans. The theoretical framework that serves as the foundational platform for this paper is the theory of work adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984). This paper is significant because it addresses the gap in the literature as it relates transitional strategies of veterans, a marginalized group. It also provides strategies that can be considered to promote diversity and inclusion of veterans within the civilian workforce. Further, it not only complements the literature regarding career development of veterans but also provides insight that can be adopted by HRD professionals within civilian organizations that can possibly positively contribute to recruitment, retention, satisfaction, and engagement of veterans within a civilian workforce.

Theory of Work Adjustment

There are several career development theories that have been introduced over the past years. These theories were the lens by which researchers have been able to navigate their studies. Researchers have identified several theoretical frameworks to utilize, among which are social-cognitive career theory (Bandura, 1986), career construction Savickas (1997), the theory of work adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984), life-span life-space theory career theory (Super, 1984), and much more. Each of these theories has been utilized depending on the scope and purpose of research. As the world is an ever-changing work, it is critical for researchers, scholars, and practitioners to understand the difference in career development theories, when, and how to apply such theories. On this premise, the theory of work adjustment (TWA) is utilized as the underpinning for this paper. Originally developed by Dawis and Lofquist (1984), TWA's intent was for vocational rehabilitation, but its application has been widely used in adults' career decisions and work adjustments (Woods et al., 2019). Taking into consideration there is a constant transition of employees between careers; it is paramount for employers to develop mechanisms by which there is a smooth adjustment process. This is especially critical for employees who serve in the public sector for a long period of time and then transition to the private sector. Hence, within this paper, veterans transitioning from the military to the civilian workforce. Such a transition would often result in an array of challenges. Such transitional challenges should be taken into consideration by HRD professionals with the view of providing the relevant support systems as an underpinning for adjustment to the workforce. The TWA can assist with comprehending such challenges that veterans encounter when transiting to the civilian workforce as it describes the relationship between individuals and their work environment (Dawis, 2005). Although the professional duties and responsibilities differ within the military, the skillset of veterans in most instances are transferable to the civilian workforce with a level of adjustment to the new work environment. The TWA further explains that individuals and work environments are considered complementary to one another, which is critical not only as it relates to institutional diversity and inclusion but also the career development of employees. Within the assumptions of TWA, a high level of correspondence means that individual and work environment continue to be each other's needs to ensure satisfaction.

Background

Transitional Challenges of Veterans

One of the greatest challenges veterans encounter is securing employment after separating from the military (Hunter-Johnson, 2020). This challenge is to intensify if the veteran received a dishonorable discharge, which would result in them being ineligible for benefits and access to Veteran Affairs (Collins, 2012). Transitional challenges for veterans from the military to the civilian workforce can be attributed to a multiplicity of factors. For example, limited experience and professional development prior to and while enlisted in the military. Clemens and Milsom (2008) state that those individuals who may have enlisted into the military only equipped with a high school diploma, not required to earn a college degree for professional advancement (promotions) within the military, and their work experience within the military is limited to their respective branch or unit creates a greater hurdle for transitioning careers. Such individuals may be considered as not being adequately prepared with the necessary skillset and transferable professional experience to transition to their career of choice.

Physical, psychological, and health challenges is another major factor that contribute to and or minimize employment opportunities for veterans when transitioning from the military to the civilian workforce (Faberman & Foster, 2013). Such physical and mental challenges include but are not limited to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Kukla et al., 2015), mental and medical challenges and substance abuse problems (Humensky et al., 2013). There are some instances when employers are of the belief that such challenges can be an institutional financial drain and negatively impact performance and productivity of veterans within the civilian workplace (Kleylamp, 2013; Rudstam et al., 2012).

Negative stereotypes and misconceptions also serve as an underlying inhibitor specific to veterans transitioning to the civilian workforce. This particular challenge can be explored through the lens of both the potential employer and the veteran as a potential employee. According to Davis and Minnis (2017), there is a misconception of employers that veteran employees exhibit traits of inflexibility or rigidity while veterans struggle to demonstrate their skill set to their employers. Minnis (2017) further elaborated that there is a misconception regarding the training and experiences veterans would have received while in the military. Even further, the inability and/or challenge to interpret the training and experiences of veterans when presented on a resume.' This often serves as a barrier as it relates to HRD professionals when presenting innovative strategies and a work environment that lends to transfer of training, strategic career development, engagement, and diversity and inclusion initiatives. It also serves as a barrier for the recruitment of veterans to the civilian workforce. Specifically, at an institutional level, negative stereotypes pertaining to veterans often result in exclusion and non-acceptance of veterans, whether intentional or nonintentional, by colleagues.

From the veteran perspective, it is often a challenge for veterans to effectively communicate and/or articulate skills, qualifications, and experiences obtained in the military to their resume' in a manner that can be effectively understood by their potential employers (Sargent, 2014; Hunter-Johnson, 2020). This not only serves as a barrier to the recruitment and selection process but, if

successful at that stage, can impose a challenge as it relates to transfer of training, diversity and inclusion, and career development of veterans.

Strategies for Promoting Diversity and Inclusion of Veterans

Within recent years, there has been an increase in the literature as it relates to diversity and inclusion. However, there is still an evident gap as it relates to the literature on diversity and inclusion of veterans to the civilian workforce (Hunter-Johnson, 2020). Organizations opting to focus on diversity management can yield a vast amount of institutional benefits. Such benefits can include, but are not limited to, competitive advantage (Foster & Harris, 2014), creativity (Abaker et al., 2019), and a diverse employee pool (Hunter-Johnson, 2020). Veterans as potential employees are unique individuals who are often equipped with a distinctive skill set, leadership abilities, team concept, disciplined, and who, once properly utilized can create a competitive advantage. Utilizing such benefits as an underpinning, it is critical that organizations focus on diversity and inclusion initiatives specifically regarding veterans. There is often an underlying perception that diversity and inclusion are one and the same and there is no distinct difference. However, as stated by Sherbin and Rashid (2017), "In the context of the workplace, diversity equals representation. Without inclusion, however, the crucial connections that attract diverse talent, encourage their participation, foster innovation, and lead to business growth won't happen" (p.2). Sherbin and Rashid (2017) further eluded to the fact that organizations focusing on diversity but do not inform or promote inclusion, and the elimination of inclusion often results in a diversity backlash. Utilizing this information as a foundational platform, the following strategies are suggested for promoting inclusion and diversity of veterans within the civilian workforce.

First, recruitment and selection process should reflect an organization that promotes diversity and inclusion of veterans. This should be represented in the articulation of vacancy notices, during the interview process and organization marketed as one that promotes diversity and inclusion of veterans. After the selection process of veterans, institutions should ensure that employee socialization and orientation process; employee-related programs such as mentoring, counselling and wellness; career development practices all reflect an organization that is promoting diversity and inclusion (Hunter-Johnson, 2020)

Second, an organization representing inclusive leadership is indicative of an organization promoting diversity and inclusion. According to Sherbin and Rashid (2017), inclusive leadership "…is a conglomeration of six behaviors: ensuring that team members speak up and are heard; making it safe to propose novel ideas; empowering team members to make decisions; taking advice and implementing feedback; giving actionable feedback; and sharing credit for team success" (p.3). This type of environment can be demonstrated within the workplace with a focus to include veterans by ensuring that the work environment is one that lends to these expected leadership behaviors. To ensure institutional leaders demonstrate such behaviors, it is paramount that HRD professionals provide adequate training and development of leaders at all levels. There should be provisions for feedback and/or evaluation of leadership in this regard on a continuous basis. Additionally, institutional policies and practices should reflect diversity and inclusion.

Strategies for Promoting Career Development of Veterans

Career development is a distinct concept that refers to the process in which employees and employers work together to develop certain goals to help employees develop their skills (Zacher et al., 2019). Specifically, regarding the career development of veterans, there is a paucity of research aimed at helping veterans' career development needs (Robertson & Hayden, 2018). Veterans have unique and rich experiences, that if utilized and tailored according to the needs of organizations, can have a positive impact. While veterans often are thanked for their service, remembered for the sacrifices they made, and regarded as heroes, organizations must develop strategies to accommodate this segment within the population. This is especially for organizations that want to classify as military-friendly organizations (Kirchner & Minnis, 2018). It is also critical for organizations that promote social responsibilities to do their part and provide the tools needed to help veterans. Some of the initiatives that organizations can include can be veterans' preferences for hiring, training, development for new skillsets, and working hours that meet their needs. Career development practitioners working with veterans need to be provided with the tools to help this population of the workforce to achieve career development goals.

Training and development initiatives. Organizations need to encourage potential veteran employees to self-identify and define the skills that they wish to possess as part of the hiring process if they wish to develop themselves within an organization. Once the skills are identified, then organizations can provide training which can be part of their career development plan. Employees can then match the veterans' skills with potential job opportunities to provide the training and development skills to these veterans. The alignment with the skills needed by the organization and veterans is critical for both. The theory of work adjustment has several assumptions; among them, Dawis and Lofquist (1984) explain employees and employers need to work together to meet each other's needs. Meeting each other's needs builds good rapport and help present the organization as a military-friendly and socially responsible organization.

Mentor program. A mentor can help veterans bridge the gap between their skillsets and the organizational skills needed (Hunter-Johnson, 2020). Also, it can assist veterans to understand organizational culture, which can be vastly different. A mentoring program can contribute to the career development of veterans. This can be accomplished by conducting a self-assessment of the skills that a veteran has and the needed skills by an organization to align a mentor who can best guide for career development. A mentoring program also provides networking opportunities for veteran employees. The benefit of a mentoring program can be vast, which includes easing transiting into a new career, enhancing skills, finding new ways to complete certain tasks, reducing turnover, and other benefits (Kirchner & Minnis, 2018). Within the organizational mentoring program, organizations can use previously hired veterans to mentor new employees as they are well-informed from their past experiences of the challenges and hurdles that new veterans face. Taking this into consideration, organizations can develop a team of veterans that can help create strategies to address the needs and career development of themselves and newly hired veterans. This can allow career development plans to grow organically from within the organizations.

Conclusion

While it is paramount for most organizations to meet the needs of its shareholders, it is also critical to strive to meet the needs of its stakeholders. Giving back to the community not only provides a good reputation for an organization but makes it an inviting place to work. Veterans are viewed as heroes. As such, individuals have respect for organizations that honor them. Hiring, training, developing, and promoting the inclusion of veterans can be extremely advantageous to an organization (Hunter-Johnson, 2020). The career development and promotion of diversity and inclusion initiatives for veterans with the view of promoting retention, satisfaction, and engagement of veterans can result in both internal and external organizational rewards.

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