



Career Track

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After the Military, Courage and Readiness Count as Much as Ever

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Angela Kyprianou is leaving the Navy in a few weeks.

After that? Who knows.

"I'm looking to transfer into government, preferably law enforcement," said Kyprianou, 28. A former pilot, she's now looking to put her criminal justice degree to use with a federal agency. She lives in Alexandria and would prefer to stay in the Washington area, where she's working on a master's degree in public policy.

It's a common scenario for young servicemen and -women these days. Even as the war in Iraq strains some parts of the military, other jobs are being cut by "reductions in force" (a.k.a. downsizing).

Whether the exit is long-planned or unexpected, the transition into civilian life isn't easy, even with help from the military's Transition Assistance Program (TAP).

"Once they get out, they do great," said Malcolm Munro, a career coach in Germantown who leads regular TAP seminars at Fort Meade and the Washington Navy Yard. "The biggest hurdle is their confidence."

"They wonder if their skills will be relevant on the outside. In many ways, [being in the military] is like speaking another language. The switch is harder the longer they've been in," he said.

Kyprianou said her biggest fear is not being able to find a job and just sitting around with nothing to do. "I seriously do not want to have to move back in with my folks," she said.

Of course, she probably won't have to. Even though she might feel as if she is out of touch, she is actually well positioned compared with many of her peers who didn't serve. "They need to understand that their skills are in demand," said Shaun Bradley, chief

executive of Bradley-Morris Inc., the largest military-focused placement firm in the United States. "Our company is successful because our product is so good."

But it doesn't help that much of what's considered basic for career planning and job hunting in the private sector is meaningless in the military.

Such as résumés. "I never had one," Kyprianou said. "And I had absolutely no clue what was supposed to be in it." She has one now, thanks to some help from family members, TAP, books and a recruiter, but it took her more than a month to pull it together.

Job interviews can also be stressful. Applicants need to be able to translate what they have been doing in the military into language a civilian hiring manager can understand.

That takes practice, Bradley said. Do all the practice interviews you can, he advised. "Don't just read the books."

Salary negotiations can also be tricky. If someone joined the military right out of school, there's a good chance he has never had to make the case for a raise, much less know how to get a fair wage from the start. When you're in the service, if you want to remind yourself what you make, you simply pull up a chart. And that number is determined by job, rank and time served.

Obviously, it's different on the outside. Many servicemen and -women "are amazed that two people are doing the same job but for different pay," Munro said.

The biggest problem, though, is figuring out what they want to do when they leave. "People think what they did in the service is what they are qualified to do on the outside," said Bradley, a U.S. Naval Academy graduate. That's not necessarily true. For one, many military jobs have no equivalent in civilian life. You're not likely to find an ad on Monster or Washingtonjobs.com for a torpedo technician.

So transitioning servicemen and -women have to be careful not to limit their scope when thinking about options. Without realizing it, Bradley said, they bring a lot of traits to the table that employers want, including their work ethic, cultural sensitivity and leadership skills.

Munro, the career coach, certainly knows how big that disconnect can be after his 15 years in the Navy. His military job? Dental assistant.

Another key element of a good transition is networking, said Deborah Frett, chief executive of Business and Professional Women/USA.

To that end, her organization created a Women Joining Forces program last year to help female veterans transition to civilian life, with advice on the basics (résumés, interviews, dress codes) as well as support through mentoring.

Kyprianou is in good shape now, with prospects lined up, but she wishes she had started planning months sooner, and she advises her peers in the service to do the same. "Put your résumé together early, then update it as needed." Take advantage of TAP classes and other resources as early as you can, she said.

Munro agreed, but took her advice several steps further. "The day you step off the bus at boot camp is the day you need to think about what you're doing to do when you leave."

Join Mary Ellen Slayter for Career Track Live, an online discussion of issues affecting young workers, at 2 p.m. tomorrow at <http://www.washingtonpost.com>.