

Career Couch

From the Armed Forces to the Work Force

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN

Q. After several years of military service, you are making the transition back to the civilian world. You need to find a job, despite the weak economy. Will your military experience help you?



A. In most cases, it is seen as an asset. In fact, new veterans have more opportunities now than they had two years ago, when the economy was stronger, said Mark Whalls, co-director of the military division of Kaye/Bassman, an executive recruiting firm in Plano, Tex.

“We can’t keep up with the demand, especially in energy, mining, medical device sales, private aviation and the semiconductor industry,” he said.

That’s because more companies now see the value of military experience, in terms of skills training, work ethic and culture, which stresses teamwork, loyalty and integrity, said Stephen Norred, co-director of the division with Mr. Whalls.

Q. Do you need to look for jobs that are closely related to the kinds of work you did in the military?

A. It would be a mistake to limit your search to industries like law enforcement or military contracting, said Tom

Aiello, vice president of Military.com, a job board for veterans. “I left the Army in 1997 and was a combat engineer; I went into advertising,” he said.

The fact that you drove a tank or carried a weapon shouldn’t define your civilian career. So keep an open mind and think of your skills — aircraft repair, electronics, project management — rather than your military job title, said Craig Griffin, a principal at Bradley-Morris (www.Bradley-Morris.com), a recruiting firm based in Atlanta that specializes in placing veterans.

Q. How do you translate your military experience into terms that executives and hiring managers can understand?

A. Skills translation is the biggest challenge that new veterans face, Mr. Aiello said. Some employers and recruiters have never known anyone with a military background, and don't understand what those experiences and skills mean in the civilian world. And military personnel may not know some terms that are now used in résumés.

Several online skills translators are available to veterans, including those on Military.com, HireAHero.org and TAOnline.com, that match your military experience, education and training with corresponding civilian occupations and skills.

It's important to quantify your experience and to be specific, Mr. Whalls said. Rather than describing your role as simply "logistics" or "maintenance," provide details, like "insured over 95 percent maintenance readiness of unit's operating equipment totaling over \$22 million, despite reduced staff," he said.

Emphasize your less-quantifiable skills, too. In a 2007 survey of corporate recruiters by Military.com, asking why they hired those who had served in the military, half cited tangible skills and half cited less-tangible traits like loyalty and integrity.

Q. What are some other job boards specifically for veterans?

A. There are many, including RecruitMilitary.com, HireVetsFirst.gov, VetJobs.com and MilitaryHire.com. The Riley Guide (rileyguide.com/vets.html) has a sizable list of job boards and other online career resources for veterans. Several sites, like Military.com and TAOnline.com, also list job fairs nationwide.

Q. Should you work with a recruiter?

A. If you need help, yes. Eighty-one percent of returning military personnel surveyed last fall by Military.com said they did not feel fully prepared to enter the job market.

A recruiter acts as a career coach — helping you to write a résumé, to prepare for interviews and to focus a job search. Although any reputable recruiter can help you, recruiters specializing in placing those returning from the military work with companies that are specifically interested in hiring veterans.

Mr. Griffin said Bradley-Morris represents more than 4,000 companies and organizes nearly 100 invitation-only hiring events, where candidates are paired with companies for interviews.

The Lucas Group, an executive recruitment firm based in Atlanta and the owner of TAOnline, has a military transition division that placed more than 1,200 military veterans last year; it now works with more than 500 companies. The firm will host 49 military hiring conferences this year.

Q. You have little experience with corporate interviews. How should you prepare?

A. Research the company, including its mission, history and competitors. Know the description of the job you're seeking, and think about how your skills and experiences match that description.

“A lot of companies struggle because they interview a candidate and they know he can do it, but they can’t pull the information out of him,” Mr. Whalls said. Steer clear of military jargon and don’t say “yes, ma’am” and “yes, sir,” because doing so can make you seem rigid and inflexible.

Finally, prepare a list of 10 questions to ask at the end of the interview, Mr. Whalls said. Of course, you may actually be asking only about two, since many will be answered during the conversation. “Asking no questions is seen as a lack of interest,” Mr. Whalls said. But don’t ask about benefits, money or perks. Those issues should be addressed when an offer is made, he said, not during an initial interview.

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