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Career Coach: Atten-hut! Here's how to make the transition to civilian life

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REUTERS/Lucy Nicholson/Files

Recently, I had the pleasure of talking to one of our Robert H. Smith School MBA alums, Christina Nichols, who had received a presidential commendation for her work linking members of the military to job opportunities. As a senior technical advisor to the government contracting firm ManTech, her team was able to link military job applicants to jobs in the solar energy field. In fact, she said, the effort was so successful that the military candidates wound up with numerous job offers.

As the Chief Executive George Pedersen so aptly noted on the company's Website, "Fifty percent of our employees have a military background. The soldier of today is among the most sophisticated warriors the nation has ever had. The technology that they operate and utilize in their missions requires a level of knowledge and training beyond earlier times. Service members also have qualities that we need in the workplace—qualities like responsibility, dedication to mission, perseverance, integrity, teamwork, and of course, leadership. We can teach skills on the job or in a classroom, but character is harder to come by."

There are also other companies in the local area that provide needed assistance to help military personnel transition to civilian jobs. In addition, there are several agencies that rank U.S. firms in terms of how well they help the military find jobs. U.S. Veterans Magazine routinely polls hundreds of Fortune 1000 companies for its annual Best of the Best evaluations. The annual review is an evaluation of the nation's employers, initiatives, government agencies and educational institutions. The magazine's research contains helpful resources for jobseekers, business owners, students,

consumers, senior management, employment agencies, among others. consumers, senior management, employment agencies, among others.

Similarly, the CivilianJobs.Com group does a comparable thing. Some of the top rated companies in our geographic area and nearby include: 3M, Aerotek, Amazon, BAE, Booz Allen, Capital One, CSC, CSX, Deloitte Federal, Exelon, General Electric, General Motors, Intel, KPMG, Lockheed Martin, ManTech International, Northrop Grumman, PepsiCo, Pricewaterhouse Coopers, Coca-Cola, Home Depot, USAA, Walmart, among others.

Seeing the progress that has been made to help the military is fantastic, yet, despite the improvements that have been made, some employers still lack a good understanding of how the leadership and management skills of the military apply to the commercial world. I certainly hear that from many military folks who are job hunting. Many employers just don't "understand the transferable skills we can bring to the organization," one told me.

Some employers struggle to figure out exactly what the military person did while serving and how that translates to business today. They may even have distorted or inaccurate perceptions about the military.

So, what can individuals do? Here are some tips for transitioning out of the military:

- First, start your move well before you're leaving the service. Don't wait until you have gotten out of the service to be thinking about these issues. The services themselves provide a good first step, through the Transition Assistance Program, or TAP. TAP, a joint program of the Department of Defense, Department of Labor and Department of Veterans Affairs, offers classes and career counseling for service members who are preparing to leave the military.
- Involve your family. Make sure they are part of the discussions and decision-making.
- Use this time to fill any gaps in your military record while it's still free to get training. Look for training opportunities, certifications or educational degrees. At the Smith School, we are pleased to have Yellow Ribbon status, meaning the Veterans Administration may help fund or partially fund tuition costs.
- Research to see what jobs are out there. Talk to folks in the jobs you are interested in. Ideally, you would like to have a job lined up as you are leaving the military.
- **Check out information on the Web. Resources can be found at civilianjobs.com, military.com, corporategray.com, militarycareers.org,**
- Find a mentor to provide the career-related and psychosocial support you need. If you find someone who has successfully transitioned to the civilian world, ask them for advice. They probably have some great insights for you. Make sure to have multiple mentors at varying levels in the organizations you are interested in. In addition, be sure to get a sponsor, not just a mentor. Sponsors are critical for advocating for you to move you into various leadership positions, while mentors often provide the needed psychological support.
- Network, network, and network!

Remember, a job search is just like any other mission. You know how to do it, you have your orders. So, as many would say "Move out, and make great things happen"!