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# NAVIGATING THE MILITARY TRANSITION



# INTRODUCTION

The process of transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce is difficult, stressful, and confusing. This observation is based on two decades of coaching service members along with thousands of interviews and survey responses. Despite formal transition programs, service members underestimate the challenges of transition and remain underprepared. This guide aims to help today's military understand what's ahead, so they can navigate the unknown and excel in their post-military career.

**The decision to separate or retire is personal, but the challenges of becoming a civilian again are universal. Research with veterans highlights three facts:**

1. **Everyone will transition**
2. **You are responsible for what's next**
3. **Planning should begin as early as possible**

Every member has different aspirations and experiences, so there's no single best solution. However, research shows there are consistent best practices. This guide is divided into five parts, and each will focus on one best practice:

- **Start Early**
- **Develop a Plan**
- **Build Your Network**
- **Translate Your Skills and Experience**
- **Be Patient and Persistent**

Let's begin with the first best practice, starting early.



# BEST PRACTICE 1: START EARLY

This might seem obvious, but the unfortunate truth is that many veterans wait until the last minute to start preparing. They know a change is coming but don't realize the magnitude. The simple fact is that transitioning requires time, and the sooner you begin, the more likely you'll develop realistic and achievable goals.

**59%** of veterans say their transition took more time than expected.

source: [www.military-transition.org/dashboard](http://www.military-transition.org/dashboard)

There are consistent reasons members use to justify putting this off until it's almost too late. You can read about these in our previous eBooks, along with ways to overcome these convenient excuses. [www.military-transition.org/ebooks](http://www.military-transition.org/ebooks)

Some have the perception that troops are better trained and more capable than their civilian counterparts. This can result in veterans thinking they just need to send in a resume and a position comparable to their current responsibilities will be attained. They are often told that military members are "America's Best," leading them to believe companies are eager to hire them. Overconfidence reinforces this perception and further delays preparation.

Another fact many overlook is that decisions made while serving can impact future options. This should be taken into consideration when thinking about military career tracks, assignments, and training.

*Veterans often describe the transition process as if they were entering an unknown land. Our research highlights three categories of transitioning service members.*

## CATEGORY 1

**This group enters the complete unknown.**

They are totally unprepared and are generally unaware of their lack of preparation. Imagine waking up in the middle of the night in a foreign land where you don't speak the language, without clothing, water, or anything to help you navigate to safety. We call this situation the transition ambush, and it's the worst-case scenario. These veterans are more likely to consider harmful behaviors as a way to escape. Those who survive the ambush live with career, family, or financial wounds that could have been avoided.

## CATEGORY 2

**This group enters the relative unknown.**

They have prior awareness of what's ahead, combined with an understanding of their marketable skills. In this scenario, you wake up in a foreign land, knowing some of the language and terrain, as well as having clothing and gear. The majority of service members fall into this group, and the level of unknown is a direct reflection of their preparation. Post-military satisfaction among this group is higher compared to the first.

## CATEGORY 3

**This group enters the unfamiliar.**

They have specific skills and connections that allow them to avoid the unknown. In this scenario, you wake up in a nearby city where you speak the language and have adequate resources. A friend awaits your arrival and escorts you to a desirable location. Members of this group often have in-demand skills (pilots, engineers, medical/technical/acquisition professionals, or those with unique clearances). This group benefits greatly by leveraging a strong and established network.

24%

45%

31%

*For the majority of veterans, the lesson is clear: preparation and networking reduce the unknown.*



Another fact to consider is that informed decisions are better than uninformed decisions. The more you know about an issue, the better prepared you are to make decisions. This same concept holds true for career and life planning. Prior to entering the military, you were thinking about long-term options. For some, this led to college and a commission. For others, it led to visiting a recruiter, followed by boot camp. Before their first day in uniform, service members learned about career opportunities. The intent now is to think about life after serving as soon as possible. This isn't easy, but you're only cheating yourself by not getting started.

An easy step is to sign up for the mandatory transition class. These programs should be completed as early as possible, but preparation must go further. A concern expressed by some after attending is that there's too much information in such a short period. Another is that course materials don't account for varied experience levels and career aspirations. A final concern is that instructors have limited private sector experience. All of these are valid and reinforce the need to take ownership of your future. The last concern highlights the need to check the source of information. Well intentioned individuals and self-proclaimed experts are everywhere. Their intentions are noble, but some lessons don't scale to the larger military community. The lesson is simple but critical to success: invest the time and do your homework!

Once the decision has been made, the transition should be your top priority. Don't rely on others to define or derail your future. And don't feel guilty about preparing for what's next. Every member will eventually transition, and the military needs you to be successful. The next best practice on this journey is to have a plan.

## BEST PRACTICE 2: HAVE A PLAN

Now that you understand the importance of starting early, the next step is to develop a plan with objectives and timelines. The plan should evolve as you progress, but having an initial roadmap is critical.

*You can't hit a target that doesn't exist.*

We recommend journaling as a planning tool that helps you gain clarity on issues and explore solutions. Invest in a notebook and be honest as you explore ideas and paths.

Please read our eBooks about PLANNING and AFTER the military transition. Both have useful exercises that can help you get started. Remember, you are responsible for your transition, and failure to plan is planning to fail.

Here are a few elements that should be part of your plan:

### **1. Self-Understanding:**

Knowing yourself is fundamental to a smooth and successful transition. Think about what you've done previously, what you enjoy, what you don't enjoy, times that you were successful, and times when you weren't. This process takes time, so don't rush through.

### **2. Career goals:**

Think deeply about this topic and don't limit ideas to your military specialty or duties. Ask others to participate as you gather insights and explore the three paths available for your next career:



**Path 1: Education** – School or training to improve career options or salary. This should be viewed as a temporary route that leads to employment or entrepreneurship.

**Path 2: Employment** – Working for someone else.

**Path 3: Entrepreneurship** – Working for yourself.

### 3. Family Considerations:

Location, educational opportunities, proximity to friends and relatives, cost of living, weather, medical care, and existing health conditions have an impact on your quality of life. These items should be discussed with your family as part of the planning process.

### 4. Identify Actions and Pathways:

Once you know yourself and what you want next, along with family preferences, you are ready to identify specific actions and pathways to achieve your goals. Be sure to write these in your journal.

### 5. Establish a Timeline with Milestones:

Identify waypoints within your plan, put these on the calendar, and hold yourself accountable.

Many transition tasks should be executed concurrently, and will shape how your plan evolves. This is a natural part of planning, so don't be afraid to make positive adjustments.

*Transition planning should be your top priority.*

Ask questions, learn, and explore options during the process. One of the best ways to accomplish this is by building your network, which is the next best practice.

## **BEST PRACTICE 3:** **BUILD YOUR NETWORK**

Research with veterans shows that networking is the most recommended aspect of a successful transition. Unfortunately, many in uniform don't learn how to effectively network until late in their transition, or until they've already started a new career in the civilian workforce. Networking and building strong professional connections will set the foundation for your next career. This best practice is all about building a strong network before taking off the uniform and continuing to expand after the transition.

Networking is a key aspect of professional development, both inside and outside the military. However, many veterans view it merely as asking others for help.

At its core, networking is about building relationships of trust and mutual benefit. It requires effort from both parties and leads to benefits for everyone. One person might benefit today and another tomorrow, but everyone benefits in the long run. Networking starts with a connection. Trust is then built upon that connection. After this, parties can assist each other and collaborate personally and professionally.

Networking is a skill that requires you to invest time with the intent of helping others, not just yourself. An important rule of thumb is that you only get out what you put in.

In today's job market, you need to stand out from the competition. The most effective way to do this is by having some type of connection or affiliation with the hiring manager, or someone they trust, before the decision is made. It's simple yet scientific—people tend to hire others they like, trust, and have a positive connection with.

Prior to the transition, veterans need to understand the difference between the open and hidden job markets.





## Open Job Market

The open job market is when positions are publicly advertised to candidates both inside and outside the company. Applications are thoroughly reviewed, and those who meet the pre-determined criteria are merged into a selection pool for the hiring manager's consideration.

In this situation, the competition appears to be open and fair. Unfortunately, many organizations advertise positions they already have someone identified to fill. In addition, some job advertisements remain visible long after the position is filled, and further applicants aren't considered.

The bottom line is clear - this approach generates false expectations and is often a waste of time.

A good rule of thumb is to never assume an organization will hire based on a posting that invites applications.

## Hidden Job Market

The hidden job market is how most positions are filled in the civilian workforce, but these positions aren't always advertised. Most companies always have openings and are constantly looking for talent to hire, but only those on the inside know what opportunities are available.

Employers source talent in five ways, and personal connections (networks) are often the deciding factor.

We can't emphasize enough the importance of knowing how to leverage your network and recommend reading more about this in our NETWORKING eBook.

SkillBridge is a great way to expand your network outside the military and should be considered when developing your transition plan. In addition, we highly endorse finding mentors through ACP (American Corporate Partners).

Your network can assist with many aspects of the transition, specifically how to translate your skills and experience.

## BEST PRACTICE 4: TRANSLATE YOUR SKILLS & EXPERIENCE

Research shows that learning how to translate military skills and experience can be difficult and time-consuming. It's one of the most challenging aspects of a successful transition. The intent is to show employers the value you bring to their organization, so they'll want you on their team.

The unfortunate truth is that many organizations don't understand the military, so they prioritize hiring talent through other sources. These companies don't invest the time or train their recruiters to understand what it means to serve or how military experience brings value. In this situation, the burden falls on service members to demonstrate their value in ways companies understand. This is what translating your skills and experience really means. When translating skills, you should focus on language, alignment, and clarity.

### **Language:**

Using military terms and acronyms is like speaking a foreign language to employers. It confuses them and decreases the likelihood of success. The earlier you begin using civilian language, both written and verbal, the better. Ask your network to help develop ways to explain your skills and experiences to those who have never served. Remove acronyms, jargon, and phrases that confuse and speak in terms hiring managers understand. Start practicing this new language today.

### **Alignment and Clarity:**

Communications with employers should demonstrate how your skills and experience align with their needs. To do this, you must understand the position along with the skills and experience required. After this, focus on how you will use these to deliver value. One of the best ways to discuss relevant skills, experiences, and accomplishments is by telling stories.



Make these short and interesting. Provide the context so they understand, highlight the actions you took, and emphasize the positive outcomes.

Focus on your actions and the result, and avoid talking about “the team.” Employers are interested in hiring you, not your team, so learn how to talk about yourself in ways that are clear and align with the employer’s needs.

One of the best ways to address the challenge of communicating with employers is to ask your network to help you prepare for written and in-person exchanges.

### **Written:**

Resumes are a big part of the hiring process, but there are additional ways to share written content such as cover letters, applications, LinkedIn profiles, and emails. Ask someone to review your resume and other correspondence before sending. A quick review is always helpful and can pay dividends. Understand that inconsistencies between your resume and online profiles may generate red flags that impact your credibility, so double-check these items.

### **In-person:**

Resumes get you invited, and interviews get you hired. After submitting your resume, always be ready to meet or speak with an employer. Another important lesson is to practice what you’ll say beforehand. With the help of your network, create talking points for each position along with relevant and interesting stories.

Next, you should practice by speaking to yourself in the mirror and then listening to the recording. Once the flow is smooth, ask someone else to listen and provide feedback. Do this until all key messages are clear and smooth.

The ultimate goal is to ensure your next career is both rewarding and successful. Our next best practice is specifically focused on this outcome.

## BEST PRACTICE 5: BE PATIENT AND PERSISTENT

Becoming a mission-ready warrior didn't happen overnight. It required time and effort. The goal of becoming a high-performing civilian will require the same level of commitment. Don't get discouraged or distracted when challenges occur. Here are some lessons to assist:

### 1. Interact

- Civilian employers don't always make the process easy. Many don't respond in a timely manner, and some don't respond at all. Don't take this personally. When conducting follow-up actions, be persistent but don't become a pain.
- Understand that you might take a step back to take a leap forward. You have the skills and experience to be successful and just need to learn the culture and language. After this, you're unstoppable!

### 2. Recover

- Preparing for retirement or separation events, training your replacement, and household moves can be exhausting. Budget time for recovery so that you enter your next career fresh and ready to learn and contribute.
- Take care of your physical, mental, and emotional health. Establish positive routines and ensure post-military freedoms don't become a curse.

### 3. Adapt

- Determining who you want to be after serving. No one cares that you were a Sergeant Major, Colonel, or Chief. They only care who you are now, so be purposeful when determining your new identity.
- No one owes you anything. Companies only hire veterans because they contribute to the bottom line. Your status is irrelevant if you can't perform the duties required. Learn how to add value and make yourself indispensable.



A technique we recommend you begin now and continue throughout your civilian career is to learn from others through informational interviews. Think of these as focused career discussions rather than traditional interviews aimed at securing a position. These are generally in-person meetings to discuss career experiences, lessons, and advice.

You can also meet virtually, but in-person meetings are generally more effective. Invite someone to have coffee or lunch, and ask them questions about their career, industry, role, education, training, organization, and general thoughts or advice to help you grow.

Do your homework before attending, so you don't waste anyone's time. These are only for you to learn, so please don't ask the other person for a job. However, if they introduce the topic, then you're safe to discuss it.

These sessions can also lead to introductions or follow-on conversations with others that have useful insights or access to roles of interest. After the session, send a handwritten thank you note or email. Also, be sure to accomplish anything you committed to during the session.

## **CLOSING COMMENTS:**

This guidebook discussed five transition best practices based on two decades of working with service members, veterans, and families. These can be used as a template to better understand and navigate the journey from military service to the civilian workforce.

The next page includes additional eBooks and resources. Everything shown is free to download, and we encourage you to discuss these with mentors as you plan and execute your transition. Remember, it's your transition and your future, so take charge and make it what you want it to be!

# FREE RESOURCES



## eBooks:

<https://www.military-transition.org/ebooks.html>

- TRUTHS about the Military Transition
- WINNING the Employment Game
- CHALLENGES of the Military Transition
- MISTAKES in the Military Transition
- NETWORKING for the Military Transition
- PLANNING for the Military Transition
- AFTER the Military Transition

## Interactive Data:

<https://www.military-transition.org/dashboard.html>

## White Papers:

<https://www.military-transition.org/downloads.html>

- Resume Advice
- Interview Prep
- Career Fair Lessons
- Hiring Manager Insights
- And more....



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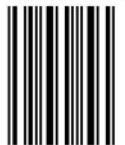
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ISBN 979-8-9855362-7-0



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