

MILITARY-TRANSITION.ORG

# MILITARY TRANSITION MISTAKES

VETERANS MAKE



## MILITARY TO CIVILIAN TRANSITION MISTAKES

Returning to civilian life can be difficult, stressful, and confusing. This guide discusses twelve common mistakes so military members can understand these along with techniques to avoid and overcome. It was developed after two decades of helping fellow veterans navigate the process.

### **The most common mistakes:**

- 1. Not starting early enough**
- 2. Not taking ownership**
- 3. Limited self-awareness**
- 4. Not understanding the process**
- 5. Not developing a strong network**
- 6. Not evaluating all sources of advice**
- 7. Too focused on a job versus a career**
- 8. Unprepared for the culture change**
- 9. Inability to align skills with the position**
- 10. Not understanding the impact of location**
- 11. Expecting quick results**
- 12. Not asking for help**



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# MISTAKE #1: NOT STARTING EARLY ENOUGH

Waiting until the last minute is the most common mistake and the root cause for many short and long-term issues. It amplifies the stress and confusion, yet it can be avoided. Over the past two decades, we've heard every reason imaginable. These are the most common excuses:

## COMMITMENT TO THE MISSION

Service members often prioritize the mission over their personal lives, and this dynamic tends to increase among senior leaders (officers and enlisted). Setting the example, taking care of troops, and preparing for deployments or inspections are examples. These are expected, but you still need to make time for your own future.

## INFLUENCE OF OTHERS

Sometimes we allow the opinions of others to influence important life decisions. In this case, members prioritize outside opinions over their own well-being. They might not want others to know they're getting out, or fear the loss of respect and influence with their teams or chain of command.

## BUSY SCHEDULES

We're all busy, but delay brings unintended consequences for members and families. We recommend you begin as soon as possible and don't cheat your future. The recommended actions at the back of this guide are great first steps.

## **MISTAKE #1: NOT STARTING EARLY ENOUGH** **CONTINUED**

### **UNSURE OF WHAT TO DO**

The regimented and isolated military lifestyle can limit our ability to think critically about the future. As a result, some members don't know where or how to begin. Maybe they don't understand or are intimidated. They might enjoy the lifestyle, and preparing for what's next acknowledges they'll eventually depart the military.



***“Don't wait! Get started now and avoid the biggest transition mistake.”***

### **OVERCONFIDENCE**

Some members under-estimate the challenges of transitioning and think adjusting to life after serving will be easy. It's true that some have smoother journeys, but don't make this assumption and fail to plan ahead. Please don't rationalize a lack of preparation because your ego says you're the nation's best and will simply adapt to whatever comes your way.

*Regardless of your situation, you need to begin thinking about what's next as soon as possible. If time is limited or you don't want to make it obvious to your command, start by researching and learning in private. You don't have to take visible action as you take ownership of your future.*

## MISTAKE #2: NOT TAKING OWNERSHIP

Too many veterans rely on others to guide their paths. While asking others for advice is necessary, don't expect or allow anyone to determine your future. Taking ownership means understanding your responsibility to yourself. Deciding what follows the military is a blessing if you're ready and a curse if you're not. The best way to own it is by developing a plan. Start simple and adapt as you learn. The first step in this process is self-awareness.

## MISTAKE #3: LIMITED SELF-AWARENESS

The best way to plan for the future is to consider the current situation and your future aspirations. Begin with a healthy dose of self-reflection and consider the following types of questions:

1. What makes me happy?
2. What family environment or relationships do I want after serving?
3. How is my emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual well-being?
4. What is my ideal post-military career field?
5. Do I know anyone in this career field or industry?
6. Do I have the education, skills, and experience required?
7. What actions should I take to achieve my career goals?
8. Who can help me refine and achieve my goals?



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## **MISTAKE #3: LIMITED SELF-AWARENESS** **CONTINUED**

Write your thoughts in a journal and be honest. Expand the questions and the depth of response as you progress. No one else needs to see your journal, so be candid. As you clarify goals, consider the enabling actions and timelines to accomplish. Your transition plan will evolve as you learn about yourself and about the process.



*“True self-awareness enables members to develop realistic expectations.”*

Many service members have inaccurate or misinformed perceptions regarding their value-proposition. There’s also a wealth of misleading information regarding civilian employment.

When combined, this leads to unrealistic expectations about follow-on roles and careers. The more you know about yourself along with the job market, the more likely you’ll have realistic expectations regarding the positions or level you might obtain after serving. This doesn’t mean you can’t achieve your long-term goals of reaching senior levels, but you might need to take a step back before taking two or three steps forward. Knowing yourself combined with realistic expectations and understanding of the transition process are critical to long-term success.

# MISTAKE #3: LIMITED SELF-AWARENESS

## CONTINUED



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### - FEELING ENTITLED BECAUSE OF RANK

In the military, compensation and influence are driven by rank. On the outside, compensation and influence are determined by the value an individual provides to his or her organization. Generally speaking, the more value you provide, the more you're worth. Experience, skills, and education get you hired, but contributing to the bottom line gets you promoted.

Many senior officers and enlisted leaders think their experience should be immediately recognized in the civilian workforce. Aside from general or admiral, military rank doesn't translate. Most hiring managers don't understand the difference between a major and a sergeant major. Unless you plan to work for the government or a DOD contractor, don't expect rank alone to open doors.

### - FEELING CONSTRAINED BY MILITARY OCCUPATIONAL SPECIALITY (MOS)

Every veteran has valuable skills, yet some members feel they're only qualified to perform work that relates to their military duties.

This approach limits your future potential and is patently wrong. Members can do anything they want after serving in uniform. The key is to identify what's next early and gaining the experience and education/training required to be successful.

# MISTAKE #4 : NOT UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS

Many service members don't invest the time required to understand the reintegration process. The worst-case scenario is discovering how the process works after several disappointments.



*“The transition is confusing!”*

There's no lack of information available to help you navigate the transition process. Unfortunately, there's a wealth of inaccurate or misleading information to avoid. An interesting dynamic we've observed is those who are successful tend to be more vocal and those who struggle tend to be quiet. Social media is full of veterans providing advice and some of this isn't helpful to the broader community. Our expertise is helping veterans find new careers and we've gathered several common misunderstandings regarding the process:

- Veterans often lack specific career objectives and think that adapting to a position is what employers require. Adaptability is great, but you need to demonstrate the skills an employer requires to be successful in a specific role. Saying you “can do anything” is like saying you “can do nothing” to a potential employer. Unfortunately, many don't learn this lesson until they experience it themselves.



## MISTAKE #4: NOT UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS CONTINUED

- Some veterans are overconfident in their abilities and think they're qualified to lead civilian organizations with no prior industry experience. This is like saying a business leader could assume command of a Brigade or Wing with no prior military experience or training. Our advice is to find a solid mid-level position, learn the organization's language and processes, and then use your training and experience to add value. This is how to get ahead in the civilian workforce.

- Veterans are too focused on crafting the perfect resume and believe this will open all doors. Resumes are important, but the best pathway to future employment is through networking. Most organizations have unadvertised positions and networking is the way to connect with individuals who know about these opportunities.

- Veterans are too focused on submitting applications and resumes to online job announcements. On the surface, this appears like the right approach, but is actually the most inefficient way to find a new career. The most effective way to secure a meaningful post-military career is through networking. You still might need to submit an application, but someone inside the organization will be looking for your resume. This is the path to success.



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## MISTAKE #5 : NOT DEVELOPING A STRONG NETWORK

According to research with the veteran community, the most important element of a successful transition is building a strong network.

Unfortunately, many veterans are intimidated by the idea of networking and don't understand how to begin. Networking is nothing more than building relationships of trust and mutual benefit. Many individuals (veterans and non-veterans) want to share their experiences and help, so don't be afraid to ask. Connect with those you served with. Target organizations, locations, and positions of interest. Become active on LinkedIn and connect through American Corporate Partners (ACP), Veterati, USO, Hiring our Heroes, FourBlock, and Vets2Industry. Ask questions and learn from others while sharing your story and offering to assist.

Mentors and coaches are important to success and can help you navigate the culture and skill gaps.



*“Networking opens doors that lead to great follow-on civilian careers.”*

# MISTAKE #6 : NOT EVALUATING ALL SOURCES OF ADVICE

As you develop your network, always consider the source of information and advice. Some individuals have good intentions, but limited knowledge. Ask about their direct experience. Many veterans talk about the process, but have never actually hired or fired a civilian. Some won't share personal experiences and hard lessons until you build trust. Find those with years of experience across multiple organizations or roles and learn from their experience. Avoid those who lack credibility.



*“Convenient sources of advice aren’t always helpful.”*

# MISTAKE #7 : TOO FOCUSED ON A JOB VERSUS A CAREER

You should be evaluating opportunities and planning for long-term career success after the military, and not just trying to find a job. Don't get distracted by job titles, starting pay, or unique benefits. Focus on organizations, industries, and roles that challenge your skills and provide long-term opportunities. Too many veterans have a short-term focus when transitioning and waste time finding their optimal career path.



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## MISTAKE #8 : BEING UNPREPARED FOR THE CULTURE CHANGE

Departing an environment of conformity and regimentation sounds easy, but the culture shock is difficult for many. Finding your new purpose and a sense of community are important in civilian life. In addition, you need to learn a new language, use first names, build a new wardrobe, and understand organizational structures, while also deciphering unwritten civilian rank and influence levels. Your military brothers and sisters won't be at your side to help endure these challenges and you might feel lost without your tribe.

Some veterans think the immediate freedom of civilian life will be liberating, but quickly learn the military structure that helped make life understandable is gone.

Don't allow your newfound freedom, loss of status, and lack of community to become an ambush. Understand the culture shock is coming and maintain some useful routines to help cope.



***“Be prepared to feel overwhelmed during the transition.”***

# MISTAKE #9 : INABILITY TO ALIGN SKILLS WITH THE POSITION

This is one of the most difficult aspects of the transition, yet it is critical to success.

In the civilian workforce, hiring managers don't hire what they don't understand. If you can't explain your experience in a way they value, hiring managers will select someone else. It's that simple. Don't make the assumption that being a veteran moves you to the front of the line. Veteran preference is nothing more than a bit of extra credit. If you fail the test and can't demonstrate how your background and experience align with the job requirements, no amount of extra credit will save you. Don't assume that companies will hire you because you have leadership experience. That too is extra credit after you've demonstrated the skills and experience required for the position.

Translating and aligning skills is done through strong resumes and good interviewing skills. After you've developed a solid network, ask them to help fine tune your words and delivery. Draft a resume that matches the company's needs and learn how to talk about your experience using language and stories they understand. This requires time and effort, so get started as soon as possible.



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## **MISTAKE #10 : NOT UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF LOCATION**

Veterans often limit their geographic options by allowing spouses or family members to determine their post-military locations. Some want to return home or to another familiar place. Understand that the law of supply and demand applies to the job market. Your skills and experience might be needed in larger metropolitan areas, but not required in smaller markets. Don't assume your skills are marketable everywhere, and do your homework. Connect with mentors in the area, research the job market, and visit locations prior to making important decisions. Job and labor markets trend up and down, so don't make assumptions on this key aspect of post-military life.



*“Supply and demand are just as important in the job market as any other commodity. Don't assume your skills will be needed in all markets. Do your homework ahead of time and make informed decisions.”*



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## MISTAKE #11: EXPECTING QUICK RESULTS

You didn't become a warrior overnight, so don't expect the reintegration process to occur quickly. There will be ups and downs, so give yourself some grace. The worst thing you can do is expect quick results and then become discouraged. It takes years to grow into a senior NCO or officer. Don't expect to become an executive within a few months as a civilian. Learn, adapt, and succeed just like you did while in uniform.

## MISTAKE #12: NOT ASKING FOR HELP

Military members and veterans believe our ranks are filled with the nation's best and heroes don't ask for help, they provide it. Our community is reluctant to ask, but must overcome this mindset. Mentors are absolutely necessary when considering life and career options as a civilian. They can help you understand and avoid pitfalls throughout the transition process. Reach-out, ask, and listen when advice is offered.

### RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

*Two decades of research across the veteran community highlight the five elements of a successful transition, which we explain in the next several pages. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, these elements are consistent across all branches, ranks, and experience levels. We recommend using this as a framework to guide your transition back into civilian life.*

# RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

## I. START EARLY

### Invest the time and effort to be successful

- Start thinking about what's next as soon as possible
- Establish a LinkedIn profile and ask others to help
- Explore your true interests and aspirations
- Visit [mynextmove.org](http://mynextmove.org) for ideas
- Join online discussions via LinkedIn and Facebook
- Listen to podcasts that share lessons from veterans
- Speak with family and friends about what's next
- Read books and articles about industries and schools
- Focus on transition as your next mission
- Begin a transition journal and be honest with yourself

## 2. HAVE A PLAN

### You can't hit a target that doesn't exist

- Consider all options:  
Employment | Education | Entrepreneurship
- Research areas of interest using resources like:  
[Military-Transition.org](http://Military-Transition.org) | [IVMF.syracuse.edu](http://IVMF.syracuse.edu) |  
[StudentVeterans.org](http://StudentVeterans.org)
- Identify career and life goals, then start your transition plan of attack
- Update and improve your plan while networking and translating skills



### **3. BUILD YOUR NETWORK**

#### **Who you know and who knows you are important**

- Contact friends and veterans who have transitioned
- Connect with and learn from mentors, coaches, and advisors (veterans and non-veterans)
- Engage with organizations such as: [ACP-usa.org](http://ACP-usa.org) | [Veterati.com](http://Veterati.com) | [HiringOurHeroes.org](http://HiringOurHeroes.org) | [FourBlock.org](http://FourBlock.org) | [USO.org](http://USO.org) | [Vets2Industry.org](http://Vets2Industry.org) | [ActNowEducation.com](http://ActNowEducation.com)
- Build contacts online and through in-person events

### **4. TRANSLATE YOUR SKILLS**

#### **The hardest part of a successful transition**

- Develop targeted resumes and practice interviewing techniques with your network, family, and friends
- Practice interviewing again and constantly update your resume to demonstrate the value you bring
- Discuss with your network and ask for help. Listen as others discuss organizations, industries, roles, locations, schools, and training opportunities
- Obtain certifications and refresh skills, as necessary

### **5. BE PATIENT**

#### **Successful transitions don't happen overnight**

- Continue researching, learning, and journaling
- Always seek feedback and improve your plan
- Enhance current skills while adding new ones
- Attend workshops, career fairs, and social events
- Explore [DODSkillbridge.osd.mil](http://DODSkillbridge.osd.mil) and other hands-on training programs, both DOD and non-DOD lead

# MILITARY TRANSITION

## RESOURCES TO ASSIST

### [military-transition.org/START](https://military-transition.org/START)

- [Veterans.linkedin.com](https://www.veterans.linkedin.com)
- [FourBlock.org/programs/find-your-calling](https://www.fourblock.org/programs/find-your-calling)
- [CommitFoundation.org/pursueyourpurpose](https://www.commitfoundation.org/pursueyourpurpose)
- Register**
- Watch**
- Complete**

### [military-transition.org/PLAN](https://military-transition.org/PLAN)

- [USO.org/transition](https://www.uso.org/transition)
- [HiringOurHeroes.org/career-services](https://www.hiringourheroes.org/career-services)
- [IVMF.syracuse.edu/apply/our-programs](https://www.ivmf.syracuse.edu/apply/our-programs)
- Engage**
- Utilize**
- Visit**

### [military-transition.org/CONNECT](https://military-transition.org/CONNECT)

- [ACP-usa.org](https://www.acp-usa.org)
- [Veterati.com](https://www.veterati.com)
- [Vets2Industry.org/events-page](https://www.vets2industry.org/events-page)
- Request**
- Explore**
- Network**

### [military-transition.org/TRANSLATE](https://military-transition.org/TRANSLATE)

- [RecruitMilitary.com/job-seekers](https://www.recruitmilitary.com/job-seekers)
- [ActNowEducation.com](https://www.actnoweducation.com)
- [Kochind.com/careers/veterans/veterans-guide](https://www.kochind.com/careers/veterans/veterans-guide)
- Access**
- Leverage**
- Study**

### [military-transition.org/WIN](https://military-transition.org/WIN)

- [Skillbridge.osd.mil](https://www.skillbridge.osd.mil)
- [Glassdoor.com](https://www.glassdoor.com)
- [Military-Transition.org/resources](https://www.military-transition.org/resources)
- Participate**
- Research**
- Bookmark**

# PARTNERS



Transitions



For additional transition lessons and resources,  
please visit: [www.military-transition.org/info](http://www.military-transition.org/info)



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