Understanding the transition challenges of military veterans with limited civilian work experience

by

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B.S., University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2011
M.Ed., University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2012

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Department of Educational Leadership
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Transitioning into the civilian workforce is a challenging period for military veterans, particularly those with limited civilian work experience. This basic qualitative study explored how veterans describe their reintegration journey, focusing on the psychological, cultural, and structural forces shaping their experiences. The findings indicated that participants experienced psychological strain, marked by identity disruption, eroded self-efficacy, and unmet expectations, as they renegotiated their personal and professional self-concepts. Culturally, veterans struggled to adapt to unfamiliar communication styles, unspoken workplace norms, and skill translation hurdles that frequency resulted in underemployment and undervaluation of their service background. Structural friction further impeded progress, such as inconsistent transition programming, administrative delays, and fragmented support channels which complicated efforts to achieve financial, educational, and employment stability. Across all domains of the transition experience, informal networks, including spouses, mentors, and veterans served as vital buffers against isolation and uncertainty. Grounded in Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory, this research underscores the interconnected nature of post-service adjustment and offers targeted recommendations to refine institutional transition programs, military to civilian pipelines, and corporate onboarding systems.

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Dedication

This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to my late grandmother Bettie Townsend Palmer-Mayo, a woman of small stature whose spirit, strength, and compassion were immeasurable. She raised 14 children, 100 grandchildren, 50 great-grandchildren, and 30 great-great-grandchildren, weaving a legacy of love, resilience, and community that continues to shape generations. Her life was a testament to endurance, faith, and unwavering devotion, and it is her example that has guided me through every chapter of my own journey.

After my birth, my parents and I lived in my grandmother's home, where her influence shaped my earliest memories and experiences. From those first days, she emerged as one of my greatest teachers. She taught me how to farm, fish, and cook, but more importantly, she taught me how to live with purpose, humility, and strength. I will forever treasure our quiet mornings at her kitchen table—sharing a cup of coffee and a Danish, listening to her wisdom, and absorbing lessons that would carry me through the most difficult seasons of my life. When I faced divorce as a young mother, she opened her doors without hesitation. In her home, I found safety, stability, and space to rebuild my confidence. She nurtured my spirit, reminded me of my worth, and encouraged me relentlessly to pursue higher education and create a future rooted in possibility.

Her dedication to service extended far beyond our family. During World War II, she contributed to the nation by working at the arsenal, assembling munitions for service members. She proudly watched four of her sons serve in the United States Army and Air Force, writing to them faithfully, tracking military news, and praying over every soldier who served. Years later, she extended that same devotion to my own son and later my daughter, ensuring they were safe,

fed, and cared for while I worked two jobs to build a better life for us. Her love was not selective, it was expansive, generous, and unwavering.

My grandmother was the heart of her community. She worked tirelessly in her brother's restaurant, raised her family without ever asking for help, and opened her kitchen to anyone in the neighborhood who was hungry or in need. She embodied service long before I understood the meaning of the word. She instilled in me my work ethic, my passion for lifelong learning, and my calling to serve others. Every accomplishment I have earned is rooted in the values she planted within me.

Grandma, this achievement belongs to you as much as it belongs to me. Thank you for restoring my spirit when it was weary, believing in my mind when I doubted myself, and teaching me the true meaning of strength. Your legacy lives on every page of this dissertation, on every step of my journey, and in every act of service I offer to others. I carry your love, your lessons, and your light with me always.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Each year, approximately 200,000 U.S. service members transition from active duty to civilian life, including enlisted personnel, officers, and airmen across all military branches (U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2024). While transition is a common milestone in their life, it brings significant psychological, social, and professional challenges (Schlossberg, 2011). Veterans must navigate a shift in identity, adapt to new workplace cultures, and translate military-acquired skills into civilian job markets (Shepherd et., 2021). Transitioning into a second career is a significant milestone in one's professional life (Gordon & Newby Parham, 2019). The experiences of military veterans transitioning into civilian work exemplify the magnitude of this professional move (Kukla et al., 2015). For many veterans, this transition represents not only a change in employment but also a broader adjustment involving identity, professional roles, and long-term career goals. Therefore, understanding second-career transitions is essential for supporting military veterans, their families, employers, and other stakeholders involved in the reintegration process.

The transition from military service to civilian employment is influenced by personal, cultural, and organizational factors that shape how veterans interpret and navigate this major life change. At the personal level, veterans often renegotiate their identities, sense of purpose, and self-efficacy as they move from a highly structured environment to one that requires greater autonomy and self-direction (Adler et al., 2021; Castro & Kintzle, 2014). Cultural factors also play a significant role. Military norms—such as hierarchy, collective identity, and mission-driven cohesion—can differ substantially from the decentralized, individualistic, and sometimes ambiguous norms of civilian workplaces (Copper et al., 2018; Cozza et al., 2017). Organizational factors further influence the transition process, including employer perceptions of veterans, the

degree to which organizations understand military training and experience, and the availability of institutional support such as onboarding programs, mentorship, or veteran-focused hiring initiatives (Cooper et al., 2018; Stone & Stone, 2015). When these factors align positively, they can facilitate smoother career transitions; however, when misalignment occurs, veterans may experience barriers to employment, underemployment, or difficulty integrating into civilian professional environments. Together, these dynamics create a multifaceted transition landscape that can either support or hinder veterans' successful reintegration into civilian employment.

Many veterans, particularly those with limited civilian work experience, are defined as individuals who have professional histories due to their predominant military backgrounds and who therefore have minimal exposure to civilian workplace norms and expectations (Stone & Stone, 2015). Although these veterans typically possess strong technical and leadership skills, they often lack familiarity with civilian hiring practices, job structures, and workplace cultures. This lack of exposure can make it difficult for them to translate military competencies into language that resonates with civilian employers, understand organizational expectations, or adapt to workplace structures that differ from the clear hierarchy and defined roles of military service. As a result, even highly skilled veterans may encounter challenges in communicating the value of their experience, positioning themselves competitively in civilian job markets, and identifying career pathways that align with their capabilities and long-term professional goals.

National data underscore the extent of these challenges. Castro and Kintzle (2014) mixed-methods study of 1,350 veterans found that 69% were not employed in their preferred career fields. Furthermore, 80% struggled to secure positions aligned with their military training, and over 40% experienced underemployment. Recent data indicate persistent disparities: veterans from infantry or combat roles consistently earn lower wages and experience higher

unemployment rates compared to those with technical military backgrounds (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025; RAND Corporation, 2020). These employment challenges may persist in both the short and long term. While Morris (2025) observes that some veterans reintegrate successfully, many continue to encounter employment barriers for years, including difficulties with hiring processes, limited professional networks, and the need to adapt to workplace environments that differ from military norms.

Veterans with Limited Civilian Work Experience (Definition)

Many veterans, particularly those with limited civilian work experience, are individuals whose professional histories are shaped almost entirely by military service, leaving them with minimal exposure to civilian workplace norms and expectations (Stone & Stone, 2015). Junior enlisted service members (E1–E4) are especially affected, as they typically enter the military at a young age, accumulate most of their work experience in uniform, and separate with little familiarity with civilian career pathways, performance expectations, or employer evaluation systems (Kleykamp et al., 2024; Peat et al., 2025). Although these veterans often possess strong technical and leadership skills, they may lack familiarity with civilian hiring practices, job structures, and workplace cultures. This limited exposure can make it difficult to translate military competencies into language that resonates with civilian employers, understand organizational expectations, or adapt to workplace structures that differ from the clear hierarchy and defined roles of military service. As a result, even highly skilled veterans may encounter challenges in communicating the value of their experience, positioning themselves competitively in civilian job markets, and identifying career pathways that align with their capabilities and long-term professional goals.

This study investigates the primary challenges veterans encounter during the transition from military to civilian life. These challenges include skill translation and occupational alignment, adapting to civilian workplace cultures, identity disruption, employment outcomes: unemployment and underemployment, and health-related concerns.

Core Transition Challenges Veterans Face

Veterans frequently encounter multiple, interconnected challenges when entering the civilian workforce. These challenges unfold within broader structural and cultural contexts that shape veterans' employment experiences.

Skill Translation and Occupational Alignment

Veterans frequently encounter challenges when articulating their military skills to civilian employers. The absence of direct civilian equivalents for many occupations complicates the demonstration of their full value. Consequently, veterans are often underemployed or assigned to positions that do not align with their competencies. Pew Research Center (2019) reported only 25% of enlisted veterans secured employment prior to leaving the military, while 42% indicated their initial civilian position was below their qualifications.

Difficulties in translating military experience also negatively impact job stability. Dexter (2020) observed that veterans often struggle to present their backgrounds in ways that satisfy employer requirements, resulting in employment that does not reflect their qualifications or long-term objectives.

Adapting to Civilian Workplace Cultures

Civilian workplaces are quite different from the military's structured, hierarchical, and mission-focused environment. Veterans need to get used to norms like autonomy, informal communication, networking, and decentralized decision-making (Cozza et al., 2017). These

differences can cause confusion or frustration as veterans figure out unclear roles, shifting priorities, and less-defined chains of command.

For many, the transition requires learning new interpersonal expectations, adapting to varied leadership styles, and interpreting workplace dynamics without the predictability and cohesion characteristics of military units. This cultural adjustment process can be especially challenging for veterans whose professional identities were formed almost entirely within the military contexts, making civilian norms feel unfamiliar or ambiguous.

Identity Disruption

Cultural adjustment involves navigating external workplace norms, but identity disruption is about the internal psychological changes veterans experience when they leave behind their strong military identity. Military service provides a deep sense of purpose, belonging, and shared mission, and separation from that environment can create feelings of loss or confusion as veterans try to find who they are without the uniform (Adler et al., 2021).

This process of rebuilding identity affects how veterans' approach civilian jobs, engage in teams, and plan their careers, with identity disruption linked to increased reintegration difficulty, lower life satisfaction, and career uncertainty among post veterans struggling to balance their military identities with civilian workplace expectations (Kleykamp, 2021; Mitchell et al., 2021).

Unemployment and Underemployment

Many veterans face significant challenges when transitioning to civilian employment. Unemployment refers to those actively seeking work but unable to find it, while underemployment describes individuals who are employed but in jobs that do not align with their

skills, education, or career goals. While veteran unemployment rates have improved over the past decade, underemployment remains a pressing issue.

As of 2024, the unemployment rate for veterans was 3.0%, slightly lower than the 3.9% for nonveterans (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). However, underemployment continues to affect a large portion of the veteran population. Veterans with service-connected disabilities face higher unemployment rates (5.7%) compared to those without disabilities (3.0%) (U.S. Department of Labor, 2025). These numbers highlight that although many veterans find employment, the nature of their jobs often does not fully utilize their military-acquired skills.

Underemployment among veterans is a significant and often overlooked issue. Studies show that around 60% of veterans feel underemployed six years after leaving military service (Penn State University, 2024). Veterans Metrics Initiative (VMI) study and the work of the Veteran Employment & Toohey Transition (VETT) program at the Penn State Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness have uncovered why veterans are underemployed. Some of the contributing factors to underemployment include a mismatch between the skills and training the veteran has and those required for the civilian job, the military skills and training not being recognized or validated by civilian certification bodies, and the veteran not being job ready. A study by Vogt, et al. (2018) and others have shown that many veterans are working in jobs that do not match the level of training that they received in the military and that are not consistent with the expectations that they had when they enlisted which can be years after the veteran has been discharged from the military (Penn State Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness, 2023).

Many veterans find themselves in part-time positions, low-paying jobs, or roles that don't make full use of their leadership skills or technical training. More than half of veterans' report

that their current job does not match their leadership skills, and over a third say their work does not utilize their education (Penn State University, 2023).

This mismatch has significant psychological and economic consequences. Veterans who are underemployed often experience lower earnings, with those reporting both underemployment and compensation dissatisfaction earning up to approximately $24,000 less than their peers, highlighting the financial impact of underemployment among veterans (Davenport et al., 2024).

Underemployment can be just as distressing as unemployment, contributing to career instability and reduced economic mobility (Vogt et al., 2018). Veterans' underemployment is influenced not only by individual factors but also by systemic barriers and external factors. Employers may struggle to recognize military skills, and veterans may encounter difficulty navigating civilian career pathways (Stone & Stone, 2015). Additionally, lack of veteran-specific employment support programs and discrimination can hinder veterans' ability to secure meaningful, long-term employment.

Understanding the challenges veterans face regarding unemployment and underemployment is crucial for developing targeted interventions. While unemployment reflects a lack of job access, underemployment captures the broader issue of veterans being employed in roles that do not align with their full potential. Addressing these issues requires a combination of systemic support, employer education, and tailored programs to ensure that veterans can fully reintegrate into civilian careers and achieve long-term professional fulfillment.

To further contextualize these challenges, it is helpful to distinguish between unemployment and underemployment, two related but conceptually distinct labor-market conditions that shape veterans' post-service experiences.

Table 1

Unemployment vs. Underemployment Among Veterans

Concept	Definition	Key Findings for Veterans	Psychological & Economic Consequences	Sources
Unemployment	Not having a job but actively seeking work	Veteran unemployment ranges from 3.3% in 2023, slightly higher than some nonveteran groups.	Associated with financial strain, reduced well-being, increased psychological distress, and higher risk of depression and anxiety.	BLS (2024); Kleykamp (2013); Tsai et al. (2016)
Underemployment	Working in jobs that don't match one's skills, education or desired hours	61% of veterans report underemployment, often due to skill mismatch or credential gaps.	Linked to identity disruption, diminished self-efficacy, lower job satisfaction, and annual earnings $11,000–$24,000 lower than peers.	Davenport et al. (2024); Stone et al. (2015); IVMF & Penn State Clearinghouse (2023); Vogt et al. (2018)
Impact	Consequences for well-being and career	Underemployed veterans are twice as likely to leave their jobs and report lower satisfaction.	Contributes to career instability, reduced economic mobility, and long-term challenges in reintegration.	Davenport et al. (2024); Cooper et al. (2016)

Table 1 illustrates the key differences between unemployment and underemployment among veterans, emphasizing why underemployment warrants focused scholarly attention. While unemployment refers to the absence of work, underemployment captures a broader set of challenges, including working in roles that do not match one's skills, education, or experience;

involuntary part-time work; or employment that provides insufficient income or career advancement opportunities.

For veterans, particularly those with extensive military leadership experience or specialized technical training, underemployment often reflects a mismatch between military-acquired competencies and civilian job requirements. Underemployment is defined as employment that does not fully utilize the veteran's skill, training, or experience, or does not fully utilize the duties and tasks of the job; and it occurs whether the overall unemployment rate is low (Davenport et al., 2024, Veteran Underemployment Research).

The table also highlights the psychological and economic consequences associated with each condition. Unemployment is linked to financial strain and reduced well-being, whereas underemployment is associated with identity disruption, diminished self-efficacy, and higher turnover rates. These distinctions underscore why underemployment is not merely an economic issue but a multidimensional challenge that affects veterans' sense of purpose, career satisfaction, and overall reintegration.

Understanding these employment patterns provides an important foundation for examining how veterans navigate the broader transition from military to civilian life. To interpret the psychological, emotional, and contextual factors that shape this transition, the study turns to Schlossberg's Transition Theory, which offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing how individuals appraise change, access support, and develop coping strategies during major life shifts.

Health-Related Factors

Health-related factors further complicate workplace adjustment. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2021) reports that 57% of veterans continue to experience mental health

challenges and 34% face ongoing physical health conditions after separation. These issues can limit job performance, reduce workplace engagement, and increase the likelihood of employment instability. When combined with skill translation barriers and cultural adjustment challenges, these factors create a multidimensional employment landscape that many veterans find difficult to navigate.

Structural, Cultural, and Psychological Dynamics of Transition

The transition to civilian life is a complex and dynamic challenge for many veterans. Veterans are affected by a myriad of issues due to a range of macro (structural and societal) and micro (cultural and psychological) factors. The transition to the civilian labor market presents further challenges that require the veteran to adapt to a new social context with different norms, expectations, and communication styles. In general, the social norms of a civilian workplace are characterized by high levels of autonomy, informal communication, and decentralized decision-making. These norms are quite different from those of the military environment, where there is a clear understanding of required behavior and a hierarchical structure that provides high levels of structure and certainty (Shepherd et al., 2021).

According to Adler et al. (2021), aspects of military culture are an important part of a veteran's identity, which can influence how they think about teamwork, leadership, and their future career. The researchers argue that the military identity is built upon a set of values, the mission that unites them, and a common purpose (Adler et al., 2021). When these frameworks of identity are removed because of the veteran's transition to civilian society, the veteran may experience confusion, low self-esteem, and ambiguity about their future career role.

Further, one factor contributing to psychological issues at work is the feeling of being lost and unsupported in the workplace (Keeling et al., 2018). The military has a very structured

way of life, clearly defined tasks and expectations, which can make the transition to a new work environment very challenging. Bailey et al., (2025) offer a systematic review that sheds light on the extent to which employment and mental health are connected among veterans. Their findings are striking across 28 studies, veterans experiencing depressive symptoms were far more likely to be unemployed or to have difficulty holding steady work, which reflects what many veterans, practitioners, and researchers already recognize—that the transition from military to civilian life is not simply about finding a new job.

Social Support and Coping Mechanisms

Social support and coping resources are vital to veterans' ability to contend with the psychological, cultural, and structural challenges associated with their reintegration into civilian society. Schlossberg's Transition Theory centers on the idea that individuals draw on social support systems and coping resources to successfully traverse significant life transitions, and that such systems are a major factor in how veterans view and interact with the challenges associated with their own transition (Goodman et al., 2006). For veterans whose work experience is limited to the military, however, these social support systems are vital in helping them make sense of the uncertainty of moving into an unfamiliar workplace, rebuilding their professional identities, and learning how to behave in their new workplace.

Family members, friends, and even other veterans can serve as the main sources of emotional and informational support. These relationships help veterans develop a sense of stability, validation, encouragement, and even comfort during transitions when they may feel as if they are losing their sense of identity, and even when they are wondering about their future in the civilian workforce. Griffin & Gilbert (2015) emphasize that access to intentional support systems, including peer connections, campus advocates, and institutional resources, plays a key

role in helping veterans navigate life transitions and build strategies that support successful adaptation to new environments, including civilian education and employment contexts. This support is particularly critical for veterans whose civilian professional social networks are limited or non-existent, forcing them to build their network from scratch.

Veteran centers, transition programs, and organizations have also recently been identified as an important source of social support for veterans' reintegration into civilian society. Whitworth et al. (2020), for example, found that such programs enhance veterans' coping skills by developing their skills and providing the resources they need to transition back into civilian life.

Supportive civilian allies in veterans' lives can also influence their successful reintegration into civilian society and its norms. Framing the transition as a *reculturation* process and providing supportive listening can help veterans adapt to civilian expectations and develop confidence in their new work roles (Hodges, 2025; Rattray et al., 2023). Such relationships are vital in helping veterans reframe their military experience as something positive and relevant to civilian society.

Coping strategies have also been found to play a significant role in reintegration outcomes. Veterans who use therapy, engage in community involvement, or even practice voluntary coping strategies have been shown to achieve better outcomes and develop greater satisfaction with their transition to civilian life (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). Such strategies can help veterans better navigate the transition into civilian life and gain greater control over their lives during this period.

Finally, commitment from practitioners, peers, and civilians is also critical to successful reintegration into civilian society and its norms. Elnitsky and Kilmer (2017), for example, found

that veterans benefit significantly from active listening from those around them and from practitioners who help them make sense of their unique experiences.

Despite the different types of social support that help integrate veterans into civilian society, many veterans still struggle significantly with their transition (Geraci et al., 2023; Stull et al., 2020). Some issues with coping with transition may relate to difficulties adjusting to new skills or work environments, while others may be more related to difficulties accessing civilian professional networks. The persistence of these coping challenges underscores the need to examine the relationships among social support, coping strategies, and structural barriers to veterans' reintegration.

Department of Defense Transition Programs

Transition Assistance Program

The Department of Defense's transition assistance programs include a variety of initiatives that support service members as they prepare to transition to civilian life. The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is the Department of Defense's federally mandatory transition assistance program for U.S. military personnel preparing to leave active duty to civilian life through support services. The Transition Assistance Program was created in 1991 through the authorization of the National Defense Authorization Act. TAP is a joint effort between the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Department of Education, the Small Business Administration (SBA), and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) (Whitworth et al., 2020).

TAP is intended to provide separating service members with information and skills needed for success in the civilian economy. TAP has been revised and expanded, but most

scholars suggest it still focuses primarily on employment-readiness and benefits. It does not provide enough psychosocial support for transitioning service members (Whitworth et al., 2020).

TAP uses a multidisciplinary team of military transition counselors, Department of Labor employment facilitators, career coaches, and education specialists. These individuals help service members gain the skills and knowledge needed for their next careers. Employment navigators at Serco (2025) train service members in resume writing, job interviewing, and job searching while facilitators teach employment readiness, credentialing, and entrepreneurship workshops.

TAP uses Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success) modular training approach, including curriculum components such as career exploration, employment-readiness, and post-military education modules (Transition GPS. 2024).

Transition Assistance Core Program Activities and Materials

TAP's training activities aim to familiarize service members with civilian workplace requirements and promote successful employment outcomes core. The core program activities and materials that TAP has developed for its students include:

- **Initial Counseling (IC):** This is the first step in the TAP program that requires service members to take a self-assessment survey. They will begin developing an Individual Transition Plan (ITP) that addresses their plans for using their time after leaving the military (Department of Defense, n.d.).
- **Pre-Separation Counseling:** Service members must complete this step in the program no later than 365 days before separation from active duty. It provides them with the opportunity to learn about benefits, entitlements, and transition resources available to former military service members (Department of Defense, n.d.).

- **DoD Transition Day:** This is the main training activity within TAP program. Service members complete a series of modules on managing transitions from military to civilian life. They learn to translate their military skills into civilian language and gain insights into developing financial skills for independence.
- **Capstone Counseling**: During the final step, a commander or another designated individual checks that all Career Readiness Standards (CRS) have been met and verifies that all required activities have been completed. Ther service members will not be able to separate from active duty until this step has been completed (Department of Defense, n.d.).

TAP's curriculum offers foundational transition preparation. However, it does not offer the experiential learning opportunities that many veterans, especially those with limited civilian work experience, need to learn about workplace norms or effectively demonstrate their abilities in real world settings. This need is met through the Department of Defense SkillBridge program.

SkillBridge Program

SkillBridge is a Department of Defense program initiated in 2011. It enables active-duty service members to participate in civilian internships, apprenticeships and industry-based training. Skillbridge allows participants to train with organizations for up to 180 days before separation (GAO, 2024). While these programs have evolved over time, research suggests they often lack the specificity needed to support veterans with minimal civilian work exposure (Kirchner et al., 2020). Through SkillBridge participation, service members can utilize their military-developed skills in various settings while building professional contacts and exploring career options, all while maintaining their military pay (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). The

experiential model strengthens TAP by providing veterans who lack civilian work experience with the opportunity to experience civilian workplace environments firsthand.

The Department of Defense (DoD) reports that 83% of SkillBridge participants are enlisted personnel, in ranks E-4 to E-6 (GAO, 2024). This group usually has limited exposure to civilian SkillBridge's structure to help TAP participants understand what they need to develop TAP's employment-readiness training.

Despite these benefits, research shows many veterans struggle with underemployment, skill adaptation, and cultural accumulation after completing programs like TAP and SkillBridge (Keeling et al., 2018). TAP and SkillBridge do not fully address all psychological, cultural and institutional barriers to reintegration. Veterans with limited civilian work exposure face steeper learning curves and more challenging, emotionally taxing transitions (Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). These areas of struggle represent the problem this study will seek to address.

Transition Programs and Persistent Gaps

Federal transition assistance programs that support service members entering civilian employment are imperfect. Persistent skill and culture gaps disproportionately affect veterans with limited civilian work experience to include:

- **Skill gaps**: exist because military skills are not easily translated cleanly into civilian job requirements, and employers often struggle to interpret military experience (Wenger et al., 2023; Peat et al., 2025).
- **Role and culture gaps:** The gaps between the roles and cultures individuals experience result from significant differences in working culture and organizational structures between the military and the civilian world. This results in individuals in the civilian world who are not adapted to the new norms of work

> and communication, as well as the patterns of work that exist there. As stated by Le (2024), "The communication style and the way military people organise themselves are very different from the world of civilian life. This often results in great misunderstandings and a steep learning curve when civilians adjust to the new civilian work environment, as described in the LinkedIn Veteran Opportunity Report (2023). The cultural and structural barriers encountered by individuals with military backgrounds hinder the translation of military skills into the workplace and impede understanding of workplace communication and leadership norms.

Persistent gaps in cultural and structural integration underscore the limitations of current transition programming and emphasize the need for more comprehensive, individualized, and context-sensitive support that better aligns military competencies with civilian labor-market demands. For example, LinkedIn's 2023 Veteran Opportunity Report highlights that veterans' skills are often undervalued or overlooked in civilian hiring practices, and that employers may fail to recognize the relevance of military experience to civilian job requirements (LinkedIn Veteran Opportunity Report, 2023). This signals a need for programs that not only teach job search skills but also address cultural adaptation and employer awareness to bridge the military-civilian divide.

To better understand how these gaps emerge, it is essential to examine the Department of Defense's transition programs, their intended functions, and the areas where they fall short in preparing veterans for meaningful civilian employment. These areas of struggle represent the problem this study will seek to address.

Problem Statement

Federally mandated programs such as the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and DoD SkillBridge aim to support service members entering the civilian workforce, yet many veterans continue to struggle during this transition, particularly those with limited civilian work experience. Veterans frequently face challenges translating military skills into civilian job roles, acclimating to new workplace cultural norms, and redefining performance expectations given the vast organizational and communication differences between military and civilian environments (Hardison et al., 2017; Sachdev, 2023).

Transitioning veterans who experience underemployment make up approximately one-third of all separating service members within their first three years of civilian life (Davenport et al., 2024). Data from the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State reveals that veterans who are dissatisfied with their compensation or role are four times more likely to change jobs than those who are satisfied (Davenport et al., 2024). Specifically, 61% of veterans experience underemployment due to mismatched skills, and 12% switch jobs between their third and fourth post-separation years in search of better operational fit and pay (Davenport et al., 2024).

These patterns demonstrate that veterans entering the civilian labor market with minimal pre-service workforce history face heightened vulnerability when navigating the transition process. Although previous research has examined veteran reintegration in general, few empirical studies have focused on the distinct experiences and challenges of those who enter the civilian workforce with limited civilian work experience (Hunter-Johnson & Al-Asfour, 2021). Collecting data closer to the transition event further helps reduce recall bias and enhances the reliability of participants' retrospective insights.

Junior enlisted service members (E1–E4) constitute by far the largest annual cohort to separate from the U.S. armed forces, representing well over 50% of all transitioning service members each year. Despite being the numerical majority, E1–E4 pay grades are remarkably under-researched in the existing empirical literature (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2025; Vogt et al., 2020). Prior transition scholarship has heavily drawn upon samples skewed toward senior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and commissioned officers—populations that typically possess greater administrative experience, higher educational attainment, and broader professional networks upon separation. As a result, the specific structural, cultural, and vocational barriers faced by junior enlisted veterans remain underrepresented in both academic literature and policy frameworks (American Enterprise Institute, 2025). Focusing explicitly on the lived experiences of junior enlisted personnel addresses a critical empirical blind spot and provides targeted insight into the sub-cohort most susceptible to early post-service underemployment and career friction.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this basic qualitative study is to explore how military veterans with limited civilian work experience describe their transition into civilian employment. By centering veterans' own narratives, the research aims to illuminate the personal, cultural, and structural factors that shape their transition journeys and influence their employment outcomes. These insights will contribute to a deeper understanding of the reintegration process and inform more responsive transition supports practices.

Research Questions

This basic qualitative study will be guided by one research question and three sub-questions that explore the psychological, cultural and structural dimensions of veterans'

transition experiences: How do military veterans with limited civilian work experience describe their experiences during the transition into the civilian workplace?

1. How do military veterans with limited civilian work experience describe their psychological challenges and support they encounter during their transition to civilian employment?
2. How do these veterans describe the cultural challenges and support they experience as they adapt to civilian workplace norms and expectations?
3. How do these veterans describe the structural challenges and support that shape their employment outcomes during the transition from active duty to civilian?

To interpret these experiences in a structured and theoretically grounded way, the study draws on a conceptual framework that integrates two complementary perspectives on adult transition and career development.

Multi-Theoretical Framework

The multi-theoretical framework for this study integrates Schlossberg's Transition Theory (TT) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) to provide a comprehensive lens understanding how veterans with limited civilian work experience navigate the transition into civilian employment. Together, these theories offer a dual lens for understanding the complexity of veteran reintegration—one centered on emotional and identity adaptation, and the other on career decision-making, self-efficacy, and motivation.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory provides insight into how individuals appraise life changes, access support, and develop coping strategies during major life transitions (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The theory's 4S System—Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies—offers a

structured way to examine how veterans interpret their separation from the military, navigate uncertainty, and reconstruct their identities in civilian contexts.

SCCT complements this perspective by explaining how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals shape career development and employment behavior (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT is particularly relevant for understanding how veterans assess their capabilities, respond to labor-market barriers, and make decisions about career pathways in environments that may not fully recognize their military experience.

By combining these frameworks, the study offers a structured yet human-centered approach to examining how veterans interpret their transitions, engage with support systems, and pursue meaningful civilian employment. This multi-theoretical foundation informs the study's design, data collection, and analytic strategies, ensuring that both psychological and career-related dimensions of reintegration are captured.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Developed by Nancy Schlossberg in the early 1980s, Transition Theory provides a structured way to examine how individuals experience and cope with significant life changes. A "transition" is defined as any event or non-event that results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world, requiring a corresponding change in behavior and relationships (Schlossberg, 1981). This theory is particularly useful in adult learning, career development, and reintegration contexts—such as military-to-civilian transitions—because it centers on how people adapt to new roles, environments, and identities. Schlossberg categorizes transitions into three types based on predictability and perception:

- **Anticipated:** Predictable life events such as graduation or retirement.
- **Unanticipated:** Unexpected events like job loss or illness.

- **Non-events:** Expected transitions that do not occur, such as a promotion that never materializes.

Transitions are classified as anticipated, unanticipated, or non-events, depending on their predictability and the individual's appraisal of the situation (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 1981). Within this broader model, Schlossberg's 4 S System identifies four domains- Situation, Shelf, Support, and Strategies- that shape how individuals understand and cope with major life changes. Table 2 below summarizes the core components of the 4 S System.

Table 2

Core Components: Schlossberg's 4 S System

Domain	**Description**	**Scholarly Sources**
Situation	Timing, control, role change, duration, previous experience, concurrent stressors	(Anderson et al., 2012)
Self	Personal characteristics (e.g., age, health, socioeconomic status) and psychological resources (e.g., resilience, values)	(Goodman et al., 2006)
Support	Relationships, networks, and institutional resources	(Schlossberg, 1981)
Strategies	Coping responses such as modifying the situation, controlling meaning, managing stress	(Anderson et al., 2012)

The 4 S System shows how these four domains interact to influence the ability to adapt, cope, and thrive in the face of change. The system offers veterans a way to systematically understand the role of their internal resources, available support, and coping strategies that enable them to move from a military to a civilian model of functioning. This system is particularly relevant to veterans with limited experience in civilian work environments, as their

transition needs are typically characterized by the need to cope with, adapt to, and thrive amid multiple, intersecting psychological, cultural, and structural transitions.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), developed by Lent et al., (2017) is the second of the two theories used to guide this study. SCCT extends Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory to understand how individuals acquire career interests, make occupational choices, and remain in those choices over time. SCCT emphasizes three major pathways: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goal setting. All three pathways relate to how people make occupation choices and navigate occupation-based social structures in response to their environment. These same pathways are particularly relevant to veterans who must reinterpret their military experience in a civilian occupation while rebuilding confidence in a non-military occupation. They must also determine whether a civilian occupation aligns with the values and expectations of a previous occupation (Clemens & Milsom, 2008). Research based on SCCT and Transition Theory has shown that veterans' enhanced employment outcomes, compared to their peers, are related to their access to resources and social networks. Those with greater access to social networks and higher self-efficacy achieve better employment outcomes than veterans with limited access to resources and lower self-efficacy, who are more likely to be underemployed (Shepherd et al., 2021). The significance of these findings cannot be overstated, as they demonstrate that psychological and environmental factors continue to exert substantial influence on the careers veterans pursue after their service.

Transition Theory will help answer questions about evaluating transitions to new occupation-based social structures and about how resources can be marshaled to facilitate the

transition from one occupation to another. SCCT will help answer questions about how those resources are used once obtained, ensuring they are used to inform occupation-based decisions.

Figure 1

Applying TT and SCCT to the Military to Civilians Transition

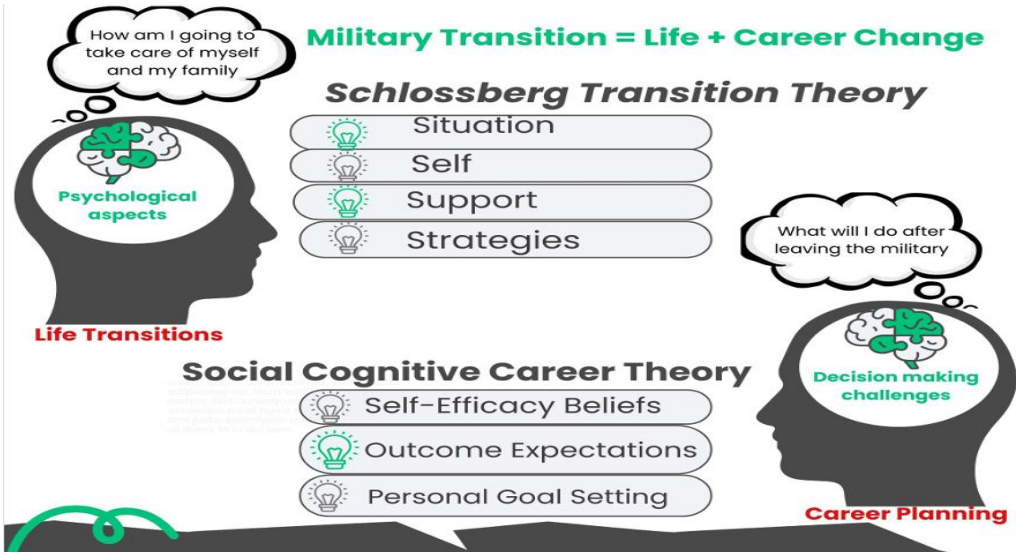


Figure 1 above illustrates how Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) apply to the military-to-civilian transition process, emphasizing both the emotional and career-related challenges veterans face. The military transition is both a life and career change, and veterans must navigate a range of emotional, personal, and career-related obstacles. The figure highlights those emotional challenges, such as how veterans will take care of themselves and their families, and play a crucial role in this transition process.

Schlossberg Transition Theory focuses on how veterans respond to life changes, focusing on four areas: the situation (their military separation), self (psychological resilience and identity), support (resources and networks available), and strategies (how veterans cope and adapt). These elements are essential for understanding the emotional and personal aspects of the transition, as veterans assess their readiness and develop coping mechanisms for the challenges they face.

However, SCCT adds an important layer by addressing the career-related aspects of transition. SCCT focuses on how veterans' self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goal setting impact their career decisions and actions in the civilian workforce. It helps explain how veterans perceive their abilities and career outcomes, guiding their engagement with career planning and decision-making.

Together, these two theories are interdependent. Schlossberg's Transition Theory provides the emotional and psychological context, explaining how veterans perceive and adapt to the life changes associated with transition. At the same time, SCCT addresses the cognitive and motivational processes behind career planning and personal goal setting. Without Schlossberg's Theory, the emotional and psychological barriers veterans face would be harder to understand, and without SCCT, we would miss the insights into the career planning and decision-making aspects of the transition. Both theories are needed to fully understand the complex, multidimensional experience of veterans transitioning from military to civilian life.

Research Design Overview

This study uses a basic qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive social constructivist paradigm to explore how military veterans with little to no civilian work experience describe their transition into civilian employment. Qualitative inquiry is well suited for examining personal transitions shaped by psychological, cultural, and structural factors, and a constructivist worldview recognizes that veterans' experiences are subjective, context-dependent, and socially constructed within military and civilian environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The study samples veterans characterized by heavy military work histories and minimal exposure to civilian work norms and expectations (Stone & Stone, 2015). These veteran

populations are known to struggle with adapting to civilian work settings, including skill acquisition, identity formation, and organizational culture adjustment. Studying the experiences of this veteran population helps answer the research question of which factors may pose challenges in the early phases of reintegration into civilian life.

Purposive criterion sampling, which uses snowball sampling as a supplemental sampling technique, will be used to ensure that study participants have minimal civilian work experience and may be representative of a population that cannot be accessed through formal structures. This method is practical for identifying individuals who may be expected to represent knowledge-rich and information-rich cases that align with the researcher's focus (Patton, 2015). The semi-urban population may be accessed via local veteran social networks (Noy, 2008). A sample sized group of 15 participants will be targeted. Qualitative studies suggest that 10-15 participants yield sufficient instances to saturate thematic analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data will be collected via semi-structured interviews that enable participants to express their views on their lived experiences while allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions about experiences that participants deem relevant to discuss. Data will be analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach, which adheres to Saldaña's (2021) guidelines for coding lived experiences. The rigor of qualitative findings will be assured through reflexive memoing, triangulation of all analytic processes, and member validation of the analyzed findings.

I acknowledge my positionality in my own interpretations and subjectivities regarding this topic, which are informed by my background and assumptions. Ethical considerations guide all phases of my research, particularly when studying populations of veterans who may have recently experienced traumatic life events.

Limitations and Delimitations of The Research

This study investigates how military veterans with limited civilian work experience navigate their transition to civilian employment through basic qualitative methods. While qualitative inquiry provides rich, detailed accounts of individual experiences, it also carries inherent limitations that shape how findings can be interpreted and delimitations that need to be acknowledged.

The research method of qualitative inquiry maintains its focus on specific contexts instead of pursuing universal applicability which quantitative studies aim for (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The research findings from this study will demonstrate the views of veterans who served in the military but do not represent all service members entering civilian employment. The research approach of qualitative inquiry will focus on detailed analysis instead of specific cases according to Maxwell (2013) which results in restricted applicability of findings to wider populations.

The research method that depends on interview data from participants creates three possible data biases because participants might remember events incorrectly or present themselves in a favorable light or interpret events based on their personal beliefs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Veterans tend to present their experiences through stories which match their personal stories and cultural norms thus affecting the accuracy of collected data.

The sample size of this study is sufficient for qualitative research, but the findings may not reflect the full range of experiences of all veterans transitioning to civilian employment, especially those without civilian work experience. Guest et al., (2006) demonstrate that thematic saturation can be reached through small participant numbers, yet researchers might miss essential variations in participant experiences.

Significance

This study will address a critical gap in the literature by focusing on a subgroup of veterans often overlooked in transition research: those with limited civilian work experience. By concentrating on the experiences of veterans entering the workforce without prior civilian-sector experience, this study will advance literature in the field. The findings will provide a deeper understanding of how veterans perceive this specific transition challenge and how the transition shapes their development of confidence in new roles, and their early career experiences in general. These insights have the potential to inform the development of more responsive transition policies and programs tailored to address these unique challenges. The input from veterans will be crucial in refining existing programs, such as TAP and SkillBridge, and in developing more adaptable approaches that go beyond standardized support models (Castro et al., 2015).

The findings will also have practical implications for human resource professionals. By understanding the specific challenges veterans face in integrating into civilian work environments, human resource professionals will be better equipped to assist veterans in adapting and succeeding. Organizations will benefit from the skills, training, and experience veterans bring, and by designing appropriate onboarding strategies, human resources can ensure that veterans' transition smoothly into new environments and are retained as valued members of the team (Stone & Stone, 2015). Furthermore, the research will create policy implications for both organizational and governmental levels. Ultimately, this study will enhance understanding of veterans' real-life transition experiences while promoting more equitable and efficient support systems.

Operational Definitions of Key Terms

Limited Civilian Work Experience: Limited civilian work experience is defined as having a work history that is almost exclusively military-based, with little exposure to civilian work norms, expectations, and structures (Stone & Stone, 2015; Hunter-Johnson & Al-Asfour, 2020).

Reintegration: The process of adapting to civilian employment norms, expectations, and culture after military service (Rattray et al., 2023).

Service Member: A person currently serving in the U.S. military, including both enlisted personnel and commissioned officers (GAO, 2024).

SkillBridge: A DoD program launched in 2011 that allows service members to gain civilian work experience during their final 180 days of service (GAO, 2024).

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT): A framework that explains career development through the interaction of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Lent et al., 1994).

Transition Assistance Program (TAP): A program established in 1991 to prepare service members for civilian life through workshops on employment, education, and benefits (Whitworth et al., 2020).

Transition: The process by which service members exit military service and re-enter civilian life, encompassing psychological, social, and occupational adjustments (Elnitsky & Kilmer, 2017).

Transition Theory: A transition as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Schlossberg, 1981).

Veteran: An individual who has served in the U.S. Armed Forces and has been discharged under conditions other than dishonorable (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023).

Post-9/11 veteran: Refers to any service member who served on active duty after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

Chapter 1 Summary

This study explores how military veterans with limited civilian work experience navigate the transition into civilian employment, guided by Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Anderson et al., 2012) focuses on four key domains: situation, self, support, and strategies, which interact to influence how veterans appraise and respond to their transition. SCCT (Lent et al., 1994) explains the psychological process underlying career development and employment outcomes, emphasizing self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goal setting. These frameworks form the basis for understanding psychological, cultural, and structural factors veterans face during their transition from military to civilian.

Programs like TAP and SkillBridge have been implemented to assist military personnel into transitioning to the civilian workforce. However, many veterans remain underemployed, dissatisfied with their jobs, and often leave their first civilian position within a year (Davenport et al., 2024; Keeling et al., 2018). This study, guided by a basic qualitative research approach Merriam and Tisdell's (2015), investigates veterans' expectations, barriers, and early employment experiences. Chapter 2 builds on this foundation, providing a comprehensive review of the literature related to military-to-civilian transitions, underemployment, workplace adjustment, and theoretical perspectives that inform the study's conceptual framework.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Chapter two examines the scholarly literature relevant to understanding how military veterans with limited civilian work experience navigate the transition into civilian employment. This chapter establishes the foundation for the study by reviewing what is known about veteran career transitions, identifying the distinct challenges faced by junior enlisted veterans, and outlining gaps in the existing research. The review is organized into five major sections: (1) veteran career transitions and civilian employment, (2) structured support programs, including the origins and evolution of TAP and SkillBridge, (3) key issues and barriers to workforce reintegration, (4) critiques and gaps in the literature, and (5) the multi-Theoretical framework guiding this study.

The central focus of this chapter is the subgroup of veterans whose professional histories are shaped almost entirely by military service. Their limited exposure to civilian workplace norms, hiring practices, and organizational cultures place them at a distinct disadvantage during transition. To situate this population within the broader literature, the following section outlines what is currently known about veterans with limited civilian work experience and identifies critical gaps that remain.

What is Known about Veterans with Limited Civilian Work Experience

Many enlisted service members enter the military directly from high school or shortly thereafter, resulting in little to no prior civilian employment experience (Hardison et al., 2017). Prior to enlistment, their work histories often include only short-term or low-skill jobs, limiting exposure to civilian workplace norms, hiring processes, and performance expectations (Kleykamp, 2013). Because their professional development occurs almost entirely within the

military, these veterans frequently lack familiarity with civilian organizational culture, including communication norms, HR systems, and evaluation practices (Cooper et al., 2022).

Crucially, junior enlisted service members (E1–E4) constitute by far the largest annual cohort to separate from the U.S. armed forces, representing well over 50% of all transitioning service members each year. Despite being the numerical majority, E1–E4 pay grades are remarkably under-researched in the existing empirical literature (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2025; Vogt et al., 2020). Prior transition scholarship has heavily drawn upon samples skewed toward senior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and commissioned officers—populations that typically possess greater administrative experience, higher educational attainment, and broader professional networks upon separation. As a result, the specific structural, cultural, and vocational barriers faced by junior enlisted veterans remain underrepresented in both academic literature and policy frameworks (American Enterprise Institute, 2025).

Veterans with limited civilian work backgrounds experience greater difficulty translating military skills into civilian job roles, particularly when employers struggle to interpret military occupational specialties or undervalue military experience (IVMF, 2025). These challenges contribute to higher rates of unemployment and underemployment among junior enlisted veterans compared to officers and senior NCOs (Kleykamp et al., 2024). Additionally, junior enlisted veterans are less likely to access advanced transition programs such as SkillBridge, which further limits opportunities to gain civilian work exposure before separation (Kleykamp et al., 2024).

Transition programs such as TAP increased awareness of available resources but do not consistently resolve employment challenges for veterans with limited civilian work histories,

especially those who separate at lower ranks (Hardison et al., 2017). Veterans frequently report difficulty navigating employer expectations, understanding civilian workplace culture, and translating military experience into civilian language (Sachdev, 2023). Structural differences between military and civilian organizations, such as hierarchy, communication norms, and performance evaluation systems, create cultural friction that complicates reintegration. These findings provide valuable context, yet they also point to areas where research remains limited, underscoring the need to identify what is still unknown about veterans' transition experiences.

What Remains Unknown

Despite growing attention to veteran employment, significant gaps remain in the literature regarding veterans with limited civilian work experience. Junior enlisted veterans are known to separate with "little to no prior civilian employment experience" (Hardison et al., 2017), yet the literature offers little insight into how they themselves articulate their transition experiences. Much of veteran-transition research focuses on officers or analyzing veterans collectively, leaving the distinct experiences of junior enlisted veterans largely unexplored (Peat et al., 2025).

Little is known about how rank, particularly E1–E4, interacts with limited civilian work experience to shape psychological, cultural, and structural challenges during transition. Existing studies do not adequately explore how these veterans interpret civilian workplace norms without prior exposure, nor how they make sense of employer expectations, organizational culture, or performance evaluation systems. There is also limited research on how transition unfolds within the first five years after separation, a period recognized as critical for reintegration and identity reconstruction (Kleykamp et al., 2024).

Furthermore, existing literature has not sufficiently explored how limited civilian work experience shapes long-term career identity formation. While some studies highlight employment barriers, they do not explore how veterans construct new professional identities, redefine success, or navigate mismatches between military and civilian cultures over time. These gaps underscore the need for qualitative inquiry that centers the voices of junior enlisted veterans and captures the complexity of their lived experiences. The following sections build on this foundation by examining broader research on veteran career transitions, structured support programs, and the key issues that shape workforce reintegration.

Veteran Career Transitions and Civilian Employment

Expectations and Identity Shifts

Military personnel face various challenges regarding their self-concept, job and career expectations, and occupational identity upon transitioning to civilian careers. The military has a highly formalized and mission-oriented culture. This culture shapes the strong occupational identity of military personnel through the completion of specific job tasks, a defined group purpose, and a set of social norms. In contrast, the civilian labor market has a less formalized structure and unclear job and social norms, which can create difficulties and identity conflicts for veterans in their work and societal roles. Based on the theory of reculturation, studies have shown that the psychological process experienced by military veterans when trying to readjust to civilian life is linked to the cultural identity shift model, where veterans undergo a cultural identity discontinuity as they attempt to reconcile their military identity with their new role as a civilian worker (Joseph & Jones, 2022).

Mitchell et al. (2020) found that identity disruption was a common issue faced by veterans upon transition to civilian life. Identity disruption is characterized by a discontinuity in

an individual's identity resulting from a traumatic event. The study found that identity disruption was associated with poorer psychological adjustment to civilian life and greater adjustment difficulties. The researchers suggest that self-concept is an important factor to consider when exploring the transition into civilian life (Mitchell et al., 2020).

Many veterans are accustomed to being flexible, to leading, and to working within a team and communicating effectively. These skills are acquired during their years of military service. However, in the civilian labor market, these skills are not necessarily acknowledged. There is a lack of understanding of the type and level of military training personnel receive within their Military Occupational Specialty (MOS). There is a lack of understanding that prevents veterans from having their skills recognized and formally accredited in a way that is understood by employers and by the hiring processes in the civilian labor market. This can lead to several negative employment challenges for veterans, including: a lack of clarity about the work and role of employment; the undervaluing of military skills and qualifications; and the longer time required to find employment that matches veterans' skills and capabilities (Kirchner, 2024).

These identity dynamics are all psychological and provide an insight into how veterans reconstruct their identity and adjust their expectations. Understanding identity reconstruction and adjustment is vital for developing effective support mechanisms for veterans that will improve their transition and employment outcomes.

Psychological Impacts of Transition

Ebaugh (1988) describes the emotional reactions veterans experience when exiting a central identity. Veterans must rebuild a sense of self after losing military rank, uniform, and mission-oriented work—elements that civilian environments rarely replicate (Brunger et al., 2013). Veterans who struggle to align their military experience with civilian job requirements

report higher anxiety and lower job satisfaction (Brunger et al., 2013). Unrealistic expectations about job placement and advancement further intensify emotional strain (Keeling, Kintzle, & Castro, 2018).

Campbell (2023) explains the transition process through Jungian theory by describing it as a liminal experience involving moving between two different worlds. Veterans frequently face loss of identity and life purpose during the transition to civilian life as they leave the structured roles and cultural context of military service and work to redefine their sense of self in new civilian environments (Misca et al., 2023; Sachdev, 2023). The new perspective becomes essential for veterans who experience civilian norm disconnection while seeking purpose in their new work roles.

Veteran with Disabilities

Veterans who have disabilities face additional obstacles during their transition process. The employment and learning environments need to provide trauma-informed support because Ostovary and Dapprich (2011) demonstrate how PTSD and TBI create additional challenges for veterans during their reintegration process. Many veterans experience ongoing physical and psychological challenges after leaving military service, and gaps in support systems can hinder their successful reintegration into civilian life (Vogt et al., 2022; Rattray, 2023).

Veterans follow diverse career paths shaped by personal background, institutional support, and societal perceptions. Understanding their readiness for civilian employment requires examining not only technical qualifications but also adaptability, confidence, and alignment with workplace expectations.

The Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program aims to help veterans with service-connected disabilities transition in preparing for, obtaining, and maintaining suitable

employment through vocational counseling, training, and employment services (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2025). However, unreliable guidance, severe understaffing, and limited job preparation are significantly reducing the program's effectiveness. As a result, many veterans are unable to successfully transition into the civilian workforce, often needing further time to adjust to new work environments, meet new expectations, and retain employment (Keenan, 2024; Veterans Benefits Administration, 2024). These persistent challenges point to deeper structural issues within federally mandated transition programs, making it necessary to examine the origins, evolution, and intended functions of TAP and SkillBridge to understand how current support systems shape veterans' employment outcomes.

Structured Support Programs: Origins and Evolution of TAP and SkillBridge

Transition Assistance Program

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 1991 (P.L. 101-510) established the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) through congressional action to support military personnel who lost their jobs after the Gulf War and post-Cold War military downsizing. The program started its mission to deliver complete transition guidance to military personnel who received involuntary separation from service (Kamarck, 2018). The military transition support system TAP introduced a new structured interagency model which replaced the previous GI Bill benefits package. The program expanded its services to provide support for all service members who leave active duty including National Guard and Reservists who served at least 180 days of active duty. The VOW to Hire Heroes Act (P.L. 112-56) from 2011 made TAP participation mandatory while establishing pre-separation counseling as a legal requirement for all service members (Kamarck, 2018).

The Obama administration launched the Veterans Employment Initiative Task Force in 2011 to transform TAP into the Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success) curriculum. The military lifecycle received enhanced career readiness standards and individualized transition planning support through revisions associated with the Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) to Hire Heroes Act of 2011, which mandated that eligible service members complete individualized counseling, develop Individual Transition Plans, and attend employment and benefits workshops to meet Career Readiness Standards (Federal Register, 2016; U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). The Department of Defense leads the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) through an interagency partnership with the Departments of Labor, Veterans Affairs, Homeland Security, Education, the Small Business Administration, and other federal entities. Under current law, TAP requires service members to participate in personalized initial counseling, employment readiness sessions, and VA benefits briefings before separation to better prepare for civilian employment (U.S. Congressional Research Service, 2024).

However, delivery remains inconsistent across installations, and many veterans report that TAP lacks depth and personalization (Keeling et al., 2018). Given these limitations in the TAP program's delivery and personalization, additional initiatives have emerged to bridge the gap between military service and civilian employment. One such initiative is the Department of Defense (DoD) SkillBridge Program, which offers service members real-world training and industry experience during their final months of active duty. The following section explores how SkillBridge enhances career readiness by connecting transitioning personnel with civilian employers and hands-on opportunities.

SkillBridge Program

The Department of Defense established the SkillBridge Program in 2011 to improve employment success for military personnel transitioning to civilian life. The SkillBridge program operates differently from TAP because it provides practical work experience through employer-led programs instead of classroom instruction. Service members can join civilian internships and apprenticeships and training programs through SkillBridge during their last 180 days of active duty while maintaining their military compensation and benefits (Kleykamp et al., 2024).

The program provides workforce readiness support through its civilian employment environment exposure programs which target readiness gaps. The program supports Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) by giving participants hands-on experience that helps them develop self-confidence and understand what outcomes will result from their actions (Lent et al., 1994). The program has experienced fast growth because it works with thousands of employers who operate in cybersecurity and logistics and healthcare and skilled trades sectors. The availability of SkillBridge participation remains inconsistent between different service members. The program requires approval from commanders, but the availability of opportunities depends on the specific installation and military branch. Service members face two main challenges when trying to join the program because they lack knowledge about it and encounter operational obstacles to enrollment (Kleykamp et al., 2024). SkillBridge stands as one of the most effective transition resources available to service members who have limited experience in civilian employment.

Effectiveness and Limitations

The two programs work together to support veterans through their critical and transformative transition period. The program provides TAP with essential knowledge and planning resources, yet SkillBridge delivers hands-on learning experiences.

The programs serve as vital resources for veterans who have no experience in civilian work. TAP provides basic orientation and planning tools, yet its program structure does not provide enough individualized support for identity transformation. The program provides contextual learning and confidence-building experiences, but its accessibility issues restrict its availability to certain groups. Yet access to SkillBridge is uneven, with approval subject to command discretion and awareness varying widely among service members (Kleykamp et al., 2024).

The program enables veterans to establish personal objectives and learn within specific contexts which helps them succeed in new work environments (Lent et al., 1994). The program's overall success depends on three interrelated factors, accessibility, quality of support services, and participant engagement, which must work together to produce meaningful outcomes for veterans transitioning into civilian life (Castro et al., 2015). Accessibility is essential, as veterans need clear entry points, flexible scheduling, and services that are available across diverse geographic and socioeconomic contexts; without such access, many are unable to receive timely support during critical transition periods, a challenge frequently noted in reintegration research (Elnitsky et al., 2017). Equally important is the quality of support services provided. Programs that offer relevant, in-depth career counseling, skill-translation assistance, and strong employer partnerships are far more effective in strengthening veterans' confidence and readiness for civilian employment (Hardison et al., 2015). Yet even the most comprehensive services cannot

succeed without active participant engagement. Veterans who attend sessions consistently, complete program activities, seek feedback, and apply learned strategies demonstrate higher levels of career self-efficacy and more successful transition outcomes (Clemens & Milsom, 2008). Together, these three factors, ensuring access, delivering high-quality support, and fostering meaningful engagement, create a supportive ecosystem that enhances veterans' ability to navigate the transition process successfully (DiRamio et al., 2008).

The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and SkillBridge are central to the Department of Defense's strategy for facilitating veteran reintegration. TAP, established in 1991, offers workshops on resume writing, interviewing, financial literacy, and career planning. However, its effectiveness has been mixed. A Department of Labor evaluation found that while TAP participants had higher employment rates at 12 months post-separation, the impact diminished by 36 months, suggesting short-term gains but limited long-term retention (U. S. Department of Labor, 2023).

SkillBridge, launched in 2011, allows service members to intern with civilian employers during their final 180 days of active duty. Veterans increasingly use SkillBridge to gain civilian work experience before transitioning out of the military, with over 50,000 service members participating in the program by 2023 and many moving into civilian roles following internships (Military.com, 2023

The most effective support for veterans without civilian work experience requires a combination of TAP and SkillBridge programs with personalized career guidance and professional mentoring. The practice of warm handovers, the quality of participating employers and post-program support services. The programs deliver separate benefits, yet they need to

which involves direct person-to-person connections between veterans and support agencies has become established as the most effective method (Castro et al., 2014).

However, access to SkillBridge is uneven, often limited by command approval, geographic location, and host availability, factors that disproportionately affect enlisted personnel and those stationed in remote areas (Zoli et al., 2015). Regarding SkillBridge, studies highlight systemic barriers to access (Wenger et al., 2024). Although SkillBridge is designed to provide civilian work experience prior to separation, actual participation heavily depends on unit commanders' discretionary approval (American Enterprise Institute, 2025). Junior enlisted personnel frequently face operational constraints, unit mission tempos, or command reluctance that systematically limits their ability to access and leverage these internships, widening the transition disparity between lower-ranking members and senior personnel (Wenger et al., 2024; American Enterprise Institute, 2025).

TAP, while universally available, may lack the tailored guidance needed to support veterans with minimal civilian exposure. Both programs reflect critical elements of Schlossberg's "support" and "strategies" domains, and their effectiveness is shaped by SCCT's emphasis on environmental constraints and outcome expectations.

While TAP and SkillBridge offer structured pathways to civilian employment, their effectiveness depends on how well they address the psychological, cultural, and career development needs of transitioning veterans. Even with these programs in place, many veterans, especially those with limited civilian experience, encounter persistent barriers that complicate their reintegration. The following section explores these key issues and barriers, including employment gaps, mental health concerns, cultural disconnects, and systemic inequities that shape veteran workforce outcomes.

Workforce Reintegration

Veterans transitioning to civilian employment encounter a complex array of psychological, cultural, and structural barriers. Research consistently demonstrates that veterans with limited or no prior civilian work experience encounter significantly steeper learning curves during their transition to the civilian workforce. These veterans often struggle with job search behaviors such as résumé development, interviewing, and networking because these skills are not emphasized in military environments (Clemens & Milsom, 2008). They also face challenges interpreting civilian workplace expectations, which differ markedly from the structured, hierarchical norms of military culture (Stone & Stone, 2015; Zoli et al., 2015). Additionally, veterans frequently report difficulty translating military-acquired competencies into civilian-recognized qualifications, particularly when their occupational specialties lack direct civilian equivalents (Carter et al., 2020). This section synthesizes the empirical and theoretical literature across fourteen key domains that govern veteran post-separation employment trajectories. It begins by establishing foundational definitions and structural roles before presenting a comparative matrix detailing transition outcomes across military pay grades. Next, the narrative examines the structural disparities inherent in enlisted versus officer transitions, establishing the foundational context for understanding the intersection of service-connected disability, rank, and post-service integration. Within this intersectional framework, the literature addresses the broader operational definitions of service-connected disabilities, the distinct impacts of physical and psychological conditions on civilian workplace performance, and the compounding effects of rank on long-term economic stability.

Subsequent subsections analyze the broader systemic and psychological barriers to successful labor market integration. Specifically, the synthesis explores employment gaps and

skill translation hurdles, the cultural shifts required when navigating civilian workplace environments, and the critical relationship between mental health and career stability. Finally, the chapter evaluates key structural facilitators and demographic nuances, including the role of continuing education in bridging vocational skill gaps, the compounding challenges of gender bias and regional economic disparities, and the protective effect of formal mentorship access during the transition process.

Understanding the influence of military rank on post-service employment outcomes is essential to contextualizing veteran reintegration. Differences in education, leadership exposure, and civilian readiness between enlisted personnel and commissioned officers shape not only career trajectories but also the types of support needed during transition. The following section explores how rank structure, particularly the divide between enlisted, noncommissioned, and commissioned officers affects veterans' ability to navigate civilian employment systems.

Structural Roles

Enlisted Personnel. Enlisted veterans, particularly those in junior ranks (E-1 to E-4), often enter the military directly from high school and may have limited exposure to civilian employment, higher education, or professional networking. As a result, they frequently struggle with translating military skills into civilian job language, navigating unfamiliar workplace norms, and accessing career-aligned opportunities (Zoli et al., 2015). These veterans are also more likely to experience underemployment and report lower levels of career satisfaction post-transition (Burnett-Zeigler et al., 2011)

Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs). NCOs (typically E-5 to E-9) serve as the backbone of military leadership, managing small teams and ensuring operational continuity. While they possess significant leadership and technical experience, they may still face challenges in

translating their skills into civilian contexts—particularly when their leadership experience is not formally credentialed or recognized by civilian employers (Cooper et al., 2018). NCOs often benefit from targeted support in resume translation, credentialing, and mentorship.

Commissioned Officers. Commissioned officers (O-1 and above), especially senior officers (O-5 and above), generally have college degrees and experience in strategic planning, personnel management, and interagency collaboration. These attributes often align well with civilian leadership roles, contributing to higher employment rates and post-transition salaries (Kleykamp, 2013). Military rank not only defines roles and responsibilities during service but also shapes the nature of veterans' reintegration experiences. Differences in education, leadership exposure, and civilian readiness across enlisted personnel, noncommissioned officers (NCOs), and commissioned officers contribute to varied employment outcomes and transition challenges. Understanding these distinctions is essential for designing reintegration programs that are responsive to veterans lived realities. Table 3 presents a comparative overview of transition outcomes by rank, highlighting typical roles, common barriers, and post-service trajectories supported by current literature.

Table 3

Comparative Chart: Transition Outcomes by Rank

Rank Group	Typical Roles & Background	Common Transition Challenges	Post-Service Outcomes	Scholarly Support
Enlisted (E-1 to E-4)	Entry-level personnel; limited civilian work or education experience	Skill translation, lack of credentials, unfamiliarity with civilian norms	Higher risk of underemployment; lower job satisfaction	Zoli et al., 2015; Goldman et al., 2021
Noncommissioned Officers (E-5 to E-9)	Tactical leaders; supervising small teams;	Difficulty translating leadership roles;	Moderate employment outcomes; benefit	Hardison et al., 2015; Mael et al., 2022

	technical experts	lack of formal credentials	from mentorship and credentialing	
Commissioned Officers (O-1 and above)	Strategic leaders; college-educated; managing operations and personnel	Cultural adjustment; identity disruption; adapting to less structured environments	Higher employment rates and salaries; more access to leadership roles	Mael et al., 2022; Giardello & Appel, 2019

Table 3 comparative table highlights several key subgroups, and the distinct reintegration needs each present. As you'll see, veterans are not a monolithic group. Their transition experiences vary widely based on factors like rank, occupational specialty, prior civilian exposure, gender, geography, and disability status. For example, officers or reservists who held civilian jobs during service often have clearer career trajectories and stronger professional networks. In contrast, younger enlisted veterans who entered the military directly from high school may lack familiarity with civilian workplace norms, resume conventions, or networking platforms like LinkedIn (Zoli et al., 2015; Mael et al., 2022).

Combat veterans may face moral injury or trauma-related challenges that require trauma-informed support and identity reconstruction (Litz et al., 2009). Women veterans often encounter gender bias and invisibility in hiring pipelines, while rural veterans may struggle with geographic isolation and limited access to programs like SkillBridge (Baechtold et al., 2009).

As illustrated in Table 3, military rank plays a critical role in shaping veterans' post-service employment outcomes. Enlisted personnel, noncommissioned officers, and commissioned officers each face distinct challenges based on their leadership exposure, educational background, and familiarity with civilian systems. However, rank alone does not fully capture the diversity of veteran experiences. To deepen this understanding, Table 4 expands

the analysis by comparing veteran subgroups across additional dimensions, such as gender, geography, occupational specialty, and prior civilian exposure.

Table 4

Comparative Table: Veterans Subgroups and Reintegration Needs

Veteran Subgroup	Key Characteristics	Reintegration Needs	Scholarly Sources
Limited Civilian Work Experience	Enlisted, entered military directly from high school; minimal exposure to civilian norms	Resume translation, workplace cultural orientation, mentorship, tailored TAP/SkillBridge access	Cooper et al., 2016; Zoli et al., 2015
Veterans with College or Civilian Jobs	Officers or reservists with prior civilian education or employment	Career alignment, advanced credentialing, leadership development	Hardison et al., 2015; Mael et al., 2022
Combat Veterans	Served in high-intensity roles; may experience trauma or moral injury	Trauma-informed support, mental health services, identity reconstruction	Brunger et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2020
Women Veterans	Often underrecognized; face gender bias and stereotype challenges	Gender-sensitive programming, peer support, visibility in career pipelines	Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Zoli et al., 2015
Rural or Remote Veterans	Limited access to services, employers, or SkillBridge hosts	Digital access, regional outreach, mobile career services	Forward Pathway, 2025; Keeling et al., 2018
Veterans with Disabilities	May have service-connected physical or psychological conditions	ADA-compliant career services, vocational rehabilitation, inclusive workplace accommodations	Hardison et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2018

This broader lens reveals how intersecting factors influence reintegration needs and highlights populations that may be underserved by generalized programming. For example, rural veterans may struggle with geographic isolation and limited access to SkillBridge hosts, while

women veterans often face gender bias and invisibility in hiring pipelines (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009).

By mapping these subgroups to common reintegration challenges, Table 4 reinforces the need for tailored support strategies that reflect veterans lived realities and align with both Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). These insights set the stage for a more focused examination of one particularly vulnerable group: enlisted veterans with limited civilian work experience. Among the various veteran subgroups, the contrast between enlisted and officer transitions is especially pronounced. Differences in education, leadership roles, and access to civilian networks shape how these groups experience reintegration. While commissioned officers often benefit from strategic planning experience and formal credentials, enlisted veterans, particularly those in junior ranks, may lack the foundational knowledge needed to navigate civilian employment systems. The following section explores these rank-based disparities in greater depth, highlighting how structural and experiential differences influence career readiness and engagement with programs like TAP and SkillBridge.

Enlisted vs. Officer Transitions

Commissioned officers (O-1 and above), particularly those at senior levels (O-5 and above), often possess baccalaureate or advanced degrees, extensive formal leadership experience, and established professional networks that align seamlessly with civilian managerial and executive roles (Gonzalez & Simpson, 2021).

In stark contrast, junior enlisted veterans —specifically those in the E1–E4 pay grades— frequently enter the civilian labor market with limited prior employment history, as their professional experiences have been shaped almost entirely by military service, leaving them with minimal exposure to civilian workplace norms and expectations (Stone & Stone, 2015). Junior

enlisted service members constitute by far the largest annual cohort to separate from the U.S. armed forces—representing well over 50% of all transitioning service members each year (Institute for Veterans and Military Families [IVMF], 2025; Vogt et al., 2020). Despite comprising this numerical majority, E1–E4 pay grades remain remarkably under-researched in existing empirical transition literature (IVMF, 2025; Vogt et al., 2020). Historical transition scholarship has heavily relied on samples skewed toward senior non-commissioned officers (E5–E9) and commissioned officers—populations that typically possess greater administrative oversight, higher baseline educational attainment, and broader institutional support networks upon separation.

Consequently, the specific structural, cultural, and vocational barriers faced by junior enlisted veterans are largely unrepresented in academic literature and policy frameworks (American Enterprise Institute, 2025). Many enlisted personnel enter military service directly out of high school or shortly thereafter with little to no prior civilian employment experience (Hardison et al., 2017). Their professional development occurs almost entirely within regimented military structures, leaving them uniquely unequipped to navigate civilian organizational cultures, human resources systems, and subjective evaluation practices (Cooper et al., 2022). While non-commissioned officers (E-5 to E-9) have attained mid-to-upper-level supervisory experience, junior enlisted personnel (E1–E4) occupy tactical, operational roles whose day-to-day duties lack formal civilian credentialing equivalents, making it exceptionally difficult to translate military occupational specialties (MOS) into competitive civilian resume language (Goldman et al., 2021; Hardison et al., 2015).

These compounding factors render junior enlisted veterans the sub-cohort most susceptible to early post-service underemployment, wage penalties, and career friction. These

disparities underscore an urgent need for rank-sensitive reintegration programming that moves beyond a generalized, one-size-fits-all approach. While rank plays a foundational role in shaping transition experiences, veterans across all levels face difficulty translating military-acquired skills, but this challenge is especially acute for junior enlisted personnel whose specialized tactical training lacks direct civilian market equivalents. These disparities underscore an urgent need for rank-sensitive reintegration programming that moves beyond a generalized, one-size-fits-all approach. Building on these rank-based structural differences, the next section examines the intersection of disability, rank, and transition.

Understanding the Intersection of Disability, Rank, and Transition

Junior enlisted veterans, it is necessary to examine how service-connected physical and psychological disabilities compound the transition process (Vogt et al., 2020). For readers unfamiliar with military structures, military service involves rigorous physical demands and high-stress environments that can result in long-term medical conditions (Vogt et al., 2020). When combined with the lack of prior civilian work experience typical of junior ranks, navigating disability ratings, healthcare systems, and workplace accommodations introduces an additional layer of vocational vulnerability (Perkins et al., 2020). The following subsections explore how these factors manifest for separating personnel.

Overview of Service-Connected Disabilities in Transition

A "service-connected disability" refers to an injury, illness, or psychological condition that was incurred or aggravated during active-duty service, officially recognized by the Department of Veterans Affairs, VA (Davenport et al., 2022). Transitioning service members often undergo medical evaluations as they leave the military to determine their disability ratings, which dictate their eligibility for ongoing medical care and financial compensation (Davenport et al., 2022).

However, the administrative burden of navigating the VA system while simultaneously trying to secure civilian employment creates significant stress during a period of major life disruption (Vogt et al., 2020).

Impact of Physical and Psychological Conditions on Civilian Employment

Physical limitations and psychological conditions, such as post-traumatic stress or operational hypervigilance, frequently alter a veteran's ability to perform specific types of civilian labor (Davenport et al., 2022). While officers and senior non-commissioned officers often transition into administrative or managerial roles where physical accommodations are easier to manage, junior enlisted veterans are more likely to have served in physically demanding occupational specialties (Perkins et al., 2020). When these service members separate with physical or invisible wounds, their employment options become even more restricted if they lack formal civilian credentials or alternative technical training (Vogt et al., 2020).

Intersection with Rank and Economic Stability

Disability status does not affect all veterans equally (Karre et al., 2022). Research indicates that junior enlisted veterans (E1–E4) face sharper economic shocks when managing service-connected disabilities post-separation (Perkins et al., 2020). Lacking the financial cushion, professional networks, or accumulated savings of higher-ranking personnel, disabled junior enlisted veterans are acutely vulnerable to underemployment, wage stagnation, and housing instability (Davenport et al., 2022). Examining this intersection underscores why targeted, rank-sensitive support systems are vital for ensuring long-term post-service success (Vogt et al., 2020). Building upon these compounding disability and rank factors, the subsequent section examines employment gaps and skill translation barriers.

Employment Gaps and Skill Translation

Veterans encounter a long-standing employment transition challenge because their military-developed abilities do not match what civilian employers seek (Zoli et al., 2015). Veterans' military service develops their leadership abilities, technical skills, and problem-solving competencies through demanding situations, which become more refined with time in service. The hiring process of traditional employers fails to recognize military skills because they focus on industry experience and standardized qualifications (Hardison et al., 2017). The difference between military skills and civilian job requirements results in underemployment and career stagnation, while veterans experience undervaluation of their abilities (Zogas, 2017).

The connection between military skills and civilian job requirements has gained rising popularity during the past few years. Resources enable users to convert military positions into civilian jobs through structured methods while showing them which qualifications are absent and building resumes that showcase relevant competencies. The tools face difficulties in delivering their services at equal levels to all users, especially to enlisted personnel and workers in non-technical fields.

Despite using available tools, veterans face difficulties when trying to explain their worth through language that matches civilian job postings. The military terminology consisting of acronyms, rank systems, and mission-based accomplishments creates challenges when converting it into corporate recruitment terminology (Zoli et al., 2015). Veterans often face barriers to employment because hiring managers struggle to interpret military experience and translate military occupational specialties into civilian job requirements (Stone & Stone, 2015). The language gap between military and corporate environments leads veterans to doubt

themselves which forces them to take lower-paying jobs that result in underemployment and prevent their career growth.

Soldiers who worked in infantry roles and combat engineering and logistics positions discover that bridging occupations offer them vital career advancement possibilities (Zogas, 2017). Transitional work experiences help veterans gain exposure to civilian work environments while developing industry-aligned skills and building résumés that meet employer expectations (Clemens & Milsom, 2008). Working in adjacent fields enables veterans to demonstrate their adaptability while building professional profiles that move beyond their military experience. Veterans who work in adjacent fields can prove their ability to adapt while creating professional profiles that extend past their military background.

Veterans need to show their achievements through quantitative data and business terminology while learning to use digital recruitment systems (Clemens & Milsom, 2008). The absence of structured career guidance, mentorship opportunities, and effective résumé-development training can hinder veterans' ability to compete in civilian job markets, limiting both job attainment and long-term career success (Morgan et al., 2022).

Veterans need to understand civilian workplace customs and social conduct because these differ significantly from military environments to succeed in their transition to civilian employment. The transformation of military skills into civilian recruitment standards requires specialized training for veterans who have no experience in civilian life. Veterans who lack experience in civilian life require specialized training to transform their abilities into formats that match typical civilian recruitment standards. Differences in communication styles, organizational hierarchy, and workplace norms may lead to feelings of alienation or identity disruption.

The following section examines veterans' cultural transformations during their transition and their effective methods for handling these changes. Even when veterans secure employment, the cultural shift from military to civilian workplaces can present significant psychological and professional hurdles.

Navigating Workplace Cultural Shifts

The process of military-to-civilian job transition requires more than task learning because it demands complete cultural adjustment to a new work environment. Military organizations base their operations on strict hierarchical systems, which demand clear mission understanding, disciplined behavior, and team-oriented responsibility. Civilian workplaces often rely on decentralized decision-making, ambiguous role structures, and employee autonomy, creating environments that differ sharply from the structured and hierarchical nature of military organizations (Mintzberg et al., 1976; Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992). The transition between military and civilian work environments produces psychological and social challenges for veterans because they face unclear feedback and unfamiliar workplace standards.

Veterans experience challenges when they need to adapt to work environments that lack centralized authority and use unstructured communication methods. The lack of understanding about military experiences among civilian colleagues together with unfamiliar workplace norms creates identity disruption and isolation and frustration for veterans (Shepherd et al., 2021). The emotional impact of this transition can be substantial, as many veterans struggle to rediscover meaning and develop a sense of belonging in their post-military lives (Smith & True, 2014).

Stone and Stone (2015) suggest that organizations that purposefully develop an onboarding program for transitioning veterans, which includes a mentor, cultural awareness training, and job task orientation that is tailored to the veteran’s abilities, have a higher rate of

onboarding success and retention (Cooper et al., 2018; Stone & Stone, 2015). Onboarding is an opportunity not only to discover the leadership potential of veterans but also to ensure an environment that is both inclusive and welcoming (Cooper et al., 2018; Stone & Stone, 2015).

The application of adult learning theory through andragogy in onboarding programs results in better outcomes because it focuses on relevant content and self-directed learning and hands-on experiences (Knowles et al., 2015).

Employers who create onboarding programs that match veterans' real-world experiences and individual learning approaches will create a smoother transition process that leads to enduring career success. The implementation of these initiatives delivers advantages to veterans while building a stronger organizational culture through the acceptance of different viewpoints and management approaches. Cultural adjustment is closely tied to emotional well-being, and for many veterans, mental health challenges complicate the reintegration process. Conditions such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression can undermine career confidence and disrupt employment continuity. The next section investigates the intersection of mental health and career stability, highlighting the need for trauma-informed support and identity-sensitive programming.

Mental Health and Career Stability

The stability of veterans' careers remains threatened by their ongoing mental health issues. The combination of PTSD with depression and anxiety affects many veterans who also experience physical injuries and chronic pain (Seal et al., 2009). The combination of these mental health issues creates problems that affect work concentration and social relationships and job performance which results in early job termination or reduced work hours (Davis et al., 2012). The workplace discrimination fears and social stigma prevent veterans from accessing mental health support and revealing their psychological needs at work (Sharp et al., 2015). The

Individual Placement and Support (IPS) evidence-based employment model shows superior results to traditional vocational rehabilitation by helping PTSD-affected veterans find lasting employment and earn better wages (Davis et al., 2018). The models focus on fast job placement and customized assistance and mental health service coordination.

The process of transition creates additional emotional challenges because veterans must deal with their mental health issues. Veterans struggle with depression and anxiety and PTSD because these conditions remain unrecognizable to most people in civilian life. The Social Readjustment Rating Scale developed by Holmes and Rahe (1967) shows that military separation stands as one of the most stressful life changes which affects veterans during their reintegration process. The absence of trauma-informed support allows stressors to damage self-confidence while blocking career progression. Service-related disabilities create additional obstacles for veterans to overcome. The study by Ostovary and Dapprich (2011) demonstrated that workers with service-related disabilities face discrimination because their workplaces lack trauma-sensitive environments and physical accessibility features. The authors recommend that organizations should establish inclusive HR systems and career services which support various requirements to create an environment where everyone feels included. Many veterans choose to continue their education because it helps them achieve career growth despite facing employment and identity-related obstacles. The process of academic navigation becomes challenging for students who lack experience with civilian educational frameworks. The following section examines how veterans use education to develop their skills while discussing institutional strategies for enhancing their academic and professional growth.

Bridging Skill Gaps and Continuing Education

Many veterans struggle to apply their military training to civilian jobs. Often, military education does not align with what you need for a license or degree to get a better job. Military training teaches many things and can be hard. But military training does not always give the things you need for a civilian license or a college degree (Zogas, 2017). This is why many veterans struggle to find jobs after leaving the military. Many veterans lack the education most jobs require (Vacchi & Berger, 2013).

Some colleges offer veteran advice, flexible classes, and peer mentoring. These services help student veterans stay in school and finish their studies (Vacchi & Berger, 2013). When veterans spend more time in school, they get the right papers for jobs after leaving the military. Education helps veterans begin civilian life and seek better work (Zoli et al.,2015). Education helps people get ahead in life. But gender bias and distance still make things hard for veterans. Women veterans and veterans from rural areas often have a harder time getting jobs. Women veterans and rural veterans may not find much support or struggle to demonstrate the kinds of work they did in the military (Zogas, 2017).

Gender Bias and Regional Disparities

Women veterans encounter numerous obstacles when returning to civilian life and seeking employment. They not only encounter sexism but also experience culture shock and feelings of isolation. Women veterans must find ways to navigate their role as women and adjust to societal expectations of women, as well as navigate the civilian workplace environment, all the while feeling excluded and marginalized due to their military experience. Smith et al. (2025) discussed the discrimination that women veterans encounter within many areas of life, especially in male-dominated professions, in which women experience high levels of sexism within the

workplace and feel marginalized due to their military experience, thereby hindering their opportunities to be considered and advanced into executive-level positions and to leverage their skills and experiences.

Greer (2017) argues that women veterans would benefit from specialized employment assistance programs that provide role models and peer support. She identifies several gender-specific employment challenges they experience, including gender stereotypes and a lack of female leaders.

Women veterans often report a larger struggle in readjusting to life in civilian society due to the large gap between what they learn while serving in the military and what is socially accepted as appropriate for women. Many women feel they do not fit into society and struggle to balance their military background with the social expectations they are supposed to meet (Smith et al., 2024). There is not a large understanding within the military about how gender impacts the service members' experiences, including Military Sexual Trauma and gender disparities (Eichler et al., 2021).

According to Clemens and Milson (2008), career counseling programs for women veterans should consider the gender-specific barriers they face. Counselors and educators must be aware of the dynamic interplay between military culture, gender, and the career aspirations of women veterans.

Women veterans who have children also experience barriers to the transition from military to civilian life. The barriers they face are intensified when women veterans with children reside in rural areas. Rural areas present a different set of challenges for women veterans due to their isolation and limited access to resources necessary for a successful transition back into society after serving in the military. Greer (2017) states, “because rural areas tend to have a

limited number of service providers and limited availability of support networks, rural veterans experience different types of barriers to care that may not be as noticeable in metropolitan areas."

Each barrier mentioned can be seen as an argument for more flexible, inclusive vocational training and reintegration programs tailored to women veterans' gender- and location-specific barriers. It is important to keep in mind that there is considerable diversity within the women veterans' group, and that their needs must be considered on an individual basis. In any case, women's needs must be addressed, regardless of their place of residence or individual situation. The overall objective will be to strengthen women veterans with the competencies they need to make full use of their skills and realize their full potential in the labor market. This also includes aspects of discrimination, as well as the possibility of being mentored and building a professional network.

Skills Gap and its impact on mentoring and networking. A sub-section that explores the impact of the skills gap. It is envisaged that this aspect of the skills gap will be highly relevant to the reintegration of women in the Armed Forces, as mentoring and networking will be fundamental to the stability of their new careers and to their successful transition back into the wider labor market.

Lack of Mentorship and Professional Networks

Veterans need professional networks and mentorship to succeed in civilian careers, yet they frequently do not have access to these essential resources. The military provides a structured promotion system, but civilian careers depend on personal connections and insider information (Stone & Stone, 2015). The programs create a sense of community among participants while offering specialized guidance that addresses their military background. Mentorship serves as a vital connection that helps veterans transition from military to civilian life by teaching them

about unspoken workplace rules and career development possibilities. The absence of mentorship is a critical gap in civilian employment systems. In the military, mentorship is embedded in daily operations and peer relationships. In contrast, civilian workplaces often lack these relational structures. Merriam (2005) and Hudson (1991) emphasize that adult transitions can foster deep learning and personal growth when supported by reflective practice and mentorship. Without such support, veterans may feel isolated and directionless, struggling to navigate professional development on their own. While the existing literature provides valuable insights into veteran reintegration, several critiques and gaps remain that limit the field's ability to fully address the needs of veterans with limited civilian work experience. These gaps span theoretical application, program evaluation, population diversity, and systemic barriers.

Critiques and Gaps in Literature

Overreliance on Generalized Veteran Narratives

A recurring limitation in veteran transition research is the tendency to treat veterans as a homogeneous group, overlooking the diversity of service experiences, ranks, occupational roles, and transition readiness levels. This overgeneralization has led to broad policy recommendations and program designs that fail to address the nuanced needs of specific subgroups—particularly enlisted personnel, younger veterans, and those from non-transferable military occupations.

Zoli et al., (2015) emphasize that veterans' transition experiences are shaped by multiple intersecting factors, including rank, age, gender, and military occupational specialty. Their study found that 55% of service members intended to pursue careers unrelated to their military roles, underscoring the disconnect between military experience and civilian employment pathways. Yet many transition programs and studies fail to differentiate between combat and non-combat roles

or between enlisted and officer ranks, despite clear evidence that these distinctions influence reintegration outcomes.

Kleykamp et al., (2023) further critique the public and policy discourse surrounding veterans, noting that generalized narratives often reinforce stereotypes and obscure the challenges faced by underrepresented groups. Their nationally representative survey revealed that public perceptions of veterans tend to emphasize heroism and resilience, which can mask the structural and psychological barriers encountered by those with limited civilian exposure.

Wenger et al., (2022) argue that federal education and employment programs often lack systematic data collection on veteran subgroups, making it difficult to assess whether these initiatives effectively serve diverse populations. They highlight that enlisted service members, who typically separate from the military around age 23 without a college degree, face distinct challenges that are not adequately captured in aggregate analyses.

This overreliance on generalized narratives not only limits the effectiveness of reintegration programs but also perpetuates inequities in access to support, career advancement, and identity reconstruction. Future research must adopt a more differentiated approach, incorporating rank, role, and readiness as key variables in both qualitative and quantitative studies. Much of the literature treats veterans as a monolithic group, overlooking the nuanced differences in service experience, rank, occupational specialty, and transition readiness. Studies often fail to distinguish between enlisted personnel and officers, or between combat and non-combat roles, despite evidence that these factors significantly shape reintegration outcomes (Zoli et al., 2015). This generalization obscures the unique challenges faced by those with limited civilian exposure, such as younger veterans or those from non-transferable military occupations. To fully understand these nuanced reintegration challenges, it is critical to move beyond

demographic generalizations and examine the psychological dimensions of transition, particularly those related to identity. Despite its relevance, identity theory remains underutilized in veteran transition research. The following section explores how limited integration of identity theory has constrained our understanding of how veterans reconstruct their sense of self during the shift from military to civilian life.

Limited Integration of Identity Theory in Veteran Transitions

In research on military-to-civilian transition, identity disruption is a common theme in qualitative studies. Very little of this work has engaged with the theory of formal identity development. One characteristic of military life is a clear sense of role and associated social identity. Leaving the military, veterans experience a state of isolation, disorientation, and liminality, because their military role and identity were so clearly defined and central to their everyday experience of self.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory is one of the most referenced theories in the counseling literature. It describes how an individual's situation, identity, and support and coping resources interact during a transition. According to Anderson et al. (2012), transitions refer to "change initiated by events outside the individual and accompanied by changes in intrapersonal state. For transitions to be accomplished successfully, adequate resources and support must be available. Barclay (2015) argues that many career development programs emphasize technical job-search skills—such as résumé preparation and job placement—while giving insufficient attention to the psychological dimensions of work and career transition.

The current theoretical gap hinders research on the veteran transition and the development of intervention programs. Current interventions focus mainly on the instrumental aspects of readaptation and, therefore, may not fully address the psychological aspects of the

identity shift faced by the veterans. Research into identity development, drawing on theories of adult development and depth psychology, would yield valuable insights into the processes involved in veterans' transitions and could help rehabilitate these individuals. Although identity issues are frequently mentioned in qualitative studies of veterans' transitions, these studies rarely use identity development theory. Although Schlossberg's Transition Theory is frequently cited in the counseling literature on veterans, it has not yet been fully applied to workforce development and program evaluation (Anderson et al., 2012). The assessment of the impact of these interventions on veterans is also too diverse to provide a comprehensive insight into the transition process they aim to support. The following subsection will describe the diversity of programs, and the possible paths veterans may take during their readaptation to civilian life.

Inconsistent Evaluation of Support Programs

Despite their prominence in military transition policy, the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and SkillBridge have been evaluated primarily through surface-level metrics such as short-term employment rates and participant satisfaction. These measures, while useful, fail to capture deeper outcomes like career persistence, identity reconstruction, and mental health stability, which are critical to long-term reintegration success.

For example, the U.S. Department of Labor's quasi-experimental evaluation of TAP found modest improvements in employment and wages up to 36 months post-separation but did not assess psychological adjustment or alignment with veterans' long-term career goals (U.S. Department of Labor, 2025). Similarly, the Milken Institute's report on SkillBridge highlighted its success in connecting veterans to high-demand jobs yet acknowledged limitations in access and a lack of longitudinal data on career progression and well-being (Klowden et al., 2025).

Whitworth et al., (2020) argue that TAP's narrow focus on employment preparation overlooks broader transition needs such as cultural adjustment, trauma response, and family reintegration. Their proposed "Success in Transition Model" calls for a more holistic approach grounded in transition theory and adult development, emphasizing the importance of psychological and contextual factors.

Few evaluations of veteran transition programs incorporate or reference theoretical models such as Schlossberg's Transition Theory or Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) that would provide theoretical justification for the interpretation of veterans' identity development, self-efficacy, and career adaptability skills and for the long-term integration of program information (Anderson et al., 2012; Lent et al., 1994). Even evaluations of high-impact programs like TAP and SkillBridge do not assess whether transition programs align with theoretical models of transition and career development or whether they provide information that veterans can interpret and use to build self-efficacy and adapt to changing circumstances (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). In the absence of theoretical grounding, evaluations cannot assess whether transition programs affect identity development, self-efficacy, and career adaptability.

Multi-Theoretical Framework

The multi-theoretical framework for this study integrates Schlossberg's Transition Theory (TT) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) to provide a comprehensive lens understanding how veterans with limited civilian work experience navigate the transition into civilian employment. Together, these theories offer a dual lens for understanding the complexity of veteran reintegration—one centered on emotional and identity adaptation, and the other on career decision-making, self-efficacy, and motivation.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory provides insight into how individuals appraise life changes, access support, and develop coping strategies during major life transitions (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The theory's 4S System—Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies—offers a structured way to examine how veterans interpret their separation from the military, navigate uncertainty, and reconstruct their identities in civilian contexts.

SCCT complements this perspective by explaining how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals shape career development and employment behavior (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT is particularly relevant for understanding how veterans assess their capabilities, respond to labor-market barriers, and make decisions about career pathways in environments that may not fully recognize their military experience.

By combining these frameworks, the study offers a structured approach to examining how veterans interpret their transitions, engage with support systems, and pursue meaningful civilian employment. This multi-theoretical foundation informs the study's design, data collection, and analytic strategies, ensuring that both psychological and career-related dimensions of reintegration are captured.

This multi-theoretical foundation also provides a basis for understanding how underemployment emerges during the transition process, offering a natural bridge to the next section. Understanding how these multi-theoretical constructs shape veterans' transition experiences also provide a foundation for examining underemployment, a persistent challenge that can be interpreted through the combined lenses of Transition Theory and SCCT.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

The Transition Theory developed by Schlossberg in 1981 serves as an essential tool to study how adults handle major life transitions. The elements demonstrate how people adapt

through their personal identity development and their access to resources and their ability to cope with challenges. The theory provides a complete understanding of role and responsibility changes through its analysis of these interconnected elements which makes it suitable for studying veteran adaptation from military to civilian life (Anderson et al, 2012).

Veterans experience major cultural and expectation shifts when they move from military to civilian workplaces, according to Demers (2011), which create challenges for their sense of purpose and identity and their ability to understand their role, particularly for those who lack experience with ambiguous tasks and casual communication methods. The Transition Theory identifies four key domains: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies—that influence an individual's ability to navigate transitions (Anderson et al., 2012). These domains are especially relevant for veterans, who often face abrupt shifts in identity, community, and purpose upon leaving military service.

Situation. Refers to the nature and timing of the transition, including whether it is anticipated or sudden (Schlossberg, 1981).

Self. Encompasses personal characteristics such as resilience, identity salience, and psychological readiness. Veterans often struggle with redefining their self-concept in civilian contexts, especially when their military identity was central to their sense of self (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Support. Includes interpersonal and institutional resources available to individuals as they navigate a transition.

Strategies. Involve coping mechanisms and problem-solving behaviors. Veterans who plan their transition and find mentors while using their educational benefits will achieve improved transition results (Castro & Kintzle, 2014).

Student veterans who receive institutional support and identity affirmation through Schlossberg's framework (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015) will maintain better academic success and psychological health. Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) model consists of coping strategies which include problem-solving and emotional regulation. The TT model applies best to role-exit situations because veterans need to transform their soldier identity into a civilian identity through a process that includes grief, uncertainty, and personal transformation (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). This identity transformation, while deeply personal, is also shaped by broader psychological and social factors that influence how veterans perceive their capabilities and career possibilities. This identity transformation, while deeply personal, is also shaped by broader psychological and social factors that influence how veterans perceive their capabilities and career possibilities. Understanding these perceptions requires a framework that not only accounts for emotional and contextual adjustment but also explains how veterans form beliefs about their skills, evaluate potential career paths, and set goals for their post-military futures. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) provides this complementary perspective by illuminating the cognitive and motivational processes that guide veterans' career decision-making during the transition to civilian employment.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1995) aligns with the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) by focusing on situational awareness, support systems, and coping strategies, which are essential for veterans navigating the transition from military to civilian life. TAP addresses these elements by preparing individuals for role changes and supporting them as they adapt to new environments, aligning with Schlossberg's framework of understanding the psychological and contextual demands of major life transitions. However, while TAP provides foundational information, it often falls short in helping veterans rebuild their sense of identity and develop the

coping mechanisms and support systems that are central to successful adaptation, as outlined in Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Social Cognitive Career Theory

While Schlossberg's Transition Theory highlights the emotional and contextual adjustments veterans make during major life changes, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) offers a complementary lens by focusing on the cognitive and motivational processes that shape career development. Developed by Lent et al., (1994) and grounded in Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory, SCCT emphasizes three interconnected components—self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals—that influence how individuals explore, choose, and pursue career paths.

Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in their ability to perform specific tasks (Bandura, 1997). Military service often strengthens veterans' confidence in leadership, discipline, and teamwork, yet many still feel unprepared for civilian job search behaviors such as interviewing, networking, or translating military skills into civilian language (Keeling et al., 2018). SCCT suggests that self-efficacy grows through mastery experiences, observing others, receiving encouragement, and managing emotional or physical reactions (Bandura, 1986). For veterans, this means that targeted support—such as feedback, modeling, and practice through mock interviews—can meaningfully strengthen their confidence in navigating civilian employment (Castro et al., 2014).

Outcome expectations involve beliefs about the likely results of one's actions. Veterans may enter the civilian workforce with distorted expectations shaped by stereotypes, misinformation, or previous negative encounters in civilian workplaces (Shepherd et al., 2021). These expectations can either motivate or discourage career exploration.

Personal goals setting serves functions as a motivational mechanism that directs and sustains career behavior (Lent et al., 1994). Veterans who engage in civic or community activities often develop stronger career self-efficacy and clearer direction, as these experiences reinforce their sense of purpose and capability (Clemens & Milsom, 2008). SCCT positions goals not simply as aspirations but as drivers of persistence, especially when individuals face uncertainty or barriers during transition (Lent et al., 1994).

SCCT has been widely applied to veteran populations because it captures both the strengths veterans bring from military service and the challenges they face when entering unfamiliar civilian systems. Research shows that career decision self-efficacy improves when veterans receive mentorship, experiential learning opportunities, and structured transition support (Bullock et al., 2020).

Importantly, SCCT also acknowledges the role of environmental influences such as socioeconomic status, cultural background, and access to resources. This makes the theory particularly relevant for veterans who experience systemic barriers, including women, racial minorities, and enlisted personnel with limited civilian exposure (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). For these groups, career advancement is shaped not only by personal beliefs but also by the opportunities and constraints present in their environments.

Alignment with Research Purpose

This study seeks to understand how military veterans with limited civilian work experience navigate their transition into civilian employment. By focusing on veterans' personal narratives, the research aims to uncover the psychological, cultural, and structural factors that shape their early workforce experiences and influence employment outcomes. The study draws on Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) to analyze how

veterans perceive and respond to life changes, barriers, and support systems. Schlossberg's theory categorizes veterans' transitions across four domains: situation, self, support, and strategies, while SCCT examines how veterans' self-efficacy, career expectations, and goals affect their engagement with support programs and perceptions of civilian employment (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 1994). These frameworks guide the study's exploration of how veterans interpret their transition challenges and how these experiences shape their career outcomes. This research will contribute to a better understanding of the reintegration process and inform more effective support practices for veterans.

Alignment with Research Questions

This basic qualitative study will be exploring the psychological, cultural and structural dimensions of veterans' transition experiences into civilian employment. Schlossberg's Transition Theory helps interpret how veterans perceive and engage with their transition, particularly regarding identity, coping mechanisms, and the support structures available to them, such as TAP and SkillBridge. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) explains the motivational and behavioral aspects of this transition, focusing on how veterans evaluate their career options, readiness, and perceived barriers. Constructs like self-efficacy and outcome expectations provide insight into why some veterans persist in finding meaningful work, while others may disengage or settle for positions below their qualifications. Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive, theory-informed approach to understanding veterans lived experiences and the factors that influence their reintegration into the civilian workforce.

Alignment with Methodology

This study employs a basic qualitative research design grounded in the interpretive paradigm. The goal is to understand how veterans make sense of their transition experiences,

including how they interpret expectations, barriers, and interactions with support programs. Basic qualitative methods are well-suited to this inquiry because they prioritize participants' perspectives and meaning-making processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The multi-theoretical framework enhances methodological rigor by providing theoretical anchors for interpreting participants' narratives. Schlossberg's Transition Theory and SCCT guide the development of interview protocols, coding strategies, and thematic analysis. For instance:

- Schlossberg's domains—situation, self, support, and strategies—inform the identification of themes related to identity disruption, cultural mismatch, emotional responses, and coping mechanisms.
- SCCT constructs—self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal setting—inform the analysis of themes related to confidence, career aspirations, and engagement with transition programs (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Moreover, the framework supports the study's focus on veterans with limited civilian work experience, a population often overlooked in reintegration research. By applying these theories to a specific subgroup, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of veteran transitions and offers actionable insights for improving transition support.

As the chapter has shown, veterans' experiences are shaped not only by their military backgrounds but also by the cultural, psychological, and labor-market conditions they encounter upon separation. With these insights established, the following summary synthesizes the major themes of Chapter 2 and sets the stage for Chapter 3 methodological approach.

Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter 2 provided a comprehensive review of the literature on military-to-civilian transitions, focusing specifically on veterans with limited civilian work experience. Schlossberg's Transition Theory (TT) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which offer complementary frameworks for understanding veteran's reintegration. TT helps assess how veterans respond to major life changes, which SCCT explains how veterans' self-efficacy, career motivation, and personal goal settings influence their engagement with the civilian workforce. The chapter highlights the challenges veterans face in translating military skills into civilian contexts, navigating unfamiliar workplace cultures, and accessing professional networks, especially enlisted personnel, younger veterans, and those with limited civilian work experiences. It underscores the need for tailored transition support on factors such as rank, gender and geography, and disability status.

Additionally, the chapter reviews the effectiveness of federal of federal transition programs like TAP and SkillBridge, revealing that while they offer valuable resources, they often fail to address deeper issues such as identity reconstruction and long-term career persistence. The problem of underemployment—affecting over half of veterans—is explored in terms of its economic, psychological, and identity-based consequences, including lower self-efficacy and higher turnover. The chapter concludes by presenting the Integrated Conceptual Framework for Veteran Career Transitions, which combines TT and SCCT to guide the study's analysis of veterans' emotional responses, identity shifts, and career motivations. This framework aligns directly with the research questions and methodology, providing a structured approach to exploring the complexity of veterans' transition experiences. The chapter sets the foundation for Chapter 3, which outlines research design and analytic strategies.

Chapter 3 Methodology

This chapter describes the methodological approach used in this study. The chapter begins by restating the purpose of the study and the research questions. It then discusses my positionality and subjectivity, philosophical assumptions, explains the rationale for selecting a basic qualitative research design, followed by a detailed description of the participant selection, data collection procedures, and analytic strategies. The chapter concluded with discussions of trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and the role of the researcher.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this basic qualitative study explored how military veterans with limited civilian work experience describe their transition into civilian employment.

This basic qualitative study was guided by one research question and three sub-questions: How do military veterans with limited civilian work experience describe their experiences with transition into the civilian workplace?

1. How do military veterans with limited civilian work experience describe their psychological challenges and support they encounter during their transition to civilian employment?
2. How do these veterans describe the cultural challenges and support they experience as they adapt to civilian workplace norms and expectations?
3. How do these veterans describe the structural challenges and support that shape their employment outcomes during the transition from active duty to civilian?

These questions are intentionally open-ended to allow participants to articulate their experiences in their own words and to support an inductive, meaning-centered analysis,

consistent with Saldaña's (2021) guidance that qualitative inquiry should prioritize depth, interpretation, and participant-driven meaning.

Researcher Positionality and Subjectivity

As a doctoral candidate and an education services specialist who works directly with service members, I occupy a position that brings both insider familiarity and a responsibility to engage in ongoing ethical reflexivity. Positionality refers to the researcher's social location and the ways it shapes the research process, including interactions with participants, interpretation of data, and the construction of meaning (Holmes, 2020). My proximity to the population enhances my ability to understand the context of military-to-civilian transition, yet it also requires deliberate attention to potential biases that may arise from my professional experiences. To remain aware of these influences, I maintained a reflexive journal and participated in peer debriefing throughout the study, practices shown to strengthen transparency and reduce unexamined assumptions (Berger, 2015).

When I worked with transitioning service members and veterans, those experiences strongly influenced my interest in exploring this topic. Over the years, many individuals have reached out to me, sometimes through platforms like LinkedIn, seeking guidance on translating military skills into civilian language, revising résumés, or preparing for interviews. These interactions have highlighted the unique challenges faced by veterans with limited civilian work experience, including adjusting to unfamiliar workplace cultures, interpreting civilian job expectations, and navigating potential stigma or misunderstanding related to their military background. These experiences have shaped my desire to better understand how veterans perceive the expectations placed upon them during the transition process and what barriers they encounter along the way.

By previously working as a transition assistance counselor, I am aware that my past experiences may shape the ways I constructed the research design, engage with participants, and make sense of their stories. Recognizing the power and privilege inherent in my position is essential. My prior work with veterans may unintentionally shape the types of questions I ask or the assumptions I bring into interviews. Veterans often receive a high degree of respect due to their service, and this dynamic can influence how they interact with me as a researcher. It is important to acknowledge that this respect, while deserved, can also create subtle power imbalances that affect the openness or direction of participant responses.

Power and privilege can also surface when working with individuals from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. For example, when engaging with veterans from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, I may unintentionally convey authority or expertise in ways that could be perceived as patronizing. Similarly, because much of my professional experience has been with veterans from specific service branches, I may inadvertently make assumptions about the experiences of veterans from other branches, which could lead to misunderstandings or incomplete interpretations of their perspectives. These risks underscore the importance of cultural humility and the need to avoid overgeneralizing based on my own experiences.

To navigate these complexities, I engaged in continuous reflection on my positionality, examining how my background, assumptions, and privileges might influence interactions with participants and interpretations of their stories (Bhattacharya, 2017). This process required acknowledging the limits of my own understanding, remaining open to perspectives that challenge my assumptions, and honoring the expertise that veterans bring through their lived experiences. By approaching the research with humility, respect, and a commitment to ongoing

self-reflection, I aimed to create a space where participants felt valued and understood, and where their voices could be represented with integrity.

Philosophical Assumptions

This study was guided by a set of philological assumptions consistent with basic qualitative inquiry and social constructivist worldview. Qualitative research assumes that reality is multiple, subjective, and co-constructed through human interaction rather than discovered as an objective truth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). From this perspective, knowledge emerges through participants' interpretations of their experiences and the meanings they assign to events, relationships, and contexts (Merrian & Tisdell, 2016). This study also assumes that individuals' experiences require attending to the contexts in which they occur (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because veterans' transitions are influenced by military culture, civilian labor markets, and programmatic support, these assumptions align with the study's aim of exploring how veterans interrupt and navigate their employment transitions.

Basic Qualitative Design

A basic qualitative design was selected to explore how veterans describe and interpret their transition experiences because of the study's broad focus on the participants' experiences. Qualitative research is particularly suited for capturing the complexity of lived experience and the meaning individuals assign to their social worlds (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This design aligns with the study's aim of centering veteran perspectives and generating nuanced insights into identity, expectations, and support barriers encountered during reintegration.

Participants

The study focused on the experiences of 10 U.S. military veterans in the rank ranging from E1- E4 who transitioned into civilian employment with limited civilian work experience

prior to or during their military service. Veterans shared these characteristics regardless of whether they separated after a single enlistment or retired after a full career, making limited civilian exposure a meaningful criterion for examining how military identity, skill translation, and workplace adaptation shape reintegration experiences (Zoli et al., 2015).

A combination of purposeful criterion sampling and snowball sampling was used in recruiting participants. Purposeful criterion sampling ensures that all participants meet specific characteristics central to the study's focus (Patton, 2015). Criterion sampling is widely used in qualitative research because it prioritizes information-rich cases—participants who can provide depth, nuance, and insight into the phenomenon under investigation (Miles et al., 2020). In this study, the defining criterion is having limited civilian work experience at the time of separation, which allows in dept examination of how veterans navigate the transition without extensive prior exposure to civilian workplace norms, expectations, or career pathways. By ensuring that all participants share this essential characteristic, the study examined the transition process with greater clarity and theoretical alignment. Participants meet the following criteria: they must have served in the U.S. Armed Forces (active duty), separated from service within the past five years, and entered civilian employment with limited prior civilian work experience. Additionally, participants should currently be employed, have been recently employed, or be actively seeking employment in the civilian workforce.

Limiting the sample to those separated within five years ensures that participants' experiences remain recent, relevant, and reflective of active transition process, which aligns with qualitative research standards emphasizing the importance of recovery in lived-experience inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Also, the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs classifies individuals within five years of separation as "recently separated veterans," recognizing this

period as one heightened transition needs and policy relevance (U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022. The criteria ensured that participants could speak directly to the study's central focus: how veterans with limited civilian exposure describe their transition into civilian employment.

Snowball sampling complemented criterion sampling by leveraging participants' social networks to identify additional veterans who meet the study criteria (Noy, 2008). This approach was particularly effective for populations that were difficult to reach through formal channels, such as veterans who are no longer connected to military institutions or who may not respond to broad recruitment efforts. Snowball sampling was especially valuable in communities where trust, shared identity, and peer referral influence participation (Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

Sample Size and Rationale

The study included approximately 10 participants ranking from the range of E1- E4 who were recruited through veteran service organizations, professional networks, and online platforms that support transitioning service members. This sample size aligned with qualitative research recommendations indicating 10 to 15 participants provide sufficient depth for thematic analysis without overwhelming the data collection and analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A focused sample allows for deep engagement with participants' stories while enabling cross-case comparisons that illuminate shared patterns and divergent experiences.

Recruitment Procedures

The recruitment strategy focuses on identifying veterans who meet the study's criteria and have direct experience with military-to-civilian career transitions. Email invitations were distributed through veteran networks, transition-focused organizations, and online communities.

This targeted approach increased the likelihood of obtaining participants whose experiences align with the study's purpose and enhanced the authenticity and relevance of the data collected (Patton, 2015).

Participants were recruited through the following channels:

- Veteran service organizations
- Professional and alumni networks
- Online platforms serving transitioning service members
- Peer referrals through snowball sampling
- Limited civilian work experience

Data Collection

Data was collected in a multi-step process that ensured the information is reliable, robust, and relevant to the research study. Recruitment began with the distribution of the flyer in Appendix B, which invites eligible U.S. military veterans to participant in a study exploring their transition into civilian employment. The flyer outlined the study's purpose, participation expectations, confidentiality assurances, and eligibility criteria, including age, years of separation, limited civilian work experience, willingness to provide rank at discharge and years of service, and willingness to participate in a one-on-one interview.

If individuals meet eligibility criteria and are interested in participating, they will be asked to reply to the recruitment email. Upon receiving their response, I followed up with additional details, including the consent form and scheduling options for the interview.

A protocol for interview questions was used, as outlined in Appendix A. Interviews were conducted via video call because some participants may be in different regions and time zones. Interviews were expected to last approximately 60 minutes, depending on availability and the

depth of discussion. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure the accuracy of the transcribed data. During the interview process, I took notes on key learnings, contextual information, and any observations that can be used to interpret the data. The semi-structured interview format ensured that all participants answer the same questions at a minimum but also allows for pertinent follow-up questions that relate to what the participant themselves finds of interest.

After each participant's interview, I explained the next steps for the research study, including where the data was stored and analyzed, and how the subsequent findings were used in this study. A summary of the interview was provided for each participant to ensure the accuracy of their responses and contributions to this research study.

Pilot Study

A pilot interview was conducted to evaluate the clarity, flow, and effectiveness of the interview protocol prior to full data collection. Pilot studies play an important role in strengthening qualitative research by helping researchers refine instruments, anticipate challenges, and improve overall preparedness (Malmqvist et al., 2019; van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). Although the pilot was originally designed to include two participants, only one veteran ultimately participated. Despite the smaller-than-planned sample, the pilot still provided meaningful insights that informed revisions to the interview process.

During the pilot interview, several observations emerged regarding question clarity, pacing, and the sequencing of prompts. The participant noted that a few questions felt repetitive or closely related, which signaled the need to streamline overlapping items. I also observed that some questions required additional context or rephrasing to elicit deeper, more reflective responses. As a result, minor adjustments were made to the wording of several questions to

improve clarity and reduce ambiguity. Additionally, the order of certain questions was modified to create a more natural conversational flow, beginning with broader, experience-based prompts before moving into more specific inquiries related to TAP or SkillBridge participation. These revisions align with recommendations in qualitative research literature emphasizing the importance of pilot testing to enhance instrument quality and interview effectiveness (Chenail, 2011).

The pilot also highlighted a practical consideration related to participant recruitment. Because one of the two planned pilot participants withdrew, I recognized the need for a more flexible recruitment strategy for the main study. To address this, I incorporated snowball sampling as a supplemental recruitment method. Snowballing was particularly effective in studies involving specialized populations, such as military veterans, because it leverages existing networks and increases the likelihood of reaching individuals who may otherwise be difficult to recruit (Noy, 2008). Including this strategy helped ensure a more reliable and consistent participant pool should any individual withdraw or become unavailable. Overall, the pilot study strengthened the interview protocol, improved the structure and clarity of the questions, and informed a more adaptable recruitment plan.

Protection of Human Subjects

All procedures were submitted for approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kansas State University. Participants who choose to participate in a semi-structured interview received informed consent forms outlining the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. They were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were assigned, and all data was stored on encrypted, password-protected devices (Tolich, 2004). To safeguard participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned in place of real names throughout the data

collection and analysis process. All data about this study is securely stored in K-State OneDrive and is accessible via passcode.

Data Analysis and Management

All transcripts and interview notes were stored on a password-protected device and in an encrypted cloud application to ensure the confidentiality of the data. Personal identifying information was removed during transcription, and participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The anonymized data were transferred to ATLAS.ti for coding and analysis, and a master codebook was created that tracks coding decisions, emerging themes, and any analytic developments throughout the study.

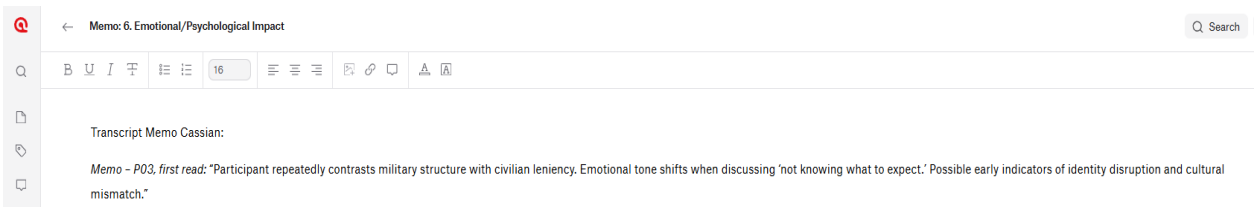
Data analysis began with reading all transcripts to ensure they are accurate and complete, consistent with established practices for preparing qualitative data for analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Once all transcripts have been verified, analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase model of thematic analysis, which retains flexibility and adaptability while also adhering to methodological standards to establish rigor.

Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data

I immersed myself in the data by reading each transcript multiple times, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) guidance that familiarization is the foundational step of thematic analysis. During this phase, I wrote analytic memos to capture early impressions, emotional tone, and contextual details (Saldaña, 2021), as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

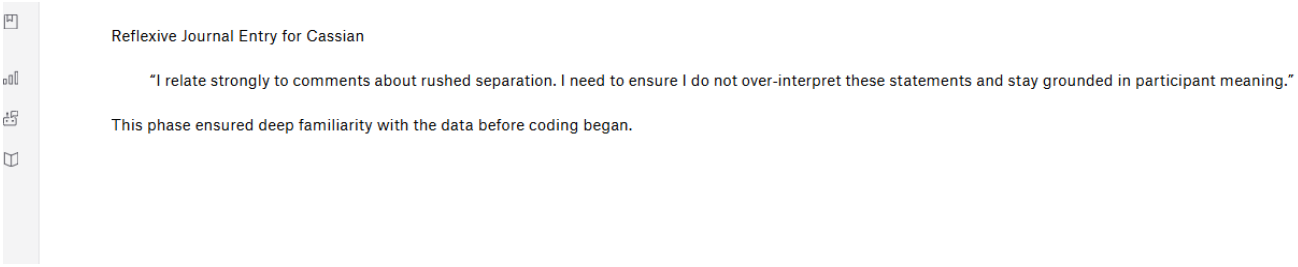
Example of Transcript memo-ing



I also engaged in reflective journaling to acknowledge how my own background as a transition professional shaped my interpretations. Reflective practice is essential for maintaining awareness of positionality and potential bias (Nowell et al., 2017), as captured in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Example of Reflective Journal Entry



This phase ensured deep familiarity with the data before coding began.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Coding began with a dual-cycle approach that incorporated both deductive and inductive strategies, consistent with Saldaña (2021) description of first-cycle coding. Deductive codes were developed prior to analysis based on Schlossberg's Transition Theory (4S System) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). These codes served as sensitizing concepts that guided early interpretation (Miles et al., 2020), encompassing situational elements and reality checks (e.g., ease misconceptions and cultural mismatches), self-dimensions (e.g., anxiety, fear of failure, and identity disruption), support systems (e.g., mentorship, family support, and resource access), coping strategies, and SCCT components such as self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and environmental barriers.

Simultaneously, inductive codes emerged directly from participants' narratives to capture experiences not fully represented by existing theory, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) emphasis on openness to new meaning. These organic codes included concepts such as invisible

wounds, surreal transition experiences, institutional distrust, redefining success, and belonging and identity loss.

To illustrate how these codes evolved during analysis, consider Amber's statement: *"It still feels kind of surreal…that fear of messing up."* Initially, this sentiment was coded deductively as anxiety and fear of failure. However, after iterative memoing and cross-case comparison, it transitioned into the more nuanced inductive code of a "surreal transition experience," reflecting emotional disorientation that was not fully captured by existing theoretical constructs alone (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Table 6 outlines the complete deductive and inductive coding structure, demonstrating how veterans' transition experiences emerged across the overarching themes.

Table 5

Deductive and Inductive Coding Structure Demonstrating How Veterans' Transition Experiences Emerged Across Themes

Sub-Theme → Overarching Theme	**Deductive Codes (Schlossberg + SCCT)**	**Emergent Codes (Inductive)**
1A. Cultural Mismatch → Theme 1: Expectations vs Reality	Situation; Strategies; Environmental Barriers; Rules & Regulations; Attendance; Being on Time; Engraved Experience	Grooming Norms; Workplace Leniency; Cultural Friction; Loss of Structure
1B. Emotional/Psychological Impact → Theme 1: Expectations vs Reality	Self; Self-Efficacy; Emotional Arousal; Anxiety; Fear of Failure; Stress Management; Overexertion	PTSD-Related Paranoia; Hypervigilance; Emotional Disorientation; Invisible Wounds
Theme 1: Expectations vs Reality (Overarching)	Situation; Outcome Expectations; Reality Check; Ease Misconception; Self-Efficacy	Surreal Transition; Identity Disruption; Redefining Success
Theme 2: Skill Translation Barriers	Situation; Outcome Expectations; Reality Check; Ease Misconception; Self-Efficacy	Surreal Transition; Identity Disruption; Redefining Success

Theme 3: Resource & Administrative Barriers	Support; Environmental Barriers; Lack of Support; VA Delays; Transition Challenges	Institutional Distrust; Navigation Fatigue; State-Level Gaps, DD-214 Issues
Theme 4: Economic Barriers	Situation; Environmental Barriers; Financial Shock;	"Sad Account"; Gas Money Stress; Hidden Costs; Minimum Wage; Living Paycheck to Paycheck; Pay Loss;
Theme 5: Support Systems	Social Support; Family Support; Mentorship; Emotional Support	Emotional Anchoring; Rebuilding Community; Restoring Stability
Theme 6: Bias/Discrimination	Situation; Environmental Barriers	Microaggressions; Civilian Misperceptions; Leadership Issues; Disability Bias; Rank Bias; Favoritism; Unequal Treatment

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

After coding all transcripts, I examined patterns across deductive and inductive codes. Codes were clustered into preliminary themes based on conceptual similarity and frequency, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) third phase. For example, analytic memos noted that codes related to cultural mismatch—such as attendance norms, leniency, and grooming standards—consistently appeared alongside emotional codes like anxiety and confusion, suggesting a combined theme around expectations versus reality. This phase produced an initial theme list comprising Expectations vs. Reality, Skill Translation Barriers, Resource Access & Administrative Barriers, Economic Barriers, Support Systems, and Bias and Discrimination.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

Themes were reviewed for coherence, internal consistency, and alignment with the dataset, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) recommendations for refining thematic structure. During this review process, codes that initially appeared as standalone categories—such as

"Cultural Mismatch" were re-examined against the full transcripts and recognized as subthemes operating within broader categories like "Expectations vs. Reality." Throughout this refinement, I revisited memos, reflective journal entries, and coded segments to ensure that the final thematic structure accurately reflected participant meaning rather than researcher assumptions (Nowell et al., 2017).

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Each theme was clearly defined, bounded, and named to reflect its analytic scope, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) fifth phase. For instance, the overarching theme of *Expectation vs. Reality* was defined as describing the contrast between veterans' anticipated transition experiences and the realities of civilian employment, including cultural mismatch, emotional disorientation, and unmet expectations shaped by TAP, military culture, or assumptions about veteran preference. This phase ensured conceptual clarity and analytic precision across the entire dataset.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The final phase involved weaving together the analytic story by integrating rich participant quotes, situating the findings within existing literature, linking the data back to Schlossberg's Transition Theory and SCCT, and explicitly demonstrating how the identified themes answered the research questions. This phase produced the comprehensive thematic narrative presented in Chapter 4, remaining consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2021) guidance for producing a compelling and rigorous qualitative account.

Trustworthiness

Ensuring trustworthiness is essential in qualitative research because it strengthens the credibility and rigor of the study's findings. This study follows the criteria established by

Lincoln and Guba (1985)—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—and incorporates updated guidance from contemporary scholars who emphasize methodological transparency and analytic rigor (Nowell et al., 2017; Morse, 2015).

Credibility

Credibility refers to confidence in the truth of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance credibility, Triangulation of data sources, the study incorporates member checking, and peer debriefing. Triangulation of data sources was used for multiple participants across different branches and ranks. Member checking involves sharing preliminary interpretations with participants to ensure their perspectives are accurately represented, a practice recommended by Nowell et al. (2017) to strengthen interpretive accuracy. Thick, rich description was detailed narrative and direct quote in chapter 4. Prolonged engagement with the data involved multiple rounds of coding and memoing. Peer debriefing with colleagues familiar with qualitative methods provides an additional layer of scrutiny, helping refine interpretations and reduce researcher bias.

Transferability

Transferability concerns the extent to which findings may apply to similar contexts or populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalization, it supports analytical generalization through rich, thick description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Detailed descriptions of participants' backgrounds, transition contexts, and workplace environments allow readers to determine whether the findings may be relevant to other veteran populations or reintegration settings.

Dependability

Dependability is related to the consistency or stability of the research process over time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance dependability, this study maintains an extensive audit trail that records decisions made within the methodological process, documenting coding procedures using both deductive and inductive coding cycles, theme development, analytic memos, and any modifications made during the study's execution. The use of an audit trail allowed external assessors to review the rationale and logic of the research process, Lincoln & Guba (1985).

Confirmability

Confirmability is the extent to which findings were reflected in the voice of the participant quotes and not that of the researcher, including assumptions that may have contributed to the findings Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance confirmability, this study employed reflexive journaling, which tracked the development of the researcher's perspective over time and recorded decisions made along the way that may impact objectivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The audit trail secured confirmability by providing access to all stages of analysis. Finally, the use of triangulation of data sources (i.e., interview narratives, field notes, analytic memos) ensured that what is derived from participants' voices and experiences is not the researcher's assumption (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Chapter 3 Summary

Chapter 3 introduced the methodological framework of this basic qualitative research study, including an explanation of the interpretive paradigm, research design, participant sampling, data collection techniques, and analysis procedures to determine how military veterans with limited civilian work experience describe their entry into the civilian workforce. Purposeful criterion sampling and snowball sampling strategies were used to select participants who met

eligibility criteria, yielding a final sample of approximately 10 veterans to address qualitative research on thematic saturation depth. Data was collected via semi-structured video interviews, with data stored securely and ATLAS.ti software used to organize and code the data. Data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis model, incorporating deductive and inductive insights and concepts drawn from the study's multi-theoretical framework. The chapter concluded with the design strategies for ensuring credibility (trustworthiness), reliability, transferability, dependability, and confirmability — to effectively interpret veterans' transition experiences.

Chapter 4 – Findings

This chapter presents the findings from interviews with ten U.S. military veterans (E1-E4) who transitioned into civilian employment with limited prior civilian work experience prior to or during their military service. Their narratives provide rich accounts of the cultural, emotional, structural, and economic challenges they encountered as they navigated the shift from military life to civilian. The chapter begins with an overview of participants' characteristics, followed by a presentation of thematic findings that emerged through a combined deductive and inductive coding process. Six overarching themes were identified, with Theme 1 containing two sub-themes that further illuminate the nuanced ways veterans experienced cultural and emotional disruption during transition. Each theme is presented with a descriptive narrative and supported by verbatim participant quotations to preserve the authenticity of their voices and honor the lived experiences shared during the interviews. All participants names used in this chapter are pseudonyms assigned by the researcher to protect confidentiality, as required by IRB protocol. Any identifying details that could disclose participant identities have been altered or omitted.

Participant Profile

Table 5 provides a demographic profile of the ten participants who contributed to this study. The participants represent branches of the U.S. Armed forces and span a range of military occupational specialties, ranks, years of service, and level of civilian experience prior to enlistment.

Table 6

Participant Demographic Profile

Participant	Gender	Branch	Rank	Years Served	Prior Civilian Experience	Military Occupational Service
Amber	Female	Air Force	E4	3 years	Sales	Transportation

Cassian	Male	Air Force	E4	5 years	Social Services	Maintenance Production
Jordan	Female	Army	E2	2 ½ years	None	Aviation Operations
Alex	Male	Air Force	E4	8 years	Retail	Maintenance Production
Chloe	Female	Air Force	E4	5 years	None	Aviation Maintenance Technology
Elise	Female	Air Force	E4	6 years	Factory worker	Aerospace Equipment
John Luke	Male	Air Force	E4	6 years	None	Aviation Maintenance Technology
Olivia	Female	Air Force	E4	5 ½ years	Factory	Aviation Operations
Bella	Female	Air Force	E4	5 ½ years	Day care/Wingstop	Aerospace Medical
Elijah	Male	Air Force	E4	7 years	Sales	Criminal Justice

Analysis of Narratives

Across participants, the transition into civilian employment was shaped by a powerful tension between what veterans believe would happen what they ultimately encountered. Many entered separation with optimism, confidence, and a sense that their service would naturally translate into opportunity. Yet, as they stepped into the civilian job market, they found themselves confronting realties that felt far more complicated, discouraging, and emotionally disorienting than expected.

Theme 1: Expectations vs Reality

Veterans entered civilian employment carrying expectations shaped by military culture, transition briefings, personal intuition, and societal narratives about veteran employability. These

expectations were not superficial, they were rooted in years of messaging that veterans are disciplined, reliable, and highly sought after in the civilian workforce. Yet, as participants described, the reality of civilian employment often diverged sharply from what they anticipated. For some, the transition felt surprisingly difficult; for others, it felt emotionally overwhelming or culturally disorienting. Theme 1 captures this foundational tension between what veterans thought civilian life would be and what they encountered.

Across interviews, participants described expectations that ranged from confidence to caution to outright anxiety. These expectations were shaped by their prior civilian experience, their military occupational specialty, and the narratives they absorbed during service. The mismatch between expectation and reality became one of the earliest and most impactful aspects of their transition.

Amber, who joined the Air Force after working two civilian jobs, entered transition with a sense of confidence. Her expectation of ease felt natural given her prior experience and the cultural messaging she received throughout her service. When asked about her initial expectations for post-military employment, she shared, “I would say…that would be kind of easy.” She clarified that she did not mean this in a boastful way, adding, “Not to sound like cocky or conceited or anything but it be kind of easy.” She elaborated with a belief shaped by years of military messaging: “Everybody want to hire vets.” Amber’s confidence reflected a common narrative veterans hear throughout their service—that employers actively seek out

Other participants carried different forms of expectation. Alex anticipated emotional overwhelm, sharing, “I expected it to be a little, I guess overwhelming since I hadn’t had to apply for a job in a professional environment.” His expectation was shaped not by confidence but by unfamiliarity with civilian hiring processes. Chloe entered with caution, explaining, “My

expectation was that it is going to be hard, I kept being told, you know, the job market is kind of hard right now for people to get jobs. That is kind of, like, my expectation." Her expectation was influenced by external narratives about the economy rather than internal confidence.

Jordan, who enlisted at 17 and spent her formative years in the Army, entered transition with a very different emotional landscape. With no civilian work history anchoring her expectations, she described feeling unprepared and unsure of what civilian employment would require. She shared, "I didn't know what to expect. I joined at 17, so I never had a real job before the Army." Jordan's experience highlights a unique vulnerability among younger veterans: transitioning into civilian life without any prior exposure to civilian workplace norms, hiring processes, or professional expectations. For Jordan, the unknown itself became the expectation.

Bella's expectations were shaped by formal transition programming. She shared, "My expectations were… I felt good and I felt they were high simply because of the TAPS program… TAPS is the Transition Assistance Program that allows members or veterans to be able to transition into the workforce or education or whatever they desire." She added, "I did want to go to school, but wanted to also try to work as well because of the skill sets that I have." Bella's optimism reflected trust in institutional support systems—yet even among those who expected difficulty, the reality still felt heavier than anticipated.

Cassian summarized this disconnect succinctly. He shared, "My expectation was that it would have been easy… but that's proven not to be the case." His experience mirrored the broader pattern: veterans often entered civilian life with hope, confidence, or preparedness, only to encounter a civilian employment landscape that felt indifferent, confusing, or unexpectedly challenging.

Subtheme 1a: Cultural Mismatch

One of the first and most noticeable observations made by the participants when going through the transition was the cultural gap between military and civilian work environments. Veterans described situations in which the norms, expectations, and routines typical of civil service seemed strange, although in some cases this was only evident in a subtle manner and in others more clearly. This was not due to veterans lacking skills or being unprofessional but was instead caused by the fundamental differences between the cultural approach of civilian workplaces and the structured, predictable, and accountability-oriented setting of military service. For many people, this kind of cultural mismatch led to emotional tension, confusion, and a strong feeling of being out of place.

Amber's experience captured how even small details can signal a cultural shift. She recently left a sales job that she described as "very military based," yet the supervisor had no military background. She explained, "It was kind of odd because the boss there at the company, he had no military background, so it kind of threw me in for a loop." What stood out to her were the subtle differences in expectations, details that might seem trivial to civilians but were deeply meaningful to someone shaped by military norms. She shared, "It was just like, a tiny bit leniency, because in the military… you weren't able to wear, like, lashes, or like… the regulations for the nails, you can't have a different… just small stuff like that."

These "small stuff" moments mattered because military structure had become part of her identity. Amber explained, "That is like okay, cool, it's just a cool transition… because now I ask employers, because this is engraved in me now, 'What are the rules and regulations on everything? Like, can we have our nails? Can we not have our nails?' You know." Her instinct to seek clarity reflected how deeply military expectations had shaped her sense of professionalism.

Cassian's experience highlighted a different aspect of cultural mismatch: attendance and punctuality. Although he had civilian experience before enlisting, he still noticed a stark contrast. He explained, "For me… it wasn't about military versus civilian because of commitment from the civilian flight prior, I kind of expected what was in front of me." Yet even with that familiarity, he encountered surprises: "There were some surprises when they spoke of attendance… folks calling in sick and all of that." He reflected on the cultural gap: "There seemed to be… I don't know if it's a new culture… when it comes to employees' commitment to being at work, being at work on time." He concluded, "The military is different in that regard… the work culture when it comes to attendance and being on time… the civilian side, it seemed to be lacking." His observation was validated by HR: "That is one of the work culture issues that they face." For Cassian, the mismatch was not about competence, it was about values. The military had ingrained a sense of punctuality and reliability that did not always translate into civilian norms.

Jordan's experience revealed the emotional and psychological weight of cultural mismatch. She described the shift in expectations between military and civilian environments: "When I was transitioning, I feel like transitioning mindset from going to work every day to being like, 'Okay, I got to get this done, this is what is expected of me,' and then the civilian world… they're just like, 'Yeah, we expect this of you, but if you can't reach those goals, then… like, that's okay, too.'' She contrasted this with military expectations: "In the military, they're like, 'No, you will be reaching these goals, because these are the goals we expect from you… so you will be reaching these goals.'" Her reflection revealed a deeper emotional truth: "So, it's more lenient on the civilian side, but the military was better… when it came to their expectations and pushing you to be better, and then the civilian world didn't really care about any of that."

Jordan also described how this mismatch shaped her expectations about employment: “I definitely thought that finding work and stuff after I got out the military was going to be a lot easier, especially since I had that military background, but getting out, it actually was a lot harder than what I thought it would be… I just assumed that since I was in the military, I had a foot ahead of other people, and that was not the case at all.”

Olivia offered a contrasting perspective, comparing her civilian job before the military to her military experience. She shared, “I’d have to say the civilian job I worked prior to joining the military, in my opinion, was a lot better.” She elaborated, “It was more freedom in how you could work, and how you could move… and it wasn’t someone constantly watching over your back or consistent basis of harassment that didn’t come with any kind of slap on the wrist.” She concluded, “Honestly, my experience as a civilian before the military was a lot better than me in the military.” For Olivia, the mismatch was not about civilian culture being too lenient, it was about the military being too restrictive, too surveilled, and too punitive. Her experience shows that cultural mismatch can cut both ways: some veterans struggle with the looseness of civilian workplaces, while others struggle with the rigidity of military environments.

These stories together demonstrate that cultural mismatch is not merely a single problem; it involves many obvious and subtle differences in areas such as expectations, communication, accountability, autonomy, and identity. The veterans did not have difficulties because they were lacking skills; rather, their problems arose from the way civilian workplace’s function, a way that usually differs from the strong norms experienced in military life.

Subtheme 1b: Emotional/Psychological Impact

Cultural mismatch showed the outside challenges veterans faced, but Sub-Theme 1B looks at what happened inside. Veterans talked about anxiety, fear, trauma, and stress that

affected how they handled work, relationships, and their sense of self after leaving the military. They saw transition as more than just a practical change. It was an emotional process where routines, expectations, and coping methods from military life started to fall apart. Many found the psychological effects of this change were deep, long-lasting, and more complicated than they expected.

Amber described the emotional weight of transition in a way that felt both vulnerable and deeply human. She shared, "I would say anxiety… my anxiety levels, they're high… but like, now that I'm out, it still feels kind of, like surreal." Her use of the word surreal captured the disorientation many veterans expressed—the feeling of stepping into a world that looked familiar but felt fundamentally different. Amber continued, "So, it's like that fear of messing up… I would say probably that." Her fear was not rooted in incompetence but in the sudden absence of the structure, clarity, and accountability she had relied on in the military. The civilian world offered more freedom, but with that freedom came uncertainty.

Jordan's experience highlighted the emotional contrast between military and civilian support systems. She explained, "The military world is big on helping you if you ever have depression or anxiety… if you ever feel bad or something." In the military, emotional struggle was met with resources, referrals, and structured support. But in civilian workplaces, she felt that emotional needs were invisible or dismissed. She shared, "In the civilian world, you just got to get up, go to work, figure it out… you're not allowed to really have bad days." Jordan contrasted this with the military's approach: "In the military… if you have bad days, they'll always try to give you resources for it. In the civilian world… they're like, 'No, you have to show up to your 9-5 today… we don't care if you're feeling bad or not.'" Her reflection revealed a painful truth: civilian workplaces often lacked the emotional scaffolding veterans had come to rely on. The

shift from a support-oriented environment to one that felt indifferent intensified her anxiety and sense of isolation.

Olivia's transition was marked by trauma, pressure, and psychological residue from her military experience. She described her separation as "Pretty terrible… my command tried to force me out at the end, and they tried to rush the entire process, so I didn't really get the full kind of TAPS." The rushed separation left her without adequate preparation or emotional closure. When asked how her military training influenced her ability to adapt, she explained, "In a corporate environment, I think the PTSD definitely added a great level of paranoia… and the amount of harassment that I experienced throughout the years of being in the military definitely makes me look at people a certain way." Her words revealed how trauma reshaped her interactions with others: "Mentally, I definitely end up side eyeing people and questioning a lot of different interactions with human beings." Olivia's experience demonstrated that emotional and psychological wounds do not disappear at separation—they follow veterans into civilian workplaces, shaping how they interpret interactions, trust colleagues, and navigate uncertainty.

Cassian, though less explicit about trauma, described emotional strain through the lens of disappointment and recalibration. His expectation that transition would be easy was met with unexpected difficulty, creating frustration and emotional fatigue. Chloe described entering transition with caution and fear, shaped by narratives about a difficult job market. Alex anticipated being overwhelmed due to unfamiliarity with professional job applications. Each of these emotional responses, fear, anxiety, overwhelm, caution—revealed the psychological complexity of transition.

Summary Theme 1

Together, these narratives illustrate the wide range of expectations veterans carried, and the emotional weight of discovering that civilian employment did not align with those expectations. Collectively, the veterans' accounts reveal a powerful and deeply human theme: they often entered civilian life with hope, confidence, or cautious optimism, only to encounter a civilian employment landscape that felt indifferent, confusing, and far more challenging than expected. Amber believed transition would be "kind of easy" because "Everybody want to hire vets." Alex anticipated overwhelming due to unfamiliarity with professional job applications. Chloe braced for difficulty because "the job market is kind of hard right now." Bella trusted the TAPS program and felt her expectations were "high." Cassian expected ease but found "that's proven not to be the case."

Jordan's experience adds a critical dimension: as someone who joined the Army at 17, she entered transition without any civilian work history to guide her. Her reflection, "I didn't know what to expect. I joined at 17, so I never had a real job before the Army." captures the profound uncertainty faced by younger veterans who must navigate civilian employment for the first time as adults.

Across these narratives, the mismatch between expectation and reality created emotional strain, cultural disorientation, and a sense of uncertainty that shaped the rest of their transition experiences. Theme 1 sets the foundation for understanding the subsequent themes: skill translation barriers, administrative obstacles, financial strain, support systems, and bias, all of which were intensified by the initial shock of realizing that civilian employment was not what they expected.

The accounts of Amber, Cassian, Jordan, and Olivia illustrate how cultural mismatch manifests in both subtle and profound ways. Veterans encountered differences in grooming norms, workplace leniency, attendance expectations, communication styles, and accountability structures. For some, like Amber, the mismatch appeared in small details that signaled a shift in identity. For others, like Cassian, it emerged in values around punctuality and commitment. Jordan experienced the mismatch as an emotional and motivational disconnect, while Olivia viewed civilian culture as more humane and less punitive than the military.

Collectively, these experiences show that cultural mismatch is not merely an adjustment, it is a deeply felt disruption that shapes how veterans interpret their place, value, and identity in civilian workplaces. This mismatch often becomes the first signal that civilian employment will not mirror the structure, clarity, or predictability of military life, setting the stage for the emotional and psychological challenges explored in Sub-Theme 1B.

The emotional landscape of transition was marked by anxiety, fear, trauma, and psychological strain. Amber described transition as "surreal," marked by high anxiety and fear of making mistakes. Jordan highlighted the stark difference between military emotional support and civilian indifference, explaining that in civilian workplaces, "you're not allowed to really have bad days." Olivia's experience revealed how PTSD, harassment, and rushed separation created paranoia, mistrust, and emotional exhaustion. Chloe entered transition with fear shaped by economic uncertainty, while Alex anticipated overwhelm due to unfamiliarity with civilian hiring processes. Cassian's disappointment and recalibration added another layer to the emotional complexity.

Collectively, these experiences show that transition is not merely a professional shift, it is an emotional journey that requires veterans to renegotiate identity, rebuild confidence, and

navigate environments that often lack the support systems they relied on in the military. The psychological impact of transition shaped every subsequent theme, influencing how veterans interpreted cultural mismatch, skill translation barriers, administrative challenges, financial strain, support systems, and bias.

Theme 2: Skills Translation Barriers

When veterans move from military service to civilian jobs, employers often fail to recognize their training, leadership, or technical skills. These disconnects leave veterans frustrated and invisible, as if their military experience does not matter. For many, it feels like a personal loss, making years of commitment, sacrifice, and growth seem less meaningful. Veterans described entering transition believing their military background would give them an advantage. They had been told repeatedly that employers value discipline, reliability, and adaptability. Yet when they began applying for jobs, they encountered barriers that made them question whether civilian employers understood the depth and complexity of military roles at all.

Bella's experience illustrates this disconnect with striking clarity. When asked to describe a memorable interaction with a potential employer, she shared a story that left her discouraged and confused. She explained, "So, one memorable would be, I applied for a position as a behavioral health patient care technician at a facility and I really looked to see if they had veterans' resources." She researched the organization thoroughly: "From what I could see through LinkedIn at the time, they did have resources available. They did have retirees that were in the Air Force as well that were actively working there. I could see from the LinkedIn profile."

Her preparation was meticulous. She submitted her resume, drafted a cover letter, prepared a thank-you letter, and even prewrote an email to the hiring manager. She shared, "I completed a cover letter, I already drafted a thank you letter, whether I received a position or did

not receive the position, I even had email set aside to make sure that I was still in correspondence with the hiring manager."

But within minutes of applying, she received a rejection: "Within maybe 20 minutes to an hour after submitting my application… I got notified… we regret to inform you that you are not the right fit for this position." She added, "I'm like did we even read my resume or my application? I was kind of confused and discouraged."

This moment was not just a rejection—it was a rupture in her belief that her military experience mattered. She explained, "That was definitely memorable for me because it kind of discouraged me. That was kind of the first, one of the first positions I applied for, and it kind of made me step back and kind of reevaluate what I should do next and how this process was going to hinder me."

Cassian's experience echoed this frustration. He explained that transitioning into a job like his military specialty might have been easier, but his path was different. "The challenges in finding employment… It's basically the same, because you come in, unless it's a job that you would have done in the military, and you're just transitioning to the same career field. I figure that transfer would be easier. Uh, but in my case, it's… It's a bit different." He elaborated, "I have a lot of skill sets and… I figured it would be an easier transition back to a career field that I'm more affiliated with versus jumping into… a new… line of work." His words reveal a quiet disappointment, the realization that even with broad skills, civilian employers often struggle to understand how military experience fits into their job descriptions.

Chloe's experience highlighted another dimension of skill translation barriers: the contradiction between job postings and actual hiring practices. When asked whether any skills or knowledge gaps became apparent during her job search, she chuckled—a sign of both humor and

frustration. She explained, “Yes, a lot of jobs were asking for… I mean, it says that no prior experience is required since they know that you're coming from the military, but when I applied for a lot of jobs… they would still require that you know at least something about their job.”

She described applying for a STEM position at NASA: “For instance, I applied for some, um, STEM job, that was happening in NASA. It was kind of like an engineering role, and I was actually pretty interested. It was, like, my number one pick.” But despite the posting stating no experience required, she was rejected: “But then they said that they don't feel like I… best, I'm the best candidate for that, because I don't have any experience.”

Her confusion was palpable: “Which is kind of weird, because obviously we wouldn't not have experience, seeing that we're coming from the military, and seeing that… we don't have many STEM field jobs in the military, if anything. So… That was, like, a challenge for me.” Chloe’s experience reveals a structural contradiction: employers claim to welcome veterans with no civilian experience yet still expect them to possess specialized knowledge they could not have acquired in service.

Summary Theme 2

Together, these narratives reveal a painful truth: veterans often discover that civilian employers do not understand military roles, do not recognize military training, and do not know how to interpret military resumes. The disconnects forces veterans to “start over,” pursue additional certifications, or accept lower-level positions despite years of experience.

The experiences of Bella, Cassian, and Chloe illustrate the profound challenges veterans face when translating military skills into civilian-recognized qualifications. Bella’s rapid rejection left her discouraged and questioning whether employers even read her resume. Cassian struggled to find roles that recognized his broad skill set. Chloe encountered contradictory job

postings that claimed no experience was required but still rejected her for lacking specialized knowledge. Jordan faced the unique challenge of entering civilian employment with no prior work history. Alex felt overwhelmed by unfamiliar hiring processes, and Olivia discovered that her military medical experience did not meet civilian credentialing requirements.

Collectively, these experiences reveal that skill translation barriers are not simply administrative, they are emotional, structural, and deeply personal. Veterans often feel undervalued, misunderstood, or forced to start over professionally. This theme underscores a critical reality: civilian employers frequently lack the frameworks needed to interpret military experience, leaving veterans to navigate a system that does not fully recognize the depth, rigor, or relevance of their service.

Theme 3: Resource & Administrative Barriers

In addition to challenges related to cultural mismatch and skill translation, veterans faced a range of resource and administrative obstacles that complicated nearly every aspect of their separation process. These barriers, including delays from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), issues with DD-214 forms, canceled relocation orders, inconsistent state resources, and confusing benefits processes, were significant rather than minor inconveniences. Participants characterized these obstacles as emotionally draining, time-consuming, and demoralizing. For many, such administrative failures resulted in instability during a period when clarity, support, and predictability were most needed.

Veterans frequently anticipated that the administrative aspects of transition would be structured and reliable, reflecting the procedural rigor characteristic of military operations. Instead, they encountered fragmented systems, miscommunication between agencies, and bureaucratic errors, all of which had tangible consequences for their families, finances, and

mental health. Cassian's experience captured the frustration of being denied access to a key transition resource. When asked about unexpected obstacles, he explained, "Not being able to do… the Skill Bridge Program. I applied… my leadership, they were like, no, you can't." His disappointment was palpable. SkillBridge is widely promoted as a pathway to civilian employment, yet leadership denial left him without access to one of the most valuable tools available to transitioning service members. His experience revealed how internal military decisions, often unrelated to a veteran's readiness or merit, can abruptly limit access to critical resources.

Alex's experience highlighted how administrative errors can cascade into major disruptions. He explained, "There were… some issues with my date of pay… that had to be updated, so I wouldn't go my last month without getting a paycheck." But the fix created a new problem: "When finance did that, it canceled my separation orders." The consequences were immediate and severe: "And that canceled, like, every other process, like my DD214." He continued, "When finance fixed it, they didn't go and tell MPF that they had to fix it on their end, they didn't go and tell AFPC that they had to fix the DD214 process… they just didn't say anything."

Alex discovered the issue only when he was two weeks from separation: "Nobody really realized until I was two weeks out of the military, asking where my DD214 was, and like, where my paycheck is." His frustration deepened when he realized he could no longer access base resources: "I'm having to… deal with those… like on-base Air Force organizations now that I'm out of the military and can't go on base." Alex's experience reveals how administrative breakdowns can leave veterans without essential documents, pay, or access—forcing them to navigate systems that no longer recognize them as service members.

Bella's experience demonstrated how administrative failures can disrupt not only the veteran's life but also their family's well-being. She described an unexpected challenge when preparing to move back to her home of record: "So the biggest one was the move itself. Initially, we had all my things situated to move. "We use a resource called TMO, and they help transition us and move us to our next location." But everything fell apart: "During that process, I found out that the order for all of my furniture and things to be shipped to my actual home of record… it was canceled due to a… some military-wide order."

Suddenly, she had no support: "So I had to figure out how to pack up my house and move out of the base housing at the time." She described the scramble: "I had to pack all my things, move it into storage… I had to give my keys from my car to one of my friends… she was able to help direct them to the storage unit… pick them up, as well as my car."

Bella's experience shows how administrative failures can force veterans to rely on personal networks to complete tasks that should be supported by military systems. Her challenges extended beyond relocation. Bella explained how her son's medical care was disrupted due to administrative gaps between states: "So, it affected my family. Specific… we'll start with my son. So, my son, he has severe eczema, and he also needs speech therapy."

She and her family prepared carefully before leaving California: "We made sure he had enough of his Dupixent… and along with that, we had all of his records." But upon arrival in their new state, everything stalled: "It was an issue with the care, the transfer of care."

She described the exhausting process: "We had to go through the same providers like the dermatologist… and we had to see a PCM all over again… instead of us being able to continue his care." The delays were severe: "Since he did have severe eczema, so that took almost a year for us to do, so that was difficult." His speech therapy evaluation was also rejected: "His speech

therapy… his evaluation was completed before we left California. They did not accept it when we came here." Bella's experience reveals how administrative fragmentation between states can create medical instability for veteran families, forcing them to repeat processes that should transfer seamlessly.

John Luke described a similar disruption during his relocation. He explained, "Leading up to it… the biggest one for me was, on my way out, shipping all of my stuff from Little Rock, Arkansas to South Carolina." The movers arrived unexpectedly early: "The movers showed up… an entire week before to take all my stuff." His retirement date was May 10th, yet the movers arrived the week prior: "They showed up on a Thursday, the week before my retirement." With no one available to receive his belongings, his leadership had to release him early: "My bosses literally just had to cut me loose an entire week early… to drive all the way down to South Carolina, because I had no one here to receive my stuff." He described the emotional toll: "It was a very tiring… I was really expecting the shipping things to go smoother than that." The lack of coordination forced him into a rushed, stressful relocation: "It was a pretty big obstacle to try to overcome… and they ended up just having to cut me loose a week before my retirement date."

Summary Theme 3

Together, these narratives reveal a pattern: administrative failures are not isolated incidents, they are systemic, recurring, and deeply impactful. Veterans often found themselves navigating complex bureaucracies without guidance, support, or clear communication. These barriers created emotional strain, financial instability, and logistical chaos during a period when stability was most needed. The experiences of Cassian, Alex, Bella, and John Luke illustrate how resource and administrative barriers shaped the transition process in profound ways. Cassian was denied access to SkillBridge, a key transition resource. Alex's pay update triggered a chain

reaction that canceled his separation orders and DD-214, leaving him without essential documents or access to base services. Bella faced canceled relocation orders, forcing her to pack and move her household alone, while also navigating a year-long disruption in her son's medical and speech therapy care. John Luke's movers arrived a week early, forcing him into an unplanned early departure and a stressful cross-country relocation.

Together, these experiences reveal that administrative barriers are not merely bureaucratic, they are deeply human challenges that disrupt families, delay benefits, create financial strain, and erode trust in institutional systems. Veterans often found themselves navigating fragmented processes without support, leaving them vulnerable during one of the most critical transitions of their lives. Theme 3 highlights that administrative failures are not background noise, they are significant obstacles that shape the emotional, logistical, and financial realities of veteran transition.

Theme 4: Economic Barriers

Financial instability became one of the most urgent and emotionally difficult problems that veterans encountered when making the transition from military to civilian life. Although military life provided regular pay, housing allowances, and access to subsidized services, civilian life brought about a sudden loss of income, low-paid jobs, and the need to handle several financial obligations simultaneously. For a great many of the participants, the move from the military financial system to the financial uncertainty of civilian life was not only stressful but also deeply destabilizing. The economic pressure influenced their decisions about the transition, influenced their mental health, and impaired their ability to take on training, education, or secure employment.

Veterans said that the move into financial independence was a shock, involving a sudden face-off with costs they had never had to bear before while being paid in a way that did not consider their experience or training. When they talked about it, the seriousness of this change was clear from the fear, frustration, and resilience they expressed. Jordan's story captured the raw reality of this financial turmoil. When asked about financial difficulties during her transition, she explained, "Financial struggles? I feel like, you know, being in the military as an E-2, I was making $750 on the 1st and the 15th." Her expenses were minimal: "I lived in the barracks… I wasn't married, didn't have kids, so I didn't have to really worry about any bills other than my car."

But civilian life was different: "So getting out, having to worry about my car, my apartment, and then like groceries and everything, and then only getting paid $7.25 an hour and working like 5 days out of the week, and then only making like $320 and my rent was $550."

Her voice reflected the exhaustion of living on the edge: "I was living paycheck to paycheck, so that definitely sucked." She described the lack of support: "They didn't give any resources for anything." Even overtime was restricted: "If I asked for overtime, they were very hesitant to give me overtime because it was extra money getting taken out the company." Jordan's experience revealed how quickly financial stability can collapse when veterans enter low-wage civilian jobs without support or guidance.

Elise described a different but equally intense financial strain. She explained how TAPS personnel warned her about the financial realities of transition: "Oh, that financial part, that'll shake you. If you are not financially prepared to get out, it'll rock you to your core." Her situation was precarious: "Prior to getting out when I did TAPS, I actually was… $13,000 in debt." She feared the consequences: "Outside of, obviously, having a job lined up outside of the

military, I was scared that does not work out for me, for whatever reason, and then I'm looking at… nothing. And that was horrifying to me." Elise turned to TAPS resources for help: "So, I actually used their budgeting book." She worked relentlessly to reduce her debt: "I planned on having that paid off by the time I'm completely out… so in June." Her story illustrates how financial strain can coexist with determination, and how veterans often must rely on their own discipline to navigate financial instability.

Bella's experience highlighted how economic barriers affect entire families. She explained, "So the financial difficulties would have been for sure going from active duty, we get paid the 1st and the 15th." Losing that structure was destabilizing: "So we lost that 1st and 15th pay. The pay was obviously increased as well. We weren't getting that at all." Her household faced a collapse in income: "And then going from a two-income household to a no-income household and down to a one income." She tried to bridge the gap: "I did go back to a position, working at the daycare only shortly, but it was enough to where I was able to do what I can until I was able to receive my full VA benefits." Bella's story revealed how financial instability can force veterans to take temporary jobs, delay career plans, and rely on partial income until benefits are processed.

Olivia's experience added another layer to the economic strain—one shaped by the immediate costs of separation and relocation. She explained, "Well, when I left separated, I used the last check that I got, which was on the 1st, before they take their time to process that last check that you get from the military in general." Her final paycheck became her only resource: "I use that mainly for gas money and my moving expenses, so my account is kind of sad at the moment." Olivia's words reveal the vulnerability many veterans face when their final military paycheck must stretch across relocation, basic needs, and the gap before civilian income or VA

benefits begin. Her “sad account” became a symbol of the emotional and financial depletion veterans often experience during transition.

Summary Theme 4

Across these narratives, financial strain was not simply a practical challenge, it was an emotional burden that shaped veterans’ sense of security, identity, and possibility. Economic instability influenced their decisions about employment, education, relocation, and family care. It also intensified anxiety, fear, and uncertainty during a period already marked by profound change. The experiences of Jordan, Elise, Bella, and Olivia reveal the profound financial challenges veterans faced during transition. Jordan went from predictable military pay to earning $7.25 an hour, living paycheck to paycheck, and struggling to cover rent and basic needs. Elise entered transition with $13,000 in debt and feared being left with “nothing.” Bella’s household went from two incomes to none, forcing her to take temporary daycare work until VA benefits arrived. Alex faced the possibility of missing his final paycheck due to administrative errors. Cassian’s denial from SkillBridge limited his access to paid training opportunities. Olivia and John Luke encountered unexpected relocation costs and disruptions that strained their finances.

Their stories show that economic barriers are not merely financial, they are deeply emotional and structural. Veterans often face sudden income loss, low-wage employment, and increased expenses without adequate support. These financial pressures shape their mental health, limit their career options, and influence their ability to pursue training or stable employment. Theme 4 underscores that financial instability is a central and defining challenge of the military-to-civilian transition, affecting veterans’ confidence, stability, and long-term well-being.

Theme 5: Support Systems

Veterans encountered a cultural mismatch, difficulties in translating their skills, administrative failures, and financial pressure, yet support systems proved to be one of the most stabilizing factors during their transition. The participants referred to support, whether it came from their family, mentors, peers, or from community resources, as something that gave them a sense of security, offered encouragement, and was essential for maintaining their emotional resilience. Although support systems did not remove the challenges of the transition, they lessened the emotional impact, gave people a sense of direction, and assisted veterans in regaining a feeling of stability at a time when things were uncertain.

For numerous veterans help was not right away on the horizon. A few experienced the transition period during times of loneliness, in the face of tenuous relationships or when there was instability within the organization. Others, on the other hand, obtained support bit by bit, via new leadership, encouragement from their families or through community networks. The emotional importance of these support systems appeared clearly in the way the participants spoke about them, they did not see them as optional facilities but as lifelines.

Elijah's experience illustrated how support systems can evolve over time. When asked how family, friends, and veteran groups contributed to his transition, he explained that support was initially limited: "For the first start of it, it wasn't very effective, because at the beginning of my career, I went to my duty station at the peak of COVID." The pandemic created isolation, disrupted routines, and limited access to mentorship. He continued, "And so, just during that time frame, before my first deployment, it just wasn't a good environment where I was at with the NCOs that I had overseas."

But support emerged later, transforming his experience: “By the time I came back, there was a new roster of leadership… beneficial and enlightening.” Elijah described how these leaders’ provided encouragement, guidance, and emotional support. “Without a doubt, some of them did PCS, and then, of course, it was hard to see them go, but of course, as everybody's service comes.” His reflection revealed how leadership can serve as a form of emotional anchoring, offering stability, mentorship, and reassurance during transition.

Elise’s experience highlighted the profound role of family support. She explained, “Yeah, my husband has been probably the biggest supporter of me getting out.” Her voice carried both gratitude and vulnerability as she described the fear of transitioning without a civilian job lined up: “It’s one of those things that he… was a big part of supporting me getting out, because… I was too sudden just not having the civilian job lined up; it would be just him. And that's scary to me, that's horrifying.” Her husband’s support provided emotional safety: “So having his support and knowing that if anything were to happen, he's got it… it's nice to know that he backs me.” Elise also described support from her father-in-law: “My father-in-law, his father, is also very supportive of me getting out.” Her experience revealed how family support can reduce fear, strengthen confidence, and provide a sense of shared responsibility during transition.

Amber described support from both family and the VA. She explained, “My family, they're happy for me to be back.” Her return home provided emotional grounding and a sense of belonging. She also described her experience with the Department of Veteran Affairs: “As far as, like, the Department of Veteran Affairs, they're different apartments.” While her quote is brief, it reflects the complexity of navigating VA resources, some helpful, some fragmented—but still part of her broader support network.

Summary Theme 5

Across these narratives, support systems were not merely helpful, they were transformational. They provided emotional anchoring, practical assistance, and a sense of community during a period marked by instability. Support systems helped veterans rebuild confidence, navigate bureaucratic challenges, and maintain hope when transition felt overwhelming.

The experiences of Elijah, Elise, Amber, Bella, Jordan, Olivia, Cassian, and Alex reveal the central role support systems played in veterans' transition. Elijah entered transition during COVID with limited support but later found encouragement through new leadership. Elise relied heavily on her husband and father-in-law, whose support eased her fear of financial instability. Amber found grounding in her family's happiness and navigated VA resources as part of her support network. Bella depended on friends to manage relocation challenges. Jordan leaned on family as she struggled with low-wage employment. Olivia found emotional support through peers who understood her trauma.

These stories show that support systems are not peripheral, they are essential. They provide emotional stability, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging during one of the most vulnerable periods of a veteran's life. Theme 5 underscores that transition is not a solitary journey; it is shaped by the presence, or absence, of people who listen, encourage, guide, and stand beside veterans as they rebuild their civilian identities.

Theme 6: Bias/Discrimination

Bias and discrimination appeared as a difficult and frequently surprising aspect of the experience's veterans went through when making the transition. The participants spoke of instances in which their military background, rank, disability status, or the stereotypes held about

veterans influenced the way employers saw them. These were not abstract experiences; they were very personal, filled with strong emotions, and often left veterans feeling isolated, misunderstood, or dismissed before they had the opportunity to show what they could do. In other cases, the bias was open and obvious, taking the form of explicit statements, discriminatory hiring practices, or workplace cultures that made them feel unsafe or undervalued. The fact that this issue reflects the emotional stress that veterans went through when civilian employers or colleagues did not see their military background as a strength but rather as a weakness shows this.

Elise's experience illustrated how bias can appear suddenly and without warning. When asked to share a memorable interaction with a potential employer, she described an incident that left her stunned. She explained, "Yeah, so there's the individual… probably won't mention who the company was. I was very excited to meet with them." But just hours before the meeting, everything changed: "I want to say an hour to two hours prior to the meeting, they had said that they weren't interested in hiring another veteran, because they already had one that was… I think this person was, like, a senior individual." The employer's reasoning was explicit: "They were a higher-ranking individual prior to, or after, during their military career, and then afterwards they were a manager supervisor, and I guess they just wanted someone who was equal to that."

Elise was left confused and hurt: "And I wasn't… I was a little bit shocked, but I was like, I don't… I don't think I've ever heard of that before, but okay. Alright." She added, "An hour or two warnings. That one was a weird one. That was a new one." Her experience revealed a troubling reality: some employers hold rigid assumptions about veterans, believing they must fit a certain rank, leadership profile, or personality type. Instead of seeing Elise's potential, they saw her as "not the right kind of veteran."

Olivia's experience highlighted a different form of bias, one rooted in her military environment and the trauma she carried into civilian life. When asked how she felt unprepared for certain aspects of civilian work, she explained that her military experience had been shaped by harassment, dismissal, and lack of accountability. She shared, "More as a civilian than the military, due to you can't… you essentially can't say anything in how they're moving now, especially the base I was at." She described how reporting issues was futile: "Even if you report, most of the time it's just dismissed, or they can't move forward with a case, or anything, so your command kind of gets away with all the bullshit they do." Her experience was not isolated, it was systemic: "A lot of it… between maintenance and security forces, a lot of it borders on… extreme harassment, annoyance, irritation, a constant, like, you're feeling on guard working with them."

Olivia's reflection revealed how military harassment and discrimination shaped her civilian expectations. She concluded, "So I'm very happy to be a civilian. I think I'll thrive." Her relief at leaving the military underscores how bias can shape not only transition experiences but also veterans' long-term sense of safety and belonging.

Summary Theme 6

The experiences of Elise, and Olivia, revealed the complex and painful ways bias and discrimination shaped veterans' transition into civilian employment. Elise was rejected because the employer "didn't want another veteran," preferring someone who matched a specific rank profile. Olivia described extreme harassment and dismissal within her military environment, shaping her expectations of civilian workplaces. These stories show that bias is not an isolated challenge, it is a pervasive barrier that affects veterans' confidence, emotional well-being, and access to opportunities. Bias and discrimination contribute to feelings of exclusion, frustration,

and mistrust, making the transition process more difficult and emotionally taxing. Theme 6 underscores that veterans' military identity, while a source of pride, can also become a point of vulnerability in civilian environments that do not fully understand or value their experiences.

The six themes show that the transition from military to civilian life is often more complicated, emotional, and difficult than veterans expect. Their stories highlight how their hopes sometimes clash with reality, and how feeling out of place affects their early days as civilians. Veterans also face challenges like trouble explaining their military skills to employers, dealing with paperwork, financial stress, lack of support, and bias from society. These issues can make it hard for them to feel secure in their new roles. Even so, veterans draw on the resilience, discipline, adaptability, and determination they gained during service as they try to find their place in civilian life, which is often not set up to support them. Together, these themes help us understand the bigger picture of what veterans go through during this transition, which is discussed further at the end of Chapter 4 Summary.

Summary of findings

The accounts given by the ten U.S. military veterans in this study show that the process of transition is not something that happens once, but a complicated one shaped by expectations, identity, culture, institutional systems, and the relationships people have with one another. The veterans described transition as an experience which had physical, emotional, and everyday effects on them. The six themes identified, Expectations versus Reality, Cultural Mismatch, Emotional and Psychological Impact, Skill Translation Barriers, Resource and Administrative Barriers, Economic Barriers, and Support Systems, together illustrate transition as a complex and highly personal matter. These experiences make it clear that hope, confidence, and self-worth met with difficulties in civilian systems which were unfamiliar, inconsistent, or not adequately

prepared to provide support. The emotional strain caused by cultural disorientation, the lack of recognition of their skills, and psychological stress affected the veterans' views of their roles in civilian workplaces and their attempts to rebuild their identities outside the military.

At the same time, veterans came up against structural obstacles which made their emotional difficulties during the transition worse. Problems such as administrative delays, the cancellation of relocation orders, fragmented medical care, and uneven state funding added to the instability they were already experiencing. Economic difficulties, such as a sudden loss of income, having to take low-wage jobs, and rising expenses, caused a large number of veterans to become financially insecure, which in turn had a negative effect on their mental health and limited their chances of securing stable employment or accessing further training. Encounters with bias and discrimination, such as stereotypes, assumptions rooted in rank, and workplace cultures that were exclusionary, also made the transition process more difficult. Nevertheless, support systems such as family, mentors, peers, and community networks acted as important sources of emotional stability and advice. In general, these findings show that transitions go beyond simply finding employment or going through the administrative procedures; it involves a major reevaluation of one's identity, sense of belonging, and stability. The themes described in this chapter form the foundation for Chapter 5, in which these findings will be linked to theoretical frameworks, the existing literature, and recommendations for improving the transition experience for future veterans.

Chapter 5 Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the multifaceted military-to-civilian transition experiences of enlisted veterans with limited civilian work experience. By examining transition through psychological, cultural, and structural lenses, the findings illuminate the practical significance of veterans lived experiences and highlight critical areas where transition programming, employer practices, higher education, and workforce systems can provide better support. This chapter synthesizes the primary findings related to the research questions, multi-theoretical framework integration, outlines practical implications, proposes recommendations for future research, and offers a conclusion.

Findings and Interpretations

Research Question 1: Psychological Challenges and Supports

Veterans described the psychological dimension of transition as an emotionally draining period marked by uncertainty, disruption, and diminished confidence. Many entered civilian life with expectations shaped by institutional messaging and TAP instruction, anticipating rapid hiring and clear career pathways, expectations reinforced by public narratives portraying veterans as highly sought-after candidates (Keeling et al., 2018; Kleykamp et al., 2023). Instead, they encountered unclear hiring processes, credentialing barriers, and steep competition from civilian applicants with specialized industry experience. This stark mismatch intensified emotional strain and eroded career self-efficacy, illustrating how unmet expectations compound psychological distress during major life events (Mitchell et al., 2020).

Identity reconstruction emerged as a central psychological hurdle. Participants described feeling trapped in a liminal state—no longer defined by their military roles yet not fully integrated into civilian professional identities (Demers, 2011; Ebaugh, 1988). This sense of

identity discontinuity heavily influenced their confidence, decision-making, and long-term career trajectories.

To counteract these psychological stressors, social support systems provide vital emotional grounding. Spouses, mentors, and veteran peers helped participants process anxiety, rebuild self-efficacy, and sustain motivation through periods of career uncertainty, underscoring the buffering effect of social support during critical life transitions (Clemens & Milsom, 2008; Goodman et al., 2006).

Research Question 2: Cultural Challenges and Supports

Participants consistently identified cultural mismatch as one of the most destabilizing aspects of their transition. Civilian workplace cultures differed intensely from military environments across communication styles, organizational hierarchies, and implicit behavioral norms. Direct communication was frequently misconstrued as abrasive, leadership experience was undervalued, and military professionalism did not always align with civilian expectations (Cooper et al., 2016; Shepherd et al., 2021). These cultural friction points routinely triggered self-doubt, interpersonal misinterpretation, and feelings of alienation.

Skill translation challenges further compounded this cultural adaptation process. Veterans struggled to articulate their operational military duties in civilian terminology, resulting in hiring misalignments and the undervaluation of their capabilities (Stone & Stone, 2015; Zoli et al., 2015) a struggle deeply tied to their professional self-worth.

Informal support networks served as crucial cultural bridges. Mentors, veteran peers, and culturally competent supervisors acted as interpreters, guiding veterans through unfamiliar workplace expectations, decoding unspoken norms, and helping them adapt their communication styles without relinquishing their core values.

Research Question 3: Structural Challenges and Supports

Structural administrative barriers were pervasive across participants' transition accounts. Participants reported inconsistent TAP delivery, significant delays in DD-214 processing, and unequal access to SkillBridge programs, outcomes that mirror national evaluations of military transition systems (Klowden et al., 2025; Whitworth et al., 2020). These administrative delays left veterans confused about their next steps and cut off from essential post-service resources. Over time, trying to manage a fragmented bureaucracy while searching for housing, work, or school took a heavy emotional toll—a burden many described as a deep, exhausting "navigation fatigue.

Financial instability further aggravated these structural hurdles. Facing abrupt income loss and difficulty securing sustainable work, many veterans experienced persistent economic strain (Davenport et al., 2024; Davis et al., 2012). This immediate financial pressure forced several participants to accept low-wage jobs below their skill level, impeding both immediate financial stability and long-term career mobility.

To handle these mounting obstacles, veterans relied heavily on practical assistance from spouses, mentors, and veteran support networks. These allies offered hands-on guidance, help decipher complex benefits, and shared job leads. In contrast, participants who lacked a strong support system felt far more isolated, making the already difficult task of managing transition systems on their own more overwhelming.

Multi-Theoretical Framework Integration

While Schlossberg’s Transition Theory captures the lived experience of navigating major life disruptions across the “4 Ss” (Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies), Social Cognitive Career Theory illuminates the cognitive mechanisms governing career self-efficacy, outcome

expectations, and goal persistence. Synthesizing these frameworks creates a powerful dual lens that accounts for both personal turbulence and professional recalibration during post-service reintegration.

Psychological and Identity Processes

Schlossberg's emphasis on the individual's appraisal of change explains veterans' emotional disorientation, identity disruption, and loss of institutional belonging (Goodman et al., 2006). SCCT complements this by explaining how these psychological disruptions directly impair self-efficacy, distort outcome expectations, and restrict career decision-making (Lent et al., 1994). Participants described a existing in a state of emotional liminality, suspended between their former military identity and an emerging civilian self. The findings show that identity reconstruction is not a secondary consideration; it is the cognitive foundation of reintegration that directly dictates a veteran's career self-efficacy and perceived professional mobility (Demers, 2011; Ebaugh, 1988).

Cultural Adaptation

Although Schlossberg's "Situation" dimension accounts for broad environmental context, participants experienced cultural friction deeper than the traditional model anticipates. SCCT complements this dimension by illustrating how cross-cultural divergence, such as misaligned communication styles or undervalued leadership norms, erodes career self-efficacy and degrades outcome expectations (Mitchell et al., 2020). Integrated, the two theories explain how veterans continuously negotiate the contrasting cultural systems, and how this ongoing friction influences their sense of workplace belonging and long-term career persistence (Cooper et al., 2016; Shepherd et al., 2021).

Structural Conditions and Systemic Barriers

Both frameworks recognize environmental supports contextual and barriers; however, empirical findings reveal systemic inequities, such as inconsistent TAP delivery, SkillBridge access gaps, and DD-214 processing delays, that extend beyond their traditional conceptual scope (Klowden et al., 2025; Whitworth et al., 2020). Rather than functioning as static background variables, these structural realities act as active institutional gatekeepers that constrain agency, diminish self-efficacy, and alter long-term mobility. These insights underscore the necessity of expanding classic career and transition models to account explicitly for policy-level dynamics and admirative friction.

Social Support and Relational Buffers

Schlossberg identifies social support as a vital coping mechanism, while SCCT explains the psychological pathways through which external encouragement bolsters self-efficacy and reinforces goal persistence (Goodman et al., 2006; Lent et al., 1994). Relational networks proved decisive across participant accounts: veterans with strong social backing experienced smoother transitions, whereas those lacking support suffered heightened isolation and anxiety Furthermore, workplace bias and civilian misperceptions presented distinct social barriers that neither model captures in isolation, highlighting the need for culturally informed support structures (Sharp et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2025).

Coping Strategies and Career Outcomes

In response to transition friction, veterans actively recalibrated career expectations, pursued targeted credentials, adapted their communication styles, and sought out mentorship. These proactive behaviors aligned directly with Schlossberg's "Strategies" dimension while SCCT explains how individual iteratively adjust their goals when confronted with environmental

barriers (Clemens & Milsom, 2008; Vacchi & Berger, 2013). Ultimately, coping strategies are inextricably linked to identity, cultural adaptation, and resource availability, confirming that military-to-civilian transition is a holistic, deeply interconnected cognitive and social process.

Implications

These findings illuminate the practical significance of veterans' transition experiences, highlighting concrete opportunities for the Department of Defense (DoD), Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), corporate employers, higher education institutions, and workforce development boards to enhance their support structures. Because reintegration outcomes are shaped by intertwined psychological, cultural and structural factors, interventions must be similarly cross-sectoral and aligned.

Practical Considerations for Military Transition Programs and Policy

Participants entered civilian life with expectations shaped by institutional messaging that often diverged from labor-market realities. Regarding the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), research emphasizes a critical need for individualization rather than a generalized, one-size-fits-all model (American Enterprise Institute, 2025). Because junior enlisted service members (E1–E4) enter the civilian workforce with minimal pre-service career history, standardized TAP curriculums are often insufficient to resolve individual employment friction, resume translation deficits, and early career mismatch (Wenger et al., 2024; American Enterprise Institute, 2025). Many participants anticipated rapid hiring, clear career trajectories, and immediate employer recognition of their military experience. Instead, they encountered cultural friction, skill-translation challenges, and financial strain. These experiences demonstrate the need for core transition curricula within TAP that provide realistic preparation for civilian hiring processes, workplace norms, and compensation structures. Unmet expectations heighten psychological

strain and diminish self-efficacy during military-to-civilian transitions (Keeling et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2020).

Furthermore, participants struggled to translate operational military duties into civilian terminology, a widespread challenge documented throughout the literature (Stone & Stone, 2015; Zoli et al., 2015). Addressing this gap requires transition programming that incorporates hands-on skill-translation exercises, industry-specific vocabulary development, and structured behavioral interview practice. Implementing robust translation tools can reduce early career mismatches and improve long-term employment retention.

Operational inconsistencies, such as uneven TAP delivery, delays in DD-214 processing, and unequal access to SkillBridge, were widely reported. Regarding SkillBridge, studies highlight systemic barriers to access (Wenger et al., 2024). Although SkillBridge is designed to provide civilian work experience prior to separation, actual participation heavily depends on unit commanders' discretionary approval (American Enterprise Institute, 2025). Junior enlisted personnel frequently face operational constraints, unit mission tempos, or command reluctance that systematically limits their ability to access and leverage these internships, widening the transition disparity between lower-ranking members and senior personnel (Wenger et al., 2024; American Enterprise Institute, 2025).

These administrative barriers created confusion, delayed progress, and restricted access to essential resources. Standardizing TAP delivery across branches, enforcing command-level compliance, and expanding equitable access to SkillBridge align with national evaluations of transition programming (Klowden et al., 2025; Whitworth et al., 2020). Streamlined administrative workflows and consistent resource access are especially critical for junior enlisted personnel who rely heavily on these services.

Enhancements for Employers and Workforce Development

Veterans in this study frequently experienced culture shock, unclear role expectations, and workplace bias that undermined their confidence and retention. These challenges highlight the importance of employers developing military cultural competency within hiring teams to better interpret military resumes, rank structures, and transferable skills. Culturally informed supervisory practices help mitigate misinterpretations of communication styles and leadership behaviors that contribute to workplace stigma and turnover (Sharp et al., 2015; Shepherd et al., 2021).

Onboarding also emerged as a critical factor in successful reintegration. Veterans reported greater confidence and smoother integration when employers provided clear feedback, dedicated mentorship, and psychological safety. Parallel to internal workplace changes, regional workforce development boards should offer targeted career counseling, credentialing assistance, and active employer engagement strategies that highlight veterans' core strengths. Coordinated employer-workforce partnerships play a pivotal role in reducing underemployment and establishing viable career pathways (Davenport et al., 2024).

Takeaways for Higher Education and Adult Learning

Many participants pursued higher education or vocational certifications to bridge gaps between military training and civilian licensing requirements. This aligns with scholarship showing that veterans often encounter credentialing barriers and institutional friction in academic environments (Vacchi & Berger, 2013; Zogas, 2017). To mitigate these obstacles, campus Veteran Resource Centers and academic advising department should provide specialized counseling tailored to student veterans’ unique life experiences.

Establishing transparent pathways that convert military training into academic credit reduces duplicate coursework and accelerates degree completion. Furthermore, flexible course delivery formats, such as hybrid or evening classes, help working veterans balance employment, family responsibilities, and academic demands with reduced stress.

Finally, adult-education programs serve as a vital function in long-term reintegration. Identity reconstruction, cultural adaptation, and skill translation remain central to veterans' academic and professional growth. Educators can enhance program outcomes by integrating identity development, career-readiness training, and culturally responsive advising directly into veteran-focused curricula. Creating learning environments that acknowledge the emotional and cultural dimensions of transition provides essential structure as veterans navigate new academic contexts.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of enlisted veterans with limited civilian work experience, several aspects of their transition warrant deeper empirical investigation. Grounded in both these findings and the broader literature, the following directions for future research address remaining gaps across psychological, cultural, and structural dimensions.

1. **Identity Reconstruction and Subgroup Dynamics:** Future scholarship should examine reconstruction, role discontinuity, and cultural friction more deeply. Participants frequently reported feeling suspended between their military identity and their emerging civilian persona. Comparative studies across rank, military, military branch, gender, operational specialty, and race would clarify how

different veteran subgroups navigate belonging, communication adaption, and organizational expectations (Demers, 2011; Ebaugh, 1988).

2. **Longitudinal Tracking of Structural Barriers:** Longitudinal research is needed to track how early structural inequities shape multi-year career trajectories. Tracking veterans over five-ten-year periods would determine how initial administrative friction, such as TAP inconsistency, delayed discharge paperwork, or restricted SkillBridge access, compounds or diminishes career opportunities, credential attainment, earning growth, and job stability over time (Klowden et al., 2025; Whitworth et al., 2020).
3. **Empirical Evaluation of Specific Intervention:** Researchers should evaluate the effectiveness of specific intervention strategies across transition programs, workplace environments, higher education, and adult-education settings. Rigorous evaluation of identity-focused modules, structure skill-translation workshops, trauma-informed supervisor training, and specialized academic advising would identify which intervention most effectively build self-efficacy and support long-term reintegration (Clemens & Milsom, 2008; Berger & Vacchi, 2013).
4. **Subgroup Disparities and Policy Impact:** Targeted research focusing on rural veterans, women veterans, and veteran with service -connected disabilities is essential to address subgroup disparities and ensure equitable resource access (Wenger et al., 2022). Furthermore, studies assessing real-world impact of recent policy updates, such as standardized TA delivery, expanded SkillBridge access, and streamlined credentialing pathways, will contribute valuable empirical data toward establishing evidence-based national practices.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the military-to-civilian transition is far more than a simple career change; it is a profound life transformation shaped by identity loss, cultural adaptation, and administrative friction. For many enlisted veterans with limited civilian work experience, leaving the armed forces proved emotionally taxing, culturally unfamiliar, and financially demanding. Reintegration required them to renegotiate their identity, decipher new workplace norms, and rebuild self-confidence in environments that often felt confusing or indifferent.

While Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) provided valuable lenses for interpreting these journeys, the findings extend beyond traditional models. Cultural disorientation, rank-specific barriers, and structural inequities emerged not as peripheral hurdles, but as central forces defining the transition experience. Consequently, effective transition policy cannot rely solely on employment placement. It demands a holistic approach that integrates identity development, trauma-informed support, rank-sensitive guidance, and consistent administrative execution.

Ultimately, veteran reintegration is neither linear nor uniform. Enlisted veterans reenter civilian life with deep resilience, adaptable leadership, and a strong commitment to service. However, their long-term success depends on civilian institutions, employers, universities, workforce boards, and policymakers, building systems that recognize and support those strengths. The path from military to civilian life requires moving beyond passive assistance toward systemic alignment across the Department of Defense, the Veteran Affairs, employers, and higher education ecosystems.

By grounding future policy and practice in lived experiences of veterans, we honor their service not just with gratitude, but with actionable pathways to long-term civilian success they truly deserve.

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Appendix A - Interview Questions

Expectations

1. Could you share if you had any civilian experience before joining the military?
2. What were your initial expectations about finding employment post-military?
3. What kind of civilian jobs have you pursued and why?
4. What kind of support or resources did you expect from civilian employers? What shaped those expectations?
5. How important was it for you to find an employer who understands veteran issues while searching for jobs after leaving active duty?
6. Overall, how would you describe your transition experience?

Experiences During Transition

7. Could you share details about one memorable interaction with potential employers during this transitional phase and its impact on your outlook toward future opportunities?
8. Where there moments within the civilian employer where everything clicked regarding understanding workplace culture versus military life? Can we discuss these instances further?
9. How did support systems, such as family, friends, and veteran groups, contribute to your transition, and how effective were they?
10. What kind of mentoring did you have as you transitioned to the civilian workforce?
11. What type of networking events were provided involved beneficial or least helpful in connecting individuals like yourself seeking meaningful careers outside armed forces?

Challenge

12. Can you describe some specific challenges you faced when transitioning from military to civilian job?
13. How did your previous military training influence your ability (or inability) to adapt to a corporate environment?
14. What were some unexpected obstacles that arose during your transitioning process?
15. How did your transition affect your family, and what kind of support did they require during this time?
16. In what ways do you feel unprepared for certain aspects of working in a civilian role compared to serving in the military?
17. Were there any skills or knowledge gaps that became apparent once you started looking for jobs? If so, can you elaborate on them?
18. What financial difficulties did you face when transitioning to a civilian job, and how did you handle them?

Appendix B- Flyer

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR A RESEARCH STUDY

Understanding the transition challenges of military veterans with limited civilian work experience

About the Study
This research explores how veterans with limited civilian work experience describe their transition into civilian employment.

What Participation Involves
Your insights will help deepen understanding of the psychological, cultural, and structural factors shaping veterans' early employment experiences.

- Participation involves sharing experiences in a one-on-one interview, 60 minutes via video call
- All information and data will remain confidential

Eligibility

- Age 18 or older
- Served in the U.S. Armed Forces (active duty)
- Separated from service within the past 5 years
- Held an enlisted rank within the E1-E4 pay grades at the time of separation
- Entered civilian employment with limited prior civilian work experience (e.g., no more two civilian jobs or less than one year of civilian employment)
- Currently employed, recently employed, or actively seeking employment in the civilian workforce
- Willing to provide your rank at discharge and years of service
- Willing to participate in a one-on one interview
- Able to communicate in English

Why Participate?
Your insights will help deepen understanding of the psychological, cultural, and structural factors shaping veterans' early employment experiences. This study seeks to understand the transition challenges of military veterans with limited civilian work experience

Interested in Participating?
Researcher: Katrina White
Email: katrin11@ksu.edu
Phone: (501) 617-0712

Appendix C- Participant Invitation Email

Subject: Invitation to Participate in a Research Study on Veterans' Transition to Civilian Employment

Dear Veteran,
I am writing to invite you in a qualitative research study titled "Understanding the transition challenges of military veterans with limited civilian work experience". This study is being conducted as part of a doctoral research project in the field of adult learning and leadership studies.

The purpose of this study is to explore how veterans with limited civilian work experience describe their transition into civilian employment. You are invited to participate because your experiences may offer valuable insight into this important topic. Participation in this study will involve a one-on-one, semi-structured interview lasting approximately 60 minutes.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. Prior to participation, you will be asked to review and sign an informed consent form that outlines the purpose of the study, procedures, potential risks, benefits, and measures taken to protect your confidentiality. A copy of the consent form is attached to this e-mail. All data will be kept confidential, and any identifying information will be removed or anonymized in research reports and publications.

If you meet the eligibility criteria listed below and are interested in participating, please reply to this email. I will follow up with additional details including the consent form and scheduling options.

Eligibility:

- Age 18 or older
- Served in the U. S. Armed Forces (active duty)
- Separated from service within the past 5 years
- Entered civilian employment with limited prior civilian work experience (e.g., no more two civilian jobs or less than one year of civilian employment)
- Currently employed, recently employed, or actively seeking employment in the civilian workforce
- Willing to provide your rank at discharge and years of service
- Willing to participate in an interview
- Able to communicate in English (if applicable)

Thank you for considering this invitation. Your experiences and insights are deeply valued and have the potential to contribute to a better understanding of how to support veterans during their transition to civilian employment.

Sincere appreciation,
Katrina White