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Understanding UK Armed Forces Veterans Career Guidance Needs: A Systems Theory Framework Approach

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Context of the study

- Transitioning from the military to civilian work and securing employment is often defined as a key indicator of a successful transition for UK military veterans
- The majority of veterans are employed within six months of leaving the military, employment rates are similar to the general population (MOD, 2023)
- However, those who are unable to secure employment can experience a poor transition in terms of economic and financial, health and well-being, relationships
- **Should securing employment within six months of transitioning to the civilian labour market be a key indicator of success?**



The influence of individual factors on initial employment outcomes

- **Demographic** (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, etc.)
- **Individual** (e.g., length of service, rank, service, reason for leaving the military, etc.)
- **Combination** of factors reported to lead to poorer employment outcomes

The influence of military experience on initial employment outcomes



- **Social capital** (i.e. social networks with colleagues in the military, other veterans, military contacts)
- **Military qualifications and skills** (i.e. interpersonal skills, self-management)
- **Transition adjustment** (i.e. loss of identity, loss of camaraderie)



What does success look like?

- Much evidence on veterans' transitions focusing on career stage, career decision-making; adjustment to civilian life, relational influences and identity transformation
- Research defines success for veterans as **being content** with their situation, **having financial stability, achieving a better work-life balance, having job satisfaction**, and **taking enjoyment and pride in their work**
- **Gap in understanding these in the context of longer-term employment outcomes from the perspective of the military veteran**

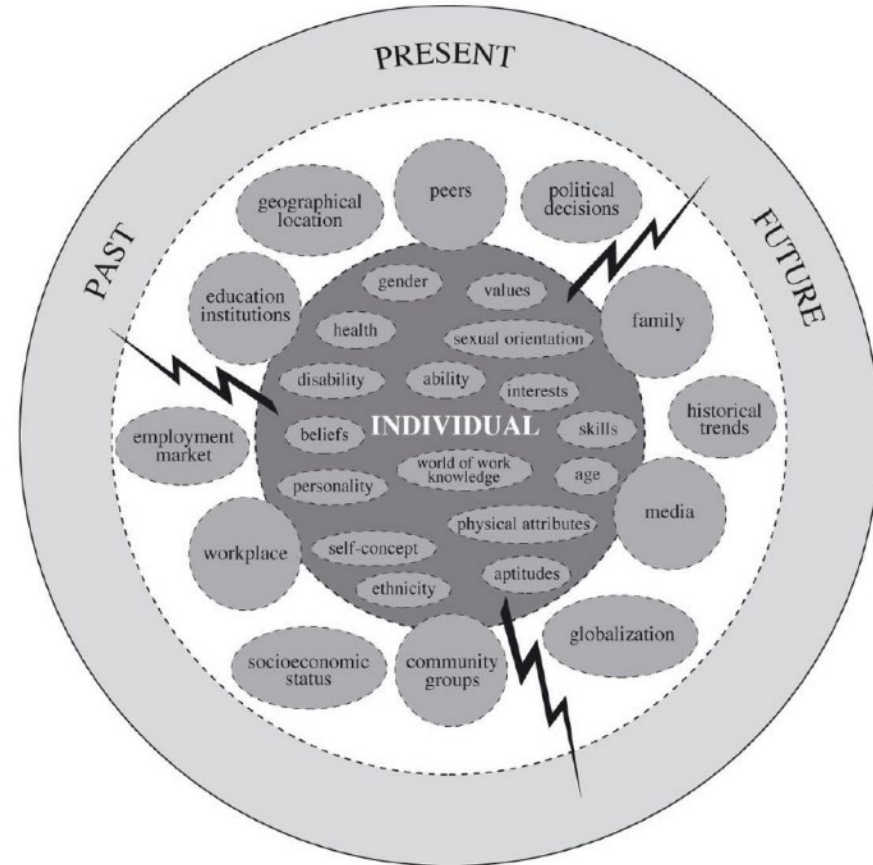


Methodology

- Data gathered from a mixed methods study of UK military veterans (Fisher et al., 2021), commissioned by the Forces in Mind Trust
- **Inclusion criteria:** a UK armed forces veteran having left over two years ago but not more than 10 years post-transition
- **Data:** survey with 534 responses from veterans and 42 in-depth qualitative interviews with veterans
- **Analysis:** System theory framework as provided a holistic framework to analyse influences on transitions from a multi-level perspective

Systems Theory Framework (STF)

- A holistic career framework
- Enables a systemic examination of interconnected influences shaping individual careers and transitions
- Allows **individual analysis** at the micro-level to understand how individuals construct and co-construct their careers and a **macro-level analysis** examining the context and influences
- Acknowledges the veteran at the centre of complex and interacting systems and sub-systems



Individual system (1)

Age

- Those who had experience in the civilian labour market found it easier to adjust as expectations of what was available and what a civilian job would be like were more realistic
- Veterans leaving early or at the *“right age”* believed that they were more employable and that their employment outcomes had been more successful

Self-concept

- Those not been ready to leave found it hard to accept change and adjusting to civilian life had taken time
- Rank reported to not hold much meaning to civilian employers as they have little or no insight into the military
- Rank linked to the training and development opportunities with seniors officers more employable

Individual system (2)

World of work knowledge

- Veterans had anticipated being able to gain employment easily and progress as they had done in the military
- When expectations were not achieved, it had taken them time to adjust, *“to learn to be realistic”* and to *“lower their expectations”* in terms of what roles would be available to them, their remuneration and what it would mean longer-term
- Feeling of being underemployed and underutilised

Skills and abilities

- Range of skills which had helped gain employment, reported lack of business-related skills and not equipped for civilian labour market
- Veterans reported employers found it hard to recognise skills, value misunderstood
- Difficult to translate skills, lacked ability and/or confidence, *“in the Army, you do ‘remarkable things’ but these are often not appreciated and difficult to sell.”*

Social system

- Plays a key role in the transition and resettlement process, but significant impact on securing longer-term employment
- Engagement with educational institutions to **attain additional qualifications** and/or to **retrain**
- Engagement with veteran support services to **help develop world of work knowledge**, transition support (not all positive)
- Interaction between social and individual systems influence employment outcomes (i.e. 'significant others' influence decisions about training and careers)

Peers

Educational
institutions

Family

Workplace

Media

Community
groups

Environmental-societal system

- **Geographical location** impacted short-term employment outcomes, but little evidence of its impact in the longer term
- Veterans typically reported that the decision about where to live had been a priority and not work
- Some veterans did not always settle where they intended or relocated quickly for employment reasons
- Veterans spoke about discovering a lack of job opportunities in the local **employment market**
- Short-term employment had not been what they had planned to do often as a result of the environmental-societal system
- Linked to poor world of work knowledge

Employment
market

Geographical
location

Socio-economic
status

Political decisions

Historical trends

Globalisation

Systemic view of veterans' longer-term employment outcomes

- **Individual systems** particularly military experience were found to shape self-concept and their knowledge of the world of work which influenced employment outcomes
- **Social system** plays a vital role in providing support at the point of transition, resettlement and longer term – it is an enabler of successful outcomes
- **Environmental-societal system** has a role to play in veteran adjustment and supporting successful longer-term employment outcomes

Interactions found to influence education and career decisions, resettlement support accessed, employment decisions and resettlement location

A system of guidance support for veterans

- Need to develop a **multi-agency system of support** (comprising guidance services, employers, service charities and government)
- Give veteran **agency** and control, provide autonomy where appropriate
- Develop **world of work knowledge**
- Focus on **socialisation** and **career management skills**
- Provide targeted and structured support for work and identity adjustment
- Support veteran's understanding of how skills and experience fit with civilian work



Conclusions

- STF provides a useful way of understanding veteran transitions and employment outcomes
- Veterans who had problems adjusting their self-concept often did so over an extended period
- Adjustment was about lowering expectations and prioritising other elements of their life and careers
- 'Success' as defined by veterans can, for some take longer to achieve
- The idea that transition ends at an arbitrary point in time is not supported by the research – for many, the adjustment phase is long
- Longer-term support is required by the environmental-societal system

Further information

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Article in progress

Barnes, S-A., et al. 'Securing and maintaining longer-term employment: UK military service leavers' experiences in the civilian labour market', *International Journal of Human Resource Management*

Report

- Fisher, N., Newell, K., Barnes, S-A., Owen, D., & Lyonette, C. (2021). *Longer-Term Employment Outcomes of Ex-Service Personnel*. London: Forces in Mind Trust.

