

Want to Hire Veterans? Look Past Your Biases, Misconceptions



By [Kathy Gurchiek](#) Apr 28, 2016

Military veterans can add value to organizations, but it's important to see beyond media hype and check your personal bias about that talent pool, said Peter A. Gudmundsson, CEO and president of Loveland, Ohio-based RecruitMilitary.

The military teaches character, discipline, resiliency and teamwork, and its members are highly skilled. But there are very real biases about hiring veterans, noted Gudmundsson, who served as an officer in the U.S. Marine Corps from 1985-88.

Gudmundsson led the session "The Veteran Hiring Opportunity: Getting Beyond the Hype and Realizing the Potential" at the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) Talent Management Conference & Exposition on April 20.

"The bias is real. No one wants to admit bias but everybody has biases—positive, negative, race, gender, foreign accents, regional accents. We all have biases; it's how the human brain works," he said. "What do you think when you hear 'veteran'? What does your team think? Your organization? If you don't address your bias, you're not going to get the benefit of veteran hiring."

Among the biases and misconceptions he addressed:

- **Veterans are a victim group that requires special consideration.** Veterans have skills, training, and intangible attributes such as discipline, resiliency and a team mindset that employers value, Gudmundsson said. They are not victims who are "owed" a job.
- **Veterans pose a security and safety risk because they suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).** "The vast majority [of veterans] did not serve in combat," and among the 15 percent to 18 percent who did, not all experience PTSD, Gudmundsson said. [Individuals who have not served in the military but who have experienced abuse](#) or been in car wrecks sometimes experience PTSD, but employers don't shy away from them, he pointed out.

- **Veterans are desperate for a job; because of this they are a source of good, cheap labor.**

There's a belief that veterans face high unemployment, which is one reason they're viewed as a source of cheap labor, according to Gudmundsson.

However, veteran unemployment was at 4.1 percent in February 2016 vs. an overall national unemployment rate of 4.7 percent, he said, citing U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"Veterans make great employees so they're employed more," he said. They want to be compensated like anybody else, he added.

"They may not know what they're worth [in the civilian world]," because for many, their military service was the only job they had ever had, "but over time they'll figure it out."

- **Translating military skills into the equivalent civilian skills is an insurmountable challenge for organizations.**

A veteran's military resume may seem as foreign to a civilian employer as that of a circus fire juggler, Gudmundsson noted. However, through thoughtful interview questions a hiring manager can learn about the kind of safety procedures and training the fire juggler underwent to successfully perform that job. The same is true when interviewing veterans about the jobs they did, as well as the training they received and the kinds of leadership roles they held, to see how the veteran's military experience translates to the civilian sector.

Also, HR should use internal resources, such as veterans currently employed by the organization, to help interpret how military skills and job experience translate to the job openings the organization is looking to fill.

Building Corporate Support

Gudmundsson advised employers interested in hiring veterans to have goals around recruiting that demographic just like any other.

He recommended that employers:

- Understand and articulate their goals of their veteran hiring program. Think about: What types of veterans are you looking to hire? Are you motivated by compliance? Finding quality talent? Looking for a brand benefit, such as being associated with a trusted institution like the military? What does a successful veteran hiring program look like to you?
"Be very clear on what the motivation is, and that goes to the highest levels of your organization."
- Harness the support of veterans on staff by highlighting their successes and setting up a veteran employee resource group (ERG). Often, an organization is not aware of which of its employees are veterans because they don't identify themselves as such. A strong veteran ERG that is tasked with a purpose—such as recruiting and onboarding of new veteran hires, translating military resumes,

or leading celebrations such as at Memorial Day—can bring them forward, he said.

- Agree upon, identify and publish metrics, such as cost per quality hire.
- Educate executives and hiring managers about the myths around veteran hiring and address bias and prejudice directly, as you would for any other group.
- Consider why veterans should work for you. Veterans expect mentorship, Gudmundsson said. Leaders who take care of their people is an important part of the military credo, and mentorship is part of that leadership, he noted. An organization's mission also is important to veterans, he said. While that mission may not be as lofty as national defense, "they want a clear sense of what your organization is all about."

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