CAREER ACTION PLANNING GUIDE FOR WOUNDED WARRIORS

SUPPORTING VETERANS WITH HIGH BARRIERS TO CAREER TRANSITION

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This Career Action Planning Guide describes a process for working with veterans with serious disabilities or wounded warriors as they begin the transition to civilian careers. Career Action Planning is the first of a four step process that together constitute the Intensive Career Transition Support Model™ for veterans with high barriers to career transition developed by the National Organization on Disability.

Career Action Planning is based on a combination of several evidence-based disability-support concepts including Supported Education, Supported Employment, and Individualized Placement and Support. It is designed to ensure that the veteran with serious disabilities receives the support necessary at the outset to succeed throughout all phases of the career transition process.
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INTRODUCTION

WOUNDED WARRIOR CAREERS PROGRAM

Since late 2008, the National Organization on Disability (NOD) has been working with severely injured Gulf War Era II (Post 9/11) veterans as they transition from military to civilian careers. Beginning with nearly two years of research and consultation with the United States Army’s Wounded Warrior program (AW2), injured veterans, and their families, NOD designed and built a new program for this purpose, called the Wounded Warrior Careers program. In its first four years, Wounded Warrior Careers served 275 Wounded Warriors, of whom 70 percent engaged in education, training, or work—a rate approximately double that of Wounded Warriors without access to this level of support.

The program began as a demonstration, intended to test various ways of meeting the needs of injured veterans as they began to rebuild their careers after retiring from the military with a disability. Wounded Warrior Careers (“Careers”) continues to refine and document the methods that work best.

Any individual with a recently acquired and serious disability requires careful planning and support when returning to work, even in an existing place of employment.

The additional factors of changing employers, career fields, communities, retraining, and adjusting to unfamiliar work environments increase the complexity of successfully transitioning into a career.

For the purposes of the demonstration, Careers began with a referral from an AW2 Advocate, the Army’s principal liaison with the Wounded Warriors. The AW2 Advocate typically enjoyed a strong confidential relationship with injured service members and a good working knowledge of their readiness and determination to begin thinking about a civilian career. This “warm referral” brought the veteran to the Careers program with an expectation of a trustful partnership with the NOD Career Specialist; an essential component of a relationship that may need to last for several years through multiple stages of planning, preparation, and course-correction.

¹ For the purposes of this demonstration we accepted referrals of officially designated Wounded Warriors. The criteria are available at: http://www.wtc.army.mil/modules/soldier/s2-aw2EligibilityEnrollment.html
**WHY THIS GUIDE?**

With the proliferation of toolkits and guides that offer solutions to veterans’ career transition, why is another guide offering a process for Wounded Warriors and their families necessary?

To answer this question, it is necessary to understand this population of veterans. Most Wounded Warriors are mid-career, and they have families and children to support and obligations to fulfill. Most significantly, they have recently acquired life-changing injuries that make it difficult to pursue a career in their former field. To further complicate matters, they must not only change jobs, they must change employers, career fields, and often, the communities in which they live.

Consider that most employment programs are self-directed, meaning that the veteran is given some initial support, such as skills translation, assistance with a resume, interviewing and networking advice, and then are sent to navigate the unfamiliar waters of civilian employment largely on his or her own. Millions of veterans have managed the transition in this manner; while many have successfully navigated their way to civilian careers, others have struggled with their transition.

Any individual with a recently acquired serious disability requires careful planning and support when returning to work, even in an existing place of employment. The additional factors of changing employers, career fields, communities, retraining, and adjusting to unfamiliar work environments increase the complexity of successfully transitioning into a new career.

Navigating the process alone, especially with serious psychological and/or cognitive injuries (such as Traumatic Brain Injury, Post-Traumatic Stress, and/or Depression) is daunting and can increase the risk of failure.

The purpose of this Career Action Planning Guide is to offer a proven structure and method for successful career transition to organizations that assist veterans with disabilities. While this type of structure is not new—it is found in the evidence-based practices of Vocational Rehabilitation and Supported Employment—it also incorporates what we have learned on the ground while working with this population of Wounded Warriors. Our experience has shown that a large number of

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**If veterans without disabilities often fail to achieve their potential with the self-directed career transition method, it is no wonder that veterans with serious disabilities become discouraged and struggle to achieve their potential.**
veterans with disabilities don’t receive the level of rehabilitative support required to make a successful transition to a new career with the least stress and difficulty.

In this guide, which is designed for practitioners providing career services to veterans with disabilities, we begin with a brief introduction to the design of the career model. We then describe the four phases of the Intensive Career Transition Support Model™, and finally, discuss the Career Action Planning process, the first phase, in more detail.

This guide is intended to be a starting point. Each community and each veteran’s situation is different. Individuals and organizations providing these services will find it necessary to adapt and evolve this process to their needs.

**Foundations of a Successful Career Transition Model**

Ideally, the career transition process should begin as early as is practical in the recovery process. Experience has shown that this is not always possible; every career transition is not necessarily linear in progression. As a result, it is necessary to meet the veteran where they are in their individual transition. Many veterans may be referred to the program while they are already attending school, working, or looking for work.

Regardless of their current situation, the Intensive Career Transition Support Model™ begins with comprehensive planning and the development of the Career Action Plan, as described in this guide. The principles of the model are described in an appendix.

**The Nature of Injury and Career Planning**

Current estimates are that at least one-third of veterans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan will experience the effects of cognitive and psychological injuries, such as Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI); Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS); and/or Major Depressive Disorder (MDD). Because these injuries are complex and may not become apparent until months or years after deployment, they necessitate a specialized approach to the career transition process.
The effects of these injuries make concentrating on long-range planning challenging. Veterans and their families can most effectively address career planning with the assistance of a Career Specialist. This process requires the establishment of clear and motivating goals that the veteran can easily recall.

The Careers experience shows that an experienced and trusted advisor can help the Wounded Warrior to achieve results at a rate which our program evaluation showed to be double that of Wounded Warriors without access to this type of support.

**FOCUS ON THE CAREER, NOT THE NEXT JOB**

The goal is for the veteran to be established in a self-sufficient, sustainable position on their career path that could ultimately lead to their career goal, not merely to secure a job.

First and foremost, we must emphasize that the Wounded Warrior Careers program focuses on guiding the veteran with disabilities to make a successful career transition. This transition process may take months or years, during which we found that consistent goals and actions (from short- to long-range) were essential to success. While many employment programs define success as placement in a position, the Wounded Warrior Careers program defines success as:

**Engagement with the career transition process.** We recognize that there may be setbacks and false steps, but engagement is the key to success. Engagement is defined as active involvement in Phases II – IV of the career transition process. Veterans who are engaged are actively preparing for their new career through education or training, actively job-seeking, or already working in a job on their career path. Having a clear and motivating purpose is a key component to successful transition. In our work we have found that veterans with goals that were tied to their core desires had more confidence in their ability to achieve those goals. (See Intensive Career Transition Support Model™, pages 10-11)

And ultimately . . .

**Placement in a position on the career path** that could lead to attainment of the veteran’s ultimate career goal, where the veteran is self-sustaining and stable.
Why a Career Goal?

Transitioning from the military to a civilian career can be difficult under the best of circumstances. For veterans with combat specialties (Infantry, Artillery, Armor, Special Forces) and others who directly support combat operations, the task of translating military skills to civilian occupations is particularly challenging. It is considerably harder when the change of career is due to an acquired disability. Just as employers may not see how a veteran with these skills might fit into their organization, veterans themselves sometimes view their backgrounds as far removed from anything that would be useful in the civilian workforce.

During our research and work with veterans with disabilities, Careers found that it was important that the veteran have an aspirational career goal that was closely related to their abilities, interests and skills. Recovery from serious injuries takes time; it may involve relearning how to engage in the world of work through volunteering, part-time work, and/or transitional employment. Having a vision of the ultimate career goal provides motivation when obstacles arise that obscure the path to achieve the goal.

We also found that veterans with well-defined career goals were more optimistic about their ability to achieve them. Development of career goals is discussed later in this document.

It’s Not Just about Skills

Employment programs typically begin with a rough draft of the veteran’s resume to help “translate the skills” the veteran learned in their military occupational specialty to jobs in the civilian sector. This is a valuable process. However, for individuals with disabilities, it is necessary to apply a more sophisticated approach to identify their ideal career. This guide describes an approach that that we have developed.

The Full-Scope of the Career Path

While many employment programs measure success as full- or part-time employment, Careers defines success based on the veterans’ goals developed in their Career Action Plan, which may include full- or part-time employment, self-employment, or volunteer work. It may also include transitional employment or taking work outside the career path to meet financial obligations or support a spouse as they complete their education.
THE CAREER SPECIALIST: A GUIDE AND COACH

More than any other single factor, the program’s effectiveness depends on the development of a sustained relationship of trust and common purpose between the veteran and the Career Specialist across, what may be, the long arc of recovery, retraining or education, job seeking, and adapting to the new career.

The role of the Career Specialist is to help injured veterans deal, over the course of a long, personal, and supportive relationship, with all of these obstacles, real and perceived while they navigate through the four phases of the Intensive Career Transition Support Model.

Career Specialists not only help guide the veteran through the planning process, but once the Career Action Plan is developed, they also work with the veteran and their support system to help make that plan a reality.

The Career Specialist also acts as a liaison to existing community resources that can assist veterans on their journey and educator for the community on the needs of transitioning veterans with disabilities.

REFERRALS AND RESOURCES

When a new program is established, the first task of the Career Specialist is to begin mapping the resources available to assist the veteran locally. As many organizations now serving veterans with disabilities have not historically worked with this specific population—previously specializing either in services to veterans, or services to people with disabilities, resource mapping can be an important step even for established service organizations. The purpose of this resource mapping process is:

- to identify potential referral sources
- to identify resources available to assist veterans
- to increase awareness of the program
- to become an integral part of the community serving veterans in the area

During the resource mapping process, the Career Specialists reach out to an ever-expanding constellation of organizations and agencies. Resource mapping and refinement continues throughout the project. Examples of partners included in Career Specialists’ outreach may include:
• Military installations/National Guard and Reserve units
• Department of Veterans Affairs facilities and offices
• VA medical centers and hospitals
• VA regional offices
• VA vocational rehabilitation and employment offices
• VA OEF/OIF/OND Coordinators
• VA community based outpatient clinics
• Department of Labor Workforce Centers
• Healthcare organizations that serve veterans
• Educational institutions
• Workforce investment boards
• Veteran service organizations
• Local veteran service officers
• Chambers of commerce
• Employer organizations

Referrals

The partnerships developed during resource mapping are critical, as the program design requires that veterans entering Careers receive a referral from an outside agency knowledgeable about both veterans and the Careers model, such as: Wounded Warrior Programs; veteran service organizations / officers, VA hospitals; employment services; other non-profits, National Guard and Reserve Units; colleges and universities schools; and others. The purpose of this “warm referral” is to allow the Career Specialists to concentrate on providing vocational support to the veterans on their caseload rather than identifying veterans individually.

Resources

Veterans with disabilities have access to a significant number and variety of benefits that are unavailable to most other individuals with disabilities. Career Specialists must become masters at identifying and securing assistance using these resources, which is a key aspect to the navigational support they provide. We have also found it necessary to provide limited flexible funds to assist veterans and their families where no other funds were readily available in order to maintain momentum of the transition process.
Over the course of more than four years working with more than 400 Army Wounded Warriors, the National Organization on Disability developed and tested a model for career transition support that incorporates the lessons learned from our externally evaluated work and evidence-based practices in disability career transition. We describe this model as the Intensive Career Transition Support Model™, a process that consists of four primary phases, each of which is an essential component of successful career transition.
PHASE I - CAREER PLANNING

This Guide focuses on the **CAREER PLANNING** phase, in which veterans envision their path from military to civilian careers, explore their interests and ambitions, formulate goals, identify obstacles, and sort through the steps and available resources that could help them reach their goals. This phase ends with the development of a Career Action Plan, a long-range roadmap covering five or more years, developed jointly by the veteran and the Career Specialist.

PHASE II - CAREER PREPARATION

In **CAREER PREPARATION**, the veteran and Career Specialist begin to activate the Career Action Plan. Depending on what the plan calls for, the veteran might enroll in education or training, pursue referrals to other services and supports, or, when appropriate, take a step into transitional or supported employment. Career Specialists work hand-in-hand with the veteran at every step in this process, sometimes accompanying them to explore options or working with them on applications for benefits.

PHASE III - JOB SEEKING SUPPORT

During **JOB SEEKING SUPPORT**, Career Specialists guide veterans through the actual work of translating interests, abilities, and skills into employment, including helping them develop a résumé, introducing them to prospective employers or job-search programs, seeking out job opportunities that might match their goals, and assisting them plan and negotiate accommodations they may need on the job. In our method, Career Specialists take a much more active role in job-seeking than other career transition programs, including making inquiries of employers, introducing the veteran to the employer, identifying necessary accommodations during the recruitment process, and following through with ongoing assistance where necessary.

PHASE IV - POST-PLACEMENT SUPPORT

In **POST-PLACEMENT SUPPORT**, the final stage, Career Specialists offer an extended period of guidance and support with problem-solving after the veteran takes a job. They may tackle issues such as housing, ongoing job coaching, interacting with employers, on-the-job performance, and general advocacy on the veteran’s
behalf. In this phase, the Career Specialist gains another client: the employer. Employers may need help in recruiting and assimilating veterans with disabilities into the workforce, making necessary accommodations, or simply understanding the veteran’s transition. Often Career Specialists aid both the employer and the veteran by dispelling misplaced worries or preconceptions.

**Career Action Planning**

A Career Action Plan helps the veteran turn his or her dreams into a reality. It describes the way the veteran, Career Specialist, and their support network will work together to achieve the ultimate career goal. Together the support team will determine

- What actions will occur
- Who will carry out these changes
- When they will take place, and for how long
- What resources are needed to carry out these changes

We believe this program model incorporates the most innovative approaches to the standard practices known by many professionals in the field of veterans’ career transition. This guide will increase awareness of our process and will share what has worked for us, as practitioners.

This guide details the fundamentals of career planning that professionals undertake when working with Wounded Warriors. Career Action Planning is a process undertaken jointly by the veteran, their family, and the Career Specialist. Military members are familiar with how to plan and execute operations; this plan provides them with an action-oriented map to accomplishing their career goals.

The ultimate objective of the Career Action Plan is for the Wounded Warrior to be self-sufficient, established in a position on their career path, and able to pursue and achieve their career goals independently. For those with the most serious disabilities, this process will likely require extended time and energy.

**Referral and Intake**

The purpose of the referral and intake process is to ensure that the Wounded Warrior is indeed ready, willing, and able to begin their career transition. As the program requires intensive time
and resources, it is necessary to identify veterans who can most benefit from the Careers model.

**Referral**

The quality of the relationship between a Career Specialist and a Wounded Warrior, initially, is dependent upon how they are introduced to our services. The referral must be made in a supportive and caring way, with the knowledge that the program staff will provide the services promised. The veteran needs to trust that the referral is beneficial and in their best interest.

Wounded Warriors are referred to the Career Specialist from a number of sources, including the Service Wounded Warrior programs, such as Army Wounded Warrior program (AW2), Recovery Care Coordinators, the VA OEF/OIF/OND programs, and other organizations that are unable to provide the intensive services the Wounded Warrior require. Career Specialists will generally meet with the referral source and talk to the veteran via phone prior to the first meeting. During these preliminary meetings, the Career Specialist must also determine whether there may be safety concerns and/or accommodations that may affect the proposed meeting location.

We rely upon the referral source to make an initial judgment as to whether the veteran is suitable for the program, using the criterion described below. The most effective referrals are those where the referring agency provides a “warm introduction” to the Wounded Warrior and introduces them in person to the Career Specialist. As referral sources become more familiar with the services we provide, they develop an understanding of which veterans are best suited for the Wounded Warrior Careers program.

Some veterans are able to manage a self-directed career transition process with the proper information. In those cases, we provide assistance and referrals to agencies best suited to facilitate their career transition.

**Initial Readiness Assessment**

The initial readiness assessment is completed as early as possible and must be completed prior to formal enrollment in the Wounded Warrior Careers program. The purpose of the initial assessment is to determine the veterans’ interest, potential barriers to employment and fit for the program.
Referred veterans must be ready, willing, and able to begin the career transition process.

**Ready** – the veteran must be ready to begin the career planning process. This means that they must be far enough along in the healing process that they do not require a significant number of medical appointments, surgeries or other treatments.

**Willing** – the veteran must want to make a career transition. During the referral process we seek to determine what factors have driven the referral.

**Able** – the individual must have the ability to work as an employee, a volunteer, or as a self-employed individual, or attend school on a regular basis.

**Intake**

The intake process primarily covers the administrative aspects of introducing the veteran to the program. Careers follows a case management process that collects data and information that contributes to a full assessment of the veteran, their family history and situation, and to the evaluation and tracking of the program’s overall results.

Whenever possible, the first meeting with the veteran should take place in his or her home or community to allow them to feel more comfortable. This approach gives veterans more control, and increased comfort to share with the Career Specialist. This extra effort at the beginning of the relationship reassures the veteran that the Career Specialist is willing to go the extra mile for them. Additionally, Career Specialists gain a better understanding of the veteran’s support network, living situation, mobility, and transportation requirements.

During the intake session, the veteran is asked to sign a data release and to acknowledge the purpose of the program. The Career Specialist provides a clear description of their role and what is expected of the veteran and their family. Then, the veteran’s initial tracking and demographic data is collected for entry into the case management system.

Family members may be welcome to attend meetings with the Career Specialist, at the veteran's discretion. Involving family and friends in the career transition process is essential and provides invaluable support to veterans as they pursue their goals, especially those with cognitive and memory issues.
It is of utmost importance that the Career Specialist is attentive to the needs of the veteran during these initial meetings. The impacts of injuries and illnesses must be planned for and accommodated; this may mean that the meeting must be chunked into manageable segments. As the veteran and family gain more trust in the relationship with their Career Specialist, they may begin to share more information than was initially disclosed.

Building rapport and developing trust early is important. Career Specialists must be careful that they do not over promise or neglect obligations without warning.

Tips for the referral and intake process:

- **Avoid asking the same question multiple times**
- **Do not follow an intake questionnaire or interview line by line, be flexible and respectful of the veteran**
- **Be alert to signs of fatigue or discomfort with the process; if this occurs, change the subject and come back to the topic when appropriate**
- **Ask the veteran how they prefer to communicate, then follow their guidance**

**Assessment**

The assessment phase provides critical information for the career transition process. The Career Specialist uses their training and judgment to determine which formal and informal assessments are required. In general, the Careers model does not use formal assessments because many veterans, especially Wounded Warriors who have been through the Medical Evaluation Board/Physical Evaluation Board (MEB/PEB) process, report that they have been through enough tests and some may refuse to undergo further testing.

The Career Specialist must pay close attention when determining the priority areas to address. Often the presenting issue is not the highest priority and may mask potential problem areas that can complicate the veteran's career transition in the future. For example, Careers has found that veterans who are in desperate financial condition want to begin to work before they are physically ready and run the risk of another injury.
Financial Assessment

Career Specialists complete a basic financial assessment for each veteran on the caseload to determine where the veteran and their family stand financially and identify their most pressing needs. Most families have gone through significant changes in their financial status as a result of deployments, injuries, and retirement or discharge from military service. As a result, finances often require extra attention.

Veterans and their families should complete a budget and the Career Specialist should review it in depth. This is an opportunity to build a rapport with the veteran and to more completely understand their needs, incentives to work, and, potentially, financial disincentives to work.

The Career Specialist must be familiar with the impacts of military retirement pay, pensions, insurance payments, and other government benefits that can influence the veteran's financial status. It is important to note that Career Specialists are not expected to serve as financial planners. If assistance beyond the basic assessment is required, the veteran should be referred to a specialist for financial advice.

The Career Specialist should be aware that some benefits can present a disincentive to work for the veteran and family. Uncovering how various benefits impact the career transition and how to use them to support the career transition is an important aspect of the financial analysis. Areas to be considered in the financial assessment are:

- **Military retirement status.** Is the veteran medically retired from their branch of service? If so what is their retirement list status (PDRL / TDRL)
- **VA Disability rating status.** Has the veteran received a disability rating from the VA? If so what is the status? If not are they in process?
- **VA Compensation and Pension status.** Is the veteran receiving disability compensation from the VA?
- **Disability payments.** Is the veteran and family receiving or are they eligible for Social Security Insurance (SSI)/Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or other payments from the government?
- **Special Monthly Compensation.** Is the veteran or their caregiver receiving compensation for Aide and Attendance?
• Education Stipends. If the veteran is in school, are they receiving housing stipends? When are these scheduled to end?
• State veteran compensation? Is the veteran eligible for state veteran payments, tuition support, and/or disability payments?
• Traumatic Service Members Group Life Insurance (TSGLI) payments. Has the veteran received or are they eligible for TSGLI payments?
• Unemployment Insurance. Is the veteran receiving unemployment compensation?
• Support obligations. Is the veteran required to pay spousal support or child support? How does this payment affect the monthly budget?

Wellness Assessment

The wellness assessment is intended to uncover any current or potential disabilities and barriers to employment. Veterans tend to display a can-do attitude and are willing to work through injuries and illnesses. The wellness assessment allows veterans to develop a better understanding of their new abilities, thereby avoiding re-injury or embarrassment that may result from their inability to perform in a given role. This is essential to understanding how their career goals and path could be influenced by a disability, as well as identifying adaptive equipment or accommodations that could make both education and employment more successful.

Career Specialists focus on understanding how wounds, illnesses, or injuries affect their clients’ lives and how they have adapted to these circumstances so far. Many veterans may only have begun the process of learning to live with the effects of their injury, and in many cases, do not yet understand the resources and tools available to them. When veterans begin attending school or working, they will have to adapt to and find supports within each new environment.

There are a number of resources that can assist with the wellness assessment process. Both the military medical system and the VA have occupational therapists that can assess the veteran’s ability to perform various tasks and advise on their capabilities.

Cognitive and psychological injuries present challenges, and each tends to be unique. While it might not be apparent, there is a risk of further injury from these injuries as well. Appropriate care is
necessary to identify limitations that could cause failure on the career path.

The wellness assessment provides the foundation for barrier and resource identification later in the process. The Career Specialist will also develop an understanding of the veteran's treatment plan and how it might affect their ability to work. If necessary, the Career Specialist will ask to obtain a release to speak to the treatment team to ensure that the career plan doesn’t interfere with ongoing treatment.

Considerations during the wellness assessment are:

- Time since injury and degree of recovery
- Pending surgeries or treatments that might impede progress in education or training, or may require additional time off from work
- Effect of the injury on the ability to work with sustained effort on any one task
- Special requirements that might affect the type of work done
- Restrictions imposed by the VA medical system
- Adaptive equipment that the veteran is familiar with and has used
- Self-sufficiency; some injuries have a significant effect on memory and information retention
- Ability to travel/drive
- Medication that might affect work
- Physical/mental capacity to work; e.g. does the veteran require a "work hardening" period to help make a gradual transition into the workforce?

Career and Employment Assessments

The purpose of the career and employment assessments is to understand the veteran's work history and how their experience can be put to use in the future. It might be helpful to consider this assessment as building the "experience" or "employment history" section of the resume.

The Career Specialist uses this information to understand the veteran's strengths and preferences as they establish goals.

To overcome the difficulty that is often experienced translating military experience into the civilian workplace, Career Specialists must listen carefully to the cues given by the veteran. We encourage the use of storytelling to have the veteran describe
their favorite job or greatest accomplishment. This process will generally reveal themes what direction the veteran would like to pursue during the goal setting phase.

Formal assessments may also be helpful during the career discovery process. We do not endorse or require any single assessment. Instead, we rely upon the professional judgment of our Career Specialists to select the appropriate tools. Some of the assessments we have found to be helpful include:

**Vocational Assessments:**

- CareerScope, administered by the VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment team
- Career Architect Development Planner
- O*Net Interest Assessment
- Profiles International Pathway Planner
- Birkman and/or Strong Interest Inventory, provided by some ACAP and education centers

**Personality / Interest Assessments:**

- Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)
- Kiersey Temperament Sorter
- Now Discover Your Strengths
- University of Pennsylvania VIA Signature Strengths Assessment

**Support Networks**

The Career Specialist must assess the level of support provided by the veteran’s support network of family and friends. Our experience has shown that a strong support network is an indicator of success for the most seriously injured veterans.

Support networks may include a combination of family, extended family, friends, or other organizations; each veteran's situation is different. The Career Specialist needs to be aware of the nature of the support network and must ensure that there is a clear understanding of the veteran’s wishes regarding communication with that network. The use of medical/confidentiality releases is recommended to define the relationship and provide access.

Support networks can be a valuable resource to the Career Specialist in communicating with the veteran and assisting them to develop their career plan. Areas to consider in the support networks include:
• Relationship between the veteran and their spouse/care-giver  
• Other members of the household/extended family  
• Transportation both for the veteran and family members  
• Child/elder care needs  
• Status of the marriage  
• Previous marriages and children  
• Other members of the household with disabilities that may also require support

**Education, Training, & Skills**

During the education, training, and skills assessment, the Career Specialist must dig deeper than the veteran’s civilian school equivalents such as GED, high school diploma, associates, bachelor’s, or graduate-level degrees. It is also essential to understand what military or unit schools the veteran has attended, and the skills that they took away from each.

Military to civilian skill "translators" may be helpful; however, they are typically based on the veteran’s military career field or specialty and do not take into account the effects on a veteran’s capabilities post-injury. Career Specialists must guard against simply guiding the veteran into a career path that matches their former military or civilian career, as many veterans who have experienced combat, especially those with severe injuries, no longer have the same motivations they did previously.

Career Specialists should be familiar with the concept of behavioral interviewing ([http://www.udel.edu/CSC/pdf/behav_interview.pdf](http://www.udel.edu/CSC/pdf/behav_interview.pdf)) and use this technique to encourage the veteran to describe their experience during the assessment phase. Behavioral interviews provide an opportunity to understand the real skills that the veteran possesses and enjoys. Considerations during the education, training and skills assessments are:

• **What formal training has the veteran received in the military?**  
  Formal training includes service schools and courses that were presented at the installation level, such as junior non-commissioned officer courses. Each of these courses teaches essential skills for today’s workplace.

• **What informal training has the veteran received?** Typically unit level training provides exceptionally valuable individual skills that can be translated to the civilian workplace. Discussing this training often prompts the veteran to talk about the kind of
work they enjoyed, which can then be incorporated into their career plan.

- What projects or special duties were assigned to the veteran? Which did they enjoy most? Understanding the type of work the veteran performed on a project basis is a valuable tool to developing an understanding of their core career strengths.
- What courses did the veteran teach?
- What was their area of expertise?
- What type of problems did other members of the unit come to them to solve? This question often reveals strengths and areas of interest that the veteran hasn't thought to mention previously.

**GOAL SETTING**

Setting clear and attainable goals is essential to both the veteran’s individual success and evaluation of data throughout the process. Because the transition process often requires a much longer focus than merely a job search, Careers recommends developing a sequential plan beginning with the long-range goal (5-10 years out), followed by mid-term goals (3-5 years out), short-term goals (1-2 years out), and immediate action steps (less than 1 year out).

Helping clients to establish their career goals often requires patience. Veterans with psychological or cognitive impairments may have difficulty following the process, remembering goals and recalling the reasons why they were set. During the goal setting process, the Career Specialist guides the client through the discovery process to clarify and develop what they envision themselves doing in the future. It is important to recognize that the Wounded Warrior may have pre-existing ideas of their goals based upon advice they have received from others. Often these ideas are not consistent with their actual desires. The Career Specialist must dig deeper to help the client create aspirational goals that will motivate them throughout the transition process.

The Career Discovery process is a system developed for use with individuals with developmental disabilities to help them shape their career goals and ambitions. While it may not be appropriate to all veterans, this process is valuable to many and can be a resource to the Career Specialist. ([http://moddcouncil.org/documents/2012/Career%20Discovery%20Guide.pdf](http://moddcouncil.org/documents/2012/Career%20Discovery%20Guide.pdf))
During the career discovery process, the Career Specialist helps the veteran to identify areas of interest or passion and understand what careers could be associated with them. Research, job shadows, informational interviews, internships, transitional employment or volunteer work are ways to familiarize the veteran with potential jobs and help them to solidify their career goals. In many cases the Career Specialist will need to arrange these experiences until the client is able to do so with confidence.

These goals and actions will be incorporated into the final Road Map and Career Action Plan and reviewed on a regular basis to determine whether the veteran’s actions are on track with the plan and whether changes are required. This practice allows the veteran to be self-directing, to define his or her own goals, and to take ownership of the plan, therefore, increasing the likelihood they will be successful.

**Barrier and Resource Identification**

Now that career goals have been identified, the veteran and Career Specialist can begin the process of barrier and resource identification. Identifying the obstacles that stand in the way of career goals in advance helps the Career Specialist and veteran to predict what strategies and resources will be required to overcome them. In cases where barriers are identified that cannot be overcome, career goals must be adjusted to accommodate the barrier.

**Barriers**

A barrier to employment is anything that presents a challenge to the veteran during the preparation, job seeking, and post-placement phases of the Intensive Career Transition Support Model™. Accurately identifying potential barriers is essential in order to complete the career plan and, ultimately, to the veteran’s successful career transition.

Barriers may include seen and unseen and known and unrealized issues that restrict the success of a client. They may include physical limitations, medical conditions, emotional issues, or criminal history. Some barriers are easily observed, and often the veteran may have received a formal diagnosis. However, other barriers, though possibly more significant, may be harder to identify.
Barriers are most often created and perpetuated by a lack of understanding. Career Specialist must take care to completely understand and maximize the strengths of those with significant barriers. Often employers, family members, and others concentrate on the barriers rather than the strengths and abilities the veteran has to offer. Both the veteran with high barriers and their support network benefit from greater understanding of the barriers they face.

It may take patience and creativity to assist a person with high barriers to develop a career action plan. Start by thinking in basic terms—what kind of job in the career path would interest the individual, maximize his or her strengths, best manage his or her limitations, and provide adequate income? Flexibility is the key as the Career Specialist learns more about the veteran's situation. The process may take an upfront investment of time, but if done well, it will help the veteran to achieve stability within their new career field.

Addressing every barrier at once can be overwhelming. The Career Specialist must guide the process in a step-by-step manner to deal with the most significant barriers at the appropriate time in the career plan. Every barrier may not need to be addressed in order to achieve the veteran's career goals.

Barriers to employment may include:

- Criminal records
- Substance abuse
- Limited civilian work history
- Very low self esteem
- Housing problems
- Mental illness
- Chronic health problems
- Family members with disabilities
- Long-term receipt of benefits (such as SSI/SSDI)
- Need for retraining or education
- Lack of access to transportation or childcare
- Location and willingness to relocate

Substance abuse and mental health services are often separated from the mainstream health care delivery system. Veterans and their families have to navigate separate systems, making it difficult to receive coordinated treatment, particularly for individuals experiencing substance abuse, mental health injuries, and physical injuries. The separate systems can make receiving
services while attending school or working difficult, if not impossible. Career Specialists should understand how services are provided and act as an advocate to reduce stress.

Attitudes, Behaviors, & Beliefs

Veterans’ who have completed the Medical Evaluation Board / Physical Evaluation Board (MEB/PEB) process have spent months being evaluated in order to receive a disability determination from their Military Service and the VA. Often, during this process, the veteran is encouraged to work toward the highest possible rating.

Other veterans may have returned home and transitioned from the service without the benefit of an evaluation. These veterans may spend months or years seeking their disability determination from the VA.

In both cases, Careers has found that veterans’ attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs about their disability are shaped by their experience. It is helpful to consider the sentiments veterans and their families shared in discussions with Careers staff during program development and over the course of the first phase of the program:

- The career transition process is rough; both veterans and their families feel "kicked to the curb" by the system
- Avoidance of the VA because they have not received the help they expected, which may be exacerbated by negative rumors about the VA
- Fear of being poked and prodded with additional medical evaluations
- Struggling with complexity of systems and processes
- Requiring help navigating systems and benefits
- Lack of understanding of civilian employment processes
- Difficulty translating their military experience to civilian jobs

The resulting barriers may include:

- Low self-esteem or belief that nobody wants to hire a veteran
- Inability to envision a future career path
- Failure to recognize strengths and capabilities
- Focus on being disabled or, conversely, denial of disability
- Negative view of health. We found that those who had a more positive attitude of their health were also more positive about their prospects to achieve their career goals.
**Job Specific Skills and Abilities**

Most veterans will not have had a career that replicates the career field they are considering after transition. The lack of a one-to-one relationship between the skills and abilities the target position requires and the veteran’s direct experience is often discouraging and presents a significant barrier during the transition.

**Physical Limitations**

Physical limitations may be the most obvious, and the VA system offers occupational therapy that can be a great help in overcoming these limitations. Adaptive equipment should be considered to assist the veteran in the transition process.

**Psychological / Cognitive Limitations**

Similar to the discussion regarding attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs, psychological and cognitive limitations resulting from injury can present a significant barrier to employment. Once again, employer attitudes about these types of injuries may present a challenge during the job seeking phase.

Although the affect of injury manifests itself differently in each case there are common themes, which may include:

- **Memory Problems**
- **Difficulty Focusing / Concentrating**
  - Time Management
  - Disorganization
- **Hyper-Arousal**
  - On edge
  - Jumpiness
  - Agitation
- **Frustration**
- **Anxiety / Panic Attacks**
- **Headaches**
- **Sleep Disturbances**
  - Nightmares
  - Fatigue
- **Chronic Pain**
  - Irritability
- Visual Impairment
  - Double Vision
  - Light Sensitivity
  - Blurred Vision
- Depression
- Low Self-Esteem

Resources

Resources help veterans overcome the barriers identified earlier in the process. Because veterans may face multiple barriers, Career Specialists need to use multiple strategies to introduce resources in different combinations and at different intensities to assist the veteran.

Career Specialists must be able to focus solely on the career transition process. They are neither clinicians nor therapists; assessing and dealing with some barriers, including many of the barriers identified by social service agencies, are best left to professionals with specialized or clinical expertise. Therefore, the partnerships that the Career Specialist forms with the VA and local community-based service providers will ensure that supports are available and accessible.

Strengths

The Careers experience shows that focusing on strengths, while also addressing the barriers reduces negative behaviors that can result from focusing on the barriers alone. For that reason, Career Specialists work with individuals to identify and concentrate on their strengths, to set high expectations, and to overcome the negative impressions that they may receive during their journey to career success.

Even veterans affected by life-altering injuries still draw on their military training and culture. The rigorous training and dedication to performance and accountability remain a part of who the veteran is and what they bring to every environment. Commonly recognized strengths that veterans bring with them to education and work environments include:

- Teamwork. Working well in a team is considered an essential part of daily life and is the foundation upon which safe military operations are built.
• Sense of duty. Responsibility for job performance and accountability for completing missions are something to take pride in.
• Self-confidence. Holding a realistic estimation of self and ability based on experiences is expected of each service member.
• Organization and discipline. The ability to self-organize and to follow rules and schedules is vitally important.
• Work ethic and determination. In the military, the mission always comes first. Military members have learned to focus and follow through on assignments, even under difficult or stressful circumstances.
• Problem-solving. Veterans have learned to solve problems quickly and creatively.
• Creativity and cross-functional skills. Members of the military are often required to learn new systems and procedures on the fly, such as extensive training on computer programs and systems, interacting with various people with different skills to accomplish a task, and coordinating and troubleshooting problems in novel and known conditions.
• Adaptability. Despite a structured environment military members understand how to change to meet new challenges.
• These strong and desirable attributes do translate to a new career pathway, even though their direct skills may not.

Veteran Benefits

Veterans’ benefits include the education and training benefits available via the GI Bill and VRE, as well as state benefits. Veterans also have access to health care and mental health services from the VA, and Career Specialists encourage them to take advantage of those resources.

Local Department of Labor Workforce Centers provide employment and training resources for veterans. Career Specialists should be aware of the state and local resources that can assist the veteran during the career transition process, and may accompany the veteran to visit these resources if necessary.

Veteran Service Organizations and Veteran Service Officers

At last count, there were more than 40,000 non-profit community organizations serving veterans across the nation. This proliferation of providers can mean greater access to services, but it also can result in confusion and difficulty navigating the system. By collaborating with these organizations, the Career
Specialist can knit together a support system that provides the veteran the resources needed to accomplish their objectives.

Career Specialists can take advantage of resources such as the National Resource Directory (NRD) (http://www.nrd.gov), which connects wounded warriors, service members, veterans, their families and caregivers to supportive programs and services. The directory includes services and resources at the national, state and local levels that support veterans' recovery, rehabilitation and community reintegration. Another valuable resource is the Warrior Gateway, which connects the military, veterans and their family members to government and non-profit programs in their local community (http://www.warriorgateway.org).

Additionally, traditional Veteran Service Organizations, such as the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars, have programs to support transitioning veterans, as do newer organizations like Wounded Warrior Project and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

**Accommodations**

Accommodations are modifications or adjustments to the education, training, or work environment that enable the veteran to participate in the transition process, study, and work more effectively.

Most veterans do not understand the importance of accommodations or know how to request help. (A common trait of veterans is not to ask for help.) The Career Specialist needs to understand accommodations, adaptive equipment, and how to request them. The Career Specialist should be familiar with the types of accommodations that might be helpful to the veteran and know how to access support. During this step of the process, veterans will gain a better understanding of their support needs and how to request assistance more effectively.

**Education Accommodations**

Most veterans are unfamiliar with the resources available to them through the school’s disability services office. Career Specialists should introduce the veteran to the staff and encourage them to request services in a timely manner.

Individualized accommodations are not designed to give the student an advantage over other students, to alter a fundamental aspect of the course, nor to weaken academic rigor. The goal is to
give the student with a disability equal access to the learning environment.

Psychological and cognitive impairments are often similar to learning disabilities. Each of these disabilities is unique to the individual and can be manifested in a variety of ways. Because of this, the Career Specialist’s intimate knowledge of the veteran and his or her needs is useful in making these determinations. Care should be taken to address needed accommodations before it is too late and the veteran has fallen behind or failed a course.

A few examples of educational accommodations are:

**Classroom and Assignment Accommodations**
- Provide instructor notes or peer note-takers
- Allow the student additional time to complete in-class assignments, particularly writing assignments
- Provide feedback and assist in planning the workflow of assignments. This is especially important with large writing assignments. It may be helpful to break the larger assignment into smaller components with opportunities for feedback on the draft
- Provide assistance with proofreading written work

**Examination Accommodations**
- Allow the student extended exam time such as, one and a half or two times the length of the original exam, or allow the veteran to take exams in a room with reduced distractions
- Allow the student to use a reader, scribe, or computer
- Offer the option of an oral exam
- Allow spelling and grammar assistive devices for essay exams
- Allow the use of a calculator or scratch paper during exams

**Technology**
- Provide text books on tape for students who have difficulty reading
- Provide electronic copies of textbooks for e-readers, tablets, etc. to reduce the burden of textbooks
- Allow the student to tape record lectures
- Use applications that provide reminders of deadlines, meetings, etc.
**Workplace Accommodations**

In the workplace, accommodations allow a qualified applicant or employee with a disability to participate in the application process or to perform essential job functions. The Department of Labor's Job Accommodation Network (JAN) ([http://www.askjan.gov](http://www.askjan.gov)) is exceptionally helpful in providing answers to accommodation questions. Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) or organizational medical staff are important resources in developing workplace accommodations.

**Adaptive Technology**

Adaptive technology can make the difference between success and failure in an education or employment setting. Technology can help mitigate the effects of many disabilities and allow the veteran to participate more fully in life.

Career Specialists should be alert to opportunities to take advantage of technology as a resource to the veteran in their career transition. The Department of Defense Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program ([http://www.cap.mil/Customer/CAPTEC.aspx](http://www.cap.mil/Customer/CAPTEC.aspx)) can provide additional guidance and information on adaptive technology and may be able to provide equipment for employees of the Department of Defense.

**DEVELOP THE CAREER TRANSITION ROAD MAP**

With a full understanding of the veteran’s goals, barriers and the resources available it is now time to design a plan for the career transition – from start to finish. The **CAREER TRANSITION ROAD MAP** is a timeline to help the veteran and their support system visualize the career transition from start to finish. Developing the road map is an opportunity to evaluate options and resources to achieve the career goal.

The format of the road map is less important than the veterans’ comfort with the chosen style. It might develop as a Gantt chart, a MindMap, a topographic map, drawing or any number of other forms that the veteran and their support network are comfortable with. The importance of this process is to help visualize the steps that are necessary to accomplish the long range goal. Both pictures and words are proven to help attain goals. For veterans with memory problems the road map provides a valuable mnemonic tool to help keep them on track.
During the mapping process the Career Specialist must ensure that all of the major goals and objectives are included on the timeline.

**DEVELOP THE CAREER TRANSITION ACTION PLAN**

With the road map complete, the time has come to develop the *Career Transition Action Plan* to achieve those goals. The action plan can be viewed as the next steps that are required to put the plan into action. It is a working document that may change frequently, provided it remains in alignment with the goals and road map established in the earlier steps.

To begin, the Career Specialist and veteran list the steps required to achieve the first goal and establish accountability measurements for each of the steps. Throughout the duration of their enrollment in the program, veterans and Career Specialists will continually review and revise the action plan as some tasks are completed and others are added.

**EXECUTION AND MEASUREMENT**

After completion of the planning phase, the Career Specialist and veteran use the Career Action Plan when they check in to make sure that the plan is on track. Short-term action goals are monitored on a regular basis until the veteran is established on their career path.

After the veteran is moving forward, the two meet at least every six months to confirm the status of the Career Action Plan, adjust goals as necessary, and ensure that the veteran maintains career momentum. During this time, the Career Specialist acts as a coach and guide, intervening only when it becomes apparent that the veteran is drifting off course or when additional support is needed.

Generally, contact intensifies when the veteran transitions between phases of the program. These are opportunities to evaluate the Career Action Plan and determine if any changes are necessary.

**CONCLUSION**

The Career Action Planning process described in this guide may appear to some as too time consuming or resource intensive to be
practical. We have found in our work with hundreds of severely injured veterans, however, that this level of engagement is necessary to ensure that the veteran has the opportunity to achieve their ideal career goals. Those veterans’ successes support the value of this investment.
Research on veterans with PTSI and TBI has shown that employment interventions that offer a ‘comprehensive’ approach to serving the veteran—rather than supporting employment in the absence of other social, medical, and life concerns—contribute to improved employment outcomes. Studies also show the importance of engaging the entire family unit in addition to supporting the veterans in their career transition. Following the lessons of this research, NOD designed its successful program based on six core principles:

OVERVIEW OF THE PRINCIPLES

We follow a veteran-centered, proactive, prolonged, holistic, results-focused, and collaborative approach. Many have heard these terms before; this guide offers some clarity in how we define these terms.

Veteran-Centered

The Career Action Plan is based on the person-centered approach that was developed by psychologist Carl Rogers. This time-tested method of guided problem-solving is tailored to individual circumstances and is neither directive nor judgmental. While we do not provide the clinical support envisioned in Rogers’s model, the basic concepts of the theory apply in this VETERAN-CENTERED APPROACH. Rogers believed that each person is motivated by an “actualizing tendency, a force that drives them to reach their maximum potential, physically, spiritually and emotionally.” The person-centered model is based on the concept that if people suppress this natural actualizing tendency, they are unable grow to their fullest potential.

Because every Wounded Warrior is different and every combination of background, interests, and injuries produces a different set of options and challenges, it is essential that Career Specialists approach each case as unique. They assess each veteran’s circumstances and interests at the beginning of the relationship and then work with the veterans and their families to gradually assemble an agenda for discussion, a list of services
and opportunities to explore, and methods for dealing with difficulties and setbacks.

In this veteran-centered approach, the Career Specialist acts as a guide, but does not provide directive answers for the veteran or act as a judge. The Career Specialist’s role is to provide guidance, support, and structure, so that the client can discover solutions for themselves and move forward confidently on their career transition path.

Each Career Specialist should complete the free online person-centered course available from Cornell University (http://ilr-edi-r1.ilr.cornell.edu/PCP/).

Proactive

The PROACTIVE approach places the onus on the Career Specialist to engage the veteran, keep the conversation going, counteract discouragement and inertia, and respond supportively to new ideas, concerns, and events. Career Specialists frequently travel to meet veterans in their homes or communities. They take initiative in suggesting options and in charting routes around obstacles. As career plans progress, Career Specialists work alongside veterans, family members, educators, trainers, employers, and other service providers to anticipate problems and make the most of opportunities that veterans on their own might not have been aware.

While the goal is always self-sufficiency, reaching that goal often entails a period of active support and guidance in helping veterans find their particular path.

Prolonged

A well-developed Career Action Plan provides the means and motivation for the veteran and their family to achieve their goals over the long run, with the Career Specialist providing PROLONGED support as needed along the way.

The relationship between the Career Specialist and veteran provides stability during what may be a slow process of coming to terms with injury and civilian life, and later through the various stages of planning, study, training, employment, and all the trial-and-error along the way. The Career Action Plan and the support Career Specialists provide do not end with the first job and may not end even after a successful transition into a satisfying career. Throughout their career journey, if veterans want and need a
continued source of support, the Career Specialist remains accessible. The amount of contact usually varies over time. After enrolling in school or a training program, a veteran’s need for regular consultations may diminish, but it may pick up again later, during a job search, for example, or in the early years of employment.

The ongoing relationship is critical to the program’s success. Even the most effective Career Specialist can bring about only a limited change with brief or intermittent contact.

**Holistic**

The **HOLISTIC** approach to career services means that the career itself is merely the center of a much wider circle of support that encompasses physical and psychological rehabilitation, family support, and the many facets of self-discovery and adjustment that necessarily follow a traumatic disruption in someone’s life. Inclusion of the veteran’s family in the Careers relationship is particularly important. Spouses often find their own lives nearly as changed by an injury as the veterans. Stresses on marriage and family can be as great an obstacle to recovery and career progress as the injuries themselves. Family members’ ability to adjust, cope with changes, and support the veteran while also looking after their own well-being, are crucial factors in the Wounded Warrior’s chances of success and growth over time.

**Results-Focused**

All Careers activities are **RESULTS-FOCUSED**, meaning (a) that they are designed to aim consistently toward concrete milestones and tangible successes in a veteran’s career, family life, and personal well-being; and (b) that these milestones and outcomes are measured and tracked to constantly fine-tune the veteran’s Career Action Plan. The program’s design builds on extensive external evaluation and research into the most effective workforce and counseling techniques. Our ongoing internal evaluation of the program continues to inform the model, as well. To that end, data tracking—though typically invisible to the participating veterans—is as integral to the program as the various services, techniques, and tools Career Specialists use to deliver results for the veterans they serve.
Collaborative

As most available services and programs tend to be discrete and specialized—some for education, some for skills training, some for medical or psychological care, others for family or income support, and so on—the Career Specialist’s most important function is to help integrate these different resources into an efficient whole that forms a coherent path toward a career, independence, and success.

Our experience shows that it is not sufficient merely to refer and recommend possible sources of support. Results are measurably better when the Career Specialist builds working or COLLABORATIVE relationships with other programs and providers, and helps veterans understand and utilize them, as a complement to their own work.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Hiring and supporting veterans who have been injured in service to their country is a worthwhile and rewarding endeavor. The National Organization on Disability and the organizations that fund us thank you for making the effort to serve those who have served.

If you find that you require additional assistance, please feel free to contact us at info@nod.org.

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About the National Organization on Disability

The National Organization on Disability (NOD) is a private, non-profit organization that promotes the full participation and contributions of America’s 56 million people with disabilities in all aspects of life. Today, NOD focuses on increasing employment opportunities for the 79 percent of working-age Americans with disabilities who are not employed.

Founded in 1982, NOD is one of the oldest cross-disability organizations in the country, and remains one of the few organizations committed to representing all Americans with disabilities, regardless of their particular condition or circumstances.

Learn More

More information on the Wounded Warrior Careers program, as well as our other disability employment programs is available on our website at www.NOD.org.

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