Return to Careers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

November 2011

A National Qualitative Inquiry into the Career Experiences, Interests, and Support Needs of Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with Traumatic Brain Injuries and/or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Work sponsored by the Institute for Economic Empowerment at AbilityOne and executed in partnership with the Aperio Consulting Group, the Economic Mobility Corporation, and the Institute for Community Inclusion.
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Foreword: Gov. Tom Ridge

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have earned their place in history as the longest running engagements fought with all volunteer forces. With repeated deployments and the stress of unconventional warfare, several hundred thousand veterans will return with these wars’ signature injuries: Post Traumatic Stress and Traumatic Brain Injury. Communities across America will be hard pressed to respond, despite their determination to ensure a better career for these veterans, than their predecessors returning from previous wars.

At NOD we have long believed that even Americans with the most severe disabilities have skills and talents to offer to employers, and in so doing, they can become productive, contributing members of their communities. And we’re firmly convinced that the added qualities of commitment to service, discipline, resilience and extraordinary problem solving skills that veterans with disabilities learn in their service, are unique talents that can be trained towards high productivity in the workforce.

So when the Army came to NOD in 2006 to develop an employment service demonstration for severely injured veterans, we gladly rose to the challenge, mounting a first-of-its-kind program. “Wounded Warriors Careers” helps both veterans and their spouses pursue civilian careers when transitioning from military duty.

We are truly grateful to contract with the Institute for Economic Empowerment at NISH to develop “Return to Careers,” an innovative and timely national qualitative analysis of the support needs and career interests of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom Veterans returning with Traumatic Brain Injury and/or Post Traumatic Stress. Both projects will, we strongly believe, make important contributions to the lives of soldiers returning to civilian life after injury—and inform what communities, the military, the Veterans Administration, and policymakers can do to help.

- Ultimately, the findings evidence a myriad of things essential to ensuring the success of our nation’s heroes. We’ve learned that a civilian career after injury is something a veteran can successfully pursue through an approach that:
• Ensures careful, methodical career exploration to inform the education or job development path
• Customizes a process suited to the unique needs and interests of each veteran
• Seeks out the veteran, often in his/her home, in a proactive manner
• Is sustained over a prolonged period, often lasting years; and
• Works closely not only with veterans, but also with their employers or schools.

We look forward to continuing our support of new and promising approaches to ensure Americans with disabilities have access to meaningful career opportunities, and we expect this research to initiate important conversations and innovations in support of veterans returning to the civilian world with newly acquired disabilities.

Sincerely,

Gov. Tom Ridge

Chairman, National Organization on Disability; Former Governor of Pennsylvania; and First Secretary of Homeland Security
Return to Careers: Research on the Career Interests and Support Needs of Veterans with Significant Disabilities

I. Background

Through the AbilityOne Program, NISH creates employment opportunities for people with significant disabilities. The Institute for Economic Empowerment (“the Institute”) was established by NISH to carry out research and development activities that advance the full and fair employment for individuals with significant disabilities, particularly those facing the most challenging barriers to employment.

The AbilityOne Program currently provides employment for more than 47,000 people with significant disabilities through a network of nearly 600 Community Rehabilitation Programs (“CRPs”). This is accomplished through the purchase of services and products by the federal government. Approximately 6% of these AbilityOne employees are veterans with significant disabilities.

The Institute was interested in discerning whether the employment needs of veterans with significant disabilities were being met through AbilityOne’s programs. To that end, it undertook a review of its programs and discovered that few CRPs actually served Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom (“OIF/OEF”) veterans with significant disabilities. Those with an interest in serving OIF/OEF veterans had difficulty locating them and understanding their needs. In turn, OIF/OEF veterans were not finding their way to CRPs who could serve them.

The Institute recognized the capabilities that CRPs could bring to helping this population of veterans access civilian careers. As a result, they launched a research project to secure primary information from the veterans, their family members, service providers, educators and employers. In 2009, the Institute released a Request for Proposal (“RFP”) seeking assistance in conducting research on identifying, developing and testing job interests and support strategies to meet the short- and long-term employment needs of significantly disabled veterans. The RFP specified that the research should focus on veterans who had been diagnosed with the signature injuries for this population:
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder ("PTSD") and Traumatic Brain Injury ("TBI").

The National Organization on Disability ("NOD") was selected to conduct this research based upon our direct experience with OIF/OEF veterans through our Wounded Warrior Careers program and our ongoing relationship with the Army Wounded Warrior Program ("AW2"). The Institute awarded the two-year contract to NOD in January 2010 and work began in February of the same year.

II. Executive Summary

In its mission to expand the participation and contribution of Americans with disabilities, NOD contracted entities with significant expertise to contribute to the research. The Economic Mobility Corporation, the Institute for Community Inclusion, and the Aperio Consulting Group provided significant knowledge and support to the Return to Careers project. This project sought to understand the career interests and employment support needs of OIF/OEF veterans who have been diagnosed with PTSD and/or TBI and are now transitioning back to civilian life.

The approach to this research was twofold. First, NOD and its contractors undertook a literature review on the employment challenges and support needs of veterans with PTSD and/or TBI and the approaches that have been effective in meeting those needs. To augment the findings of the literature review, NOD conducted primary research via focus groups and a written survey of demographic indicators administered in concert with more than 200 face-to-face and telephone interviews with veterans, their families, support networks, employers and educators.

Interviews were transcribed and coded, and the results were analyzed. Additionally, meetings of involved partners were convened in the form of an advisory panel, which served to support field researchers and facilitate analysis of findings that ultimately comprised the report.

In conducting the research, NOD sought to determine:
• Common challenges encountered by veterans with PTSD and/or TBI;
• Factors influencing the short-term employment and educational interests, as well as long-term career goals of veterans with PTSD and/or TBI;
• Occupations of most interest to veterans with PTSD and/or TBI, and characteristics of ideal work environments;
• Support strategies that are shown to be effective in obtaining employment in preferred careers;
• Effective delivery strategies and costs of these short- and long-term career supports;
• How veterans’ goals and required support change over time;
• The role of the veterans’ family members in pursuing their career goals, and what family support systems have been most effective; and
• What supports for employers have been most effective in recruiting, retaining and promoting candidates with PTSD and/or TBI.

There are 2.4 million OIF/OEF veterans, 114,000 of whom have received disability ratings from the VA. Of these veterans, 18.5% have been diagnosed with PTSD or depression. Another 19.5% have been identified to have TBI. Because of their prevalence, PTSD and TBI have become known as the signature injuries of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

All veterans interviewed by NOD reported a diagnosis of PTSD and/or TBI. They are mostly white males aged between 20 and 40. The majority are married with children. Most lived with a partner, family member or roommate; while just under 20% lived alone. Forty-one percent had PTSD only; 53% had both PTSD and TBI; and just 6% had TBI only. Importantly, more than 50% of the veterans in the sample had a physical disability in addition to their cognitive or psychological injuries.
a. Literature Review Findings

From the literature review, NOD found that the most common challenges to employment and education for these veterans include difficulty maintaining attention and concentration, difficulty responding to instruction due to memory issues, challenges related to endurance in the workplace (such as lack of focus and premature fatigue) and an increased likelihood of anger and anxiety-related social challenges (such as relating to and working with others).

Additionally, while clinical and other therapeutic interventions designed to help with overall functioning are effective. It was found, universally, that interventions specific to career transition and training on the specifics of PTSD and/or TBI for the staff that support these veterans, would result in more consistently positive outcomes in employment and education.

Other key findings from the literature revealed that a “whole life” approach (such as counseling, physical therapy and employment supports) to supporting a veteran was of greater value than concentrating on education or employment alone. Also, support provided directly to employers can have a great impact.

Ultimately, the literature showed that the most effective approaches to success in employment and education are those that are flexible, customized to the abilities of the veteran and his/her family, and readily available through a variety of community-based workforce development service providers. In other words, interventions based on a distinct understanding of the individual and his/her family are far more likely than others to lead to competitive employment outcomes.

b. Interview Findings

Nearly 75% of the veterans were not working at the time of their interview, while close to 50% were attending college or other training. The interviews also revealed that a large majority of the veterans believe they need further education or training in order to achieve their goals.
Career Interests by Occupational Cluster

Interviews and analysis revealed that while occupational interests showed wide variation across veterans. Some industry sectors were mentioned more frequently than others. These included, in descending order of frequency:

- Management and Business or Financial Operations;
- Protective Service;
- Healthcare;
- Social Services;
- Teaching;
- Computer Occupations;
- Engineering and Surveying;
- Installation, Maintenance and Repair;
- Other Social or Physical Sciences.

Just as we emphasize the criticality of individualized supports, it is important to note that while the above occupational interests and careers were identified as trends, the individual veteran’s goals and preferences remain of paramount importance in identifying career interests.

Ideal Work Environments

The desire to work in an organization with a clear structure for advancement was voiced frequently, particularly by those veterans whose interests were in the fields of business and financial operations or computer networking. In other words, a structure of guidance and advancement similar to what was experienced in the military was preferred. A trend that was not occupation-specific was the desire to work in an environment that includes other veterans.

Effect of Rank in the Military

Trends also emerged based on veterans’ most recent or current rank (in cases where the interviewee had yet to be fully separated from the service) in the military and their level of education. Veterans who retired as non-commissioned officers were more often interested in management or business and financial operations
positions. These veterans believed that their military service gave them the transferable leadership skills and experience to supervise and train people in civilian positions. Veterans who retired at lower ranks were more likely to be interested in jobs in the healthcare field.

**Effect of Mental Health or Cognitive Impairments on Ability to Work**

A vast majority of the veterans interviewed felt that symptoms related to their mental health or cognitive abilities had affected or would affect their ability to work or to perform certain types of work—even if the effect was relatively small. These veterans noted periods of depression, loss of sleep due to nightmares, anxiety, mood swings, short tempers, short-term memory loss, inability to concentrate, stupor from medication and migraine headaches.

**Support Needs**

The specific types of supports needed for veterans with PTSD and/or TBI to obtain and retain meaningful employment were found to be unique to each individual. In general terms, this study found that supports must be provided as early as possible in the pre-employment process. Some supports that proved effective include:

- In-depth career consultation and exploration with a focus on a veteran’s abilities, not the cognitive impairments;
- A deeper understanding of veterans’ own disabilities (specifically their manifestation in the workplace);
- An understanding of benefits and legal rights;
- Knowledge on how to carry-over military skills to the civilian workforce (transferable skill identification);
- Recognition of military-earned certification and credentials by colleges and employers;
- Help discovering well-matched job opportunities;
- Peer-to-peer mentoring; and
- Social interaction practice.

In keeping with the “whole life” approach, the study found that a veteran’s family is often instrumental to ensuring
his/her well-being, self-confidence, job satisfaction and ongoing career success. PTSD and TBI can cause significant stress to the family, which—without support—can break the family unit. Consequently, when the family unit understands the veteran’s disability and takes a role in providing support, the veteran is more likely to succeed in the workforce. As a result, support for the whole family is critical for success.

The family supports that were reported as most effective are:

- In-home medical care for the veteran;
- Consistent VA appointments; and
- Counseling and education to the realities of PTSD and TBI.

For businesses to succeed in hiring veterans with PTSD and/or TBI, NOD found the following to be key:

- A company-wide commitment, starting from the top, to hiring these veterans with disabilities;
- Education and training for managers and co-workers about PTSD and TBI, how they manifest themselves in the workplace and how they can help veterans succeed;
- Education and training about military culture for managers and co-workers;
- Accommodations, such as memory aids, customizable work stations and environment;
- Encouraging disclosure so that employers may provide the most effective accommodations for productivity;
- Assignment of an easily accessible job coach or mentor, like a specially trained manager or co-worker;
- Employer access to qualified veterans for recruitment;
- Flexibility in structuring job descriptions and work hours (to allow time for therapy and medical appointments);
- Clear management structure and process for and advancement; and
- The presence of other veterans in management and leadership.
We found these final three trends—flexibility, a clear management and advancement structure and the presence of other veterans in a company’s leadership—to be the most prominent.

Given the intense interest among employers to hire wounded warriors, we strongly believe that if committed business leaders put these methods into practice, many other employers would follow.

III. Conclusion

This research project was undertaken by NOD and AbilityOne to better understand the process of recovery and re-entry to civilian life faced by veterans with PTSD and/or TBI who are returning home from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and to help ensure that these veterans find success in the career marketplace. Chronically unemployed and underemployed, these veterans often require specific supports to remove barriers and ensure success in the workforce. It is our goal that—by identifying these supports and suggesting methods of delivery—these injured men and women who have served our country will indeed return to civilian life and embark on careers of personal and professional satisfaction.