THE PATHFINDER PROJECT:

What Veterans Tell Us About the Transition to Meaningful Civilian Work & Private Sector Success

A DISABILITY-FORWARD ANALYSIS OF VETERAN EMPLOYMENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pathfinders are elite specialist soldiers trained to be the vanguard of the military. Deployed ahead of their units, they are charged with creating safe conditions for others to follow. In this study, Pathfinders refer to those disabled veterans who have established successful corporate careers. Their perspectives and experiences describe the transition to meaningful civilian employment after separation from the military and navigating civilian life with a service-connected disability.

Crucially, many service-disabled veterans keep their disabilities private in the context of work, even when they have a formal disability rating from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). In this study, **over 60% of veterans say that they never or rarely talk about their disabilities at work**. However, once disabled veterans secure work in organizations that value them, they bring their considerable skills, discipline, accountability, and problem-solving habits to bear.

In the process of getting there, Pathfinders are not only navigating disability-related hiring barriers; they are also trying to convert military experience into terms civilian employers understand. For this, disabled veterans turn to one another. Peer networks emerge as the most helpful resource in the process of transitioning to the civilian workforce.

Once at work, veterans link positive work culture to the activation of the skills that veterans gained in the military. Disabled veterans report higher levels of job satisfaction when their roles make good use of their military-learned skills. This holds true for both soft skills like working collaboratively, problem solving under pressure, attention to detail, and hard skills like supply chain management, project management, and logistics. However, the clearest link is leadership. Veterans who report high organizational culture and job satisfaction scores are **especially likely to say their leadership skills are being used at work (88%).**

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Interestingly, veterans are not looking to recreate the military experience at work. For business, the solution is not simply mimicking cultural features of the military (hierarchical, rigid, and disciplined) since there is a low correlation between veteran job satisfaction and cultural similarity to the military.

Therefore, in thriving contexts, veterans are not just adjusting to civilian work, they are able to contribute in ways that draw on their military skills. A positive work culture, then, is not only good for veterans. It can also help organizations operate more effectively with the help of veterans' service, leadership, accountability, and ability to bring people together.

Once in the workforce, veterans with service-connected disabilities can benefit from exposure to the business disability community's understanding of disability inclusion, which emphasizes the advantageous impacts of disability in business. The business disability ethos situates people with disabilities as an untapped source of talent, driver of business performance, and asset to workplace innovation. **Veterans' service-orientation, leadership skills, job accountability, and team instincts strengthen the business case for disability inclusion.** The Pathfinder Project, then, uncovers a new dimension of the business case for disability inclusion that centers the strengths of service-disabled veterans.

WHAT CONSTITUTES POSITIVE WORK CULTURE FOR DISABLED VETERANS

Positive work culture does not mean just like the military

There is a weak correlation between disabled veteran job satisfaction and having a culture similar to the military, suggesting that the solution for employers is not simply mimicking the chain of command, discipline, or high stakes of military culture.

Managers value veteran experience and leadership skills

The components of a positive work culture exist when managers value veteran experience and understand leadership capacity. **Veterans who report high organizational culture and job satisfaction scores were especially likely to say their leadership skills were being used at work (88%).**

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Managers make informal arrangements for disability, rather than formal accommodations

Positive work culture is driven by managers who are open to making informal arrangements to support their veterans' disability-related workplace needs, often in lieu of formal accommodations – for example appointments made through the VA, which are rarely offered outside of work hours.

Clear and transparent career growth trajectories

"In my current role, I'd say it's five stars across the board; it's fantastic — I absolutely love what I do. It's challenging, it's dynamic, and it's different every day. I'm constantly learning new things, and the company I'm with is huge, with a 'sky's the limit' kind of career trajectory in terms of growth and progression."



Activation of hard and soft military skills

For disabled veterans, positive work culture is linked to the activation of the skills that veterans bring from the military. Disabled veterans report higher levels of job satisfaction when their roles make good use of their military-learned skills. This holds true for both soft skills like working collaboratively, problem solving under pressure, attention to detail, and hard skills like supply chain management, project management, and logistics.

INTEL FOR EMPLOYERS

- **Train managers on disability inclusion as part of veteran hiring.** Managers need to understand VA disability ratings and what they do (and don't) mean, the military culture around disability that discourages asking for help, how to handle accommodation requests from veteran employees, how to support veteran ERGs, and the most common service-connected disabilities they're likely to encounter as managers.
- **Embed disability inclusion into veteran onboarding.** From day one, veterans should have clear information about disability disclosure, confidentiality protections, how to request workplace accommodations, and what benefits are available to them, including your veteran focused employee resource group (ERG).

MAXIMIZING TALENT THROUGH VETERAN NETWORKS

Veterans report difficulty securing job interviews

Veterans with service-connected disabilities and civilians with disabilities face many of the same workforce entry barriers. In our data set, disabled veterans feel they have a harder time getting initial interviews, hearing back after interviews that went well, and experiencing positive interviews overall, compared to civilians with disabilities. Disabled veterans also report more difficulty securing interviews and more negative interview experiences, pointing to a veteran-specific challenge around translating military experience into civilian hiring language and helping employers recognize its value.

Peer networks are the main way veterans learn how to navigate civilian work

For veterans, informal peer networks are not just helpful extras; they are often the main way veterans learn how to navigate civilian work. Veterans described turning to other veterans who had already made the transition because those individuals could explain what formal programs often did not.

Table 1: What Helps Veterans Navigate Civilian Work

Source of Support	Average agreement score	Interpretation
Guidance from Military Peers	3.64	High agreement; practical informal guidance
Nonprofit programs	2.53	Moderate-to-low agreement; helpful for some
VA Resources	2.39	Lower agreement; formal support was less consistently useful
TAP / Formal Transition Programming	2.25	Lowest agreement; generally viewed as basic or incomplete

Peers help translate military experience into civilian language

Peers helped translate military experience into civilian language, identify realistic career paths, prepare for interviews, and understand which employers were worth pursuing. The data suggest that formal programs provide a baseline, while peer networks provide the practical, trusted, real-world guidance that veterans experience as most useful when looking for work. An overwhelming **72% of veterans agreed that the informal support that colleagues offered was more useful than formal programs run by the service.**

72% of veterans agree that informal colleague support is more useful than formal transition programs

Peer networks are more trustworthy than programs

Peer networks gave veterans advice that felt trustworthy because it came from people who had "been there" and understood both military culture and the civilian workplace. In this sense, informal networks filled the gaps left by formal systems by giving veterans practical guidance, honest feedback, and encouragement at the moments when they were most likely to feel lost.

INTEL FOR EMPLOYERS

Shift skills translation to the employer. Don't leave veterans to do all the work of explaining how their military experience applies — employers should take on some of the responsibility of mapping military skills to their open roles.

Bring veterans into your hiring process. Include veterans in recruiting, hiring, and interviewing so they can help make skill connections accurately and signal to candidates that the organization understands their background.

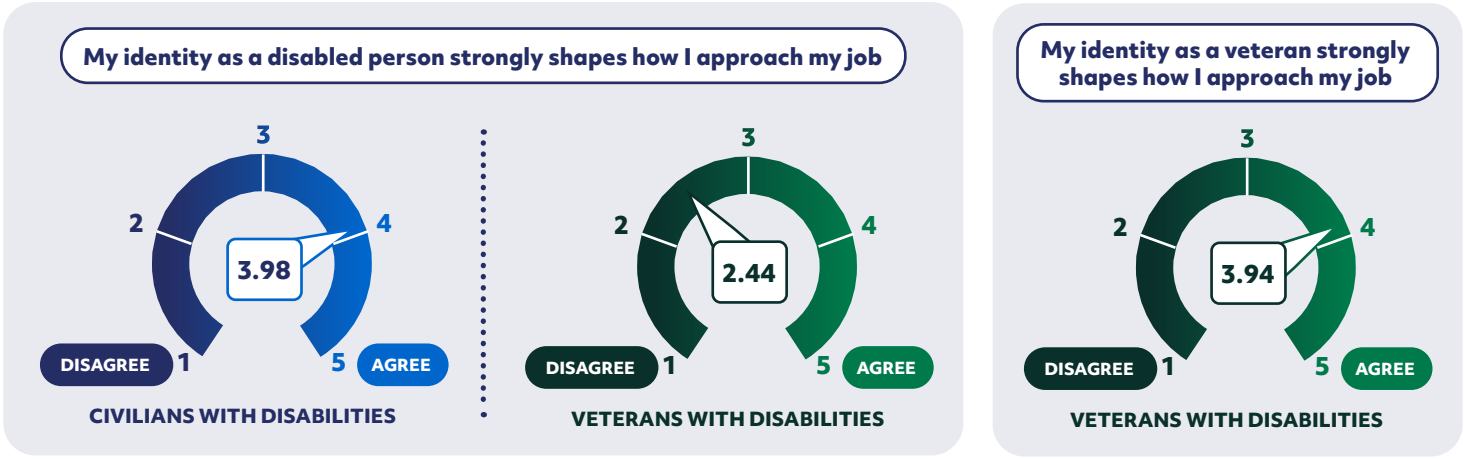
VETERANS *DRIVE ON* WITH DISABILITIES

"Drive On" **is a phrase used in the military that means keep moving, keep going, and don't stop – even when something goes wrong, conditions are bad, or morale is low. It is both a command and mindset.**

"I usually don't tell people about the military—like, when I write my bio, I'll just say 'my other career' and keep it moving. The reason is there are a lot of preconceived notions—like how people assume that because you were in the Marines and that you're going to be doing pushups in the office."

Quiet about disabilities at work

Veterans are quiet about their disabilities at work. Veteran identity shapes workplace behavior more strongly than disability identity for veterans with disabilities. Veterans with disabilities were much more likely to say that being a veteran shapes how they approach work than to say that being disabled does.

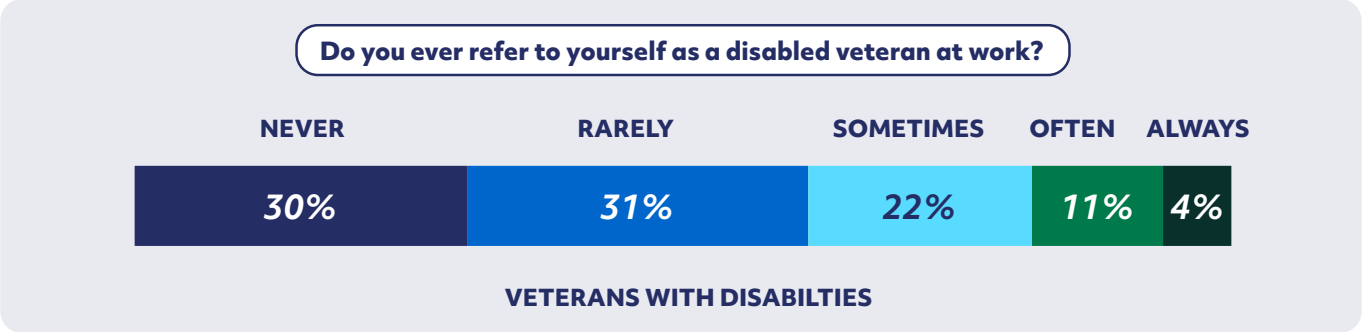


"When we come out of the military, we have our own perception of ourselves, right? And when we go into a big organization—and we don't want to make waves—we carry that 'quiet professional' persona, right? Like, we just want to do our job and do it well, but we don't necessarily want all the attention or recognition. Not everybody needs to know about me."



Do not lead with disability identity

Many veterans keep disability private at work, even when they have a formal Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) disability rating. In interviews, veterans described wanting to be seen first as capable workers rather than as people defined by injury or need. In fact, **over 60% of veterans said they never or rarely talk about their disabilities at work**. Participants described how they avoid talking about disability because it can bring up stereotypes about PTSD, physical limits, or what disabled veterans can and cannot do.



Understand disability through the VA rating

Veteran understandings of disability are shaped by federal government policies surrounding compensation for injuries sustained in the military, termed service-connected disabilities. For many veterans, disability identity is shaped by the VA disability system. Once a veteran applies for disability compensation, the VA assigns a 0-100 percent disability rating based on standardized rubrics to evaluate the functional impact of the disability on their life. In the process of determining benefits and access to long-term care, the VA can make disability feel like a government category instead of a lived experience. As a result, a veteran may officially have a VA disability rating but still not think of themselves as "disabled." This may be especially true when the disability is not apparent or was something the veteran learned to effectively conceal.

"I think getting out, it was difficult for me to identify as a disabled veteran. I just saw myself as a veteran who was receiving disability payments."



Low accommodation request rate in the workplace

Workplace accommodation requests were also relatively uncommon among disabled veterans in the survey. **Among veterans with disabilities, 65% said they had never requested a workplace accommodation.** This suggests that many disabled veterans are not using formal accommodation systems at work, even when they have documented disabilities. Instead, some may be managing their workplace needs quietly, relying on informal flexibility, or avoiding disclosure unless it feels necessary.



INTEL FOR EMPLOYERS

- **Veteran ERGs as Business Resources.** Harness the military field expertise (service, mission, leadership, accountability, security, camaraderie) that veterans bring your business to inform business strategy and product development.
- **Connect Your Veteran and Disability ERGs.** Develop cross programing between your Veteran and Disability ERGs to foster new affirmative understandings about disability so that veterans are exposed to other ways of understanding disability anchored in civilian business disability culture.

Many organizations have already realized that hiring veterans is just the starting point. Employers who support the needs of their disabled veteran employees stand to benefit the most from building systems that also give them what they need to thrive. In creating cultures that activate veteran skills, by fostering a sense of purpose and clear growth trajectories, they elevate leaders within their organizations with powerful skills gained from service. Businesses who recognize that veteran peer networks are a resource that can help solve well-documented challenges will be best prepared to resolve them. In supporting new understandings around disability through ERGs, these employers will combat stigma and support healthy outcomes for those who served.

Supporting healthy disability identity for veterans does not require them to disclose their disabilities; in all likelihood, many veterans will continue to keep their disabilities private. However, providing the contexts in which disabled veterans can bring their vast skill repertoires to work will have massive collateral benefits for other employees, for organizational culture, and ultimately, the bottom line.

ABOUT THE STUDY

The Pathfinder Project used innovative methodology to explore successful transitions to civilian employment to identify the success factors that could be built into scalable employer systems. The study is built upon in-depth qualitative interviews with fifteen disabled veterans who have already found success and well-being in corporate America; the interviews yielded insights about transitioning out of the military, navigating talent acquisition structures, communicating their transferrable military skills, the features of good civilian work culture, and how they understand their service-connected disabilities at work. Those insights were converted into a survey to understand the scale of agreement between participants that was circulated among Disability:IN corporate partners and their contacts, yielding over 200 responses from disabled veterans and non-disabled veterans, as well as both disabled and non-disabled civilians in order to highlight the unique features of the disabled veteran journey, and to what extent disability and military service respectively shape their corporate employment experiences.

This study was designed and executed by the Disability:IN research team, including Louis Olander, Ph.D., Lisa Stern, Ed.D., Reid Jewett Smith, Ph.D., Jacob Wilson, and Hanako Kusumi. An advisory group comprised of disabled veterans has contributed feedback throughout the design, data analysis, and narrative construction of the study, ensuring that the data and narratives were held to the highest standards of fidelity. Our deepest thanks go to AJ Dunk, Lance Dorsey, Cody Lueck, and Danelle Justice for their commitment to the study and their advice throughout the process.

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ARES Charitable Foundation

About the Ares Charitable Foundation:

The Ares Charitable Foundation (the "Ares Foundation)" envisions a world in which people have access to the knowledge, resources and opportunities needed to help chart pathways to self-sufficiency and drive strong economies. Established in 2021 as a 501(c)(3) qualifying organization sponsored by Ares Management Corporation ("Ares" or the "Firm"), we strive to advance economic mobility by helping people prepare and reskill for quality jobs, launch and scale businesses, and build personal financial knowledge. We execute our philanthropy with the same rigor, discipline and entrepreneurial spirit that Ares brings to its investment activities and business operations. Furthermore, we aim to ensure that these efforts help demonstrate Ares' core values—to be collaborative, responsible, entrepreneurial, self-aware and trustworthy—in action.

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