Completing the Mission:

BEST PRACTICES FOR RECRUITING AND HIRING VETERANS

Introduction

Each year, approximately 200,000 U.S. service members leave the military and enter civilian life, according to the U.S. General Services Administration. Some have spent their entire career in the military—typically between 20 and 30 years—while others are leaving this role after one tour of duty. Regardless, these newly minted veterans face the challenge of transitioning their personal and professional lives to a vastly different culture and day-to-day reality. Navigating the job search process—applying for open positions, interviewing, getting hired, and finally starting a civilian career—can be a daunting but essential element of this successful transition.

For employers, tapping into this talent pool presents a significant opportunity. Veterans bring many invaluable skills, leadership experience, a strong work ethic, and more to the workforce, all of which can benefit any organization. By leveraging the right tools and strategies, HR can not only ease the recruiting and hiring process for veterans, but also help meet their organizations' talent needs and enhance their competitive edge. However, despite some successful efforts to integrate veterans into the civilian workforce, research shows that there are persistent challenges and obstacles that both veterans and employers face in this process.

To help employers better understand and navigate these obstacles, SHRM and the SHRM Foundation, with support from USAA, surveyed HR professionals about a range of issues related to recruiting, hiring, and retaining veterans. This report provides insights into the current state of military veteran hiring, the top strategies organizations can use to effectively hire from this group, and actionable steps HR professionals can take to overcome these challenges and leverage the unique value of veterans within their own organizations.

Key Insights

○ **Nearly all HR professionals said they believe veterans can thrive in a variety of work settings.**
  - 98% agreed (to any extent) that veterans can thrive in both team-based and individual settings (71% agreed/strongly agreed; 27% slightly agreed).
  - 96% agreed (to any extent) that veterans can thrive in both entry-level and managerial roles (71% agreed/strongly agreed; 24% slightly agreed).*
  - 95% agreed (to any extent) that veterans are uniquely trained to work through chaotic times (63% agreed/strongly agreed; 32% slightly agreed).

○ **Most HR professionals said veterans do as well as or better than civilian employees across a variety of performance metrics, but they stand out in three areas.**
  - **Work ethic** (68% said veterans perform better or much better than civilians).
  - **Teamwork abilities** (61% said veterans perform better or much better than civilians).
  - **Leadership skills** (58% said veterans perform better or much better than civilians).

○ **Even as HR professionals expressed positive perceptions of veterans' skills and abilities, nearly a quarter (23%) said aligning those skills and abilities with civilian job requirements is a major hiring challenge.** A mere 2% of HR professionals reported using military skills translation tools to help, despite their availability. But within that small group, nearly half (46%) said these tools have helped them hire veterans who would otherwise have been deemed unqualified, demonstrating the tools' utility.

○ **There is a significant gap between the value employers see in veterans and their understanding of this talent pool and ability to hire from it.** Almost all HR professionals (93%) agreed (to any extent) that their organization values veterans in the workplace. Yet, less than a third (31%) agreed or strongly agreed that their organization is effective at hiring veterans. Even fewer—just 24%—agreed or strongly agreed that their organization understands the unique challenges veterans face.

○ **Organizations with formal recruiting/hiring programs for veterans are more likely to implement targeted strategies and report higher effectiveness in their hiring efforts.** HR professionals with formal programs (65%) were more likely to agree or strongly agree that their organization is effective at hiring veterans than those with informal programs (42%) or those without a program (21%). And organizations with formal programs in place (96%) were significantly more likely to say they have implemented at least one strategy aimed at recruiting/hiring veterans than those with informal programs (85%) or those without a program (21%).

*Does not sum exactly due to rounding.

The Business Case

Back in 2021, when SHRM first conducted research on recruiting, hiring, and retaining veterans, the findings demonstrated the indisputable value this group brings to the workforce and served as a renewed call to action amid the COVID-19 pandemic. As the workplace landscape continues to evolve, this new research not only builds upon those insights—reaffirming that veterans possess the essential skills for today's dynamic business environment—but also recontextualizes the findings beyond the immediate challenges of the pandemic.

"Veterans are a great contributor to the workplace because of their experience and exposure to various situations and environments."

- HR professional at a midsize organization in the professional, technical, and scientific services industry

Almost all HR professionals agreed (to any extent) that **veterans are able to thrive in a variety of work settings.** This includes:

98%
who said veterans thrive in both team-based and individual settings

96%
who said veterans thrive in both entry-level and managerial roles

95%
who said veterans are uniquely trained to work through chaotic times

HR professionals also broadly and consistently reported that veterans perform as good as or better than civilian employees on a variety of metrics. In these three areas, they said **veterans perform better or much better than civilians**:

## 68%
Work Ethic

61%
Teamwork Abilities

58%
Leadership Skills

Once employers bring veterans on board, they reap these benefits and tend to retain these hires effectively. In fact, less than half of HR professionals (39%) said their organization has faced a major challenge in its efforts to retain veterans. However, the process of bringing veterans on board in the first place remains a significant obstacle for many organizations. Two-thirds of HR professionals (67%) said their organization has faced at least one major challenge in its efforts to recruit and hire veterans.

Recruiting and Hiring Military Veterans

Most organizations want to hire veterans. An overwhelming majority of HR professionals (90%) agreed (to any extent) that hiring veterans is appealing to their organization—and with strong sentiment: 61% agreed or strongly agreed. **And most organizations have hired veterans.** Nearly the same number of HR professionals (89%) said their organization has hired from this talent pool. **Still, less than a third of HR professionals agreed or strongly agreed that they are effective at hiring veterans** (31% agreed/strongly agreed; 36% slightly agreed; 19% slightly disagreed; 13% disagreed/strongly disagreed).
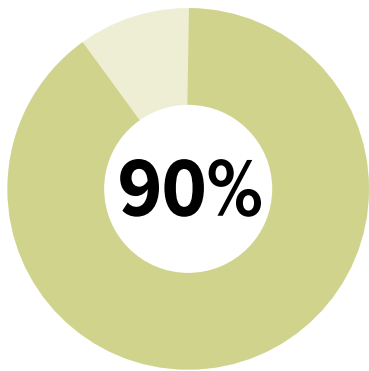
90%

of HR professionals agreed (to any extent) that hiring veterans is appealing to their organization
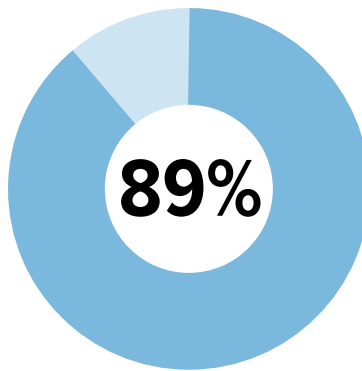
89%

of HR professionals said they've hired from this talent pool
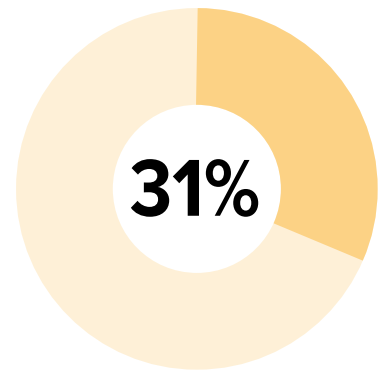
31%

of HR professionals agreed or strongly agreed they are effective at hiring veterans

This gap may be explained by a disparity in strategic planning and execution. Only about a third of organizations have a formal (13%) or informal (23%) recruiting/hiring program in place geared toward veterans. HR professionals from this minority, though, were more likely to report that their organizations are effective at hiring from this group:

○ HR professionals from organizations with formal programs aimed at recruiting/hiring veterans (65%) were **1.5 times more likely** to agree or strongly agree that their organization is effective at hiring veterans than those with informal programs (42%) and **3 times more likely** than those without a program (21%).

Informal programs can still yield results, but the distinction between formal and informal programs is crucial because formal programs are more likely to demonstrate success. Organizations that implement formal programs are more action-oriented, have more targeted strategies, and reported higher effectiveness in their hiring efforts:

- Organizations with formal programs in place (96%) were significantly more likely to say they have implemented at least one strategy aimed at recruiting/hiring veterans than those with informal programs (85%) or those without a program (21%).

- HR professionals from organizations that have implemented at least one recruiting/hiring strategy (46%) were **more than twice as likely** to agree or strongly agree that their organization is effective at hiring veterans than those from organizations that have not (20%).

Who do formal recruitment programs target?

More than half of HR professionals that have a formal program in place to recruit and hire veterans (60%) said their program also targets former members of the National Guard and military reservists. Just 10% said their formal program doesn't include these groups, and 30% were unsure.

The Most Effective Strategies for Recruiting and Hiring Veterans

There are several effective strategies that HR professionals identified for recruiting and hiring veterans, but the research indicated that many organizations are underutilizing them. Consider these strategies:
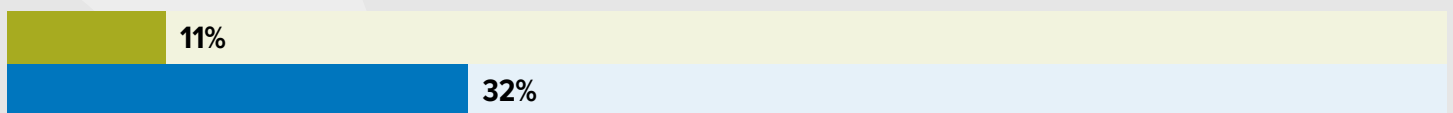
Providing targeted outreach and communication to veteran networks or communities

24%
29%
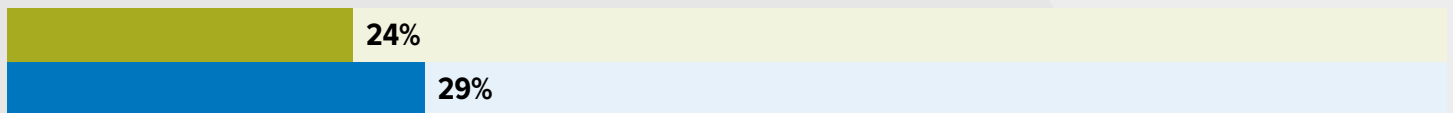
Partnering with advocacy organizations supporting veterans for recruitment purposes

18%
29%
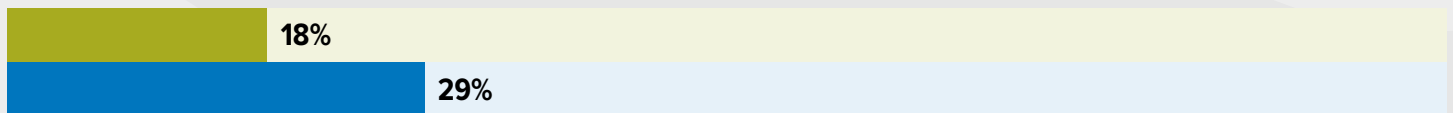
Including "or equivalent military experience" or similar language in job descriptions

11%
32%

Reserving a percentage of positions at their organization specifically for veterans

2%
35%
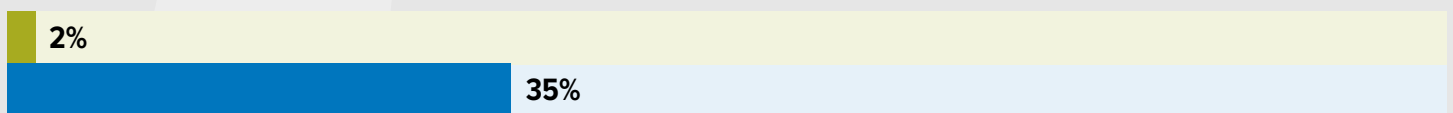
Key

Percentage of organizations that have implemented this strategy

Percentage of HR professionals that said this strategy is very or extremely effective (among organizations that use it)

Given that organizations with formal recruiting and hiring programs are more likely to be successful at hiring from this talent pool, we examined the most common strategies they employed. The top three strategies included providing targeted outreach and communication to veteran networks or communities, actively participating in veteran job fairs or recruitment activities, and adopting hiring pledges to actively recruit and hire veterans. These strategies are utilized by both formal and informal programs, but the key difference lies in their effectiveness. Organizations with formal programs for veterans are significantly more successful in implementing these strategies, leading to more effective recruiting and hiring.

Top 3 Most Prevalent Formal Recruiting and Hiring Strategies

	Formal Programs' Effectiveness (Percentage of HR professionals that said this strategy is very/ extremely effective [among organizations that use it])	Informal Programs' Effectiveness (Percentage of HR professionals that said this strategy is very/ extremely effective [among organizations that use it])
Providing targeted outreach and communication to veteran networks or communities	51%	19%
Actively participating in veteran job fairs or recruitment activities	42%	20%
Adopting hiring pledges to actively recruit and hire veterans	35%	15%

5 Top Challenges and Solutions to Recruiting and Hiring Military Veterans

Two-thirds of HR professionals (67%) said their organization has faced at least one major challenge in its efforts to recruit and hire veterans. These are the top five challenges they reported facing:

Challenge 1: Self-Identification

Veterans do not self-identify during the application process, so organizations are not aware of whether they have hired members of this talent pool (26%).

> "I think we probably have a lot of veterans who haven't self-identified. This keeps us as an employer from knowing if there are any special needs or accommodations that may be needed."
>
> - HR professional at a large organization in the government, public administration, and military industry

Possible solution: Organizations often utilize standard U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidelines for identification, but there are other opportunities to support disclosure. Review your job application process to see if there is an opportunity to better promote your inclusive workplace culture and provide additional context so there are explicit opportunities for veterans to self-identify within your organization's standard application questionnaire. It is likely your recruitment software has the capacity and even examples to choose from. Still, veterans may not want to self-identify this way, so consider screening resumes your organization receives for the names of U.S. military branches, military titles, and other signs that candidates have been in the military. If your organization uses artificial intelligence or applicant tracking systems to assist in screening resumes, you can make sure this is something the technology accounts for. After that, you will need a human staff member to review the resumes and determine whether qualified candidates served in the military or only worked for the military in a civilian capacity.

Challenge 2: Lack of Awareness

HR professionals lack awareness about where to post jobs to target veterans (26%).

> "[We need] advice on job boards and local resources for advertising to veterans—advice on how to help the transition to a civilian work environment."
>
> - HR professional at a midsize organization in the finance, banking, and insurance industry

Possible solution: Start with the places where you are already posting jobs. You can add language to every job posting indicating that military veterans are encouraged to apply. You can also add the wording "or equivalent military experience" to the section inquiring about relevant work experience. This is a quick and easy first step that could help your job posts turn up in veterans' searches. No matter how they reach your listing, those who read it will know your organization is thinking of them. There are also several dedicated platforms and opportunities that can help your job postings reach more veterans. For example, LinkedIn offers tools that allow you to search, segment, and connect with veterans directly. Getting Hired is a resource dedicated to helping veterans with disabilities connect with employers. By registering, employers are provided job board access. You can also register at the U.S. Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) to import your jobs directly from your corporate website to their site at no cost and post them to state job boards.

VETS also provides a wealth of resources to veterans and the employers who seek to hire them, including vetted targeted job boards. With the knowledge you gain there, you will be equipped to expand your outreach to veteran job candidates.

Challenge 3: Access and Engagement
Challenges in accessing and engaging veteran talent pools in the local area (26%).

> *"Provide locations for specific job fairs or targeted groups geographically."*
>
> - HR professional at a midsize organization in the hospitality industry

Possible solution: The Department of Labor can help you with this challenge, too. Its VETS [Regional Veterans' Employment Coordinators (RVECs)](#) operate out of six regional offices working to help employers find service members, veterans, and military spouses. They provide employers with one-on-one assistance and can connect you with a variety of resources, share industry-recognized best practices, and put you in touch with federal, state, and local resources to facilitate veterans' employment. Local [American Job Centers](#) are a rich resource that have a focus on veterans. State Veterans Affairs offices also are able to connect you with resources and organizations and provide support to local veteran talent pools. Lastly, check out the Monster website [military.com](#) or your local government or chamber of commerce initiatives.

Challenge 4: Aligning Skills
Difficulty aligning military experience and skill sets with civilian job requirements (23%).

> *"Look at the vet's career history, not just the immediate need for a skill. If a person has mastered one body of knowledge, they can master another. There may be some soft coaching needed to help the transition to commercial/unpredictable culture, and most vets I know could benefit so they are not so hard on themselves or their colleagues/reports."*
>
> - HR professional at a small organization in the professional, technical, and scientific services industry

Possible solution: There are many military skills translation tools—both free and paid—that can help you understand what types of military work align with the experience you're seeking. You can use these tools in two different ways: 1) when you are writing job listings and 2) when you are translating resumes that may reference military jargon or concepts that you are not familiar with. When writing job listings, you can add a section describing the types of military experience and skills that align with the civilian experience and skills you've already identified. You can also consider how artificial intelligence may assist in these military skills translation efforts.

When you are interviewing known veterans, use behavioral or situational interview techniques. Be clear about the job role and responsibilities, but utilize structured questions to draw out applicant skill sets and uncover their applicable strengths for their role. When possible, avoid asking questions that could elicit brief answers because it is in their training and culture to do so. Instead, ask probing questions that allow them to share stories that draw a parallel between their service experience and the job for which they have applied.

Challenge 5: Lack of Knowledge

Lack of knowledge about the unique needs of veterans (19%).

> *"Veterans can be widely used in most any organization—they just need a guide to positions applicable in your agency and support along the way."*

- HR professional at a midsize organization in the health care industry

Possible solution: Due to the unique aspects of military life, veterans may have assumptions upon transitioning to civilian life that HR professionals should be aware of to successfully hire and retain veterans. For example, veterans are used to hierarchical chains of command in a highly structured culture, so ensuring they understand guiding principles, organizational charts, leadership communication, and company culture is critical. Veterans are also used to a very structured compensation framework that includes separate housing allowances and all-inclusive, comprehensive health care. Concepts such as co-pays, co-insurance, parking costs, and other assumed costs that most civilians are aware of may be unfamiliar to veterans. Therefore, helping veterans understand your organization's full compensation package, including what is and is not covered, is important. Overall, provide veteran job candidates with as much information as possible and offer them ample opportunities to ask questions without judgment, recognizing that their needs may be different from those of civilian candidates.

5 Things HR Professionals Say Would Help Them Recruit, Hire, and Retain Veterans

HR professionals identified five key resources they would find most useful in their organizations' hiring and retention efforts:

1 Advice and tools focused on assessing how veteran skill sets translate to roles at their organizations (36%).

2 A direct connection to local community-based organizations that support veterans (32%).

3 Information on best practices to engage veterans after hiring (32%).

4 Guidance on how to make job descriptions' language more inclusive of veterans (30%).

5 Updates on the laws and regulations that impact veteran hiring policies and practices (26%).

> *"I am unsure of what 'segments' of work are in the Army. I know we have had luck hiring technologists (like cybersecurity) from the Army, but that was just based on luck and not meaning to hire a veteran (they just happened to be a veteran after we hired them). But what other segments of work does the military have? For example, we hire a lot of pharmacists and product people. I am not sure if the military employs that skill set and have never thought about it. I would like resources and more information on how we can better recruit veterans based on position/skill."*

- HR professional at a small organization in the software development industry

A Focus on Skills

"Veteran" is a blanket term for a broad group of individuals. As with other broad groups, when you dig deeper, you find a rich diversity within. Not only are there veterans who were commissioned officers, noncommissioned officers (NCOs), and enlisted, there are multiple job specialties within those ranks. **About half of HR professionals said they have sometimes, often, or always observed significant differences regarding key employee competencies among veterans who left the military at different ranks.** These competencies include:

○ **Leadership skills—**54% of HR professionals said veterans who ended their military careers at senior ranks often possess significant leadership experience and skills developed through their service, making them well suited for leadership roles in civilian organizations.

> *"NCOs tend to have more hands-on leadership/ front-line leadership skills than commissioned officers, who have the strategy piece (at all levels) and more front-line/hands-on [leadership skills] as they progress. As a veteran myself, I am also aware of what questions to ask to draw out this experience in people during an interview."*
>
> - HR professional at a small organization in the administrative and support services industry

> *"We have hired and employed both enlisted and officer ranks; generally, the officer or higher-level enlisted have stronger leadership skills, which are transferable into the workplace."*
>
> - HR professional at an extra-large organization in an unspecified industry

○ **Communication skills—**51% of HR professionals said veterans who ended their military careers at senior ranks tend to have more polished and effective communication skills compared to those who ended at junior ranks.

> *"Anecdotally, we have seen communication issues with people who are more recently out of the military (struggle with casual communication—for example, tend to provide yes/no answers and do not ask for additional context on some instructions, as well as struggle with civilians who do not do what they are asked when they are asked)."*
>
> - HR professional at a midsize organization in the software development industry

> *"Senior-ranked candidates tend to be more verbal and use more examples when responding to interview questions, when working with other team members in the workplace, and when asked for input on process improvements."*
>
> - HR professional at a large organization in the food service industry

○ **Technical skills—**50% of HR professionals said veterans who ended their military career at senior ranks often have more extensive technical training and experience, while those who ended at junior ranks may excel in hands-on tasks.

> *"Senior-ranked employees seem to be better prepared for office-type positions, while lower-ranked employees often have more hands-on, technical skills."*
>
> - HR professional at a large organization in the mining, quarrying, and oil and gas production industry

> *"Candidates differ on technical skills, depending on their rank, branch, individual job. An example is a candidate that spent a lot of time on desk duty versus someone on the front lines."*
>
> - HR professional at a small organization in the child care, community, and social services industry

> *"For the most part, they all come equipped with excellent tech skills. We're a technology firm working primarily for the DOD [Department of Defense], so this is our main focus. Candidates with less years of military experience tend to have more recent and hands-on technical skills (as opposed to a 20-year veteran). Military systems change with technological advances, too, so recent experience is important. Having worked on a system 10 years ago might not be relevant experience today. But that's the same with any candidate, veteran or not."*
>
> - HR professional at a midsize organization in the information technology and data processing services industry

○ **Overall preparedness for civilian work—**48% of HR professionals said they have noticed differences in overall preparedness for civilian work among veterans who ended their military careers at different ranks, but there is more variability in the details of their observations. Some believe that the longer veterans have been in active duty, the less prepared they are because they haven't experienced civilian life for some time— and those who entered the military soon after high school have never experienced civilian life as a working adult. Others believe that candidates who ended their military careers at senior ranks have more exposure to different experiences and types of work and are more prepared for civilian work because of this.

> *"Most are very eager to prove that their military career will prove valuable in their civilian career."*
>
> - HR professional at a small organization in the finance, banking, and insurance industry

> *"Higher-ranked candidates/hires tend to be more prepared for civilian work. They seem to have had more exposure to other types of work that is nonmilitary, given their age and experience. Lower-ranked individuals usually haven't worked anywhere else. Many entered the military right out of high school and haven't been exposed to much else in the way of work."*
>
> - HR professional at a large organization in the food service industry

> *"Higher-ranking veterans tend to rely heavily on hierarchy to get the job done, while lower-ranking veterans are more agile and rely on influence. In terms of being prepared for civilian work, the lower-ranking veterans seem better prepared to adapt to civilian work styles."*
>
> - HR professional at an extra-large organization in the information technology and data processing services industry

These observations and perceptions are real, but they do not prove that veterans who ended their military careers at different ranks are better or worse prospective employees.

Every veteran is an individual with a unique mix of education, experience, skills, personality traits, and a host of other factors. Like any other candidate with interest in your organization, that mix may lend itself more to a leadership role or to one as an individual contributor. The candidate may fit better with a technical job or with one that requires more soft skills. HR professionals and hiring managers must avoid prejudging candidates, work to understand what veterans have to offer, and match the right person with each open role. This is essential whether the candidate is a veteran or a civilian.

To Effectively Hire Veterans, Employers Must Engage in Skills-First Hiring

To better gauge the diversity of skills and experiences that veterans bring to the table and match them with the right roles, organizations should focus on translating military skills and experience for the civilian workplace. However, nearly a quarter of HR professionals (23%) expressed difficulty aligning military experience and skill sets with civilian job requirements. Several reasons contribute to this difficulty, including:

1 Difficulty mapping military occupations to civilian job classifications (58%).

2 Limited awareness of the transferable skills possessed by military candidates (54%).

3 Lack of standardized methods for translating military experience on resumes (48%).

4 Incompatibility between military certifications and civilian job requirements (43%).

5 Challenges in effectively communicating the value of military experience to hiring managers (33%).

6 Insufficient training or resources for HR personnel involved in veteran hiring (22%).

Only **a mere 2%** of HR professionals said their organizations are using readily available military skills translation tools to help bridge the gap between military experience and civilian job requirements. This underutilization is surprising given the potential benefits these tools can offer. Nearly half of the small number of HR professionals that use skills translation tools (46%) said that these tools have helped their organizations hire veterans who would have otherwise been deemed unqualified. However, not all skills translation tools are created equal. Therefore, employers should investigate and review potential tools before adopting them to ensure the tool they select effectively meets their needs. When used thoughtfully in conjunction with other strategies, these tools can play a meaningful role in enhancing veteran employment.

Additionally, nearly three-quarters of HR professionals (71%) expressed a willingness to explore these tools.

> *"We have hired some veterans in our vocational program as teachers, and they have been amazing. As recruiters, you need to keep an open mind."*
>
> - HR professional at a large organization in the education industry

By focusing on veterans' specific skills and experiences through a skills-based hiring approach, employers can more accurately assess veterans' fit for various positions. This method, combined with the thoughtful use of military skills translation tools, has the potential to significantly enhance veteran recruiting and hiring outcomes. Effectively doing so will not only enhance organizational performance but also drive innovation and competitive advantage in today's business landscape.

Conclusion

This research reveals several obstacles that organizations face when recruiting and hiring veterans, but also provides ample strategies and opportunities for organizations and HR professionals to overcome them. Implementing these strategies will not only benefit veterans who are in the job search process but also enhance organizations' competitiveness and reach to this valuable talent pool. The research also demonstrates that adopting even one strategy aimed at recruiting and hiring veterans could have a positive effect on organizations' talent management efforts. It's clear from the findings that this effort is not just the right thing to do; it's imperative for attracting and retaining talent in today's competitive job market. By embracing these approaches and equipping themselves with the right tools, organizations improve their recruitment and hiring efforts, foster an inclusive workplace culture, and fully leverage the potential of the veteran workforce.

Methodology

This survey was fielded to a sample of HR professionals via SHRM's Voice of Work Research Panel from Feb. 26 to March 4, 2024. In total, 1,076 HR professionals participated in the survey. Respondents represented organizations of all sizes in a wide variety of industries across the U.S.

Partners

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