Your Camouflage Parachute: Work After the Military

Preparing to leave the service for the high end of the civilian job market? These tips will get you locked and loaded.

By Sean Gallagher

If you’re moving from a military career to a civilian one — whether after returning from mobilized duty as a reservist, separating from the service or retiring — you’re facing more than a job change. You’re facing a whole new world. And especially in today’s challenging job market, how well you prepare your switch from the service to civilian life will have a major effect on how smooth and quick that transition is.

Indeed, this may not be an ideal moment to leave the service, Col. Dick Crampton, director of placement services for the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) told TheLadders. “Unless you have to get out, or you have a job locked in and ready to go to, I would be very careful about this,” he said. “This is probably not the best time to be getting out of the military right now.”

And for reservists coming off active duty, there’s an even bigger barrier. Jim Deimer, a member of TheLadders who’s now a human-resources manager for the Department of Veterans Affairs, said employers often balk at the commitment asked of reservists. Deimer, a former infantry officer in the Army Reserve, had been in HR in the banking industry and was mobilized in 2005. “That mobilization put me at..."
a disadvantage” re-entering the workplace, Deimer said. “Employers would look at my resume and say, ‘Every five years, you’re going to be called up and asked to serve 18 months?’ A lot’s being asked of reservists.”

All this leaves service members on the cusp of the end of their careers feeling no small amount of trepidation. Chief Warrant Officer Trevor Dempsey, a Marine Corps personnel office at Camp Pendleton, outside San Diego, is two years out from his retirement, and he’s already begun to work on his transition plan. “I have 18 years now, and I didn’t want to wait until the last minute to start looking for a job,” he said. “I wanted to get as much information and a head start on things as I possibly could.”

Dempsey said he’s seen his peers linger too long. “They waited until the last minute, or they waited until six months out or a year out to start collecting information. They didn’t have enough to get them the job that met their requirements. Or they ended up doing something completely different that’s something that they hate and they’re looking for another job just as soon as they get the first job.”

The fastest year of your life

So start your move well before you’re leaving the service. The best first step is to use what’s available to you from the military to get the ball rolling. The services themselves provide a good first step, through the Transition Assistance Program, or TAP. TAP, a joint program of the Department of Defense, Department of Labor and Department of Veterans Affairs, offers classes and career counseling for service members who are preparing to leave the military.

“The Navy recommends getting TAP as early as two years before separation,” Crampton said. “We say start at least a year out. The last year of active duty is the fastest year of your life.
If you’re considering a job in the public sector, there’s at least some good news: The federal government is hiring, and veterans have a foot in the door for interviews. “I can tell you that if you’re interested in this type of work, your skills would be very applicable,” said Jim Deimer, a member of TheLadders who’s now a human-resources manager for the Department of Veterans Affairs. “There are over 53,000 jobs posted on USAJobs.gov, and those vary from very entry-level positions that pay $30,000—$40,000 a year to the select executive-service positions that could pay up to $150,000 a year.”

More military retirees are now moving into government service, thanks to a change in laws about dual compensation.

By Sean Gallagher

If you’re moving on from the military, remember: You’ve got an inside line with the feds.

Deimer also turned to his military network and looked up an old colleague from the reserves. “This individual, the last time I had made contact with him it was well over 10 years ago,” Deimer says. “We served together in a National Guard unit. He was in human resources like myself, and we had shared resumes and just stayed in contact over the years.”

Deimer’s contact worked as the chief of a human-resources section in the Department of Veterans Affairs. “And he said, ‘You know, I’m sure you’ve seen a variety of government opportunities, and I can tell you that if you’re interested in this type of work, your skills would be very applicable.’” So Deimer began the process of applying for a position with the VA.

Applying for a federal position, however, wasn’t a shoo-in. Even with a contact in the VA, he still had to go through the same process as anyone else. “The Office of Personnel management mandates that all applicants go through USAJobs.gov, create a user profile and create an online resume.” Almost all federal employment opportunities are posted on the site – over 53,000 jobs, ranging from positions that pay $30,000 a year to senior-
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I think that’s a disservice to the individual and to the company they interview with. Know what you want, and go after that.

Henderson said that reputable search firms won’t charge to help prepare for interviews and will do mock interviews with candidates to help them get their interview style polished.

The key to preparation for the job search, Henderson said, is honing a personal story that commercial managers can understand — an elevator pitch of your key strengths. “They have to learn how to tell their story, and do it succinctly. In the commercial market, a hiring manager is asking, ‘If I hire you, how are you going to make my company profitable?’ They can talk about how they managed budgets, how they were innovative.”

An army of one

Part of the preparation is preparing for the cultural shock of the civilian job market.

“When I retired, I didn’t get a call from the chief of staff of the Army asking me how my job search was going,” Crampton said. “You’ve got to start thinking about yourself. And that’s one difficult thing, too, because in the military, you’re programmed — it’s the military first. That’s just the way it is. Well, the time comes — and this is a difficulty many have — when you’ve gotta start thinking about yourself, and we’re not programmed that way.”

Include your family in the preparation as well. “Get your spouse involved in this because, you know, you’ve been a team for so long, especially for retirees,” said Crampton. “You know, the last thing you want to happen is — this happened to one guy, he interviewed for this job, and he did so well, and they called to invite him back, and his wife didn’t know that he interviewed, and she thought it was telemarketing, and she said, ‘We don’t want any,’ and she hung up on them. And then a week later, they’re talking, and he said, ‘Gee, honey, I forgot to tell you about this interview I had, and I really felt good about it, and I’m surprised I haven’t heard from them.’ The family is important in transitioning.”

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One aspect of the culture of the private-sector job market that often surprises veterans is the absence of any response. “In the military, we’re used to, you correspond with someone, and they get back to you, whether it’s e-mail, whether it’s a letter, whether it’s a telephone. I had one guy tell me he was so angry because he was shooting out his resume and he wasn’t hearing from anybody. And, of course, he’s programmed thinking that way, and not understanding that IBM receives three million unsolicited resumes a year.”

A culture gap

There’s also a cultural barrier to overcome with employers when explaining how your military experience is relevant. Part of the problem is a misconception about the nature of military service. While the past seven years have raised the profile of the military in the civilian world, less than one percent of the U.S. population has served in the military, and employers in the private sector may not have a good understanding of how the leadership and management skills of the military apply to the commercial world.

Deimer’s job search lasted only a month after leaving active duty. “Really, it was phenomenal — I tell my wife every day how lucky I am, in the job climate that exists. I know friends in the private sector who are still out of work — it’s been two years and counting.”

You have to upload your service record and your discharge documents, and there’s a federal application for employment in which you will fully disclose a variety of personnel related questions, and you’ll have to upload transcripts,” Deimer said. “It’s not hard, you just have to put the time into it.

“I compare it to applying to a law school or applying to college. I remember the same sort of tasks — preparing and requesting transcripts, and personal statements and all that. It was intense but well worth it.”

Once Deimer got past the application process, he went through a performance-based interview “that was scored by three other people I didn’t know,” he said. “It was one of those things where you had to show your worth on paper and through an interview, and it worked out, and I’m fortunate.”

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Around the Web: Resources for Military Transition

Headed for civilian life? Here are five sites you can turn to for networking, leads and advice.

The military community is a tight one, and there are many former servicemen and servicewomen out there waiting to help you make a successful transition to civilian life. Here are five organizations that are focused on the needs of service members hanging up their uniforms:

- **Military Officers Association of America**
  An association serving active, former and retired military officers. Provides networking opportunities and other transition services. MOAA’s job fairs are open to anyone.

- **HireAHero.org**
  A social networking site for veterans leaving the service to network with employers, recruiters, volunteers and mentors to assist in their job search.

- **Corporate Gray**
  An organization serving the veterans community, providing job-seeker resources, job fairs, and career-transition education books and services, as well as promoting veterans as employees to employers.

- **Hire Vets First**
  A job-search and transition-assistance program run by the Department of Labor with career resources online, and events and information for employers, including a skills translator and career centers.

- **TAOnline.com**
  Claiming to be the “largest single source of transition assistance information and tools for today’s separating military,” this site offers locators for Transition Assistance Program offices, Veterans Employment Representatives, and other information and resources to help service members find civilian employment.

Fatigues to Pinstripes: Four Tips for Interviews and Resumes

Army veteran-turned-executive recruiter Mark Henderson tells you how to ace your interview.

Sizing up the leap from a military career to the private sector? Take some tips from Mark Henderson, a retired Army colonel and one of the founders of Palladian International, an executive-search firm based in Waynesboro, Va.

Bottom line: Don’t narrow your search too quickly, and don’t try too hard to translate your experience into civilian terms.

Know what you want — and make sure you know what’s out there.

A lot of people leaving the service, particularly retirees, focus on the defense industry for employment, Henderson said. “That’s valid, but they overlook the fact that there’s a commercial world out there where the sky is the limit. They sometimes overlook what they could go after if they looked at the commercial world and thought about what they bring to the plate.”

**Translate into terms businesses will understand … But don’t overdo it.**

When it comes to building the resume “the biggest thing is translating military experience into commercial words,” Henderson said. And that goes beyond the acronyms — you have to convert what you did in each role you had to business terms.” However, he said, don’t push your luck trying to convert military titles to equivalent corporate ones. (A company commander is not a CEO.)

**Don’t just list responsibilities – sell your accomplishments.**

Just listing off the responsibilities you held won’t explain to a potential employer your value to a business, and it won’t set you apart from the crowd. To do that, you need to talk about what you achieved, in business terms.

In the military, “we’re taught to be humble,” Henderson said. “But you need to explain things by accomplishments — how you innovated. Everyone in the military has a story like that.”

**An interview goes both ways.**

Preparing for an interview means doing research on the company you’re interviewing with and being prepared to ask questions yourself that show you’re prepared. “An interview is a lot more detailed than standing up and answering questions,” Henderson said.

A frequent mistake in interviews is failing to follow through on telling your story about your accomplishments. Many candidates “think that if they put it on their resume, that’s good enough,” Henderson said. Be prepared to talk about your achievements, and tell your story in a way that resonates with the interviewer.
“A lot of the employers don’t understand the functionality or the transferable skills we can bring to the organization,” Deimer said. “In my case, HR is pretty much HR wherever you go. But when you’re talking to people in sales, logistics, general management, it’s hard to figure out what a supply-management officer did in the reserve; or a Navy logistics officer; or a quartermaster; or even combat-arms people, who have had significant leadership opportunities.”

“I think a lot of people don’t understand who we are,” Crampton said. There are false perceptions maybe about the military. Lieutenant General (William) Pagonis — who was responsible for logistics planning during Desert Shield and Desert Storm — went to work at retail giant Sears. Sears executives admitted after they hired him that they (had been) concerned, that they’d never hired anyone from the military at the higher levels at Sears. They used words like ‘autocratic’ and ‘not a team player’ (to describe the military culture), and they (asked), ‘How would a Rambo fit in at our headquarters?’ ” Pagonis was a key player in engineering Sears’ turnaround.

“Companies get a flawed perception of what a military guy is capable of,” added Henderson. “They’re much more flexible than [employers] believe. I was a colonel when I interviewed with my first company — they asked if I was going to be able to answer my own phone!”

Crossing that cultural divide will require translating your experience and skills into terms private employers will understand. It also may require educating employers about the scope of what military service entails. “So many vets are afraid of listing military experience, or maybe any applicable experience that has a hint of the military to it,” said Deimer. “Because sometimes you get unintentionally discriminated against. I’m not faulting anyone for it, it’s just the ignorance of folks, who once they know more about it they won’t discard it as they have in the past.”

**Locate those who have transitioned**

Networking is key to bridging those gaps. People you’ve worked with in the service who’ve preceded you into the civilian world are a good place to start — Deimer found his position through a former reserve colleague he had worked with 10 years ago. And there are several associations and organizations that can help you expand your network quickly. MOAA, for example, has made networking a major focus of its transition assistance efforts, with regional networking services available through its Web site to members. “We have over 400 chapters throughout the United States,” Crampton said, “and what we’re doing now with our networking program is trying to pull the chapters in to be involved with us, too. For example, we are having a networking meeting here in the Washington, D.C., area in April at the Army/Navy Country Club.
for the two local chapters here — for the Mt. Vernon chapter and the NoVA chapter — to get people together who are MOAA members who are in the workforce to be networking contacts. But also we’re bringing some employers.” MOAA also holds large job fairs.

Who is military friendly?

Some organizations have been set up recently to specifically assist veterans’ job searches. HireAHero.org has set up a social networking site specifically to connect veterans with a network of other veterans already in the work force, and with employers. And there are a number of other organizations that offer networking opportunities.” (See “Fatigues to Pinstripes” Page 5.) There are a lot of organizations out there wanting and trying to help our service members as they get out,” Crampton said. “So, definitely take advantage of that. They’re out there, you know, people are very patriotic, they care about our service members, and they want to help them.”

Some employers are military-friendly by nature. In the public sector — such as the Department of Veterans Affairs, where Deimer now works — there’s a preference given to veterans in the selection of candidates. Veterans are given a five-point preference in the candidate-selection process for civil-service positions — 10 points if they have a service-related disability. But that just gets you higher on the list of candidates to interview. (See story, Page 4.)

Also inherently veteran-friendly are defense and government contractors — especially for those who’ve held a security clearance. There’s no problem in translating your military experience for them, in general. “The DoD contractors out there, they want to see that stuff,” Crampton said. “Because who are they? They’re just you, but a little bit older. And they’re looking for people like these men and women who are getting out, and they understand the lingo, and they’re saying, ‘Don’t hide it, let us know.’”

But more and more private employers are seeing the benefit of military service. Deimer remembers speaking with an executive at corporate recruiter Korn/Ferry, “They did a really nice article for clients on junior military officers, and how they developed significant leadership and management skills in the reserve. Not having been afforded those opportunities in the private sector, that really put them ahead. And it wasn’t until a lot of CEOs read that article or became familiar with what junior military officers or career military people bring to the table that now we’re starting to get some more opportunities for veterans.”

Perhaps the most important thing to bring to your preparation for transition is something core to military culture — a can-do attitude. “It’s just persistence,” Deimer said. “You can’t give up.”
Retired service members no longer have their retirement pay reduced when they take a federal job.

“We find more and more people going into the government now,” said Col. Dick Crampton, director of placement services for the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA). “And that is a very smooth transition. … You just take off the pickle suit and put on a regular suit, and you’re ready to work at the Pentagon.”

However, applying and landing a federal job can be a long, arduous process. It can take as long as six months to complete the process of applications, screenings and interviews.

Jim Deimer compared the process of applying for a federal position to applying for college or law school. “The Office of Personnel Management mandates that all applicants go through USAJobs.gov, create a user profile and create an online resume. You have to upload your service record, your discharge documents, submit (college) transcripts … and there’s a federal application for employment that you will fully disclose a variety of personnel related questions. It’s not hard, you just have to put the time into it.”

Much of that time will go into collecting the documentation required by USAJobs.gov’s lengthy online application process. Once that’s complete, you’ll likely need to create multiple online resumes, tailored to each position you apply for. Applications are then screened, and while your veteran’s preference points will boost you in the rating process, they’re not a guarantee of getting the job — they just get you closer to the top of the candidate list.

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—Col. Dick Crampton

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