Helping Veterans with Disabilities Transition to Employment

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Abstract

Veterans with disabilities constitute a vast, capable, deserving, and under-utilized workforce, and many successful hiring campaigns have targeted the employment of veterans. Colleges offering comprehensive, individualized transitional services have proven successful in supporting veterans with disabilities reentering the civilian workforce. With the incorporation of learning models and reasonable academic adjustments to educational pedagogies and policies, veterans can be poised to successfully transition from college to the workforce. Disability Service (DS) offices can serve as an important bridge between the disability and career transition needs of these students. Specific suggestions are offered to increase collaboration with career offices to enhance the transition to employment.

Currently, more than 6 million veterans have a disability, and more than 700,000 are unemployed in any given month (American Community Survey, 2006). In addition, many of those who are employed are drastically under-employed. The United States Department of Labor (2008) predicts that annually, over 200,000 veterans with disabilities will flood the civilian job market as they leave the military in coming years.

The Current Population Survey (CPS), a monthly sample survey of about 60,000 households, reports that among veterans who served in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), about 260,000, or 17 %, have a service connected disability (CPS, 2007). Each year these newly injured veterans and active duty members receive rehabilitation at VA centers in hopes of rebuilding their lives in the community in a relatively short period of time. However, upon reentry into civilian life, soldiers with newly acquired disabilities often find the job market daunting. One-third of employed veterans with a service-connected disability work in the public sector, with 16% employed by the Federal government (US Bureau of Labor Statistics Press Release, 2007). The Department of Defense is the largest Federal employer of veterans, encompassing 700 different occupations.

At the very same time that our nation's veterans with disabilities search for quality rehabilitation and employment, our country's workforce is shrinking (Employment Situation of Veterans, 2007). As the general population ages, two things will occur: (a) gaps in the workforce will emerge due to attrition, and (b) many individuals who remain in careers past traditional retirement age will require some form of accommodation due to an age-related disability. There is a clear dual need. The forward trend will be towards the inclusion of people with disabilities in the work place, especially veterans with disabilities, while disability employment becomes increasingly mainstream and readily available throughout the general population.

As an aging nation, the 76 million strong "Baby Boomer" generation threatens to leave employers scrambling as they prepare for retirement, and in turn leave a knowledge and manpower gap in its place (U.S. Department of Labor, 2008). Disability Service (DS) providers are addressing this emerging trend by increasingly exploring new and developing programs for veterans with disabilities, such as One Stops, TAP Centers, and other concerted initiatives that can fill this void as veterans prove to be our nation's next skilled workforce.

DS providers in the educational arena are advised to seek out and familiarize themselves with both veteran-related resources as well as evidence that prove the abilities of veterans with disabilities in the workplace. As service providers, professionals assisting people with disabilities will need to have the ability to not

only locate resources and point to best practices, but to also serve as leaders on campus by demonstrating measurable bottom line results and examples of veterans with disabilities in the workplace.

DS providers should know, and be able to convey, that veterans offer character traits, skills, and abilities to employers that are both valuable and marketable. Veterans with disabilities have demonstrated the capacity to overcome daunting obstacles. Their ability to learn new skills and change career paths exemplifies the determination and innovation that makes veterans with disabilities successful and sought-after employees. Many Fortune 500 upper management find that veterans are flexible and adapt quickly to professional demands and Human Resource needs. DS providers should create an environment that fosters the belief that veterans can and do transition from educational settings to the civilian workforce, and that the traits and skills fostered by the military are easily and productively redirected in the civilian employment context (House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Transcript, 2006).

DS providers should understand that veterans with disabilities represent a highly skilled , dedicated, and resourceful workforce prized for their innovation, professionalism and loyalty. For example, veterans are uniquely qualified to assume an active and proficient role especially in technical fields and the cross disciplinary use of technology, as they have often already received training in technology through military service. Their leadership skills and technological expertise readily translate into a greater propensity to excel in both the educational setting and the civilian employment (House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Transcript, 2006). The DS provider's role is to create an environment to facilitate this transition.

Programs to Assist Veterans with Disabilities Transition to Work

Having adequate medical, emotional, and transitional support are imperative for a successful outcome. DS providers should therefore familiarize themselves with and explore resources such as the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), which offers a guide of accommodations and providers for particular disabilities. Additionally, the Department of Veterans Affairs administers a program entitled "Coming Home to Work." This program is designed to assist veterans reentering the civilian workforce. These programs

provide transition services for veterans with disabilities even while recovering from their injuries. Services include matters such as the accommodations and skill development necessary to succeed in a particular professional setting (House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Transcript, 2006).

Legal Protections for Veterans with Disabilities

Discrimination against an individual on the basis of disability is prohibited by the American Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990). Additionally, President Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Amendments Act (ADAA, 2008) into law, taking effect on January 1, 2009, significantly broadening the federal definition of the "disabilities" that require accommodation under the ADA. This new legislation defines disability as one which "substantially limits one or more major life activities." As such, this broad definition of disability can now include any condition that "materially restricts" (rather than "substantially limits") a major life activity. Educational services providers are advised to fully understand both ADA and ADAA, as individuals are now covered under the ADA as long as the individual "perceives" they have an "impairment" that has an expected duration of more than six months.

While understanding the ADA and ADDA is critical to DS providers, ending discrimination and unemployment amongst our nation's wounded warriors and returning service men and women will not occur until institutions of higher education move beyond these minimum legal standards and adopt best practices, such as deploying assistive technology and Universal Design (UD) practices on campuses.

The Role of Technology

Advancements in information technology amongst other technological innovations present a myriad of viable opportunities for people with disabilities to obtain postsecondary education and pursue careers in scientific and medical disciplines (Brill & Park, 2008). Assistive technology can alleviate many on-the-job challenges and increase a variety of career choices accessible to veterans with disabilities. People with disabilities are much more likely to enter healthcare education programs than they were thirty years ago, with a 300% increase amongst the enrollment of undergraduate students by 2000, and medical schools reporting a "doubling of enrollment by students with learning disabilities during the late 1990s"

(Newsham, 2008, p.1).Veterans with disabilities who have received training in the latest technology and have already demonstrated a capacity to successfully grasp these concepts are uniquely equipped to excel in postsecondary education and successfully compete in these fields.

Future projections of the emerging technology landscape indicate several trends that will facilitate greater inclusion of veterans with disabilities both in employment and educational programs. The continuing evolution of technology will produce smaller, cheaper, more mobile, and sophisticated pieces of technology (Brill & Park, 2008). Small businesses, institutions of higher learning, individuals, students, and public facilities, such as libraries, will be able more generally and readily to make use of these innovations. As we move from an Information Age to and Interactive Age, technology will become more and more an embedded fixture in daily life. Increasingly, emerging technology will be "calm technology" that unobtrusively blends into the context of daily activities (Brill & Park, 2008, p. 74). Emergent technology supports accessibility and minimizes disruption or distraction by the technology itself (Brill & Park, 2008). Increased use of online services in recent years has provided greater educational and employment opportunities for veterans with disabilities. Distance Education (DE) is on the rise and its usage is becoming more mainstream.

A recent survey of DE higher education program revenues recorded a mean increase of 15.5 % in 2006 (Hake, 2008). Increased use of DE and confidence in the caliber of educational outcomes it produces greatly broadens educational, and thus, professional, opportunities for veterans with disabilities. The interactive engagement pedagogy utilized in DE has been found effective in conveying technically and conceptually complex subject matter. Physics education researchers have measured an improvement of two standard deviations for students learning Newtonian mechanics while enrolled in DE introductory physics courses (Hake, 2008). It is logical to extrapolate that other technical fields of study could be taught effectively using DE (Hake, 2008).

Veterans with disabilities increasingly use a range of assistive technologies such as screen reader software, Braille displays, and alternative pointing and clicking devices to interact with computers. Such devices are currently fueling the growth of DE for veterans with disabilities when educators have designed online coursework in a fashion that works with assistive technologies used by their students. For example, screen reader software is widely used when text cannot be read. Therefore, an instructor's web page or online educational tool must be designed using "alternative text HTML tags" so that all images on the page include text descriptions. When this happens, the student's screen reader software can easily use this information to explain the image to the user.

Even when DE is not employed, there are a growing number of accommodations that can be utilized within the physical educational setting for veterans with disabilities. For example, educators presenting using an overhead projector or PowerPoint slides to accompany their talk can have a transcriber using assistive technology software to place the lecture into words that will be read simultaneously by a student with a hearing impairment using a laptop. While many educators initially argued that they were not versed in the most effective pedagogical techniques for students with disabilities, advancements in assistive technology and the use of UD in the learning environment has eliminated the need for educators to have to retrofit their courses every time to accommodate different disabilities.

UD practices, for example, which originated in architecture and industrial design, is the notion that when products or services (including education) are created in such a way that they can be used by all people, regardless of ability level, then everyone benefits — not just those with disabilities. For instance, curb cuts and captioning were both designed to aid people with disabilities, yet today are used equally, if not more, by people without disabilities. In the educational arena, UD acknowledges that every student is different, and coursework should therefore be planed and designed with all learning styles in mind. Educators using UD principles, for instance, might create lesson plans that incorporate the option to utilize books on tape, captioned videos, placing audio files of courses online, and using speech-to-text software. While helpful to veterans with disabilities, educators report that many students without disabilities, or mild forms of disabilities benefit from these technologies. For example, while an accommodation might initially be made for a veteran with a disability, other students, such as a person with attention deficit disorder (ADD), could also potentially benefit by having the ability to access a lecture via an ear receiver to block out distracting noises.

Due to their technical background and first-hand knowledge of accessibility and UD requirements, veterans with disabilities are uniquely qualified to pioneer the application of technological innovation to foster inclusion and, more generally, to modify user applications. As more and more communication and learning take place using an online-offline experiences, issues of accessibility will become paramount and a more consistent standard of accessible usage will occur. Veterans with disabilities are well equipped to lead this initiative. However, DS providers are advised to play an equal role in recognizing the need for DE and assistive technology, and to serve as levelers, thereby leading the way on campuses in attempt to have more of these constantly evolving options available.

The Role of Educational Programs

Educational programs play a vital role in the process of veterans with disabilities transitioning from military service to the civilian workforce. According to the ADA, a student must meet the academic requirements for admission into an educational program with reasonable accommodation, or academic adjustment (Newsham, 2008). Accommodations may include the use of assistive technology and equipment, note takers or interpreters, large-print formats, additional time to complete assignments, alternative information delivery systems, or other techniques. The purpose is to adapt academic work in order to increase accessibility of information to students with disabilities to better indicate academic progress (Newsham, 2008).

Postsecondary education must move beyond minimal legal requirements and endeavor to achieve best practices. Institutions of higher learning are ideally situated to lead the progressive wave towards utilizing technological advancements and developing a teaching pedagogy that embraces full inclusion and development of the academic and professional potential of veterans with disabilities. Practical ways to accomplish these outcomes include observing and applying the benefits of existing learning models to reeducate veterans with disabilities returning to civilian work. Engaged learning provides a multidisciplinary educational experience, which is assessed by real performance (Brill & Park, 2008). This model is readily applicable to providing on-the-job training for veterans with disabilities transitioning to civilian employment. The service-learning model demonstrates the strategic and integrative benefits of engaged

learning that is conducted in the context of an organized service activity (Berle, 2006). Service learning relates knowledge to real situations and builds upon prior experience; projects of short duration can produce significant results (Berle, 2006). Adapting the cross training and real life benefits of the service learning model can aid in devising programs with practical professional application.

As we evolve culturally from an Information Age to an Interactive Age, post-secondary educational and professional landscapes will inevitably follow suit (Brill & Park, 2006). Complete inclusion of veterans with disabilities as viable professionals in the civilian workforce depends upon the development of sound approaches to learning that consider their real world needs as learners and integrate new technologies (Brill & Park, 2006).

DS providers must be cognizant of not only emerging technology, but also how this technology can be made accessible to veterans with disabilities. Many people with disabilities use instant messaging, email, chat forums, and social networking as much, or more, than people without disabilities. Veterans with disabilities must therefore be trained on the use of such technology as voice recognition software to send e-mails and instant messages, surf the web, and create documents. These examples demonstrate that veterans with disabilities, especially in an employment setting or postsecondary educational environment, can and do benefit from technology. For example, many veterans who experience visual difficulty or impairment, dexterity difficulty or impairment, and/or hearing difficulty or impairment, excel when introduced to assistive technology.

Additionally, such technology can improve the ability of DS providers to appropriately educate the alarming number of veterans today with devastating injuries such as traumatic brain injury (TBI), post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other psychological wounds of war. Due to advancements in medical care, veterans now come home with injuries that might have been fatal in earlier wars. Common PTSD reactions exhibited in postsecondary education, and in the workplace, can include impairment of attention, concentration, and memory. For example, a veteran may have difficulty paying attention or concentrating on a task or operating machinery for a period of time after a traumatic event. Veterans may also feel a sense of detachment or estrangement from others (Parrish,

2008). Faculty and staff in postsecondary education should be reminded that such behaviors are normal reactions to abnormal events, and thus it is not the veteran who is abnormal. There is not one "standard" pattern of reaction to the extreme stress of the traumatic experience of war. Some veterans respond immediately, while others have delayed reactions. DS personnel who become familiar with these issues and characteristics, are ideally situated to serve as leaders on campus, and can educate faculty and staff. Service providers in the educational setting are advised to create educational programs for veterans that provide a mixture of training in assistive technology, online/virtual job training from the veteran's home, mentoring/follow-along support in a unique career field, behavioral health support and coaching, and job placement assistance after completion of a training program. Successful veterans' educational models often rely on a telecommuting model that allows participants to work from the "safe" and secure environment of their own home. Other successful models include programs that customize curriculum for each individual to accommodate various disabilities and modalities of instruction to train veterans anywhere. Most report that the level of accommodation required cost under $100. It is also advisable to seek a briefing, and ongoing support, from outside experts experienced with PTSD and TBI.

The increasing availability of technology, coupled with the growing visibility of veterans with disabilities, in the workplace and in the classroom represents an untapped opportunity. Providers and employers alike now report that assistive technology and accessibility can and does aid more than those with disabilities and the aging. Forrester Research Inc. (2003), for example, studied the effect of accessible technology for the general population (those with and without disabilities), and reported that in the United States, 60% (101.4 million) of working-age adults 18 to 64 are likely or very likely to benefit from the use of accessible technology.

DS providers report that with new technology there are new possibilities for veterans with disabilities. Unemployment, seclusion, doubt, and inactivity are removed with improvements in technology, accommodations, and attitudinal barriers. When faced with a newly acquired disability, veterans are now taught to find – or create – alternatives through the use of assistive technology that can take abilities to a higher level.

In addition to the need for a better understanding of emerging technologies, educational program pedagogies and policies must be established that incorporate the academic adjustments that are necessary for veterans with disabilities to reach their full potential. Educators, as well as the programs and students they serve, stand to greatly benefit from greater familiarity with not only new technology, but also disability law and the development of policies specifically related to the inclusion of students with disabilities. Educators often lack the first-hand experience necessary to effectively address real life scenarios that arise (Newsham, 2008). Thus, they would greatly benefit from practical strategies that have been devised from the insight and experience of others. Disseminating this information to educators and DS providers is the logical next step towards ensuring that people with disabilities, especially veterans, are fully accommodated and represented in academic programs. True inclusion of veterans with disabilities in postsecondary educational programs and, in turn, the professional civilian workforce, will not be accomplished until we move beyond minimal understanding of assistive technology and legal standards, to best practices.

Model Corporate Practices

Many issues relating to transitioning veterans with disabilities, and overall disability awareness, can be addressed by properly training all DS providers that interface with veterans. From direct providers to campus administrators, understanding the different types of disabilities and common issues relating to each area is crucial. Providers and educators can emulate successful practices in the corporate arena in order to understand – and create new – methods to best train and transition veterans with disabilities.

For example, corporate models reinforce the growing need to be aware of hardware and software used to support many disabilities. Understanding system requirements and configuration issues between assistive technology and IT is today a component of both successful learning and workplace environments. Corporate models demonstrate the need to present veterans with disabilities troubleshooting tips, checklists, and processes for problem escalation. Additionally, it is advised that providers, like corporate stakeholders, create disability awareness training within their organizations – for example, disability awareness training that uses simulation exercises

work best, (such as putting people in wheelchairs or blindfolding them) in order to allow people without disabilities to have an idea of what having a specific disability may be like.

As an example, several companies currently actively recruit veterans for employment and utilize these best practice techniques to ensure their success. For these companies, hiring veterans and other individuals with disabilities is included in their diversity philosophy. DS providers are therefore encouraged to familiarize themselves with the best practices exhibited by these companies who have found veterans to be loyal and capable employees, stakeholders who benefit their business outcomes. Several Fortune 500 companies, for example, have initiated highly successful recruitment policies targeting veterans. For instance, Home Depot established "Operation Career Front," a veterans recruitment campaign. During the first two years, Home Depot hired 26,000 veterans. The company hired 17,000 veterans in 2005 alone (House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Transcript, 2006).

Dennis Donovan, Executive Vice President of Human Resources at Home Depot, stated that Fortune 500 companies can help veterans transition to employment by learning to navigate and coordinate Department of Defense, Department of Labor, and Veterans Affairs resources (House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Transcript, 2006). Home Depot had One Stop representatives work with their Human Resources staff and connected their 1,800 stores via satellite broadcast (House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Transcript, 2006). They also went online, providing veterans with a clearinghouse of services that are available at Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Centers. Thus, veterans can apply or test for positions with Home Depot, or even schedule an interview, online. Furthermore, Donovan touted the importance of demonstrating best practices as a company in order to set an example for others to follow (House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Transcript, 2006). DS can use such model programs to create learning and transition opportunities within the educational setting as well. Disability educators are also advised to collaborate with career offices to make similar programs possible on campuses.

By examining these corporate models, DS providers may find that the process of transition is the most crucial component to the success of veterans with disabilities returning to the workforce. DS providers, organizations, and consultants that incorporate these engaged learning models, whether in a service learning or DE context, have proven successful (House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Transcript, 2006). These programs offer individualized and comprehensive transitional services that are beneficial for promoting greater inclusion. Programs that work with veterans with disabilities as soon as they leave active duty and continue to provide supportive job training and even job placement have been found effective (House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Transcript, 2006). Assistive technology, online services and "telework" opportunities also contribute to program success (House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Transcript, 2006).

Such veterans' programs as TecAccess, a leading disability employment and staffing consultancy, have demonstrated that veterans with disabilities – when trained appropriately – can fill this void and prove to be our country's next great workforce, especially in the fields of technology and assistive technology.

To make this vision a reality, TecAccess launched a Disabled Veterans (DVET) educational initiative driven by partnerships between private industry and government agencies nationwide. Providing an immediate impact, DVET implemented an innovative approach that offers professional training and hiring of veterans with disabilities. This pilot program kicked off with the Commonwealth of Virginia in 2007, when Governor Tim Kaine directed all state agencies to identify opportunities to partner with the Department of Veterans Services on ways to offer new, expanded, or customized services that meet the needs of Virginia´s veterans, especially those now living with disabilities. This pilot program, along with the subsequent nationwide rollout of the DVET program, was designed to ensure that veterans receive the support, job training, and recognition they have earned through service and sacrifice. DVET, an example of private and public collaboration, today serves as an innovative approach to increasing employment for veterans with disabilities, offering participants professional training and employment.

DS providers can collaborate with, or simply emulate, learning models found in the DVET model. For example, this first-of-its-kind program uses Assistive Technology (AT), such as screen readers and voice activated controls, for unique training opportunities. DVET also provides mentoring, counseling, job training, and the motivation that a competitively

paid and respected job is at the end of the program. TecAccess' DVET model demonstrates to disability providers that it is important to reach soldiers as soon as possible, as worries about down time and patient frustration can occur in some rehabilitation settings. TecAccess therefore exemplifies the importance of using assistive technology and the ability to "telework" as a way to educate, transition, train, and place veterans in technology positions where they learn new skills and interact in boardrooms across the country with private industry and government.

DVET training program prepares participants to use computer technology and work in a wide array of professions including IT, web and non-web based accessibility consulting, call centers, and project management. The DVET training program, like postsecondary education, ultimately benefits both the disabled veteran and the hiring organization by empowering veterans with disabilities to leverage their unique and newly marketable qualifications. The success of the DVET program, and in any learning environment, is ultimately measured by the successful employment for the veteran in a satisfactory job or profession, ideally with a competitive salary and growth opportunity. DS providers are therefore increasingly advised to seek out, create, and/or use such examples as evidence of the importance of training and transition, as well as to demonstrate the end result – the positive impact of veterans with disabilities can and do have in the workplace. As service providers, many professionals assisting people with disabilities will need to use the language of private industry, and have the ability to demonstrate measurable bottom line results and examples of progressive businesses who actively recruit, train, and hire veterans with disabilities.

Additionally, DS provides must be knowledgeable of initiatives and support systems, such as the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), that can facilitate the move from military service to civilian employment. TAP provides career resources and veterans benefit information, as well as an employment skills evaluation in relation to the current job market. Spouses are eligible to obtain derived preference for employment based on the qualifying service of a spouse who is unable to work. A Standard Form 15, Application for 10-Point Veteran Preference, must be completed.

Such programs as DVET and TAP demonstrate the need for training programs that provide veterans with a positive focus during his/her initial rehabilitation period. It effectively keeps their intellect active and the individual involved in positive activities using assistive technology and telecommuting during rehabilitation. These programs also serve as valuable examples that can be used when interfacing with hiring agencies as evidence of successful transition from the battlefield to the workplace.

It is critical that DS providers help set up an environment that allows veterans to demonstrate that despite newly acquired disabilities, this pool of potential employees have a proven track record of persevering under difficult circumstances. They also have work histories and job skills that are directly applicable to many jobs. Research has shown that veterans with disabilities are more loyal and productive employees.

Effective training programs allow companies to adapt to veterans with disabilities at the same time the veteran adapts to the new workplace. What the employer gains is access to unique skill sets and qualifications. Returning veterans possess unique skill sets and qualifications such as security clearances that are difficult, and expensive, to find in the civilian population.

Conclusion

Each year, increasing numbers of veterans with disabilities reenter the civilian workforce. Postsecondary educational institutions and programs must endeavor to become more knowledgeable of the ADA, and the ADAA, as well as guidelines and innovative teaching pedagogies that facilitate greater inclusion. While this is not a new or novel theory in the educational setting, it is becoming increasingly critical in the current climate, specifically when assisting veterans with disabilities.

As we enter an Interactive Age, online accessibility has become an area of paramount importance in order to provide veterans with disabilities opportunities for DE, telework and access to professional skill development, whether they are recuperating in a veterans hospital or transitioning from home. Veterans with disabilities who have a foundation of training and proven skills in technology are uniquely qualified to take the lead in technical occupations and the burgeoning field of adaptive and accessible technology. The demonstrated ability of veterans with disabilities, often at a very young age and under the most demanding and stressful of circumstances, exemplifies their qualification to pursue higher education and specialized professions in technical fields.

DS providers are encouraged to create an environment that allows veterans with disabilities to demonstrate that they are insightful leaders who are equipped to pioneer the development of policies and best practices in professional and postsecondary educational programs. Programs that comprise engaged learning techniques, coordinate services, and integrate technology, best support veterans with disabilities reentering civilian life. In carrying forward these findings, DS providers are encouraged to implement key factors when developing a successful educational and transition programs for veterans with disabilities. Providers are advised to create an accessibility team, or host of experts on the topic. Partnering with experts in the field, is suggested, and whenever possible, ask a person with a disability, "How are you doing? – or in other words, using a person with a disability to test the accessibility and usability of your learning environment. This provides a firsthand perspective as to what does and does not work. Additionally, DS providers are advised to become a trusted advisor on campus, and to set themselves apart as knowledgeable on topics/resources important to veterans, and leverage this knowledge to create an environment that fosters growth.

There is an increasing need to educate everyone from front line providers up to campus administrators in disability awareness and in some of the difficulties veterans with disabilities might encounter with your program and educational environments. It is important to educate all DS providers with such information so that they become more efficient, more comfortable, and more sympathetic to the concerns of veterans with disabilities.

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