



Perceptions and Practices of Military Friendly Organizations

RESEARCH

MICHAEL KIRCHNER 

FAITH STULL

KATIE HOLLOWAY

**Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*

 | VT Publishing

ABSTRACT

United States organizations are unlikely to claim any level of unfriendliness toward military veterans; however, what it means to be “friendly” toward veterans is also not clear. Few, if any, criteria exist to articulate what makes an organization veteran friendly as compared with its peers. Prior to the pandemic, 2019’s annual veteran unemployment rate fell to 3.1% suggesting veterans were having little difficulty securing employment. Still, once hired, nearly 50% of veterans were leaving their first non-military job within a year and nearly two in three had moved on in less than two years—similar to turnover rates of recent college graduates. The high rate of turnover coincides with heightened favorability perceptions toward veterans and suggests military friendly may not be significantly improving organizational or veteran employment outcomes. This study explored 33 midwestern United States companies who were recently recognized as friendly toward veterans. Specifically, the participating companies’ general military friendly perceptions, practices, and evaluation strategies were examined. The findings revealed both a lack of consistent practices as well as reaffirmed stereotypes about the challenges and benefits of employing military veterans. This study is the first we are aware of that explores employer perceptions of the term, “military friendly” and how organizations recognized as being “friendly” demonstrate their support. By further understanding how organizations interpret and demonstrate being friendly, organization leaders may be able to promote positive organization change and create programming that reduces current personnel turnover rates.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Michael Kirchner

Purdue University-Fort Wayne,
US

kirchnem@pfw.edu

KEYWORDS:

military friendly; veteran friendly; transition; support; training

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Kirchner, M., Stull, F. & Holloway, K. (2021). Perceptions and Practices of Military Friendly Organizations. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 7(1), pp. 23–35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i1.224>

Organizations across the United States frequently express friendliness toward the military and veterans, with many promoting themselves as military or veteran friendly. Regardless of their reasoning, few organizations—if any—would intentionally portray themselves as unfriendly toward veterans. At the same time, minimal literature or guidance exists to inform employers about what it means to be friendly toward veterans. As a result, the blanket use of “military friendly” may have unintended consequences, such as higher turnover and lower satisfaction rates once veterans realize limited support is in place. One recent study revealed nearly two thirds of veterans leave their first non-military job within two years (Maury et al., 2016)—a figure that is particularly concerning when considering the priority organizations place on employing veterans. In the study, veterans most frequently reported leaving their first job because of new opportunities, lack of career advancement opportunities, work that was perceived as unmeaningful, low compensation, and inadequate professional development (Maury et al., 2016). The high rate of turnover also suggests that although organizations are successful in hiring veterans, once employed, organizations might lack the knowledge and corresponding programs to sufficiently retain former service members.

Though researchers have examined veteran support programs used by employers (Burton Blatt Institute, 2013; Kirchner & Minnis, 2018), we are not aware of any studies that have explored employers’ interpretation of the meaning of “military friendly” and the corresponding influence on veteran initiatives. As a result of turnover for reasons including lack of career development, poor match, and low quality of work, the need to understand employers’ perceptions of military friendly is necessary if improvements to veteran employment outcomes are to occur. This study sought to fill an existing gap in the literature regarding what it means to be “friendly” to veterans and corresponding military friendly initiatives. This paper presents findings from a qualitative study conducted in 2018 and 2019 that explored U.S. organizations’ understanding of military friendly by identifying perceptions, practices, and evaluation strategies affiliated with being a friendly organization to veterans. The authors provide a brief history of organizational support for veterans and address the study’s significance. Next, the study’s methodology is described followed by a discussion of the findings and implications for organization leaders and future research. Through examining military friendly perceptions and practices, organization leaders and human resources (HR) professionals may be better prepared to develop or improve existing military friendly practices and incite positive organizational change for veterans.

SIGNIFICANCE

Today the phrase “military friendly” can often be found on employer or college webpages, with few organizations detailing what makes them friendly (Kirchner & Minnis, 2018). Ferraro (2016) argued veteran friendly organizations identify and integrate business objectives centered around supporting veteran employees and the veteran community, as well as understanding the value former service members bring to the workplace. Kirchner and Minnis (2018) offered that military friendly appears to be “a process of providing transition support to military veterans through four pillars: (a) recruitment and hiring; (b) personal, professional, and career development; (c) community outreach; and (d) promotion of veteran hiring practices” (p. 103). Though their study revealed various areas where employers invest in supporting veterans, most organizations offer limited descriptions of their military friendly interpretation.

Employer support for military veterans is likely the result of converging perceptions, starting with the transition challenges veterans face. Although numerous challenges have been identified, concerns related to mental and physical health issues, substance abuse, homelessness, and unemployment all suggest veterans can benefit from a supportive, non-military workforce (Optum, 2015). In support, Heaney et al. (1995) found workers who participated in a workplace support program experienced positive mental health impacts—particularly those with high likelihood to leave their organization (e.g., veterans)—and strengthened perceptions of coping abilities. Further compounding the need for and importance of organizational support is the persistence of stigmas that most or all veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress, which can make it harder for them to get hired for fear they may be ‘damaged’ (Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2011). Regardless of the perceived transition challenges, organizations and civilians may consider veterans a social responsibility that need to be supported because of their service and sacrifice. At the same time, hiring managers and organization leaders often have other favorable perceptions of past and current service members due to their professional training and experiences.

Though numerous factors influence decision-making in organizations, hiring and retaining veterans across industries is frequently considered a good business practice (Harrell & Berglass, 2012). The leadership and teamwork skills, expertise, character, and discipline veterans learn in the military and bring to the workplace make them desirable employees (2012). Still, veterans are often an underutilized resource due to their underemployment in many positions (Barrera & Carter, 2017). In fact, one third of all employed veterans,

based on an analysis of veterans' resumes versus their current positions, are underemployed, suggesting that veterans are accepting positions which do not reflect their acquired skills and experiences (Barrera & Carter, 2017; Maury et al., 2016). This finding is significant as veterans have reported that the most important factor in civilian employment is securing a position where they can use their acquired knowledge and skills (Maury et al., 2016). Despite investment in hiring veterans, organizations also struggle to retain them. Some of the most frequently cited reasons veterans leave their positions include lack of career advancement, unmeaningful work, inadequate pay, and lack of professional development opportunities (Maury et al., 2016). Employers stand to benefit from understanding military friendly initiatives which would impact veteran employment issues.

Despite Kirchner and Minnis' (2018) description, no universally accepted definition of "military friendly" exists, as few scholars or practitioners have attempted to define the term. Further, current research has yet to clearly articulate the attributes that organizations perceive as making them 'friendly' toward veterans. As a result, organizations may use "military friendly" as a marketing and branding tool with little to no scrutiny regardless of the actual level of support. The low rates of unemployment potentially overshadow veterans' dissatisfaction and turnover in post-military employment. Without criteria supported by research and widely accepted by practitioners, organizations will be free to describe themselves as friendly toward veterans while continuing to experience similar hiring and retention issues.

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to explore military friendly perceptions, practices, and corresponding evaluation strategies as described by employees of military friendly organizations. The researchers used Kirchner and Minnis' (2018) review of the literature and proposed definition as a guiding framework for the study; however, because researchers have limited understanding of the perceptions and practices of organization leaders and HR professionals who are familiar with their employer's military friendly practices, an inductive approach was used to collect and analyze data. Through this study, the researchers sought to address three primary research questions:

1. How do organization leaders and HR professionals of military friendly organizations describe being friendly toward veterans?
2. How do organizations demonstrate their friendliness to military veterans?

3. How familiar are organization leaders and HR employees with their military friendly programming?

By using an inductive analysis approach, researchers are able to unrestrictedly explore the raw data in its entirety to develop coding patterns, derive concepts and generate corresponding conclusions (Bernard, 2011; Thomas 2006). Inductive analysis allows theory and findings to emerge without the restraints of other methodologies (Thomas, 2006). To date, few definitions regarding what qualifies an organization as "military friendly" are offered, in part because scholars have yet to explore employer perceptions of military friendly, and limited empirical research exists to report the impact of military friendly programs on organization outcomes. As such, the researchers conducted a qualitative study to examine how organization leaders and HR professionals interpret, apply, and evaluate being military friendly. Thus, the data collected was primarily guided by interview participants, with the researchers serving as conduits in transcribing, interpreting, and reporting findings.

This study involved method triangulation of two data collection points using online surveys and follow-up interviews to develop a comprehensive understanding of this phenomena (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999). The two collection methods allowed the researchers to contrast survey data and interview responses and more clearly understand organization leader and HR professional perceptions and practices of their organization's military friendly programming than either approach used alone (Terrell, 2012). The survey and subsequent interviews were constructed from existing practices of other organizations identified as military friendly. By conducting a qualitative study, the researchers were able to build knowledge regarding organization leader and HR employee perspectives and practices as they relate to their military friendly employer.

DATA COLLECTION

Following IRB approval, this study invited more than 270 previously identified military friendly organizations to participate in an online survey inquiring about their military friendly programs during the months of August and September 2018. The organizations were identified through support from a regional Society of Human Resource Management affiliate chapter located in the midwestern United States which recognized more than 270 organizations in 2017 as being military friendly. The criteria for recognition as a military friendly employer was that the organization had to either self-report (a) they have

hired veterans; and/or (b) they actively-seek veterans for hire. An initial email was sent to employees who accepted their organization's military friendly recognition certificate during the fall 2018 with a follow-up email distributed two weeks later. The request to participate email included information about the study's purpose and solicited survey responses from employees who claimed to be familiar with the organization's military friendly programming. Due to numerous returned emails because of screening systems, the follow-ups were emailed in sets of 10 to reduce the likelihood of email filters blocking the solicitation request to participate from making it into the receiver's inbox. A final email was sent two weeks later following the same format of the second request to participate email.

Of the approximately 270 organizations, 47 started the survey with 34 employees from 32 organizations completing the entire 30-question assessment (see Appendix A), representing a 72% completion rate. The online surveys were accessed through email, and a link was provided which allowed participants to complete using Qualtrics software. The survey allowed researchers to learn about the organization and employee including industry, employer demographics (size of workforce, staffing structure), and annual turnover (total and veteran employees), participant history with organization, familiarization and history of military friendly programs and military friendly programs/practices. The survey had an estimated completion time of 10 minutes and consisted of multiple choice or fill-in-the-blank questions. Prior to beginning the survey, participants were notified their participation in the study was voluntary and responses were confidential with no identifying information being included upon publication of the findings. The last question of the survey asked participants if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview to discuss their military-friendly organization. The survey results were organized and interpreted, allowing the researchers to compare participant demographics and military friendly practices.

Ten employees—one of which did not complete the survey—also agreed to a follow-up interview, which were completed between December 2018 and May 2019. Interviews are one of the most common methods for collecting qualitative data such as opinions, experiences, and motivation (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Gill et al., 2008). Each participant was informed they could take a break, choose not to answer a question, stop the tape recording, or terminate the interview at any time. Lastly, the participants were reminded that research findings may be published; however, no identifier information would be included which could connect them with the study. Compensation of up to \$50 was offered for their time commitment, though each declined the offer.

The interviews were conducted at a mutually-agreed upon quiet space, with prepared questions distributed at least 24 hours in advance to allow participants time to review. The interviews, lasting one hour on average, were structured with 27 questions surrounding four categories: (a) background of employee and employer, (b) understanding of military friendly, (c) military friendly programs/practices, and (d) assessment strategies (see Appendix B). Though the researchers prepared 27 questions, interviews did not include each as participants frequently already responded to later questions through previous answers. Alternatively, follow-up questions were asked when clarity or expansion on a response was deemed beneficial (Gill et al., 2008). The semi-structured form allows for key questions to be answered while giving the interviewer and interviewee the ability to diverge from the interview questions to pursue an idea at greater depth (Gill, et al., 2008). Examples of prepared interview questions were: Can you describe how you became connected with the military friendly initiatives at (insert company name here)? What does "military friendly" mean to (insert company name here)? Based on the military friendly programs you have identified, how are each of the programs assessed? Does your company follow established procedures for interviewing and hiring military veterans? Please describe.

In addition to being recognized as a military friendly organization and completing the survey, the following criteria were used to select interview candidates: (a) work in HR or as a senior leader, (b) maintained employment with the organization for at least six months, (c) were at least somewhat familiar with the organization's military friendly programming, and (d) agreed to participate in a face-to-face, up to 90-minute interview. **Table 1** offers a brief description of each organization and corresponding interview participant.

DATA ANALYSIS

After allowing participants up to three months to complete the survey after each email invite, the researchers began organizing and analyzing the survey to better understand the participating organization and their military friendly strategies (e.g., How long have you been involved in military friendly programming? or Which of the following industries does your organization represent?). Upon compiling the survey data, interviews were completed and transcribed within one week. Following transcription, the researchers printed the first four transcripts and completed an initial examination for theme analysis. The inductive coding process began with each researcher reading through the transcripts twice to

EMPLOYEE	YEARS W/ ORGANIZATION	INDUSTRY	ORGANIZATION SIZE	MILITARY AFF.	YEARS AFF.	FAMILIARITY
Person One	7	Transport	100–249	V/F	0	Somewhat
Person Two	8	Manufacture	100–249	N	8	Moderately
Person Three	15	Oil	50–99	F	15	Extremely
Person Four	1	Waste	50–99	N	1	Somewhat
Person Five	16	Manufacture	250–500	N	16	Extremely
Person Six	4	Manufacture	100–249	N	10	Somewhat
Person Seven	6	Manufacture	100–249	U	6	Moderately
Person Eight	14	Manufacture	50–99	F	5	Somewhat
Person Nine	3	Manufacture	250–500	N	3	Somewhat
Person Ten	6	Distribution	500–999	F	6	Extremely

Table 1 Participant Demographics.

Note: Years w/Organization = Number of years the interview participant has worked for their current organization; Industry = Type of industry the interview participant reported their current organization is in; Organization Size = Number of current employees in the interview participant's organization; Military Aff. = Represents how the interview participant is affiliated with the military; V = Veteran; F = Family member of veteran or someone currently serving; S = Spouse of a veteran or someone currently serving; N = No immediate affiliation; U = Unknown; Years Aff. = Number of years the interview participant reported being "involved" with military friendly programming; Familiarity = Level of which the interview participant reported being familiar with their current organization's military friendly programs.

highlight and note repetitive statements, comments of interest, or emerging themes (Maxwell, 2013). From there, the researchers came together to review each transcript, statement by statement, to identify similarities and discuss alternative perspectives. During two subsequent read-throughs, the research team used open coding to develop a coding dictionary which led to the creation of 23 codes. The coding dictionary, presented in **Table 2**, was used to generate themes from the interview data and survey responses.

Following development of the coding dictionary, the researchers used NVivo software to upload each of the 10 transcripts and continue analysis of the interview data; NVivo is a research analysis tool used to identify common codes and themes in qualitative data. The remaining transcripts were coded by two of the researchers according to the corresponding dictionary and compared for consistency. When discrepancies arose, the researchers reviewed and revised the coding dictionary as needed until each transcript was coded in its entirety.

Through the theme identification process, the researchers began condensing the codes into categories (i.e., favorable veteran perceptions, stereotypes, recruitment, looking ahead, current understanding, lack of structure, employer reasoning, and historical practices). Again, the researchers discussed the categories, as part of identifying overarching themes. Through further scrutinizing and condensing, the data suggested four resounding themes to describe employer perceptions and practices toward military

friendly (i.e., conflicting perceptions, lack of structure, recruitment, and stimulated interest). After identification of the themes and frequency of reported data, the researchers determined a low likelihood of additional interviews revealing anything new or contradictory to the existing findings and subsequently concluded the data collection process.

FINDINGS

This study revealed four prevailing themes regarding perspectives and practices of organizations previously recognized as being military friendly from a Society of Human Resource Management chapter located in the Midwest United States. The findings were informed through predetermined research questions and demonstrate how organizations perceive and practice military friendly efforts. The inductive approach allowed for data condensing and conclusion drawing, while, when applicable, themes from the interviews were compared and contrasted with survey data (Thomas, 2006). Each theme is presented and described below.

CONFLICTING PERCEPTIONS

The theme, conflicting perceptions, captured the largest number of references and addressed the first and third research questions regarding understanding of military friendly and interest in maintaining military friendly status.

CODES	DEFINITIONS
Accommodations	Any reference to the employer's willingness to accommodate/provide additional assistance to military/veterans.
Desired Improvements	Any reference to ideas/opportunities for military friendly improvement.
Employee Knowledge Deficit	Any reference to employee/co-workers being unaware of military affiliated behaviors/attitudes/ characteristics.
Employee Responsibilities	Any reference to job duties taking precedence over military friendly programming.
Employer Knowledge Deficit	Any reference to employer knowledge deficits related to military service/veteran issues.
Expressed Interest	Any reference to employer interest in hiring and/or retaining veterans.
Favorable Veteran Perceptions	Any reference to positives of veterans that does not fit with other veteran benefit codes.
Gratitude	Any reference to interviewees'/organizations' gratitude or appreciation of military members and their service.
Historical Practices	Any reference to military friendly specific strategies/programming/assessments maintained over time.
Interest in Learning	Any reference to interest in learning more about military friendly.
Justification	Any reference to the need/lack thereof to justify hiring a veteran.
Military Connection	Any reference to employee connections to the military.
No Military Friendly Assessment	Any reference to no assessment noted for military friendly specific program(s).
No Military Friendly Program	Any reference to no military friendly specific program(s) noted.
Prioritize Recruiting	Any reference to pointedly targeting/recruiting military/veterans.
Recognition or Designation	Any reference to being designated as a military friendly employer.
Social or Sense of Responsibility	Any reference to moral or ethical sense of obligation/responsibility to support the military/veterans.
Stigmas	Any reference to negative stigmas held towards the military/veterans.
Traits	Any reference to veterans having acquired, due to military service, characteristics or traits.
Unchanged Perceptions	Any reference to interviewees'/organizations' understanding of military friendly remaining consistent over time.
Veteran Knowledge	Any reference to knowledge gained that occurs during military service.
Veteran Perceptions	Any reference to the interviewees' perceptions of veterans' perceptions of the employer being military friendly.
Win-Win	Any reference to mutual benefits for veterans and the employer.

Table 2 Military Friendly Coding Dictionary.

Other categories, favorable veteran perceptions, employer reasoning, and stereotypes comprised the conflicting perceptions theme. Conflicting perceptions highlighted the attitudes held by the interview participants toward veterans—whether positive or negative. Specifically, participants frequently provided positive views of those with military service, yet potential concerns related to employing veterans were also often mentioned.

Interview participants provided broad statements which expressed the largely positive attitudes held towards veterans. In particular, all interview participants noted the valuable traits and knowledge service members developed through military service as translating well to the non-military workplace. Additionally, interview participants noted holding high expectations of veterans and/or experiencing some sort of beneficial outcomes from employing them. Specifically, Person One stated, “I think it

is a given you are going to get a good quality employee,” and Person Three added, “There is so much that you can do in the military, it’s not just combat. It has been a great thing in our operations.” Frequently, interview participants posited the advantages which resulted from recruiting, employing, and retaining veterans.

Moreover, many references as to the purpose behind recruiting, hiring, and retaining veterans were offered by interview participants: (a) desiring to be recognized as military friendly; (b) feelings of social responsibility; (c) achieving mutually beneficial outcomes for organizations and veteran employees, and perhaps most surprising; (d) a lack of justification in support of military friendly initiatives. For military friendly designation, all but one (“unsure”) of the 35 survey participants considered it important to be friendly towards members of the military and/or veterans. The military friendly designation was viewed as a tool to attract

the right candidates who also shared this appreciation for the military. Person Two shared, “It means a lot to us to be recognized as a military friendly employer, and I think that pays off because a higher level of candidate will come through our door hopefully, someone who shares that appreciation.” While some interview participants shared not understanding what the designation meant, one added he was unaware of his organization’s designation as military friendly. As Person One described, “I think that would be pretty important for us to be labeled that way. Again, I don’t know how we go about being labelled that way other than put it in our website.”

A sense of social responsibility also became apparent. Some interview participants held themselves accountable and even felt it was their duty to provide veterans job opportunities or accommodations. For instance, Person Two shared, “I think we all feel a sense of obligation, especially during wartime, and this is wartime, to men and women who put their lives on the line, literally, for their country.” Interestingly enough, despite the explanations previously listed and the various resources (e.g., capital, time, etc.) devoted to employing veterans, many interview participants did not feel a need to justify military friendly initiatives. Person Four declared, “I don’t think I really have to justify it. I think it is just automatically known that we are going to do it.” Person Ten explained:

We don’t spend a lot of resources looking at what we’ve done and seeing if it has been successful. We have a good feeling the things we are doing are working at least at some level. We’re getting military candidates for certain jobs and we’re seeing that come in, but we’re not assessing, and we should do more of that, but we’re just not. We’re not at that point, we’re six years in, I guess we’re not evaluating a whole lot of that. The question would be is, what would we do with the data? Would we do something different? If we said we made an uptick of 10%, we hired 10% more military now than we did 10 years ago, is that good? What’s good?

In contrast to interview participants’ favorable veteran perceptions and employer reasonings for employing veterans, stigmas were also provided. The interview participants’ remarks on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), behavioral issues, and deployment concerns were generally unprompted by the researchers, and only explored upon after initial participant reference. In total, nine of the 10 interview participants offered potential negative outcomes from employing service members. The referenced stigmas were considered issues for only some of the participants, while many did not view stigmas associated with military service as an issue. Person Five acknowledged, “I think that there is such a stigma about PTSD that there is that fear of what’s going to happen? Not just work related, not just are they going to come to work,

but what could happen on the job?” For those interview participants who did not see stigmas as an issue, some shared arguments to discredit unfavorable yet popularly held stigmas. For instance, Person Three reported:

I guess to me a lot with what I had seen previously or read about is a lot of organizations didn’t want to hire military because if they are active, the chance of them being called away on leave, they weren’t sure necessarily whether they would be able to join the workforce, and I found that to be incredibly inaccurate.

Despite largely favorable perceptions of military veterans, stigmas—whether existing issues in their organization or not—were still pervasive.

LACK OF CONSISTENT STRUCTURE

This theme captured the second greatest number of references and provided insight into the second research question: How do organizations demonstrate their friendliness to military veterans? The categories belonging to this theme were historical practices and lack of structure. The theme highlighted the lack of formalized programming and assessments specifically pertaining to military veterans. Further, the practices which participants did identify as being military friendly in surveys were typically found to be generalized to all employees or informal and infrequent opportunities to recognize and/or support service members in subsequent interviews.

Despite each interview participant reporting interest in recruiting, hiring, and/or retaining veterans, a lack of consistent structure was apparent. Half of the interview participants identified three or fewer military friendly specific programs, with an extensive range of number and type of programs being offered. For example, 12 survey participants reported zero military friendly programs. Similarly, discrepancies arose when contrasting survey results with interview data, wherein reported programs in the survey were subsequently retracted during interviews. Further, no interview participant noted having formalized military friendly specific assessment procedures in place to evaluate long-term organizational outcomes. Survey participants (number of references in parentheses) identified having onboarding programs (6), veteran employee resource groups (4), professional development (4), military cultural competency/sensitivity trainings (1), mentoring/coaching programs (2), military spousal hiring programs (1), apprenticeships/internships (6), hiring initiatives (14), pay differentials (6), fundraising/donations (9), extended benefits (5), community service (7), and accommodations (4) as being specific to veterans. A more general willingness to support and accommodate veterans was frequently reported, such as allowing for flexible work arrangements or providing support services

when needed. Person Six detailed, “We have a couple that have gone out and they’ve been gone for 8- or 9-months during training, and just supporting them while they’re gone and whatever we can do for them and their family.” Person 10 explained:

Letting them know that we have things here to help them out, and then also programs for folks. Folks that may need some additional help transitioning into the workplace, whether it’s from a military hospital standpoint, if they’ve been injured or something to that effect. How can we accommodate someone with whatever disability they may have, perceived or unperceived?

While several military-specific programs were identified by the survey participants, the practices outlined during interviews were often informalized programs, such as impromptu fundraising or donations and recognizing veterans in meetings. Person Six shared, “One of the fundraisers that we did was for the Honor Flight. We try to give money to that every year as well.” Person Nine added, “...we make a donation generally to a veterans-based charity, so I’m thankful our general manger allocates those funds. We’ve done some of the national programs like Wounded Warriors to some of our local programs.” Overall, despite the lack of consistency regarding veteran-specific programming and assessment, eight interview participants identified historical practices that highlighted participants’ largely positive outlooks on military service members. This category alluded to the varying levels of support offered to veterans.

RECRUITMENT

The recruitment theme provided further insight into the second research question. Although there was an overall lack of consistent practices (chiefly after the hiring stage), each interview participant expressed interest in recruiting and hiring veterans with many prioritizing veterans for employment consideration. Through numerous recruitment efforts and hiring initiatives, organizations noted attending military-specific hiring events, utilizing veteran-specific job hiring websites, and connecting with recruiters and military bases to post or promote open positions. Interview participants provided numerous instances of specific efforts to connect with military veterans searching for a job.

Person Three offered:

To go as basic as really just an interview and looking at a resume, a lot of times I will see military and it is almost like you can have 200 resumes to look at, and you automatically throw a lot out, but

then there is a lot of stuff on what you look to keep to look at it closer would be actually military background, so it’s like alright, I’m going to hold onto this to look at it a little bit more.

Person Five echoed:

We have a couple of foremen out in the shop that will look at veterans before they will anyone else. It is basically those foremen or those supervisors in the shop who are going through the resumes that we get and say this is who I want to see first, second or whatever. Some of them will specifically say, this guy was in the military, I want to see him, and he is qualified, and he can do this and these kind of things.

Person One recalled:

I feel like 99% of the time, if I could find an ex-military person, I feel like they would be just a little bit better than the average person because of their discipline and training and the attitude they should have coming from the military.

Person Four described:

If we’re near a military base, I’ll call and ask them if they have any type of job boards that we can post that we’re actively hiring, whether it is somebody just about to get out of the military or whether they have a spouse on base with them and they are looking for employment outside of the base.

This finding suggested that organizations are willing to use multiple approaches to recruit service members, despite the survey revealing more than two-thirds of the participants hired “less than ten but at least five veterans” in 2017—excluding temporary, seasonal, and contract employees. An unexpected outcome of the interviews was expressed interest in learning more about the topic and meaning of military friendly.

STIMULATED INTEREST

The theme, stimulated interest, captured the third highest number of references and shed further light on the third research question. The two categories belonging to this theme were current understanding and looking ahead. This theme highlighted interview participants’ acknowledgement of their desire to learn more about the term and related techniques to implement in the workplace. More than half of the survey participants reported low to only moderate levels of understanding with their organization’s military friendly practices. Even interview participants who reported being extremely familiar with

their employer's military friendly practices struggled to describe what the term meant to the organization. Further, some disclosed a misunderstanding of veteran challenges and expressed concern in how to effectively support them.

As Person Five explained:

We have had a couple employees, they're not here anymore, they've moved on, who had some issues with PTSD where it is pretty loud in the shop and we primarily work with steel, metal, and when items would drop, it would scare him and it would cause episodes. At first, we didn't understand what was going on and he would just leave. So, it took us some time, he was embarrassed, didn't want to share what was going on and ultimately was almost terminated.

Despite the lack of understanding the term, a majority of interview participants expressed interest in learning more about military friendly and requested a report once the study was complete so they could use the information to improve their current level of support. Person One voiced:

I guess I'm curious as to, I know military friendly is a thing, but in my experience since I've been out, there has not been a whole lot that I've seen or used. Does somebody realize that, hey, the veterans need more help or whatever and so you were tasked to study this, or what is this coming from?

Person Five echoed:

I wanted to understand about what military friendly meant, so I looked it up. It is a lot more complex than what I ever imagined. So, anything I Googled or researched all came back to militaryfriendly.com. Is that complex definition of what military friendly means the only working definition? It wasn't just one definition, it was a lot of components and walking away from that, I felt like I still don't quite understand what military friendly means, and that is a problem. Is that what this research is about?

In conjunction with a desire to learn, nine interview participants revealed potential or desired improvements that could be done at their organization simply as a result of participating in the interview. Person Two noted:

You and I already talked about the fact that the results of the survey would come back so that we could build on the foundation we already have, and

just as a result of our dialogue, I've come up with a couple of do-betters or do-differently for us, so I appreciate that.

Person Three, in responding to how assessments might be worth implementing, offered:

I think really just assessments overall. One thing is I would like to be able to spend more time analyzing more closely employee morale and training and how exactly that is affected and that even being treated with veterans and some other characteristics, but the time to do that would be great. You could say veterans and assess that compared to other employees, but I'd also like to do that with some of the benefits and how that retains and tracks those employees and any employee.

A strong willingness to improve current military friendly practices was revealed and supports interest for this study. Regardless of knowledge or existing programming, the themes demonstrate an opportunity for expanded education and program development. Specifically, opportunities exist to educate employers on veteran-specific needs; develop veteran-friendly onboarding, diversity training, mentorship programs, and employee assistance programs tailored to identified needs; and create structured assessments for established veteran programming.

DISCUSSION

The identified themes—conflicting perceptions, lack of structure, recruitment, and stimulated interest—highlighted organizations' desire to be recognized as military friendly yet revealed a lack of detailed understanding of the term. The conflicting perceptions held towards military personnel supported the persistent military-civilian divide (Pew Research Center [PRC], 2011). The stereotypical attributes veterans are often credited with were reported by study participants, even with limited experience employing and interacting with veterans, which supports prior research (Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Kirchner, 2018; Kirchner & Akdere, 2019). While participants shared numerous favorable attributes of veterans, they also noted common stigmas associated with former service members. In fact, nine of the 10 participants referenced mental health, physical health, or other career transition challenges, though only two were able to reference a relevant case in their organization. Expanding, although the study emphasized perceptions

and practices related to military friendly, interview participants often offered unsolicited responses related to the stigmas of veterans. This finding appears to further support previous research regarding the military-civilian divide. The majority of recent veterans have suggested the general public does not understand the challenges they face, with organizations often viewing veterans as “heroes” rather than “strategic assets” (Edelman, 2016; PRC, 2011).

The findings also indicated that despite existing stigmas, organizations maintain a strong desire to better recruit and hire service members. Previous research has provided similar results, with one survey finding 99% of its participating organizations recruit veterans—though less effectively perform these practices (Orion Talent, 2018). In fact, 73% of businesses have no formal veteran recruitment in place, despite this steadfast inclination to attract, hire, and retain veterans (Orion Talent, 2018). These findings suggest businesses have significant interest in hiring veterans, even without maintaining a systematic recruitment policy. As such, the reported recruitment challenges should be somewhat expected.

Disparity regarding military friendly programming was also revealed when survey results were contrasted with interview transcripts. Whereas more than a third of employers recognized as being military friendly reported having no formalized programs in place, another survey respondent shared seven different established initiatives. Related, multiple employees from the same two companies completed the survey, with each reporting different programs. Similarly, interview responses often did not coincide with programming reported in the military friendly survey, and in fact highlighted fewer programs in place. This discrepancy may suggest employees are unaware of the existing military friendly programming.

Additionally, participants outlined they had not previously considered the meaning of military friendly, beyond acknowledging the importance of supporting military veterans. Although the research questions did not intentionally seek to address interest in improving military friendly programming, responses from the interviews alerted attention to a training need faced by organizations today. Still, this knowledge gap—whether regarding military service or military friendly—did not deter participants from maintaining their desire to employ veterans. The finding supports prior research about the general public’s overall favorable perceptions about the military and veterans, and demonstrates that with additional training, both veterans and organizations may benefit from a greater understanding of the term (Kirchner & Minnis, 2018; Pollak et al., 2019; PRC, 2011).

IMPLICATIONS

This study revealed four themes—conflicting perceptions, lack of structure, recruitment, and stimulated interest—related to organizations’ military friendly perceptions and practices. The themes offer insight into how existing transition issues, retention challenges, and the military-civilian knowledge gap may correlate with underdeveloped criteria regarding what makes an organization military friendly. Implications for each theme are relevant for organizations, human resource professionals, veterans, and society to consider.

DEVELOPING CONSISTENT MILITARY FRIENDLY PROGRAMMING

The research conducted encourages organizations to create consistent and formalized military friendly programs and to evaluate their impact. Organizations lose military veteran employees because of inadequate human resource services and a lack of military-tailored programs and initiatives (Maury et al., 2016). To lessen high turnover rates, military friendly practices such as recruiting and screening policies, mentorships, and career development programs are a few examples to be considered for inclusion by organization leaders. Moreover, increased consideration to the incorporation of socialization experiences, such as the onboarding and mentoring of veteran employees, stand to contribute to perceived organizational support and subsequently “bind” employees to their organizations (Allen & Shanock, 2012). Organizations that consider veterans’ unique backgrounds and experiences will be more prepared to translate and leverage their skills, experiences, and knowledge in the non-military workplace. Accordingly, workplace diversity can result in increased employee commitment, satisfaction, improved performance, and leveraged potential (Patrick & Kumar, 2012). Thus, when organizations acquire a more-complete understanding of military friendly, they may be able to improve organization outcomes by tailoring programs to fit the needs of the organization and its organizational members.

BUSINESS CASE

A second implication of this research suggests a strong business case may be needed for organizations to expand their investments in military friendly programs. Past low veteran unemployment rates demonstrate the impact of organization hiring initiatives, but also shields the high percentage of veterans who leave their first non-military job within two years (Maury et al., 2016). With nearly two out of every three turning over within two years, substantial costs are accrued by the organization (Maury et al., 2016). In fact, turnover can cost organizations as much as 250%

of an employee's salary (Hester, 2013). Even if turnover costs do not run as high for most employees, organizations still incur a significant cost whenever an employee departs. The higher-than-expected turnover rates of U.S. veterans suggests future investments in support of military friendly programming may decrease if current initiatives do not demonstrate a positive impact on organization outcomes. As a result, organization leaders and veterans should consider identifying strategies to generate a positive return on investment.

TRAINING

Participant interest in learning more about the study's findings and military friendly in general encourages scholars and practitioners to expand and discuss best practices and evaluation strategies related to supporting military veteran employees. Expressed interest in further understanding military friendly stimulated discussion related to effective hiring techniques, cultural issues, acquisition of technical and soft skills, and, more generally, best practices in being a military friendly organization. In support, Hammer et al. (2019) discovered veteran supportive training which focuses on increasing supervisors' knowledge of beneficial veteran qualities stands to promote more positive attitudes toward veteran employees. The findings suggest that organizations may wish to consider incorporating training sessions for employees. Successful training would be designed to build trainee confidence, provide practical examples, and present behavioral content (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2014). Training topics could include but are not limited to military culture and corresponding stigmas, the technical and soft skills veterans acquire while serving, and strategies for integrating a veteran onboarding program.

LIMITATIONS

Although 35 employees from 33 organizations participated in the survey and/or interview, findings from this study should not be generalized across all organizations recognized as being military friendly. Being primarily a qualitative study utilizing a convenience sample of organizations recently recognized as military friendly, primarily HR professionals and a very small number of organizations were able to participate. At the same time, despite multiple attempts, 24 survey participants were unwilling to participate in a follow-up interview. Organizations that participated were also small- to medium in size, with each having less than 1,000 employees. As many interview participants reported numerous responsibilities that extend beyond veteran employment, the findings may not be representative of larger organizations.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Findings from this study offer several opportunities to continue military friendly research. First, as this is one of the earliest studies on military friendly organizations, additional research is needed to understand the impact of these initiatives on veteran employee satisfaction and retention. To date, research is limited regarding how programs such as internships, employee resource groups, volunteerism, fundraising, and career development opportunities influence veteran employee support, interest, and retention for organizations. Subsequent research should also be conducted from veterans' perspectives, as past and current service members have not been asked about their own perceptions and expectations from a military friendly employer. Additionally, there may be benefits in exploring how veteran stigmas and other stereotypes influence civilian responses. Through the research, scholars, veterans, and organizations may learn how to alleviate stereotypes and ultimately improve veteran employment outcomes. Finally, consensus for what comprises a military friendly organization remains necessary, and additional research regarding the term is needed before a more definitive definition can be presented. In particular, studies which capture veterans' perspectives and further explore employers' perspectives are recommended for future directions.

CONCLUSION

This paper outlined research findings of organization leaders and HR professionals' perspectives of military friendliness by their employer. Based on the findings, researchers are encouraged to continue exploring what it means to be military friendly, while advocating for organizations to develop and assess programming to support veteran employees. With over 200,000 men and women transitioning from military to civilian life every year, organizations can benefit from training to improve their veteran recruitment and retention strategies (Monster, 2016). However, to improve veteran employment and organization outcomes related to being a military friendly employer, much research is still needed to understand interpretations of military friendly and the corresponding impact on organization stakeholders and veteran employees. Future research needs to include veterans' perceptions of military friendly, as well as further examination of employer approaches and justifications for investing in military friendly initiatives. Through the research, organization leaders can replicate military friendly practices that are particularly impactful and improve their understanding of how to support veteran employees.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

ADDITIONAL FILES

The additional files for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix A.** Survey Questions. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.224.s1>
- **Appendix B.** Interview Instrument. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.224.s2>

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Michael Kirchner  orcid.org/0000-0001-5681-188X
Purdue University-Fort Wayne, US

Faith Stull

Purdue University-Fort Wayne, US

Katie Holloway

Purdue University Fort Wayne, Indiana, US

REFERENCES

- Allen, D. G., & Shanock, L. R.** (2012). Perceived organizational support and embeddedness as key mechanisms connecting socialization tactics to commitment and turnover among new employees. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 34(3), 350–369. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1805>
- Barrera, C., & Carter, P.** (2017). Challenges on the home front: underemployment hits veterans hard. *Call of Duty Endowment*. https://www.callofdutyendowment.org/content/dam/atvi/callofduty/code/pdf/ZipCODE_Vet_Report_FINAL.pdf
- Bernard, H. R.** (2011). *Research methods in anthropology* (5th edition). AltaMira Press.
- Burton Blatt Institute.** (2013). Veterans in the workplace: Recruitment and retention. https://www.va.gov/VETSINWORKPLACE/docs/Veterans_in_Workplace_Final_Report.pdf
- Denzin, N. K.** (1978). *Sociological methods: A sourcebook*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Diamantidis, A. D., & Chatzoglou, P. D.** (2014). Employee post-training behaviour and performance: Evaluating the results of the training process. *International Journal of Training and Development*, 18(3), 149–170. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijtd.12034>
- Dicicco-Bloom, B., & Crabtree, B. F.** (2006). The qualitative research interview. *Medical Education*, 40(4), 314–321. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2929.2006.02418.x>
- Edelman.** (2016, July 07). 2016 veterans well-being survey. <https://www.slideshare.net/EdelmanInsights/2016-veterans-wellbeing-survey>
- Ferraro, M.** (2016, April 4). Veteran friendly employer...what is the real definition? [Web log post]. *LinkedIn*. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/veteran-friendly-employerwhat-real-definition-mike-ferraro/>
- Gill, P., Stewart, K., Treasure, E., & Chadwick, B.** (2008). Methods of data collection in qualitative research: Interviews and focus groups. *British Dental Journal*, 204(6), 291–295. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1038/bdj.2008.192>
- Hammer, L. B., Brady, J. M., & Perry, M. L.** (2019). Training supervisors to support veterans at work: Effects on supervisor attitudes and employee sleep and stress. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 93, 273–301. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12299>
- Harrell, M. C., & Berglass, N.** (2012, June 11). Employing America's veterans: Perspectives from businesses. *Center for a New American Security*. <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/employing-americas-veterans-perspectives-from-businesses>
- Heaney, C. A., Price, R. H., & Rafferty, J.** (1995). Increasing coping resources at work: A field experiment to increase social support, improve work team functioning, and enhance employee mental health. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 16(4), 335–352. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.4030160405>
- Hester, J.** (2013). The high cost of employee turnover and how to avoid it. *Nonprofit World*, 31(3), 20–21.
- Kirchner, M. J.** (2018). Veteran as leader: The lived experience with Army leader development. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 29(1), 67–85. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.21302>
- Kirchner, M., & Akdere, M.** (2019). An empirical investigation of the acquisition of leadership KSAs in the U.S. Army: Implications for veteran career transitions. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 4(1), 110–127. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v4i1.85>
- Kirchner, M., & Minnis, S.** (2018). Engaging military friendly in organizations: An empirical- based definition. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 3(2), 94–108. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v3i2.49>
- Maury, R., Stone, B., & Roseman, J.** (2016). Veteran job retention survey. *Syracuse University Institute for Veterans and Military Families*. <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/VetAdvisor-ReportFINAL-Single-pages.pdf>
- Maxwell, J. A.** (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. SAGE.
- Monster.** (2016). *Veterans talent index* (9th ed.). <https://media.newjobs.com/cms/monsterabout/documents/veteran-talent-index/2016/vti-nov2016.pdf>
- Optum.** (2015). An employer's guide to hiring and supporting veterans. https://www.optum.com/content/dam/optum/resources/whitePapers/7846_EAP_Veterans.pdf
- Orion Talent.** (2018). Veteran hiring survey. <https://www.oriontalent.com/recruiting-resources/veteran-hiring-survey/thank-you.aspx>
- Patrick, H. A., & Kumar, V. R.** (2012). *Managing Workplace*

Diversity. *SAGE Open*, 2(2), 215824401244461. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244012444615>

Patton, M. Q. (1999). Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis. *Health Sciences Research*, 34, 1189–1208. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1089059/>

Pew Research Center. (2011). War and sacrifice in the post 9/11 era. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/10/05/war-and-sacrifice-in-the-post-911-era/>

Pollak, M., Arshanapalli, B., & Hobson, C. (2019). The business

case for hiring military veterans/reservists: Stock price performance of military friendly firms. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 4(2), 52–63. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v4i2.99>

Terrell, S. R. (2012). Mixed-methods research methodologies. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(1), 254–280. <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol17/iss1/14>

Thomas, D. R. (2006). A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237–246. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214005283748>

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Michael, K., Stull, F., & Holloway, K. (2021). Perceptions and Practices of Military Friendly Organizations. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 7(1), pp. 23–35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i1.224>

Submitted: 09 November 2020 Accepted: 26 December 2020 Published: 01 March 2021

COPYRIGHT:

© 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Journal of Veterans Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by VT Publishing.