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Beyond Yellow Ribbons: Creating Inclusive Workplaces for Veterans with Disabilities

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A Returning Soldier

A 27 year old soldier returned from an extended tour of duty in Afghanistan to his pre-military job in a security agency. During the first week of going back to work, he knew something was wrong. Though he'd made it through his tour of duty with minor injuries, he had seen the deaths of several close friends and had been under constant threat during his extended tour of duty. Back at home, it seemed his life was unraveling; he was agitated, anxious, and hyper-vigilant. Going to his doctor, he got a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder and began treatment. But now he felt he was facing another crisis: What would he do if someone at work found out? Fearing what his boss would do if she found out he was "crazy," he did everything he could to hide his diagnosis. In the end, though, this became his career undoing. When his boss started asking about his unexplained absences to attend treatment, he gave her a vague response about needing some time off and just walked out of the meeting. Fearing he would have to tell everyone at work about his diagnosis, he resigned that afternoon. One month later when his condition had stabilized, he wished things would've gone differently. He ended up leaving a job he was actually very good at and his employer ended up losing an employee who would be hard to replace.

For this veteran, and for many others like him, having a disability inclusive workplace isn't just about pity or even about simple legal compliance. It's about being able to fully contribute their talents in the workplace; it's about their healing; and it's about the employers' ability to tap into a valuable source of talent. And, for the rest of us, it's about not repeating the mistakes of the Vietnam era, when veterans with disabilities were largely shunned from work and community life, with all-too-many sinking into addiction, suicide and homelessness.

Is Goodwill Enough?

Recently, there has been a surge of goodwill among employers to "do the right thing" in employing veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. While this goodwill is laudable, we must pose a question. Will this goodwill be enough?

To a large degree, veterans' workplace issues are disability workplace issues. A look at some statistics on veterans in the workforce paints the picture. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were 9.8 million veterans in the workplace in 2009. 5.5 million veterans of working age had a diagnosed disability. Yet, the real rate of disability among veterans is likely substantially higher when the many veterans with under- or undiagnosed disabilities are considered.

The “Signature” Disabilities

Two types of disabilities have been widely seen as being “signature” disabilities for service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan: traumatic brain injury (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to a 2008 RAND study, almost 20 percent of recently-returned veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan screened positive for depression or PTSD. The findings are similar for TBI. The 2008 RAND study found that about 19% of soldiers received a probable TBI during their deployment, with more subtle (and more difficult to diagnose) close-head blast-related injuries being the most common. Finally, many veterans have more than one disability, further complicating the picture of veterans’ disabilities. Overall, the 2008 RAND study found that 30% of returning veterans screened positive for PTSD, TBI and/or major depression.

Why are these signature disabilities so prevalent among recently-returned veterans? According to the *Invisible Wounds* study by V. Williamson and E. Mulhall (IAVA Issue Report, January, 2009), several features of the engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan make the situation for these returning veterans unique. Veterans from these engagements are more likely than other veterans to have extended tours of duty and to be deployed more than once. They are also less likely to have the full recommended rest time between deployments. These troops are more likely to be National Guardsmen or Reservists, who may not have the social safety net of active-duty military life. Finally, because of the nature of weaponry used in these engagements, these veterans are more vulnerable to blast injuries, closed head injuries caused by mortar attacks and roadside bombs—injuries that are more subtle, more difficult to diagnose and less well understood than other types of brain injury.

HR’s Take on the Issue

A survey of HR professionals conducted by SHRM in 2009 showed that employers generally had a great deal of good will around employing veterans, but had some concerns when considering veterans with disabilities. Building upon this prior SHRM study, we wished to explore these issues more deeply as they pertained to veterans with disabilities.

In the fall of 2010, the Northeast ADA Center at Cornell University, the National ADA Network of Centers (supported by a grant from the National Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation Research) and the national Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) collaborated to survey 10,000 HR professionals about their readiness to employ veterans with disabilities. The 1,083 surveys returned suggest overall that HR professionals are largely willing to hire veterans with disabilities and do see some benefits of having these veterans in their workforce. Yet, they are struggling to turn this goodwill into solid HR practices to find, hire, and manage the talents of these veterans.

What do HR professional believe about the benefits and costs of employing veterans with disabilities?

Generally, respondents agreed that there were benefits to employing veterans with disabilities, but they also believed there were costs.

- 73% of respondents agreed that hiring veterans with disabilities would benefit their business; 24% were unsure of the benefits.
- 72% agreed that these veterans perform as well as other employees; 26% were unsure.
- Yet, 62% agreed that employing workers with PTSD or TBI would require more effort on the part of the employer.
- 61% of respondents agreed or were unsure whether workers with PTSD posed a threat to others in the workplace.

What HR practices or processes were in place?

Our findings indicate that, though respondents were making some effort to include veterans with disabilities in their staffing practices, they were largely not using resources specific to recruiting veterans with disabilities. Likewise, though respondents did, for the most part, have in place diversity plans that included disability and veterans, they were less likely to have in place other disability-related or veteran-support practices. Finally, few respondents had direct experience in accommodating workers with either PTSD or TBI.

- 38% used recruitment sources that targeted veterans; 27% used recruitment sources targeting people with disabilities.
- Yet, this number dropped precipitously when respondents were asked to indicate whether they had used specific resources, with at most 3% using any of the recruitment resources named.
- 17% had hired a veteran with a disability; 83% had not or were unsure.
- 74% had an EAP; but only 38% reported that their EAP had expertise in veterans' issues.
- 6% had accommodated a worker with PTSD; 2% had accommodated a worker with TBI.

Do HR professionals have the knowledge they need?

Though respondents were largely aware of basic issues around disability in the workforce, they reported some knowledge gaps specific to veterans with disabilities. They were largely unaware of recruitment and accommodation resources related to veterans with disabilities and lacked knowledge of how to support workers with PTSD and TBI. Finally, respondents were unclear about the laws applying to veterans with disabilities in the workplace.

- 73% of respondents had not heard of the VetSuccess Program; 61% of the Wounded Warrior Program; 60% of the Job Opportunities for Disabled American Veterans.
- 70% were not aware of any accommodation that might be needed by workers with TBI.
- 41% did not know where to find resources to help them accommodate veterans with disabilities.
- 65% believed (incorrectly) or were unsure whether job applicants must tell potential employers about their disabilities during the hiring process.
- 42% believed (incorrectly) that USERRA, not the ADA, is the main law covering veterans with disabilities in the workplace. 31% did not know.

Ten Tips for HR Leaders

Clearly, the HR professionals surveyed were beyond “pity” and recognized the potential talents and contributions of veterans, including veterans with disabilities. They struggled, though, to translate this goodwill into solid HR practices to ensure that qualified veterans with disabilities can fully contribute their talents in the workplace.

Is your organization ready? Here are a few questions to ask yourself to begin to assess whether your organization is prepared to be effective in employing veterans with disabilities.

1. Do you understand the special workplace dynamic of the veterans' signature disabilities of PTSD and TBI? Consider the following points:

- The unfolding nature of these disabilities. Many returning service members will be entering or re-entering jobs with un- or under-diagnosed disabilities. Hence, the veteran employee may still be on a journey to understand the meaning of the disability after he/she has returned to civilian employment.
- The changing nature of these disabilities. Because PTSD and TBI are conditions that can change significantly over time, employers must have in place responsive, flexible and effective accommodation practices.

- The subtle and varying nature of symptoms. PTSD and TBI often have a wide range of symptoms and subtle manifestations in the workplace. Because of this, a diagnosis alone will not be enough to identify and manage the accommodation process.
 - The highly-stigmatized nature of these disabilities. PTSD and TBI are both highly stigmatized disabilities, often viewed through the lens of automatic unquestioned assumptions and misperceptions. This is particularly the case for PTSD, which can invoke unfounded assumptions of a “character flaw” or a risk for workplace violence. These misperceptions can both pose a significant barrier to the hiring of veterans and prevent the veteran employee from coming forward with an accommodation need.
2. **Have a look at your diversity plan; does it include disability?** Though our research shows that the majority of diversity plans include disability in some way, diversity plans for disability often do not translate into actual employment practices, such as recruiting, hiring, employee development, services (e.g. EAP) and cultural practices (e.g. resource or affinity groups). Veterans with disabilities will need more than a diversity plan; they will need disability inclusive workplace practices. To get beyond goodwill, diversity plans must be robust enough in their attention to disability to inform talent management.
 3. **Are you familiar with the resources?** A broad array of resources are available for employers on recruiting, hiring and accommodating veterans with disabilities (See the boxes below for more details). These resources span across HR processes, including recruiting, hiring, accommodating and supporting veterans with disabilities in the workplace.
 4. **Are you trying to go it alone?** Likewise, there are many opportunities for employers to build partnerships, both in their local communities as well as nationally, to provide support, ideas and resources as they work toward including veterans with disabilities in their HR practices (See boxes below for more details).
 5. **Can you separate fact from fiction?** Our survey suggests that the signature disabilities of PTSD and TBI are “mysterious” to many HR professionals, both in terms of their workplace implications as well as fears of possible threats. A disability inclusive workplace for the many veterans with these disabilities begins with employers questioning automatic assumptions about these conditions--questions that might be tacitly driving their hiring decisions. Also, employers who can cultivate an organizational climate characterized by trust and openness will enable veterans with these highly stigmatized disabilities to come forward to get the accommodations they need to be effective performers on the job.
 6. **Are face-to-face leaders on board?** In many organizations, it is mid-level managers who are the real gatekeepers of disability inclusive workplace practices and cultures. These key face-to-face leaders often determine who gets hired, who gets coached and developed, who get promoted and who gets terminated. Also, managers are likely to be on the frontline of getting, recognizing and granting an accommodation request. In many organizations, it is the face-to-face manager who will be most powerful in determining whether a veteran with a disability can fully contribute his/her talents in the workplace.
 7. **Can you accommodate BOTH obvious and non-obvious disabilities?** Most employers “get it” when it comes to accommodating employees with obvious disabilities, such as those who use wheelchairs. But they struggle with accommodating employees with non-obvious disabilities. Given that the signature disabilities of recently-returned veterans tend to be non-obvious, developing organizational capability to

recognize and provide accommodations for workers with non-obvious disabilities will be an imperative for these veterans.

- 8. Are people with disabilities and veterans included in your talent acquisition practices?** Our survey showed that many HR professionals are not aware of and do not use recruitment resources that would reach veterans with disabilities. The resources listed below may help you locate qualified, talented veterans with disabilities for your workforce.
- 9. Do you understand which laws apply?** Some HR professionals responding to our survey were confused about the laws applying to veterans with disabilities in the workforce. The Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) are the main two laws applying to veterans with disabilities in the workforce. While there is some overlap in these two laws (for example, employers may have accommodation obligations under both laws), each law has a unique focus. While USERRA covers all veterans, the ADA applies to all individuals with a covered disability, including veterans. Also, respondents of our survey were confused about disability inquiry and disclosure, with the majority of respondents (incorrectly) believing or unsure whether veteran applicants must tell their employers about their disabilities. For more information on these two laws, see the web resources listed below.
- 10. What actually happens to people with disabilities in your workforce?** When workers come forward with a disability and accommodation need, what actually happens to them in your workplace? Are steps taken to ensure that they can continue to fully contribute to their jobs when working with this disability? Or is this coming forward the first step on a road to termination? Ultimately, what happens to employees with disabilities in your organization will happen to veterans with disabilities. And this will be the true test of your goodwill.

The 27 year old veteran we met at the beginning of this article is now at risk for a host of other problems: family disintegration, financial crisis, an exacerbation of his symptoms, homelessness and even suicide. But who is to blame? The military, for not adequately screening and treating his condition? His employer, for not having the culture and practices in place that could pave the way for him to come forward with an accommodation need before his disability impacted his work? His family, for failing to provide him with support? His community, for not making him aware of local supports? Or the veteran himself for being unwilling to honestly come to terms with his condition?

We are all to blame. And we will all lose if this veteran's workplace experience comes to reflect those of the majority of veterans with disabilities. But perhaps employers have the most to lose. This veteran (and many more veterans with disabilities like him) had talents, skills and discipline that clearly made him an asset to his company; he just needed a temporary accommodation to enable him to perform and contribute when working with his disability. The cost of this accommodation would have been minimal compared to the cost of replacing him. Or, for all of us, the cost of his dropping out of the workforce. Hiring, engaging and accommodating veterans with disabilities is about good talent management. Yet, on a broader scale, it's also about making choices to not repeat the mistakes of the Vietnam era. We all have a role to play in making these choices.

Aside Box: Resources for Employing Veterans with Disabilities

www.tipofthearrow.net

www.nationalresourcedirectory.gov

www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/emp_resources.htm

www.americasheroesatwork.gov

www.VetSuccess.gov

www.RealWarriors.net

www.Hireheroesusa.org

www.eeoc.gov/facts/veterans-disabilities-employers.html

www.jofdav.com

www.askjan.org/media/post.htm

www.askjan.org/media/BrainInjury.html

Aside Box: Building Partnerships

<http://dvoplverlocator.nvti.ucdenver.edu>

www.servicelocator.org

www.vba.va.gov

www.studentveterans.org/chapterinfo

www.usbln.org

www.nbdc.com