



# Ten Tips for Employers: Tapping into the Talents of Veterans with Disabilities

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Veterans have a lot to contribute to the workplace: skills, resilience, teamwork, loyalty, discipline, and adaptability. This is as true for the roughly 50% of veterans who will return from service with a disability. Many employers want to do “the right thing” in employing and retaining veterans with disabilities in their workforce. Though this goodwill is admirable, it alone may not be enough. Employers must have in place workplace practices to ensure that veterans with disabilities can contribute the full extent of their capabilities.

The following points flow from two surveys about the employment of veterans with disabilities we conducted in 2010. In collaboration with the Kessler Foundation, we surveyed veterans with disabilities on their beliefs and plans around employment. In collaboration with the National SHRM organization, we surveyed HR professionals on their readiness to employ veterans with disabilities.

**Is your organization ready? Here are a few questions to think through.**

## **1. Can you separate fact from fiction?**

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A first step in creating a disability inclusive workplace for veterans with disabilities lies in questioning misperceptions about employees with disabilities. Overall, workers with disabilities perform as well as any other employee. They are no more likely than others to be violent in the workplace, do not have more workplace accidents and are no more likely to be absent from the job than other employees (DePaul University, 2007). Job accommodations (required under the law for employees covered under the ADA) cost far less than what many employers believe (JAN, 2007). Also, for veterans with disabilities, financial assistance may be available for accommodations (See Resources below).

## **2. Do you understand the special workplace dynamic of the signature disabilities of PTSD and TBI?**

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Many employers struggle with understanding the special dynamic of non-obvious disability in the workplace. About 30% of veterans returning from recent engagements will do so with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI) and/or depression (Tanielan & Jaycox, 2008). Called the signature disabilities of our recent military engagements, these disabilities 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. 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.

## **3. Have a look at your diversity plan; does it include disability?**

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Though 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.

## **4. Are you familiar with the resources?**

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A broad array of resources are available for employers on recruiting, hiring and accommodating veterans with disabilities. These resources span across HR processes, including recruiting, hiring, accommodating and supporting veterans with disabilities in the workplace. See the Resources section at the end of this document for more ideas.

## **5. Are you trying to go it alone?**

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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.

## **6. Are face-to-face leaders on board?**

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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?**

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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?**

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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?**

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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?**

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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.

## **References**

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- DePaul University and Disability Works (2007). Exploring the Bottom Line: A Study of the Costs and Benefits of Workers with Disabilities. Released January 28, 2007. Accessed at [www.disabilityworks.org/downloads/disabilityworksDePaulStudyComprehensiveResults.doc](http://www.disabilityworks.org/downloads/disabilityworksDePaulStudyComprehensiveResults.doc)
- Job Accommodation Network (2007) Workplace Accommodations: Low Cost, High Impact. U. S. Department of Labor. Accessed at [www.jan.wvu.edu/media/LowCostHighImpact.pdf](http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/LowCostHighImpact.pdf)

Tanielan, T. & Jaycox, L. Eds. (2008). Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, their consequences and services to assist recovery. RAND, 2008:  
[www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG720/](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG720/)

## Resources for Employing Veterans with Disabilities

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[www.hirevetsfirst.org](http://www.hirevetsfirst.org)  
[www.woundedwarriorproject.org](http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org)  
[www.tipofthearrow.net](http://www.tipofthearrow.net)  
[www.nationalresourcedirectory.gov](http://www.nationalresourcedirectory.gov)  
[www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/emp\\_resources.htm](http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/emp_resources.htm)  
[www.americasheroesatwork.gov](http://www.americasheroesatwork.gov)  
[www.VetSuccess.gov](http://www.VetSuccess.gov)  
[www.RealWarriors.net](http://www.RealWarriors.net)  
[www.Hireheroesusa.org](http://www.Hireheroesusa.org)

[www.jofdav.com](http://www.jofdav.com)  
[www.askjan.org/media/post.htm](http://www.askjan.org/media/post.htm)  
[www.askjan.org/media/BrainInjury.html](http://www.askjan.org/media/BrainInjury.html)  
[www.vetjobs.com](http://www.vetjobs.com)  
[www.jobcentral.com/vetcentral](http://www.jobcentral.com/vetcentral)

## Resources for Building Partnerships

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[dvoplverlocator.nvti.ucdenver.edu](http://dvoplverlocator.nvti.ucdenver.edu)  
[www.servicelocator.org](http://www.servicelocator.org)  
[www.vba.va.gov](http://www.vba.va.gov)  
[www.studentveterans.org/chapterinfo](http://www.studentveterans.org/chapterinfo)  
[www.usbln.org](http://www.usbln.org)  
[www.nbdc.com](http://www.nbdc.com)  
[vetcentral.us.jobs](http://vetcentral.us.jobs)  
[biztaxlaw.about.com/od/taxcredits/f/Whats-The-Tax-Credit-For-Hiring-Unemployed-Veterans-.htm](http://biztaxlaw.about.com/od/taxcredits/f/Whats-The-Tax-Credit-For-Hiring-Unemployed-Veterans-.htm)

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## Contact Information

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