

Beyond Yellow Ribbons: How Prepared are Veterans with Disabilities and Employers to Participate in a Disability Inclusive Workforce?

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Overview

Why is this a burning issue?

The nature of veterans' disabilities

The Employers' Study

The Veterans' Study

Implications: Policy, practice and research

Why is this a burning issue?

A 30 year old veteran returns from Iraq with PTSD. A middle school teacher prior to his service in Iraq, he now plans on limiting his job search to non-skilled work because he is sure he will never be hired for professional jobs when he tells his potential employer about his PTSD diagnosis.

A 24 year old soldier is recovering from a traumatic brain injury. She plans on hiding her disability from her employer because she fears she will be terminated if her employer finds out.

A 32 year old returns from Iraq with a spinal cord injury. An IT professional prior to his service, he believes he will not be able to return to his old job because the building he worked in lacks an elevator.

Why is this a burning issue?

For these veterans (and many others like them), will goodwill be enough?

What else needs to happen?

Why is this a burning issue?

To a large degree, veterans' workplace issues are disability workplace issues

- Since 2001, about 1.64 million U.S. troops have been deployed for Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan
- According to the U.S. Census Bureau (American Community Survey 2009):
 - 21.9 million veterans in 2009
 - 9.8 million of these veterans were in the workforce
 - 5.5 million veterans had a diagnosed disability

Yet, the real rate of disability among veterans is likely substantially higher

“Signature” Disabilities: PTSD, TBI and depression

PTSD:

2008 RAND study: About 20 % of recently returned veterans screened positive for depression or PTSD

Erbes , Westermeyer , Engdahl & Johnson (2007): Rate of PTSD among returning service members was 6 % diagnosed, with an additional 27% estimated to be undiagnosed

TBI

2008 RAND study: 19% of soldiers received a probable TBI, with more subtle (and more difficult to diagnose) blast-related injuries being the most common

Many veterans have more than one disability

30% of returning veterans screened positive for PTSD, TBI and/or major depression (RAND, 2008)

Overview: Disability rates & types

DOD rates across OIF, OEF & OND*

Total casualties:

41,675

Largest reason code:

WEAPONRY, EXPLOSIVE DEVICE

29,789

*US Department of Defense (DoD) Personnel and Procurement Statistics at <http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/CASUALTY/castop.htm>.

Returning veterans...

Arguably, the number of veterans with non-obvious disabilities far exceeds those with obvious disabilities

The two signature disabilities for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are:

1. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
2. Traumatic brain injury (TBI)

The nature of veterans' disabilities

Iraq and Afghanistan vets have higher rates of signature disabilities (Williams & Mulhall, 2009)

- Nature of weaponry—TBI closed-head blast injuries from roadside bombs and mortar attacks
- More vulnerable to PTSD because of street, hand-to-hand fighting and snipers
- More likely to have repeated deployments
- Not as likely to have recommended rest period between deployments
- Recruited from National Guard and Reservists—may lack the sense of shared community of enlistees

The special dynamic of these “signature” veterans’ disabilities...

Veteran is likely still on a journey to understand the impact and meaning of the disability AFTER the return to civilian work life

Under-diagnosed & under-reported—Inadequate screening mechanisms

Many will not be fully diagnosed & treated until long after return to civilian life

Change a lot over time

Can have a wide range of symptoms and subtle manifestations

Tend to be highly stigmatized

About PTSD...

Three major categories of diagnostic criteria*

1. Re-experiencing Symptoms

Uncontrollable flashbacks

Nightmares

2. Avoidance Symptoms

Withdrawing from others

Loss of interest in life activities

3. Hyper-arousal

Sleep problems

Unexplained anger

Difficulty concentrating

Symptoms can “creep up” –not necessarily present immediately after the event

*4th edition of the [*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders \(or DSM-IV\)*](#).

About TBI...

A leading cause is blast injuries, ranging from life threatening to mild/undetected

Our screening systems for TBI are probably inadequate

A very complex injury, with subtle symptoms:

Sleep problems

Impaired memory

Poor concentration/attention

Depression

Anxiety

Irritability/mood changes

Headache/dizziness

Fatigue

Noise/light intolerance

Ringing in the ears (tinnitus)

Vision change: blurred or vision

And what does this mean

in the workplace?

Many veterans may still be on a journey to understand the meaning of working with a disability long after they return to civilian work life

Their conditions & treatment plans may still be in the process of adjustment well into their civilian work lives

No "one size fits all." Course of recovery and employment needs is different for each individual

If workplaces are not disability inclusive, they are not welcoming to returning vets--Disability inclusiveness is the knot that holds together the yellow ribbon

Symptoms and accommodation options for PTSD and TBI often overlap:

Interacting with co-workers or supervisor:

Alternative communication systems

Work at home option (can be part time)

Clarity expectations and give positive coaching/feedback

Assign feedback partner

Sleep disturbances:

Provide consistent schedule

Combine short breaks into a long break for a nap

Fine motor skills issues:

Alternative input devices for computer

Speech to text software

Ergonomic phones, desks and office equipment

Large motor skills issues:

Universal design

Basics of accessibility

Main laws that apply to
veterans with disabilities in the workplace

USERRA

FMLA

ADA

USERRA

(Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act)

Enforced by US DOL

Protects civilian jobs of service members called to military duty

Retains employment rights for five years

Has some disability protections for service-acquired disabilities--right to reasonable accommodation

Must be re-employed in the job they would have attained had they not been in service

Guaranteed same seniority, rights and benefits

Employer must train/re-train service member to attain the "escalated job

http://www.dol.gov/vets/programs/userra/userra_fs.htm

FMLA

New military family leave entitlements—2009

Family members of service members can take up to 26 workweeks leave to care for service member with a disability

Family members of National Guard may use 12 weeks FMLA leave to arrange family affairs of active duty service member

ADA

VWDs protected in same way anyone else with a disability is.

Not automatically protected

Independent of military benefits disability rating

Hiring—Right to an accommodation during hiring process itself

Hiring—Right to disclosure as a choice

Accommodation—Right to an accommodation

Other work processes—Right to have equal access to training, development, coaching, equal compensation, promotion, etc.

Right to an accessible workplace

Two studies:

Are we ready for a workplace that includes veterans with disabilities?

Study #1. Employer Study

Study #2. The Veterans' Study

An overview of each study

Study #1. Employer Study

- Northeast ADA Center & ADA Center Network in collaboration with National Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM)
- Builds upon a prior SHRM study on HR professionals attitudes about veterans
- Question: Do HR professionals have the knowledge, beliefs/willingness and practices in place to be effective in hiring, accommodating and retaining veterans with disabilities?

An overview of each study

Study #2. Veterans' Study

- Northeast ADA Center in collaboration with Kessler Foundation and Tip of the Arrow Program
- Veterans are being prepared in terms of medical, training and vocational preparation. But what about their rights as people with disabilities in the workplace?
- Question: Do veterans with disabilities have the knowledge, beliefs/willingness and practices in place to apply their rights as people with disabilities in the workplace?

1. The Employer Study

A surge of goodwill:

Will it be

enough?

1. The Employer Study

In collaboration with:

SHRM

National ADA Network

Northeast ADA Center (formerly DBTAC—NE)

Methods

- Employer survey online only
- Took about 10 - 12 min to complete
- 10,000 surveys distributed to members of SHRM
- 1,083 returned
- Mixed response scales
- Some response scales included a “Not Sure” option
- Respondent data—from what type of org? etc?
- Survey based on DBTAC Barrier Intervention Model

Employer Study Findings:

Employers knowledge, willingness & practices around employing veterans with disabilities

Overall: 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

Expressed goodwill is not the same as prioritizing this issue!

Do employers have the knowledge they need to be effective in employing veterans with disabilities?

Recruiting. Most employers had not heard of resources related to finding and recruiting VWDs.

73% had not heard of the VetSuccess Program;

61% had not heard of the Wounded Warrior Program.

Varied by sector—govt sector respondents more likely to know about recruiting resources

Signature disabilities. Employers reported significant knowledge gaps regarding PTSD and TBI.

70% could not identify any possible accommodations needed by workers with TBI

Do employers have the knowledge they need to be effective in employing veterans with disabilities?

Accommodations. Employers largely did not know where to go to find accommodation resources for VWDs

41% did not know where to find resources to help them accommodate VWDs

The Law. Employers were confused about disability disclosure and did not know which laws applied to VWDs

58% incorrectly believed applicants must disclose during the hiring process (a key finding given that, to a large degree, PTSD and TBI are often not obvious to others)

42% incorrectly believed that USERRA and not the ADA is the main law covering VWDs in the workplace

31% of respondents did not know which laws covered VWDs

Do employers have the willingness/beliefs in place to employ VWDs?

Overall perceived benefits. Generally, employers did believe in benefits of employing VWDs.

73% agreed or strongly agreed that hiring VWDs would benefit their business/organization

24% were unsure

Job performance expectations. Employers generally believed VWDs could perform on the job.

72% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that VWDs perform as well as other employees

26% indicated they were not sure

Customer relations. Employers generally believed hiring VWDs would be good for customers

71% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that hiring VWDs would improve their customer image;

24% were unsure

Do employers have the willingness/beliefs in place to employ VWDs?

Yet...

Perceived effort burden. Despite these positive beliefs, employers thought VWDs would require more effort.

61% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that accommodating workers with PTSD or TBI would require more effort on the part of the employer

Manager time burden. Generally, employers believed VWDs would take more of a manager's time.

61% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that accommodating VWDs would take more of a manager's time

29% were unsure

10% believed accommodating VWDs would not take more of a manager's time/effort

Do employers have the willingness/beliefs in place to employ VWDs?

Cost burden. Generally, employers were unsure if accommodations would be costly.

35% of respondents disagreed or disagreed strongly that is costly to accommodate workers with PTSD or TBI.

52% of respondents were unsure whether accommodating workers with these disabilities would be costly

Signature disabilities. Generally, employers were unsure if workers with the signature disabilities would be violent in the workplace.

39% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that workers with PTSD were more likely than others to be violent in the workplace

53% did not know

Did employers have practices/processes in place to be effective in employing veterans with disabilities?

General Recruiting Practices. Some employers use recruitment sources targeting veterans.

38% of respondents reported that their organization generally used recruitment sources targeting veterans

27% reported using recruitment sources that targeted people with disabilities

VWD Recruiting Practices. Yet, surprisingly, these numbers drop precipitously when respondents were asked more specifically about using common recruiting sources targeting VWDs.

Only 2-3% of the employers surveyed reported using any of the specific resources among a list of possible sources for finding and recruiting VWDs

Varied by organization size: 25% of smaller organizations used recruitment sources targeting VWDs; 77% of larger organizations

Did employers have practices/processes in place to be effective in employing veterans with disabilities?

The Diversity Plan. Generally, employers included disability and veterans in their diversity plans.

70% of respondents reported that they included disability in their diversity plans (**Varied by organization size:** 67% of smaller organizations and 93% of larger organizations included disability in diversity plan.)

67% included veterans (**Varied by organization size:** 59% of smaller organizations and 89% of larger organizations included veterans in their diversity plan.)

Hiring. Generally, employers had not hired veterans with known disabilities.

17% had hired a veteran who had disclosed a disability either before or after time of hire

52% had not hired a veteran who had disclosed a disability

31% unsure

Did employers have practices/processes in place to be effective in employing veterans with disabilities?

Accommodation Practices for PTSD. Employers had little experience accommodating workers with PTSD

Only 6% had accommodated a worker with PTSD in the last year

61% had not made any accommodations for PTSD

33% were unsure

Accommodation Practices for TBI. Employers had little experience accommodating workers with TBI

Only 2% of respondents reported that their organization had accommodated a worker with TBI in the last 12 months

66% had not made accommodations for TBI

32% were unsure

Did employers have practices/processes in place to be effective in employing veterans with disabilities?

Centralized accommodation function. Some employers do not have a centralized accommodation office

40% of respondents indicated they had a centralized office to handle disability-related accommodation requests.

Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Most employers do not have an EAP with expertise in VWDs

74% of respondents reported having an EAP

38% of respondents reported that their EAP had expertise in veterans' issues

Affinity/resource group. Most employers do not have an affinity group focusing on either disability or veterans' issues.

9% of respondents indicated their organization had an affinity/resource group focused on disability

7% reported an affinity/resource group focused on veterans

Our findings...

Limitations of our study:

"Not sure" response category

Surfaces knowledge needs, but masks socially undesirable responses?

Sample that consisted solely of SHRM members

Accessed a difficult-to-reach audience, but over-represented large, private sector organizations

Could practices around diversity plans, EAP and Affinity groups be over-represented in our study?

Study #2. Veteran Study

In collaboration with:

- Kessler Foundation
- Tip of the Arrow Foundation
- SM Clark, U.S. Army
- Northeast ADA Center

The purpose of this project was to describe the readiness of veterans with disabilities to enter/re-enter the workforce as a person with a disability.

A gap--Veterans were being prepared for work life in the areas of medical rehabilitation, vocational training, skills acquisition, resume preparation and interview practice

But are they prepared to “work the ADA?”—To deal with legal, practical and human issues around working with a disability?

Methods

- Veterans survey pencil & paper only
- Data collected June – Nov 2010
- Incentivized self-selected volunteers completed survey
 - Surveys distributed at veteran job fairs and Wounded Warrior Units in several locations
 - Survey took about 20 minutes to complete
 - 421 surveys completed
 - Survey based on DBTAC Barrier Intervention Model