



PROMOTING VETERAN CAREER SUCCESS THROUGH EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIP

A case study of the Commercial Club of Chicago Veterans Working Group.





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CAEL thanks the individual Veterans Working Group members who participated in interviews to share their experiences for this publication:

- David Hiller, President and CEO, Robert R. McCormick Foundation
- Jim Holmes, Senior Vice President, Bank of America
- Barb Kreski, Director of Horticultural Therapy Services at the Chicago Botanic Garden
- Aaron LeMay, Recruiting Programs Specialist, Exelon Corporation
- David Maher, Managing Director, Deloitte LLP
- Jen Sommesí, Senior Manager of Talent Programs, CDW
- Pat Whiteside, Vice President of Business Support, Nicor Gas

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This document has also greatly benefitted from input from Amy Sherman at CAEL, as well as Kirsten Carroll and Dea Meyer at the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago and Megan Everett and David Hiller at the Robert R. McCormick Foundation.

Photographs by Glenn Kaupert.

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VETERANS WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

AAR CORP.

Abbott

Accenture

Allstate

Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's
Hospital of Chicago

Aon

Archer Daniels Midland Company

AT&T

Bank of America

BMO Harris Bank

The Boeing Company

CDW

Challenger, Gray and Christmas, Inc.

Chicago Botanic Garden

Chicago Tribune Media Group

Combined Insurance

Deloitte LLP

DePaul University

Exelon Corporation

Fifth Third Bank Chicago

Flying Food Group, LLC

Franczek Radelet P.C.

Health Care Service Corporation

Illinois Institute of Technology

ITW

Jones Lang LaSalle, Inc.

JPMorgan Chase & Co.

Kellogg School of Management,
Northwestern University

McDonald's Corporation

Nicor Gas, an AGL Resources Company

Northern Trust

PlaneTechs

PNC Financial Services, Inc.

PwC LLP

Rasmussen College

RBC Capital Markets

Robert R. McCormick Foundation

Roosevelt University

Rush University Medical Center

Sears Holdings Corporation

SOS America (Service Over Self)

Spencer Stuart

UL LLC

United Airlines

University of Illinois

William Blair & Company



INTRODUCTION

The Veterans Working Group provides a forum for local employers to learn about best practices in veteran recruitment and retention. Pictured: Greg Dellinger (AAR CORP.).



As trained leaders for whom accountability and a strong work ethic are second nature, Chicagoland veterans are uniquely equipped to meet the demands of today's jobs. That veterans typically possess the skills and character needed to excel in the civilian workplace makes reports on the state of veteran unemployment more troubling. Through the Commercial Club of Chicago Veterans Working Group (VWG), some of the city's top employers are working together to share best practices and advance new ideas to help reverse this trend and support veterans in finding meaningful careers.

In 2013, the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation joined forces to form the VWG as a community of knowledge dedicated to veteran employment efforts. Since its inception, the group has progressed into an effective model of collaboration among employers and community partners, all seeking to make Chicagoland a better place for military veterans and servicemembers to live and work. With representatives from more than 40 Commercial Club employers and related community organizations, the VWG is unique in its approach.

The Commercial Club and its Civic Committee are grateful for the leadership and support of David Hiller, President and CEO of the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, along with the guidance and expertise of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). The VWG's success is an outstanding example of a community's potential to effect change when diverse stakeholders are

empowered to share challenges, leverage each other's strengths, and develop a community of practice. The goal of this publication is to recognize the efforts that VWG members have taken to improve their veteran recruitment, training and retention practices, and to create a blueprint for the successful replication of the VWG model in other communities.

It is the VWG leaders' hope that the lessons learned from this initiative will be used to strengthen the veteran employment pipeline in other communities throughout the country.

As the VWG continues to address important issues related to veteran employment, its members have made noteworthy strides in the dissemination and implementation of best practices, and many lessons have been learned along the way. The accomplishments of the VWG demonstrate the important role a local forum can play in efforts to create an inclusive workplace. It is the VWG leaders' hope that the lessons learned from this initiative will be used to strengthen the veteran employment pipeline in other communities throughout the country.

Visit the Veterans Working Group online at www.commercialclubchicago.org/veteranemploymentinitiative

VETERANS WORKING GROUP PARTNERS



David Hiller (Robert R. McCormick Foundation) welcomes attendees to a Veterans Working Group meeting.



The Commercial Club of Chicago—founded in 1877—is a membership organization of senior leaders from the business, education, cultural, and philanthropic sectors of Chicago. Throughout its long history, the Club and its affiliate organizations have played a role in shaping Chicago. Many of the Commercial Club’s activities occur through its affiliated organizations and committees: the *Civic Committee*, the *Veterans Employment Initiative* (Veterans Working Group), the *Civic Consulting Alliance*, and *New Schools for Chicago*. These affiliates share the Club’s overarching goal: creating a better Chicago for every person and every business who calls this City home. Learn more at www.commercialclubchicago.org.

The VWG is made possible through support provided by the following Commercial Club of Chicago and Civic Committee staff:

- Kirsten Carroll, Vice President, Policy
- Maureen Sheerin, Director of Membership & Events
- Hilary Holbrook, Assistant to the Director of Membership & Events

The Robert R. McCormick Foundation’s mission is fostering communities of educated, informed, and engaged citizens. Through philanthropic grant-making and Cantigny Park, the Foundation works to make life better in Chicagoland. The McCormick Foundation, among the nation’s largest foundations with more than \$1.5 billion in assets, was established in 1955 upon the death of Col. Robert R. McCormick, the longtime editor and publisher of the Chicago Tribune. Find out more at www.mccormickfoundation.org.

The VWG is made possible through support provided by the following McCormick Foundation staff:

- David Hiller, President and CEO, Veterans Working Group Chairperson
- Megan Everett, Director, Veterans Program

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), a national 501(c)(3) non-profit organization founded in 1974, provides colleges and universities, companies, labor organizations, and state and local government with the tools and strategies they need to create practical, effective lifelong learning solutions. CAEL’s veteran-focused initiatives build capacity in postsecondary education environments to support veterans in the military-to-civilian transition, advocating college credit for military learning for, and promoting career paths in appropriate fields. Learn more at <http://www.cael.org/serving-student-veterans>.

The VWG is made possible by support from the following CAEL staff:

- Amy Sherman, Associate Vice President, Innovation & Policy
- Andrew Miller, Project Coordinator
- Connie Johnson, Project Support Specialist



BACKGROUND



Panel discussions at Veterans Working Group meetings aim to engage attendees in the conversation. Pictured: (from left to right) Amy Sherman (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning), Erica Jeffries (Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs), Michael Hubbard (William Blair & Company), and Gerard Metoyer (Navy Fleet and Family Support Center).

Returning veterans and employment challenges

With over 700,000 veterans living in Illinois, the state has a strong commitment to supporting its veterans and helping them develop meaningful careers in the civilian sector (Kintzle, Rasheed & Castro, 2016, p. 10). Half of separating post-9/11 veterans will experience a period of unemployment during their transition back to civilian life (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015, p. i). Echoing these findings, a 2016 report, issued by the University of Southern California and Loyola University Chicago, shows that many veterans returning to the Chicagoland area are unprepared for the transition from the military to the civilian workforce, and, consequently, “struggle during the transition processes” (Kintzle, Rasheed & Castro, 2016, p. 38).

In 2010 - before the VWG was formed - the unemployment rate for post-9/11 veterans in Illinois stood at 13 percent - the fourth highest in the nation (Social IMPACT Research Center, 2012, p. 3). Recognizing that meaningful and stable employment is the foundation for a smooth transition to civilian life, Illinois government agencies and community organizations perceived a need for greater employer engagement in their efforts to address the challenges faced by returning veterans. For their part, employers understood the unique qualities that veterans bring to the civilian workforce.

“When employers discuss the skills and traits that veterans bring to the table, what always impresses me is how many touch on the same themes,” said Ty Fahner, President of the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago. “Leadership, teamwork, discipline, expertise, resiliency, loyalty, and dynamism are all words commonly used by leaders representing diverse industries to describe veterans in the workplace.”

Founding the Veterans Working Group

Like other Commercial Club members, Robert R. McCormick Foundation CEO David Hiller understood the importance of raising awareness of veterans' workforce needs. The McCormick Foundation had already introduced its own veteran employment program, and, while Hiller saw efforts made in the way of hiring fairs aimed at veterans, there were few truly systematic efforts at the community level toward building a bridge between the military and the workplace.

“What we saw was that many organizations were working to help veterans through hiring initiatives and several national veteran-focused programs, but there wasn't enough being done on the local level,” said Hiller. “It was clear that there was room to do more, together, to improve the hiring situation for veterans here in the Chicagoland area.”

Erica Borggren, then Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs (IDVA), shared Hiller's view of the importance of engaging the business community to serve veterans. In concert with Borggren, Hiller and Fahner identified the Commercial Club as a fitting forum to foster cross-sharing and collaboration around a common goal of elevating veteran support. Hiller also sought the assistance of Amy Sherman, Associate Vice President of Innovation and Policy at CAEL, a national non-profit organization and grantee of McCormick Foundation's Veterans Program, to facilitate discussions at the initial veterans-themed Commercial Club luncheon in 2013. The luncheon helped spark greater interest in a collaborative approach to veteran recruitment and retention, and when Fahner and Hiller developed and presented the idea of the VWG to Commercial Club members shortly thereafter, they were very receptive.

"The initial reaction was strong; we had interest from more than 25 organizations," said Hiller. "With their approval and support, we began to organize the VWG. The enthusiasm we received from everyone told me we hit on a subject that was of universal importance." Hiller became the VWG's Chairman, and Chris Janc, Global Co-Chair of J.P. Morgan Chase's Voices for Employees That Served (VETS) veterans' business resource group, volunteered to represent the private sector as VWG Co-Chair.

Today, the VWG's mission is to provide a learning community for Commercial Club member companies to discuss challenges and implement solutions that increase veteran recruitment and retention. The VWG membership is comprised of leaders from industry, academia, and nonprofit sectors.

Chicagoland industry leaders hear the call to serve veterans

"If anybody thinks they've got all the answers they aren't being self-critical enough."

That's the thought that Pat Whiteside, Vice President of Business Support at Nicor Gas, said inspired his company's decision to join the VWG. Whiteside knew that Nicor had a pre-existing commitment to veteran hiring but wanted to know more about how to best serve veterans.

"We share best practices not only to improve ourselves, but also to help other Chicagoland firms improve their efforts to create a work environment that affords better opportunities for veterans."

It was apparent to leading Chicago-area employers that veterans were primed to excel in these roles—they just needed local pathways to lead them there. The VWG was formed to build those pathways.

For some VWG members, gaining access to local resources for best practices was the impetus for finding a veteran-focused community of practice.

"The main purpose for us [participating in the VWG] is to find out what other firms are doing in the marketplace and to make sure that we're on the right path, locally, in recruiting and retaining veteran talent," said Jim Holmes, Senior Vice President at Bank of America. "We share best practices not only to improve ourselves, but also to help other Chicagoland firms improve their efforts to create a work environment that affords better opportunities for veterans."

Jen Sommesi, Senior Manager of Talent Programs at CDW, shared Holmes' perspective. "What I find beneficial about the VWG is the networking and the sharing of best practices with a local group of resources. With the VWG, we can discuss challenges and potential solutions that we know are having an impact in our own backyard."

Additionally, new regulations enacted in 2014 for the Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act (VEVRAA), which requires federal contractors to implement an affirmative action program to encourage the hiring of veterans, increased companies' interest in the VWG as federal contractors sought resources to support their compliance efforts.

THE VETERANS WORKING GROUP: THE NUTS AND BOLTS

Building the VWG

The VWG has developed a model for collaboration among employers that encourages the sharing of resources, knowledge, and best practices that help member organizations improve the effectiveness of their veteran recruitment and retention efforts. By design, the VWG brings together leaders from a variety of backgrounds, allowing attendees to engage with, and receive feedback from, representatives of many different industries and organizations.

“Ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives and a variety of experiences creates a robust dialogue between VWG members, which was a key goal of the group’s organizers,” said Kirsten Carroll, Vice President of Policy for the Commercial Club’s Civic Committee.

“From the beginning we knew that for the VWG to be successful it would have to incorporate voices from industries throughout Chicagoland,” Carroll explained. “Whenever you’re bringing people together to talk about a subject that’s rarely discussed, with the kind of candor we encourage, you have to make sure you’re always fostering an environment of inclusion.”

Hiller, Janc, Sherman, and Carroll work together to plan, organize, and facilitate the group’s meetings, which typically include three key components:

1. A “lightning round” of member updates
2. Guest presentations from subject matter experts
3. Panel discussions on featured topics

The “lightning round”: Setting a framework for a community of practice

It was clear from the first VWG meeting that attendees had a passion for helping veterans and it was essential to turn that passion into active engagement. To ensure that all VWG meeting attendees can have their voices heard, a portion of each quarterly meeting is



Every Veterans Working Group meeting includes a ‘lightning round,’ during which attendees are given the chance to share updates and questions with the group. Pictured: Jerry Bell (JBJ Business Group Inc).

dedicated to a “lightning round,” during which one person per organization is granted one minute to share one update or idea with the entire working group. This approach affords attendees the opportunity to discuss recent successes serving veterans and challenges they’ve overcome, in addition to letting them follow up on topics from previous meetings or propose topics that they feel merit additional discussion.

“It’s always a good habit when you have a diverse group of people to do some introductions,” said Whiteside. “I think the lightning round evolved out of everybody getting that chance at the microphone. As those chances got longer and longer, the lightning round concept provided more structure. As people started getting into the habit, it made speaking less intimidating for new attendees.” David Maher, Managing

Director at Deloitte appreciates the lightning round because it helps individual meeting participants to maximize the value of the VWG for their organizations. “I really like the lightning round,” he said, “because it’s a chance, without giving too much detail, to talk about what we’re focused on as an organization. As you listen to the different members discuss their successes, struggles, and concerns, that’s where you start to spark ideas.”

Gaining Access to Subject Matter Experts

Following the lightning round, Amy Sherman of CAEL, as emcee, transitions into an examination of a specific topic, usually addressed by a featured speaker who is a subject matter expert.

Featured speakers at VWG meetings have included representatives of the following organizations:

- **The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD):** Background on the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), which is aimed at helping veterans transition from military to civilian life
- **City Colleges of Chicago:** Presentation on Veterans Service Centers and the Military Credit Transfer Initiative
- **The Center for a New American Security:** Summary of findings from a report on women veterans, “Battlefields and Boardrooms: Women’s Leadership in the Military and the Private Sector”
- **The U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP):** Overview and update on the interpretation of new OFCCP hiring regulations and requirements

VWG meeting attendees are given the opportunity to pose questions to the guest speakers, helping to ensure that the meeting content stays relevant to the needs of the VWG member organizations. “I like going in with a couple of speakers because you can extract from them how the VWG can help your firm,” said Bank of America’s Jim Holmes. “They really give you a different point of view you wouldn’t get elsewhere.”

Sharing best practices through panel discussions

In addition to expert presentations, each VWG meeting has a panel discussion on relevant topics. Panels have included “Women Veterans: Lessons Learned and Best Practices,” “Supporting Employment Pipelines for Student Veterans,” and one focused on veteran mentorship programs. The panel typically consists of representatives from local veteran-serving organizations and the working group members themselves. This approach helps to connect the VWG with relevant local resources while also providing members with opportunities to learn from and engage with each other around solutions to specific veteran recruitment and retention challenges. For example, speakers from the Illinois Institute of Technology, AT&T, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce shared best practices that organizations can follow to translate veterans’ skills into work skills. Local speakers from the U.S. Department of Labor, the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES), and CDW gave a presentation on how employers can collaborate with Local Veterans’ Employment Representatives (LVERs) and Disabled Veterans’ Outreach Program specialists (DVOPs) to serve veterans.

Providing a resource library

In addition to sharing best practices and providing resources for members during VWG meetings, the Commercial Club also provides a website that serves as a resource library for current and prospective members. The VWG website lists the topics covered during each meeting and provides meeting summaries and corresponding presentation materials, as well as providing information about upcoming veteran hiring events and external resources that organizations can use to enhance their veteran outreach.

One VWG member has repeatedly taken advantage of the resources available on the webpage. “Anybody who started something like this would need a page like that because I have needed to go to that page probably eight or nine times so far.”

Working behind-the-scenes

Behind-the-scenes work by the Commercial Club, the McCormick Foundation, and CAEL has proven essential for keeping meetings running smoothly, attendees say.

“The fact that there is a strong organizer that keeps it going, keeps it tight, keeps it structured and ensures really good content, I think it takes that key person,” said Barb Kreski, Director of Horticultural Therapy Services at the Chicago Botanic Garden. “The rest of us, we just show up at the meetings and get everything we can out of them. Someone behind the scenes is doing a heck of a lot of work and it shows.” Another VWG member concurred. “I go to so many meetings and they often have far too many slide decks that cause the meetings to drag, but [the VWG meetings] are not overwhelming.”

Serving as the VWG’s chairman, Hiller pointed to effective collaboration as being the lynchpin for the group’s success.

“Without the support of [the Civic Committee’s] Kirsten Carroll none of this would be possible,” said Hiller. “Having access to CAEL’s dedicated staff resources and thought leadership has also been instrumental to the process and success of VWG. Convening a learning community takes a significant amount of planning. We tend to find that members are busy and can’t do hands-on research and support activities. CAEL has been invaluable in moving the work forward including creating the agenda, setting up the panels and other important tasks.”

Member expectations

The VWG has set a key voluntary benchmark for its member organizations to join the Illinois Hires Heroes Consortium (IHHC), a joint initiative of IDVA and IDES. IHHC members adopt its aforementioned best practices for recruiting, HR training, and veteran employee retention. They pledge to adhere to these best practices, although this pledge is not a formal legal agreement. Those who make this commitment receive no-cost access to training resources and support, as well as a listing on the IHHC website and access to the IHHC Member logo to market themselves as military-friendly employers. Through these benefits, organizations that make the IHHC pledge can increase their access to valuable veteran talent. Due in part to the efforts of the VWG, the IHHC’s



Jim Holmes of Bank of America (pictured), appreciates the the guest speakers at Veterans Working Group meetings because they “give you a different point of view you wouldn’t get elsewhere.”

membership is heavily represented by VWG members. This linkage strengthens the bond between employers and the state’s veterans’ affairs and employment agencies, which promotes a more systemic approach to strengthening the veteran employment pipeline.

Celebrating service

Because the VWG is made up of a subset of Commercial Club members, continued information-sharing with the Club’s larger pool of employers has remained an important VWG function. Since the VWG was founded, the group has held an annual Commercial Club luncheon the week of Veterans Day to honor veterans, and to encourage other Commercial Club members to join the group. The luncheons provide a platform for VWG members and guest speakers to highlight the many ways veterans’ experience and talents can benefit the workforce, as well as updating Commercial Club members on the work the VWG has accomplished to strengthen veteran hiring and retention efforts.

More than just a venue through which VWG members can disseminate best practices in veteran employment, the annual Veterans Day luncheon shines a spotlight on the contributions veterans have made to our country and the importance of removing the barriers that can impede their successful transition to a meaningful civilian career. “The luncheon really lets the VWG broaden the scope of its efforts by reaching out to the broader Commercial Club membership about their employment practices,” said Hiller. “It’s a terrific opportunity to show the business community all the great work being done to serve veterans and to demonstrate that they, too, can help support veterans in their organizations.”

IDENTIFYING BEST PRACTICES

Though VWG members represent a diverse range of industries, the group is nevertheless able to identify best practices to encourage the hiring and retention of veteran employees that can be followed in almost any organization.

For recruiting and retaining veterans, best practices shared at VWG meetings suggest that employers need to:

- Develop specific metrics and goals around veteran employment and regularly assess progress against these goals.
- Ask current veteran employees to help recruit new veteran hires and solicit their recommendations for partnering with veteran-serving organizations.
- Create a dedicated page on the company website to highlight their commitment to veteran employment.
- Revise company application forms to better identify veterans, and provide multiple opportunities during the hiring process for veterans to self-identify.
- Train hiring managers on military-to-civilian occupation translation.
- Introduce a mentor relationship at the recruitment stage to serve as a bridge between veterans and hiring managers.
- Connect with military service members during their transition through programs, such as DoD SkillBridge.
- Develop relationships with veteran coordinators and student veteran groups on the college campuses where recruiting takes place; offer mentorships and internships for student veterans to explore potential careers and transition into the civilian workforce.
- Partner with Local Veterans' Employment Representatives (LVERs), who operate within state employment agencies.
- Participate in veteran hiring events, such as Hiring Our Heroes and state employment agency job fairs.
- List jobs on specialized job boards, such as IllinoisJobLink and USAJobs.gov.

For retaining veterans, VWG members have shared the following best practices, according to which employers should:

- Encourage current veteran employees to “self-identify” through special events and recognition (e.g., challenge coins).
- Establish a veterans' resource group to support both veteran employees and their families; involve veterans' family members in programs.
- Partner with veterans resource groups to evaluate and strengthen veteran recruitment, hiring and retention efforts.
- Include training on reintegration and potential veteran challenges in managerial workshops.
- Partner with coalitions such as Illinois Joining Forces and its network of veteran-serving organizations to ensure that veteran employees benefit from services geared specifically to their needs; promote access to employee assistance programs.
- Provide veteran employees with opportunities to give back to the veteran community, such as mentorship programs and other volunteer activities.
- Identify and implement specific strategies to support women veterans, such as assigning them to female and/or veteran managers.

THE VETERANS WORKING GROUP: SUBJECT MATTER FOCUS

To ensure that VWG meetings provide specific takeaways that add value for participants, the VWG’s planning committee is committed to shaping each meeting agenda around group members’ needs. This personalized approach to veteran outreach differs from other veterans’ employment initiatives that provide more generalized advice and best practices. Continuous feedback remains an important way VWG facilitators ensure that attendees remain engaged and that their thoughts are heard. Through surveys issued following VWG meetings, facilitators are given an understanding of the topics attendees find most salient. Subsequent meetings are then formed around tackling these subjects. The organizing principle around the selection of meeting topics is to provide “news you can use,” said Hiller. The following section showcases some of the key topics covered during VWG meetings.

The organizing principle around the selection of meeting topics is to provide “news you can use.”

Public resources to encourage veteran recruitment and hiring

One of the initial VWG meetings covered public resources that are available to assist and encourage the recruiting and hiring of Illinois veterans. Speakers from IDES and IHHC provided an overview of the regional veteran workforce landscape, sharing facts on the available veteran talent pool and outlining incentives for organizations who choose to hire veterans. Meeting attendees were also given a walkthrough of online Illinois job resources and shown how they can be leveraged to identify and attract veterans.

“As we started as a part of the VWG, we saw that there was an opportunity for us to increase our knowledge and understanding of what veteran responsibilities were in the military, and how we could help them to translate that into corporate experience and help with that transition,” said CDW’s Jen Sommesi. “The access to local resources that the VWG has provided has helped us gain that knowledge and put it into practice.”

Tracking veterans and self-identification

Self-identification and veteran employee data tracking is essential for measuring and sustaining successful veteran recruitment and retention initiatives, and for maintaining Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) compliance. As such, tracking protocol remains a topic of considerable conversation within the VWG. To gain a better grasp on the issue, VWG members were issued a survey to assess members’ data tracking practices. Aggregate results that were shared with the group indicated overall forward momentum on veteran hiring and retention, but that tracking practices were not consistently implemented across the board.

Many employers note that they are often unaware whether they have employees who have served in the military, pointing to a lack of veteran self-identification as the cause. This lack of a line-of-sight into organizations’ veteran employee populations may complicate efforts to develop programs to attract and hire veterans, or to offer services to support current veteran employees. There are several possible reasons why a veteran job applicant or employee might neglect to self-identify. Some have concerns about negative perceptions of veterans; for example, the Chicagoland Veteran Study found that nearly one-third of post-9/11 veteran respondents agreed that



Veterans Working Group members take advantage of networking opportunities before and after each meeting. Pictured: Tamara Queen (CDW).

“people think I am all ‘screwed up’ because of my military service” (Kintzle, Rasheed & Castro, 2016, p. 17). Regardless of the reason, the decision not to self-identify hinders an organization’s ability to address veterans’ unique needs and leverage their strengths.

“The first thing we have to do is encourage veterans to self-identify,” said David Maher of Deloitte. “If it doesn’t come up in the interview organically, we sometimes hire somebody who is a veteran and never know it—and then they have a chance to fall through the cracks.”

Some of the recommended strategies for improving veteran employee self-identification are relatively simple. Barb Kreski of the Chicago Botanical Gardens was able to improve the organization’s efforts to encourage veterans to self-identify by making a small—but important—change to their application form. “Our HR department has tried to make the changes necessary, and one thing was changing the veterans question on the employment application from ‘Are you a veteran?’ to ‘Have you served in the military?’, and I think that tweak made a difference.”

Other best practices require more substantial changes but provide significant return on investment. Nicor’s Pat Whiteside explained that the VWG made him aware of the importance of self-identification, and led to the implementation of a solution:

establishing an employee resource group for veterans. “One of the ways we tried to solve [the self-identification issue], which we became aware of thanks to the VWG, was making sure you have your employee resource groups aimed at veterans. When we began our efforts, we did not have an employee resource group aimed at veterans and now we do.” Employee resource groups are voluntary associations based on a shared experience or affinity; for veterans, these groups can not only help provide a sense of belonging within a larger organization, but also serve as a vehicle for mentorship, community service activities, and peer-based veteran recruitment efforts. Because they serve to highlight the recognition and resources provided to veteran employees, these groups are effective at encouraging them to self-identify.

As self-identification is a challenging issue that requires different solutions in different contexts, the VWG’s ability to promote discussion and cross-learning is especially important in this area. Aaron LeMay, Recruiting Programs Specialist at Exelon, said his organization has developed policies and procedures—including a resume review for all new hires to check for military status—that have improved the rate of veteran employee self-identification by almost 40 percent. The platform provided by the VWG has allowed him to share Exelon’s best practices and to identify strategies for continued growth. For example, he was very impressed to hear that a fellow VWG member follows up with every single veteran job applicant. “I think a lot of veterans and active duty people that are applying to jobs sometimes feel very frustrated when they don’t hear back because it feels like a black hole. So for a company to have that level of commitment to say, no matter what, if you self-identify as a veteran or you put it on your resume, you’re getting an email back—that’s huge.”

“There’s been a lot of attention on tracking, with a significant increase in the number of employers that are now tracking veteran employees,” said David Hiller. “Everyone gets the idea about tracking that you can’t manage or improve something that you can’t measure. We’ve seen an increased interest in learning about best practices for encouraging veterans to self-identify.”

Transitioning from military to civilian life

Making the transition from service to civilian life can be difficult for veterans. Indeed, the Chicagoland Veterans Study noted that 61 percent of surveyed active and retired military personnel indicated that adjusting to civilian life was challenging for them (Kintzle, Rasheed & Castro, 2016, p. 14). A recent national survey of Gulf War and post-9/11 era veterans identified the following as the top five key challenges of the military-to-civilian transition: “navigating VA administration or benefits (60 percent); getting a job (55 percent); getting socialized to civilian culture (41 percent); financial struggles (40 percent); and skills translation (39 percent)” (Zoli, Maury, and Fay, 2015, p. 29). While some of these challenges may not appear to be relevant to employers at first glance, they all impact employers’ access to veteran talent to the extent that they impede separating servicemembers from focusing on their career transition.

Consequently, members of the VWG have actively collaborated to develop solutions to issues commonly facing returning veterans. A recent VWG meeting focused on transition issues included speakers from the DoD’s Transition Assistance Program (TAP), the IDVA and Bunker Labs, a national nonprofit that promotes veteran entrepreneurship. Meeting participants expressed significant interest in exploring partnerships that would link transition programs to employment opportunities at their organizations, demonstrating how the VWG encourages collective action and innovation.

Mentorships for veterans

Mentorships continue to help veteran employees hone their skills and operate successfully in a civilian workplace environment. Addressing the topic during a VWG meeting, Sidney Goodfriend, founder and chair of American Corporate Partners (ACP), noted that more than half of returning veterans report that they are unsure of the career they would like to enter. ACP’s mentorship program, which is provided to veterans for one year at no cost, matches veterans with employers, providing access to personalized guidance that they might not otherwise receive.

Speakers from Deloitte and Student Veterans of America-Illinois affirmed the value of the ACP program and offered their perspectives on the mentor and mentee experience. VWG meeting attendees gained insight into how they can take part in a mentorship program and how they can train veterans to excel on the job.

Some VWG members, such as Deloitte’s David Maher, have developed their own mentorship programs and shared their insights with the group. “The one practice that I thought we brought to the VWG, which sparked the most interest, was around what we call the Veterans Practitioner Program,” said Maher. “The whole concept was based on onboarding and helping retain the veterans we hire.” Deloitte established the program after determining that the firm’s veteran employee retention rate required improvement, and that the first year of employment was the most crucial to long-term retention.

“The program is basically a mentorship that pairs prospective candidates with a veteran in the firm, preferably somebody similar in background. We start the program prior to the first interview and, if a candidate is hired, maintain it all the way through their first year to make sure they are assimilated, that they find their network, that they leverage the assets available to them to help them find a life and purpose inside the firm. Consulting can be a tough life, but the program gives veterans a sense of home, a sense that they are cared for, and that someone is there to listen to them, which I believe has helped to improve our retention rate.”

Women veterans

According to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, there are 54,707 women veterans in Illinois (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). While women veterans often experience many of the same challenges returning to civilian life as their male counterparts, they may face additional obstacles that can prevent them from finding employment upon their return home. For example, 12 percent of active duty female servicemembers are single parents, compared to 4 percent of their male counterparts (Bensahel, Barno, Kidder, and Saylor,

2015, p. 15). Furthermore, military women are much more likely than military men to be married to a fellow servicemember (48 percent and 7 percent, respectively), meaning that women veterans' transition challenges are more likely to be compounded by those of their spouse (id., p. 15). As previously mentioned, the VWG meeting devoted to women veterans featured a presentation from Battlefields and Boardrooms co-author Katherine Kidder of the Center for a New American Security, as well as a panel of women veterans from VWG member organizations who provided background on their own experiences acclimating to life at home. These unique perspectives, provided by women who successfully navigated challenging circumstances, highlighted a demographic of veterans that is sometimes forgotten.

“As we continue to focus on diversity, I think we have an opportunity to make sure that we are supporting diversity on all levels,” added CDW’s Jen Sommesi. “This includes supporting veterans as a whole, but also paying attention to the needs of specific groups of veterans, including women veterans.”

Skills Translation

While employers may be aware that veterans are well-skilled, veterans may struggle to clearly articulate the skills they possess and translate them into workplace-relevant skills. This can put them at a disadvantage when applying and interviewing for civilian jobs. At the VWG’s second meeting, a panel discussion with representatives of the Illinois Institute of Technology, AT&T, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce shared proven solutions to this challenge. These solutions included online skills translation tools and veteran employee resource groups, whose members can leverage their own military experience to translate resumes and meet with potential applicants at recruiting events.

David Maher said working with the VWG has helped his organization tackle this issue. “It’s common to take a resume that’s very military-centric and spend a lot of time thinking about how to translate that into civilian speech, into the terms those job descriptions would fit from a civilian standpoint. We learned during a VWG meeting that one of the other companies built a tool to take military credentials and spit

them back out into a form that the commercial world would recognize. Deloitte ended up taking that concept back to our organization and developed a skills translation tool of our own that’s gotten tremendous feedback.”

A breadth of topics

As noted, a common denominator to which VWG members attribute the group’s success is the ability for attendees to discuss challenges and opportunities for veteran employees that they themselves have identified. To date, VWG meetings have covered:

May 2013	Examining the business case for hiring veterans
August 2013	Finding veterans, military-to-civilian skills translation, and establishing veteran affinity groups
October 2013	Issues impacting veterans with disabilities
January 2014	Best practices around tracking veterans, and hiring events
April 2014	Best practices implemented by leaders in veteran employment
August 2014	Best practices for building pipelines for student veterans between higher education and civilian employment
February 2015	Creating pipelines between employers and the state’s Local Veterans Employment Representatives
May 2015	Best practices for veteran mentorships and internships
August 2015	Building relationships with veteran-serving organizations
March 2016	Women veterans
June 2016	Best practices in tracking veteran employment
August 2016	Transition programs for veterans

A FRAMEWORK FOR SUCCESS



Pictured: (from left to right) Sarah Levy (Greater Chicago Midwest HERC) and Amy Sherman (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning).

Framework overview

The VWG provides a forum for the discussion of challenges facing veterans, the exchange of ideas, and the exploration of opportunities for collaboration. VWG meetings are structured to foster a spirit of unity to support these common goals, providing:

- A focal point for collective veteran workforce efforts
- Access to a rich network of potential partners and resources
- A platform for sharing successes and challenges

A focal point for collective veteran workforce efforts

The VWG was founded on the notion that Chicagoland employers could, together, develop practices and policies that benefit veterans and could be used by all manner of organizations throughout the region. The McCormick Foundation's David Hiller believes that it is this community of practice that distinguishes the VWG from other veteran-focused initiatives.

“There is a sense of energy and purpose with the VWG,” added Hiller. “We’re all in this together and we can all learn from each other. It’s easy to lose energy or commitment for a cause if how you approach it is more isolated or disconnected. With the VWG, energy, commitment, and engagement remains high. People learn a lot and see the value. This group is very active and a real model of public-private information sharing and learning opportunities.”

One of the most valuable parts of being in the Veterans Working Group is that we’re all committed to this greater goal and everyone is more than willing to share best practices and feels comfortable even sharing challenges.



Aaron LeMay of Exelon Corporation (pictured) views the Veterans Working Group as a means of enhancing the collective impact of local companies committed to veteran employment.

The VWG's members share Hiller's view that a key component of the group's success is its ability to serve as a catalyst for collective action on veteran workforce issues. "The VWG helps sustain the focus and interest I have personally in building up the Chicago chapter [of Deloitte's armed forces business resource group] to support veterans," said David Maher. "When you're out there by yourself and you're trying to build up a sustainable program, you fight your own internal issues. Balancing work and life can be daunting enough. The VWG provides an excellent support network."

For Nicor's Pat Whiteside, the VWG's framework leads to the kind of thorough face-to-face discussions needed to inspire true systematic organizational change that, he said, isn't available anywhere else. "Everyone at the VWG has similar problems, and though we all have to solve them differently depending on how we operate, everyone gets to learn from our shared experiences finding a solution. You can give me a list of best practices, but that's only half the story. How I implemented it, how I used it in my enterprise - that's where the value of the VWG comes in."

Exelon's Aaron LeMay agreed that the VWG's ability to function as a safe space for dialogue and exchange allows members to multiply their efforts and achieve greater impact. "One of the most valuable parts of being in the VWG is that we're all committed to this greater goal and everyone is more than willing to share best practices and feels comfortable even

sharing challenges. I think each of the companies understands that by coming together it really allows us to do more and to be better collectively."

The Chicago Botanic Garden's Barb Kreski explained how the VWG provides situational awareness that helps to clarify challenges and potential solutions to veteran employment issues. "Without this sort of forum, you don't know if a failure to connect with veterans is because of something you're failing to do, something that you could easily change about your organization if you were only made aware. So, it's helpful to hear that we share the same challenges with other groups, which in turn leads to solutions. I think that's been one of the best things about the VWG."

Access to a rich network of potential partners and resources

Networking remains a crucial component for the success of the VWG, and group members frequently cite it as the most valuable result of their participation. Bringing together leaders from organizations who represent many different sectors and industries throughout Chicagoland, VWG members gain unique access to an extensive set of connections, and a great deal of experience in identifying and addressing barriers to veteran recruitment and retention.

"If I wasn't with the VWG, I would be out there on an island by myself," said one VWG member. Recently, she had a question about local veteran employment resources and reached out to the Civic Committee's Kirsten Carroll for assistance. "Kirsten immediately got back to me with the appropriate contacts at the state's veteran and employment agencies and explained how they could be of assistance. Those resources got back to me because I had connections with them, and since we are all part of the same group working toward the same goals, they were willing to help wherever they could."

The VWG network also grants access to a deep pool of talent, as members try to refer their job applicants to fellow VWG employers that might be a better fit. "Simply being networked with all those people helps us find the right ones for our program," said Chicago Botanic Garden's Kreski. "When we launched the veteran internship this summer, I announced it to the

group and people responded, sending us many promising candidates. People at those meetings are busy people with a lot of different responsibilities, but they are all sincere and ready to note wherever they could help somebody else out.”

Aaron LeMay of Exelon said he was able to foster relationships with regional partners thanks to his involvement with the VWG.

“The VWG has really given us unfettered access to groups in the region, which has let us partner with a lot of other community leaders and organizations. So many of our partnerships and strategies have been a result of learning about best practices from another company as facilitated through the VWG. For example, Student Veterans of America-Illinois (SVA-Illinois) is one of our newer partnerships that we were able to build because of the VWG. At Exelon, you must build a business case for a new partnership, so we were able to use a lot of great information from companies that were already partnering with SVA-Illinois. That absolutely helped us push this partnership through and find the funding.”

A platform for sharing successes and challenges

A crucial element of the VWG’s model that provides encouragement to attendees is the ability for members to share triumphs and setbacks as they implement their strategies.

“I really think one of the things I’ve found most valuable in participating in VWG meetings is just being able to hear the struggles and successes that other companies are going through,” said Exelon’s Aaron LeMay. “It’s inspiring and informative to go to these meetings, to the next meeting or the meeting after, and to hear that someone who had a struggle earlier in the year has now been able to establish a military employee resource group. Regardless of how they did it, tracking that success is helpful for us all.” According to one VWG member, “Knowing that there are tested, proven strategies that an organization can implement to help veterans is tremendously helpful when it comes time to have internal conversations on hiring veterans.”



Veterans Working Group members share their organizations’ achievements and challenges at each meeting. Pictured: Barb Kreski (Chicago Botanic Garden).

Knowing that there are tested, proven strategies that an organization can implement to help veterans is tremendously helpful when it comes time to have internal conversations on hiring veterans.



VWG MEMBERS ATTRIBUTE THE GROUP'S SUCCESS TO A FEW KEY COMPONENTS:



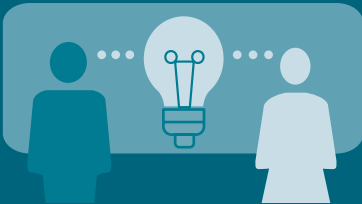
Value for members:

Meeting content must be focused on addressing members' specific needs, which should be identified through active solicitation of feedback. In contrast to groups that might offer more generalized advice for members seeking to work with veterans, the VWG is localized, personalized, and up-to-date. It is structured to provide timely best practices its members can share and help implement.



Well-planned meetings:

The VWG planning committee takes members' time commitments seriously and therefore works to ensure that presentations are concise and that meetings are run efficiently and hew closely to the agenda. VWG members continue to participate in meetings because they know that their time will be put to good use.



Encouraging engagement and exchange:

Through such features as the 'lightning round,' the VWG meeting structure helps to ensure that all members have a voice, and that they use it to recognize successes, share lessons learned, and seek out solutions to the specific challenges they encounter.



Connecting to local resources:

Access to local resources has proven invaluable as VWG participants begin to learn, share and implement best practices to serve veterans. The group's local focus and face-to-face networking opportunities allow members to develop strong relationships not only with each other, but also with veteran-serving agencies and organizations.



CONCLUSION

The VWG is unique in its approach to providing an environment for regional leaders and experts to devise actionable solutions for issues that affect area veterans. The localized approach to the VWG, however, does not preclude those in other parts of the country from forming similar groups. On the contrary, as Hiller noted, the VWG is replicable by design.

“I absolutely believe an initiative like the VWG can—and should—be replicated throughout the country,” said Hiller. “Like any potential collaboration, you need a sponsoring group with strong leadership to support it and direct personal commitment from its members. Once a group has those qualities, it would be suited for the same kind of success the VWG has been able to achieve.”

For Pat Whiteside of Nicor, successful replication of the VWG’s framework would require access to a pre-existing group of business leaders, a deep concern for the issue, and good facilitation. “You can’t hand over control of a meeting to someone who has never done it before,” Whiteside noted. “That’s what makes the VWG work - if you don’t have somebody up there like Amy Sherman who knows how to draw out the conversation, who has a deep understanding of what we’re trying to achieve, it’ll never work.”

Exelon’s Aaron LeMay agreed that the VWG concept could be carried out in other communities, while also noting that the concept could be applied to serving other diversity efforts, including disability recruiting efforts. “I really do feel that this initiative could work in other cities, and I think that this kind of platform could work in other recruiting efforts. Part of my role is also working with our diversity, inclusion and disability recruitment strategies and I see a lot of overlap with military outreach.”

The success of the VWG, demonstrated through the long-term engagement of its members and the impact of their efforts to hire and retain more veterans, is



Veterans Working Group meetings provide opportunities to pose questions to guest speakers with subject matter expertise. Pictured: Dean Espenschied (Archer Daniels Midland Company).

a testament to the fact that employers recognize all that veterans bring to the table. Employers also understand that they need a platform to discuss how to contextualize and implement concrete strategies for recruitment and retention through cross-learning and collaboration with local and national resources.

That the VWG continues to draw organization leaders and experts on veteran employment is promising not only for those in the Chicagoland area, but also for those around the country who might be considering starting a similar regional initiative. The VWG serves as an exemplar of the value of regional collaboration for developing pathways that will lead veterans to satisfying careers. As VWG members note, the group’s structure can be successfully replicated wherever organization leaders are willing to make a commitment to improving their support of veterans. When veterans are given access to rewarding jobs, the entire community benefits.

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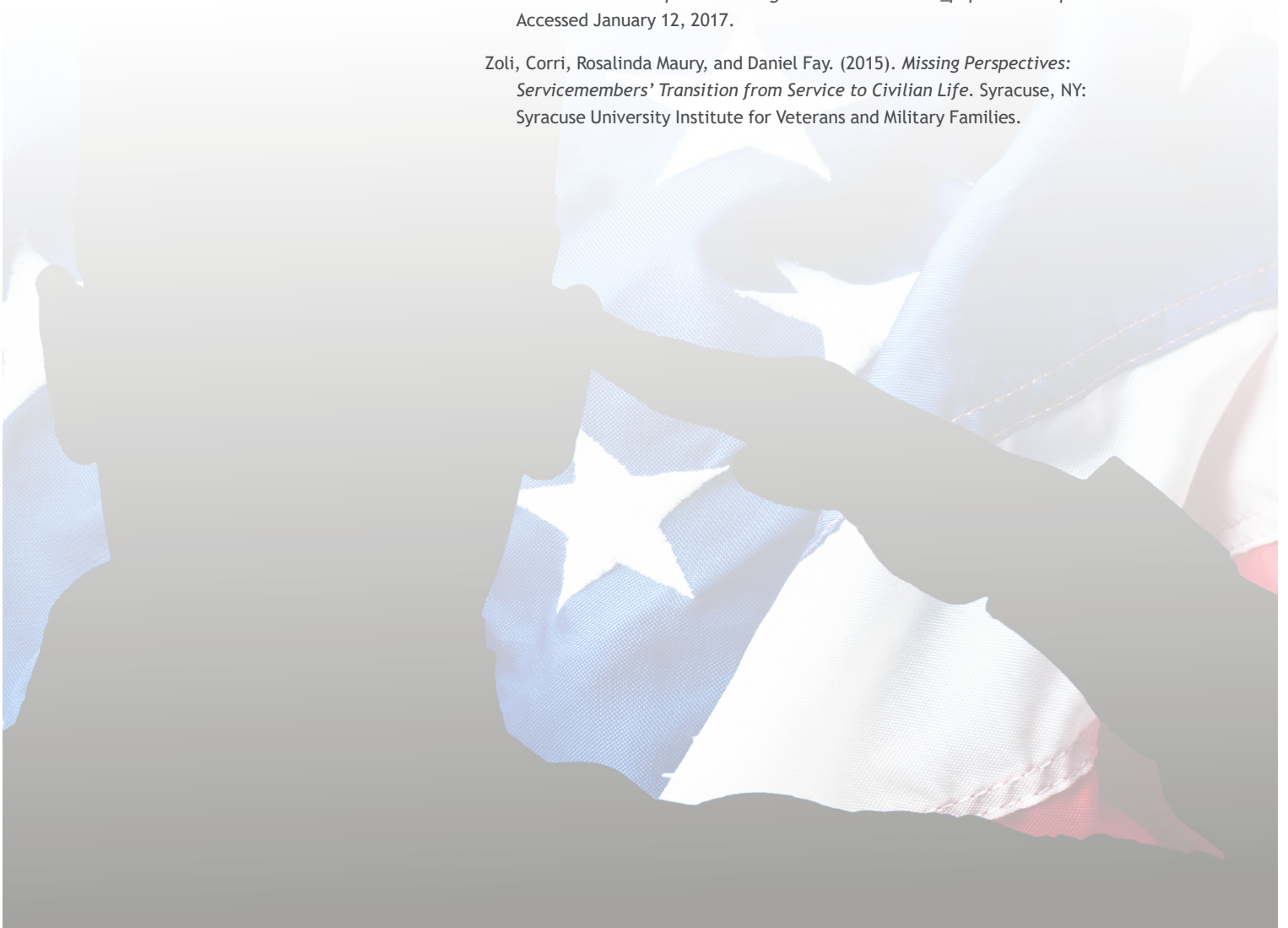
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