Translating Skills from Military to Civilian

- What skills do you possess that are most relevant to today’s job market?
- Are the skills you acquired in the military attractive to many employers?
- What other skills do you possess which may or may not be related to your work in the military?
- Do you need to acquire new skills?

We live in a skills-based society where individuals market their skills to employers in exchange for money, position, and power. The ease by which individuals change jobs and careers is directly related to their ability to communicate their skills to employers and then transfer their skills to new work settings.

But before you can refine your skills or acquire additional skills, you need to know what skills you presently possess. What skills did you acquire in the military that are directly transferable to the civilian work world? Unfortunately, few people can identify and talk about their skills even though they possess numerous skills which they use on a regular basis. This becomes a real problem when they must write a resume or go to a job interview. Since employers want to know about your specific abilities and skills, you must learn to both identify and communicate your skills to employers. You should be able to explain what it is you do well and give examples relevant to employers’ needs.

Regardless of whether or not you have a college degree, you have gained experience through your military service. Now may be a good time to take stock of what you have and what you need to pursue a civilian career. Depending on your circumstances, it may make more sense for you to pursue a certificate or earn civilian credentials in your field. Check out the credentialing sections of America’s Career Information Network (www.ACINet.org), America’s CareerOneStop (Workforce Credentialing Information Center— www.careeronestop.org ), GoArmyEd (www.goarmyed.com), and the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) agency (http://www.dantes.doded.mil/index.html).

For those of you who decide that now is a good time to obtain your bachelor’s or master’s degree, you’ll have to decide whether you want to do it on a part-time or full-time basis. Such a decision requires a good amount of forethought. If you do not make the investment in time now to pursue this degree, how will it increase your income potential 5, 15, or 25 years from now? Are you able to financially to go to school full time or would it make more sense to find full-time employment immediately and then pursue your bachelor’s or advanced degree on a part-time basis? Only you know the answers to these questions.

If you have just completed an educational program relevant to today’s job market, the skills you have to offer are most likely related to the subject matter you studied. As you transition from the military, the skills you wish to communicate to employers will most likely be those you have already demonstrated in specific military jobs. If your degree or certificate is in the same area, you can use it as leverage to increase your market value to a prospective employer. If, on the other hand, the degree or certificate is in a totally different area, you can honestly claim to have received academic training in this particular discipline.

The skills required for finding a job are no substitute for the skills necessary for doing the job. Learning new skills requires a major investment of time, money, and effort. Nonetheless, the long-term pay-off should more than justify the initial costs. Indeed, research continues to show that well selected education and training provide the best returns on individual and societal investment. Be sure you well understand and take advantage of the excellent educational benefits you earned through your military service.

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Most people possess two types of skills that define their accomplishments and strengths as well as enable them to enter and advance within the job market: **work-content skills** and **functional skills**. You need to acquaint yourself with these skills before communicating them to employers.

**Work-content skills** are necessary to function effectively in today’s job market. These “hard skills” are easy to recognize since they are often identified as “qualifications” for specific jobs; they are the subject of most educational and training programs. Work-content skills tend to be technical and job-specific in nature. Examples of such skills include helicopter repair, programming computers, teaching history, or operating an X-ray machine. They may require formal training, are associated with specific trades or professions, and are used only in certain job and career settings. One uses a separate skills vocabulary, jargon, and subject matter for specifying technical qualifications of individuals entering and advancing in an occupation. While these skills do not transfer well from one occupation to another, they are critical for entering and advancing within certain occupations.

At the same time, you possess numerous **functional/transferrable skills** employers readily seek along with your work-content skills. These “soft skills” are associated with numerous job settings, are mainly acquired through experience rather than formal training, and can be communicated through a general vocabulary. Functional/transferrable skills are less easy to recognize since they tend to be linked to certain personal characteristics (energetic, intelligent, likable) and the ability to deal with processes (communicate, solve problems, motivate) rather than do things (build a house, repair air conditioners). While most people have only a few work-content skills, they may have numerous—as many as 300—functional/transferrable skills. These skills enable job seekers to more easily change jobs. But you must first know your functional skills before you can relate them to the job market.

Most people view the world of work in traditional occupational job skill terms. This is a structural view of occupational realities. Occupational fields are seen as consisting of separate and distinct jobs which, in turn, require specific work-content skills. From this perspective, occupations and jobs are relatively self-contained entities. Social work, for example, is seen as being different from paralegal work; social workers, therefore, are not “qualified” to seek paralegal work.

On the other hand, a functional view of occupations and jobs emphasizes the similarity of job characteristics as well as common linkages between different occupations. Although the structure of occupations and jobs may differ, they have similar functions. They involve working with people, data, processes, and objects. If you work with people, data, processes and objects in one occupation, you can transfer that experience to other occupations which have similar functions. Once you understand how your skills relate to the functions as well as investigate the structure of different occupations, you should be prepared to make job changes from one occupational field to another.