Bridging the gap

Helping veterans get from underemployment to fulfilling career fields

While veteran unemployment nationwide is down, some experts say the raw data can be misleading.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the unemployment rate for post-9/11 veterans in 2016 was at an all-time low of 5.1 percent, and stood at 4.3 percent for all veterans. But, those numbers fail to illustrate the struggle many veterans find in regards to being underemployed.

“If a person accepted $20 last week for mowing someone’s lawn the government considers them employed,” said Call of Duty Endowment Executive Director Dan Goldenberg. “This is clearly a ridiculous way to measure anyone’s economic well-being, especially in the ‘Gig Economy,’ but that’s where the BLS unemployment rate comes from.”

“Underemployed veterans are really the majority of folks we see at our career fairs,” said DAV National Employment Director Jeff Hall. “Some have jobs and I’ve even met veterans who have two jobs and are just getting by. Many veterans are not employed to their fullest capabilities.”

Goldenberg, whose organization provides grants to nonprofits that work to secure jobs for veterans, agreed.

“In many cases it’s because they are underemployed,” he said. “The problem is less ‘I don’t have a job’ and more ‘I’m working two jobs and can’t pay the rent.’”

However, the skills veterans have continue to be in demand.

According to a report from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, veterans are third on employers’ list of desirable candidates nationwide, behind women and job hunters with advanced
But, bridging the gap between veteran underemployment and meaningful vocations is still a challenging dynamic for veterans and employers alike.

In *The Business Case for Hiring Veterans*, a 2013 study released by The Corporate Executive Board Company (CEB), of more than 700 CEOs surveyed, the majority said managing human capital was their biggest challenge. Inadequate human capital, to include recruiting and retaining quality employees, negatively impacted their financial goals and advances in innovation. It also reduced competitiveness.

The study also examined employee turnover and available talent pools. In a sample size of 2,527 hiring managers, most said about one in five new employees were “bad hires” and 23 percent of new hires left for other opportunities within the first year.

“What we’re seeing is a trend of employers struggling to find high-quality personnel, while at the same time many veterans are still searching for meaningful employment,” Hall said.

One reason for the gap between underemployment and meaningful work is the difficulty of potential employers bringing veterans into the workplace.

In the CEB study, just 7 percent of HR specialists in 84 organizations surveyed said they were satisfied with their veteran hiring program. They cited difficulty in attracting enough high-quality veterans, lack of understanding how to translate military experience to a civilian career and the difficulty of veterans transitioning to the workforce as being the chief barriers they encountered.

Goldenberg said the underemployment gap is especially challenging for enlisted personnel transitioning from the military to the civilian sector.
“Enlisted service members are technical experts in their field who also typically have far more leadership experience than their civilian counterparts,” he said. “What they rarely have is confidence in the value of their military experience, the knowledge of how to market themselves and the network necessary to land that first role en route toward a high quality career.”

More resources for unemployed or underemployed veterans are available at jobs.dav.org.