Factors affecting hiring decisions about veterans

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A B S T R A C T

Military veterans have numerous problems gaining and maintaining jobs in the U.S., and their unemployment rates are consistently higher than nonveterans (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2013). Despite these problems, little theory and research in Human Resource Management (HRM) has focused on understanding the factors affecting hiring decisions about military veterans (e.g., Bordieri & Drehmer, 1984). Thus, the present paper modified an existing model of the treatment of persons with disabilities (Stone & Colella, 1996) to explain the issues that influence selection decisions about veterans. We also offered hypotheses to guide future research on the topic. Our modified model indicated that the (a) attributes of the veteran, (b) the characteristics of the observer, (c) the nature of the job, (d) the perceived transferability of skills from military to civilian jobs, and (e) the differences between military and civilian organizational cultures influence hiring decisions about veterans. We believe that an increased understanding of these selection decisions will help organizations utilize the many talents and skills that veterans bring to the workforce, and enable veterans to enjoy a more fulfilling work life and career.

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1. Introduction

Although military veterans have many skills that should make them attractive to employers (e.g., discipline, leadership, teamwork skills), they often have numerous difficulties gaining and maintaining employment. For example, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013), Gulf War II veterans have a 10 percent unemployment rate compared to 6.4 percent for non-veterans. In addition, 64 percent of U.S. veterans who served in the military after 9/11 revealed that they have difficulties adjusting to civilian life (Prudential, 2012). Furthermore, a large number of veterans (i.e., 69 percent) report that finding a job is their greatest challenge (www.whitehouse.gov, 2011). These reports indicate that organizations are not always using the many talents and skills that veterans bring to the workforce and these individuals may have fewer opportunities to enjoy a satisfying work life than nonveterans.

Among the many potential reasons for the employment problems of veterans, some analysts argued that veterans are more likely to have a disability or health condition than nonveterans (Prudential, 2012). Estimates indicate that 66 percent of veterans have health conditions or disabilities stemming from their military service, and a corresponding unemployment rate of 20 percent (Prudential, 2012). Furthermore, even those without a disability are often perceived as disabled. As a result, the stereotypes and biases associated with people with disabilities are often attributed to veterans, and serve as major obstacles to their employment (Stone & Colella, 1996). Although in some cases there are positive characteristics attributed to veterans (e.g., discipline, adept at teamwork, leadership), reports suggested that veterans are often stereotyped as withdrawn, bitter, mentally ill, depressed, or drug and alcohol abusers (Bordieri & Drehmer, 1984).

Another reason for veterans' employment problems is that they may lack civilian work experience, and employers do not always understand how military experience transfers to private sector jobs (www.whitehouse.gov, 2011). For example, the military trained approximately 10,000 health care workers and 10,000 truck drivers after 2011, but these skills are not always recognized by private-

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sector employers or licensing agencies (Prudential, 2012). In particular, veterans trained in health care or truck driving often go through new training and licensing tests before applying for private sector jobs. Recently, 34 states adopted laws that "waive behind the wheel" tests for truck drivers so that veterans with relevant military experience can gain access to these jobs (www.whitehouse.gov). However, despite the shortage of health care workers in the United States (Department of Labor, 2012), military medical experience does not translate into private-sector health care jobs, and veterans must get a diploma from an approved nursing program or pass licensing exams before applying for health care jobs.

In an effort to increase employment opportunities for veterans, Congress recently passed legislation that offers employers tax credits for hiring veterans (www.whitehouse.gov). In addition, a larger number of employers have made a compelling business case for hiring veterans because they often have high levels of performance. For instance, 29 percent of private sector employers designed specialized programs to recruit veterans (e.g., Amazon, General Electric, Wal-Mart, Charles Schwab, USAA, Dupont, JB Hunt, etc.) (Harrell & Berglass, 2012). Research showed consistently that employees' military service was positively related to performance on civilian jobs (Harrell & Berglass, 2012), and other studies found that veterans with disabilities perform as well as nonveterans without a disability (Gurchiek, 2011). Research also revealed that compared to nonveterans, veterans are more likely to: (a) have advanced technology training, (b) be adept at skills transfer across contexts and tasks, (c) display good teamwork skills, (d) exhibit cultural sensitivity and acceptance of diversity, and (e) possess high levels of resiliency, integrity, and loyalty (Syracuse University, Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2012). These results suggested that many of the stereotypes attributed to veterans may be unfounded (e.g., rigidity, bitter, lack of adaptability to new contexts), and that hiring veterans may be quite beneficial for organizations.

Despite the employment problems experienced by veterans and employers' interest in recruiting them, little theory and research in Human Resource Management examined the factors that affect hiring decisions regarding veterans. Some notable exceptions include research in the journal of Military Psychology regarding stigmas associated with veterans (e.g., McFarling, D'Angelo, Drain, Gibbs, & Olmstead, 2011; Sudom, Zamorski, & Garber, 2012). However, much of this research focused on: (a) barriers to rehabilitation and mental health or drug abuse treatment for veterans (McFarling et al., 2011; Sudom et al., 2012), (b) affective responses to treatment for mental health and substance abuse (Gibbs, Olmstead, Brown, & Clinton-Sherrod, 2011; Kim, Britt, Klocko, Riviere, & Adler, 2011; Olmstead et al., 2011), and (c) self-stigmas (Dickstein, Vogt, Handa, & Litz, 2010).

To our knowledge, only one study addressed the factors affecting hiring decisions about veterans (e.g., Bordieri & Drehmer, 1984). As a result, the primary purposes of this paper are as follows: (a) expand an existing model (Stone & Colella, 1996) to explain hiring decisions regarding veterans, (b) present hypotheses based on the model to guide future research on the topic, and (c) offer strategies for organizations and individuals to overcome the challenges faced by veterans in the employment process. We believe that an understanding of the factors affecting selection decisions concerning veterans is important for organizations trying to hire these individuals, and for the veterans who want to enhance their job and career opportunities.

2. Modification of the Stone and Colella (1996) model

We expanded a model of the factors affecting the treatment of persons with disabilities by Stone and Colella (1996) (hereinafter referred to as the disability model) to explain the variables thought to influence employer decisions to hire veterans. The original model is presented in Fig. 1, and a depiction of our modified model is noted in Fig. 2.

We believe that the Stone and Colella (1996) model provides a compelling explanation of the factors that are likely to affect hiring decisions about veterans because it: (a) focuses on stereotypes associated with individuals with disabilities and many veterans are perceived as disabled or actually have a disability, (b) identifies a number of key factors that are likely to influence hiring decisions (e.g., attributes of the person, attributes of the observer, and nature of the job), and (c) provides strategies that can be used by organizations and veterans to ameliorate the challenges faced by veterans in the hiring process. Although the disability model focused specifically on people with disabilities, we believe that the factors in the model apply to hiring decisions about members of all stigmatized groups (e.g., veterans). Furthermore, we added two unique factors to the existing model because the situations facing veterans in the hiring process may be somewhat different than those facing people with disabilities. As a result, the two new factors included the (a) degree to which military skills are perceived to transfer to civilian jobs, and (b) differences between military and civilian role requirements and organizational cultures. Therefore, we describe the existing model and our modifications and extensions to the model in the sections that follow, and offer specific hypotheses to guide research.

It merits noting that we present hypotheses in this paper rather than propositions because our predictions are based in a specific theoretical framework. A number of research methodologists argued that hypotheses are relational predictions that are based on theory, and can be tested empirically (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000; Stone-Romero, 2011). However, propositions are broad statements that are typically used with exploratory research (e.g., not based in theory), and cannot be directly tested (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000). Thus, we presented hypotheses because we wanted to include specific predictions based on a theoretical model, and believe that they will advance our knowledge of the factors affecting hiring decisions about veterans.

2.1. Categorization and stereotyping of veterans

In their original model, Stone and Colella (1996) used a social cognitive framework to understand the cognitive factors that affect the treatment of people with disabilities in organizations, and we believe these same processes apply to hiring decisions regarding veterans. As a result, we modified the original model to focus on applicants who are veterans. For example, the disability model argued that when individuals apply for jobs, raters: (a) assign them to a category (e.g., post 9/11 war veteran), (b) use the categorization to generate stereotypes about the individual (e.g., veteran is mentally ill, rigid, an alcohol and drug user), and (c) apply the stereotypes to