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Research Brief

The Transferability of Military-Provided Occupational Training in the Post-Draft Era

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Research Highlights:

- An important factor when considering the value of military training to the post-service vocational life is the transferability of military training to the civilian workforce.
- The study finds that the transfer of skills gained through military training was not statistically different from skills transfer related to most forms of non-military training.
- The ability to leverage skills learned in the military in a post-service-vocation is an important determinant of post-service earnings. In fact, the study finds that within two years of entering the civilian workforce, veterans with transferred skills enjoyed higher average earnings as compared to those that received occupational training in the civilian sector.

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Abstract:

“Several studies have examined how military-provided training affects post-service employment experience, but this study is the first to investigate that relationship for young men and women who enlisted in the ‘all-volunteer’ era that began in 1974. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey-Youth Cohort, the authors find that the transfer of skills to civilian employment was as high for military training as it was for civilian training (45-50 percent), once employer-provided training is excluded from consideration. Furthermore, within two years of their return to civilian life, those who received military training had higher earnings than those who received training in the civilian sector – a finding that contrasts with the results of studies of Vietnam veterans, but agrees with the results found for veterans of World War II and the Korean conflict.”

Implications

For Practice

The study highlights the important role that occupation skills training—and the subsequent transfer of skills learned in the military to a post-service occupation—plays in the economic life course of military veterans. For the transitioning service member, this research highlights the importance of seeking and cultivating opportunities to leverage knowledge, skills, and abilities developed as a result of military training and experience, in the context of the civilian job search; doing so, based on the findings of this study, will be an important determinant of post-service earnings. As a consistent finding across the human resource literature is that the most impactful training is employer-provided (internal labor market), this study also implies that employers of military veterans can maximize the effective and efficient transfer of military-learned skills through ongoing training positioned to ‘draw out’ relationships between the military occupation, and the employees current work-role tasks and responsibilities.

For Policy

The authors of the study note that the research was motivated, in part, by public skepticism (1984-85) of military recruiting campaigns that suggested military service was a ‘stepping stone’ to a productive and meaningful military career (i.e., U.S. Army’s recruiting slogan: “It’s a Great Place to Start”). As such, for contemporary policy-makers the most salient implication of this research relates to the design, development, and implementation of modern military training programs. Still today, military recruiters rely heavily on the proposition that military service represents a means to prepare for (and accelerate) a post-service career. This study suggests that the validity of that proposition is largely a function of the transferability of military-training to civilian work roles. Thus while it is reasonable to acknowledge that military-provided training will (and should) focus first on preparing the individual for his or her military work-role, individuals developing military training programs should also purposefully focus curriculum development in a way that makes the linkages between learned skills and the civilian labor market clear and explicit. Doing so will further the transitioning servicemember’s ability to identify occupational opportunities in the civilian workforce, and likely accelerate the career trajectory of military veterans.

For Future Research

The study was conducted during a period of peacetime, and as such researchers should consider and investigate whether or not the findings of this study hold true for a population of veterans whose military service was defined by war and combat. Further, additional research should be conducted to consider differences in skills transferability as a function of disparate military occupations, and also as a function of the different military service branches. In a related way, while this study is focused on the transferability of formal skills training, future scholarship should also investigate the transferability of ‘soft skills’ developed as a consequence of military service (i.e. teamwork, leadership). Finally, this study affords contemporary researchers the opportunity to consider how changes in the labor market - relative to the nature and structure of the labor market at the time this study was conducted—might impact the findings of this research.

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