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### **Value of a Veteran Challenge: Culture, Leadership Champions, and Veterans' Employment**

Fortunately, many issues related to corporate culture and leadership-in the context of employment-have been thoroughly explored in the context of initiatives focused on workforce diversity. As such, models for leadership-driven decision making have been developed in the areas of high-performance talent acquisition, diversity initiatives, disability accommodations, and more. As a result, the community of employers does not have to reinvent the wheel in the context of veteran-focused engagement, but rather survey the landscape and choose the models most appropriate given the firm's goals and setting. However, the model itself does not appear to represent the most important factor positioned to overcome obstacles based in corporate culture; instead, we have found that it is the engagement of leadership that will drive progress within the organization, as it relates to veteran-focused employment initiatives.

To date, much of the hiring of veterans has been driven by calls for corporate social responsibility, and the "support the troops" goodwill that exists in American society. That is a good starting point, as it has drawn attention to the employment needs of the population, and to corporate America's drive to give back. However, all indications are that this motivation is insufficient to sustain enduring employer commitments. Instead, the longer- term sustainability of veteran-focused employment initiatives at any given firm will correlate directly to the commitment of the firm's leadership to such programs. Executive level commitment is essential to motivate the culture change necessary to institutionalize programs and processes positioned to sustain a focus on veterans' employment within a private-sector organization.

Based on our research of leading firms, it was apparent that almost all firms that have successfully implemented veteran-focused initiatives have also identified executive level champions responsible for those initiatives. In fact, almost all the firms participating in this research were of the opinion that to meaningfully address veteran employment, veteran-initiative leaders need to be involved either at, or reporting directly to the executive level.



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Only leadership commitment to the establishment of values and goals supportive of the initiative, backed by understanding of the competitive advantages veterans bring to a civilian employment situation, will overcome cultural barriers. Some practical advantages cited in support of executive-level engagement from the employers surveyed were:

- Executive-level engagement promotes robust assessment and the development of metrics designed to evaluate progress.
- Reporting progress at the executive level promotes opportunities to address institutional barriers and enhance opportunities for veterans.
- Programmatic successes connected to executive-level engagement are likely to be visible both within and outside the organization.
- Alternatively, programmatic failures not driven by executive-level engagement may impede current and future employment opportunities for veterans.
- The commitment of organizational resources to enable recruitment, hiring, retention and advancement of veterans in employment is more likely given executive-level engagement.

Class leading examples of leadership-driven initiatives include JPMC's decision to situate the firm's veteran initiatives under the direct purview of the firm's Chief Administrative Officer (CAO). JPMC integrates all the firm's veterans' initiatives (products, employment, philanthropy, training and education, etc.) under a single organizational unit, and by doing so can promote the firm's vision through a single, unified channel. Because this unified team is fully focused on veterans' issues impacting the firm, a deep understanding of the ties and integration between JPMC's varying initiatives impacting veterans is cultivated. This can be leveraged to educate others throughout the firm as to the opportunity available to business and industry related to veterans as customers, clients, suppliers, employees, and investors, with each reinforcing the other.

Other firms such as Walmart, Prudential, Ernst & Young, and Humana Healthcare have assumed a similar approach with regards to an executive-level champion for veteran-related issues. The key finding in this area is that executive-level engagement is most likely to foster a veteran-engaged culture within the organization.



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Firms with a veteran-engaged culture are more likely to support access to employee development programs for veterans, including mentoring, career planning and full engagement, and sponsors who will focus on advancing the careers of veterans under their sponsorship. Advancing employee development creates a competitive advantage for both employee and employer by using the full range of skills and talents available and leveraging experience and training gained through military service, as well as through networks available to the veteran employees. Strength and growth opportunities may focus less on management, team building, or leadership, and more on fit and focus within the organization. Veterans may be able to impart lessons learned in military service to their teams, fostering organizational trust and cohesion.

Firms with a veteran-engaged culture are also more likely to embrace strategies related to work-life balance given unique constraints of specialized healthcare for veterans. Veterans with healthcare needs may require flexible schedules, flexible work spaces, or other accommodations. Previous research on inclusive corporate cultures, and particularly on accommodations and flexibility, has demonstrated business value, including reduced turnover intention, fewer work absences, and increased performance. Perceptions of treatment and inclusion impact workplace engagement and productivity, and communicating the value of accommodations and investment in human capital imparts positive perceptions of the workplace.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to recognize the impact of veteran accommodations and the value of investing in their training and education, related to flexibility and inclusion, in order to realize the human capital inherent in veterans in the workplace. This realization is made even more important to the number of veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq with injuries and disabilities, and the stigmas that still exist for those who suffer from PTSD and depression. Workplaces with effective accommodations for people with disabilities also tend to have effective workplace modifications and flexibility that benefit the entire workforce, and in turn provide bottom-line value to the business. Accommodating the needs for flexibility may allow attainment of otherwise unavailable human capital. All this said, it is unlikely that these accommodations will be institutionalized—and thus these advantages realized—without an executive-level commitment to a veteran-engaged culture.



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### Citations:

<sup>1</sup> Disability Case Study Research Consortium. (2008). *Conducting and Benchmarking Inclusive Employment Policies, Practices, and Culture*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP). Retrieved from <http://www.dol.gov/odep/research/CorporateCultureFinalReport.pdf>.



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