



Plan for Civilian Employment Before You Leave the Service

Leaving military service involves more than changing employers. You may also be changing your location, daily routine, professional identity, and the way you describe your qualifications.

Whether you are completing one enlistment or retiring after a career, begin preparing while you still have access to military transition resources. Your experience can be valuable to civilian employers, but you need time to identify suitable work and explain how your abilities meet its requirements.

Our companion article, “**Could Military Service Be Your Next Career Step?**”, examines the decision to enter the military. This article addresses the other end of that commitment: preparing for the work and life that follow.

Use Today’s Transition Assistance Program

Some veterans will remember “Project Transition,” an earlier military initiative intended to help members prepare for civilian employment. Today, the principal transition program is the **Transition Assistance Program**, or TAP.

TAP provides preparation for civilian life, including employment, education, financial planning, and information about benefits. For sailors, the [Navy’s TAP guidance](#) explains the process and required milestones.

Contact your installation’s transition office or command transition counselor early. Ask when you should begin, which activities apply to you, and how to schedule them around your duties. If your separation is approaching unexpectedly, make contact promptly rather than assuming it is too late.

Treat the program as a working resource. Bring questions, use the exercises to develop your plans, and follow up on referrals.

Choose a Civilian Direction

Start by identifying work you would like to pursue. You may want to continue using your military specialty, apply your skills in another setting, or prepare for a different occupation.

Consider location, working hours, income needs, family responsibilities, and the amount of additional training you can undertake.

Research the duties behind civilian job titles. A familiar-sounding title may describe work quite different from what you expect. Conversely, an unfamiliar title may fit your experience well.

Our article **“How to Use the Bureau of Labor Statistics Before Choosing Your Next Job”** explains how to compare duties, typical preparation, wages, and employment outlook. Check those findings against current advertisements in the area where you intend to live.

Translate Your Experience Into Civilian Language

Civilian employers may not understand military acronyms, ranks, unit descriptions, or equipment names. Help them recognize the work you performed.

Describe functions such as supervising staff, coordinating maintenance, managing inventory, training personnel, preparing reports, or responding to operational problems. Explain the scope and results accurately.

For example:

“Coordinated preventive maintenance schedules and tracked repair status to help keep equipment available for operations.”

Add verified figures when they help establish scale or results. Avoid assuming that rank alone explains the size of your responsibilities.

Keep your official background accurate while adding plain-language explanations. Exclude classified, controlled, or other information you are not authorized to disclose.

Gather Records and Arrange References

Before leaving, organize records that may help document your qualifications. These can include training transcripts, certifications, education records, and authorized descriptions of relevant accomplishments.

Review separation documents when they become available and ask how to address any errors. Store sensitive records securely, and provide them only through appropriate channels when required.

Identify supervisors or colleagues who can discuss your work. Obtain their permission to serve as references and confirm contact details that will remain usable after you leave.

A reference who can explain your contribution clearly may be more helpful than someone whose main distinction is seniority.

Check Whether Civilian Credentials Are Required

Military training and experience do not automatically satisfy every civilian licensing or certification requirement.

If your target occupation requires a credential, ask the appropriate licensing authority what counts, what documentation is needed, and whether examinations or additional training remain.

Investigate these questions before paying for a course. A civilian employer, licensing body, or established training provider can help clarify the requirements.

Apprenticeships may provide a way to build on existing skills or enter another field. Ask program sponsors whether prior military training or experience can receive credit, and what evidence they need.

Ask About Additional Transition Opportunities

Discuss work-based training, internships, and programs such as SkillBridge with your transition counselor. Availability, participation rules, timing, and command approval must be confirmed under current service guidance.

Do not assume that finding an interested employer means your participation is approved. Likewise, a training placement should not be treated as a guaranteed job offer.

Explore the [VA's career and employment resources](#) as well. Different programs have different eligibility requirements. For example, Veteran Readiness and Employment may assist eligible people whose service-connected disabilities affect their ability to work.

Ask which resources apply to your circumstances and how to begin the relevant process.

Build Civilian Contacts Before You Need an Offer

Reach out to former service members who have entered the field you are considering. Ask how they translated their experience, what surprised them, and what they would do differently.

Also speak with civilians doing the work. Their perspective can help you understand hiring expectations and everyday responsibilities beyond the military-to-civilian transition itself.

Use LinkedIn, professional groups, local events, and personal contacts to arrange short informational conversations. Describe the work you seek and ask focused questions.

Our article “**Networking for Work: Use LinkedIn, Facebook, and Your Local Connections**” offers practical ways to begin.

Prepare for Applications and Interviews

Create a résumé tailored to your target occupation. Ask a civilian reader to flag terms they do not understand and claims that need clearer examples.

Practice explaining accomplishments, difficult decisions, teamwork, and lessons learned. Focus on what you did and why it matters to the prospective employer.

State your anticipated availability accurately, accounting for remaining duties and transition arrangements. For government applications, read the announcement carefully and confirm which eligibility provisions and documents apply. Veteran status does not guarantee selection.

Continue applying through several sources rather than relying entirely on a transition program, recruiter, or military connection.

Plan for the Financial and Personal Change

Compare civilian compensation with your full military arrangement. Salary alone may not reflect differences in housing, health coverage, retirement contributions, commuting, and other expenses.

Build a practical budget for the transition, including a possible gap before employment begins. Review benefit questions with the appropriate counselor or agency rather than assuming eligibility or immediate payment.

Discuss the change with the people affected by it. A move, new work schedule, or period of study may require adjustments throughout the household.

Leave With a Plan You Can Use

Keep a written list of target occupations, employers, contacts, credential requirements, application deadlines, and next actions. Revisit it as you learn more.

Transition assistance can provide tools, guidance, and connections. Your preparation turns those resources into a search suited to your goals.

Starting before separation gives you time to test assumptions, address gaps, and present your military experience in terms a civilian employer can understand.