



The Value of Veterans in the Civilian Workforce: A Study on Soft Skills Competencies by Dr. Chris Dalrymple

Findings from a Quantitative Research Study Investigating The Value of Veterans in the Civilian Workforce: A Study on Soft Skills Competencies

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Employers focus on attracting, recruiting, and hiring talent that will drive performance, achieving and maintaining a competitive advantage over competitors. Unfortunately, they are faced with significant skills gap challenges only to hire some employees who are a bad fit for the organization. So why does this research focus on soft skills competencies over hard skills? A focus on soft skills was done for a couple of reasons. First, there is a growing and significant soft skills gap in the civilian workforce. Second, Soft skills have an exponentially greater impact on performance than hard skills. I like to think of hard skills as the capability of the employee to accomplish a task. Conversely, I think of soft skills as the capacity to accomplish tasks. Therefore, these two skills are necessary for performance but could be viewed as an equation: $\text{Performance} = (\text{Hard Skills})^{(\text{Soft Skills})}$ or $(\text{Capability})^{(\text{Capacity})}$. Without going into great detail about the differences between the two skills and their impact on performance, a simple way to distinguish between the two is 1) Hard Skills-Can they do the job? 2) What are the impacts and influences of accomplishing job tasks? Third, the Military are experts in developing leaders through their culture, education, training, and experience. Does this development of a Service Member (SM) in human capital investments provide value to civilian organizations in soft skills that are important to the civilian workforce?

I recently completed a quantitative research study investigating the soft skills competencies of Army veterans in the civilian workforce. This study investigated veterans' soft skills competencies in the top 10 soft skills needed in the workforce identified by Jones, Baldi, Philips, and Waikar (2016). This study included 98 organizations and 104 veterans as a two-part survey to assess soft skills competencies and the attributes of human capital investments in terms of education, training, and experience that impacted the soft skills development. After the study, the following key points were found.

1) The top ten soft skills identified by Jones, et al. (2016) are validated to the impact they have on organizational performance. The organizations ranked the top ten soft skills in descending order of importance: **1) trustworthiness, 2) responsibility, 3) initiative, 4) respectful, 5) critical thinking, 6) communication, 7) positive attitude, 8) teamwork, 9) self-confidence, and 10) ambition.**

2) Veterans demonstrated higher levels of competency in all 10 soft skills.

3) It was found that there are differences in the way organizations view soft skills competencies to the way veterans self-assess their soft skills competencies in 6 of the 10 soft skills. The remaining four soft skills were rated at similar levels of competency. Of the six skills identified, initiative, teamwork, ambition, and confidence were rated higher than what veterans give themselves credit for. On the other hand, organizations ranked trustworthiness and critical thinking lower than what veterans self-assessed.

4) Human capital investments in terms of education, training, and experience all had a significant impact on the soft skills development of veterans.

a. More specifically:

i. Years of service (**YOS**) impacted the competency level of **responsibility**

ii. **Service component** impacted the competency levels of **initiative** and **critical thinking**

iii. **Specialty courses** impacted the competency levels of **trustworthiness, initiative, and critical thinking**

iv. **Grade or rank** impacted the competency levels of **initiative, teamwork, self-confidence, and critical thinking**

v. **Civilian education** impacted the competency levels of **responsibility, communication, and critical thinking.**

5) Demographics of the organization had the following results:

a. Industry type had no impact on the rating of Army veterans' value.

b. Organizational size and location had a significant impact on the overall rating. Smaller organizations tended to rank Army veterans' skills higher on value gained than larger organizations.

6) The average overall value a veteran brings to an organization was rated 8.78 out of 10 for their overall impact and performance in the organization.

7) 63% of the participating organization did have processes in place; however, there are 37% of those who had no process for veterans in their talent management processes.

8) Only 49% of the organizational participants knew about or used the tax advantages associated with hiring military veterans.

Study Implication:

There is a strong desire or at least a verbal commitment of organizations to hire military veterans but lack of understanding of what veterans bring in terms of value. This lack of understanding of skills competencies impacts how veterans are recruited, hired, and placed in the organization and with the alignment of skills strengths. Having a greater understanding of the soft skills competencies might provide a viable solution to narrowing the soft skills gap if traditional talent management processes are adjusted to allow for the greater success of veteran employment. Organizations that understand what components of human capital investments produce higher levels of soft skills competencies can make better selection decisions on what meets the best fit of the organization beyond hard skills alone. This data can help organizations also identify the types of human capital investments to make to improve the desired soft skills competencies of their current workforce.

Recommendations for Application:

- 1) Talent management personnel need to evaluate their methods of selecting talent with a greater focus on soft skills competencies.
- 2) Within the reevaluation of TAM processes, organizations need to evaluate the process for how they recruit, select, and retain veterans as they appear to be a population that can address the soft skills gap found in the workforce today.
- 3) Organizations need to have a better understanding of investments in human capital, specific to the development of soft skills competencies of its workforce. Having empirical data to support the types of education, training, and experience to invest in for workforce development.
- 4) Because veterans have higher felt value on smaller organizations, veterans should consider a transition to smaller organizations for meaningful employment and appreciation of the value they offer to the organization. This also includes looking for states who have higher levels of veterans' benefits and programs that collaborate with companies to offer meaningful employment opportunities adequate to the skill levels of the veteran. An example of this is Next Level Veterans and INVETS in the state of Indiana. Many other states have programs in place to attract veterans as part of the workforce.
- 5) Veterans should look for organizations who have Veterans' Resource Groups (VRGs) to assist in circumventing barriers to ATS and the traditional TAM processes. VRGs can be helpful in understanding human capital investments made by Armed Services and to translate skills competencies into value propositions to the organization. Especially since there are misunderstandings found in the rating of some soft skills competencies between employers and Army veterans.