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# Journey of a Veteran: Transitional Pathway from Military to Civilian IT and Cybersecurity Workforce through Educational Advancement

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*The following article is a narrative recounting the experience of one veteran. We are offering this to you as representative of the voices of America's vets. This article will not increase your knowledge of the field. But it will give you practical insight into the hearts and minds of the people who you serve and who are the subject of this special edition. The opinions in this are the author's. However the insights presented belong to every member of the educational community. Please read and enjoy.*

## INTRODUCTION

According to a study conducted by Morin (2011) at Pew Research Center, 44% of veterans found it very to extremely difficult to transition back into the civilian workforce. The following is an in depth case study which will take you through the experience that an army veteran endured when transitioning from active duty to civilian life. The scope of this paper is to show other service members, within the IT and cybersecurity field specifically, the "best practices" in regards to choosing a university for educational advancement, identifying and obtaining proper cybersecurity skills and industry certifications, and successfully transitioning from military to civilian life.

## BIG DECISION AT THE CROSSROADS

It all just seemed to hit Joe one day. Joe woke up in a cold sweat with his stomach twisted into knots as the sweat beaded off his forehead. He asked himself, “Was I sick? Did I have the flu? Did I have a bad dream?” These were questions that Joe thought would get him to the truth as to why he was in the condition that he was in. As this particular Monday morning progressed, it all started to dawn on Joe that he had joined the United States Army in October of 2010 and within the blink of an eye, his four years was almost up.

This is when the stress really started to kick in and the true worries and questions started manifesting themselves in full force. Joe remembers this particular day like it was yesterday, May 5th, 2014. This is the day that he remembers as decision day, as the two by four to the head saying, “Wake up Joe, what are you going to do now?”

When asked why he joined the service Joe had a very unique and rather different response than most fellow service members. The response was similar in that Joe felt it was his duty to serve the country, but where his response differed is that he mainly joined the military for a *Defining Life Experience*. An experience that would live in his mind for the rest of his life. An experience that would provide him with countless stories to tell his children and grandchildren. Joe wanted to make his mother and father proud, while paying the debt to this great country that we all lived and prospered in. You see, Joe believes that it is the responsibility of each and every person living in this country to serve and defend her, even if it means giving up their own lives. Like most other service members and many American people, he believes that freedom is not free but rather it has been bought at the price of blood. Blood that men and women of our country have shed so that the American people can live in the way that they see fit.

## ENRICHED INFORMATION THAT OVERFLOWS

Joe's days of being a soldier were indeed numbered, and it was now time that he started giving much deserved attention to his future in the civilian world. This

all started with the Army Career and Alumni Program or ACAP for short. The program consisted of three main requirements. The first was to meet with a transitioning guidance counselor and discuss your tentative plans, the second was to attend a five-day intensive workshop, and the third requirement was a two-day job or college workshop. The intent behind the five-day workshop was to provide every service member with the information needed to successfully transition from the military back into the civilian sector. This five-day workshop turned out to be of nominal if not minimal use. Joe was required to sit in a room with 60 to 80 other service members for eight hours per day for five days, without any water or drink, and listen to a person go through slide after slide on a pace that mirrored the speed of Superman. Joe could tell from the very beginning that few of the “instructors” wanted to be there, nor did they fully comprehend the significance of the information they were giving out to the discharging service members. All in all, Joe would estimate that he retained roughly 10 to 15 percent of the priceless information given out in the five-day workshop. The things that he retained consisted mainly of starting a working resume, getting a LinkedIn account, and a brief summary of veterans’ benefits that applied specifically to him.

Next came the career or college workshops that every service member was required to attend one or the other. Joe chose to attend the college workshop as he was primarily leaning towards going back to college after the discharge from active duty. This workshop was two days in length and he actually came away with some important information. Joe had applied for the Post 9-11 GI Bill when he was in Afghanistan in the summer of 2013 and had received the Certificate of Eligibility (COE) from the Department of Veteran Affairs. This certificate informed Joe that he was entitled to 90% of the Post 9-11 GI Bill only because he had not completed his third full year of active duty service yet. Upon taking the college workshop (formally known as Furthering Education Workshop) Joe was informed that this 90% eligibility was in fact a mistake and that upon completion of military service he would only be entitled to the Post 9-11 GI Bill at a mere 50%, not 90% rate. This fact was crushing to Joe's future plans as by the time of this college workshop, he had completely invested in the returning to college option for when he

transitioned back home to Wisconsin. This class was indeed helpful in identifying the error in Joe's official VA document and saving him countless headaches and hassles in the long run.

## KNOWLEDGE IS POWER VIA HELPING HANDS TO A WOUNDED SOLDIER

Joe will never forget one of the instructors of this college workshop, Erin, because she took it upon herself to look further in the state of Wisconsin and after 3 weeks had gone by she emailed him with some amazing news. It seemed Erin had found out that Wisconsin had implemented a State Level Post 9-11 GI Bill which would cover any in-state college tuition that the Federal Post 9-11 GI Bill did not. This meant Joe's plans to return to college were back in and that he would have 50% of his tuition paid for by the Federal and 50% paid for by the WI State GI Bills. At this time, Joe was also in the process of applying for pre-discharge disability benefits and the workshop instructors led me on to a potential Chapter 31- Vocational Rehabilitation. This particular education benefit was given to service members whom had received a service connected disability rating. This benefit is potentially the *most inclusive* of all the educational chapters. The last major benefit that this college workshop had was that during the class every service member was required to apply for educational benefits through the VA's online Website. In addition, the participants had to apply to at least one college or university that they were interested in attending.

## STEMMING SUCCESSFUL CAREER WITH STEM EDUCATION AND VOLUNTEERING

Joe was a very meticulous person with choosing which military occupation specialty (MOS) he would learn. Many considerations went into this decision, however, there were a few that stood above the rest. These were, "Am I going to enjoy doing this kind of job for the minimum of the next four years?" "Would I learn a skill that was transferable to the civilian sector?" "Would this skill and

experience look good on my resume and therefore make me more marketable?”  
“Would this MOS fulfill my need for a fulfilling military career?”

After two months of research and countless pieces of advice from his recruiters and other service members, Joe chose the Military Occupational Specialty of 25S, which is STEM-related Satellite Communications Operator Maintainer. This MOS satisfied all of his previously listed considerations. In the meantime, Joe learned that his application to be admitted to the MBA program with IT Management emphasis at the University of Wisconsin was approved. Excited and humbled, Joe felt privileged enough while remembering a priceless piece of information very early in his military career. This information was, “The Army is what you make it SPC Stark, wherever you go and to whichever unit you get assigned, there are many varying perks to each and every duty station... and finally if you want something bad enough you have to go out and take it, do not let anyone tell you NO!” This quote came from Drill Sergeant Cameron Abbott, who was not only the toughest and strictest service member that Joe have ever met, but also the most caring and helpful. Sergeant Abbott's advice led Joe to volunteer for Airborne School and consequently jump out of 17 various aircraft in his army career. This advice also prompted Joe to volunteer, ahead of his companies’ rotation, for a deployment to heart of Afghanistan for a Top Secret Mission. This advice stayed with Joe for his entire military career and it continues to affect the way that he thinks today.

## MISMATCHED IT AND CYBERSECURITY CERTIFICATIONS

Throughout Joe's service, his unit pushed many “important” cybersecurity and IT certifications onto the soldiers. The individual unit companies’ promoted these classes and since the slots were very limited, they made the attendance of these classes very competitive. This competition led to the same select few of the soldiers getting the opportunity to attend said classes and afterward test for the certification. Joe did not appreciate the fact that many of his fellow service members whom were less athletic, intelligent, or personable, got left out of any opportunity to advance their skills as IT and cybersecurity professionals. These classes led to various IT and cybersecurity related certifications include, A +, Network +, Security +, and ICND

1&2 (passing both ICNDs leads to the CISCO certification of CCNA). The Army saw these four certifications as the golden tickets for their service members to transition into highly advanced IT and Cybersecurity professional careers. Joe bought into this logic 100% and it wasn't until sometime later when he met a certain MBA professor at the University of Wisconsin that he realized that this logic, though valuable in the past, may not enable the service members to sufficiently make the cut in today's civilian workplace that is moving rapidly to the virtualized and cloud computing environment.

### MUTUAL EDUCATION BETWEEN THE VETERAN AND THE FACULTY

Dr. Ted Lee is Joe's primary professor at the University of Wisconsin's MBA Program for the Information Technology Management emphasis. Dr. Lee and Joe have talked in great depths about the marketable industry certifications that are sought after in the IT arena today. Through the discussions Joe soon came to realize that the four certifications that he had earned through the military were considered more as complements to actually IT and cybersecurity work experience by the industry. The CCNA certification that Joe was especially proud of had become a relatively common entry-level proof of basics of Cisco's proprietary internetwork solution. This went to show that the Army has a rather alarming misconception as to the industry-ready service members which they had previously thought they were producing. Joe enlisted in the Army and therefore he can only speak for the enlisted side of the military. As an enlisted service member, Joe found that the Army actively encourages soldiers to enroll into college and attain their bachelor's degree. This is a fantastic idea, however, out of the 50 plus fellow service members that Joe knew were in school for their bachelor's degree, roughly 45 of them had no clue what college really was. Nearly all of the service members, who enrolled in college, did so under the simple motive of promotion points. The army promotion system is so competitive that those soldiers whom have a bachelor's degree seem to have the advantage in terms of more pay, more responsibility, and consequently better retirement. These soldiers found a college in Texas and another in Maryland which

would convert all of their military training into actual college credits for a fee of around \$500. So here we have roughly 45 service member who had never attended or enrolled in a single collegiate level class, and they had college transcripts telling the world that they had attained anywhere from 40 to, in some cases, 85 college credit hours. Most of these college credit hours coming from the paid “conversion” of their four IT certifications; A+, Network+, Security+, and CCNA. All of which, as explained, can guarantee good-paying IT and cybersecurity related jobs in the civilian sector.

A certain sect of people believe that veterans transitioning from active duty back to the civilian sector should be placed in accelerated degree programs. Their justification for the acceleration is the fact that service members come out of the military with an extensive IT background having both job experience as well as industry ready certifications. Joe, along with Ted want to bring attention to the Army, the military, and most importantly all veterans past, present, and future that the accelerated degree programs may not be suitable for all veterans. If one looks on usajobs.com or dice.com and search for any employment under the IT category, it is apparent that less than 10% of the job postings even list the four main Army IT certifications. The percentage is even less if one examines the suggested or required certifications of those same IT job postings.

One thing positive growing out of Joe and Ted's relationship is that not only had Joe learned how to gain advanced knowledge in IT and cybersecurity management that can apply to job functions in civilian workplace, Ted had also learn from Joe what type of training and education Joe has received to perform the daily duties in the Army that Ted wouldn't other get to know. Educating the STEM faculty at the universities on what the veterans went through in the military is a critical step often missing in a successful mentor-mentee relationship.

## A ROAD MAP FOR FINDING A PATHWAY TOWARD SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION

There are a number of simple steps that a transitioning service member should follow when his or her contract begins to run out. These steps include:

- 1) **Apply for Education Benefits through the VA.GOV Website.** Whether you are choosing to go straight into the workforce or continuing your education, the most important thing to remember is that the GI-Bill can truly set you up for success at nearly any college, technical school, or university that you choose.
- 2) **Make contacts ASAP at the schools that you are interested in.** The faculty members and guidance counselors will never know who you are, be able to lend you any advice in terms of your plan or road or to success, or have the opportunity to mentor you unless you contact them and let them know your circumstances. These people will also be able to fill you in immediately about whether that school is Veteran or military friendly. Is that school accommodating of Veterans to include such things as counseling, tutors, guidance, disability accommodations, and even fellow veteran staff members? I have definitely come to realize that no one understands what we have been through while deployed and what we have all experienced in the military, *like a fellow veteran*.
- 3) **Identify and enable mentorship.** Joe for one was lucky enough to have a caring and mentoring kind of NCO, and that experience led him to reach out to his professors as soon as he arrived at the university. Joe wanted to know what they knew. Joe wanted to learn from them, pick the knowledge from their brains, and in the long run maybe continue educating them something more on what U.S. military experience is about. The value of great mentorship is truly priceless, the benefits are practically countless. When you do eventually decide on a school make sure to find that professor that you can connect and bond with, then ask him or her to be your mentor. The faculty mentor is in the position to provide you with the tools, educational direction, guidance, advice, and even networking with businesses necessary for you to gain that competitive advantage over your peers. Your unit wouldn't deploy

you without the best possible equipment or without the most knowledge and training that exists in order for you successfully accomplish the mission. Use this same tactic when choosing the education program, the school, and the pathway that suits you the best.

- 4) **Work hard toward completing the degree and make the most out of the education.** When Joe graduated college in 2009 with a Bachelor's Degree of Philosophy, he had no clue what he was going to use his degree for or what occupation he could even use it in. Joe joined the military as a satellite communicator and through the Army he attained the four emphasized certifications. After all was said and done, though Joe was indeed great at the military occupation, through the transition into an MBA program he soon realized that he had a solid but small foundation into the civilian workforce. Joe realized that in order to succeed in the corporate world, he needed to further his education by increasing both IT and cybersecurity core knowledge and business acumen. The MBA program with IT Management emphasis has opened Joe's eyes into what is truly needed in terms of becoming a sought-after IT and cybersecurity professional.

## CONCLUSION

Joe and Ted would like to formally make all service members interested in transitioning into IT and cybersecurity in civilian workforce aware of the facts that they have jointly uncovered. There is so much information that Joe would like to share with all his fellow Veterans. Joe feels strongly that, "We have all given years of our lives in service to our country and now it is time that we start our transition back into the civilian world with the right information, the right path way, utilizing all possible tools and benefits available to us, and determining where and how we should start." If Joe had never thought about then actually applied for MBA Program at the University of Wisconsin, he would have never met Dr. Lee. Without Ted's guidance and mentorship Joe would have entered the workforce under-prepared and way behind his peers even with a post-graduate degree at hand.

## REFERENCE

- [1] Morin, R. (2011). The Difficult Transition from Military to Civilian Life. Retrieved from [www.pewsocialtrends.org](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org). - See more at: <http://www.ejournalncrp.org/problems-of-combat-veterans-transitioning-to-civilian-life/#sthash.EijDYhHA.dpuf>