



The Role of Career Development for Veterans with Psychiatric Disabilities: A Review of Literature

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Abstract

The number of military veterans with psychiatric disabilities continues to increase. To best serve veterans with these conditions, rehabilitation professionals must be aware of current best practices. Psychiatric disabilities may not be visible but these conditions impact veteran's and must be taken into consideration when making career decisions. To aid professionals with increasing knowledge of the literature, a total of five articles were reviewed and major findings were summarized. Implications for rehabilitation professionals and suggestions for future practice directions are provided. This project highlights the importance of staying current in the literature regarding veterans with psychiatric disabilities.

Keywords: Veterans, career decision making, psychiatric disability, vocational evaluation

Veterans with psychiatric disabilities represent a large percent of the veterans receiving vocational rehabilitation services. The most common disabilities experienced by veterans are associated with depression, PTSD, and TBI. Symptoms of PTSD include a combination of more specific symptoms from four clusters of intrusion, avoidance, negative alterations in cognition and mood, and alterations in arousal and reactivity (Bidel et al., 2014). Symptoms of depression include feelings of sadness and worthlessness, disinterest in activities that were once enjoyable, thoughts of death and dying, and disturbances in sleep and appetite (Bidel et al., 2014). Symptoms of TBI can include changes or loss of physical mobility, speech, cognition, sensory processing, and mental health (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, n.d.). While each experience is individualized, these conditions can create numerous concerns,

especially as it relates to finding and maintaining gainful employment. It is important for rehabilitation professionals to understand the current research regarding veterans and career development services. The purpose of this project is to review the selected research to assist professionals and to stay current on some of the contemporary issues. Articles were select based on recency of publication and topics that were most closely related to providing services to veterans with psychiatric disabilities. A total of five articles will be reviewed and conclusions will be offered.

The article *Providing Career Development Services to Veterans: Perceived Need, Acceptability, and Demand* (Stevenson, et al., 2021) takes a look into the feasibility of the Vocational Evaluation Center (VEC) for veterans with psychiatric disorders. The VEC is a veteran affairs system for career development services. The research questions posed in the article asks is how well received the intervention of the VEC is among providers and consumers and to what extent veterans with psychiatric disorders utilize services? Researchers analyzed 90 veterans who had referrals to the VEC between December 2016 and June 2018 (Stevenson, et al., 2021). Specifically, they looked into veterans' demographics, referral source, previously utilized sources, a self-report, employment status, service connection status, and education level. They also investigated why these individuals were looking for services through open ended questions. The data was gathered when a veteran was referred to the VEC, then was re-identified and analyzed by a counseling psychologist and pre- and post-doctoral trainees through qualitative analysis (Stevenson, et al., 2021).

As a result, from this data, they were able to come to a conclusion that answered the research question. They found that the interventions that the VEC provide are indeed practical, well received, and in demand by veterans with disabilities (Stevenson, et al., 2021). Although the researchers were able to come to a positive conclusion, there are some cautioned limitations, such as limited qualitative data and lack of data regarding the effectiveness of the VEC interventions (Stevenson, et al., 2021). Overall, the article addressed all the steps in the research process.

Combat Experience and Career Development

Taking a deeper look into veterans with mental health disorders, researchers show how veterans experience with mental health differ based on having or not having combat experiences during their time serving in the military. Kukla et al. (2015) studies the perspectives of 40 veterans who have PTSD or a severe mental illness (SMI) and are receiving health care from the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA). Specifically, 21 participants experienced combat and the remaining 19 have not had combat experience. Those participating, completed a survey and interview in person where they were asked to describe positive and a negative employment experiences. Results concluded that veterans who served in combat experienced more work barriers and a higher prevalence of mental health disorders, especially PTSD (Kukla et al., 2015). Those who did not serve in combat were primarily diagnosed with psychotic disorders and only a few were diagnosed with PTSD and/or mood disorders. Health, transition, interpersonal relationships, self-experiences, and characteristics of the employer and workplace were all considered barriers to work reintegration.

There were some notable differences between both groups within each category. In the health domain, combat veterans reported both mental and physical disorders, primarily physical, while non-combat veterans reported more mental health disorders than physical (Kukla et al., 2015). The transition domain had mixed responses. Some veterans felt confused once discharged, as if they were just thrown out with nothing. However, others felt that learning about leadership and interpersonal skills during their military career helped them transition after discharge (Kukla et al., 2015). The interpersonal domain included ideas of support from family, friends, co-workers, etc. While some veterans had great support, others felt misunderstood and that their diagnosis made some work tasks more difficult. Both groups of veterans felt that their skills translated well into civilian jobs, however their employers did not agree and struggled to understand how military and civilian jobs compare (Kukla et al., 2015). It was beneficial for veterans to find work that related to the structure of the military and to also find purpose in their civilian careers.

A limitation of this study was that the veterans were asked about recent work experiences, but their recent experiences may differ greatly when compared to work integration experienced further in the past. Another limitation was the specific war or time of peace when the veteran had the opportunity shape their mental health and work integration opportunities. However, there were some conclusions drawn from this study that could help make great strides in understanding how psychiatric disabilities impact a veteran's career development. First, work integration involves many factors such as the way veterans think about themselves and their ability to succeed in the civilian world. Secondly, veterans who have psychiatric disabilities may need more support with work integration and adjustment to the civilian workforce. We can conclude that providing career development services can help veterans manage a psychiatric disability and better acclimate to civilian work.

Job Search Strategies

The article *Helping Veterans Achieve Work: A Veterans Health Administration Nationwide Survey Examining Effective Job Development Practices in the Community*, offers research pertaining to effective job development practices, providers perceptions of job development for veterans with psychiatric disabilities, and effective job development practices. This study includes 233 staff interviews at the VA who work in career development and assist veterans with psychiatric disabilities. Unemployment is an ongoing obstacle that veterans with disabilities face. In fact, “70% of participants perceived job development to be difficult” and only one out of seven interviews resulted in job offers for veterans with disabilities (Kukla et al., 2018).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions and magnitude of job development services from VA professionals. Data was collected through a survey of open-ended questions sent to VA professionals nationwide that worked in job development facilities. The data was then analyzed by trained coders. Results showed that the most effective job development strategies with employers was to center on the interests and needs of the employer, followed by marketing the VA career programs, and

focusing on the benefits of hiring a veteran (Kukla et al., 2018). The use of these two strategies was useful for veterans' employability, as the employer will likely see it as a benefit to have the veterans' skills and feel that they are a proper match. Results also showed that the least two effective strategies were employer characteristics and using a team-based approach (Kukla et al., 2018). Businesses not interested in working with veterans as well as VA professions working together to network and solve vocational barriers for their clients seemed to be at the bottom of the list for the participants.

Although, there are other important strategies pertaining to the career development of veterans with psychiatric disabilities, other important strategies include working as a team to generate new ideas that benefit the client(s) and having a network of veteran friendly companies that can accommodate disability would also be beneficial to the veterans looking for work. Overall, the results highlight several strategies that promote positive job development for veterans with psychiatric disabilities. Researchers suggest that the strategies used should be linked together to benefit veterans with disabilities seeking job development within the VA (Kukla et al., 2018). It is important to note that the most effective strategies anticipate more favorable employment outcomes; however, each individual will have different needs so all strategies should be considered when working with a client.

Transitional Work

The article *Employment Outcomes from VA Vocational Services Involving Transitional Work for Veterans with a Diagnosis of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder* studied job development for veterans specifically with PTSD. Researchers investigated the differences in the veterans who did and did not engage in transitional work and the employment outcomes of doing so. Veterans with PTSD were randomly assigned to participate (141 veterans) or not participate (129 veterans) in transitional work (Davis et al., 2019). Transitional work should be beneficial to those who engage in the program as it provides them with an environment to expand skills, improve work etiquette, and affords the opportunity to earn income while getting support through the VA to find competitive jobs (Davis et al., 2019). However, Davis et al. (2019) suggests that transitional work has limitations and barriers for veterans with PTSD and emphasizes that previous research does not suggest transitional work relates to stronger competitive employment outcomes. Results of this study did show that those who participated in transitional work "had higher rates of adherence to completing protocol assessment visits" compared to those who did not take part in transitional work (Davis et al., 2019).

However, there was "no difference in the rate of becoming a steady worker, the rate of becoming competitively employed at any time, the number of weeks or days employed, the amount of income earned, or the type of jobs held during the 18-month follow-up" (Davis et al., 2019). In the adjusted analysis, researchers found that those who did not participate in transitional work were actually 2.5 times more likely to get a competitive job than those who did engage in transitional work (Davis et al., 2019). A limitation of the study is that half of the veterans with PTSD who were assigned to transitional work did not do so. In addition, job skills learned in one setting during transitional work may not be applicable to all jobs. Since transitional work has been

shown to be less than beneficial to many veterans with PTSD, more resources should be made available to help them with successful career development.

Supported Employment

Looking further into VA professionals' point of view, the article *Barriers and Facilitators Related to Work Success for Veterans in Supported Employment: A Nationwide Provider Survey* explores the barriers and facilitators of employment success in supported employment for veterans with psychiatric disabilities. 114 professionals who work in supported employment sectors at the VA completed a survey consisting of questions using a Likert scale as well as open ended questions. Results of quantitative and qualitative data arose from the survey and was read by coders to find themes in the responses. A notable theme that surfaced was the lack of available transportation for veterans to get to jobs. Another theme was that professionals reported a lack of resources overall, suggesting that computer labs and better transportation services for staff and clients incorporated into the programs would be beneficial to providing successful career development to the veterans (Kukla et al., 2016). Participants of the study mentioned that having good relationships with the employers hiring these veterans was an essential factor in providing supported employment services (Kukla et al., 2016). This theme aligns with many other research studies discussed, making it a fundamental factor to be aware of for rehabilitation professionals. Quantitative findings included the highest rated facilitators being "veteran motivation, a good match between the veteran and the job, the assistance of VA SE services, and the veteran's self-confidence related to work" (Kukla et al., 2016).

On the other end of the spectrum, the highest rated barriers veterans experienced included substance use, psychological stress, mental health, cognitive functioning, and other general medical health concerns (Kukla et al., 2016). The psychiatric disabilities veterans experience is impacting their work success and career development. However, balancing these barriers while increasing their self-confidence and motivation may help to enhance the work success rates. Finally, as discussed in previous literature, educating employers, and promoting that veterans with psychiatric disabilities are productive employees, can increase the likelihood that employers will hire these individuals and open up to relationships with them (Kukla et al., 2016). Overall, this literature provides thorough understanding of the facilitators and barriers that veterans with psychiatric disabilities experience during career development. This study adds to rehabilitation professionals understanding of tools that are beneficial or those that need improvements so that these services may be provided in the best way possible.

Conclusions and Future Directions

The findings from the articles suggest that future research can and should be done. There were some limitations discussed that should be explored further to enhance the topic. More research should be done on the long-term effects of supportive employment and career development services for veterans with psychiatric disabilities. It would also be beneficial to investigate programs outside of the VA, such as private companies, who provide these services as they may show different results and may provide new insights for methods that best support these veterans.

We can conclude that increasing positive facilitators such as self-confidence and finding a good match between veterans and the job will help to support veterans with psychiatric disabilities in career development. Another conclusion that can be made is eliminating barriers such as psychological health, employer stigma, and transportation barriers that contribute to veterans and career development. Having a deeper understanding of common psychiatric disabilities that veterans may have will provide a new perspective on how to increase these positive facilitators and decrease employment barriers. This knowledge will help rehabilitation professionals find needed accommodations in job environments as well as focus on these veterans' strengths when working on career development.

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About the Author

Stephanie Smelser is a student in the Accelerated Master of Science program in Rehabilitation Counseling at Northern Illinois University. As part of this selective program, Stephanie will complete her undergraduate degree in Rehabilitation & Disability Services in May 2023 and is on track to earn her masters in December 2024. Stephanie is an Undergraduate Representative for the Northern Illinois University Rehabilitation Counseling Student Association. She has also been a campus leader through the Signing Huskies ASL club and Mortar Board honor society at NIU. She currently works in therapeutic recreation, but her career goal is to be a rehabilitation counselor for veterans.