

# Beyond yellow ribbons: Are employers prepared to hire, accommodate and retain returning veterans with disabilities?

**PUBLICATION:** *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* (2012); 36 (2), 87-35.

**PUBLICATION TYPE:** Peer-Reviewed Journal Article

**KEYWORDS:** Veterans, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), disability, employers, signature disabilities, recruiting, hiring, accommodating and retaining veterans.

### RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Veterans' employment issues largely align with disability issues, specifically with the need for more inclusive workplace policies. Of the 9.8 million veterans in the workforce in 2009, 5.5 million had a diagnosed disability.
- Many employers lack the ability to recruit, hire and accommodate veterans with disabilities. About 70% of respondents could not identify accommodations needed by workers with TBI, while 41% did not know where to find accommodation resources.
- Employers were also unsure of hiring policies involving veterans with disabilities, with 58% incorrectly believing that job applicants must tell employers about disabilities during the hiring process. Few were able to correctly identifying the role of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

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### ABSTRACT:

“Are employers ready to hire, retain and accommodate veterans with disabilities (VWDs) returning from engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan? A survey of 1,083 human resource professionals examined employer readiness in three areas: knowledge, beliefs/willingness and actions/practices, with an emphasis on the signature disabilities of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Overall, employers surveyed did have willingness to employ VWDs and saw some benefits in doing so. Yet, they had key knowledge gaps around accommodating workers with PTSD and TBI and around disclosure issues. In the area of respondent willingness to employ VWDs, findings indicated most employers believed VWDs would benefit their organizations and would perform as well as other workers. Yet, they believed employing VWDs would involve more costs and more of a manager's time and were largely unsure if workers with PTSD were more likely than others to be violent in the workplace. Respondents' actions/practices indicated that the majority were not using recruitment or other resources specific to VWDs and had scant experience in accommodating workers with PTSD and TBI. Implications of these findings are discussed in terms of research and application to impact employer knowledge, willingness and practices around employing VWDs.”

## Implications

### FOR PRACTICE

Veterans with disabilities (VWDs) can increase their chances of finding and keeping suitable employment by working with supporting agencies such as the VetSuccess Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), or the Wounded Warriors program. These organizations provide pamphlets, websites and other resources to help veterans share information with potential employers. However, it is employers who should take the lead in working with these agencies to ensure that they are informed about appropriate hiring practices and accommodations. Although some employers have established practices and systems aimed at creating a more disability-inclusive organizational culture for VWDs, these practices and systems may not yet be operating effectively. Employers also had very little experience accommodating workers with PTSD and TBI, or creating a company infrastructure to support these employees. Accommodations need not be expensive or time-consuming for employers, and the partner organizations mentioned above are a great resource for suggestions and training regarding simple, low-cost accommodations for veterans with disabilities. Most importantly, employers should be engaged in on-going conversations, collaborations and partnerships to further employment success for veterans with disabilities, which are more focused on continuous consultation with advocacy organizations than traditional one-time trainings or information dissemination. Finally, employers need to make sure their decision-making is guided by facts and evidence. Surveyed employers reported concerns about the safety and productivity of VWDs in the workplace, although research suggests otherwise. Workers with PTSD are not more likely than others to be violent in the workplace and perform as well as others.

### FOR POLICY

Although many employers expressed good will and stated the value of VWDs working in their organizations, this alone is not sufficient for the full participation of VWDs in the workforce. Although federal policies provide various incentives for hiring veterans, few employers have policies in place to provide support to VWDs during or after the hiring process. Policy makers may wish to explore the possibility of a reward system for employers who not only hire veterans, but establish evidence-based systems for hiring and supporting VWDs, especially those with the largely invisible disabilities of PTSD and TBI. Fortunately, since this article was published, the Vietnam Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act (VEVRAA) has been strengthened to address some of these issues, so policy makers should continue to establish infrastructures for hiring, accommodating and retaining veteran workers with disabilities over the long term as this will be beneficial for both veteran and civilian populations.

### FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies should utilize mixed methods to further examine the relationship between organizational practices and everyday work life. Specifically, researchers should explore the implementation and impact of diversity plans and accommodation practices, and how these impact work-life quality in veterans with PTSD and TBI. As these workers will also likely be confronted with stigma, the impact of the policies will determine whether employees with disabilities are willing to come forward to get the supports they need, and their experience thereafter. Researchers should also interview VWDs to get a sense of the specific workplace practices needed to improve workplace culture. Systematic interviews of employers could also be beneficial in exploring the effectiveness of current knowledge production and dissemination processes, as well as in determining which resources work best within a variety of business organizations that differ in size and sector.

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