

RESEARCH REVIEW | ISSUE 277

■ Structure in transition: The role of structure in facilitating workplace efficacy and belonging for military veterans and civilians

AUTHORS:

W. Connor Gibbs, Lauren Ortosky, Alair MacLean, Aaron C. Kay & David K. Sherman

SOURCE: PLoS ONE

YEAR: 2025

Publication Type: Peer-reviewed journal

LINK: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0317575>

KEYWORDS: Employment, Veterans, Careers, Military psychology, Built structures

ABSTRACT:

"Employment transitions necessitate a degree of uncertainty and lack of control, which may present a challenge to succeeding and belonging at a new organization. The present research tests ideas derived from compensatory control theory which posits that people may seek external structure to help exert control over their lives when they experience a lack of control in an important life domain – and that this can aid in their goal pursuit. Across three studies, we explore whether the perception of a higher degree of organizational structure can help employees compensate for uncertainty and lack of control and facilitate transitioning employees' occupation self-efficacy and sense of belonging in a new work environment. This research focuses on military veterans, who face significant challenges during their separation from military service and transition to civilian employment, as an exemplar of the people experiencing employment transitions more generally, and compares them (in two studies) with civilian participants. Across three studies, two using simple correlational methods, one using an experimental methodology with veterans and civilians, we find consistent evidence that when transitioning employees perceive greater structure at their organization, this facilitates increased feelings of occupational self-efficacy which, in turn, promotes greater feelings of belonging at work. When people perceive greater structure in their environment, people feel more efficacious and a greater sense that they belong at work. The results are discussed in the context of compensatory control theory, addressing the challenges of transitioning employees, and in particular, transitioning military veterans."

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Drawing from three studies, the authors explore how perceived organizational structure contributes to employee control and veteran employment transitions.
- The authors analyzed data from three distinct studies, comparing veterans to nonveterans, conducted between 2019 and 2023, to examine how perceived organizational structure is associated with workplace self-efficacy and sense of belonging during employment transitions.
- Findings across the studies suggest that greater perceived structure at an organization is associated with greater self-efficacy and sense of belonging in the workplace. The authors found limited evidence to support the theory that organizational structure has a differential impact on self-efficacy and sense of belonging between veterans and nonveterans.

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Greater organizational structure is associated with better outcomes, including self-efficacy and sense of belonging during employment transitions. Programs and services designed to assist veterans seeking new employment opportunities could support them by connecting veterans with employers with a reputation for having high levels of perceived organizational structure. Veteran employment programs and services may benefit from including questions about perceived organizational structure in their program evaluations. Veteran employment programs can consider incorporating organizational structure indicators, alongside other criteria, in employer evaluations or certifications, for example, for “veteran-friendly employer” badges or ratings.

FOR POLICY

Federal or state funded employment programs aimed at veterans, including those run by the VA or Department of Labor, may consider incorporating organizational structure into a wholistic assessments of partner employers. Policymakers should explore including funding for training programs for human resource leaders and managers at partner employers that focus on military cultural competence and emphasize the value of structure for veteran wellbeing and performance.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The authors suggest that future research should examine the "specific forms of structure that best facilitate" positive outcomes during employment transitions. Identifying specific qualities of organizational structure that veteran employees have perceived as helpful may allow for opportunities to replicate those structural aspects in other areas of a veteran's life (e.g., higher education, healthcare systems, etc.) and improve their overall military-to-civilian transition experience. It is also possible that some forms of organizational structure may be more impactful for some employees compared to others (e.g., veterans compare to nonveterans). Finally, future research should examine the impact of organizational structure on additional outcomes, such as employment satisfaction, and performance, for newly transitioned veterans. The present studies draw from samples of veterans with varying lengths of time since their military separation. Future studies could benefit from focusing on veterans who recently separated from the military and are likely experiencing their first significant employment transition.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

W. Connor Gibbs, PhD
Fuqua School of Business, Duke
University
Durham, North Carolina, USA
connor.gibbs@duke.edu