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## **A Potential High Value HRM Recruitment Tool for the VHA**

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Partnerships and Outreach:

A Potential High Value HRM Recruitment Tool for the VHA

Submitted by

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for

EMPA 396 Graduate Research Project in Public Management

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### Abstract

Each year the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) develops a Workforce Succession Plan aligned with its strategic goals and priorities. This plan also highlights mission critical occupations. In 2016, Human Resources Management was identified as the third highest mission critical occupation in VHA. The VHA Workforce Succession Plan also identifies the recruitment of Veterans as part of its plan for increasing diversity. The purpose of this capstone paper will be to explore methods of outreach to veteran job seekers as well as propose that a policy be developed to promote outreach and establishment of competency based training plans for veteran employees hired to fill these positions. A review of the relevant literature will discuss cases and strategies in the private sector, state, local and federal government to attract veterans. It also highlights the importance of veteran outreach and employment to increase the benefits of diversity in the workplace. Data will come from three main sources, a review of existing data that the VHA has collected on gains and losses; interviews with staff from the VHA's Health Care Talent Management Office regarding the identification of key competencies for new HR employees; and interviews with individuals from organizations involved in outreach, job readiness, and skill development for veteran job seekers. It is hoped that the results of this study may provide information on whether veteran outreach combined with an on the job training program would help newly hired HRM employees develop relevant skills to ensure a workforce to fill critical HR positions in the VHA.

## Transformative Training Plans for Veterans:

### An HRM Recruitment Tool in VHA

The VHA serves veterans from eras that span from the World Wars to the Operation Iraqi Freedom. Post 9/11 Veterans faced multiple deployments and 1.5 million post 9/11 veterans have re-entered civilian life (Roberts, 2015). VHA provides health care benefits for veterans experiencing a wide range of issues such as homelessness, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, military sexual trauma, loss of limbs, and other health care concerns not directly related to military service to eligible veterans. In order to provide this spectrum of care, the VHA must find ways to hire and retain staff to provide care for this diverse population that spans generations, wars, and gender. Each year the VHA examines the top 10 mission critical occupations and each year Human Resources Management is listed as one of those top ten mission critical occupations. With a turnover rate of 40.7% of new hires within the first five years (VHA Workforce Succession Plan, 2016), HRM's ability to attract and retain qualified individuals to learn the complexities of HR in a federal health care environment is critical to the agency's success.

### **Background and History**

In 2014, the VHA published its Blue Print for Excellence that outlined the history of the VHA, the VA's role, and how the role is evolving in over the years. The blueprint describes a "triple aim for better health, better care, and better value" (p. 3) The VHA evolved from a hospital centered model to what is described as a delivery system. In

order to meet those needs, the Blueprint identifies 10 key strategies, including foster an environment of continuous learning (p.23); become a model integrated health service network through activities that include public-private partnerships and community relationships (p.33); and modernize management process, including human resources “to operate with benchmark agility and efficiency” (p. 42).

The VHA’s Blueprint for Excellence outlines the VA’s mission “...To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan.” The Blueprint further describes how the VHA mission was born of these words and describes its evolution. In recent decades, the VHA shifted from a hospital-centric model to a health care delivery system. Today the VHA is challenged in the Blueprint for Excellence to aim for better health, better care, and better value. The VHA finds itself in a position where it must adapt to the changing and unique needs of the veteran population it serves, including a population that is almost two-thirds over the age of 65, facing higher rates of physical and mental illness, and with lower incomes. The VHA also serves newer patients who deployed after 9/11 experiencing physical and emotional trauma from their service. This diverse patient population calls for VHA employees committed to the VA’s mission and values. It also calls for employees who are able to win back the public’s trust in serving veterans and dedication to developing a veteran-centric model of service. (2014, p.3-4).

Human resources management staff with the knowledge and experience to operate at the journey-level of their profession are essential to human resources management being able to operate with the agility and efficiency described in the Blueprint for Excellence (Department of Veterans Affairs Blueprint for

Excellence: Veterans Health Administration, 2014). One challenge in operating at this level is that the Human Resources Management (HRM) field in VHA experiences significant retention challenges (VHA Workforce Succession and Strategic Plan, 2016). Data in the plan indicates that 40.7% of newly hired HRMs quit within the first five years of employment. Furthermore, 55% of those quits are within the first two years of employment. Included in this number are those who quit to leave VHA for another organization with less complex hiring authorities and more HRM staff per employee served (p. 100-101).

Typically vacancies are filled using a competitive recruitment process, that involves announcing a position, reviewing resumes, and an interview process that can take three to four months. By using direct hiring authorities to hire Veterans into these positions, an applicant can be immediately hired into a position, upon successfully meeting pre-employment requirements. In most cases, a job offer can be extended within in one to two weeks.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine, evaluate findings and provide a recommendation to key decision makers on how to create an effective veteran's outreach and partnership program with local veterans' service organizations and universities. The program would potentially increase the number of qualified veterans recruited from various employment sources by partnering to promote employment in the VHA through internships, work-study, and career-ladder opportunities.

### **Research Question and Hypothesis**

Will targeted outreach to local universities provide a pipeline of qualified HRM applicants who will stay with VHA for careers in Human Resource Management? The impetus of this study was to determine what, if anything, could be done to create a continuous flow and subsequent larger pool of qualified and career-oriented HRM applicants at the VHA. It has been and continues to be an important element of the VA's strategic plan to provide timely, career minded and high quality accessions of HRM specialists to meet the ever-growing health services needs of an expanding, diverse, and aging veteran population.

The research hypothesis of this study is that through strategic partnerships with local universities and non-governmental agencies, the VHA can attract candidates who are qualified for a career ladder position and retain those employees for three-five years through a transformational training program. The VHA has the ability to use direct hiring authorities to quickly recruit qualified veterans into the workforce. In addition, the qualification standards for an HR Specialist allow for recruitment of specialists at the entry level who possess a bachelor's degree, master's degree, or specialized experience in human resources. NGOs and universities who already have veterans as customers who are looking for employment opportunities provide a resource for qualified HRM specialists to address the critical shortage of quality, career-minded applicants for a career in public service.

The main question of this research paper is: will targeted outreach to local universities provide a pipeline of qualified HRM applicants who will stay with the VA for three to five years? This question is important in that the high percentage of HRM employees leaving the VA for other agencies has an impact on the medical center's



ability to staff and provide administrative support to the medical center. If the hypothesis is supported, then career ladder positions, with promotions each year, may serve to retain HRM employees longer than two years and provides time for them to build an affinity with their place of employment or a connection to the work in service of veterans.

When examining the main question, sub-questions emerge including, what the best sources of outreach may be, how extensively career ladder and similar programs are used, and what are the most effective methods for HR departments to partner with outside organizations. The focus on effectiveness and efficiency provides HR staff, who may already be stretched thin, to focus on the programs most likely to yield highly qualified candidates who are likely to remain with the organization.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Study**

The scope of this study encompasses human resource management recruitment and the federal government's San Francisco Veterans Administration hospital. No other occupational specialties nor were other private or public medical hospitals or clinics included in this study. Additionally, this study is limited to some extent to the population available to interview in the San Francisco Bay area and the impact of the cost of living on recruitment efforts (the San Francisco area is considered among the top three (??) cost of living areas in the United States). The study focuses on the unique challenges of recruitment and retention of a skilled HRM workforce in a high cost of living area. Collected data from interviews conducted by this researcher reflect the experiences and biases of respondents involved with veteran employment activities in the San Francisco Bay area.

### **Literature Review**

A review of the VHA Workforce Succession Plan establishes that HRM is one of the top ten mission critical occupations and requires facilities to develop a plan to address this critical gap. Research in the area of HR training programs and veteran employment is limited. The literature reviewed below highlight cases and strategies in the private sector, state, local and federal government to attract veterans. It also highlights the importance of veteran outreach and employment to increase the benefits of diversity in the workplace. There are three elements of the hypothesis that are explored in the literature review: (1) the program should provide an element of outreach to potential veteran applicants; (2) career ladder positions can provide incentives to remain with the VHA and improve earning capacity; and (3) career planning is essential following onboarding to develop a skilled workforce.

Each year the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) publishes its workforce succession and strategic plan that identifies the VHA's unique workforce challenges. In 2016, David Shulkin, M.D., Under Secretary for Health for the VHA, described the plan as outlining strategies to ensure the "best workforce is in place at VHA" (Veterans Health Administration, 2016, p. 2). Dr. Shulkin described the plan as data driven and based on feedback from medical centers, regions, and program offices. Kim and Fernandez (2017) describe a situation where given recent news, scandals, and headlines related to VHA mismanagement; the organization is challenged with increased levels of mistrust. They highlight the effect that this would have on the retention of skilled professionals in the federal service.

The VHA workforce succession plan provides an overview of workforce analytics related to growth in onboard employees and loss rates, with particular attention to losses described as quits. In addition to reviewing data related to gains and losses, the plan pays particular attention to data related to diversity and inclusion. Thirdly, based on input from network plans, VHA identifies the top ten mission critical occupations. For 2016, the top 10 occupations included the following: Physician, Nurse, Human Resources Management (HRM), Physical Therapist, Physician Assistant, Psychologist, Medical Technologist, Occupational Therapist, Diagnostic Radiologic Technologist, and Pharmacist.

The top ten occupations are identified based on the challenges they face related to gaps between supply and demand, competition with the private sector, reductions in retention incentives, hiring practices, delays in onboarding, limited opportunities for promotion in entry level fields, lack of job control and poor public image. While HRM placed third in the list of the top ten mission critical occupations, the quit rate was one of the highest. The VHA Workforce Succession Plan identified one reason being that VHA HRM employees are well equipped to perform work in other agencies. The plan asserts that this may be because HR work is more complex in VHA than other agencies and the ration of HR Specialists to employees serviced is higher in VHA than other agencies.

The data presented in the VHA Workforce Succession Plan identifies a significant rate of turnover that has persisted over the years. While the hiring of veterans into entry-level positions will not immediately address the needs related to turnover, it does present an opportunity to develop a succession pipeline with employees ready to fill

these key vacancies in the VHA. Additionally, for applicants able to substitute a bachelors or masters degree for experience a training plan to build the requisite skills and competencies would provide a pathway from junior to journey-level specialist.

Freeman (2015) described Hilton Hotels and Resorts veteran hiring initiative in an article for Talent Management. While this article draws from Hilton's own data, it does highlight the popularity of a program that may be useful for the VHA to consider. In 2013, Hilton launched "Operation: Opportunity" to hire 10,000 veterans, spouses, and dependents by 2018 (Freeman, 2015). Hilton's Chief HR Officer, Matt Schuyler, described this as a bold goal that was popular at their properties. Schuyler described the initiative as featuring a six-month rotational management-training program, a veteran employee resource group, and a point of contact at each property to be the main point of contact for military matters. In addition, Hilton provided employees with access to local resources for vets in the city where they live and work (Freeman, 2015). While the article does not go into the data used, does not indicate its level of success, it does provide a model that could be considered in recruiting and retaining veterans in the workforce.

In another article by Freeman (2014), she describes resources available to the VA and to employers to help veterans re-enter the workforce. Curtis Coy, Deputy Undersecretary for Economic Opportunity at the VA stated at the June 23, 2015, Society for HR Management's annual conference that the unique training opportunities and "portfolio of benefits and services" that they can use at no cost to build their career skills make veterans "more competitive". These benefits that enhance their competitiveness include access to traditional higher education, apprenticeships, and vocational

training. While this is not peer reviewed data, the stories shared by Coy demonstrate how veterans benefits may support career progression in the VHA and enable veterans to enter the workforce in jobs, such as HR that offer the opportunity to substitute education for specialized experience. Davis and Minnis (2016) describe the challenges faced by veterans in employment, due to misperceptions related to their skillsets and military experience. Davis and Minnis suggested that HRD practitioners understand these strong contributions and the societal misperceptions regarding the value of the skills and experiences of veterans.

Lewis and Pathak (2014), examined whether veterans' preference was successful in increasing veteran access to state and local government (SLG) jobs. The reviewed census data for 1980-2011 and characteristics of those jobs that might make them more or less appealing to veterans. Specifically, the study asserts that in states that offer absolute preference or pay well relative to the private sector nonveterans are more likely to accept SLG jobs. While this article examines jobs at the SLG level, the information as it relates to preference and pay apply to veterans seeking federal jobs, as well. For the purposes of this literature review, Lewis and Pathik's work can apply when reviewing their studies of states with absolute Veterans preference. Lewis and Pathik's study relies on data from the U.S. Census Bureau to estimate a veteran's probability to work for an SLG. For example, in 2010, 25.7 percent of federal employees and 8.1 percent of all employees were veterans. This implied that federal employees were 3.2 times as likely as full time employees to be veterans. U.S. Census data indicated that veterans were 1.56 times as likely as non-veterans to be federal employees in 1980 and this number grew to 3.19 times as likely in 2010. Lewis and Pathik concluded that

veteran preference gets veterans government jobs, as evidenced in the federal sector. In the federal sector veterans were more than four times as likely as nonveterans to hold federal jobs.

By developing a pipeline of veteran candidates, a VHA medical center can work towards improving diversity within the workforce and meeting its diversity related performance measures. A study by Wyatt-Nichol & Antwi-Bosiako (2012) found that an organization's diversity strategy had a positive impact on recruitment, professional development, and retention. This could be studied further to determine if it would have a similar affect, specifically within Human Resources.

Wyatt-Nichol & Antwi-Bosiako examined diversity initiatives among state and local government agencies by developing an online survey through Survey Monkey regarding specified dimensions of diversity. The average size of these organizations was 760 employees. They also found there were limited variations based on the level of government when it came to identifying factors that lead to effective diversity strategies.

In their study, the authors found that an organization's diversity strategy was effective in the areas of recruitment, retention, and professional development. While the study was focused on state and local government, it provided an example of Federal agency outreach to minority colleges and universities in an effort to attract diverse candidates (p. 754). These strategies are also included in the VHA's Workforce Succession Plan to attract students and new graduates to mission critical occupations through internships designed for recent college graduates and academic affiliations for health care specialties through the VHA's Office of Academic Affiliations (Veterans

Health Administration, 2016). While the VHA Workforce Succession Plan focuses on students, hiring authorities exist to allow for the outreach and expedited hiring of eligible veterans under these same or similar authorities.

Wyatt-Nichol & Antwi-Bosiako identified a concern that was also highlighted in the VHA Workforce Succession Plan related to the recruitment of mid-career professionals. The study cited OPM's recruitment strategy's effectiveness indicators, including: "A recruitment strategy to reach diverse populations at colleges/universities, minority-focused professional organizations, and other organizations representing women, veterans, people with disabilities, and other groups as part of the agency's overall outreach strategy." (p. 754-755). In considering whether using veteran's preference in hiring has an impact on quality of federal service, Johnson (2015), found that based on a study of personnel records and grade attainment, there was no discernable difference between those who did and did not receive veterans preference. In fact, when added controls were put in place for employee's personal traits, promotions were either at the same rate or slightly faster than employees without veterans' preference. Furthermore, Ford (2017) found that businesses recognize veterans as a source of high-quality talent. However, Ford does note that the value of veteran hiring initiatives does vary from organization to organization. Ford found there was no difference in what it took to attract, resource, measure, and evaluate veteran and non-veteran employees.

Outreach to local colleges is one avenue for the VHA to recruit Veterans for careers in HRM. Ghosh and Fouad (2016) conducted a review of literature and study to predict career transitions of student veterans, specifically in regards to career adaptability and occupational engagement. They identified limiting factors to their study including

that their research was based on self-reporting from participants at one campus, so they were unable to generalize the findings to a larger populations. Their study focused primarily on occupational engagement and the need for individuals to make better career-related decisions. The study determined that student veteran might not have had the opportunity to consider or develop skills related to career adaptability. A significant part of military culture is that service members have tasks assigned to them, with little opportunity for exploring options. The authors assert this assignment of tasks could hinder the self-exploration aspect of making decisions related to a prospective career. Ghosh and Fouad's study suggest that if veteran students were willing and prepared to participate in career planning activities they may be better able to manage the transition from college to career. In addition, Irwin (2016) points out that veterans share many of the same struggles as college students in addition to facing the challenges of returning from combat or the responsibilities that come with being an older college student with a family. When reflecting on Hilton's study of Operation: Opportunity, the integration of resources, such as a veteran employee resource group and a point of contact at each property to be the main point of contact for military matters (Freeman, 2015) may be a consideration in the development of VHA's own transformational training program for college students entering internships or career ladder positions.

Many veterans leave military service with access to benefits such as the GI Bill to provide funding for college, apprenticeships, certifications and other pathways to employment. However, translating military experience and college experience into practical job skills is where a training program may provide a pathway to employment. One option available within the VHA is the development of career ladder



positions, where an eligible veteran may be selected based on the completion of a masters or bachelor's degree based on the entry level grade of the position. However, to identify candidates for these programs it is necessary to identify a pipeline of candidates, BNA's HR Practitioners Guide (2016) provides guidelines that are helpful for hiring managers. The BNA HR Payroll and Resource Center provides a variety of documents related to payroll and HR. This literature item comes from a guide, and suggests strategies similar to what is seen in local workforce succession plans in VHA. The BNA HR Practitioners guide suggests that employers work with local federal and state advocacy groups and service organizations. The article also suggests reaching out to military branches that offer employment-related services for transitioning service members. A third method suggested reaching out to younger workers through colleges and graduate schools. This strategy can also be used to recruit veterans from all generations using their educational benefits.

While the pathways for employment exist, veterans are still faced with some inequalities in income. In MacLean and Kleykamp's study "Income Inequality and the Veteran Experience" they found that wage inequality between male veterans and non-veterans between 1979 and 2010 varied based on factors within groups based on the era that they served in. Their research concluded that it was possible that "the decline of military as a normative experience for men has contributed to the increase in inequality" (2016, p.114). This study also highlights that the in-group variations in pay were often linked to college education being more valued than the premium placed on being a veteran. However, it opens the door for the VHA to consider increased use of hiring authorities and partnerships with universities to leverage the premium placed on a college

education for recently discharged veterans. This study was limited to male veterans serving in wars as early as World War II. It does serve to explore the premiums placed on military service in different eras as well as the shifting increase in the premium placed on education.

Rothwell, Brower, and Jackson (2015) make a case for succession planning and career planning integration. The authors urge developing the workforce by using “contemporary and forward-looking career development” (p. 3). The authors provide examples of human resources intervention that may encourage individuals to take action to develop themselves including:

- o Workforce Planning
- o Recruitment and Hiring
- o Employee actions such as promotions, job rotation, cross training, job enrichment, and job rotation
- o Employee orientation and socialization
- o Employee training
- o Performance management
- o Coaching and feedback

The authors describe human capital management as key business strategy that must be able to “recruit, develop, and retain the right people in the right roles” (p. 7). However,

the authors also cite a challenge of a sufficient talent pool to meet those needs over the long term. The authors suggest that the concept of work will evolve from what a person is to what or who they may become. This shift in the nature of work and concurrent oversupply of available and undersupply of qualified workers provides an opportunity for those with the skills and competencies to step into a training program and associated career ladder position to build critical skill needed in HRM.

### **Research Methods**

The questions related to targeted outreach and retention of HRM professionals from amongst veteran college students, defined for the purposes of this study as college students with military experience, will be explored using descriptive quantitative research. According to Leedy and Ormond (2016), this type of research examines a situation as it is. By examining the current outreach efforts and current retention data, possible correlations may be drawn to highlight effective outreach techniques and explore why employees may be motivated to stay in a career in HRM. In order to solicit stories and experiences of veteran job seekers telephone interviews were conducted. The subjects of the telephone interviews were from nongovernment organizations and student veteran organizations in the San Francisco Bay area. The telephone interview method was chosen to allow more flexibility in times available to meet with interviewees during the eight-week period dedicated to research. While Leedy and Ormond caution telephone interviews may be limited in that rapport is more challenging to develop, it does allow for more interaction than a survey or a mailed questionnaire. In an effort to obtain richer stories and detailed experiences of the subjects in a limited time, the research took the form of telephone interviews.

### **Research Design**

In order to address the research questions, a case study was designed in which three organizations were studied to understand what types of outreach efforts were most effective for employers. In the interest of exploring what outreach efforts were most effective and what veterans were looking for in potential employers, a multiple case study was conducted. The case study was conducted by reviewing material available online about the subject organizations and data from interviews with key staff at three organizations to determine the value of strategic partnerships with NGOs and universities. The multiple case study format explored what is currently happening in the community and what might be an effective outreach and retention tool. Leedy and Ormond caution that the case study method is limited in that there is no certainty that the findings are generalizable to other situations and the data gathered in this multiple case study is specific to the experiences of the organizations interviewed.

### **Research Questions and Hypothesis**

Research will take the form of a series of interviews as part of a multiple case study approach to evaluate the effectiveness of veterans outreach programs in local universities, a local non-governmental organization, and staff working as veteran employment coordinators in the Veterans Health Administration. The case studies of these three organizations will provide an understanding of the current structures to support and opportunities to leverage pipelines of applicants into critical HR positions within the VHA.

The case study and associated interview questions were designed to explore the

questions of (1) Will targeted outreach to local universities provide a pipeline of qualified applicants with the requisite competencies to be successful as HRM staff at the entry level? (2) Is a career ladder position incentive to remain with the VHA and progress to the journey or senior HR Specialist level? In exploring these research questions, the initial design involved reaching out to management officials at the Veterans Health Administration, the subject agency of the hypothesis. However, as these questions were explored further it was determined that those who worked closely with veteran job seekers would be able to provide insights into what works for the students they serve through their own outreach efforts and programs.

The purpose of the multiple case study research is to explore the hypothesis that through strategic partnerships with local universities and non-governmental agencies, the VHA can attract candidates who are qualified for a career ladder position and retain those employees for three-five years through a transformational training program. In order to answer the research questions and explore the hypothesis, the qualitative research used what Leedy and Ormond refer to as an emergent design. Data collected early in the investigation shaped data subsequently gathered. The emergent design provides the flexibility to adjust to the data available and explore the experiences of experts in the field of veteran outreach and retention. The design of interview questions (Appendix A), provide structure to frame the emergent design of this study of effective outreach and recruitment strategies.

### **Data Collection Plan Overview**

The data for this research paper was derived from three main sources, a review of existing data within VHA, interviews with staff at a local NGO and universities who

work with veteran job seekers, and secondary data from government documents, reports, and literature. VHA data regarding gains and losses is available to the public. For the purposes of this study VHA data will be reviewed with particular attention paid to quit rates (including transfers). Interview questions were designed with a focus on what strategies successful veteran job seekers graduating with a bachelors or masters degree in a field related to HR used as well as prospective employers. The data reviewed in this paper also included a literature review of available secondary data to establish the need for a program to support long-term succession planning efforts within the HRM profession. The review of currently existing data related to turnover rates as they relate to employees hired by VHA provides information in the context and using the language that exists within the VHA to evaluate if the current career ladder programs could serve as a model for a Veterans Transitional Training Program.

Interviews with key staff at a local nongovernmental agency, local universities and within VHA provided an overview of existing structures that can be used to attract and retain highly qualified veteran applicants to fill critical vacancies. These interviews provide stories in the context of a case study to illustrate the data related to outreach and retention introduced in the literature review. A list of interview questions is provided at Appendix A.

### **Independent Variables**

This multiple case study research is designed to explore how strategic partnerships and transformational training programs can recruit and retain highly qualified veterans for critical HRM vacancies in VHA. The independent variable is adjusted in each case study by exploring questions related to effective outreach, interests

of potential job applicants, and what veteran job applicants are looking for in a prospective employer. The study was designed with the expectation that veterans would be open to outreach in the traditional job fair format and the same training plans for career ladder positions would be an effective retention tool. The study was designed with open-ended questions to explore if those expectations were the same as what was seen by NGOs, universities, and VHA recruiters. The interviews demonstrated that different outreach strategies were effective and that there were other independent variables that could be adjusted to affect retention related to job satisfaction, respect, pay, and career growth.

### **Dependent Variables**

The purpose of this study was to explore how outreach and retention efforts affect the ability of VHA to attract and veteran applicants with aptitudes and knowledge qualifying them for appointment to a career ladder position. The assumption of the study was that outreach and career ladder opportunities would provide both a succession pipeline and retain qualified veterans in HRM positions. The interview questions were designed to inquire into the efficacy of techniques used by employers to reach out to veteran job seekers and to explore what veteran job seekers were looking for in a prospective employer. By comparing and contrasting techniques through the multiple case study method, the influence of an effective outreach and appropriate retention techniques were explored to evaluate their affect on the dependent variables of a succession pipeline and improved retention.

### **Development of Interview Questions:**

In order to gain an understanding of what universities, NGOs, and the VHA currently engaged in to reach out to veteran job seekers and explore the efficacy of career ladders, an interview was designed with open-ended questions to solicit stories and experiences from key individuals working with veteran job seekers. The survey was designed to explore the hypothesis from the perspective of outreach and retention. Questions were specifically designed to encourage those interviewed to share stories and experiences of the veterans and employers they work with in order to identify successes and challenges related to outreach and retention. Each question was tied to one of the two research questions, with a heavier focus on outreach. As the qualitative data emerged, it became clear that more information was available on the diverse outreach methods employed. This was a rich source of stories and caused the research to focus more on outreach and identifying what works from the veteran's perspective.

### **Operational Definitions:**

**Career Planning Assistance.** Refers to both outreach efforts and transformational training program activities. Outreach efforts are those directed towards veteran recruitment sources at local employment agencies and universities to meet with potential applicants and discuss career opportunities in HRM at VHA.

**Transformative Training Plan.** Defined as a competency based training plan focused on the needs of recent graduates or new appointees with military experience in human resources.

**Appointment to a career ladder position.** For the purposes of this study, the career ladder positions will be specific to those starting at the GS-7 or GS-9 level, with



promotion potential to the journey level of GS-11 or senior level of GS-12. Based on the Office of Personnel Management's qualification standards, a bachelor's degree (with superior academic achievement) or one full year of graduate level education may be used as a substitute for education at the GS-7 level. For the GS-9 level a master's degree may be used as a substitute for education (Office of Personnel Management Qualification Standard for Administrative and Management Positions, n.d.).

**Veteran Job Seekers.** Veteran job seekers for the purpose of this study would be Veterans eligible for a noncompetitive hiring authority as outlined in the Office of Personnel Management's Veterans Guide. These special hiring authorities allow for the direct hiring of qualified Veterans who meet specific criteria related to their Veteran status (Veterans Employment Initiative Vet Guide).

**Veteran College Students.** Veteran college students for the purposes of this study are defined as students who served in the military and are attending a college program at either the graduate or undergraduate level.

**Aptitudes and Knowledge.** Aptitudes and knowledge are defined in this study by meeting two criteria. The first criteria is that the qualifications be directly related to obtaining an appointment and subsequent promotions, as defined in the Office of Personnel Management's qualification standards for the Human Resources Management job series. The second criterion is that the skills encompass specific aptitudes and knowledge related to Human Resources management in the Veterans Health Administration. Researching agency documentation, reviewing existing training programs, and interviewing employees at VHA's Health Care Talent Management Office

will further define these.

**Ensuring a workforce of journey-level HR specialists to fill critical HR positions in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA).** HR Specialists were identified as a mission critical occupation in both the VHA Workforce Succession plan (VHA Workforce and Succession Strategic Plan 2016). For the purposes of this study, the identification of the elements of a transformational training plan for HR management, specifically designed to meet the needs of Veterans entering career ladder positions will support the hypothesis.

### **Internal Validity**

Factors that could affect the internal validity of this research is that while the VHA offers Pathways Programs for recent college graduates, and current college students, the experience and skills of a veteran job applicant may be slightly different. Pathways programs were designed to attract recent college graduates and current students by providing a path to federal internships for high school students, college students, and recent graduates (Miller, 2016). While veteran job seekers bring college and military experience to the workplace and the training program. Other internal threats to validity include the influence of other outreach and job training programs available to transitioning veterans.

### **External Validity**

This research may have external validity with private sector employers as well as state and local governments seeking to hire veterans with similar competencies into

HRM or other administrative fields. The finding may also be applicable within the VHA in addressing the need to hire in other administrative fields, as seasoned program analysts, administrative officers, business managers and other staff increasingly become retirement eligible. The external validity of a multiple case study is limited to the experiences of the subject of the study and may not be easily generalized to another population.

## **Results and Findings**

This chapter provides the raw data collected for this study along with this researcher's findings as they relate to the hypothesis that targeted outreach and tailored retention techniques will recruit and retain qualified and skilled HRM professionals. Based on a thorough examination and analysis of the raw data, the following questions were asked: What does this data indicate and what does it mean? This chapter provides the reader with the essential elements relevant to answering the main question of this research: Will targeted outreach to local universities provide a pipeline of qualified HRM applicants who will stay with VHA for careers in Human Resource Management?

### **Overview of Results**

A multiple case study was conducted by reviewing websites and official documents related to NGOs, local universities, and the VHA related to veteran employment, retention, and outreach efforts. The objective of the survey was to identify the most effective forms of outreach to veteran job seekers and what strategies VHA could implement to retain those job seekers selected for careers in HRM. Based on interviews of four individuals associated with one NGO, two local universities, and a VHA recruiter, the hypothesis was confirmed and strategies were identified. The data

analysis in this portion will include the themes and findings from interviews with key individuals within the organizations studied. The themes will be broken down into two categories related to the research questions. The first category will be related to the question of whether targeted outreach to local universities provide a pipeline of qualified applicants with the requisite competencies to be successful as HRM staff at the entry level. The second category will explore if a career ladder position is incentive to remain with the VHA and progress to the journey or senior HR Specialist level and remain with the agency for three to five years.

Secondary data gleaned from a literature review and government documents provided examples of cases and strategies in the private sector, state, local and federal government to attract veterans. It also highlighted the importance of veteran outreach and employment to increase the benefits of diversity in the workplace. The literature review supported elements of the hypothesis in that (1) the program should provide an element of outreach to potential veteran applicants; (2) career ladder positions have the potential to provide incentives to remain with the VHA; and (3) career planning is essential following onboarding to develop a skilled workforce.

Primary data expanded on the secondary by providing information regarding what types of outreach veterans preferred and what veterans were looking for from a prospective employer. While the data supported the importance of career-ladders and financial incentives to remain with VHA, it also spoke to other themes related to quality of life at work that were important to consider in retention efforts.

The results and findings support and expand on the hypothesis that through

strategic partnerships with local universities and non-governmental agencies, the VHA can attract candidates who are qualified for a career ladder position and retain those employees for three to five years through a transformational training program. This support and expansion through experiences of agencies and organizations surveyed in the multiple cases studies is highlighted in two themes outlined in the following section.

### **Theme 1 – Targeted outreach is essential**

In the case study of Organization 1, employers were encouraged to focus on how to market job opportunities to veterans. Specifically, these employers contacted them with the question of how to attract veterans. Organization 1, advocated piloting peer-mentorship programs to build a network for veterans after college and to identify what skills are needed to move on to a career or a better position. All four organizations recommended targeted outreach events such as resume workshops, classroom visits, campus visits, and other activities that provide a tangible benefit or outcome for veteran job seekers. These organizations recognized these activities as key to getting veteran students to attend and learn more about opportunities with the prospective employer.

Organization 1 and Organization 3 noted that it wasn't just college experience that veterans were looking for, but also job experience in the form of internships, volunteer work, and work studies. Organization 3 strongly advocated for internships as a way of gaining experience and a foot in the door for potential veteran applicants.

Organization 1 indicated that there are many outreach programs that offer a direct link to employers, however to be effective it is essential for the programs to be well thought out with a connection to the community to be effective. Similarly, Organization

2 pointed out that awareness of smaller universities and outreach to those communities might provide a pipeline. Organization 4 described a successful outreach effort when they visited a local vet center while they were serving coffee and donuts. All four organizations stressed the importance of the relationship between the employer, the community, and the veteran focused organization in reaching out to prospective applicants.

Organization 3 recognized that one significant challenge is that veteran students may not plan as early as they should for the next step in their career. This same organization provided an example of how preparation and a plan that was put in place by the veteran student contributed to him successfully finding a job with a government agency. Organization 4 recognized a similar challenge in that some veteran student organizations weren't as focused on career development. Organization 4 noted that outreach to sources such as work centers, unemployment offices, and military transition offices offered more opportunity to recruit veterans for jobs in the VHA.

### **Theme 2 – Tailored retention strategies are critical**

When asked what veterans are looking for from prospective employers, Organization 1 responded that they were looking for long term prospects for career advancement, skill they would obtain from a prospective employer and consideration of their military experience as an added value to the job. Organization 4 provided more detailed information related to retention of veterans and organizational culture.

Organization 1, also added that while professional development was important it also should be tied to the next steps in the employees career. Organization 4, specifically

addressed how the VHA's Technical Career Field Program could be leveraged to attract veteran job seekers. Organization 4 also mentioned that bringing on entry-level interns would serve as a pipeline to develop future HRM staff. Organization 4 focused on the need to provide training and tools to support the developing HRM employee as they build their skills in HR management.

Organization 1, also stressed the importance for employers to be aware of the needs of veteran employees and offer benefits such as employee assistance programs to support all employees, including veterans. Similarly, Organization 4 described a culture where the HR office promotes an open door policy. In addition Organization 4 described a veteran-centric culture for patients that was reflected in how employees were treated when visiting the HR office. Organization 4 reported that advertising the benefits for veterans at VHA as well as the benefits of employment is an important recruitment and retention tool. In Organization 4's outreach events information packets include more than just information on benefits of employment, they also contain information related to benefits available to veterans.

Organization 3, cited internships as an example of how veteran students can learn valuable job skills while in school or while starting out in a new career field. Organization 4 also advocated for internships, work-study, and volunteer programs to grow the skills of prospective and current employees who are seeking advancement.

The case studies and associated interview questions were designed to explore the questions of (1) Will targeted outreach to local universities provide a pipeline of qualified applicants with the requisite competencies to be successful as HRM staff at the

entry level? (2) Is a career ladder positions incentive to remain with the VHA and progress to the journey or senior HR Specialist level?

The case studies suggest that employers who engage in targeted outreach programs have the best opportunity to attract veteran job seekers to their events. The importance of career planning highlighted in the literature review and in Organization 3 indicates that this may be an effective outreach technique to engage in as it provides a clear benefit to the veteran job seeker. In addition, this type of targeted out reach provides the opportunity for an employer to connect with interested job seekers and the local community.

The case studies reinforce the importance of career ladder positions as well as job enhancement activities such as career development, work-life balance, and access to resources to support the veteran employee. While a career ladder is incentive to remain it is important to design a training plan to engage the employee and further both organizational goals and the employees' goals.

### **Significant Findings**

The multiple case study provided significant findings highlighting effective outreach strategies and a variety of suggestions for what may improve retention of HRM employees. Effective outreach strategies include: tailored information regarding benefits, use of internships, partnering with the community and considering what the veteran job seeker is looking for when designing an outreach event or material. Tailored retention is critical to reduce turnover in HRM, and the most effective strategies are connected to an organizational culture that supports the veteran employee. These tailored strategies



include building competencies in management related to hiring and retaining veteran employees, promoting employee and veteran benefit programs, and promoting opportunities for career growth through professional development programs, such as the Technical Career Field intern program.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **Conclusions**

The data in the literature review, as well as in the research, supports the hypothesis that through strategic partnerships with local universities and non-governmental agencies, the VHA can attract candidates who are qualified for a career ladder position and retain those employees for three-five years through a transformational training program. The data gathered suggests that targeted outreach designed to meet the veteran student's interests is most effective. In addition, the partnering with local outreach organizations is critical to the success of recruitment efforts and in tailoring these activities. Some organizations are more social, and outreach in a social setting is most effective. Other organizations are focused on internships and work experience, and as such, outreach in the form of job workshops, resume workshops, and other activities with a clear benefit for veterans seeking a job are effective in attracting an audience of potential applicants. When considering retention, the most robust data was collected from Organization 4, a VHA recruitment office. The data gleaned from Organization 4 indicated a veteran-centric culture that was reflected in how employees were treated with opportunities for professional development designed to improve job skills correlated to what was seen in the literature and what the other three organizations believed might be

helpful.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendation 1- Strategic Partnerships with NGOs**

In order to identify veteran job seekers with the competencies and abilities to be successful HRM staff within VHA, partnerships with NGOs are crucial. Local VHA recruiters should establish close working relationships with local NGOs to identify the interests of veteran job seekers and the best sources of qualified applicants in the local area. This recommendation should be implemented as part of the local VHA's 2017 Workforce Succession Plan. These strategic partnerships should result in the ability to determine if candidates are available from this pool of potential applicants within 60 days of identifying a vacant HRM position.

### **Recommendation 2- Partner with local colleges and universities to offer career planning resources**

In order to attract veteran students and job seekers to employment opportunities within VHA, partnerships that offer career-planning resources should be implemented as part of the local VHA facility's workforce succession plan. The workforce planner should identify colleges and universities with students who are interested in careers in the federal government, particularly in human resources. Once the institutions are identified, the workforce planners should work with recruiters to develop and implement workshops and internship programs to attract veteran students and job seekers. These strategies should be implemented within the first 60 days of the approval of the workforce

succession plan.

### **Recommendation 3 – Focus on enhancements to organizational culture**

In order to retain critical HRM staff, a culture of continuous learning with a focus on serving our nation's veterans must be implemented and integrated into the local VHA facility's workforce succession plan. Facility specific action plans must be developed by local workforce planners within the year to begin the work of enhancing organizational culture. In addition, HR Development staff is critical to implementing the transformational training program that will ensure newly hired veterans into career ladder positions build on their competencies and skills and are integrated into the culture of veteran-centered care VHA offers. Effectiveness of these strategies should be evaluated by reviewing results of the annual all-employee survey, with a focus on questions related to organizational culture.

Each of these recommendations provides a pathway to implement key strategies offered by NGOs, local universities, VHA recruiters, and studies documented in the literature review. However, in order to determine if these strategies are effective, more research should be done into the efficacy of each of these strategies. HR specialists with duties that focus on HR development and HR data analysis should conduct research and evaluation of this data. By analyzing the use of hiring authorities, speed of hire, and retention data, these staff can provide a snapshot to leadership of the effectiveness of HR recruitment strategies and impact of transformational training programs on organizational culture.

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## Appendix A – Research Questions

1. I'd like to hear more about the work your organization does as it relates to veterans transitioning from college to careers or military to careers.
2. Do you have any successes or challenges you'd like to share? Any that particularly relate to employment in the federal government? Healthcare? Human Resources?
3. Are there some stories you'd like to share on this topic as it relates to transitioning from the military to a career in human resources or a related field?
4. What have you seen that veterans are looking for from prospective employers?
5. What types of outreach activities have you seen that are most successful and/or appealing to veteran job seekers and students?
6. In your experience what is that keeps veteran job seekers in a job? Career opportunities? Educational opportunities? Quality of Life/Work Life Balance? Other?
7. Any other stories or information that you would like to share?