

## Retaining United States Military Veterans in the Civilian Workforce

By

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Veterans of the United States (U.S.) armed forces are leaving their post-service employment at a rapid rate, with 50% leaving their first job within a year of transition (Ford, 2017). With approximately 200,000 veterans transitioning into civilian employment each year, these numbers are troubling (p.37).

Veteran retention rates in the U.S. are as low as 20% to 35%, in the first two years post-service transition. Retention rates among employees in the U.S. workforce are approximately 77%, significantly higher than that of transitioning veterans (Work Institute, 2019). This high rate of churn among transitioning veterans has a large financial im-

act on employers, costing millions of dollars in addition to the loss of productivity. In addition to the high cost for employers, veterans are also negatively impacted by post-service employment churn with periods of unemployment, difficulty assimilating into civilian culture, a lack of peer and social support, and social isolation. Organizations need to have a better understanding of the factors that affect veteran churn.

This study provides a systematic review of the literature to identify the factors impacting veteran churn rates and how organizations can increase veteran retention. The findings of this

research include six common themes that contribute to veteran retention and attrition: social support/peer support, culture, health (mental health, physical disabilities, and functional impairment), supportive leadership, cultural competency, and mismatched job skills. The themes were viewed through the theoretical lens of

social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The article provides concrete recommendations for employers that may help to reduce veteran churn, which can save employers money and improve the veteran transition process. The recommendations consist of the following two overarching areas and are based on the findings and flow

**Organizations are incurring significant economic losses due to the high rate of U.S. military veteran attrition during periods of post-service transition. The study explores the factors affecting veteran churn and makes recommendations for employers that may reduce this turnover.**

through the theoretical lens:

- 1) Culturally competent hiring and training, which includes job/skills match, veteran-centric onboarding, an established performance management plan, clear career progression, and a clear understanding of veterans' health issues, as well as how the disability laws protect veterans.
- 2) Supportive practices, including social/peer support, and supportive leadership, which includes programs that promote social/peer support as well as support from leadership that promotes a positive work-life balance.

**Keywords:** Veteran integration, veteran culture, veteran transition, cultural competency, social support, supportive leadership, social identity theory, combat disabilities, mental health, veteran churn, veteran retention

Veterans, of the United States (U.S.) armed forces, are leaving their post-service employment at a rapid rate, with 50% of veterans leaving their first job within a year of transition, compared to only 27% of the total civilian workforce in the U.S. (Ford, 2017, p.37 ; Workforce Institute, 2019, p.7). This high rate of attrition can have large financial impacts on employers. With 9.8 million veterans in the workforce, the costs are adding up (Rudstam, Strobel Gower, & Cook, 2012, p.87). Every year since 2014, over 200,00 transitioning veterans have entered the workforce (Ford, 2017, p.37). The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) (2016) ascertains the cost to hire a new employee on average is approximately \$4,129 (p.1). Therefore, the cost to replace 50% of veterans each year (100,000) would be \$412.9 million. During the second year, when an additional 15% to 30% of veterans change jobs, further costs of \$123.87 to \$247.74 million are incurred. Additionally, many veterans will change jobs multiple times within the first three years after they transition, further increasing the financial impact on employers. These figures do not account for losses in productivity caused by turnover and downtime, which also impact an organization's bottom line. Productivity can be affected by the average time to replace an employee, which is 42 days, according to SHRM (2016).

Veterans report difficulties transitioning between military and civilian employment, with 50% of veterans reporting periods of unemployment after transitioning into the civilian workforce (Kintzle & Castro, 2018, p.118). Transitioning veterans lack civilian work experience that would better aid them in obtaining civilian employment. During the transition period, veterans must integrate into a new work culture establishing a new identity as a civilian employee (Scurfield & Platoni, 2013). This process can lead to crises of identity for veterans, leaving them feeling torn between their military culture and their new civilian culture (Demers, 2011). Along with difficulty transitioning into the civilian workforce, veterans may simultaneously experience feelings of disconnection from family, friends, and co-workers; anyone who does not share in their military experiences and culture (Ahern et al., 2015). This disconnection occurs during a time when many veterans have little or no contact with military peers, leaving veterans without the support of colleagues and friends during a critical time. Compounding the difficulties of assimilating to a new culture, many veterans may also be dealing with service-connected disabilities that can significantly impact their ability

to obtain and retain fulfilling employment (Harrod, Miller, Henry, & Zivin, 2017). Failure to successfully transition into the civilian workforce can lead to veteran unemployment, underemployment, and may compound existing physical or mental health issues (Ahern et al., 2015).

Based on the management problem, the following research questions were developed: *What external factors influence the retention of transitioning U.S. military veterans in the civilian workforce? How can employers mitigate the effects of external factors on churn among transitioning U.S. military veterans?*

## Literature Summary

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) (2009) provides transition services (Transition Assistance Program (TAPS) and VA employment programs) for service members leaving active duty service. However, only approximately 55% of separating service members are participating in the workshops, despite the programs being mandatory. The Army reported the lowest participation of all branches of service, the rate at 33% (Clemens & Milsom, 2008, p.247). The other branches of service reported participation

rates between 64-72% (p.247). Although transitioning veterans are provided with policies and programs to help them find employment, including the American Jobs Act, Veterans Job Corps, and Veterans Opportunity to Work to Hire Heroes

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Act, veterans still encounter employment difficulties. Surprisingly, research shows that transitioning veterans of the Navy and Air Force experience higher rates of unemployment after transition in spite of higher participation in transition services (Horton et al., 2013). In addition, veterans with mental health concerns have a more difficult time with employment challenges (Harrod et al., 2017). While there are many programs that aid veterans in gaining employment, little research was found regarding veteran retention. This study addresses this knowledge gap by determining what factors affect the retention of U.S. military veterans in the civilian workforce and how organizations can mitigate their effects.

The literature review sought to determine what factors affect U.S. military veterans' ability to successfully transition into the civilian workforce and what specific actions organizations can take to assist veterans in a successful transition, while also reducing high rates of veteran attrition. Table 1 provides a summary of the literature findings addressing the key constructs found within the literature, as well as the percentage of articles that discussed each construct. It is important to note that these percentages

## Methodology

The research question article enlisted a systematic review of recent empirical literature focused on the retention of military veterans in the civilian workforce. The systematic review provides an extensive search for evidence to explore what is known or not known about the research question utilizing OneSearch (a university compilation of 45 different library databases) and ProQuest databases.

The following search strings were used:

1. (retention OR retain OR attrition OR turnover OR churn) AND (transition\* OR return\*) n5 vet\*
2. (job\* OR career\* OR vocation\* OR occupation\* OR profession\* OR employ\*) n5 (support\* OR assist\* OR aid\* OR help\*) AND (transition\* OR return\*) n5 vet\*

The literature search was limited to relevant, scholarly-empirical literature published in English between 2011-2019. Due to the impacts of the economic downturn in 2008 and the subsequent effects on the job market, the date range was limited to the most current literature. The date parameter search was also supported when a search of the literature from 1944-2010 did not reveal additional relevant literature. In addition, the research indicated that many of the issues with transition were found to be specific to veterans of current wars, thus reinforcing the exclusion of earlier literature (Horton et al. 2013). Studies focused on military veterans from countries other than the U.S. were excluded. This exclusion was to limit uncontrollable cultural and economic factors, and to better address the population studied. The initial literature search, including snowballed literature (literature located using the references from articles returned by the literature search), returned 188 results. After duplicates were removed, the remaining 86 articles titles and abstracts were reviewed, and those that did not meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria were eliminated. The 23 articles remaining were screened for relevance in answering the research question. After one exclusion, due to a lack of evidence to help answer the research question, 22 articles remained. Appendix A provides the PRISMA diagram of the literature selection.

A critical evaluation of the evidence was conducted to increase rigor and ensure the quality of the included studies. The selection of a literature sample was evaluated using a quality/ relevance appraisal framework. All 22 articles meet the established criteria of 1) quality in the transparency in the reporting, 2) methodological quality, 3) appropriateness of methods, and 4) quality of the message in the research. Each item was assessed on a scale of 1-3 to indicate low to high quality with an average overall score assigned. The results can be found in Appendix A. Five of the 22 articles were scored between 1.0- 2.0 0 (Davis & Minnis, 2017; Ostovary, & Dapprich, 2011.; Wewiorski et al., 2018; King, 2012; Sayer et al., 2014) indicating that some of the criteria were either poorly met or not addressed. However, these flaws did not appear to compromise the evidence provided, and these articles contributed to the findings. Therefore, all 22 articles were included in the primary findings and added value to the discussion.

After the quality appraisal, 22 articles were coded to develop themes and patterns during the thematic analysis. The author employed memoing techniques to record the coding, operational, and analytical processes. Memoing provides researchers with the ability to maintain continuity in the analysis of the data and involves recording keywords, phrases, and concepts (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). Common themes were extracted for the literature utilizing manual coding techniques in Microsoft Excel and ATLAS.ti, which is a qualitative analysis coding tool (ATLAS.ti, 2019). The findings from the review articles were synthesized into six themes. The summary of the included literature is presented by theme in Table 1 of the article, along with the primary themes produced from the coding.

represent the literature found that discusses these constructs, rather than providing correlation.

The six factors, extracted from the common themes, support the recommendations for employers. The recommendations are based on the literature and flow through the theoretical lens of belonging and consist of:

1) *culturally competent hiring and training*, which includes job/skills match, veteran-centric onboarding,

an established performance management plan, clear career progression, and a clear understanding of veterans' health issues, as well as how the disability laws protect veterans, and

2) *supportive practices, including social/peer support, and supportive leadership*, which includes programs that promote social/peer support as well as support from leadership that promotes a positive work-life balance.

**Table 1: Themes Affecting Retention of Military Veterans**

Finding	Sources	%
<p><b>Social/Peer Support</b> - Social support is widely accepted as having a positive impact during periods of high stress and can help mitigate the stress of adjusting to a new culture. Social support is important for transitioning veterans and may come in various forms such as society, community, family, and friends. Lack of supportive relationships contributes to issues with the transition into the civilian workforce, which can be mitigated by supportive workplace services. Creating peer support groups among veterans can foster a self-supporting network. Social support is a known protective factor that can help veterans feel more connected to their new civilian environment; its use as a coping strategy for veterans dates back to World War II. Social support can mitigate the effect of daily stresses experienced by veterans as they deal with changes in both their personal and professional lives. Veterans who lack supportive relationships may have more issues with transition into the civilian workforce.</p>	<p>(Redmond et al., 2015; Dillard &amp; Yu, 2016; Rudstam, Strobel, Gower, &amp; Cook, 2012; Ostovary &amp; Dapprich, 2011; Hammer, Kossek, Anger, Bodner, &amp; Zimmerman, 2011; Clemens &amp; Milsom, 2008; Kintzle &amp; Castro, 2018; Ahern et al., 2015; Liggans et al., 2019; Davis &amp; Minnis, 2017; Hammer, Wan, Brockwood, Mohr, &amp; Carlson, 2017; Wewiorski et al., 2018; Sayer, Carlson, &amp; Frazier, 2014; Scurfield &amp; Platoni, 2013; Ford, 2017; Kabat-Farr, Cortina, &amp; Marchiondo, 2018; Demers, 2011; Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, &amp; Hammer, 2011)</p>	<p>77%</p>
<p><b>Culture</b> - Culture is a unique social environment that includes shared values, mission, rules, and ideology. Although men and women join the military from widely diverse backgrounds, through the process of assimilation, members become indoctrinated into a joint military culture. Military culture, including social, historical, political, and cultural constructs, help to shape the service members' identity. Servicemembers' civilian identities are replaced by their new group service identity, focused on military culture. Veteran culture combines work, community, and home life with military leaders who often genuinely care about the well-being of the member of their units</p> <p>Transitioning veterans may find themselves torn between military and civilian contexts, which have different cultural norms and beliefs. Veterans, who have served for many years and experienced multiple deployments, as well as potential exposure to numerous traumatic events, may be unable to disengage from their military culture and engage in productive civilian employment. Veterans experience a need to transition towards a self-centered culture, moving away from a team-centric culture.</p>	<p>(Redmond et al., 2015; Dillard &amp; Yu, 2016; Rudstam, Strobel, Gower, &amp; Cook, 2012; Ostovary &amp; Dapprich, 2011; Hammer, Kossek, Anger, Bodner, &amp; Zimmerman, 2011; Clemens &amp; Milsom, 2008; Kintzle &amp; Castro, 2018; Ahern et al., 2015; Harrod et al., 2017; Liggans et al., 2019; Davis &amp; Minnis, 2017; King, 2012; Demers, 2011; Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, &amp; Hammer, 2011)</p>	<p>73%</p>

### Theoretical Lens

In developing this paper, the author analyzed existing theories related to social needs, including social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which provides the lens through which we are better able to understand the challenges faced by transitioning veterans. The analysis produced the theoretical foundation for this study, which provided a new approach drawing on existing literature to advance theory in the areas of veteran transition. Military cultural competency can be achieved by organizations that understand veterans' unique skills, needs, and culture. Understanding these needs allows organiza-

tions to develop and institute appropriate supportive programs, which can help move veterans towards more successful transitions.

Social identity theory addresses how social identities can affect people's attitudes and behaviors regarding their in-group and out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identities are most instrumental when individuals consider their self-concept as critically linked to their membership in a group to which they have strong emotional ties. This theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), addresses the ways that social identities affect people's feelings of belonging within groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Individuals



**Table 1: Themes Affecting Retention of Military Veterans (Continued)**

<p><b><i>Mental and Physical Disabilities and Functional Impairment</i></b>                  - Disabilities are a significant barrier to post-service employment for our nation's veterans. Veterans suffering from mental and physical difficulties are likely to experience more significant employment concerns, such as finding and maintaining employment and higher rates of unemployment. Veterans suffering from combat-related mental health disorders tend to have increase absenteeism, lower job satisfaction, and more problems with interpersonal work relationships. Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) experienced employment issues at five times the rate of the general population. Symptoms of combat disabilities may affect veterans' functional capacity and negatively impact their ability to be effective in the workplace. There was a link between functional impairment and poorer overall physical health and increased work absenteeism. Functional impairment was correlated to job performance outcomes that directly impact veterans' careers. However, it is essential to note that not all veterans experience PTSD, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), or depression, a majority of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans reported positive military experiences that provided an increased appreciation of life.</p>	<p>(Redmond et al., 2015; Herrell et al., 2014; Dillard &amp; Yu, 2016; Rudstam et al., 2012; Ostovary &amp; Dapprich, 2011; Hammer et al., 2011; Clemens &amp; Milsom, 2008; Kintzle &amp; Castro, 2018; Ahern et al., 2015; Harrod et al., 2017; Liggans et al., 2019; Davis &amp; Minnis, 2017; Hammer et al., 2017; Wewiorski et al., 2018; Sayer et al., 2014; Scurfield &amp; Platoni, 2013; Kabat-Farr et al., 2018; Horton, et al., 2013; Demers, 2011)</p>	<p>73%</p>
<p><b><i>Supportive Leadership</i></b> - Veterans benefit from supportive leaders and organizations that have an understanding of veterans' issues; they were perceived as more willing to work with veterans during times of distress. Work-family support involves the supervisor being supportive of the employee's ability to successfully balance work and family roles. This type of supportive leadership was shown to significantly reduce work-family conflict and provided veterans with a greater sense of social support. Leadership that was supportive of work-family conflict had the most significant impact on turn over intentions and job satisfaction for those veterans with the highest work-family conflict. Additionally, when employees perceive organizational support for work-family conflict, there was a significant reduction in conflict. This support allows veterans the ability to successfully manage work and family environments in ways that increased successful transition. Family-supportive supervisor behavior was also related to significant improvement in health outcomes for veterans, which can improve engagement and productivity. The research indicates that supportive leadership can promote organization trust leading to reduced turnover.</p>	<p>(Redmond et al. 2015; Dillard &amp; Yu, 2016; Rudstam et al., 2012; Hammer et al., 2011; Ahern et al., 2015; Liggans et al., 2019; Hammer et al., 2017; King, 2012; Scurfield &amp; Platoni, 2013; Ford, 2017; Kossek et al., 2011)</p>	<p>55%</p>

make comparisons between the in-group and out-group, which can either positively or negatively impact the individual's self-concept. Figure 1 provides a theoretical model of social identity theory.

Veterans continue to identify with their military group, in part due to the distinctive nature and prestige associated with the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Transitioning veterans' self-concepts are tied to their military ethos. Veteran culture promotes the group over the individual, which can be

seen in the Navy's unofficial motto, "Non sibi sed patriae" translated as "not self but country." Transition can be affected by dramatic changes in attitude, behaviors, norms, and feelings, which may lead to identity conflicts for veterans, which can negatively impact their sense of belonging.

Social identity affects how veterans see their civilian co-workers, but it also affects how civilians see veteran coworkers, especially when there are misconcep-

**Table 1: Themes Affecting Retention of Military Veterans (Continued)**

<p><b>Cultural Competency</b> - Post 911 veterans are more uniquely diverse than those from past wars, consisting of more women and minorities than veterans of prior war eras. Previous wars produced significant numbers of veterans, 12% of the population served in WWII, and 2% in Vietnam. Only 0.5% of Americans have served in military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, which decreases the number of Americans who have had direct exposure to service members and veterans. Employers' who lack an understanding of military culture can contribute to veterans' inability to transition into the civilian workforce successfully. Employers report significant gaps in knowledge regarding the creation of employment practices for veterans with disabilities, specifically PTSD and TBI. There were also gaps in knowledge regarding laws protecting veterans with disabilities. Employers' lack of cultural competency has led to a stigma regarding hiring veterans. Employers need to focus efforts on educating themselves on veteran culture, including veteran skillsets, experiences, and disabilities. Also, veterans have become immersed in the military culture and have difficulty transitioning into the civilian culture. This culture clash can lead to frustration and workplace difficulties for veterans.</p>	<p>(Redmond et al., 2015; Dillard &amp; Yu, 2016; Rudstam et al., 2012; Hammer et al., 2011; Clemens &amp; Milsom, 2008; Ahern, et al. (2015); Harrod et al., 2017; Liggans et al., 2019; Davis &amp; Minnis, 2017; Hammer et al., 2017; King, 2012; Scurfield &amp; Platon, 2013)</p>	<p>55%</p>
<p><b>Mismatch Skills</b> - Employment is more than just a job for many veterans; it is a calling, a way of life, and is a part of their identity and community. Veterans are looking for employment that is stable, intellectually challenging, and contributes to society. Recreating this type of environment in civilian employment can be difficult. Veterans often have difficulty translating their military skills and qualifications to civilian job qualifications. Some may have skills that do not translate jobs in the civilian world. Also, lack of planning for transition often forces veterans to take a job after leaving military service that does not fit their long-term employment goals, making them more likely to churn. Many veterans lean toward positions that align with their military skills and experiences, even though these jobs were assigned based on the individual's aptitude rather than employment interests. Veterans with high levels of training, experience, and security clearance may feel a sense of demotion if their employment does not utilize and appreciate their military skills. Veterans reported feeling like they were starting over and often found themselves underemployed in lower-paying positions. These feelings can also lead to churn. This was not always true; some veterans moved towards career change that reduced their level of responsibility while still providing them with stability and predictability.</p>	<p>(Rudstam et al., 2012; Clemens &amp; Milsom, 2008; Kintzle &amp; Castro, 2018; Ahern et al., 2015; Harrod et al., 2017; Davis &amp; Minnis, 2017; Wewiorski et al., 2018; King, 2012; Ford, 2017; Clemens &amp; Milsom, 2008)</p>	<p>36%</p>

tions relate to culture and combat-related disabilities (Dirthe & Branscombe, 2018). Transitioning veterans (out-group) can experience incivility from civilian coworkers (in-group) because they fail to meet the standards of the in-group (Kabat-Farr et al., 2018). The stress, caused by veterans' failure to assume the social identity associated with their new organizations, can contribute to poor health, job dissatisfaction, and withdrawal from peers (veterans

remain part of the out-group) (Dirthe & Branscombe, 2018). Veterans who experience incivility and lack of inclusion in the workplace may experience negative impacts on health and transition, as well as increased turnover intentions related to their organization. Organizations can mitigate these issues through training programs that promote civility and cultural competency (Kabat-Farr et al., 2018). The goal should be to help veterans find balance and join

the civilian in-group while considering their multiple identities.

The military culture/ethos provides service members with a sense of *belonging* among their brothers and sisters in arms, their military family. Unit members develop intimate bonds of friendship, meeting their need for belonging. Service members, who were once surrounded by their military family, may now find themselves alone, traversing this strange new civilian culture without a “battle buddy” at their side. Veterans may feel a loss of belonging and social support during this critical time. Military culture is focused on providing service members with status, recognition, and respect. Service members receive recognition for their service with awards, commendations, promotions, and the respect of their peers. The Air Force slogan, “Aim high, fly-fight-win,” the Army’s use of the slogan “Be all you can be,” and the Marine’s slogan “The few, the proud, the Marines” represents the standards of the service to which members are held, pushing them towards reaching high levels of esteem. Veterans with high levels of training, experience, and security clearance may feel a sense of demotion as they transition into the civilian workforce, primarily if their employment does not utilize and appreciate their military skills (Harrod et al., 2017).

Social identity theory focuses on the impacts of group identification on the self and social identity

(Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Fostering change at the organizational level may produce better results. The literature suggests that for veterans to successfully transition, they must have a sense of social acceptance and belonging. This theory explicitly deals with concepts of identity needs, providing us with a better understanding of the aspects of veterans’ belongingness motivation during transition.

## Discussion

To provide context for the reader and to promote cultural competency, Table 2 provides a list of commonly used terms defined within the literature that may help expand the readers’ knowledge regarding military terminology and constructs.

Although much of the literature provided consistent conclusions regarding the contributing factors affecting veteran retention post-military service, there were some discrepancies in the study’s outcomes. The Horton et al. (2013) study found that PTSD was not a significant predictor of employment status among transitioning veterans. This finding conflicts with numerous other studies reviewed, including Herrell et al. (2014), and Redmond et al. (2015), which found PTSD contributed to employment difficulties. However, the Horton et al. (2013) study looked at different mental health diagnoses

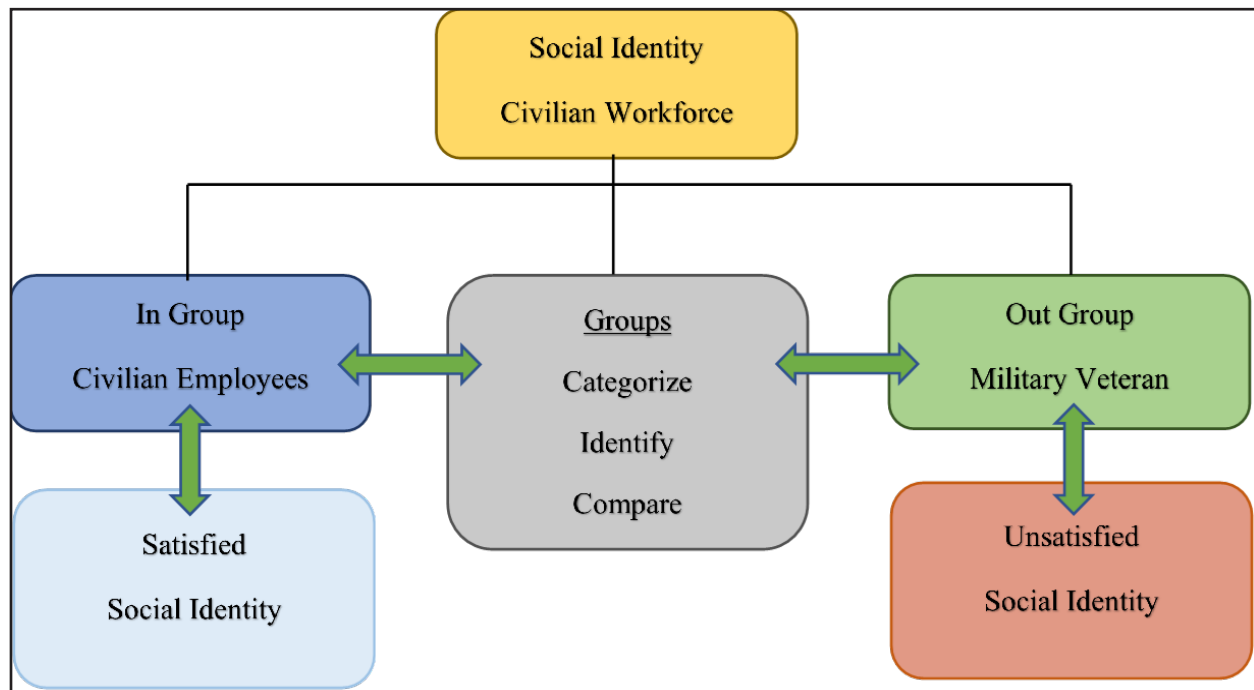


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of Social Identity Theory. The model is the basis of social identity adapted from Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). *An integrative theory of intergroup conflict*. In W.A. Austin & S. Worschel (Eds.). *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relationships* (pp. 33-47). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole

Table 2: Concepts with Definitions

Terms	Definitions
Veteran	A person who served in the active-duty military or National Guard (army, naval, or air service) and were discharged from service under either “honorable” and “other than honorable” conditions.
Transition	The movement, change, or evolution from, active or guard, military service to civilian employment. Successful transition occurs when a transitioning veteran is hired and retained in a civilian employment position for longer than the average one year.
PTSD effect in the workplace	Symptoms (Anger, depression, anxiety, intrusive thoughts or memories, flashbacks, etc.) may affect the veteran’s ability to function effectively in the workplace (Harrod et al., 2017).
Feeling of demotion	Veterans civilian employment has lesser levels of responsibility and perceived leadership than they experienced in their military careers (Harrod et al., 2017).
Work ethics	Veterans expressed that civilian co-workers lacked the same work ethic they experienced in the military (Kintzle & Castro, 2018).
Lack of peer support	Having lost their military peers, veterans may not find supportive relationships with coworkers in their civilian employment (Dillard & Yu, 2016).
Supportive Leadership	Supervisors who are supportive of family obligations, providing emotional support by listening and showing caring behaviors toward employees with family demands (King, 2012).
Military family	Military culture can be experienced as a family. The veteran felt taken care of and supported (Ahern et al., 2015).
Lack of cultural competency	Civilians making unwarranted assumptions about veterans and their time in service or asking unwanted questions (did you ever shoot someone?), and/or connection unrelated personal experiences can be seen as disrespectful to a veteran (Rudstam, Strobel Gower, & Cook, 2012; Davis & Minnis, 2017).
Cultural competency	The understanding of the uniqueness of veterans’ perceptions, attitudes, and workplace behaviors, including how they differ from civilian employees (Dillard & Yu, 2016).
Functional impairment	A loss of functional capacity affecting the veteran’s capability to work as a direct result of a medical condition (Herrell, Riviere, Edens, & Thomas, 2014).
TBI	Sudden damage to the brain caused by a sudden injury. It may result from multiple injuries and can produce permanent brain damage and impaired functioning (Harrod et al., 2017).



separately, many of the other studies look at mental illness as one construct rather than distinguishing between PTSD, TBI, depression, anxiety, and panic disorders. This is an important distinction and indicates a need for further research into these disorders as separate constructs.

There was consensus in several areas of the research. For example, the phenomenon of veteran attrition was not found exclusively in civilian employment. Higher education institutions are experiencing similar churn among veteran students with veteran graduation rates much lower than those of traditional students (52%) (Dillard & Yu, 2016, p.182). Factors mitigating veteran churn, at higher education institutions, were similar to those within the civilian workforce. These findings allow us to reasonably deduce that problems with veteran transition reach beyond civilian employment.

In addition, the literature revealed that being separated from military service for more than a year was a protective factor and reduced the likelihood of employment-related issues. Ahern et al. (2015) and Horton et al. (2013) studies support this having both found that transition difficulties are mitigated by time, with the first year being the most difficult. It is important to note that veterans experiencing mental/physical health issues might experience prolonged periods of transitional conflict beyond the first year, which may help explain additional veteran

churn in years two and three after, military-separation (Ford, 2017).

Research indicated that combat experience alone was not strongly correlated to employment difficulties or unemployment (Horton et al., 2013). However, combat experience was related to an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and anger, all of which were significantly linked to reintegration challenges and employment difficulties (Demers, 2011). Among those veterans who retire from active duty, depression, anxiety, and panic disorders were also significantly positively correlated with unemployment (Horton et al., 2013). Again, this points to a need to look more closely at the constructs experienced by those who have been involved in combat environments, rather than looking at combat experience as one whole construct. It also indicates that not all veterans who have been exposed to combat will experience negative outcomes.

## Recommendations

Veterans who can obtain and retain satisfying employment have an easier time transitioning (Wewiorski et al., 2018). Human resource professionals can help veterans accelerate their ability to adapt to civilian culture (King, 2012). Figure 3 provides a conceptual framework of the progression of transitioning veterans through the lens of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When a veteran's needs are

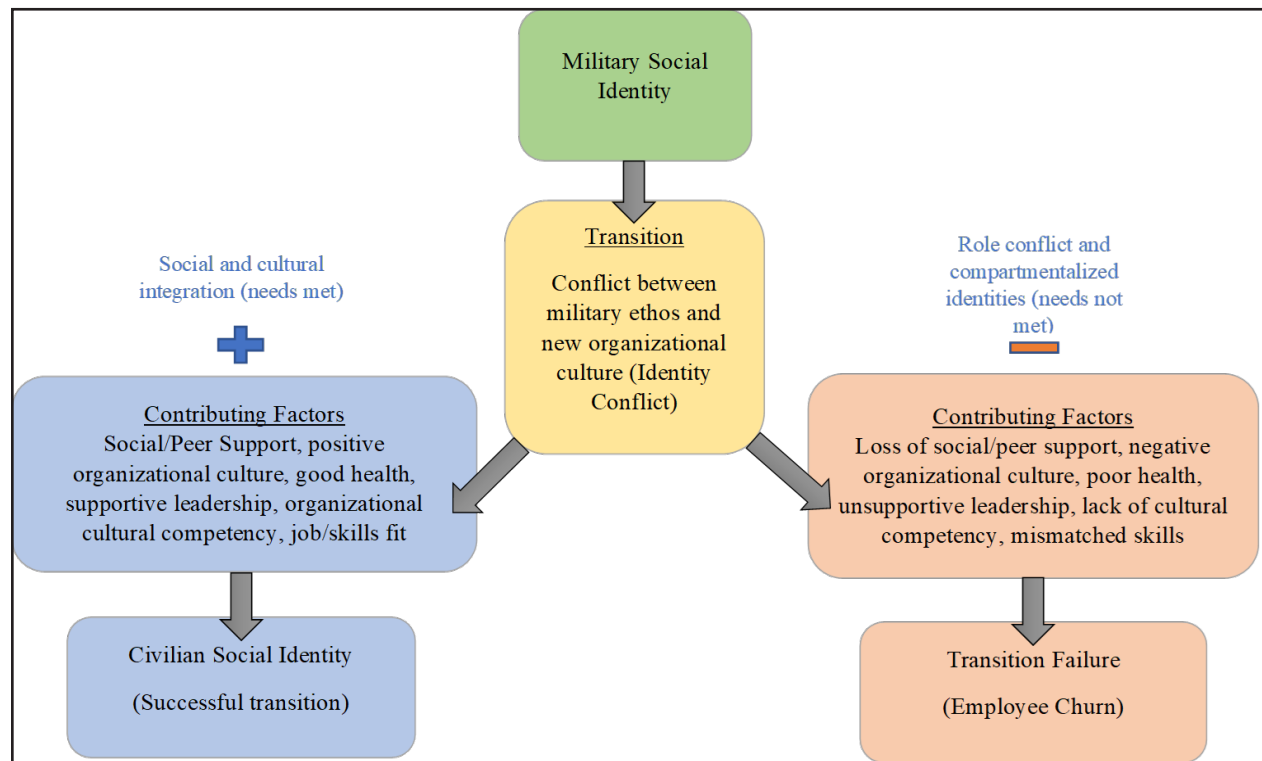


Figure 3. Conceptual Framework Social Identity of Transitioning Veterans. The model outlines the progression of transitioning veterans using a lens of social identity theory

met, transition struggles will be limited, allowing the veteran to focus on a sense of belonging within the organization.

In addition, organizations that can retain veteran employees will not only benefit from tax credits and government subsidies. Organizations can also benefit from the retention of a highly skilled workforce that brings with them a desirable skill set that includes knowledge, training, and leadership experiences acquired during their military service (Davis & Minnis, 2017).

The following recommendations were developed as a guide for organizations to aid in the appropriate hiring and retention of U.S. military veterans. These recommendations are focused on supporting veterans' unique skills and experiences and flow from the literature utilizing the combination of theoretical lenses.

### **Culturally Competent Hiring and Training**

The first step to ensuring veterans' successful transition into a civilian workforce is for organizations to actively engage in military, cultural competency training throughout the organization. Promoting a veteran-friendly organizational culture can improve attitudes towards veteran-employees as well as improve veterans' views of the organization (Dillard & Yu, 2016). Organizations must work towards providing employees with information regarding veteran culture, experiences, and disabilities to ensure that employees are open to the inclusion of veterans within the civilian workgroup (in-group) (Liggins et al., 2019). To create appropriate programs, employers must understand deployment-related health and issues with reintegration.

#### **Job/Skill Match**

The veteran hiring process must start with a job search that is geared towards skill matching and understanding of how to translate military skills to civilian requirements. Studies showed a positive correlation between a good match of skills (job alignment) and retention (job tenure), indicating the importance of skill-match in retention efforts (Ford, 2017). It is important to begin the veterans' transition process with the proper translation of military to civilian resumes. However, veterans often fail to take advantage of transition services that may provide help with resumes, leaving employers left to translate veterans' skills (Clemens & Milsom, 2008). This can lead to poor hiring decisions, especially if the employer does not know how to translate the vet-

eran's skills appropriately. To mitigate this problem, it may be helpful for organizations to engage the assistance of current veteran employees to help translate military skills or hire a civilian recruiter who may better understand how veterans' skills match their organizational needs. In addition, employers can take the process a step further and customize jobs that fit their organizational needs and as well as the unique skills and needs of veterans (Wewiorski et al., 2018). This can be especially effective when hiring veterans dealing with combat-related disabilities (Ostovary & Dapprih, 2011). During the hiring process, it is crucial for employers to match military experience to civilian job requirements as well as ensuring that veterans will be comfortable in the organization's environment. Taking these steps can help organizations to make better job matches, which may, in turn, encourage long-term retention of veteran employees.

#### **Veteran-Centric Onboarding**

Once employers hire qualified veterans, it is essential to establish appropriate onboarding processes. Organizations that utilized veteran-centered onboarding programs, within the first two weeks of

employment, helped to determine the success of the veteran's transition into the organization (King, 2012). Onboarding is an essential tool that can help veterans learn to navigate their new work environments (Ford, 2017; Ahern et al.,

2015). Onboarding should include training on civilian organizational culture (how feedback is given and reviewed, how conflict is addressed, and how interpersonal style is interpreted). This provides organizations the ability to ensure new veteran employees understand the differences in civilian culture before they become a problem. Proper onboarding includes introducing new hires to the social and performance aspects of their new jobs and should be geared towards veteran transition, which can help veterans to establish positive support networks. This can aid in expediting the transition, quickly helping veterans to become productive members of the organization.

#### **Performance Management**

Another important aspect aiding in successful transition involves performance management. Organizations should provide clear performance metrics so that veterans understand the organizations' performance expectations, parameters, and processes. This can help civilian organizations to better align their culture to one that is familiar to the veteran, as a military organizational structure provides for clear performance expectations, including consequences for not meeting those expectations (King, 2012).

Organizations should provide clear performance metrics so that veterans understand the organizations' performance expectations, parameters, and processes.

### Career Progression

Throughout their military careers, veterans understood the path for career progression. The military clearly outlines the steps a service member must take to get promoted or to move within the organization. This understanding of career progression is an essential aspect of the veteran culture. Organizations must also ensure that veteran employees understand their ability for career progression within the civilian organization. Service members that recognize their ability to move within the organization will be more likely to look for internal opportunities rather than looking for external employment (King, 2012). Veterans are accustomed to frequent moves as well as continued increases in responsibility and work challenges. It is important to provide veterans with training and resources that challenge them to move and grow within the organization.

### Health

Veterans with disabilities often faced unique challenges when confronted with transition to the civilian workforce. These challenges can affect productivity, attendance, and attitude, which can lead to higher rates of churn (Wewiorski et al., 2018). Even those individuals not affected by more serious mental health issues can be left with changes to the psyche from things witnessed or experienced during combat. These challenges may be especially difficult for veterans with PTSD and TBI (Redmond et al., 2015). Employer programs should include education regarding identifying PTSD triggers as well as coping strategies to help reduce symptoms.

Veterans and employers may not be aware of the protections proved to veterans under Title 1 of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (Scurfield & Platoni, 2013). Employers are required, under these laws, to make reasonable accommodations for disabled veterans such as low-noise environment, peer or group mentoring, memory aids, and flexible schedules (Ostovary & Daprich, 2011). Organizations need to understand the laws and provide appropriate accommodations for veterans who are dealing with disabilities. In addition to protecting disabled veterans, there are also laws that benefit employers. According to the VA, organizations that employ disabled veterans may be entitled to tax benefits for hiring eligible veterans (2019). In addition to tax incentives, employers can

benefit from salary subsidies, assistive technologies, and salary reimbursements.

### Social/Peer Support

Transition issues, due to lack of supportive relationships, can be mitigated by these supportive workplace services promoting peer support (Redmond et al., 2015). Programs should include practices that help develop social and peer support, such as partnering veteran new hires with another veteran employee. Employee resource groups, comprised of other veterans, are another way to promote supportive peer relationships. Creating peer support groups among veterans can foster a self-supporting network (Dillard & Yu, 2016). Additionally, assigning veterans a civilian mentor (not necessarily a veteran) can help them navigate the organizational culture while providing them with peer support from within the civilian workforce (in-group). This can also help civilian employees to be more open to veteran teammates.

### Supportive Leadership

Leadership should also provide supportive programs that promote work-family balance. Challenges with family reintegration can make transition more difficult for veterans (Sayer et al., 2014). Programs need to address the challenges of veterans returning from long periods away from home. Providing appropriate work-family conflict accommodations, at the organizational and leadership levels, can improve veteran health and improve attrition rates.

Transition issues, due to lack of supportive relationships, can be mitigated by these supportive workplace services promoting peer support.

### Conclusions

Transitioning veterans are provided with considerable resources to prepare them for a successful transition to the civilian workforce. Despite the availability of a wide range of resources, veterans continue to have difficulty securing and maintaining civilian employment. Many veterans are changing jobs several times in the first few years post-transition. These transition problems are negatively impacting veterans' well-being and costing employers millions of dollars in hiring and training costs.

The systematic review was conducted to aid in understanding what factors affect the retention of transitioning U.S. military veterans into the civilian workforce and what employers can do to mitigate the effect on veteran churn. The literature review identified a gap between transition programs and job retention. The current study contributes to the limited literature regarding successful veteran transi-

tion, establishing what external factors affecting veteran churn and providing recommended solutions. While there is significant literature surrounding the factors contributing to veteran churn, there were no studies that analyzed the constructs through the lens of social identity theory. Additionally, none of the literature provided actionable recommendations to help civilian organizations mitigate transition issues. Findings from this study indicated that transition to civilian life requires significant adjustments for veterans in both their personal and professional lives, which can be supported by effective workplace practices combining both cultural competency and support. The factors contributing to veteran churn were broken down into six factors: social/peer support, culture, health (mental health, physical disabilities, and functional impairment), supportive leadership, cultural competency, and mismatched job skills. The article's recommendations for the institution of supportive practices are based on the contributing factors gleaned from the literature, as seen through the lens of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Recommendations included helping organizations to develop military, culturally competent workplaces and training programs as well as social/peer support initiatives and supportive leadership programs aimed towards increasing veteran employee retention.

## Limitations

There were several limitations associated with this study. A systematic review was used as the research method as it is intended to offer evidence on a specific topic without introducing researcher bias. However, the review was limited to one researcher, and therefore coding was not conducted by multiple coders, which eliminates the inter-rater reliability desired for this type of research. The review was limited to scholarly peer-reviewed literature and did not include grey literature (non-peer-reviewed resources). However, the search did include snowballing (searching for additional relevant articles using the references of studies) to find other articles. Ultimately, the coding and synthesis of the evidence included

the final set of only 22 studies. The primary findings, provided in Table 1, were based on recent literature from 2011-2019, except Clemens & Milsom (2008). However, multiple additional articles supported the finding of the cultural competency and skills mismatch found in the Clemens & Milsom (2008) article, as is supported in Table 1. Limiting the research to U.S. military veterans reduced the generalizability to other countries. Additionally, the review focused on the responsibility of employers and did not take into account the responsibility of veterans.

## Implications for Future Research

Future research should focus on further exploration of the lesser researched constructs which were found to have possible links to post-service unemployment such as age (older retirees/younger combat veterans), gender (female), physical health, race (black), education level (low), branch of service (Navy and Air Force) and disabilities (physical or mental illness/injury). Additionally, future research should focus on the links between social identity and organizational culture to determine how organizations can better prepare themselves to hire and successfully retain veteran employees by creating a corporate culture that is supportive of the complicated transition process.

Moreover, further research should be conducted on the findings regarding PTSD's lack of significance as a predictor of employment status (Horton et al., 2013). This research should explore the significance of the impacts of mental illnesses as separate constructs (such as PTSD, TBI, depression, anxiety, and panic disorders), rather than looking at mental health as a single construct. Many of the current studies look at mental health as one construct, leaving a gap in the research. It is also important to note that suicide risk in transitioning veterans is 51% higher than similar civilian populations, with the highest risk occurring within the first three years post-separation (Wewiorski et al., 2018). Further research should look to determine if suicide risk is positively correlated to poor transition.

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“\*” Denotes article used in Systematic Review

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## Review

This article was accepted under the *strict peer review* option. For further details, see the descriptions at:

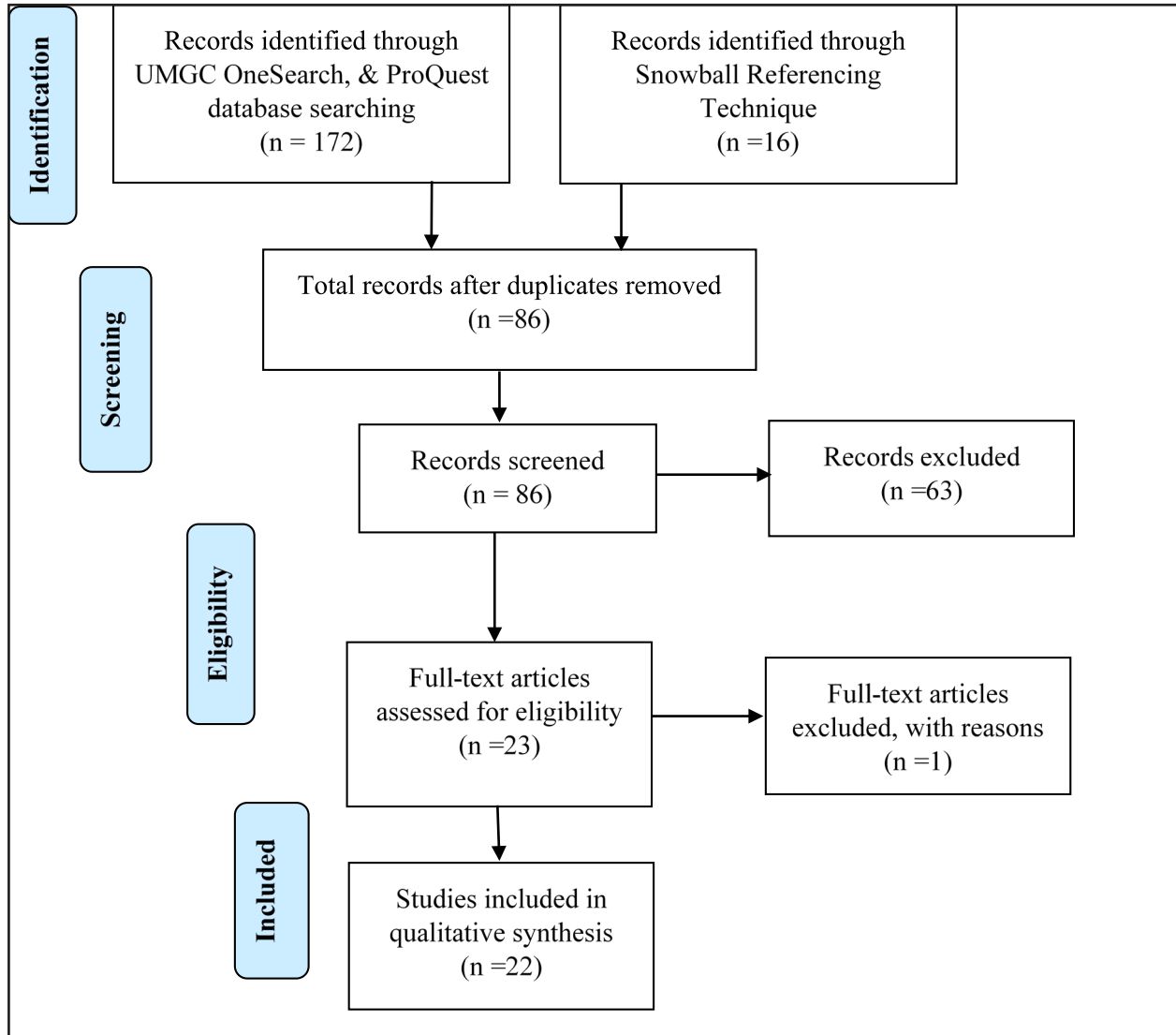
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**Patty LePage** is owns a business management consulting company providing start-up consulting, business strategy, and marketing to local businesses: <https://www.lepagemanagementsolutions.com/>. LePage Management Solutions provides customized business solutions for small/medium-sized businesses and non-profit organizations including web, business, marketing, and printing solutions. Ms. LePage holds a Bachelor of Science in Psychology, a Masters in Clinical Social Work with a sub-concentration in military social work and is a Business Administration Doctoral Candidate. She also holds an executive certificate in the Principles of Leading Transformational Nonprofits. With over 25 years of leadership experience, Ms. LePage excels in the areas of business management, customer relations and non-profit leadership.

## Appendix A: Prisma Diagram



## Appendix B: Quality Appraisal

Article	1) quality in the transparency in the reporting	2) methodological quality	3) appropriateness of methods	4) quality of the message in the research	Average Score	% of quality
Ford, D.G. (2017)	3	3	3	3	3	100%
Hammer, L.B., Wan, W.H., Brockwood, K.J., Mohr, C.D., & Carlson, K.F. (2017)	3	3	3	3	3	100%
Herrell, R.K., Riviere, L.A., Edens, E.N., & Thomas, J.L. (2014)	3	3	3	3	3	100%
Liggans, G., Attoh, P.A., Gong, T., Chase, T., Russel, M.B., & Clark, P.W. (2019)	3	3	3	3	3	100%
Redmond, S.A., Wilcox, S.L., Kim, A., Finney, K., Barr, K., & Hassan, A.M. (2015)	3	3	3	3	3	100%
Rudstam, H., Strobel Gower, W., & Cook, L. (2012)	3	3	3	3	3	100%
Ahern, J., Worthen, M., Masters, J., Lippman, S.A., Ozer, E.J., & Moos, R. (2015)	3	2	3	3	2.75	92%
Hammer, L.B., Kossek, E.E., Anger, W.K., Bodner, T., & Zimmerman, K.L. (2011)	3	3	3	2	2.75	92%
Horton, J.L., et al. (2013)	3	3	3	2	2.75	92%
Kabat-Farr, D., Cortina, L.M., & Marchiondo, L.A. (2018)	3	3	3	2	2.75	92%
Kossek, E.E., Pichler, S., Bodner, T., & Hammer, L.B. (2011)	3	3	3	2	2.75	92%
Scurfield, R. M., & Platoni, K. T. (2013)	3	3	3	2	2.75	92%
Demers, A. (2011)	3	2	2	3	2.5	83%
Dillard, R.J., & Yu, H.H. (2016)	2	3	3	2	2.5	83%
Harrod, M., Miller, E.M., Henry, J., & Zivin, K. (2017)	3	2	2	3	2.5	83%
Clemens, E.V., & Milsom, A.S. (2008)	2	2	3	2	2.25	75%
Kintzle, S., & Castro, C.A. (2018)	3	1	2	3	2.25	75%
Davis, V.E., & Minnis, S.E. (2017)	3	1	1	3	2	67%
Ostovary, F. & Dapprich, J. (2011).	2	2	2	2	2	67%
Wewiorski, N.J., Gorman, J.A., Scoglio, A.J., Fukuda, S., Reilly, E., Mueller, L., O'Connor, M., Penk, W.E., & Drebing, C.E. (2018)	3	1	1	3	2	67%
King, E. (2012)	1	2	2	2	1.75	58%
Sayer, N.A., Carlson, K.F., & Frazier, P.A. (2014)	2	1	1	2	1.5	50%
*Each item was assessed on a scale of 1-3 to indicate low to high quality.						