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Identity Work in Career Transition: Lessons for Human Resources Development in the
Verification of Identity in Career Transition

by

Jennifer Sherene Crenshaw

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Of

Executive Doctorate in Business

In the Robinson College of Business

Of

Georgia State University

GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

ROBINSON COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

2020

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2020

ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation was prepared under the direction of the *JENNIFER SHERENE CRENSHAW* Dissertation Committee. It has been approved and accepted by all members of that committee, and it has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Business Administration in the J. Mack Robinson College of Business of Georgia State University.

Richard Phillips, Dean

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ABSTRACT

Identity Work in Career Transition: Lessons for Human Resources Development in the

Verification of Identity in Career Transition

by

Jennifer Sherene Crenshaw

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Chair: Richard Baskerville

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Human Resource Development has for the last few decades accepted a career transition process with elements focused on teaching the mechanics of outplacement and onboarding. Execution of this standard career transition process relies on a pedagogical approach. This qualitative study explored the lived experience of Army veterans in career transition through the lens of identity. Identity theory has taught us that identities are reflexive and we edit our identity to create stability in our self-concept. The outcome of this phenomenological study combines the development of new skills, new citizenship behaviors and the individual's need to adjust their own identity as they enter their new work environment. It became evident a tailored career transition will provide the individual in transition with the much-needed information and support. *A complete career transition process* includes identity work. The *Career Identity Matrix*, developed as a result of this study, provides HRD with a framework to customize the transition.

INDEX WORDS: Veteran career transition, career transition assistance, identity work, identity theory, social group identity

I RESEARCH FOCUS

How do people adjust when moving from one strong, all-encompassing culture to another? Career transition has become common. The recent Bureau of Labor Statistics website indicated that the average person will have 12-15 jobs in their lifetime. The SHRM Foundation published a research report that stated that 25% of the US population experiences some type of career transition each year (Bauer, 2010). The accepted career transition process (Fig. 1) includes movement from a career experience through outplacement in search of a new opportunity, an accepted job offer, and then onboarding in preparation to succeed in the new career experience.

A Google search of “making a successful career transition” returned more than 100 million results. These results were listicles – articles offering advice in a list format from those gone before or those believing they can be helpful. A search of peer-reviewed publications returned few results on the study of the career transition process as a whole. What I found depicts elements of the career transition process as focused on teaching the mechanics of outplacement and onboarding. The synthesizing of these elements into a process has been the accepted standard over the last 30 years, yet little is written about the study of the full process. Execution focuses heavily on a pedagogical approach; where the success of the transition is dependent on the individual learning a set of skills that will first help them find a new job. Once hired they will be taught a set of organizational citizenship behaviors, enabling them to act appropriately in the new environment. (Lawson, 2016; Marzucco & Hansez, 2016; A. M. Meyer & Bartels, 2017; J. L. Meyer & Shadle, 1994) Success, therefore, is defined as having a new job. This leaves much to be understood about how one experiences the effects of the career transition process on their identity.

In 1985, the National Career Development Association (NCDA) was formed from an organization previously known as the National Vocational Guidance Association (NVGA). The NVGA was initially formed in the early 1900s to assist citizens in the shift from an agrarian to an industrialized society (Feller & Wilson, 2013). Today the NCDA, publisher of *Career Development Quarterly*, has a stated mission which reads “provides professional development, publications, standards, and advocacy to practitioners and educators who inspire and empower individuals to achieve their career and life goals” (NCDA, 2019). A search of keywords in *Career Development Quarterly* proved the focus of such research had been identity construction in adolescence, seemingly with an audience of career counseling professionals practicing in the high school, college, and university settings (Vondracek, 1992). Less attention has been given to exploring identity shifts or identity work in the career transition process more frequently occurring throughout a person’s life span and associated with voluntary career moves. This gap provides an opportunity for research. Extant literature illustrates a need for an examination into the currently accepted career transition approach, the SHRM Foundation report (2010) stated, “Half of all hourly workers leave new jobs in the first four months, and half of senior outside hires fail within 18 months. Clearly, there is room for improvement.” This improvement can be achieved by a phenomenological approach by studying identity management in career transition and, seeking to understand how a person in career transition experiences the identity shift that occurs when moving from one career experience to the new career experience.

There is a gap to be explored – teaching a set of skills in the pursuit of a new job and subsequently teaching a set of skills in the pursuit of expedited socialization into the new organization is not resulting in successful transitions. (Bauer, 2010; Gribble & Miller, 2013) This study explored that gap in favor of a new approach. The research answered the question, “How

does the career transition process affect the identity of the individual in career transition?”.

Through qualitative phenomenological research methods the work expands on the research into *identity theory*, as recommended in a book of the same title (Burke & Stets, 2009). Expanding on identity theory in the context of career transition will lead to new approaches in career transition, resulting in a full career transition process (Fig. 2) aimed at improving success for individuals who will make job changes as many as 15 times in their career.

The intended audience for this engaged research is Human Resource Development (HRD) professionals who seek to implement changes in practice and assist those in transition while improving the success of both outplacement and onboarding in their various host organizations. HRD is an applied discipline requiring a balanced approach of the theoretical and practical. HRD is itself a system that attracts, develops, motivates, and retains human capital for the purpose of improving organizational performance. In the second edition of *Foundations of Human Resource Development* (2009) Swanson and Holton posit, HRD relies on a theoretical framework from three distinct areas of study: economics, psychology, and systems theories. Contributions from several of these frameworks help to illustrate support for career transition work in human resources. First, economics literature brings us the *Scarce Resource Theory*. The application of this theory requires that HRD justify its use of scarce resources like – skilled, knowledgeable workers. Second, psychological research brings us both *Gestalt Psychology* and *Cognitive Psychology*, the application of which requires that HRD clarify the goals of individual contributors and how their experiences create meaning in their own lives. Finally, the systems literature offers *Futures Theory*. When applied to HRD Futures Theory provides the language and tools of alternative futures and scenario building allowing HRD practitioners to shape alternative futures for their organizations with the goal of improving performance. One result of

the application of theories is four core contributions HRD is accountable to make in its host organization: 1) improving individual or group effectiveness, 2) improving organizational effectiveness and performance, 3) developing knowledge, skills, and competencies, and 4) enhancing human potential and personal growth. (Hamlin & Stewart, 2011)

Current practices in career transition represent one area of HRD that is a source of spontaneous, unstructured, and informal learning for individuals and the organization (Manuti, Pastore, Scardigno, Giancaspro, & Morciano, 2015). This experiential on the job learning is a method of increased professional performance - producing knowledge and skill attainment in a less structured and measured way (Black & Warhurst, 2019). The development of an effective career transition process that adequately addresses the individual and group effectiveness, organizational effectiveness, and performance, while developing knowledge, skills, and competencies, and enhancing human potential, is a core goal for HRD. As such, HRD practitioners assign the work of career development, inclusive of transitions to their Training & Development function, demonstrating that heretofore the work of career transition is mainly treated as pedagogical. (Black & Warhurst, 2019) HRD often finds its most notable contributions at the intersection of adult education (learning) and organizational effectiveness (performance) (Swanson & Holton III, 2009; Truty, 2005). Learning is intended to contribute to bottom-line performance which researchers believe leads “practitioners to focus on designing and implementing programs that transmit to passive workers the knowledge and skills needed to improve the company’s overall performance and, ultimately, society’s economic competitiveness.” (Swanson & Holton III, 2009)

Globalization, career mobilization, and workforce reductions for efficiency and re-investment have all contributed to a marked shift in the treatment and resourcing of career

development within HRD. Careers no longer develop on a single career path within the same organization. A study of career transition found, “the majority of careers do not consist of upward moves within a framework of long-term employment relations.” (Nazar & Heijden, 2012) Careers now develop both within and across various organizations throughout one’s career lifecycle. (Banks & Nafukho, 2008) HRD practitioners are challenged to focus their attention on developing organizational structures and job design that supports the business strategy. They have moved away from a focus on the career paths of the individuals. These individuals are now challenged to take responsibility for their development as they may choose to navigate outside of their current organization in favor of a new opportunity or for better personal alignment. (Robbins, 2005) HRD has a bifurcated focus on career transitions - the study of career transition on the individual and the study of career transition on the organization. This research focuses on the individual and how their identity becomes an interface that links the independent components of the *full career transition process*. (Fig. 2) In this study we examined the process components of outplacement and onboarding and the role HRD plays in both setting the stage for identity work as an interface creating a full system.

I.1 Outplacement

Employers started to offer outplacement as a benefit by the early 1990s. The *Journal of Employment Counseling* published an article in 1994 which stated, “This *new* type of employee assistance is called *outplacement*, and it can help laid-off workers regain their equilibrium, plan for new careers, and become gainfully re-employed.” (Kirk, 1994) Outplacement is no longer new having become the standard and even an industry. Global Outplacement Service Provider (OSP) revenues grew from \$50 million a year in 1980 to \$650 million in 1994, and with continued growth reported revenues grew to over \$2 billion in 2019. Despite the growth, there is

a dearth of research to substantiate the effectiveness of the standard process which in some cases includes the engagement of an OSP. In 2016, the *Journal of Employment Counseling* published an article that stated, “these benefits reflect the recommendations of scholars or the objectives promoted by outplacement practitioners rather than any empirical proof of the benefits of outplacement from a client’s perspective.” (Marzucco & Hansez, 2016) The former employer most frequently funds OSP's programs and place a heavy focus on helping the newly out of work client secure new employment as quickly as possible. There has been research that warns this may not be the best for the individual, giving more attention to the goal of gainful re-employment than to the meaningful planning of overall career goals and their overall psychological and social wellbeing. In 2013, Gribble & Miller wrote, “in order for the experience to be a positive one, the provider must consider what the *retrenchee* needs, rather than offering a standard program.” (Gribble & Miller, 2013) Despite their best intentions, OSP may be beholden to those who pay for the services - employers who lay off the workers. The primary goal of the former employer is for the individual to obtain new work. While this is a shared goal, it is not addressing the holistic needs of the person in career transition.

Outplacement as a function of HRD has historically focused on assisting those who are involuntarily separated from an existing career experience. Layoffs due to loss of business, reorganization, and non-performance are thought to be the catalyst to receive outplacement counseling. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funding Workforce Investment Boards were established to, “reform and strengthen the workforce investment system of the Nation to put Americans back to work and make the United States more competitive in the 21st century” (113th Congress United States of America, 2014). Putting Americans back to work whether funded by private industry after layoffs or through public programs has been the focus

of outplacement. The full definition of *outplacement* as used in this research includes any period experienced by an individual who is seeking their next career opportunity regardless of the catalyst. This outplacement stage in the career transition process is critical in the experience of individuals who voluntarily make a change from one career experience to another just as it is for those who are involuntarily separated. This can occur when education and training are completed to facilitate career changes, or when one sees a span of their career as preparation for the next. As an example, one's career in the military ends with outplacement commonly referred to as Transition Assistance Program (Kamarck, 2018). It will be this sub-set of individuals' in transition whose experience this study examines through semi-structured interviews - individuals who have experienced the outplacement process upon voluntary discharge from the United States Army.

Congress established the military outplacement program originally in 1991, "the original purpose of the program was to help ease the transition to civilian life for military service members who were involuntarily separated as part of the force structure drawdowns of the late 1980s" (Kamarck, 2018). In 2011, this pre-separation counseling program became mandatory for all servicemembers with at least 180 continuous days of active duty service.

Much like the outplacement services mentioned above the Army TAP program process focuses on helping those being discharged find a job. The Army's *Soldier for Life - TAP* (SFL-TAP) webpage reads, "Soldiers, even those going to school after separation, will need to begin the process of setting a career objective. Objective setting requires a careful assessment of occupations, the job market, and the Soldier's skills, aptitudes, experience, education, and training. Once the Soldier has set an objective, the tough task of achieving that objective begins. Typically, job seekers must create a resume, network, identify job opportunities, apply for jobs,

prepare for interviews and prepare to negotiate salary and benefits.” (Army Human Resources CMD, 2019). Their program does include workshops with the Veteran’s Administration (VA) to review the benefits available to the service member as a covered veteran. There are Veteran Assistance programs in the VA that address psycho-social needs of transition. These are not a mandatory step in the discharge/career transition process. Veterans would have to seek out these services in their local VA system. The practice gap mentioned earlier exists specifically in the SFL-TAP program for those being discharged from the Army today. Army outplacement is narrowly focused on the transactional skill attainment related to resume, interviews, and VA benefit application as offered by SFL – TAP in partnership with the Department of Labor and Veteran’s Administration, respectively.

I.2 Onboarding

Organizations welcome their newly hired employees with an introduction process referred to as onboarding. The standard onboarding can be described as, “the process through which new hires acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors that will ensure their success in an organization.” (Lawson, 2016) The accepted standard is to take a pedagogical approach, the *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* published a 2015 article stating, “Onboarding is used by organizations to expedite socialization, which we define as the learning and adjustment process by which individuals assume an organizational role that fits the needs of both the individual and the organization.” (Klein, Polin, & Sutton, 2015) Research has presented a few extant models over the last few decades. One such model is the *Inform-Welcome- Guide (IWG) framework* - practices that help inform the newcomer, those that welcome the newcomer, and those that guide the newcomer. (Klein et al., 2015) Additionally, Bauer’s model demonstrates that the onboarding process can be broken down into four distinct levels -

compliance, clarification, culture, and connection. The *Journal of Organizational Psychology* published an article which stated, “*orientation* describes activities within the first and second levels of Bauer’s theory, Compliance, and Clarification, and *socialization* describes activities within Bauer’s third and fourth levels, Culture and Connection.” (A. M. Meyer & Bartels, 2017)

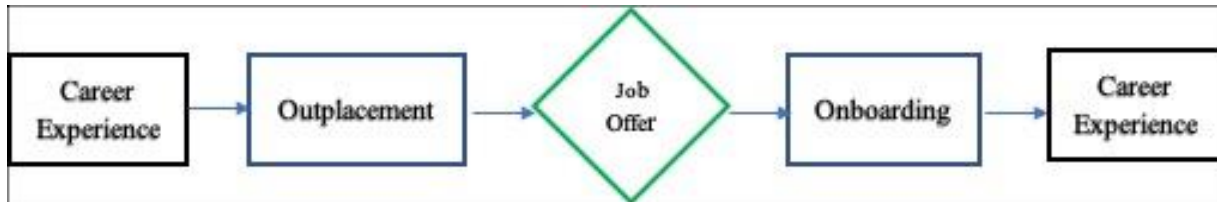
We find in practice that where time and resources are scarce organizations often shorten their focus to the first two levels – intending to orient the new hire to the expectations of the organization and their responsibilities to behave accordingly. HRD professionals value culture and connection as important levels of onboarding yet use informal methods and timelines compared to their treatment of compliance and clarification. The very nature of compliance calls for a more formal approach where signed acknowledgments are often needed for various audit processes. Culture and connection often require less accountability and may even be labeled soft-skills which are harder to validate and measure. Research into standard onboarding practices have found there is a great deal of variety in the way and timeline in which these new hire welcome and socialization processes are carried out. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* published an article which stated, “As a result, we know little about the onboarding practices that are most effective, or how and when these activities should occur during this pivotal time in the employment relationship.” (Klein et al., 2015)

When considering how HRD might improve the onboarding element of the career transition process a synthesis of existing studies such as those mentioned above lead us to a gap. More attention on culture and connection would improve the career transition experience. Studies conducted by the Institute of Veteran and Military Family at Syracuse University point out that the military is adept at socializing and teaching organizational behavior characteristics that stick with the veteran beyond their time of service, making them valuable to civilian

organizations (Bradbard & Schmeling, 2018). HRD professionals can capitalize on this veteran experience and use similar socialization tactics to help the onboarding veteran connect to the new career experience. (Ford, 2017) Many toolkits and recommendations can be found that give recommendations for the appropriate onboarding of military veterans making the transition to new civilian careers. Nearly all of the toolkits mention *learning partners, buddies, or mentors* as being helpful to ensure the new hire develops a positive first impression (Bauer, 2010; Bradbard & Schmeling, 2018; Constantine & Morton, 2018; Syracuse University, 2019) The philosophy behind the initiative is simple — “military service is unlike any other human experience. No one knows more about the issues facing a soldier—in combat or on the home front—than a fellow soldier” (M-SPAN, 2017). Many employers have a buddy system, pairing a new employee with a current employee who can help him or her navigate the transition. It is always beneficial to identify a learning partner, or buddy for the new hire, so she has an available resource other than the supervisor (Bradbard & Schmeling, 2018). Some well-known companies with successful veteran hiring initiatives have found that the veterans themselves do not well receive specialized onboarding programs focused on the military veteran only. The newly hired veterans want to be included in the mainstream programs, not singled out. Often, veterans are hesitant to report their veteran status. (Crossland et al., 2014; Ford, 2017) The advice in the mainstream varies. Nicole Fuqua wrote in March 2018, “it is important for employers to build veteran-specific onboarding programs to acquaint new hires with their new workplace” citing an HBR article that recommends a customized approach to veteran onboarding. (Fuqua, 2018) Having a comprehensive onboarding program which incorporates the best practices that have been found to work for transitioning Army veterans will only benefit organizations in their efforts to provide

the best experience for all newly hired employees. All employees can benefit from onboarding that includes all four phases as set forth above.

Figure 1: The accepted career transition process



II CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

II.1 Identity theory and career transition

Identity theory “seeks to explain the specific meanings that individuals have for the multiple identities they claim; how these identities relate to one another for any one person.” (Burke & Stets, 2009). The formation of any one identity comes from energy, motivation and drive to internalize the elements of a role, assuming a role forms an identity. Humans are known to assume many roles simultaneously and thus, taking on those identities. This study of individuals in the career transition process seeks to apply identity theory in a meaningful way while also contributing to the furtherance of the research into the theory itself. First, a look at the history of the theory, then on to some current applications to career transition broadly and finally identity theory and the Army to civilian career transition. Identity management during these career transitions is a topic worth further research. There is growing literature on identity as an iterative process, making research into *identity work* increasingly common. Ibarra & Barbulescu define *identity work* as people’s engagement in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising their identities. (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) By understanding how identity is affected by the career transition process we can improve the system to lead to the most effective and efficient transitions that serve both the professional and the business. This study explores how incorporating *identity work* can improve the success of the career transition process for the individual and therefore prove to be more successful. The career transition process provides the individual with the symbolism needed to form perceptions and therefore choose actions that are consistent with his or her own goals (Burke & Stets, 2009). The future is uncertain when the individual leaves their current career experience. In a 2018 HBR interview, Herminia Ibarra said about career transition, “You’re trading off something that you know very well for something that is very unformulated and nascent, and that creates uncertainty.” Central to identity theory is

the connection between perception and action, “behavior is always in the pursuit of the goals of the person” (Burke & Stets, 2009). Following a known and accepted process allows the individual in transition to set goals. Meeting goals allow for a sense of accomplishment but may not validate a new identity that is congruent with the new role in the civilian organization. Ibarra went on to say, “you really need to know kindred spirits, and you really need to have people with whom you can talk fairly candidly about what it is that you’re experiencing. Because it can catch you by surprise in the intensity of it” (Ibarra & Green Carmichael, 2018). The identity shift may not follow the success of met process goals. Despite writing a resume, successfully navigating the interview process, accepting a new job, learning the policies, procedures and expected mores of the new organization there may still be a sense of unmet identity validation.

II.2 History of identity theory

In their seminal work, *Identity Theory*, Burke & Stets explain that the theory grew from the roots of work by Mead, and Stryker. (Stryker, 1980) Mead’s work in the shared use of symbols in human interaction, *Symbolic Interactionism*, provides a basis for our understanding of identities as symbols of the self. “The mind adaptively operates to relate the person to his or her environment” and self operates as an object like any other object in the environment, taking on meaning in context. (Burke & Stets, 2009) Identities, or the meanings one attributes to *self*, are thought to be reflexive and relational. Reflexivity allows for editing or correction and relativity allows for the use of salience hierarchy as a control process. (Burke, 1980) Stryker’s work tells us about multiple identities resulting from multiple positions which can be managed through a control system. Humans maintain a steady stable environment in the face of disturbances, not a steady output. (Stryker, 1980) These multiple identities are arranged in a salience hierarchy that can change based on contextual cues (Welbourne & Paterson, 2017). People seem to use

whatever behaviors accomplish the control of perceptions (Burke & Stets, 2009); we vary our actions to ensure our perceptions match the reference point. Maintaining identity salience then occurs through the purposive actions of this control system.

II.3 Recent application of identity theory and career development

A search of peer-reviewed journals to find the intersection of identity theory and career development/career transition proved to produce evidence that the work in this area has been increasing over the last ten years. This could be a natural occurrence due to the increase in the number of career transitions in today's labor force, it could also be related to the rise in research into the concerns of HRD in engaged management scholarship, and it might be a reaction to Burke and Stets invitation to further the research. More than 20 articles published since 2009 provided rich information to confirm there is a gap in addressing how the individual's identity is affected by their experience in career transition.

Shortly after Burke & Stets' *Identity Theory* (2009), the Academy of Management Review published Ibarra & Barbulescu's (2010) qualitative examination of identity-related to work roles. Through their collection and analysis of identity narratives they, "aim to contribute to a growing stream of literature that links role transitions and identity processes" (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). What they found is that for many people a job or occupation is a central component of their understanding of who they are – their identity. The narratives collected also showed a pattern that "discomfort arises when people are unable to draw a continuous link between old and new selves, leaving them feeling inauthentic" (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

In a 2014 issue of the Academy Management Review, Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly presented a useful theoretical model looking at *work-related identity losses* in the light of grief recovery work. While their work is illuminating to identity theory and career transitions, it does

focus on career losses like what we've learned about the practical focus of outplacement work. This theoretical model known as, the Model of WRI Loss and Recovery (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014) is useful and did provide the researcher a framework to consider a sense of loss that did emerge in some cases. While this research did focus on voluntary career transition, a sense of loss was present even when the individual had taken volition to leave the Army.

Organization Studies published a study that includes a theoretical framework exploring how people in organizations engage in transitions between roles (Järventie-Thesleff & Tienari, 2016). The framework depicts roles as mediating factors in identity work. "We have argued for conceptualizing roles as mediators in identity work, and suggested that this approach paves the way for enhanced understanding of the dynamism in the processes by which organization-based identities evolve" (Järventie-Thesleff & Tienari, 2016). The co-creation of identities and organizational roles provided a meaningful approach to the analysis of the data as we explore how the career transition process affects the identity of the individual in transition.

The *Journal of Vocational Behavior* published the work of Mancini, Caricati, Panari, & Tonarelli which was intended to extend the *identity status model* designed by James Marcia. The original model is "based on semi-structured interviews conducted on a sample of 20 late-adolescent men, Marcia expanded Erikson's ideas on identity formation in different areas through two behavioral indicators: exploration, referring to the active questioning and weighing of various identity alternatives before making decisions about the values, beliefs, and goals that one will pursue; commitment, which consists of making a relatively firm choice in an identity domain considered important and engaging in significant activities oriented toward the implementation of that choice" (Mancini, Caricati, Panari, & Tonarelli, 2015). Marcia's identity status model was initially designed for and has been tested on adolescents – including this 2015

study of over 400 participants who were all Italian college students studying psychology. The study does call out this limitation and recommends that in the future various career types and career stages be studied.

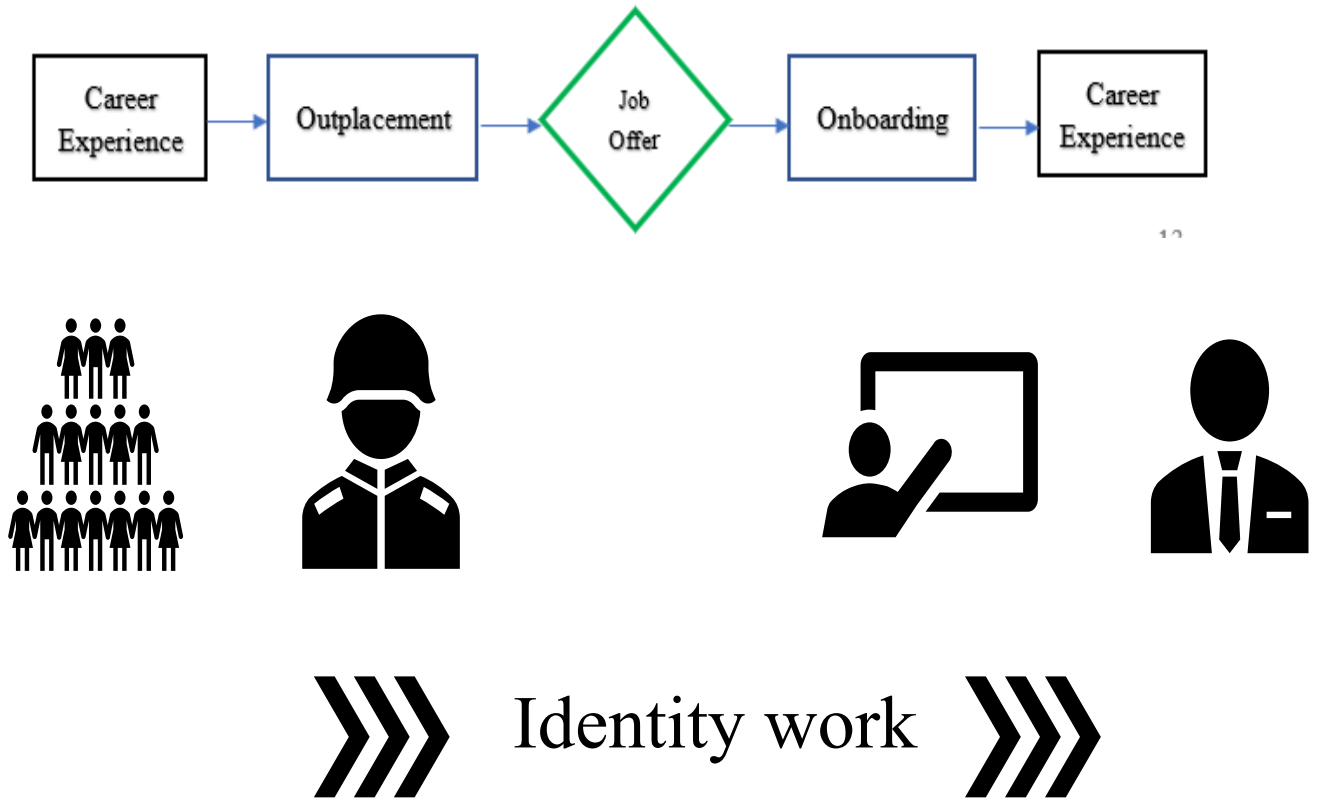
Just a couple years later the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* published an article to address the need for older workers to remain agile so that they can navigate the new reality of a non-linear and stable career path. (Van der Horst, Klehe, & Van der Heijden, 2017) They examined how older workers navigate four adaptive facets of career transition: career concern, career control, career confidence, and career curiosity. The results of the study show the negative relationship between adaptive responses and age, however, they appeared to be moderated by individual core differences. “Based on our findings, we suggest that practitioners in working organizations should promote the career adaptive responses of workers throughout their career by fostering an internal locus of control, general self-efficacy, and train curiosity at work” (Van der Horst et al., 2017). Workers who maintained these adaptive qualities were more likely to make career transitions effectively.

II.4 Identity theory and *the Army to civilian career transition*

We know that career changes cause an identity threat. (Winkler, 2018) “Veterans experience different types of career transition, including retirement, transition to college, or transition to the workforce, during early adulthood, middle adulthood, and later adulthood” (Robertson, Miles, & Mallen, 2014). Leaving the Army, whether planned retirement or unplanned troop draw downs, can be considered a challenge and a biographical disruption (Hallqvist & Hydén, 2013). There is much written about how the various roles we play affect the salience of our identity. (Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2018) That is the prominence of one’s self-concept in alignment with the roles they are playing. We know from the research, as individuals

move through social situations, they re-prioritize particular identities and alter their propensity of enactment from the position of specific identities. (Brenner et al., 2018) These reprioritizations occur at the various stages of the career transition process – leaving the Army, experiencing TAP and upon entry and Onboarding with a new civilian organization. In 2007, *Journal of Applied Psychology* published a meta-analysis regarding newcomer adjustment during organizational socialization. The findings show that role clarity, self-efficacy, and social acceptance mediate the relationship between newcomer information seeking, organizational socialization tactics and socialization outcomes. (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007) One's identity is affected by changes such as the loss of a job, the acquisition of a new job and the career transition process. We want to understand how individuals in transition experience these identity shifts. We believe studying this extreme case of career transition, Army to a civilian career has provided valuable data with which to make the expected contributions to both practice and scholarship.

Figure 2: The full career transition system



III CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH APPROACH

This study employed an interpretive qualitative research method. Qualitative method was chosen in order to explore evidence that explains how individuals experience career transition within context. Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them. (Lincoln & Denzin, 1994) Qualitative researchers may ask both how and when something has occurred in the human experience. This study sought to answer how individuals experience career transitions and through the collection of narratives I aimed to learn how the individual's identity plays a role in the career transition experience. I agree with other qualitative researchers who have said, "it is virtually impossible to understand why someone did something or why something happened in an organization without talking to people about it" (Myers, 2013).

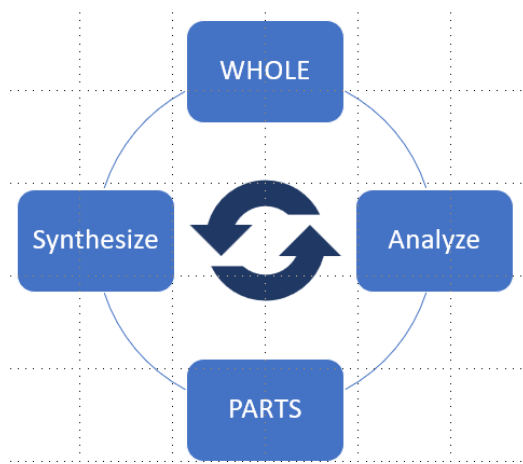
Many types of qualitative methods are available to explore subjects' experience within in their setting and context. Methods such as action research, case studies, grounded theory, and hermeneutics. This study turned to a less common form of qualitative inquiry - phenomenology. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is thought to be the father of phenomenology; the study of phenomena which may be commonly known and even considered to be common sense. The study of these phenomena "intends to return and re-examine these taken for granted experiences and perhaps uncover new and or forgotten meanings" (Lavery, 2017). We are aware that people construct meaning as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Flood, 2010) and therefore phenomenology is the best qualitative research method to answer the questions about how individuals experience the phenomenon of the career transition process.

This study searched for meaning in the essence of the experience of individuals rather than attempting to measure career transition or identity theory in quantitative terms. The phenomenological method treats the research participants as *co-researchers* and to that end

requires that the participants have directly experienced the phenomena being studied and has an interest in understanding the associated meanings and essence of that experience. Semi-structured interview questions were asked to learn how each person has experienced their career transition. The goal of the interview was to learn what each person perceives, senses, and knows in their immediate awareness. (Moustakas, 1994) The intensive inquiry aimed to construct a point of view on the impact made to one's identity in the moving from one career experience to another. The approach was inductive, allowing ideas and themes to emerge from the interviews rather than imposing a predetermined hypothesis, thus allowing new insights into how identity shifts are experienced in career transition. (Clarke, 2009) Questions were designed to discover how each component of the career transition process is experienced and how the experience affects the identity of the individuals in transition. Definitions emerge from the experience of the individual experience of the phenomena.

Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology is an interpretive form of phenomenology; versus descriptive, where the researcher is expected to engage in a disciplined and systematic way, withholding their prejudice and bias. Heidegger, a student of Husserl, taught philosophy and method of phenomenology that incorporated the hermeneutic circle (Fig.3). Heidegger did not believe, as Husserl taught, that the researcher could or should eliminate everything that represents their prejudgment, setting aside presuppositions. In fact, Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology is marked by three features that, when combined, distinguish it from other qualitative methodologies: 1) its interpretive nature and focus on lived experience, 2) the inclusion of researcher experiences in the processes of data collection and analysis, and 3) the dynamic, thoughtful process of reflecting and writing that guides data analysis. These features shape what we mean when we say: hermeneutic phenomenology (Bynum & Varpio, 2018).

Figure 3: Hermeneutic circle



How one's identity is affected by the career transition process is of specific interest among the cohort chosen for this research - the Army Veteran in career transition. Individuals on a variety of career tracks could have been selected for the study. The Army to civilian career track was chosen for three reasons. First, the military culture is strong and thought to be all-encompassing (Carter, 2017). Second, there is significant research to validate that the transition from military career to civilian career is challenging (Ainspan, Penk, & Kearney, 2018; Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Bennett et al., 2015; Gati, Ryzhik, & Vertsberger, 2013). Finally, HRD professionals are interested in improving the transition of veterans into their host organizations – successful attraction, hiring, and retention are goals (Bradbard & Schmeling, 2018). I recognize that this is an extreme case study with the military culture being pervasive, and likely having a stronger impact on the member's identity, than other career experiences. I believe this fact is not a limitation but a benefit in helping to make clear the experience for the individual in transition and their management of their shifting identity.

Outplacement relies on teaching the soon to be or recently unemployed person to write their resume, network, search job postings, and interview for a new job. There may be some

discussion of how job *loss* has been known to cause grief – some coping mechanisms may be shared with the person in the outplacement process. Most of the outplacement process activities are focused on transactions intended to find new employment (Marzucco & Hansez, 2016).

Onboarding is focused on teaching the newly hired employee how to behave in a way that will allow them to *fit in* and be successful based on their new employers accepted norms. Often we think of models such as welcome, inform, guide or compliance, clarification, culture, and connection when we consider the onboarding process. (Klein et al., 2015) Most of the onboarding process focuses on policies, procedures, and behavioral norms. Identity work considers the outputs or behaviors that can be observed and measured and the inputs such as perceptions held by individuals about themselves and the roles they play. As we examine the effect of the career transition system on the identity of the person in transition we are reminded, “humans maintain a steady and stable environment in the face of disturbances, and they do so by changing their actions (outputs) to make their perceptions (input) match a reference standard.” (Burke & Stets, 2009) The literature shows that teaching the mechanics of transition and assimilation may not be completely effective. This research explored the gaps in the effectiveness of the career transition system while adding to the research into Identity Theory by studying the lived experience of each soldier in career transition.

The research participants for this study are United States Army service members/veterans in one of three distinct categories: 1) left the Army more than one year ago and currently employed in the civilian sector, 2) left the Army up to one year ago and either presently employed in the civilian sector or seeking employment in the civilian sector and, 3) currently in the Army with a scheduled discharge date and seeking civilian employment. Each subject served at least five years before a voluntary discharge, the catalyst for their discharge varied – physical

fitness for duty and retirement were most common. The semi-structured interviews covered both the experience of the career transition system itself (A in Appendix A) and the effect on their identity (B in Appendix A). Narratives formed captured the phenomena of identity shift through their lived experience of the career transition process. The study validated that these post service veterans did experience the components of the career transition process thought to be standard in civilian career transitions. The Department of Defense Transition Assistance Program is the outplacement component. (Kamarck, 2018) Upon accepting a civilian job offer, veterans typically experience the same onboarding as other newly hired employees into the same organization. The context of each interview was to allow the researcher to learn of each veteran's lived experience as they moved through their transition from the Army to a civilian career. The questions are not designed to surface sensitive or traumatic information. All participants were reminded in the Informed Consent that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. No one withdrew or expressed any concerns about the interview. In fact, many referred others to participate. There was no pressure to answer any question. The semi-structured approach allowed the participant to provide the information they themselves found most relevant.

The study included 15 participants. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and, was recorded and transcribed verbatim for coding and analysis. The interviews took place between October 2019 & February 2020. The method of data analysis was guided by Clark Moustakas' adaptation of VanKaam's method of analysis of phenomenological data. (Fig.4) Before step one of the Moustakas' method each interview recording was replayed and additional notes taken, transcripts were read for an overall understanding of each case, each cohort and, the group as a whole. NVivo12 software was used to code themes and clusters for analysis. Textural

narratives were composed to represent the lived experience of each study participant. Each narrative was then read to validate the themes – quotes from the verbatim transcripts are used to support the core themes.

Figure 4: – Data analysis

- The steps to code and analyze are as follows:
Starting with a complete verbatim transcription of each research participant.
1. List every expression relevant to the experience
 2. Reduce & eliminate - test each expression
 - a. Does the expression contain a moment of experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding?
 - b. Is it possible to abstract and label it?
Expressions that do not meet the above or are overlapping, repetitive, or vague are eliminated.
 3. Cluster and thematize the invariant constituents – these become the *core themes*
 4. Validation
 - a. Are the core themes expressed explicitly in the transcription?
 - b. Are the core themes compatible if not explicit?
 - c. If they are neither explicit or compatible, they are irrelevant to the experience and are deleted.
 5. Using only relevant/validated invariant constituents and core themes construct for each co-researcher an Individual Textural Description of experience. Include verbatim examples. (Moustakas, 1994)

III.1 Research Participants

Research participants were recruited through personal relationships, LinkedIn Network and referrals/introductions by members or veterans of the US Army. The first contact was made by email. Each email explained the study and included the informed consent. Once the participant confirmed interest and agreed to participate, a link to a questionnaire (Appendix B) was sent to gather demographic and descriptive data. Upon receipt of the completed questionnaire an interview was scheduled. All interviews were conducted by phone, audio only (no video). A VOIP conference call service was used to ensure a reliable, and clear connection. This technology also provided the means of recording the interviews. In one or two cases, the

participant was not able to access the conference line and a speaker phone and digital voice recorder was used as a back-up.

Table 1: Participant demographics

Gender		Age (at the time of the interview)		Race		Education level	
Female 13%	Male 87%	25 – 34	20%	Asian	7%	High School	20%
		35- 44	33%	Black	20%	College	27%
		45 – 54	33%	White	73%	Post Graduate	53%
		55+	14%				

IV CHAPTER 4: REVIEW OF RESULTS

IV.1 Case narratives

This phenomenological research views identity work through narratives constructed after semi-structured interviews captured the stories of individual veterans regarding their career transitions. Consider the career transition process inclusive of identity as you read the narratives found on, the next 40 pages (Fig 2).

Staff Sergeant Amy Alpha described herself as an "Army Athlete," further commenting that she was a "little spoiled" because she spent a great deal of her service time training and competing with the Army's Track & Field Team. She served for six (6) years before accepting a medical discharge following a knee injury sustained while training for the Olympics. At the time of her discharge, SSG Alpha worked in Infantry Support, specifically Nuclear, Biological, & Chemical (NBC) Detection. Accepting the discharge was a difficult decision. Shortly after, she married an active duty service member and became an Army dependent for many years. Though she has an established civilian career after leaving the Army, she stated, "I miss the fact that everybody is your sister, and everybody is your brother. It was a family."

The career transition process was different in the 1980s. There was no Soldier for Life - Transition Assistance Program. The soldier made an appointment to fill out her paperwork, and she was out. The transition assistance office did offer support with resume writing workshops and offered a database of military-friendly employers by location. As mentioned, Alpha married an active duty soldier and was, therefore, able to live on base and access all resources available to dependents. She remembers benefiting for the military spouse preference program, which guaranteed three interviews. She secured a job through that program. Even with the preference program, the job offer stage was challenging; she experienced translation issues. The civilian hiring managers did not understand the skill set of Staff Sargent, no matter the specific specialization. While the civilian employer may not have needed NBC Detection skills – Alpha served as the driver and administrative assistant to a General. The skills obtained and mastered while serving the General were transferable. Alpha reminisced on her transition experience. One way the civilian sector struck her as different from the Army is that civilians are not "given a

chance to fail, they screened your resume and dismissed all the soft skills that may not have been as easy to describe in a page or two of text."

In the first civilian job, Alpha served as the back-up administrative assistant to a group of five senior executives. Upon arriving, she found the presence of standard operating procedures (SOP) to be comforting. She was confident she could do a good job. She would simply follow the SOP. Soldiers are trained to adapt and overcome; they take that skill set to any new job. Alpha believes it may be harder for the civilian manager to adapt to their new employee from the Army than for the soldier to adjust to their new environment. Alpha enjoyed working as part of the team while recalling the experience she noted that the approach to teamwork was different from her military experience; she did not elaborate. She did go on to say, almost as if a specific memory was coming back to her, obtaining her college education gave her a sense of comfort that she could compete in the civilian job market. Today, after many years, she continues to advise other veterans, whenever possible, to get their education while serving.

Alpha also recommends that newly transitioned veterans join their company's Employee Resource Groups (ERG) when they are available. It does not have to be the veteran group – it can be any affinity group that fits the individual. These groups provide the employee with an internal network. Internal networks, such as ERGs, provide opportunities to learn some of the cultural aspects of the environment informally. An example is the need to teach veterans about corporate infrastructure and understanding where and how they fit.

The identity of Alpha throughout the career transition process could be described as a teammate, family member, and community servant. She has been successful in creating and sustaining a successful civilian career. Her first post-service job was in a military-friendly environment. She was thankful for the military dependent connection and support of the military

spouse community. Even 30 years after making the civilian career transition, Alpha continues to identify as a veteran and participates in her company's Employee Resource Groups for Veterans. She still speaks of missing the sense of community and teamwork that she describes as being a member of a family. She describes the Army family as one where nothing matters (race, family of origin, socio-economic status), you belong because you are a member of the US Army community. She strives to recreate this in her community and workplace. In her mind, it always falls short.

Alpha's identity while serving was that of a member of the family. She appreciated knowing that she belonged and that many fellow service members had her back. She also took pride in having theirs. Her identity as a member of the military family did allow her to take advantage of preferential candidacy as a military spouse; however, she still found it challenging to connect with her would be civilian employers. They did not understand her experience; it did not easily translate. She had to find a way to communicate her skill set into their environment. Her early civilian jobs were not ones where she felt that sense of belonging. She has been in the civilian workforce for decades, and still, she misses working alongside her military family.

Today, she works as human resources professional in a large pharmaceutical company. In her current role, as with all the other civilian roles she has had over the years, she chooses to stay connected to her soldier identity. She connects with other veterans who are co-workers, and she is a vocal advocate for veteran hiring. She found, in time, the completion of her Master's in Business Administration to be the bridge she needed to feel confident in her new world. Additionally, she found a way to preserve what was important to her. She still has the backs of those she will always see as a family – her military veteran sisters and brothers.

When assessing former Staff Sergeant Alpha's identity from the perspective of the career identity matrix we find that she places low value in her alignment to both a specific profession and to a specific organization. She is defined by neither WHAT she does or WHERE she does it. If she has the right people around her, she can learn both a new profession and how to fit in to a new organization.

Second Lieutenant Brian Bravo served the Army in the Armor Division for approximately one year after graduating from the US Army Academy at West Point. Bravo recalls with regret being forced to accept a medical discharge after experiencing an acute illness, unrelated to his military service. He had just completed intensive training and was scheduled to be deployed as Platoon Commander in Fallujah, Iraq. He was not able to fulfill that deployment. He describes the regret specifically as shame that he did not fulfill his obligation to the Platoon he trained to lead. He was their Second Lieutenant. He let them down. He carries this regret palpably; it was still evident at various points in our interview.

Once it was determined that Bravo would be discharged, he began the steps of outplacement. He did attend TAP (it was not yet called Soldier for Life), he stated he did not find TAP helpful – it was designed in a way that did not address his specific circumstances or academy graduate pedigree. His West Point network was then, and continues to be, an asset in building a civilian career. Additionally, he did seek the assistance of specialized recruiters who have developed databases of veteran-friendly employers. He quickly realized through interviews that he was generally unprepared to communicate his soft skills and lacked an understanding of business infrastructure. He was completely unprepared to negotiate civilian salary and benefits – he had not had to think about his own budgetary needs. He went from his parents' care to the academy to active duty. Now he was a civilian with household overhead and expenses. Many veterans find themselves unprepared for this civilian reality. For Bravo, this deficiency was pronounced because of the sudden and utterly unplanned change in direction due to his health event.

Bravo's first civilian job was with a utility company in a Project Manager role. He entered with a cohort of other Veterans. He noted, almost parenthetically, no one in his cohort

stayed with this employer. They felt the job was poorly represented, and ultimately it was not a good fit for their long-term interests. There had been no structured onboarding and training - Bravo recalls they were "thrown in" and "expected to figure it out." Additionally, the culture and work environment were also discouraging. The labor union leaders representing the workforce was not supportive of the program to hire vets. Bravo and his veteran peers were treated as outsiders who had not come up through "rank & file." They were not welcome, and it made the job even less enjoyable. One by one, they quit. Bravo went back to school to get his MBA and certification in Lean Six Sigma. He has built a successful civilian career in marketing and worked with several well-known restaurant brands.

The identity of Bravo through the career transition process could be summed up as one of legacy – West Point legacy, Honor Code legacy. According to the Army, *honor is a matter of carrying out, acting, and living the values of respect, duty, loyalty, selfless service, integrity, and personal courage in everything you do*. Bravo seeks career opportunities with a mission fit, and he is willing to make career changes if he is not in the right environment. When asked about advice, he might give others he brought up that he is often disappointed by the civilian employers who take advantage of veterans and their commitment to duty, honor, and country. Bravo became animated when asked to explain, "they know that there is a certain personality type who volunteer for the military. They feel like they can get that out of you, as well, on the private sector side. They believe they can work you into the ground....it angers me". Bravo continues to see himself as forever shaped by his experience in the Army and specifically by the Honor Code – he will always seek to create a work environment where honor thrives, and he expects to work for leaders who do the same.

Bravo's identity was shaped by family legacy (both parents served), the military academy, and his health event resulting in sudden and unplanned discharge. He carries, even after nearly two decades, shame for not having been deployed to a war zone with his team. There is a sense that his soldier identity is congenital. He has chosen to preserve the parts of his identity tied to his belief in the Army Code of Honor. Though he did not see this preservation as a successful path forward for a civilian career, he chose to complete his MBA because he believed that business school was the key to being respected in the civilian workforce. There is no doubt that Bravo's upbringing and journey as a soldier still inform his point of view on civics, and he has found success as a marketing executive in the multi-billion-dollar restaurant segment for more than ten years.

Each job move he has made has been heavily influenced by his need to align with a company that shares his values. When assessing Former Second Lieutenant Bravo's identity using the career identity matrix, we find that he places high value on both his alignment to a profession and the organization where he is employed.

Sergeant Chris Charlie is a high school graduate who served in the Army for 13 years, including his time in the elite Special Forces (SF). He describes his experience as formative. He is exceptionally proud of his induction to serve as a member of SF. He noted, "my LinkedIn profile says, "Former Green Beret." That is one of the major accomplishments of my life. It is the one thing that they can never take away from me is the fact that I was a Green Beret." Charlie's separation from the Army was voluntary; he decided it was time for the next chapter. He has experienced several periods of unemployment since his exit in 2018.

Charlie struggled to comment on his SFL-TAP experience. He mused that it simply was not memorable and generally not that helpful. He went on to say that he believes the experience is based on the duty station. He was stationed overseas, in Germany, at the time of his discharge. He had many recommendations for how SFL-TAP could be improved. His thoughts summarize that SFL-TAP needs to be more customized. He went on to explain that they do talk about three possible tracks out of the Army: 1) school, 2) trade, and 3) civilian career. He went on to point out that many soldiers do not know what they want to do upon separation. Charlie does not know what he wants to do next. He left the Army focused on finding a civilian career in Executive Protection. He has had some successful contracts but also periods of unemployment, causing him to reconsider the best path forward.

Given that he finds himself returning to the career transition process multiple times, his suggestions for the improvement of the TAP programs include a more tailored experience that is defined based on 1) life stage of the veteran (i.e., mid-career or retirement), 2) reasons for discharge, and 3) provide a curated list of Veteran Service Organizations by location – make accessible as needed over time. In short, make the knowledge attained more memorable and useful over some time. As Charlie talked about the need for TAP resources to be available longer

during the transition process, he noted, "that is when the service member is going to feel completely alone, completely abandoned, or all of the above. They are moving away from their friends and family, or they are moving somewhere new. They are definitely alone at that point."

Charlie recalls his onboarding experience as generally positive. Working in executive protection, it is often with former military and law enforcement. The integration is easy, and the team is familiar. While he did not recall a programmatic onboarding, he spoke of completing necessary HR paperwork and receiving equipment. There was no job-specific training. He worked for a large well-known tech company in Silicon Valley. He thought most of the programmatic onboarding might not have applied to his job. "I would say the onboarding process was good. My job is with a tech company, but it is not a tech job. I am essentially, a billionaire babysitter. So, for me, it really wasn't too bad. It was awesome. You got your work phone, your work computer. You got free food at the cafeteria. Also, the company had a veteran community. They did some outreach stuff."

Charlie does show signs of understanding the need to adapt, to edit his identity. He stated, "For me, if I'm with the guys, I like to swear, I like to kind of be un-PC. And you can't do that in the corporate world. Unfortunately, that's just one of the things you've got to kind of be mindful of what you say and who you say it around and all that stuff." He continues to report a solid sense of identity tied to his service in the Army. "To be honest, the Army has given me quite a bit of my identity. Without it, I'd be pretty lost."

I completed my interview with Charlie, being concerned that he is lost in the career transition process. He has a strong sense of belonging to the Special Forces community and is willing to work hard and earn his job every day. He knows how to adapt & overcome. Charlie

explains that he has learned, "complacency kills." Even with that set of skills, his keen sense of identity may be working against him in the transition process.

Former Sergeant Chris Charlie continues to align his own identity both with his profession, which he now calls executive protection and organization. It is equally important to him WHAT he does and WHERE he does it – or at least with and for whom he does it.

Master Sergeant Daniel Delta came from a military family and served in the Junior ROTC as a high school student. He always knew he would serve in the military, though his original plan was to become an architect and serve in the reserves. While in college, the needs of a young family influenced his decision to move to active duty. He served as an Army Medic, which included several deployments during the Iraq & Afghanistan Wars. He retired after 23 years, realizing the effects of repetitive injury had caught up with him. He was no longer able to maintain a level of physical fitness required to do his job as a field medic.

Delta was stationed at Ft. Bragg, NC, when he began his transition process. He reports that his experience with SFL-TAP was both "awesome" and "excellent." Specifically, he was grateful for the opportunity to meet with representatives from the Veterans Administration to learn what he needed to do to complete his process in documenting all his health care needs. He noted that one's experience might depend on the duty station and the resources available. He thinks Ft. Bragg may be one of the best. Delta stated, "The most helpful was the fact that VA was there, and they were present. You could make a phone call and get somebody in real-time without going through a phone prompt for 30 minutes. You could literally walk in with no appointment, sign in, and see somebody within a few minutes."

Even with great VA resources, Delta was uncertain of the direction his career would take. His qualifications and experience as an Army Medic did not easily translate to the civilian healthcare workforce. He could not quickly move to a position managing the operations of operating rooms. He had not received the education and credentials required by the civilian healthcare system. "You only learn pre-hospital care. Everything you do is focused on getting a patient to the hospital." Delta had received certification as an EMT, which translates for first responders in the civilian system but does not meet qualifications for hospital-based positions.

Delta's first post-service job was with the United States Postal Service. He always had a favorable opinion of the postal service. He respected the uniform and the culture of service; to him, this felt familiar. His onboarding process was not particularly memorable. He said it was fine, but generally, the USPS lacks the appropriate resources needed to provide a safe and healthy work environment. When recalling his experience with USPS, he shared, "I was a new guy, so I did not have my own route. So, every day I worked, I was working for somebody who was off that day. I had a new route every day. But they weren't safe. In the postal service, they give you a million boxes and a little bit of letter mail. If you just Google back to like 2016, the Atlanta area, greater Atlanta, had more deaths in the postal service than they had experienced in anywhere in the United States over, I think, a five or ten-year period." He only stayed six months before leaving for self-employment. He received news of his VA disability rating, and it gave him the financial flexibility to join the family transportation business and launch his carpentry business.

Military service was the family legacy for Delta. He sees his service as a validation for his role in society. He has served his country, and in return, the citizens of the country provide for him in fair exchange. He does not feel entitled; he does feel invested. As we discussed this validation, he shared, "there was no doubt in my mind that I was going to go into the military. It validated me as a young black man; I have my place in society. I think it provided great validation. It answered the question that I think young people have, and I think maybe in particular young black men have, " Who's going to give me an opportunity? I don't need nobody to do anything for me or just give me anything, but who's going to allow the door to open on my behalf to give me an opportunity?" It was clear to me that Delta feels most comfortable in roles that allow him to serve others. He has continued his education and serves his community as a

minister in the local church. He and his wife seek out opportunities to serve for the sake of service. He explained it in this way, “there are times that you just want to get out there and be anonymous and dig in and help somebody or be a part of a something without somebody thinking that the only reason you're doing it is because you were trained to do it. You just want to be a normal part of your community and not be necessarily recognized as a veteran. It's not the only thing that defines you.” Delta seems content with his post-transition life. While he has not maintained employment with a traditional civilian employer, he has found entrepreneurial pursuits that are meeting his goals and the needs of his family.

Retired Master Sergeant Delta did not indicate a strong tie to his identity as an Army Medic. He cited concern for both his physical and mental well being as the reason he did not pursue a medical career after his retirement. Even as he believed he could easily transition to the uniformed, service-driven culture of the USPS, he found his concern for his physical and mental health were not a high enough priority for that civilian employer. He has found a higher level of comfort in his entrepreneurial pursuits. He has chosen to see his soldier identity as formative but in the past. Assessing Delta’s transition through the lens of the career matrix we find that he places low value on alignment to his profession identity and high value on his alignment to his organization identity. Though he did not find what he was looking for in a new organization, so he chose entrepreneurship.

Sergeant Major Everett Echo served a total of 27 years before retiring after 16 years of active duty in Army Intelligence. He acquired a specialized knowledge with UNIX and maintained Top Secret Security (TSS) clearance. He was highly marketable to a variety of Defense Contractors. He left the defense industry after obtaining his Masters in Healthcare Administration, developed, and sustained a career in healthcare management. He made these transitions without the benefit of a formalized transition assistance program. He did reach out to Veteran Service Organizations for assistance in navigating the Veteran's Administration benefits application process. Echo recalls feeling fear and uncertainty during his transition from active duty. He had a family to provide for. He was uncertain as to how he would provide the same stability as active duty. He had his TSS clearance, which he found to provide some level of reassurance that he would be marketable. He explained, “top-secret security clearance is kind of a security blanket because it's extremely expensive to get, but it's really easy to transfer it over to civilian status. Security clearance is a security blanket that opportunities will be available. Real or not real, it at least provides you a little bit of comfort.”

Echo is grateful for the mentors that assisted him during the early years of his career transition, in the absence of a formal program. In turn, he has mentored many Veterans making their transition. He has come to a few conclusions about what is needed. He shared his thoughts on what should be taught, “business acumen, understanding how strategy is delivered from the top, and how that's translated to income. In the military, you do the exact same thing, but it's not based on bringing in income. It's based on accomplishing a mission. Soldiers are adept at understanding how to take a strategy and turn it into tactical operations and getting it done. In business, you do the same thing, but you just don't realize it's the same thing because translating and understanding the financial aspect of a company is just not taught.”

Recalling his integration into his first civilian job, Echo noted that military-friendly bosses make the transition experience better. His first boss was not former military, but he hired veterans almost exclusively. He was sympathetic and understanding. He went on to recall that his second civilian boss was not helpful or sympathetic and generally made the job harder. He remembers feeling siloed. He wanted to understand the mission and how he fit in; he did not. He was grateful to receive a reach out from a fellow contractor from another company offering him a better opportunity. He left and moved to a new defense contractor in a position that paid better and allowed him to learn the language of business. He continues to be surprised after all these years. No one has figured out what should be included in the outplacement and onboarding programs for veterans, making a move to civilian organizations.

Echo identifies strongly with his service in the Army. He recalls vividly when he had to sign a declination statement after setting his discharge date. He immediately felt like an outsider, no longer given assignments because he could not be counted on to be there to carry them out. This is the standard operating procedure, but for some, it feels as though they are being pushed out, even if leaving was their decision. Echo is grateful for the discipline and life skills he gained.

One such skill he spoke of in detail is the skill of learning how to fail. He said, "learning from your failures means you understand how to take a risk and how to mitigate risk. It prepared me for the civilian world to know it's okay to fail when you fail; it doesn't define you as a whole." Echo is proud to have served and identifies strongly as a veteran and believes that he has a responsibility to serve. He is a soldier for life (even without a program of the same name). He spoke openly of the fear and insecurity a soldier feels to leave the financial stability of active duty, especially if supporting a family. He chose to continue his service as a reservist for more

than ten years after leaving active duty. This one foot in, one foot out, means of transition, extended a sense of stability and community. It has now been ten years since his complete retirement from duty, and he still finds solace in serving fellow veterans by leading the employee resource group for veterans with his civilian employers.

Assessing Retired Sergeant Major Echo's transition through the lens of the career identity matrix we find that he places high value on his alignment to both his profession and his organization. His profession did change over time as he obtained new civilian credentials and even then, we see evidence that having credentials – first his Top-Secret Security Clearance and then his Masters in Healthcare Administration – were critically important to him in feeling a sense of security that he would be valuable to the organization where he is employed.

Sergeant First Class Frederick Foxtrot served 23 years as an Army Human Resources Specialist; he retired with interest in creating greater family stability. In the last five years of his service, he lived separately from his family most of every year, and retirement offered the opportunity for his family to live together in the place of their choice. Location was a significant factor in determining where to begin looking for civilian jobs. They needed to consider his spouse's career opportunities and schooling for their children. As someone who identified strongly as a Human Resources professional, he understood that he would need to have a strong LinkedIn presence to find his next job. He became active on LinkedIn his last two years of service. He was intentional about building a network and paid close attention to the Human Resources jobs posted. Foxtrot attended job fairs and reached out to a variety of veteran service organizations.

Foxtrot did participate in the SFL TAP and said it was "pretty good." During the five-day program, he received guidance on applying for Veterans Administration benefits. He stated this was the most important day of the five. He found most other elements "outdated." One example, *Employment Fundamentals* offered by a Department of Labor, had not been updated to include the use of standard tools such as LinkedIn. Foxtrot was able to offer his peers in the class the LinkedIn tips he had learned in the year prior. He believes strongly that this part of the program should be revised and updated. As we continued to talk about the improvements that could be made, he offered this thought, "each installation is different as far as their approach. Either they're proactive or reactive. The ones at Fort Stewart are very proactive. The manager at the Soldier for Life TAP manager here, Eddie, in Columbus, at Fort Benning, is proactive. At another installation, they may not be as proactive." However, I still note that even with the programs Foxtrot sees as proactive, the curriculum itself needs to be refreshed.

Months before Foxtrot's final retirement date, he received a job offer from a local healthcare system. He had applied for the position and still seems surprised by how smoothly the process went for him. He progressed through the interview process over a month. He received the job offer and was able to negotiate a start date of approximately two months later, allowing him to complete his service to the Army. His onboarding experience was formal and well designed. He found it to be an extremely positive experience. "That day, you are welcomed into the Piedmont family. You walk the orange carpet because it's one of Piedmont's colors." This experience made him feel welcome, and as though he had found an organization that shared his values. He continued, "for me, my next day after orientation, I reported to the HR Department. I was met by my team who I had met in the interview, with a welcome breakfast for me. "He was enjoying being a part of this team and was quick to mention he is now the person responsible for managing this onboarding process for others. Foxtrot believes he has found a great culture fit for him, both in the healthcare system and the people he works with on the human resources team.

Each interview participant was asked how the Army defined them, and this was Foxtrot's response, "I look at me being in the Army as just a part of me. I don't identify myself as, "Hey, the Army did this to me." They afforded me some opportunities, but is this a makeup of the conglomerate that makes me a person? Being a soldier was just a part of who I am because I could be a soldier at this point, but I'm a husband and father first before I'm a soldier. So, I look at it as some people identify themselves as out of uniform. They're Colonel So-and-So, or Sergeant Major So-and-So. I never did that. When I'm out of uniform, I'm out of uniform. I'm a dad and husband first before I put on a uniform because I was that before I put on the uniform, before joining the military."

Retired Sergeant First Class Foxtrot placed high value on both his profession identity and his organization identity. He has found it easy to move into his new human resources role with the healthcare system, he identified as a human resource professional in the Army. Foxtrot was ready to leave the Army, prioritizing his role as a present and participative father. His successful career transition as assessed by the career identity matrix is supported by the high value he placed on both WHAT he does and WHERE he does it.

Colonel Greg Golf served in the Armor Division of the Army for 28 years, obtaining two Master's degrees while serving. His last assignment before retirement was as the Deputy Commandant with accountability for training and education. He had a unique perspective on the Soldier for Life Transition Assistance Program as both a participant and a leader. He did attend the executive version, which I have learned is the same curriculum but is attended by senior officers. Concerning his participation, Golf reported, "I did not have an established retirement date when I went to TAP. Because you have to go through TAP, I wanted to make sure that I checked that off, so if somebody came calling, I could say, "Hey, I can be out of the Army in three months." He did find some benefits in attending, specifically, the interaction with colleagues, and the opportunity to receive feedback on his resume and role-play interview scenarios. As a leader responsible for the execution of SFL TAP at his base, he said, "TAP is designed to empower you. It doesn't serve it to you on a platter. The problem with the TAP program as the Army does it is, it's very much geared for the masses, not geared for the exception." He noted that self-study is expected, and each soldier will get out of TAP what they put in. Each soldier's transition experience is determined by their commitment to doing the work. He offered some advice he gives to soldiers he has mentored in their outplacement, he recommends they are clear on four things going into their transition: 1) what do you want to do with your life 2) what expertise do you have that is valuable 3) where do you want to live 4) what are your salary expectations.

Golf was sure about his answer to these questions. He knew that he would need to find an opportunity that would allow him to connect with a mission. He knew that he is an expert in the application of armored vehicles for warfighting. He knew his family preferred to remain in their current home to reduce the disruption to the lives of his spouse and children. Furthermore, he

knew the salary range he would accept in order to provide for his family. He was quick to say he is not motivated by the money; he is motivated by the mission, "If I'm having my needs met, the cultural piece for me is more important than increased salary. I think some people, for lack of a better term, they get that wrong. They're more focused on the dollar sign than the quality of the interaction which I, personally, believe speaks directly then to quality of life."

There was a semi-structured approach to his onboarding with the defense contractor, where he is now employed as a Director of Military Sales and Strategy. The federal government requires a 60 day "cooling off period" for anyone leaving the military and moving into a position with a government contractor. He spent his cooling-off period traveling to two of the contractor's offices sitting in on briefings and learning about both the products offered and the overall infrastructure of the organization. When I asked Golf what he found to be the most challenging he stated, "even turning my relevant experience into a second career that has a similar focus as my military service, the language (of business) is a lot harder to learn than the Russian I learned years ago." It seems the most critical aspect of the onboarding process for Golf was to learn that he had chosen well. He noted that his first three days with the company were spent at their headquarters attending classes related to ethics and compliance. He was encouraged to spend his time in this way, stating, "that, to me, was the culture that I wanted because it's what I've lived for the last 28 years. It is mission-focused."

When Golf and I spoke about identity, he was quick to say that he is, of course, defined heavily by his time in service. He notes that he has spent three decades in uniform. He is mission-driven. He also noted that he sees himself first as a strategist, and in leaving the Army, he was looking for an organization that would allow him to use his skills to continue to play a part in the improvement in the protection of the warfighter. He noted that his current employer is

"all in" – everything they do is for the customer, whom Golf sees as the modern warfighter. He said, "It's real simple. If we do this right, the technologies that we're bringing to fruition, if we bring these to the Army and do it right, then there are less Gold Star families."

Retired Colonel Golf has been in the role for a few months, and based on the time I spent with him, I would say he is adapting well, likely because he is committed to the mission. He seems quite steeped in his identity as a strategist and as an advocate for the modern warfighter. A mission first identity is not hard to understand, considering it has been his personal and professional orientation for the last 28 years. Using the career identity matrix as an assessment of the value Golf places on his profession identity and organization identity we found both to be high. WHAT he does (strategist) and WHERE he does it (DoD) are highly valuable to him as he makes his civilian career transition.

First Sergeant Horatio Hotel served 32 years in both Infantry and Intelligence, earning his bachelor's degree while serving. When we spoke about his decision-making process leading up to his retirement, he noted that he started to realize he was in a "young man's game." He sustained a service-related injury and found it more difficult to recover than from injuries in the past. He recalled it was an 18-month process to decide he was ready to leave. He is a bit of a stand out in the data set. He did not attend SFL TAP; he had a job offer with a defense contractor before he had even submitted his request to retire. He faced few of the same transition challenges that the other participants faced. He said about his transition, "my transition was real easy, almost too easy. And that was the scary part.....still now five months later, I'm like, 'Okay, what else do I need to do?' I thought there would be a lot more things involved."

Hotel did offer an opinion about the SFL TAP program. As a senior NCO, he supported many soldiers in his command as they followed the Army's required outplacement program. Based on what he saw from their experience, he had no interest in what TAP offered. He believes the contractors employed to facilitate the program are not kept up to date on the most modern employment search strategies, and the curriculum is outdated and not frequently refreshed. He believes a better approach would be to bring back veterans who have been successful in making the transition to help those preparing. He found a great deal of support and mentorship in his new leaders and co-workers at the defense contractor. Most of them had also transitioned from active duty military, and they offered advice on how they had been successful and what to watch out for in the process. As almost all other participants noted, the Veterans Administration benefits application process is one of the most crucial transition activities – he is grateful to have received excellent guidance and advice from co-workers.

Hotel's onboarding experience with the defense contractor has been mostly informal. He continues to see his transition as going smoothly and has been able to pick up what he needs from his new team. He stepped into a position that is very similar to what he was doing in the Army and finds the language spoken on the team to be familiar and similar. He mentioned the use of "shorthand" as he explained that even when he does have to ask questions about duties he may find to be new, there is an overall sense of familiarity that allows his boss and co-workers to explain quickly and efficiently as he has experienced much of the context during his Army service.

When Hotel spoke about his identity, he first pushed back on the idea that the Army has defined him in some way. He brought up examples of how he served with others who had the same training and similar experiences to his, and yet they had not achieved the same rank or success. He cautioned that when a hiring manager is considering a veteran, she should pay attention to how that individual managed their military career. He suggested the hiring manager note, "What kind of career did the person have? Did they go to every school that was available? Did they do all the other crazy stuff you could do - Airborne and all the other things? Or did they just make it a job, show up 9 to 5, and do it that way? I think that's another factor to kind of look at when you're looking at personality types is, 'How did they conduct themselves in their military career?' Because just doing 30 years in the Army, while honorable, you can do it 9 to 5, or you can be driven to get everything you can do in that period of time." It seemed important that he communicate that Veterans are not monolithic. Once he had made that point clear, he did comment further, "So, there's identifiable qualities. It's difficult to go 30 years of your adult life in an organization and not have it be... It's actually been the toughest thing to try to determine

who I am now.” There was a great deal of pride evident in the way he spoke about his military service and the fact that "everyone knows I was Army."

While he is careful to be sure it is understood that not all who serve, serve equally, he does hold his experience dear. His transition to a civilian career seems to be advancing nicely, given he has had to make very few changes. He is still adjusting to civilian life overall in a broader sense. Many veterans comment on freedom that comes from leaving the grooming standards of the military behind. One intriguing comment Hotel made, “I’ve grown a beard. So, that was a thing I’d been thinking of doing for 30 years.” A seemingly small gesture of independence expressed.

Retired First Sergeant Hotel decided to transition into a defense contractor career that required little to no identity editing in order to fit in quickly. He is surrounded by others who served in the military. They are empathetic to the transition and are serving as guides and mentors. When assessing Hotel's identity from the perspective of the career identity matrix we find that he places a low value on his alignment to profession identity and high value on his alignment to organization identity. His civilian career transition seems to have gone smoothly because he moved into a civilian position with a Department of Defense contractor and the job duties were very similar to those he learned in the Army.

Major Isaac India served 25 years as a member of the Infantry and earned his MBA and a certification in Lean Six Sigma while serving. The transition has been difficult, and at times he was fearful and confused about why it was so challenging. Early in the interview, he stated, "my transition story started just over a year ago. I was the Field Grade Officer that worked to the eleventh hour, and I was kind of in denial. Some of it was denial. Some of it was, I kind of believed the lies that were told to us, 'All these companies are going to come chase you down.' I knew I was leaving with an MBA. I knew my level of experience in the military with an MBA should translate easily to corporate America. I just didn't really know where or how."

India was looking forward to attending SFL TAP. Unfortunately, TAP did not provide what he was expecting. He shared powerful thoughts on the lack of value TAP provided to him. "I quickly realized that the things that I learned in SFL TAP was no value-added. It was almost as if the entire course was a waste of my time. I felt like a gut punch as I started to realize these things.....what disappointed me the most was, I lost that time, the time from when I left the course, and it was mid or end of October to February when I started to actually engage in the process." India engaged in other job search activities in addition to attending TAP but stated he should have started a year earlier instead of waiting for SFL TAP. He developed his LinkedIn network and connected with American Corporate Partners (<https://www.acp-usa.org/>), where he was partnered with a volunteer mentor from a civilian organization. He completed the one-year ACP program, where he received valuable feedback on his resume and was introduced to several members of the mentor's network. He found their calls helpful and even grounding when he would become discouraged. He sought feedback from former Army colleagues who had already made the transition, from professionals in the private sector in jobs he thought he might want to explore. He attended job fairs and found them to be frustrating at best. He shared several stories.

One, in particular, stood out, "the recruiters and the HR people there didn't even bring business cards. And they were almost talking me out of the position. One consulting firm asked, 'Well, how much do you want to travel?' And I was like, 'Well, I don't want to travel all the time, but I'm willing to travel for the job.' 'Well, it sounds like you're 50%.' And I was like, 'Well, maybe. Sure.' 'Well, we need you to be at least 80%, so this probably isn't the place for you.'" He gave up on job fairs.

India said, in the beginning, he was just blindly applying for jobs that seemed interesting or that he thought would be a good fit. He eventually realized his blind spots related to the level of the civilian positions he would be taken seriously for in the civilian workforce. Once India and his spouse determined the location they wanted to live, they began to research the companies there. He focused on two large banks where he believed he could contribute. He received an offer from both banks, one shortly after he had accepted the first.

At the time of our interview, India had been in his new role for 90 days. His onboarding was haphazard at best. In his very first week, he was told to take days off as a "bank holiday" because they were unprepared for him. He found this quite unsettling and disorienting; he said he has often felt lost during this period of orientation. He has had to accept that his new company moves slowly, much more slowly than the Army. One additional contributing factor to India's feelings of disorientation is the nature of his new position. He serves on the business process improvement team. By design of the team, as an expert in Lean Six Sigma, he gets dropped in to help solve large scale organizational problems. He often does not feel like a part of any specific team. He misses being a part of a cohesive team where he is counted on to deliver, and he can count on others to do the same. At one point in the interview, India stopped and made a point to say that he is grateful for his new opportunity, and he looks for the positive – "hunting the good

stuff." His family can live in the city they have chosen; his children are happy in their new school and have a feeling of stability as they begin high school. The role has provided him with a great deal of flexibility and good pay and benefits.

As we talked about identity, India expressed his identity in terms of being a part of a team. He stated, "I started developing as a leader and developing leadership skills through martial arts, through Boy Scouts, and then through athletics playing on teams. All through my childhood, I played on teams and really just built that mentality of supporting the team, doing whatever is for the greater good of the team and the organization." The Army did not define his identity as a team player; serving as an Army Infantry Officer provided opportunities to live out his identity.

Assessing Retired Major India's career transition through the lens of the career identity matrix we find that he places high value on his profession identity – earning credentials respected in the civilian world so that he may more easily transition into his newly chosen profession. We find he places low value on his organization identity. He interviewed with several and ultimately chose the first one to choose him – the ultimate goal was to find an organization that would allow him to serve in the capacity of his new profession.

Major Jack Juliatt served as Chaplain to Army Rangers for 20 years. Before serving in the Army, he served four years in the Marines and earned two Master's degrees and a Doctorate of Divinity. He retired from the Army with the specific purpose of becoming a lead pastor of a local church. He attended SFL- TAP 18 months before his planned retirement date and described the TAP experience as a "net gain." He, like many others, said the most helpful element of TAP was the Veterans Administration benefits overview. His overall assessment of SFL TAP was that it seemed to be geared toward helping retirees get defense contractor jobs. He was not interested in the defense contractor opportunities, and so he had already determined he would have to construct his specialized plan for a successful transition.

Juliatt set out to create his outplacement program four years before his intended retirement date. He believed he was being called to serve in the local church, so he prayed with purpose and set a plan into motion. His exit strategy had what he called "lines of effort....to be extremely pro-active". These lines of effort were: 1) served as the Lead Chaplain of the base chapel – developed ministries that would also be relevant to the local church, 2) wrote and published three books relevant to his ministry to men and families, 3) served as a guest speaker at local churches as called, and 4) launched a website to market his ministries, books, and speaking to ensure he would have an active presence to supplement his resume.

His strategy worked. He received an offer to serve as the Lead Pastor of a church in Arkansas, beginning in the exact month he had planned. In the year leading up to this appointment, he had created his onboarding program as well. It served to enhance his network with local church leaders from around the country. He chose the programs he did with focus. He knew that he needed to be prepared to reform his leadership style to fit the local church and that he would need the skill to assess the church's needs. The leadership skills he developed in the

Marines, and the Army and working with Rangers specifically would be helpful, yet he realized he would need to round these skills out to serve a civilian congregation of the community church. He found two specific programs that he believes prepared him for his new role: 1) *The Lead Pastors Coaching Network* offered by Vanderbloemen Ministries, and 2) *The Bonhoeffer Project* for discipleship training. These programs provided Juliet not only instruction, but new peers and colleagues with which to network and learn from even after the program had concluded.

These professional clergy networks are consistent with the elite network Juliet most identifies within his military service. When we talked about identity, he was quick to reflect on his identity as being linked to his profession. “Every guy is going to find his identity to some degree in his career. For me, I identified myself as a chaplain to the Rangers, and I didn't really see myself as a member of the chaplain branch just in a generic sense. I felt like God called me into the Army to minister to a certain type of person.” Juliatt went on to talk about his calling using terms familiar to both the Army and the Christian church; in all cases, he is motivated by purpose and direction. Retired Major Juliet finds little need to edit his identity. He identifies as a Pastor – those he ministers to has changed – from Army Rangers to the members of his local church. The identity editing that did take place did so over four years as he prepared himself to be a Lead Pastor.

Retired Major Jack Juliatt places high value on his identity as Clergy/Chaplain/Pastor all names for the same profession. He places a low value on organization identity – he will find a flock to minister to in whatever organization he believes he has been called to serve.

Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Kilo graduated from the Army Academy at West Point, serving for five years before leaving to begin a civilian career. After five years in that civilian career, he returned to the Army as a Chaplain served an additional 14 years with a planned retirement after 15 years of continuous service (21 total years served). Kilo has earned two Master's degrees and is a Doctoral candidate expected to finish about the same time he retires.

Kilo attended SFL TAP and had a great deal to say about the experience and the program overall. He started with, "For me, SFL TAP has been good because I found what's good in it. All I wanted to know was, 'How do I get my VA disability? How do I get all my medical stuff taken care of? And how do I make sure that my vacation days and all this stuff gets taken care of?' I have learned more from people that have retired than from SFL TAP." Later he added, "I'm glad they're doing that [TAP], but to be honest with you, that stuff is for that 23-year-old kid that just spent four years in the Army and doesn't know how to do what's next." Later in the interview, we talked about the Department of Defense's choice to call the program *Soldier for Life*, Kilo shared a recollection from his time at West Point. He said that at West Point, they are taught no matter how long you choose to serve actively in the Army, you are committing yourself to a lifetime of service to the nation. Kilo takes that commitment very seriously. None the less, he expressed being torn about having TAP bear the title *Soldier for Life*, "I think, also, politically, it's a huge 'cover your ass' for how poorly our nation, how poorly our government, how poorly leaders, have taken care of our veterans." He continued, "Hey, this is the Transition Assistance Program, *Soldier for Life*, so that we can say we did everything we could to set you up for success after you leave the Army."

Though Kilo is about a year from his retirement date, he has decided on his next career opportunity. Kilo is an entrepreneur; if he is to have an onboarding experience, it will be one, he

designs for himself. He has launched his consulting and coaching business specializing in working with leaders in the private sector to teach ethics and character development. Melding his experience as West Point grad, Army Ranger, and Ethicist. In addition to his professional pursuits as a consultant, he and a couple of other ministers have started a new church in their local community. When I asked him about the ministry, he shared, “we feel God called us here to this city to make an impact. And that comes from scripture, Jeremiah 29:4-7, where God tells the people of Israel even after they were brought out of captivity, ‘Hey, I've planted you here, so be fruitful, because when you're fruitful, the city will be fruitful. Pray for your city and support your city because when you are fruitful, the city will be fruitful, and it's all a good thing.’ So, we really feel like this is the place where we're supposed to be rooted.”

When we spoke about identity, he was extremely open and shared his perspective on service and the commitment to the moral covenant of military service – a willingness to die for God, country, and your team. For him, the Army was character shaping, "I would say being an Army Ranger and being a West Point graduate are probably two of the most character shaping aspects of my life that I have the greatest affinity to." He continued and spoke about what he will miss the most, “I think the hardest thing for me to disconnect from is the legacy...hoping that people take care of it as well as you took care of it. When I teach ethics, I tell the young lieutenants and captains, ‘the reason why I'm so committed to teaching you guys and challenging you guys is because one of you might be one of my kid's commanders one day, and you may have to make a life or death decision for them.’ I said, ‘I'm investing in you because my kid, someday, might be counting on you.’" It is clear Lieutenant Colonel Kilo will miss the Army it is also clear that he is ready to move to what is next and he feels the way is being paved, “the different doors that God's opening for me to take this material [character/ethics] out to the

corporate world is just absolutely incredible. I think it is the easiest transition to make. There's just these different opportunities where I get affirmed that this is going to be okay.” While some identity editing may be necessary, Kilo was a part of the civilian workforce for five years, and he has been pastoring a local church and coaching civilian professionals. His transition process has been gradual.

Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Kilo is approaching retirement and career transition placing a high value on profession identity and low value on organization identity. He identifies as clergy/chaplain/ pastor but he does not identify with a specific organization or see WHERE he does WHAT he does as highly valuable in his transition process. The career identity matrix position for Kilo is the top left quadrant – high profession identity, low organization identity.

First Sergeant Louis Lima served 20 years in the Infantry Division, retiring as a First Sergeant, completing his Bachelor's degree while he served. Lima is actively seeking a job on the human resources team, preferably leading a team. When we talked about his career goals, he stated one laudable goal decidedly, "I want to be a CHRO of a Fortune 500 in 12 years or less."

He did complete the SFL TAP program approximately eight months before his retirement date. He did not find the program helpful. Unlike most of the veterans I spoke to, Lima was not able to identify any part of SFL TAP that he found beneficial. When I asked about the element of the program that he found most helpful, he responded, "Most helpful out of SFL TAP. Not really anything that sticks out in my mind." He went on to say that the Department of Labor curriculum is "antiquated," noting that the facilitator was not able to brief the class on the use of LinkedIn or any of the other online networking or job search tools. He found the resume writing session "glossed over" and not particularly helpful. He approached TAP, hopeful that it would help him establish his brand, facilitating his transition to his desired civilian career opportunity, in human resources. In his opinion, TAP did not assist him in any way. He harshly summarized the class as "garbage" predicated on "washed up old ideas."

Lima did participate in a new program offered by the Department of Defense, SkillBridge. He held a civilian internship sponsored by SkillBridge and found the experience to be beneficial. He did say that the program is relatively new, not well known, and requires a great deal of coordination on the part of the individual service member. He is not surprised that few soldiers pursue participation, no one works on their behalf to find the sponsoring company or obtain all of the approvals required by Command. It requires that the service member both know about the program and have the drive to make it happen for themselves. The DoD SkillBridge website describes the program as *an opportunity for Service members to gain valuable civilian*

work experience through specific industry training, apprenticeships, or internships during the last 180 days of service. SkillBridge connects Service members with industry partners in real-world job experiences. Separating Service members can be granted permissive duty to focus solely on training full-time with approved industry partners.

<https://dodskillbridge.usalearning.gov/program-overview.htm>

Lima completed a four-month internship with a well-known financial services company. He was able to work on several human resources analytics projects. He described the experience as a great opportunity to gain recent relevant experience that should translate to more civilian career opportunities. He also discovered the financial services company was not the right culture fit for him. He would not have accepted a full-time position there if they had offered. He noted that their overall leadership culture is "consensus-driven and political" and that they purport to be a mission-focused organization, but he did not see it. He went on to talk about his experience, "so, the organization presents itself as a family organization. They value their employees. They have all these high values, morals, and ethics, but when you get on the inside, it's really not like that at all, which is a huge turnoff for me because coming from the military, you're looking for values, morals, and ethics."

It was not a surprise to learn that Lima is feeling mixed emotions about his retirement from the Army. He has prepared by obtaining his college degree and completing a rare four-month internship with a Fortune 500 company. In many ways, he feels prepared. In many others, he does not. Specifically, he states, "there was no real sort of preparation from the military that's like, 'Hey, transition is going to suck. You're going to lose a lot of friends. You're going to lose that support network of the military, that daily interaction. You're going to go out on this thing alone." Lima has not had the opportunity to onboard with a civilian employer. His SkillBridge

internship provided him with exciting project work and insights into the organization but did not provide him with the opportunity to experience the company's onboarding program. He does have thoughts on what he is looking for in his next opportunity. He is looking to work with an organization that he considers having integrity, he explained, "not that my values from the military actually align, but that they believe in their values and they use their own values within the organization."

I asked Lima in what way the Army has defined him; he responded, "The Army is not me anymore. Yes, the military is what I wanted to do ever since I got my first G.I. Joe at six-years-old, but at the end of the day, this is not me anymore." As we spoke about identity, Lima expressed confidence in his ability to assimilate into a new culture. "I'm able to assimilate into a lot of different organizations very, very easily based on the fact of what I've done in the military." Retired First Sergeant Lima is in search of an environment that meets his tightly defined expectations; he knows the job title and description and the work environment he seeks to join. In assessing Lima's career transition through the career identity matrix lens, we find that he places high value on both profession identity and organization identity – placing him in the top right quadrant of the matrix.

First Sergeant Mitchell Mike served in the Infantry Division for 28 years and is scheduled to retire in the Spring of 2020. He had not yet attended SFL TAP when we spoke. Mike had a great deal of expectancy for his transition process. He knew of others in his unit who retired before him, who was able to skip SFL TAP due to it not being offered at a base near them. He was not willing to miss the opportunity and believed he needed whatever the program was going to offer. He planned to drive a few hours to a base where he could attend the five-day class. He has also been signing up for job fair events scheduled closer to the time of his discharge.

Mike is looking into all options for his civilian career. His highest priority is to make sure that he can provide a stable home for his family. He spoke openly about his responsibility as a husband and a father. He was looking forward to having more time with his family and joked nervously that they might not be as ready to have him at home so much. When we spoke about the types of positions he had considered, he mentioned that there is a high likelihood he will be hired into a logistics quality position he previously held as an E8. He said that the base leadership had already started the process of approval to make the role a civilian job. He would have to observe the 6-month cooling-off period, so he felt there would be adequate time for the approvals to be completed before he could accept the position.

We spoke mostly of his expectations for the transition since he had not yet experienced SFL TAP or interviewed for any specific job. He believed the most natural part of settling into a civilian career would be in the utilization of the work ethic gained in the Army. "I will always excel at showing up and getting the work done. That is a trait all employers are looking for and value; I don't care who they are." He went on to say, the second trait he brings, he has learned to work with anyone. Mike thought it essential to include that he is not an *alpha* and believes in

developing relationships. “I can work with anybody - good, bad, indifferent. I’ve prided myself on that for the past 10, 11 years in the organization I’m with. If there is a problem child, they always put him with me, and I figure out a way to work with them, and I up their level of performance.”

This led to our conversation about identity. The researcher asked Mike how the Army has defined him (if it had at all), he said, “I’m a soldier. It’s my identity. The way I carry myself and the expectations, my values, is all based off that one thing.” I asked him what it meant to him to be a soldier. His response, “It starts with the professionalism and the way we’re expected to carry ourselves, how we deal with stress, how we deal with pressure. When we do let our guard down, it’s not very far, and, honestly, as a soldier, it’s very difficult to let people in the inner circle because our structure with rank and everything is so regimented that my engagement is with my peers. It’s not with the superiors. It’s not with my subordinates.” He did state clearly that while it will be difficult for him to leave the soldier identity behind, he does intend to try. He expects he will have to adjust to the civilian work environment. He was not able to explain precisely what he thinks he will have to change, but he is ready to figure it out.

Retired First Sergeant Mitchell Mike places a high value on his profession identity – both a soldier and a teacher/trainer/mentor to young soldiers. He places low value on organization identity – the Army is where he has worked and he is open to working somewhere new – as long as he is able to use the profession he learned in the Army.

Sergeant First Class Nolan November is retired from the Infantry, where he served for 23 years straight out of high school. This interview was different from some of the others. He was challenging to connect with and made it clear he did not have a lot to offer. He was speaking to me as a favor to a "battle buddy." He seemed generally bitter about his experiences in the last few months of his service. He did attend TAP. However, although he was active Army, he attended the Marine Corp TAP class, which they call the *Transition Readiness Program*. November said as he understands it is the same 5-day curriculum, to include the same facilitators from the Department of Labor. He said that overall, the program was a waste of his time. He was particularly irritated by the amount of time spent bringing in a local Clothier to speak to them about how to choose a suit and tips on dressing for work in the civilian sector. He said, "they called it, *Dress for Success*. I walked out. I'm like, 'You know what? I'm done.' I am not interested in a job where I have to wear a suit and tie." He did stay the day they talked about applying for VA Benefits - he found it truly helpful.

For November, his focus during outplacement was to simply complete the requirements so he could get out and move on to the next phase as quickly as possible. He mentioned taking part in an internship program. I did not know that it was SkillBridge at the time. I realized it later when I learned about the program from another veteran. He spent two months working for a sponsor civilian company. His description confirmed what I heard about SkillBridge, "One of the things was the internship program. I reached out to her [SkillBridge coordinator], and, honestly, I never was able to find anything that really worked for me. I did up the whole thing myself. Wrote the contract between me and him, and I kind of walked it through. It was messy. It was rough. I did it somewhat last minute; I had to get it signed by a General in one day, which is very

difficult. But I did it. Did it help me? No. I didn't even add it to my resume. Honestly, I did it to get out of work for the last two months because I was really needing to leave.”

Despite the relatively negative outplacement experience November described, he had already received a job offer. His Top-Secret Security Clearance and general facility maintenance experience were the keys to securing his next opportunity. His onboarding was not going to be a formal process. The building where he will serve as their Facilities Maintenance Technician has not yet opened. He will begin reporting to work and will coordinate furniture delivery and floor plan execution preparing for the company to begin operations when the new contract starts. November expected there would be on the job training. The expectation will be for him to get the job done simply. Have the building ready in time for his future co-workers to begin.

I asked November how he felt about leaving the Army. His response was "Unbelievable," going on to explain that after more than twenty years, he is ready to move on. November came across as fairly detached from the Army generally. As we discussed his choice to join the military, he spoke of his interest to serve because, in his family, it's what you do. He did add that the Army provided discipline that he knew he needed as a young man. He then shared his first conversation with the recruiter, “He asked, ‘Why do you want to be in the Army?’ And I said, ‘I want a place to live. I want clothes to wear. And I want something to eat.’” Retired Sergeant First Class November never felt particularly defined by his service in the Army; for him, it was a job he had for 23 years - a job he is ready to move on from now. Assessing his responses through the lens of the career identity matrix we find that Retired Sergeant First Class Nolan November places low value on both profession identity and organization identity. He has a tool box full of tools and he will apply them as fair days work for a fair days pay with no particular effect on his own definition of his identity.

Captain Olivia Oscar served seven years in human intelligence; she began her service in the ROTC while earning her Bachelor's degree. She began learning languages in high school, mastering more than one, and traveling extensively. The Army was a means to an end. Oscar shared, "After high school; I lived in Jordan for a year working as a teacher. I taught English with a focus on writing skills. And when it came time for college, my dad was pro-choice. I could choose the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force." She served two deployments in Afghanistan. Overall, she speaks of her experience as a positive. "I would happily go back to Afghanistan right now. It's my element, my culture, my language; it's my job. It's a mission set. And those are my fondest memories of the Army, oddly enough, are Afghanistan." Her decision to seek a discharge after seven years is due to her desire to travel more freely and seek higher levels of education and work in a career field that allows her a greater degree of variety and independence.

Oscar attended SFL TAP and found it very useful. She is grateful that it is offered and learned a great deal. She, like most, found the day offering Veterans Administration benefits registration assistance the most helpful. She is aware that it takes 6 – 12 months to get through the process and be granted the appropriate level of benefits. She has several service-related medical concerns and wants to be certain she will be able to get the continued care she needs after discharge. The second element of the program she found noteworthy was the assistance provided in the use of the GI Bill for continued education. She plans to return to graduate school and found the information about the use the education assistance for veterans helpful.

Oscar did offer an *after-action review* of SFL TAP. She found the resume building workshop just average. Her concern is the large number of soldiers who never had a resume. She was able to start with her college resume and was able to learn from the workshop to make it

better. She is aware that many of her peers in the workshop did not complete a resume; they took notes but do not have a finished version to begin applying for jobs. In Oscar's opinion, it should be a requirement that you have a completed resume by the end of the 5-day SFL TAP program.

In addition to TAP, Oscar has updated her LinkedIn profile and has started to network with former commanders and mentors to let them know she is looking for a career opportunity to begin in a few months. She has determined she would like to return to the community where she attended college. After working there for a year, she then plans to move to Washington, DC, to expand her opportunities for graduate school in programs that are suited for intelligence. Oscar is still actively serving and planning her discharge for September 2020. One additional area of preparation Oscar is putting a great deal of energy into is financial planning. She is aware the locations she has chosen to live have a higher cost of living than her current on-base housing.

While she is not yet confident about where she will be working. She is hopeful and believes the most natural part of the transition will be marketing herself. She has an education from a top tier university, which she attended on Fulbright Scholarship, and served as a Captain in the Army. The hardest part is adapting to the unknowns of a new career, "I'm not worried about getting a job. I'm worried about starting a new career. I know that the job I get when I get out of the Army will be a stepping stone for a couple years while I finish grad school. I worry about making the wrong choice and being stuck there." What she is looking forward to the most is her freedom to travel. She began traveling at an early age and while the Army did include some travel it was of course quite different being assigned to a foreign US military operating base than having the freedom and independence of a civilian foreign national.

Oscar spoke openly about how her service in the Army has shaped her. "I'm glad I was in the Army and glad I served my country. Was I a great fit for the Army? You know what? I

had to mold myself to the Army, which is fine.” She openly shared what she will miss and what she believes many veterans struggle with in the transition. “My coworkers are family. But because of that, because you know that the people at work are your family, you're then willing to make that extra sacrifice. You're willing to deploy and fight with them because you have a mission, and your mission is to keep your soldiers safe as an intel officer.” Serving in the military, you feel a "sense of personal sacrifice that your part of a greater picture. And I think a lot of veterans end up struggling when they're getting out because you can get out and work at Walmart, but you don't get that same sense of accomplishment when you're working at Walmart, Google, or any organization. I think that's what a lot of veterans cope with.”

We concluded our conversation talking about Oscar’s desires for her next career – she described her desire to find a place to put down roots. She fears losing the implicit respect that has come with her rank. Yet she knows that she was successful in molding herself to the Army, and she will adapt again. As someone who is well-traveled, and open to a variety of cultures, editing to fit in seems to be a welcome task. Assessing Captain Olivia Oscar’s transition only partially through the process through the career identity matrix lens we placed her in bottom right quadrant. She places a high value on organization identity tied in part to the respect that comes with a position in an organization. She places low value on profession identity – she is voluntarily leaving her current profession as a Captain in the Army and heading out to seek a new unknown profession.

After several passes of naïve reading and, structural analysis I sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena that is a complete career transition process inclusive of identity work. (Flood, 2010, p.12) Table 1 summarizes the key impressions I discovered when analyzing the lived experiences of the study participants.

Table 2: Key experience impressions

The lived experience	
➤	Influences to join the Army
➤	Years of Service
➤	Circumstances of separation
➤	Outplacement (TAP-SFL) experience
➤	Onboarding experience
➤	Overall transition experience – identity work – “Soldier for Life” identity

Among those who shared their *influences for joining the Army*, there were two major themes. The question was not asked explicitly, yet most of the veterans did offer the information in the course of sharing their transition experience. Many joined the Army to take advantage of opportunities - opportunities for a job that provided for their young families, opportunities for education, and opportunities for travel. Several mentioned that joining a branch of the military was their only avenue to pursue job training and or education, as they would not have had the financial means otherwise. One participant was quite explicit that the Army was always a job – a means by which to provide food and shelter for himself and later his family – he served over two decades and to him, it was always just a job. Two of our participants graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point – both spoke openly about family legacy to serve and a desire to be a part of the West Point legacy and lifelong network. Family legacy broadly was the second influence named by several participants. They served because their father and uncles before them had served. The researcher did not get the impression that they felt this legacy of

service was a burden or an obligation but that they were proud to do as their forefathers had and serve their country by serving in the United States Army.

Years of service by this group ranged from 5 years to 32 years. Some of those who served for 20 plus years did make reference to their own belief that they identified themselves as a soldier because they had been in service for so long; however, the length of service did not seem to be an indicator of one's "Soldier for Life" identification. One West Point graduate who was only able to serve a total of five years before his medical discharge in 2005 definitely still identifies with "Duty, Honor, Country" and for him, this is a life calling. The participant mentioned earlier who always experienced the Army as a job, served 23 years and was certain that though he had just completed his final outplacement paperwork he was able to leave the Army happily and never look back - no residual soldier identity with which to contend. I was surprised to learn that *years of service* did not offer any indication as to the ease or difficulty of identity work in career transition.

All of the participants of this study voluntarily left the Army under generally favorable conditions. However, each *circumstance of separation* was unique. The Army allows a soldier to retire with full benefits after they have served 20 years. Of the fifteen study participants eleven were retirees, having met that service requirement. Some of the retiree's did share their thoughts and planning that led up to their decision to submit their retirement request. One filed his papers on the first day he was eligible, and had started actively planning his transition approximately four years prior. He served as a Chaplain and he believed that his next calling was to become a Lead Pastor of a local church – he actively prepared to heed that calling – just as he had his calling to serve as the Chaplain to The Rangers.

A common catalyst for retirement among this group was a realization that the Army is “a young man’s game” according to the First Sergeant who’d served 32 years. He recalled an injury that took longer to heal and prevented him from engaging in his normal physical training (PT) protocol. The four participants who elected to leave the Army far short of retirement also provided a variety of reasons for their decisions. Two reported that they simply needed a life change. Explained in more detail by reporting she wanted the opportunity to travel without checking in and he the opportunity to live where he chose. The researcher did not find that the circumstance of separation as a strong indicator of ease of identity management. Those who chose to separate prior to retirement also experienced a preservation or strengthening of their soldier identity. Of those who retired, some had a diminished or revised soldier identity and others a preserved or strengthened soldier identity.

Most of the study participants did attend the “Soldier for Life – Transition Assistance Program” (SFL-TAP). All the participants offered their recollections of their *outplacement experience*. I was not surprised to learn that the general impression of the Army’s SFL-TAP program is that it requires a great deal of improvement and updating. By and large the participants found the workshop led by a representative from the Veteran’s Administration (VA) the most helpful. They are all aware that the process of applying for VA benefits can be a long and arduous process. They were grateful for the opportunity to begin the application process with a VA Representative present to answer questions and guide them in the process. Any variability in quality reported was related to the level of knowledge of the VA Rep who led their specific workshop. Some thought the session was of extremely high-quality others thought it was just adequate but not exceptional. A few veterans mentioned that they believe the duty station or base where you attend SFL-TAP has a role to play in its quality. A couple participants reported that

they had a positive experience with the workshop led by the Department of Labor (DOL) Representative.

Those who share their positive experiences found the skills building workshops helpful in writing their resumes, gaining tips to prepare for interviews, and sharing information about veteran friendly job fairs. Most found that the DOL workshop materials and curriculum were aged and tired. Several specifically noted that LinkedIn was not mentioned by the DOL Rep and when asked they were not equipped to answer questions. A few of the participants noted that they spoke up and shared their own LinkedIn tips and lessons learned.

Another area that came up as an area for improvement is the veteran friendly job fair circuit. Several participants mentioned that while these events are not put on by the Department of Defense they are just as aged and tired as the SFL-TAP program. Those who attended job fairs reported meeting Human Resources professionals from a variety of well-known companies who did not seem prepared to answer questions about bon fide job opportunities. One veteran told of his experience where the company representative literally talked him out of applying for a job that he believed he is qualified for, based on the job description they shared.

Eleven of the fifteen study participants attended TAP – their lived experience validates that the current program is designed and delivers instruction in a set of skills in the pursuit of a new job. One retired senior officer with prior accountability to averse the SFL-TAP program on his base reported that the program is “geared for the masses” and “not intended to serve transition on a platter”.

The *onboarding experience* was unique for each veteran interviewed. Most of our participants reported that their civilian company onboarding program included the *compliance* and *clarification* elements of the standard onboarding – they received the information they

needed as a new employee. Generally, what was missing from the formalized onboarding program was the *culture* and *connection* elements of best practice models. All of the study participants, even the retirees were actively seeking full time civilian employment upon separation. Even those who had served well over twenty years are in at most their early fifties – they are interested in finding a civilian career that will allow them contribute to society and provide for their families.

The most comfortable onboarding experiences occurred for the veterans who moved into defense contract positions with civilian organizations who hire from the military in order to gain both the requisite skills and knowledge needed to do business with the Department of Defense and the Top-Secret Security Clearance career military service members have gained while serving. I assert that the reason those entering a defense contractor position was a more comfortable transition is that they were surrounded by other veterans and civilians who worked with veterans. One study participant is a stand out in their *onboarding experience*. This retired Sergeant First Class joined a local hospital system that had a very well designed, structured onboarding that resulted in him feeling welcome and genuinely connected with his new employer and new team. To hear his description of his experience it was clear to see that they hospital system had invested in a program that included compliance, clarification, culture, and connection.

No element of the veteran's lived experience was more varied and unique than their *overall transition experience – identity work – "Soldier for Life" identity* impact. I have worked to find themes and clusters among the various cohorts and simply have not found any definitive link among any similarly situated group that would qualify as an explanation. Those recruited were intentionally those who had separated among three cohorts based on the time elapsed since

separation. It is not clear that there is any meaningful difference among the three. Veteran's interviewed represent those who served for as few as 5 years and as many as 32 years – *time served* also does not offer a definitive link. What does seem to emerge is that both the *outplacement experience* and *onboarding experience* do have an effect on the lived experience of identity work. While this study does not provide evidence to support a specific design for the career transition process it does provide evidence that a soldier experiencing the career transition is open to the guidance provided in this process. They are engaged in the outplacement process and they have expectations for what they will learn and experience. They are expectant going into their onboarding process and they are open to learn – several veteran's spoke of their own ability to *adapt & overcome* or *hunt the good stuff* when they spoke of their experiences in both outplacement and onboarding. They are open and expectant – they are poised for identity work – ready to process feelings of loss – ready to revise and edit their own identity in order to find their *new normal* and excel in the next battle. Just over half of those interviewed embrace as a part of their own identity that they are in fact a *Soldier for Life* – and any good soldier knows you have to make appropriate adjustments to fit into your environment if you expect to be successful. Those veteran's who did not claim the Soldier for Life identity either never identified as a soldier or had worked hard to diminish that earlier identity in order to prioritize new ones.

One additional note on an element that stands out for some of those interviewed. Many believed that continued civilian education and credentials would be the key to their civilian career transition. While a couple commented that their MBA served them well as it taught them the language of business others commented that they felt “lied to” when they were told that with the combination of their Army service and an MBA they would be highly attractive for civilian employment when they were ready to make the shift.

Table 3: Case descriptions

Research participant (pseudonym)	Date of Army discharge	Years of Service	Circumstance of separation	“Soldier for Life” identity-verification
Staff Sergeant Amy Alpha	January 1988	6 years (plus 15 years as Army spouse)	Physical fitness	Yes; the Army is a family
Second Lieutenant Brian Bravo	June 2005	5 years; includes West Point	Medical	Yes; Army service is family legacy. “Duty, Honor, Country”
Sergeant Chris Charlie	January 2018	13 years	Voluntary – new life pursuits	Yes; SF Green Beret
Master Sergeant Daniel Delta	January 2015	23 years	Retired - physical fitness	No; soldier identity was formative, but in the past
Sergeant Major Everett Echo	December 2010	27 years	Retired - new career pursuits	Yes; actively supports other veterans in career transition
Sergeant First Class Frederick Foxtrot	November 2019	23 years	Retired – new career pursuits, family stability	No; the Army provided opportunities and he’s moved on to new opportunities
Colonel Greg Golf	January 2020	28 years	Retired – civilian defense contractor	Yes; mission continues to be the safety of the modern warfighter
First Sergeant Horatio Hotel	September 2019	32 years	Retired – physical fitness	No; “everyone knows I WAS Army”
Major Isaac India	August 2019	25 years	Retired – new career pursuits	No; identifies as a team member. The Army was one team.
Major Jack Juliet	November 2019	20 years	Retired – new career pursuits	No; Serving Army Rangers was a mission, on to a new mission
Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Kilo	Scheduled for April 2021	21 years; includes West Point	Retiring – new career pursuits	Yes; West Point was formative and Army Chaplaincy allowed opportunities to serve
First Sergeant Louis Lima	January 2020	20 years	Retiring – new career pursuits	No; learned to assimilate
First Sergeant Mitchell Mike	Scheduled for April 2020	28 years	Retiring – time for a change	Yes; hopes to work on base as a civilian
Sergeant First Class Nolan November	February 2020	23 years	Retiring – time for a change	No; the Army was always just a job
Captain Olivia Oscar	September 2020	7 years	Voluntary – new life pursuits	No; the Army provided educational opportunities

Table 4: Career Transition Process

Study participant	Influences to join the Army	Outplacement TAP Experience	Career prospects/ expectations	Onboarding Experience	Transition Experience – Identity Work
Staff Sergeant Amy Alpha	Opportunity - competitive athlete – Army track & field team	None – no known program in 1988	Difficult to translate experiences – obtained MBA to bridge to civilian	Comfort in standard operating procedures	Felt the loss of being a part of the <i>family</i>
Second Lieutenant Brian Bravo	Family legacy West Point grad	None – program not yet mandatory	West Point network – attain to bridge to civilian MBA	On-the-job training. Not programmatic	Searching for value/mission fit
Sergeant Chris Charlie	Opportunity – uninterested in college or trade school after High School	SFL – TAP 2017 Generally, not helpful.	Felt alone/unassisted. Reliant on SF Veteran network	Comfortable - peers were former military and paramilitary	Felt loss of compatriots - Special Forces
Master Sergeant Daniel Delta	Family legacy of military service	SFL – TAP 2014 “Excellent” VA Benefit counseling and assistance	Open to new career options. First attracted to the uniformed aspect of the USPS Then self-employment	Comfort in the uniformity and standardization of USPS Comfort in creating a safe work & family environment	Home missions - Service to the community through local Christian mission work
Sergeant Major Everett Echo	Opportunities - service, education, provide for family	None – program was not mandatory in 2008 – transitioned to Army Reserve	UNIX skills and Top-Secret Security Clearance – DoD Contractor Obtained MBA to bridge to non-DoD career	Difficult. Lack of support by supervisor	Sense of loss when transition started – chose to serve in the Reserves Commitment to serve; mentors transitioning veterans
Sergeant First Class Frederick Foxtrot	No meaningful data	SFL – TAP 2019 Positive experience - duty post offered a proactive program	Masters in Human Resources –	Structured, ceremonial, positive Created a sense of welcome and belonging	Army was formative – moved on to find his identity in family and community – strong identity in his profession
Colonel Greg Golf	No meaningful data re: his influence to join	SFL – TAP 2019 Executive version “designed to empower the soldier, not serve	Two Masters degrees – Strategists Valuable skillset and experience	Reassuring - new employer is committed to a mission consistent with personal values	Committed to the mission of providing for the safety of the modern warfighter

	Note: his son is currently ROTC – family legacy	up transition on a platter”	for DoD Contractor		
First Sergeant Horatio Hotel	No meaningful data	Did not attend SFL – TAP Requested a waiver - believed it was a waste of time	DoD Contractor – work related to last active duty position	Welcoming - peer mentors assisted with Veteran Benefit info, and other transition info typically covered in TAP	Army was formative though in the past. Ready to find new identity
Major Isaac India	Opportunity to be a part of a team	SFL – TAP 2019 Attended hopefully – described the experience as having “no-value”	Search process was discouraging - Expected civilian employers to find his military experience + MBA & Lean Six Sigma more valuable	Disorienting, disorganized, Discouraging Had to “hunt the good”. Offers stable income in a community where his family is happy	Sense of loss – no longer feel like a member of a cohesive team
Major Jack Juliet	Call to serve Army Rangers - joined the Army after serving in the Marines and completing Seminary	SFL – TAP 2019 Attended to complete the requirement. Neutral on quality of experience	Custom designed his own outplacement plan to build a network in the community of the local Christian church	Custom designed his own onboarding plan – included a network of senior and lead Pastors	Mission to serve Men and families in Christian ministry - as Army Chaplain to the Rangers and now as Lead Pastor of a local church
Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Kilo	West Point graduate – civilian career for 5 years – reenlisted as a Chaplain to the Rangers	SFL TAP 2019 “hunt the good stuff” Found the information about VA Benefits most helpful. Also noted his own Veteran network has been most helpful	Ethicist and Leadership Coach with two Masters degrees – Doctoral candidate. Entrepreneur in leadership consulting and Lead Pastor in local church plant	As an entrepreneur building a consultancy his onboarding plan is to begin to take on some consulting contracts in the final months of his service	Mission of teaching character development, ethics, and cultural competencies
First Sergeant Louis Lima	Decided as a young man he would serve in the Army	SFL – TAP 2019 Executive version Found the program “antiquated” and not at all helpful	Bachelor’s Degree in Human Resources DoD SkillBridge Program Ultimate goal Chief HR Officer Fortune 500 in 12 years	Had not yet accepted a civilian position. Did complete the 3 month “internship” placement with SkillBridge Found a mismatch in the well-known company’s stated values and lived values	The Army was formative though - “not me anymore”

First Sergeant Mitchell Mike	No meaningful data	SFL – TAP 2019 Attended after our interview	Waiting to hear that a job on base would be approved for civilian candidate. He formerly held this job as an E8	Discharge scheduled for the after the interview	Army was formative “I’m a soldier. That is my identity”
Sergeant First Class Nolan November	Opportunity - entered the Army for the provision of food, shelter and livelihood	Attended Marine Corp’s Transition Readiness Program - 2019 Instead of the Army’s SFL - TAP	Secured position with a Gov’t Contractor requiring Security Clearance prior to discharge	No formal onboarding programs. “just show up and do the job”	The Army was a job. Upon entry and for 23 years. Noted sense of loss – “little small things here and there that just led up...it's not me anymore”
Captain Olivia Oscar	Opportunity - Army ROTC with commitment after degree was earned as means to finance college education	SFL – TAP 2019 Found it very useful	Speaks multiple languages to include Persian Farsi and Arabic She will return to complete a Master degree. Plans to work in a civilian position for a while first.	Discharge scheduled for the after the interview	Had to “mold” herself to fit the Army. Prepared to feel a loss of her “work family”

The fifteen participants in this study are making their transition after a successful career. These veterans know what it is like to be a part of a widely recognized in-group. It is reasonable to assert a part of their identity was defined by that membership, and therefore experience some degree of identity-nonverification as they move to their new civilian career. They will be seeking to reduce their feeling of uncertainty created by nonverification. Uncertainty reduction, “allows one to avoid harm and plan effective action. It also allows one to know how one should feel and behave.” (Hogg, 2006, p. 117). Seeking to align with a new organization identity provides these individuals with the cues and symbols they need to reflect and determine if editing is needed in their effort to stabilize in their new career experience.

As a result of our hermeneutic analysis of the fifteen unique cases of Army to civilian career transition, we developed the *Career Identity Matrix* (Fig 5). This matrix describes one's career identity in terms of social group membership. According to Burke & Stets (2009) one aligns with a social group for one of two reasons: self enhancement – desire for positive information about the self, the profession has a positive reputation and therefore I have a positive reputation, or seeking a predictable environment - even when I move between employers given an ability to edit my self-concept, I can achieve stable identity-verification.

The components of the *Career Identity Matrix* are *profession identity* and *organization identity*. The clusters and themes in the analysis illustrated how the transitions could be grouped according to the veteran's alignment to each. The 2x2 matrix depicts the interplay between the degree to which one forms their career identity based on their profession and the degree to which one forms their career identity based on the organization where they are employed.

The definition of these two concepts are familiar but in application they are unique and nuanced. Each of these concepts is a specific kind of *social group identity*. Michael A. Hogg, well known for his work in social group identity defined it as follows,

“a distinction originally made in 1857 by Ferdinand Tonnies between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (association) that is, social organization based on close interpersonal bonds and social organization based on more formalized and impersonal associations.” (2006, p. 117)

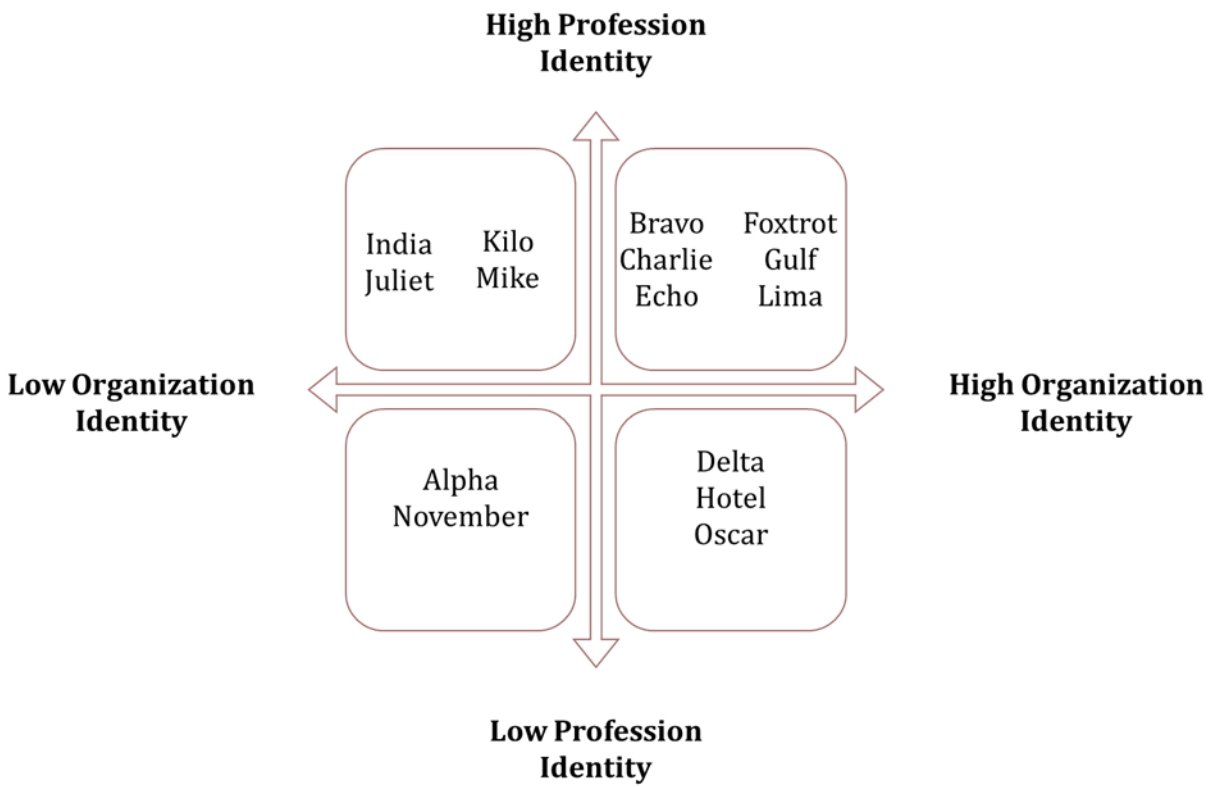
Within the last decade, social psychologists have expanded on Tonnie's work and even argued for its canonization as seminal. In 2009, The British Journal of Sociology published David Inglis' work which proposed that the value in *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (association) is not the movement of one to another but the balance of the two.

Organization identity can best be characterized as an intra-individual and intergroup identity standard. This is not the same as “organizational identity” first defined by Albert & Whetten in 1985. In that case, organizations (as entities/objects) seek to have an identity and a culture and strive to have individuals desire to align with the espoused organizational identity. For example, the Army has a strong brand - an identity as the largest of the five branches of the US military service. From well-known recruiting slogans like “Be all You can Be” to outplacement programs titled “Soldier for Life” they show their desire for the individual members of the organization to identify as a member of something that defines them. *Organization identity*, as a component of the matrix, is the degree to which an individual uses the organization (the Army) as their identity standard in identity work. Put most simply the *organization identity* is the act of engaging with this standard in the assessment of one’s identity and using that standard as the plumb-line in the editing process. How am I the same? How am I different? What is my perceived need to flex? In the context of the matrix, do I place a high value or a low value on this standard as it relates to my own stability and veritable ease in my environment.

Profession identity is also an identity standard with both intra-individual and intergroup properties. It differs from the much researched “professional identity” which Mancini, et al described as, “both one's awareness of being a worker doing a specific job and one's identification with the groups and social categories to which one belongs by virtue of one's job” (2015, p. 141). Some societal identities allow the individual to play the role as a utility. While I am fishing, I am a fisherman but that is not my profession, its merely a temporary role description. Other role identities are enhanced with the social group identity alignment - priests are not only clergy when wearing the collar. Kreiner, et, al., (2006) studied the tensions inherent

in the quest to balance individual and social group identities in the context of Episcopal priests. The findings of their study are consistent with the interviews conducted in this study. In some cases, the veteran placed a high value on their profession identity – being aware of both the job they perform and a sense of pride of alignment to the social group to which they associate. This is not to be confused with their organization or employer. One example is a human resources professional who served as such in the Army and then as a civilian with a hospital system. As a part of his outplacement activities, he focused on finding a civilian job in human resources – the profession identity held a high value. A contrary example is former Staff Sergeant Amy Alpha who was quick to share her identification as an “Army athlete” during her time of service and later she developed a successful career and today strongly identifies with the human resources profession. During her career transition process, she assigned low value to her *profession identity* though she did in both the Army and her future career strongly identify with the social group associated with her profession.

The *Career Identity Matrix* operationalizes the blending and balance proposed by Inglis’ in 2009. *Organization identity* is a social group identity that can be described as identifying with a community while *profession identity* is a social group identity that could be described as having an association. As an example, if I am a Chaplain to the Army Rangers and I retire, I maintain my association as a member of the clergy while exiting the community of the Rangers. I likely have a perceived need to edit to achieve identity verification. How I experience that phenomena and how the identity work is managed will be dependent on the value I place in my alignment to both my association to (profession) and my alignment and participation in my community (the new organization).

Figure 5: Career Identity Matrix

IV.2 Low Profession Identity/Low Organization Identity

Those in this quadrant place low value on both profession identity and organization identity. They are open to career transition possibilities in both new professions and new organizations. In order to create the most successful career transition for this individual more than the accepted process offering job hunting tips and a rudimentary introduction to the new organization must be included as they move from one career experience into the next.

The outplacement activities that will be most important for those in this quadrant will be providing coaching in career/vocational exploration (Falco, 2020 & Kirchner, 2019), a gap analysis of current skills and needed skills for a new profession (Marzucco & Hansez, 2016), and the education and training options available (Kamarck, 2018) to enable the person in transition to fully explore their options. This process could last a few months to a few years depending on the vocation chosen, the gap that exists and the training or education required to meet the goals.

Once a profession is chosen and the new employer is found the onboarding activities are the next important element of a successful career transition. Those in this quadrant will benefit the most from a structured onboarding that includes more than the standard compliance related activities. The company's onboarding should include clear communication of their espoused values and the expected behaviors in support of the desired culture (Meyer & Bartels 2017, Bauer, et al., 2007). Explicitly communicating the organizational citizenship behaviors expected is important for those who are open to finding a new organization identity to call home.

IV.3 High Profession Identity/Low Organization Identity

Those in this quadrant place a high value on profession identity and low value on organization identity. In many cases those in this quadrant have gained the skills, education, and credentials and therefore the identity alignment and verification of a specific profession (e.g.

human resources, information technology). Even when they transition from one employer to another their profession identity does not change. They are invested.

A successful career transition process for those in this quadrant begins with the accepted outplacement of updating one's resume, brushing up on interview skills (Kirk, 1994) and adding activities such as teaching effective networking, personal branding and the use of social media such as LinkedIn. Study participants Foxtrot, Lima, and Oscar all specifically mentioned their disappointment in the SFL-TAP's lack of content in this specific area. A successful outplacement experience for these individuals who place a high value on their profession identity includes successfully building a network for peers in their profession with connections and experience in civilian industry. Social media sites such as LinkedIn are an excellent way to build that network. Learning the tools that equip one to build these networks are key.

Once the new network delivers the next career experience, the individual in transition moves on to onboard into their new organization. These onboarding activities should include the activities similar to those in the Low Profession/Low Organization quadrant. The slight difference for this cohort capitalizes on their profession identity alignment. So, in addition to the focus on organizational citizenship behaviors those in this quadrant will have the most successful onboarding experience when they are paired with a buddy or mentor – especially one who shares their profession. Studies show mentees experiences heightened confidence, self-esteem, and job satisfaction when working with a mentor. (Minnick, et al 2014, Ibarra, 2018). This is the added focus those in this quadrant need.

IV.4 High Profession Identity/High Organization Identity

Those in this quadrant place high value on both profession identity and organization identity. They have a strong sense of both WHAT they do and WHERE they do it. They see

career transition as the opportunity to find a new alignment. They do not take the new alignment lightly – it will not be enough to find a new job, they are looking for a new career home to practice their profession.

The career transition process activities that will be most successful for this cohort will need to be the most flexible and tailored of all the processes. Outplacement should include internship style experiences (Mancini, et al., 2015) such as the Department of Defense's SkillBridge. This internship allows the individual in transition to apply their profession in a new environment (McNichols, et al, 2019), with little risk. In this specific program, the military service member applies for a paid leave from their service job and is assigned to a sponsoring civilian organization. This allows the individual to assess the new organization without the pressure of making a long-term commitment. They have the opportunity to test drive the best way to practice their profession in the new civilian organization. Many of these internships do result in offers of full-time employment – the program boasts a higher retention rate than military to civilian transitions that do not include this program.

Once the individual does accept an offer of full-time employment the onboarding process should include a foundational program sharing the values and culture of the organization. Additionally, this cohort should be assigned a peer mentor to support their onboarding for several months (Minnick, et al, 2014). These mentorships are key in allowing the individual who places high value on both profession identity and organization identity to navigate their transition in a way that allows for identity-verification in their new environment. Mentorships are found to benefit both an organization and the mentee; providing a smoother transition and improved retention.

IV.5 Low Profession Identity/High Organization Identity

Those in this quadrant place low value on professional identity and high value on organization identity. They accept that the knowledge skills and abilities they have learned to this point in their career may not be the profession they take into the next career transition. They place a high value on their organization identity alignment and because of this it is critically important to them that they find an organization with which they feel aligned.

In order to create the most successful career transition for this individual the outplacement activities should include more than the accepted standard of teaching resume writing and interview skills. Providing career/vocational exploration coaching (Falco, 2020 & Kirchner, 2019), a gap analysis of their current skills and needed skills for a new profession (Marzucco & Hansez, 2016), and the education and training options available (Kamarck, 2018). Due to the high value this cohort places on organization identity they would also benefit from learning to use social media to research companies that may be a good fit. Study participants Foxtrot, Lima, and Oscar all specifically mentioned their disappointment in the SFL-TAP's lack of content in this specific area. A successful outplacement experience for these individuals who place a high value on their organization identity includes researching organizations. Social media sites such as LinkedIn and Glassdoor are valuable tools to conduct research into a company's business and culture.

Once the individual does accept an offer of employment the onboarding process should include a foundational program sharing the values and culture of the organization (Meyer & Bartels, 2017). Since social media research was a part of the outplacement process, for those in this quadrant learning the company's espoused values and culture will be a confirmation of what was learned prior. Additionally, the individuals in this cohort should be assigned a buddy or a mentor (Minnick, et al, 2014), especially someone who has had a similar transition experience

(e.g. Military to Civilian). This is a critical part of a successful career transition process for this cohort as they place high value on organization identity and will benefit from the guidance of those who have navigated the transition successfully (Conroy & O'Leary Kelly, 2014, Ibarra, 2018).

Table 5: Identity work in career transition

Career Identity Quadrant	Outplacement Activities Assumes the standard review of job-hunting skills (Kirk, 1994)	Onboarding Activities Assumes the standard compliance-related activities (Bauer, et al., 2007)
Low Profession Identity ties + Low Organization Identity ties	<p>Career/vocation exploration with a Coach (Falco, 2020 & Kirchner, 2019)</p> <p>Gap analysis of current skills and needed skills (Marzucco & Hansez, 2016)</p> <p>Education/training options (Kamarck, 2018)</p>	<p>Structured with an emphasis on culture and connection</p> <p>Clear communication on the espoused values of the company and the expected behaviors in support of those values</p> <p>(Meyer & Bartels 2017, Bauer, et al., 2007)</p>
High Profession Identity ties + Low Organization Identity ties	<p>Networking & Personal branding</p> <p>Social media (e.g. LinkedIn)</p> <p>(Foxtrot, Lima, Oscar, 2020)</p>	<p>Clear communication on the espoused values of the company and the expected behaviors in support of those values</p> <p>Semi-structured activities with an emphasis on culture and connection (Meyer & Bartels 2017, Bauer, et al., 2007)</p> <p>Assign buddies or mentors – especially those of the same profession (e.g. human resources, information technology) (Minnick, et al 2014, Ibarra, 2018)</p>
High Profession Identity ties + High Organization Identity ties	<p>Internship style programs (e.g. SkillBridge) that allow for assessment of the organization before committing (Mancini, et al., 2015)</p> <p>Social media used for both networking & researching companies that would be a good fit (Foxtrot, Lima, Oscar, 2020)</p>	<p>Foundational program introducing the company's values and culture – even greater flexibility in how the information is consumed (Meyer & Bartels 2017, Bauer, et al., 2007)</p> <p>Peer mentor assignment (Minnick, et al 2014, Ibarra, 2018)</p>
Low Profession Identity ties + High Organization Identity ties	<p>Career/vocation exploration with a Coach (Falco, 2020 & Kirchner, 2019)</p>	<p>Foundational program introducing the company's values and culture –</p>

	<p>Gap analysis of current skills and needed skills (Marzucco & Hansez, 2016)</p> <p>Education/training options (Kamarck, 2018)</p> <p>Social media used to research companies that would be a good fit (Foxtrot, Lima, Oscar, 2020)</p>	<p>even greater flexibility in how the information is consumed (Meyer & Bartels 2017, Bauer, et al., 2007)</p> <p>Assign buddies for mentors - especially those with a similar transition experience (e.g. Military to Civilian) (Minnick, et al 2014, Ibarra, 2018)</p>
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V CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

V.1 Contributions

This research provides insights into the experience of career transition and identity work. The phenomenological exploration of identity management in career transition has revealed inadequacies in the *accepted career transition process*. The data suggests the veterans' lived experience illuminated a gap between the intended goals of the career transition process and outcomes for each of the individuals studied. This research has confirmed we seek verification of our self-concept according to an identity-standard by which an individual will verify their identity in a new situation (Burke & Stets, 2009). Identities are reflexive. My analysis confirms that when an individual is moving through the career transition process, they are reflecting on their own identity given all they see around them and assessing their need to edit in order to stabilize.

The marked contribution made by this research is the development of our *Career Identity Matrix* (Fig 5). This two by two matrix depicts the interplay between the degree to which one defines their career identity based on their profession (profession identity) and the degree to which one defines their career identity based on the organization where they are employed (organization identity). The matrix was derived through hermeneutic phenomenology. (Bynum & Varpio, 2018) These two social group identities used in my matrix are applied in a unique way. I found no other literature which define these terms in the way the analysis lead. The foundation for the matrix is *Identity Theory* (Burke & Stets, 2009), specifically their discussion on the three bases for identities. The *Career Identity Matrix* is comprised of two identity types which can both be defined as social group identities. Social group identities are defined by one's membership in a group. Inspired by the work of Mancini, et al. (2015) which stated, "professional identity is a type of identity that includes personal as well as social

dimensions....and provide[s] evidence of the combination between intra-individual and intergroup processes...” (p. 2) Coding the verbatim transcripts, themes emerged; transition success of the veterans interviewed were impacted according to their own perceived value of membership in a profession, and/or by their membership in an organization. The matrix contributes both to theory and to practice. I offer this application of identity work to career development studies and to identity theory studies this application of social group identity. I offer to HRD a tool to be applied in the improvement of career transition activities with the goal of improved organizational fit and retention.

I found in our study substantiation for the research of Conroy, S. A., & O’Leary-Kelly, A. M. (2014). Examples confirming their findings on work related identity loss and recovery could be seen in several of the narratives of our veterans. The losses recognized by the veterans were described as losing their *work family* or losing membership on their high functioning, cohesive team. I extend the theoretical work of Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly’s (2014) by recommending that the emotional stories of loss encountered in career transition can become growth opportunities with individualized onboarding. An individual in career transition, traveling from one organization to the next will be reflecting and considering their need to edit in order to find a new sense of organization identity stability. A new sense of stability and growth can come through the assignment of mentors or buddies in the new organization onboarding program, HRD can help the individual in transition process the emotions of *work related identity loss and recovery* (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010, Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014).

The *Journal of Vocational Behavior* published an article by Mancini, T., Caricati, L., Panari, C., & Tonarelli, A. (2015). In this article they detailed their work to enhance an instrument (PISQ-5d) developed several decades prior to measure the development of

professional identity in university students. While this previous research focused on university students, our results demonstrate that veterans making the transition to a civilian career have similar needs. This enhancement of Mancini, et al.(2015) adds the lens of professional identity alignment for those entering a new career after having been successful in an earlier one. My results build on existing evidence that vocational career coaching is needed in career transition. Given the rapidly changing workforce and the possibility that one could make as many as 15 job transitions throughout their life vocational exploration may be needed well beyond high school and university. One tool for HRD is internship style programs such as the Department of Defense SkillBridge (McNichols, et al, 2019).

My research into the career transition from one organization to another extends the work of Järventie-Thesleff, R., & Tienari, J. (2016) In their article, Roles as Mediators in Identity Work, they introduced a framework that illustrates how dynamic role transitions can be inside one organization. The aim of their study was to “advance theory on identity work *in* organizations”. (p. 259) In the analysis I depicted the lived experience of identity work beyond roles in a single organization. I introduce the *Career Identity Matrix*, which provides a framework for the effect on one’s identity when traveling through the career transition process leaving one organization and joining a new organization.

Peter J. Burke wrote in the March 1980 edition of *Social Psychology Quarterly* that one measure of role identity is the measure of reflexivity. The data collected in this study confirms this application of identity work is the element most helpful for individuals traveling through career transition. Successful identity verification improves the career transition experience, resulting in the re-stabilization of one’s identity. In the 2009 seminal work of Burke and Jan E. Stets, they suggest future research that tests the identity verification process “in one’s natural

environment”. (p. 206). They additionally encouraged research in a variety of methodologies.

My research used a phenomenological method to explore the lived experience of professionals in career transition. In answering the question, “How does the career transition process affect the identity of the individual in career transition?” we substantiated that a new approach that incorporates identity work into the standard career transition process is needed. A full career transition process will improve the outcomes not only for Army veterans making their civilian career transition, but for other professionals who will make job changes as many as 15 times in their career.

V.2 Practical Recommendations

V.2.1 *Career coaches in career transition*

We find that most of the research and editorial writing on the topic of career transition focuses on the mechanics of getting a new job. My research into the experience of veterans in career transition demonstrates the identity verification process is reflexive and thus engages to maintain, strengthen or revise one’s identity (Stryker & Burke, 2000). This leaves the individual in transition asking; do I belong here? do I want to belong here? can I belong here? When this reflexive process is occurring as a part of the career transition, individuals are looking for the cues and symbols that tell them how to proceed (Stryker, 1980). The best way to learn a new set of organizational behaviors is by setting goals and inviting someone to be an accountability partner, a coach.

Often in career transition you do not know exactly what you want to do next or where you fit in. In these cases, where a reduction in that uncertainty is paramount, you will benefit from working with a career/vocational coach (Hogg, 2006). During outplacement, career coaches can assist in determining the variety of career opportunities that exist given your current

knowledge, skills, and abilities (ksa's). Career coaches can help you identify gaps in your ksa's and the educational opportunities available to bridge the gaps. Career coaches take a solutions and growth approach to the challenges faced by their clients (Bachkirova, et al, 2018).

The results of an internet search for the question, "What can a career coach do for me?" returns the websites belonging to professional career coaches promising to assist with improved job search documents (resumes, professional profiles), improved LinkedIn profiles, and preparation for interviews. Most also mention setting goals and creating accountability to reach those goals. Several coaches boast that their clients secure new jobs at higher salaries than expected. Once again, the focus appears to be on the mechanics of finding a new job. My research illuminates the need for more. We see the potential of career coaches offering the guidance, support and personal accountability needed to navigate the full career transition process, inclusive of identity work.

Career coaches are not a new idea in career transition. Though not new they are also not common. Many do not know how to connect with a career coach and assume it would be costly to do so. There are a variety of low and no cost opportunities to work with a career coach. Students can find career coaches in their college and university career services office, and military veterans can reach out to Veteran Service Organizations. Many can access career coaches offered by their company's Employee Assistance Programs - usually a healthcare insurance supplement and is completely confidential.

V.2.2 Mentoring programs in career transition

I've intended to offer this engaged scholarship to an audience of Human Resource Development (HRD) professionals who seek to improve the success of both outplacement and onboarding in their organizations. The application of identity theory to the lived experience of

the veterans of this study lead us to an awareness that identity work in career transition is a meaningful enhancement. HRD can improve the success of the standard career transition process by giving it an upgrade to include identity work. Individual customization of the career transition process, an investment in each new hire, improves their experience and predicts a greater likelihood of retention (Cable, et al., 2013). HRD can improve the retention of the veterans they've vowed to hire by integrating identity work into the design of their programs.

Selection receives a lot of attention in HRD literature and while this study did not address the challenges of selection, we do recognize the role it plays in the career transition process. We assume in this recommendation that an organization's selection process is working. The candidate who receives a job offer has the knowledge, skills, abilities, and motivation to be successful in their new career. Therefore, a truly successful transition into the new organization is now dependent on the onboarding process.

The standard onboarding programs are less than effective according to my research. Meyer & Bartels (2017) details Bauers' levels of onboarding: compliance, clarification, culture, and connection and describes their impact on work attitudes. Each of the four levels are critical and could each be studied in depth. I find in the results of my study, an opportunity to highlight the importance of connection during onboarding. I believe by creating an opportunity for genuine connection, the likelihood of success of those who transition from a strong organizational culture into a new career experience is enhanced.

Assigning mentors to new employees is one of the most effective ways HRD can be assured they are able to connect the new hire either with respect to their profession identity or their organization identity – whichever is the most impactful to them (Caldwell & Peters 2018). We know that those who receive positive feedback from coworkers and are socialized into the

organization through the presence of role models display higher levels of organizational commitment than those who are socialized alone and do not receive feedback affirming their identity as a member of the organization (Bauer et al., 2007). Mentorships work to connect people in their new organization. Mentor programs require intentional design and management, informal mentor relationships are much less effective (Kantor & Moore, 2019). If HRD wants both the individual and the organization to succeed in this new relationship, planned and managed mentorship is the key.

To begin the intentional design of each mentor assignment, HRD should first gather information from the new hire to understand their identity alignment. You could conduct an interview, or use a brief survey to gather information about what the new employee values and what they expect. Understanding their quadrant on the Career Identity Matrix (Fig 5) is helpful in determining their most effective mentor match. Exploration into the degree to which one defines their career identity based on their profession and the degree to which one defines their career identity based on their employer provides additional information to assist HRD in making successful mentor matches. Should their assignment be based more heavily on the new employees' alignment to their chosen profession or their desire to identify with the organization itself? These well-planned matches allow identity work to flourish on an individual basis.

Imagine the part of your career identity that you align with most heavily is having been a soldier, a member of the United States Army, and you enter your new civilian organization as a Project Manager and have no strong alignment to the profession of project management. You value being a productive member of a high functioning, cohesive team. You elected to retire, you are ready for the next set of challenges and you begin your new job filled with hope for a great career experience. The onboarding level that is going to be most formative is the connection you

feel to your new organization – your employer. You chose this company because you believed in its mission and found alignment with your values – your new role as a Project Manager has very little in common with the jobs you held in the Army. The mentor assignment that will be the most helpful for you is a match who provides you with the connection needed to facilitate a successful identity edit. A relationship that allows you to reflect and determine what may be off target with the way you see yourself and the way you see the role you are being asked to play. You will need a safe and supportive place to conduct your identity work and find stability in this iteration of your career.

HRD seems to understand the value of mentoring but still seeks to have the relationships occur organically and informally. Seasoned HR executives have been known to say that they think mentoring is important but forced match programs don't work. (Labin, 2017) Purposeful design of the new hire mentoring program is the key to success as a tool for enhancing the career transition process. Mentor program consultants, Twomentor wrote in their recent white paper, "Creating a formal mentoring initiative will promote a positive feedback loop of mutual support, collaboration, and inclusion in your company." (Kantor & Moore, 2019) Each match should be made with care and on purpose; addressing the identity work occurring as the individual in transition travels through the process. Identity work in career transition should no longer be left to chance. That has not worked.

V.3 Limitations

There are several limitations of this study. First, we met only fifteen veterans to learn about their career transition and there was a great deal of variety in their profiles. This variety made it more challenging to find themes and clusters in the data. Second, the demographic differences in the participants was not taken into consideration in any way. The research was

focused on the lived experience of the transition itself and did not consider the impact that one's ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic background may have had on their pre-service identity. I also did not consider how those same factors may have impacted their individual soldier identity while serving. For example, did the African Americans interviewed (20% of participants) or the female veterans interviewed (13% of participants) ever feel marginalized for their perceived alignment to those role and/or social group identities? This study did not explore those questions, though I admit it is a formidable topic to wrestle. Third, this study did not consider the quality of the outplacement program, selection process of the civilian organization, or the onboarding program. I asked questions to understand how each veteran would have improved on the outplacement and onboarding they received. However, I did not employ an objective measure of the overall quality of the programs experienced. Finally, the reliability of the data may have been impacted by the study design. Specifically, the decision to ask semi-structured interview questions and to only interview each participant one time. This phenomenological study may have been strengthened by collecting journal entries related to in- the-moment reflections of the transition process. Despite these limitations our results are valid, providing insights for the furtherance of identity work in career transition – through the lens of the lived experience of this group of veterans.

V.4 Future Research

A natural extension of this study would be to research the Transition Assistance Programs of the other branches of the armed services. Or conversely, choose an even more limited group and spend more time with them – perhaps engage in action research to study alternative plans for improvements to TAP. One study design could be to partner with a company that has a strong commitment to veteran hiring and work with veterans who all

transitioned into the same organization to look back and provide recommendations of improvement for the transition assistance program. An area of identity theory that would be a worthwhile extension of this research would be to study how self-efficacy and confidence might also be important elements of identity work to add to the full career transition process. Additionally, using a methodology such as design thinking to iterate on the design of mentoring programs to address identity work in career transition specifically.

Additionally, quantitative research could be conducted to test the application of the *Career Identity Matrix*. The study design might include both primary survey data and secondary source data to determine if there is a higher degree of objective career success in one quadrant over the other. Does placing a high value on one's *Profession Identity* result in a higher degree of career success as measured by level of income or organizational level attained? Subjective success could also be measured. Does placing a high value on one's *Organization Identity* result in a higher degree of job satisfaction?

V.5 Conclusion

In conclusion the recommendation to Human Resources practitioners is to implement a career transition process that combines the development of new skills and addresses each individual's need to adjust their own identity as they enter their new work environment. One-size-fits all will not result in the best possible outcomes for individuals in transition. Identity theory has taught us that we edit our identity as needed to create stability for ourselves. Our identities are reflexive – we treat them as objects that we can adjust in the situation. A tailored career transition will provide the individual in transition with the much-needed information and support. *A complete career transition process* inclusive of identity work produce the most successful career transitions. Enhancing the standard career transition process with activities that

support identity work could be an important contribution as the global economy will be struggling to rebound from the Covid19 pandemic of 2020. There have been early predictions that some industries could become extinct under the strain of the current economic downturn. If this happens, the individuals who will be seeking assistance in making a career transition will benefit from the addition of support for their identity work as they move through outplacement and onboarding.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Guide

		Question	Experiential sensemaking	Source	
A		Career transition process			
	A1	Outplacement experience SFL-TAP			
		What did you experience in your Transition Acceptance Program?	Outplacement experience	Kamarck, K. N. (2018).	
		What did you find most helpful from TAP?	Outplacement experience		
		Did the sessions and activities of TAP provide you with improved confidence in your level of preparation for your transition?	Outplacement experience	Gowan, M. A. (2014).	
		Did you participate in any additional career transition activities outside of TAP when preparing for your career transition?	Outplacement experience	Marzucco, L., & Hansez, I. (2016).	
		What do you wish you were told/taught/experienced in TAP?	Outplacement experience	Vagle, M. D. (2018)	
	A2	Onboarding into civilian career			
		What did you experience from your company's onboarding?	Onboarding experience	Lawson, K. (2016)	
		What did you find most helpful from the onboarding program?	Outplacement experience	Klein, H. J., Polin, B., & Sutton, K. L. (2015).	
		Did you feel prepared to become a part of your new team/company?	Outplacement experience	Vagle, M. D. (2018)	
			What do you wish someone would have told/taught or warned you about?	Outplacement experience	Meyer, A. M., & Bartels, L. K. (2017).
	B		Identity shift questions		
B1		Scheduled for SFL-TAP now			
		In what way has the ARMY defined who you are?	Identity formation	Burke, P. J., & Stets, J. E. (2009).	
		How do you feel about leaving the ARMY?	Internalized role	Brenner, P. S., Serpe, R. T., & Stryker, S. (2018).	
		What are you expecting the transition experience to be for you? Hardest part? Easiest part?	Transition experience	Vagle, M. D. (2018)	
B2		Veteran of the Army – currently employed in civilian workforce or seeking civilian employment			
		In what way has the ARMY defined who you are?	Identity formation	Burke, P. J., & Stets, J. E. (2009).	
	How did you feel about leaving the ARMY?	Internalized role	Brenner, P. S., Serpe, R. T., & Stryker, S. (2018).		

	How has that identity changed over time?	Multiple identity management	Burke, P. J., & Stets, J. E. (2009).
	Tell me about your transition experience.	Transition experience	Vagle, M. D. (2018)
	Are there times when you feel more or less comfortable with people knowing you served in the ARMY?	Multiple identity management	Burke, P. J., & Stets, J. E. (2009).
	What advice do you give to those preparing to leave the ARMY now?	Transition experience	Vagle, M. D. (2018)

Appendix B: Questionnaire

Career transition research participant survey

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Please read and sign the informed consent form (attached to the email) prior to responding to this survey. Participation in research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time.

The purpose of the study is to learn how individuals experience their career transition. You are invited to participate because you are a veteran of the United States Army who has transitioned to a civilian career or is actively planning a transition after serving at least 4 years.

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Here we seek only demographic and descriptive data. The researcher will reach out to schedule a 60 – 90 minute interview which can be done by phone.

Q1 I have received a copy of the Informed Consent and I have signed it and volunteer to participate in the study.

- YES
- NO. If you make this choice do not continue.

Q2 Please enter your first name and last initial (only) in the form below.

- First Name
- Last Initial (please do not include your full name)

Q3 What is your email address?

- Email Address
-

Q4 What is the best daytime telephone number to reach you?

Daytime Telephone Number

Q5 What is the best evening telephone number to reach you?

Evening Telephone Number

Q6 What is your gender?

Male

Female

Prefer not to identify

Q7 What is your year of birth?

Year of Birth

Q8 Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be:

White

Black or African American

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Other (specify)

Prefer not to identify

Q9 What is the highest grade or level of school that you have completed?

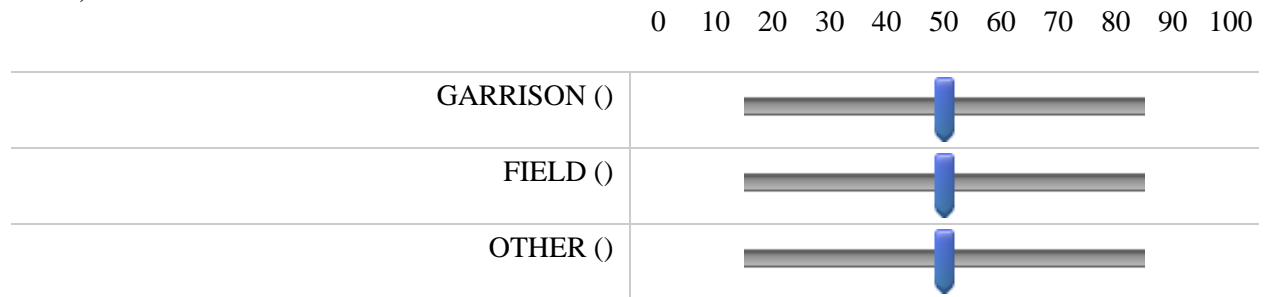
- High School Graduate (includes GED)
- Some College
- Graduated 2-year College
- Graduated 4-year College
- Post Graduate

Q10 What date (month and year) did you join the Army?

Q11 Please tell us your US Army military occupational code.

- Current MOS (last if discharged)
- Previous MOS (if different)
- Previous MOS (if different)

Q12 What percentage of your service did you spend in each of these environments? (they should equal 100%)



Q13 What date (month and year) did you complete your discharge from the US Army? If scheduled for future discharge, please respond with your planned date as currently known.

Q14 Please tell us your reason for discharge.

Q15 What was your final rank?

Q16 Please leave any additional information that you would like us to know in the space provided below.

Appendix C: Lars' alphabet of engaged research

Component	Definition	Specification
Journal	The target journal defines the audience for the research and the conversation in which the work participates.	Journal of Applied Psychology Workforce
Title	The title expresses the essence of the research design, with emphasis on C.	Identity work in career transition: Lessons for Human Resource Development on the verification of identity in career transition.
P	The problem setting represents people's concerns in a real-world problematic situation.	The career transition process focuses on teaching the mechanics of outplacement and onboarding and does not appropriately address the identity shift of the person in transition.
A	The area of concern represents somebody of knowledge in the literature that relates to P.	The use of identity theory in understanding career transition through a phenomenological lens.
F	The conceptual framing helps structure collection and analyses of data from P to answer RQ; FA draws on concepts from A, whereas Fi draws on concepts independent of A.	Identity Theory (Burke & Stets, 2009) Identity Work (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006)
M	The method details the approach to empirical inquiry, specifically to data collection and analysis.	Hermeneutic phenomenological, qualitative study of post service military veterans seeking to transition to civilian careers. (Benade, 2016; Lavery, 2017; Moustakas, 1994)
RQ	The research question relates to P, opens for research into A, and helps ensure the research design is coherent and consistent.	How does the transition process affect the identity of the individual in career transition?
C	Contributions influence P and A, and possibly also F and M.	CP: Contributes to HRD methodologies by establishing a full career transition system inclusive of identity work. Theoretical insight for HRD illuminating how an individual's identity explains whether a successful career transition happens. CA: Provide insights into the human experience of identity work in career transition. Reveal meanings constructed through living through the career transition process. Explain how individual identity work establishes an ease of transition.

(Mathiassen, 2017)

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