

10 Tips for Transitioning Veterans

Transitioning from military service to the civilian world can be very stressful. I was fortunate to have a very positive experience in my transition. By the time my tour as a Navy JAG (attorney) was nearing its end I already had several opportunities. I could continue serving as a JAG, take a job with an “OGA” (Other Government Agency), or work for one of several law firms and companies that had offered me a job. I ended up working for the prestigious law firm of McKenna, Long, & Aldridge, LLP.

I attribute my successful transition into the civilian sector to a couple of factors; the fact that I started planning early and to my fellow Navy JAG and officemate Vincent Ward. Vince went on to serve as Assistant General Counsel to then Governor Richardson of New Mexico where he ultimately became his General Counsel. Vince then went on to work in the Whitehouse administration and now is a partner at one of the best plaintiff firms in the country.

You see, almost 12 months prior to the end of our military obligation, Vince and I began planning our exit and transition. I believe our team planning was a strong factor in our respective success. Here’s how we did it:

1. **Plan Early, Plan Often:** Back when I left the military, we were in a different economy. It was vibrant, compared to today’s economy. We were in the middle of various wars on different fronts. Even then, jobs were not that easy to come by. Back then, planning for transition 8-12 months out was recommended. In today’s economy, jobs aren’t readily available and competition is tough. Start planning for transition 12-18 months before your end of service commitment.
2. **Educate Yourself:** In today’s economy, it is very difficult to get a job without the right education. By the same token, it has never been *easier* to get an education. There are dozens of good online universities. If you can, work on your degree while in the military. Obviously some military careers (e.g. special operations) make it difficult, if not impossible to seek a joint education. If you don’t have the right education, this should be your immediate step before and after you leave the military. Choose the best school your money and talent can

“buy.”

3. **Determine What You Want To Do:** Half the battle is trying to decide what you want to do when you get out. Identifying what you want to do after the military will make your transition process easier. If you enjoy doing what you do in the military, begin identifying potential employers who do the same thing. Spend time talking to colleagues and their civilian counterparts in different sectors about their job. Don't just ask them about what they do, ask them if they are *happy!*
4. **Find A Buddy:** If possible, find someone, or team of buddies that have the same goals and desires as you do; work together to come up with a transition plan. Divvy up research projects and meet often to share your collective knowledge.
5. **Translate Your Skills:** One of the wonderful things about the military is that your military training is the best in the world. I truly believe that. The skillset, discipline, and camaraderie you acquire in the military is coveted and highly valued by civilian employers. The trick is in knowing how to translate what you do in the military to jargon that civilian employers can understand. Research who your prospective employers are, learn their culture, jargon, and how they work with each other, then translate your skills to something they can understand. Here, I recommend creating a list of things you do in your job (and your previous jobs, if they are relevant) and then ensure you have a civilian term for everything you do. For example, I was a Trial Counsel (aka, *Prosecutor*) and also served as a Staff Judge Advocate to a Submarine Squadron (aka, *In-House Counsel*).
6. **Prepare Your Resume & Practice Interviewing:** Once you know what you want to do, and how to translate what you've been doing into something a civilian employee can understand, start preparing your resume and template cover letter. There are dozens and dozens of resources to help you with this. Be wary of outfits that charge you a bunch of money to help with this and look for vet friendly organizations that have a track record of success. For example, take a look at the [Centurion Military Alliance](#) (“CMA”) This amazing organization is run by the dynamic veteran duo Jarod Myers and Chaunte Myers. Not only can CMA help with your resume, their seminars and programs prepare you on critical interviewing skills and put together amazing recruiting events throughout the country. In addition to preparing a resume, you should print business cards with basic contact information and your job title (in civilian terms!).

7. **Develop an Elevator Speech:** An “elevator speech” is contrary to its name in that it is not some long boring speech. It is a succinct, short, dynamic, and quick statement of who you are, what you do, and what your goal is. It’s called an elevator speech because you should be able to deliver the “speech” on a short elevator ride. Develop a meaningful elevator speech to break the ice with prospective employers or referrals – whether you do it over the phone or in person.
8. **Network, Network, Network:** I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to begin networking early. “Networking” is the process of expanding your existing connections with people and organizations in your target industry. Networking is accomplished by employing a combination of tactics. One way to expand your network is by joining groups and organizations focused on the industry you are interested in and attending their events. When you go to events, take business cards and make it a habit to give one to every person you meet (and take theirs). Set up a professional social media profile and start connecting with people in your target industry (and those industries that work with and/or support that target industry). One of the best social media networking tools out there is LinkedIn.com. If you’re planning early, by the time you get close to checking out of the military, your network should be expansive.
9. **Be Detail Oriented & Focus:** When searching for jobs and applying for them, be sure to provide the information you are being asked to provide. Nothing irks employers more than to get incomplete applications. For example, if the job application asks for a resume *and* a cover letter. Send both! And don’t just send a template cover letter – customize it to that particular job. Make sure you qualify for the job. If the requirement is 10 years experience, don’t apply if you only have 3! Now, if the qualification requirement is close to what you have (but perhaps will need some explanation), don’t be afraid to apply – but do explain it in your cover letter.
10. **Execute!** Don’t just think about transition. Plan for it and execute. Success isn’t a game of Blackjack – there is no “luck” to it. You have to work hard to be successful. There no magic formula and the above tips are just that, tips. Utilize the resources available through your branch of service, but don’t stop there. 9 out of 10 veterans I talk to (including myself) tell me that the transition classes offered by the military are not enough. Talk to your brothers and sisters at-arms that have transitioned successfully and get pointers from them. You are not alone.

If you have any questions about transitioning please feel free to reach out to me at joseph@casaslawfirm.com or 855-267-4457. If I don't have the answer, I will do my best to point you in the right direction. Good luck and Semper Fi!

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Joseph N. Casas, JD, MBA

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