



# The Skillful Veteran: Transforming Overseas Experience into Competence, from the Military to Civilian Working Life Domain

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## Abstract

Veterans returning from military service often struggle to translate their occupational experiences into recognized civilian employment skills, despite possessing valuable competencies. This study examines how Swedish veterans from international overseas deployments navigate this transition, using qualitative data from in-depth interviews and reflective writings with 33 participants. Grounded in Donald Schön's theory of the reflective practitioner, the research frames veterans' career transitions as reflective processes involving navigation of uncertain professional territories. The study investigates how veterans demonstrate the value of their military experiences, how employers perceive these skills, and the societal narratives shaping transition outcomes. Despite possessing competencies in leadership, adaptability, and cross-cultural communication, veterans frequently encounter misconceptions that obscure their professional value. Four key themes emerge: situation contextualization (adapting skills to new environments), flexible performance (and self-efficacy), cross-cultural communication (empathic approach), and initiative-taking (inventing space for action). These themes illustrate how veterans create meaning and agency in civilian work environments through reflective practice. The findings reframe veterans as competent resources rather than vulnerable subjects, offering practical insights for employers seeking diverse talent, policymakers developing transition programs, and veterans themselves navigating career changes. This research contributes to understanding skill transferability and professional identity transformation in post-military careers.

**Keywords** Occupational transition · Military veteran · Experience · Competence · Civilian employment

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## Introduction

The transfer of occupational competencies presents a compelling issue, especially in the contemporary work environment where transitioning between organizations, across domains, and work cultures has become commonplace. Being able to recognize, articulate, and employ competencies acquired in one specific work context to a different one has implications for workplace learning and human resource development. The issue becomes particularly salient when the transition involves radically different organizational structures, and cultural norms. In the article we examine this question through the lens of a specific workplace transition—individuals who have completed international service training and deployment subsequently entering civilian employment sectors. By focusing on Swedish personnel who have engaged in overseas deployments before transitioning to civilian careers, we aim to investigate what occupational experiences from overseas deployment can be transformed into competencies applicable to diverse work contexts.

Our investigation addresses the research question: how do individuals who have completed international military service express the value of their overseas occupational experiences for their ensuing civilian work? This inquiry contributes to broader discussions in vocational learning about competence recognition, informal learning, and workplace learning transfer.

## Workplace Learning and Competence Transfer

Individuals develop transferable competencies through diverse pathways that extend beyond formal educational settings. Institutionalized education, along with personal experiences and social circumstances, collectively shape the conditions for lifelong learning (Billett 2024). However, personal experiences and social circumstances are significantly less recognized as important factors in the development of vocational competences, despite their substantial contribution to professional development (Salling-Olesen 2007). This represents a gap in understanding how workplace learning occurs across different organizational contexts. The preparatory training that individuals undergo for overseas military deployment constitutes a form of institutionalized education consisting of programs and relevant curricula specifically designed to achieve defined learning outcomes (Choy & Hai Le 2023). Typically, this involves completion of basic (conscript) military training followed by preparatory operation training lasting at least nine months, succeeded by six months to a year of practical application in international contexts. After completing their service, most Swedish soldiers return home to civilian employment (Bäckström 2024). This structured approach provides a good case study for understanding the interplay between formal training and learning from experiences in creating transferable competences.

From research we know that military veterans transition into civilian employment with a diverse set of transferable skills that are both technical and interpersonal in nature (Davis & Minnis 2016). Among the most frequently cited are leadership and management capabilities, honed through structured command hierarchies and mission-critical responsibilities. Veterans also bring technical proficiencies in areas such as logistics, engineering, and operations, which are directly applicable

to high-demand civilian sectors. In addition, they exhibit strong professional attributes including discipline, reliability, and the ability to work under pressure—traits that are consistently valued across industries (Keeling et al., 2018). Veterans also demonstrate soft skills such as communication, adaptability, and teamwork, which enhance their effectiveness in collaborative civilian work environments. However, significant challenges persist in translating specialized occupational competencies into language and frameworks recognized by different employment sectors. Many individuals find it difficult to articulate how their military training and experience translate to civilian workplace requirements (Binks & Cambridge 2018; Morris & Hanna 2023), often resulting in underemployment or misalignment with appropriate roles (Castaneda 2019). This suggests a broader issue in vocational learning: the need for better frameworks to support competence recognition and transfer across diverse work contexts.

### Overseas Deployment as a Learning Environment

The context of international service is unique, individuals deploying have completed rigorous training designed to develop competencies for operating in complex, dynamic, multicultural, and often challenging work environments. As such the training is a form of intensive vocational training with practical application in a real-world setting.

In the Swedish context, this form of workplace learning has produced a substantial population of individuals with specialized international experience. Since 1953, an estimated 70,000 Swedes have completed international military service abroad (Bäckström 2023). Among these individuals, approximately 5% are women and 95% are men (Swedish Armed Forces 2025). After completing their service, most individuals return to civilian employment (Bäckström 2024), creating a significant population whose workplace learning experiences span both specialized international environments and conventional civilian sectors.<sup>1</sup> Sweden presents a particularly interesting case study for examining this form of workplace transition due to its unique historical and cultural context. Sweden's approach to international engagement has been characterized by long-standing commitments to peacekeeping and international cooperation rather than traditional military conflict. For the past 250 years, Sweden has not experienced war on its own territory, creating a distinctive cultural framework that has shaped societal perceptions of international service experience differently than in countries with recent histories of domestic conflict.

An interesting paradox emerged in Swedish society during the 1990s and early 2000s that illustrates challenges in recognizing non-traditional workplace experience. While Sweden's involvement in international operations increased substantially, with annual participation fluctuating between 900 and 3,000 individuals between 1990 and 2013 in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Africa (Pethrus 2019), public awareness

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<sup>1</sup> Swedish veterans, a highly selected group (Pethrus et al., 2017), demonstrate positive long-term outcomes, including lower mortality rates compared to the general population (Pethrus et al., 2022). They also perform exceptionally well in the labour market, achieving comparable earnings to their non-serving counterparts (Bäckström 2023).

and recognition of these international workplace experiences reached historically low levels (Strand 2019; Victor Tillberg et al., 2020). This disconnect between the production of individuals with military overseas experience and societal recognition of their competencies exemplifies broader challenges in workplace learning: how non-traditional work experiences gain recognition and value in conventional employment contexts.

## Research Gap and Contribution to Vocational Learning

Despite growing recognition that workplace learning occurs through diverse pathways, there continues to be limited research on how occupational experiences from specialized contexts translate into competencies applicable to different work environments. A Swedish policy investigation acknowledged that “the vast majority who return home after their service have been enriched and developed as individuals by the challenges that the work entails” and that these individuals “constitute, in many respects, a resourceful group that contributes in various ways to our society with their knowledge and experience” (Statens Offentliga Utredningar 2014, p. 25).

Nonetheless, many veterans find it challenging to articulate the occupational experiences gained during international service and translate them to the civilian job market (Binks & Cambridge 2018; Morris & Hanna 2023). In many respects, the potentially valuable work experiences of veterans from international service are overshadowed by societal stigmas and misconceptions, portraying veterans as vulnerable individuals in need of assistance (Gross & Weiss 2017; Phillips 2020). Some describe their international service experience as a “black box,” something that can only be discussed with others who have similar backgrounds (Andersson 2001; and Victor Tillberg et al., 2020). This suggests significant untapped potential in recognizing and utilizing diverse forms of workplace learning.

Research on Swedish military veterans increasingly examines the long-term effects of deployment, often emphasizing individual wellbeing and being problem-oriented (Larsson et al., 2025; Pethrus et al., 2022). Both Swedish and Western veteran research predominantly adopts a problem-oriented focus, viewing veterans as individuals in need of support, with topics like PTSD and moral injury dominating recent international scientific publications (Grimell 2023; Pethrus 2019; Weibull 2011). Despite this problem-focused approach, academic literature consistently highlights that “most do well” during the transition to civilian life (Binks & Cambridge 2018; Iversen & Greenberg 2009; Truusa & Castro 2019).

The article addresses this gap by examining how individuals with specialized overseas service experience perceive and articulate the value of their occupational learning for subsequent civilian employment. Using qualitative methods, our investigation focuses on personal accounts of professional development and competence application following the transition from specialized international roles to civilian employment.

In the following we present our theoretical framework, grounded in Schön’s concept of the reflective practitioner, followed by a detailed account of the data collection and analysis methods. The subsequent sections introduce the results, which are then contextualized within the discussion, culminating in a concluding reflection.

## Theoretical Framework: Reflective Practice

As a theoretical tool for analysis, we employ Donald Schön's theory of the reflective practitioner as a central framework (Schön 1983, 1987). We choose to view the time that Swedish overseas veterans have spent abroad as a form of professional "practice", which Schön describes as "performance in a range of professional situations" (Schön 1983, p. 60). This perspective is particularly relevant as we seek to understand how knowledge is transferred across contexts and expressed in action. Of specific interest is Schön's concept of *indeterminate zones of practice* (Schön 1987), where pre-defined solutions are lacking, and practitioners must navigate both practical demands and the specific knowledge of the situation. Schön contrasts *Technical Rationality*, which views professional activity as instrumental problem-solving through scientific theory (Schön 1983), with *Reflective Practice*. Schön argues that competent practice extends beyond rote application, incorporating artistry and tacit knowledge (Schön 1983). In line with this, we contend that professional action and transferring competencies from specialized work placement to another cannot be fully understood through *Technical Rationality* alone; it also requires reflection in and on practice. The reflective practitioner effectively manages complex, ambiguous situations that demand experience-based judgments (Schön 1983).

The concepts of "experience" and "competence" are central to our study. Our definition of experience is based on the view of philosopher John Dewey, who posits specific conditions for the generation of experience. According to Dewey, experience is not merely a passive reception of impressions, but an active interaction between the individual and the environment. Dewey (whose thinking Schön is following) emphasizes the importance of meaningful experiences connected to real world situations to foster deeper understanding and learning. In Dewey's view, an experience inherently involves both "doing and undergoing" which highlights the essential relationship between these two aspects (Dewey 1934). We find that Schön's constructionist articulation of the concept of competence in the 1980s corresponds well with how competence is defined by the European Council as:

the ability to mobilise and deploy relevant values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and/or understanding in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities that are presented by a given type of context (Council of Europe, 2016, p. 23).

By focusing on the veterans' ability to recognize and articulate their experiences as valuable competencies, our analysis explores the competencies veterans carry from military service, their significance in civilian life, and how veterans perceive their utilization in the workforce. This perspective informs the design of the study, in which participating veterans were asked to provide concrete examples of how their experiences from international service have been beneficial in civilian employment, further elaborated in the methods section.

## Method

The findings presented in this article are grounded in data collected from twenty in-depth interviews with veterans, complemented by written accounts from an “experience forum” conducted in accordance with the dialogue seminar methodology. The study focused on understanding the world as it is experienced from the subject’s perspective, sometimes referred to as the lived experiences (Grimell 2017; Thomassen 2007). Both the in-depth interview and dialogue seminar methods lend themselves to conducting research on lived experiences. Table 1 describes the method and scope of the collected material that forms the basis of our investigation.

This exploratory study used a purposive, maximum variation sampling strategy to include veterans with diverse backgrounds and experiences of military deployments. This approach was adopted to capture the substantial variation in the character, duration, and life-course timing of deployments. For a detailed description of the sample, see Appendix A. The following core questions were posed to the veterans participating in the study. The same questions were asked in the focus group dialogues as in the interviews (see Appendix C for the full question template).

- *Can you provide examples of situations where your overseas service is perceived as an asset?*
- *When do you feel that your experiences/knowledge as a veteran have been utilized or sought after?*
- *Can you give examples of situations where you felt respected as a veteran, and conversely, instances where you felt questioned?*
- *What questions are you asked about your overseas service by others, both privately and at work?*

## Interviews

Between 2018 and 2019, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with veterans of varying backgrounds, ages, and genders (16 men and 4 women). Each interview lasted between 1 and 3 h. The oldest participant was born in 1941, and the youngest in 1987. Collectively, they have participated in approximately 50 military missions on behalf of Sweden in around 20 different countries. The interviews were semi-structured, guided by pre-formulated core questions (see above), followed by

**Table 1** Data collection methods and sample

Method	Number of informants	Activity	From	Number of pages
Interviews	20 veterans	Semi-structured interviews	Transcripts	192 pages
Dialogue seminar method	13 veterans	Focus group, five full-day meetings spread over six months	Meeting minutes	175 pages
		Personal writing	Text written by veterans	82 pages

adaptive inquiries based on the flow of conversation. This approach was used for the purpose of obtaining a “description of the [professional] life world of the interview with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena” (Brinkman & Kvale 2019, p. 15).

All interviews were transcribed in full, with participants anonymized and, in this article, referred to by a fictional name. Assurances of confidentiality were crucial for encouraging participants to share openly their post-deployment experiences. All interviewees consented to the use of information from their interviews in the study.

### Texts Authored by Veterans

During 2018–2019, fifteen veterans were invited to participate in the Experience Forum for Veterans, organized by the Swedish Center for Studies of Armed Forces and Society (CSMS) at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm. Of the fifteen invited, thirteen completed the project. The group of participating service members included both men (12) and women (1), representing various positions and ranks within the military organization. Their ages ranged from 25 to 60. The veterans invited to participate had to be fully active in professional life and not have extended sick leave periods related to foreign service or pronounced PTSD. The project was described in the invitation as follows:

In a series of writing seminars, you as a veteran are offered the opportunity to reflect on in writing and share your experiences of what happens after deployment. The project’s aim is to develop a knowledge base focused on the veteran as a competent resource in society and the workplace.

One objective of the project was to explore and describe veterans’ skills and contributions to the workplace and society after deployment by means of concrete examples. The writing method employed was the Dialogue Seminar Method (DSM), which combines systematically conducted meetings with informants’ written reflections on their experiences, followed by structured and documented focus group discussions (Göranzon et al., 2006).

### Analysis

We used thematic content analysis mapping veterans’ perceptions of the experiences from overseas deployment they have utilized in their subsequent civilian employment. In the study, we have not only inquired about the utilization of experiences, but we have specifically sought examples of *how* experiences from international service manifest in concrete situations. To create an aggregated picture of the analyzed accounts from the veterans, we adopted an approach based on Gioia et al. (2013, 2020).<sup>2</sup> We looked for both explicit and latent themes, forming them into first-order concepts that were later grouped into second-order themes, representing the research-

<sup>2</sup>A detailed account of the analytical procedure and the full overview of second-order themes, aggregated dimensions, and associated meaning units is provided in Supplementary File, Appendix D, Table S3.

ers' overarching interpretations of the activities described by the informants (Braun & Clarke 2022). These themes were not predetermined but emerged inductively from the data (Graneheim et al., 2017). Initially, each researcher independently analyzed the collected material. Subsequently, we collaboratively formulated the aggregated themes. As a complement to the analysis, AI was used after the researchers had completed their individual coding of first order concepts serving as a secondary check for potentially overlooked themes. The AI output did not result in the addition, removal, or modification of first-order concepts or themes. Final themes were selected and interpreted solely by the authors. Discrepancies were resolved by means of author discussion, following the recommendation of Gioia et al.: "If agreements about some coding are low, we revisit the data, engage in mutual discussions and develop understandings for arriving at consensual interpretations" (2013, p. 22). The authors bring diverse disciplinary backgrounds to this study, enabling us to highlight and analyze the collected material from multiple perspectives. The research team also possesses varying degrees of familiarity with military professional practice, which informed our analysis. Drawing on Koss Hartmann et al. (2018), our researcher positions can be characterized as a combination of "outside insiders" and "outside outsiders" (p. 16). One author is a working life researcher with extensive experience researching military professional practice, another is a military sociologist with an emphasis on civil-military interactions, and a third is a researcher with a military background. This allowed us to analyze the data using diverse perspectives and theory triangulation (Yin 2018). Having categorized themes from the material, we then analysed the material to identify statements describing factors that either hinder or facilitate the transfer of military experiences into civilian expertise. These hindering and facilitating factors are presented in our concluding section.

## Results

### Overview of Themes and Concepts

The following sections present our analysis of empirical material from interviews and texts authored by veterans participating in the study, guided by the research question: how do Swedish veterans express the value of their foreign military service for their civilian work? Based on the veterans' accounts, we identified four prominent recurring themes, below presented in Table 2.

In the discussion below, we have selected quotations from interviews and texts to exemplify the emergent themes identified in our analysis. These themes are conceptual constructs that, in practice, lack clear boundaries and are both overlapping and interdependent. To support transparency, we indicate the relative prevalence of themes using qualitative frequency markers (e.g., "several," "many"), rather than reporting exact counts, as the analysis was interpretive and not designed for numerical comparison.

**Table 2** Overview of aggregated dimensions

Dimension	Description
Situation contextualization, adapting skills to new environments	Seeing the bigger picture; the ability to situate oneself and one's contribution in new contexts; awareness of complexity and difficulty
Flexible performance and self-efficacy	The ability to rapidly adapt to changing conditions without becoming stressed; confidence in one's own abilities based on previous experience and challenges
Cross-cultural communication, an empathic approach	Awareness of power dynamics and privilege, including empathetic engagement and recognition of others as individuals within broader societal hierarchies
Taking the initiative, inventing space for action	The capacity to move beyond rigid rule-following and avoid inaction when facing uncertainty by proactively creating opportunities for action

## Discussion

### Situation Contextualization – Adapting Skills to New Environments

Contextualizing a situation involves understanding it within its broader framework—recognizing its relationship to its background, environment, and other influencing factors. It entails the ability to broaden one's perspective, moving beyond isolated events or facts to comprehend them as integral components of a larger, interconnected whole. In our material, we observed that veterans described an ability to situate work situations within a broader context, demonstrating an awareness of complexity and challenges. We have termed this capability “contextualization,” which we define as a developed proficiency in perceiving, understanding, and managing the context in which a task is to be accomplished. For example, one veteran, now in a management position in the manufacturing industry, shares that when management at his workplace presents a problem, the other [civilian] managers open an Excel document and begin calculating various solutions:

I go down to the floor and talk to the people instead; I try to understand how the problem arose. Here, I think differently than my colleagues. My team often solves problems faster. It's appreciated in the organization (veteran Göran).

Many veterans testify to how employing military mission command is valued in civilian workplaces. Mission command is characterized by trust between the manager and the subordinate, where the subordinate has the freedom to act independently to solve the task.<sup>3</sup> One veteran, now working in a healthcare organization, gives an example:

<sup>3</sup>Mission command (German: *Auftragstaktik*) is a military leadership philosophy in which superiors provide clear missions with defined goals and intent but delegate the specific details of task execution to subordinates, fostering initiative and flexibility. This contrasts with command and control, a management style whereby superiors issue detailed orders and instructions on how tasks are to be performed, thus limiting the autonomy and initiative of subordinates. Mission command has been the guiding leadership philosophy of the Swedish Armed Forces since the late nineteenth century. [Försvarmakten 1995].

My boss says that I am very solution-oriented; I have this principle of always thinking two steps ahead. You plan, carry out the work you need to do, and then you report back. [...] Even in my profession, I notice that when larger projects arise and someone needs to be chosen to take the lead, it often ends up being me (veteran Nicklas).

Several quotations address the lessons learned from being truly tested in one's professional practice. Having navigated situations requiring analysis and an understanding of the background and context is presented as valuable experience. One interviewee, Gustav, articulates it as follows: "That's an important life lesson, a valuable experience to take with you – to not jump into situations you don't have control over." Another veteran, Rickard, concurs, noting: "It's about the experience of knowing what you're capable of, what you can handle, and how far you can push yourself." A recurring theme among the veterans is the experience of having physically and mentally lived through situations that were not fully within their control, but which they nevertheless managed to master because they could interpret the context of the situation. The veterans' ability to anticipate problems based on prior experience highlights a developed capacity for actively interpreting situations and setting the problem by drawing upon their experiences. This aligns with Schön's view of professional knowledge being rooted in practical experience.

Schön distinguishes between problem-solving and problem-setting. Problem-solving typically involves applying known techniques and procedures to well-defined problems. Problem-setting, on the other hand, is the process of defining the problem itself. It's about framing the situation and determining what needs to be addressed in the first place:

When we set the problem, we select what we will treat as "things" of the situation, we set the boundaries of our attention to it, and we impose upon it a coherence which allows us to say what is wrong and in what directions the situation needs to be changed (Schön 1983, p. 40).

Problem-setting is not a neutral or purely technical process; rather, it is an active, interpretive act where the practitioner constructs an understanding of the situation based on their experiences, values, and contextual factors (Schön 1983). The veterans' emphasis on contextual understanding before acting demonstrates a move beyond applying pre-defined solutions, showcasing a grasp of situational nuances gained through experience. In conclusion, the veterans' contextualization skills exemplify Schön's theories by connecting professional knowledge and reflective practice. Their ability to perceive the broader picture reflects a deep understanding of their environment, cultivated through experience and reflection.

### **Flexible Performance and Self-Efficacy**

Our analysis of the collected material reveals a flexible approach to work and tasks as a recurrent theme. Experiences gained across diverse [military] situations requiring action are described as collectively shaping a repertoire of actions that can be drawn

upon as needed. Statements about having been tested in difficult situations when it truly matters also belong here. The veterans emphasize that it is an advantage to have been tested both physically and mentally, and that through this, one becomes aware of and can regulate one's own capacity. This theme aligns with the contextualization process detailed above. This understanding of contexts enhances their self-efficacy, which in turn gives them the confidence to act decisively, especially in high-stakes situations where lives and well-being depend on their actions. Related to this, interviewees also emphasize a greater awareness of their own mental limitations. A veteran with experience from multiple international missions, coupled with civilian work in his home country, describes what he has learned from his deployments abroad in this way:

I have learned that patience is a virtue [...]. I have learned to carry out my mission despite an inner struggle of despair [...]. I have learned to take command where others become paralyzed [...]. I have learned what the word “delegation” means in practice and have learned to use it when I have a lack of time or knowledge (veteran Ludvig).

He concludes his list of what he has learned from military missions abroad: “I have learned a lot from other people, but *I have also learned a lot about myself*” [our italics]. Another veteran interviewee, Björn, describes taking greater responsibility for his work group in his civilian workplace after returning home. He also describes how his experiences have given him confidence to handle conflicts and foster effective group dynamics. Back in his civilian workplace, he describes how he initiates new approaches to improve the workplace environment:

We held a more structured weekly meeting where we clearly went through what everyone was working on that week [...] so that others on the team could know whether you were balanced and on top of things, or not (veteran Björn).

Several veterans described increased resilience to stress and rapid change, along with the ability to make decisions in complex and ambiguous situations, as a key outcome of their overseas service. Back in civilian employment in Sweden, several of them report having a high stress threshold and, unlike their civilian colleagues, they are less likely to worry about changes or unexpected workloads in the workplace.

Veteran Emma describes developing a much higher stress tolerance as a result of her mission: “I have a much greater stress tolerance, and it takes a lot – quite seriously – for me to feel “Oh, my God!”. Accounts from several veterans argue that a flexible mindset, grounded in diverse experiences, builds confidence, which in turn promotes further flexibility. This, combined with the ability to understand and contextualize situations, gives them a strong sense of self-efficacy, which is a key component of their confidence and ability to act effectively.

In Schön's epistemology of practice, professional knowledge is intrinsically linked to possessing a repertoire of actions. As he wrote: “when a practitioner makes sense of a situation he perceives to be unique, he *sees* it as something already present in his repertoire” (Schön 1983, p.138). In his reasoning about the act of seeing, Schön

draws upon Wittgenstein, who posits that “seeing-as” is simultaneously a process of seeing and thinking (Wittgenstein 1953). The capacity to perceive something through the experience of something else, while simultaneously recognizing the uniqueness of each situation, is an aspect of Schön’s theoretical framework that resonates with the veterans’ accounts. The veterans in this study describe returning home with a heightened practical knowledge base that extends beyond their initial training. Often, they have acquired the ability to manage entirely different challenges. We observe that, when confronted with new [civilian] work situations, they express a sense of familiarity that can be understood through Schön’s assertion: “The familiar situation functions as a precedent, or a metaphor, or... an exemplar for the unfamiliar one” (Schön 1983, s. 138). In summary, the veterans’ flexible performance demonstrates the practical implications of Schön’s epistemology of practice, highlighting the crucial role of experiential learning in the development of professional expertise.

### **Cross-cultural Communication – an Empathic Approach**

Communicating effectively across cultural boundaries is a recurring theme in several statements. This ability is described as connected to cultural understanding and attentiveness. Building and managing relationships is a consistent theme in the testimonies of veterans, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal connections in their experiences. In our analysis, we identify an attention directed towards understanding and managing power dynamics in relation to other people. Many of the veterans express that they have had reason to reflect on the privilege of power. One veteran reflects on what is specific and distinctive about the experience of military service abroad in this way:

That vulnerable people place their trust in complete strangers because they have no better options. That patience sometimes extends much further than a lack of tolerance [...] what language barriers can entail, how different cultures exert influence on decision-making, how I myself function in a critical situation (veteran Karl).

One interviewee, with experience from several missions in the Balkans, talks about a particular kind of empathic approach learned from overseas service. The missions in the Balkans involved keeping apart groups that could not coexist. In his later work as a civilian manager at a housing facility for immigrants awaiting asylum decisions, where people from various parts of the world share living spaces to varying degrees of willingness, this patience comes into play. The veteran describes how an unspoken hierarchy exists among the people he encounters in his work today – an influential informal hierarchy. Overseas service has created an awareness of differences between people. He notes that “people are different, but the differences can be bridged” and continues with the following observation:

I am well-educated, I have money, I am white, I am male, and there is a hierarchy – good and bad people, rich and poor, well-educated and uneducated. Those I meet today are far down that scale. If you are a poor black woman, you

are at the very bottom. And I must have patience; if I lack patience, they are completely hopeless... So, when I meet women in my current job, I simply have to pause. If I don't take that time, nothing will happen. They will never assert their space. That cultural understanding is essential. They will never find their place unless I help create it. And we create that with patience and time. That is what I have learned from the missions. I have no weapon today, but I still have power (veteran Magnus).

These narratives highlight the veterans' developed sense of empathy and understanding of power dynamics, crucial for navigating complex cross-cultural interactions. This nuanced awareness, cultivated through their experiences, translates into a more patient and effective approach in their civilian roles.

In conclusion, the analysis of veterans' experiences reveals the critical role of empathy and reflective practice in navigating cross-cultural interactions. These examples illustrate a capacity for reflection that is necessary in what Schön terms *indeterminate zones of practice* (Schön 1987). In these zones, pre-defined solutions are lacking, and practitioners must navigate both practical demands and the specific knowledge of the situation. What we choose to call an empathic approach to cross-cultural communication presupposes the ability to engage in reflection-in-action: "reflection in action [...] is central to the art through which practitioners sometimes cope with the troublesome 'divergent' situations of practice" (Schön 1983, p. 62). In this art, according to Schön, not only is the situation itself the focus of examination, but attention is also directed, as in the veterans' accounts above, towards the practitioner's own role in the whole. Crucially, this involves understanding power dynamics in societal situations and demonstrating an awareness of the privilege of power. As the veteran above noted, sometimes it is necessary to "give space" to others. Schön describes: "Conscious of a dilemma, he [the practitioner] may attribute it [reflection] to the way in which he has set his problem, or even to the way in which he has framed his role" (Schön 1983, p. 63). The form of reflection that Schön points out here is closely connected to what Dewey believes is required for an experience to take hold and find its place in the individual.

### **Taking the Initiative – Inventing Space for Action**

International military service involves encountering unpredictable situations and managing problems that often must be resolved without access to clear instructions. Veterans recount how resourcefulness and imagination play a role. In many concrete examples of real events, veterans describe how the "external forms" – in the guise of regulations and rules – are so restrictive that those tasked with resolving situations on the ground must invent a space for action. One veteran, Åsa, describes it as follows: "You might become a little MacGyver, solving problems in your own way if they arise." In the interviews the veterans recount how, in their service, they had to assess, decide, and act in situations bounded by rules, yet also requiring improvisation and personal judgments. Another veteran talks about, following service abroad, he is now considered to be solution-driven:

In my [civilian] daily life, I have ended up as chairman in all the associations I've been involved with. They can see that you're solution-driven, get things done, and are communicative, I guess (veteran Nicklas).

Many veterans have operated within a complicated professional practice that demanded reflection and entailed a personal responsibility beyond the mere application of rules. The veterans have often had to act in situations characterized by uncertainty and lacking clear guidelines and instructions. Several of the participants in the study link this experience with an ability to subsequently tackle [civilian] problems:

You acquire certain tools in how you work, how you handle conflicts, and so on, to resolve issues effectively. I've benefited from this and appreciated it when I've made suggestions and provided input (veteran Björn).

Another veteran, Nicklas, describes an approach that he perceives as being appreciated in his civilian working life: "You complete your task, you're loyal, and there are no problems. If you see problems, you ignore or bypass them, or sink them." In interviews and texts, we observe a connection between how problems are described and contextualized, and how limiting circumstances, instead of causing paralysis, lead to the invention of new solutions. A veteran who served in the Middle East in the 1960s, and who subsequently held leading positions in healthcare in civilian working life, provides an example:

I became very, not fascinated but captivated by the refugee camps that I visited and the poverty I saw there. This was in '63, and they had been sitting there since '48, and that made me have some kind of thought that eventually matured into me having done a lot of things for immigrant people in my civilian life. [...] I don't think I would have done that if I hadn't been on the mission; in the contacts I had with the local population and the refugees, I realized that they were completely ordinary people. Primarily, I have worked in healthcare, mainly with administration and training of doctors. I quickly made sure to create courses for internship and specialist training doctors, and intercultural meetings within healthcare. Eventually, I saw a large national impact, many followed suit, and our refugee doctors got a great opportunity to get in. I don't think I would have done that if I hadn't been on the mission (veteran Lennart).

What the veterans in the examples above do is, through reflection, to research their own practice by, in Schön's words:

reflects on the phenomena before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior [...] which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomena and a change in the situation (Schön 1983 p. 68).

Thus, veterans' experiences reveal that the challenges of international military service cultivate resourcefulness and independent thinking, enabling them to drive inno-

vation and positive change in civilian life. Schön's distinction between what he calls Technical Rationality on one hand and Reflective Practice on the other is useful in understanding the capacity to taking initiative and giving space to others. According to the dominant model of Technical Rationality, "professional activity consists in instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique" (Schön 1983, p.21). However, Schön further describes a more complex professional practice explaining that it requires more from the practitioner than merely following rules or applying theory: "over the years, several writers on the epistemology of practice have been struck by the fact that skillful action often reveals a 'knowing more than we can say'" (Schön 1983, pp. 49–51).

In the next section we will briefly outline the factors that support or hinder the transference of competencies acquired in overseas deployment to later civilian work life.

### **Forces of Facilitation and Hindrance**

The transition from military service to civilian employment for veterans is shaped by a complex interplay of hindering and facilitating forces. Veterans participating in this study described barriers that include societal stigmas, misconceptions about veterans, and a lack of understanding regarding the competencies and experiences gained during military service abroad. Several veterans in the study express that they do not identify themselves as veterans, veteran Ulf says: "The first time someone called me a 'veteran,' I responded, 'No, that's not me.'" The image of the injured veteran overshadows the image of the competent veteran, which in some cases leads to the veteran choosing not to highlight their veteran status as part of their professional expertise. One veteran reflects over a job interview:

It's hard to explain how I've changed by experiencing a world I wasn't used to [...] it's difficult to convey how my overseas experiences have transformed me. That's why I respond "sandy" and smile slyly when asked how it was in Afghanistan during a [civilian] job interview. I know the questioner wants a different answer. But the story they want to hear is not the one I have. The narrative I have in store [...] is about self-awareness [...] about choices and introspection [...] It's not what I've experienced that distinguishes me from others, but rather what others think they know about my experiences that sets them apart from me. (veteran Edvard)

To counter misconceptions, veterans in this study often prioritize demonstrating their competence over disclosing their military background. Many describe how, in their professional lives, they first build an identity as a competent, solution-oriented employee before they are open about the fact that parts of the work methods they apply can be attributed to what they learned in international military service. In the veteran interviews and texts within this study, several recount how colleagues, not initially, but over time, begin to recognize or inquire about their overseas experience. Conversely, support for this transition arises from informed hiring practices, particularly when managers and recruiters possess knowledge of the valuable qualities

inherent in veteranship. Ultimately, recognizing and leveraging the resourcefulness, independent thinking, and adaptability cultivated through experiences of military service is crucial for enabling veterans to successfully integrate into and contribute to the civilian workforce.

## Limitations

Situated within a constructivist framework, this study aims to explore how individuals *construct and articulate* competences gained during overseas deployment rather than to produce generalizable claims. As the analysis draws on a small and context-specific sample, the findings should be understood as situated insights into the meaning-making of the participants rather than representations of broader military-to-civilian transitions. The study relies on retrospective self-accounts, which reflect participants' ongoing sense-making as they navigate their post-military careers. Consequently, the competences described are shaped by participants' current perspectives and identity reconstruction, and differences related to age, service era, or time elapsed since transition were not systematically analyzed.

Finally, while AI was used to support the initial review of first-order concepts, these outputs constitute an additional interpretive layer informed by the model's training data (OpenAI 2025). All interpretive decisions, including the construction of aggregated dimensions, were made by the researchers; however, the hybrid analytic approach requires recognition of the mediated nature of the resulting themes.

## Conclusion

This study examined how occupational experiences from overseas deployment may be transformed into competencies applicable in civilian employment. Drawing on Schön's theory of the reflective practitioner, the findings suggest that veterans can engage in reflective processes that support the reframing of professional experiences. The competencies identified – situation contextualization, flexible performance, cross-cultural communication, and taking the initiative – may extend beyond Technical Rationality toward elements of Reflective Practice, through an emphasis on problem *setting* rather than problem solving. The study indicates the potential value of recognizing informal and non-traditional learning environments, such as overseas military deployments, within vocational education and training. For vocational educators, the findings point to the relevance of structured reflective practices, such as the Dialogue Seminar Method, that support the articulation and translation of experiential competencies. For employers and HR practitioners, recruitment and assessment practices should more explicitly recognize experience-based and informal learning, for instance through structured reflective interviews that enable veterans to articulate their competencies. Employers may benefit from assessment practices that more explicitly consider experience-based learning in recruitment and workplace integration. For veteran affairs services, the findings suggest that transition support programs could benefit from integrating structured reflective practices, such as systematic experience-based skills mapping, support in CV writing, or competence

portfolios, to support veterans in making their experiential competencies visible and transferable to civilian employment. At the policy level, the results suggest a need to consider frameworks that facilitate the recognition of experiential learning acquired outside formal education and training systems. Future research could further explore how transitions between occupational cultures are navigated in different contexts, and how vocational learning and recognition practices might be designed to support such transitions across the life course.

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**Data Availability** No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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**Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate** All interviewees have provided written consent to participate in the study, which was conducted in accordance with the approval of the Regional Ethical Review Board in Gothenburg, Ref. no. 157–18.

**Competing Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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