

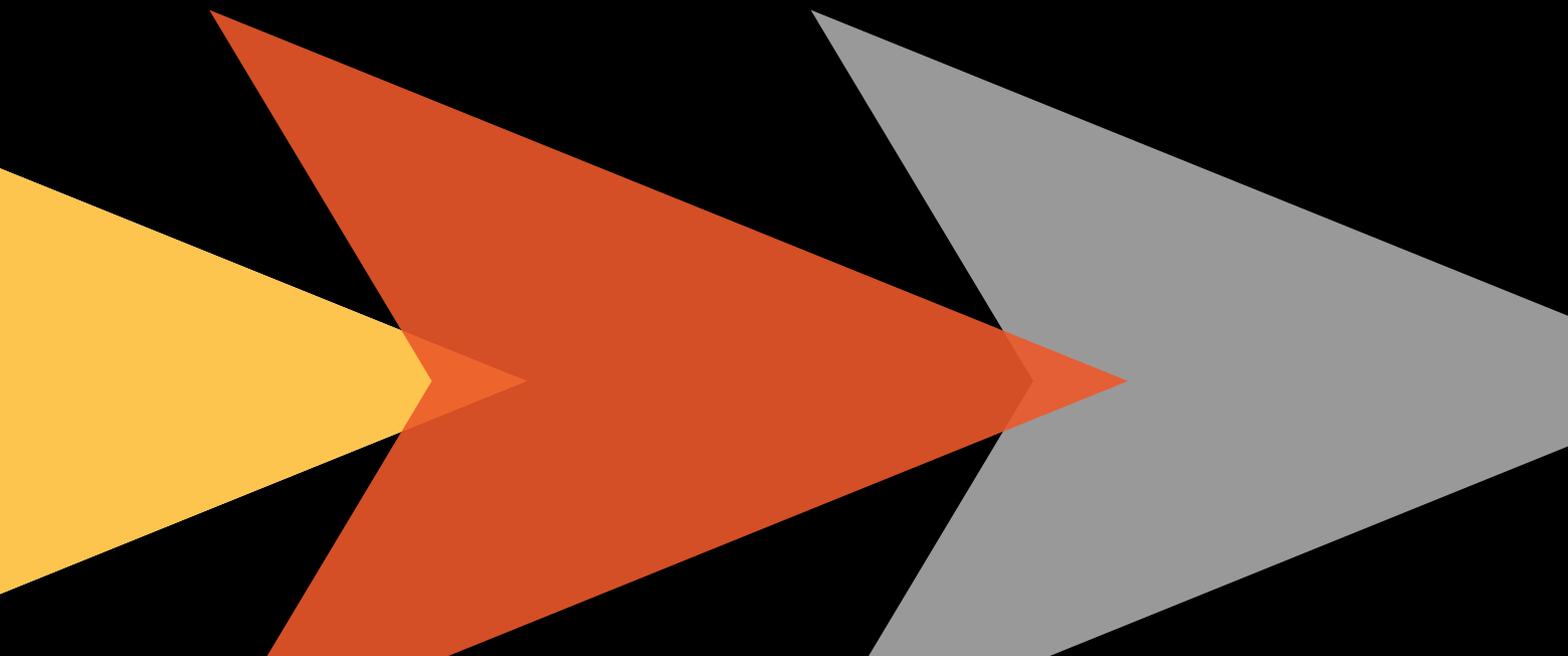


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# Ready for a New Mission

Most military veterans have project management skills. But landing a job requires translating them into civilian terms.

BY NOVID PARSİ  
PORTRAITS BY TODD DOUGLAS





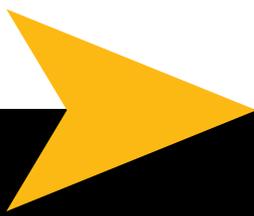
# Even

in times of peace, militaries don't sit still. Battle-readiness is the result of constant training and well-honed logistics capabilities. Mike Hoal learned that firsthand while serving in the U.S. Army. He spent years managing training projects at U.S. bases in both South Korea and the state of Washington, including as a sergeant first class senior operations/project manager. The U.S. military is a global organization, and Mr. Hoal's projects often crossed borders. One consisted of managing the logistics involved with sending

soldiers and equipment from Washington to Singapore and then ensuring a joint training exercise with that country's military met objectives.

That kind of project management experience helped him acquire all 4,500 hours of experience he needed to sit for the Project Management Professional (PMP)<sup>®</sup> certification exam while in the Army. "I [qualified for] the PMP<sup>®</sup> [exam] solely based on my last three or four years of military experience," says Mr. Hoal, now a project manager for Tacoma Public Schools in Tacoma, Washington, USA. (He's also CFO of the non-profit organization Vets2PM.)

His transition into a civilian project management role doesn't surprise Tracey Richardson, EdD, PMI-RMP, PMP. An associate professor in the College of Business at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical Univer-



**Over two-thirds**  
of 600 surveyed veterans have  
project management experience as  
a result of their military service.

in-demand skills—it's knowing how to translate project management skills into terms civilian employers understand.

#### **'WHATEVER IT TAKES'**

Project management skills are hard to avoid in any military because most activities are project-based.

"Most people in the military get the fundamental concept of managing a project end-to-end," says Mark Johnston, associate director, KPMG Australia, and chairman and director, Australian National Veterans Arts Museum, Melbourne, Australia. "The military is largely project-centric, less operational like running a call center or a factory." During his 12 years in the Australian Army, Mr. Johnston supported and led training and operational missions for sub-units of up to 100 people.

Just like any other project, every military mission must be carefully planned. While in the Air Force, Dr. Richardson led a team of 300 people through flying programs that began with four months of planning. During the 12 months of daily flight missions that followed, her team closely monitored execution. "While we were doing the missions, we had milestones and metrics to track success. Any departure from the plan had to be captured with a formal change process. And when we were done, we had an extensive debriefing process," she says. "In the military, we're trained to get things done."

Indeed, of all the life cycle skills Dr. Richardson surveyed, respon-

**"Military people work with cross-functional teams from all ethnicities and different nationalities—and everyone must work toward a common goal."**

—Mike Hoal, PMP, Tacoma Public Schools, Tacoma, Washington, USA

sity, Dr. Richardson last year surveyed around 600 U.S. military veterans about their experience with planning, executing and monitoring projects. (See "Universal Skills," page 61.) Dr. Richardson, who spent 20 years as an aircraft maintenance officer in the U.S. Air Force, found that over two-thirds of the veterans have project management experience as a result of their military service.

"The overwhelming answer was yes, the military prepares project management talent," says Dr. Richardson, Fort Walton Beach, Florida, USA. "In the military, we execute missions. In the civilian sector, we execute projects."

But as hundreds of thousands of veterans transition from active duty to the civilian world each year (see "Building Bridges," page 58), many face a common challenge. It isn't how to obtain



## Building Bridges

For years, the unemployment rate among post-9/11 U.S. veterans has been higher than the country's overall jobless rate. Aware of the challenges veterans face transitioning into the civilian workforce, the U.S. federal government in 2011 launched its nonpartisan Joining Forces program, which aims to mobilize public and private sectors to ensure veterans have the tools and resources they need to succeed.

A proud supporter of the Joining Forces program, PMI last July launched its program Preparing U.S. Military for Project Management Careers. The goal of the program is to help military personnel find employment in the project management profession by using the benefits offered through membership: networking, mentorship, accessing professional development resources and certification. PMI's U.S. chapters have received information to help military personnel qualify for PMI certifications.

The need for that support is large: According to a report by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, there are 8.5 million employable veterans in the United States, and almost 350,000 personnel transition from active military service to veteran status each year.



**“Most people in the concept of managing military is largely pr**

—Mark Johnston, KPMG Australia, Melbourne, Australia



dents said project execution was the strongest. That might be attributable to the can-do attitude the military fosters. As a civilian project manager, Graeme Hood once put on a hard hat and helped lay fiber-optic cable beneath a road—because that's what was needed to complete an office relocation project on time.

“The military taught me that, whatever it takes, you get it done,” says Mr. Hood, estates strategy program manager for the insurer Royal London in Wilmslow, England. He served in the British Army for 12 years.

The military cultivates leadership skills that project managers need from an early age. “Civilians at 21 or 22 years old might be in college, but they're not getting the leadership development opportunities

**military get the fundamental  
a project end-to-end. The  
object-centric.”**



that a younger ranking person gets in the military,” says Mr. Hoal.

Exposure to people from around the world can support this development process. “Military people work with cross-functional teams from all ethnicities and different nationalities—and everyone must work toward a common goal,” Mr. Hoal says. Experience with varied stakeholders has served him well in his current position: He works with half a dozen departments, from human resources to IT.

#### **CROSSING THE LANGUAGE BARRIER**

Although many project management skills are universal, there’s a divide between military and corporate culture—and it creates an obstacle for veterans seeking civilian employment. Vocabulary

differences are one issue. The military says “mission”; civilians say “project.” What the military calls “debriefing,” project managers describe as “gathering lessons learned.”

“As an officer, I did project management but didn’t necessarily use project management language,” Mr. Johnston says.

That’s why veterans should dive into learning the civilian language of project management, Dr. Richardson says. “Veterans bear the burden of articulating what they can do in language that can be understood by civilians,” she says.

Ideally, veterans should learn that terminology before leaving the military. Whenever there’s downtime, “have a textbook in front of you and learn the language of project management so that you can



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—Tracey Richardson, PMI-RMP, PMP

talk the talk while learning to walk the walk,” Mr. Johnston says. While serving, Mr. Hoal studied *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*. “I was able to translate what I did in the military and speak about that in job interviews,” he says.

Not doing this creates a risk that employers will interpret a veteran’s lack of project management vocabulary as a lack of experience. But civilian employers have a role to play, too, says Dr. Richardson: “They should understand that veterans come with an amazing project management skill set—they just need help learning the language.”

#### **MISSION ACCOMPLISHED**

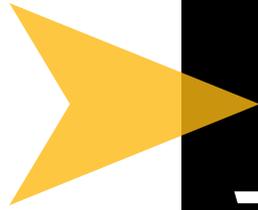
Beyond learning the lingo, veterans should try to earn certifications to signal their skills. “[Earning] the PMP before you get out of the military will make your transition easier,” Mr. Hoal says. “Employers

won’t have to question your experience. It will be proven by an industry standard.” And don’t forget to acquire and document project hours while still in the military, Mr. Hood says: “You always forget what you’ve done after you’ve done it.”

Earning the PMP was “a door-opener for employment,” Dr. Richardson says. “I attribute my getting hired as a full-time professor to my project management experience and to the PMP certification.”

Networking with other military members also helps veterans make the leap. “While in the military, cultivate your network. When you get out, stay in touch with people and learn from their experiences,” Mr. Johnston says. “Then pay that back to help others make the transition to civilian life.”

After he left the military, Mr. Hoal networked while volunteering with his local PMI chapter in Olympia, Washington, USA. (He now serves on the chapter’s board as military liaison director.) He



# Universal Skills

also posted a LinkedIn request to connect with any veterans who had transitioned into project management careers, asking to meet them for informational interviews. One veteran who responded—the CFO at Tacoma Public Schools—happened to be looking for a project manager. A few weeks later, he offered Mr. Hoal the position.

When Mr. Johnston left the military, he got his first project management job when a veteran at a consultancy firm recognized the skill set he would bring. “He understood that an officer would have necessary and fundamental project management skills and insights,” he says.

Building relationships with other ex-service members will help veterans not only get that first project management job, but also navigate the transition into the civilian project environment. In the military, an officer understands that in order to

complete missions that often have life-or-death consequences, the team will do whatever it takes. That isn’t always the case in the civilian world.



**“Veterans have to learn how to deal with people who don’t have a military background, who don’t speak the same language.”**

—Mark Johnston

The key is to respect individuals’ unique abilities and value diversity, he says: “Veterans have to learn how to deal with people who don’t have a military background, who don’t speak the same language—and who don’t show up to meetings five minutes ahead of time.” **PM**

**70%** of surveyed U.S. military veterans say they have experience in managing a project life cycle.

Strongest skill: **Project execution**

**63%** say they have experience in *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)* Knowledge Areas.

Areas most experienced in: **quality management, risk management and communications**

**69%** have experience in personal competencies.

Strongest competencies: **communication, leadership and professionalism**

Among veterans who served in the military for 10 or more years...



**77%** have experience in quality management.



**77%** have experience in communications management.



**74%** have experience in risk management.

Among veterans who have served in the military for 15 or more years...



**80%** have experience in planning.



**77%** have experience in execution.



**78%** have experience in monitoring and controlling.

Source: *Armed Forces Project Management Talent Survey*, Richardson, T., Earnhardt, M., and Marion J., Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University – Worldwide, 2016. Methodology: 620 U.S. military veterans were surveyed.

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