
Six Reasons to Hire Military Veterans



By Antoine Tirard , (INSEAD MBA '97D), Founder, NexTalent and Claire Harbour , (INSEAD MBA '92J), Founder, Culture Pearl

Military experience builds the elusive character traits that companies sorely need in their leaders.

As long as reality falls short of our peace-loving ideals, there will be a pressing need to recruit bright talents into the military. When military leaders re-enter civilian life, however, they often find it difficult to convince employers that their experience applies to the business world. True, life on an army barracks bears little obvious resemblance to that of most corporate executives — but the differences may be more superficial than most realise.

In speaking to several flourishing officers-cum-execs, we discovered that they directly attributed their business success to qualities acquired and honed in the military. Their stories suggest that the rigours of military leadership can be ideal preparation for the corporate battlefield.

“Resilience is built into our thought process”

As one of three brothers in an Indian “army family”, you could say that Devendra Yadav, now CEO of a French multinational, was destined to go into the military. After graduating from the military academy with top honours, he began a thriving career encompassing both combat roles and UN peacekeeping missions in Africa. In 2004, as a young colonel, Devendra was asked to raise a new unit, which he now compares to a start-up business with venture capital funding.

Unlike most of his colleagues, who aimed to spend their entire careers in the army, Devendra started to crave a new challenge once he had served the obligatory 20 years. For him, the critical question was “When was the last time you did something for the first time?” When he realised it had been so long that memory failed him, he decided to reinvent himself as a business leader.

He eventually enrolled in a dual MBA programme from Tsinghua and INSEAD. Surrounded by students much younger than himself, he relished the opportunity to question himself on all fronts, after so many years of being in command. “The higher you go in the army, the lonelier you get, whereas I now have a magnificent network of supportive buddies just a phone call away”, Devendra says of the experience.

Devendra believes his rise to CEO owes much to the strengths he developed in the army, specifically a unique package of analysis, quick solutions, and implementation. He says this outlook allows him to anticipate problems without slowing his advance toward the finish line. The “everything can go wrong” attitude that prevails in the army fosters a helpful sense of proportion. It is “losing money versus losing lives and limbs, and resilience is built into our thought process.”

“Most people are afraid”

Prominent executive coach Ton de Graaf had a harder time making the transition to civilian life. Upon ending an illustrious military career that took him from platoon leader in the Royal Dutch Military Police, involved in NATO security issues, to Air Force captain, he found himself 0-for-150 on his job applications.

Through sheer persistence, he won an executive leadership position as “head of change” in a large construction company. He soon learned the real reason he had been hired; to oversee a major restructuring effort. He used

his military experience to “keep his cool” and be first in, last out, on the work floor with “the men”. Things got tough, but he held his ground, as he had learnt, and gained a great deal of respect. His performance was rewarded with further and rapid promotions, as well as with the sense that the change he had led had been as painless as possible, thanks to his work.

Ton’s wisdom from the military carries over into his current role as a coach, including the notion that you must “walk your talk” and be a leader who can be trusted. He tries to inspire in his clients the same fearlessness the army instilled in him. “I’ve been an executive coach for over a decade now, and the one thing I notice time and again is that most people are afraid. Afraid to be judged, afraid to give or receive feedback, to ask for help, or to lose their job. Apparently this is the system we have built for ourselves”, Ton says.

6 Highly Desirable and Distinctive Transferable Skills From the Military

1. **Fearlessness** - "losing money vs. losing life and limbs"
2. **Resilience** - "you can never feel as bad as when you lose a comrade, so it is easy to get back up and recover from the failure of a project or initiative"
3. **Character** - "it is easy to train up business skills, but impossible to train up character"
4. **Self-discipline** - "I survived remote, isolating and exhausting postings, by reminding myself of the value for my nation of this hardship"
5. **Cool** - "I managed this situation by keeping my cool, just like I had in the midst of heavy combat"
6. **Caring** - "it is all ultimately about how you treat your people, and humility and empathy count above all"

“It all boils down to how you treat people”

Priya Panjekar's career has, in a sense, come full circle. She is now being groomed for a General Manager role at Marriott, the company she joined as a fresh graduate, before discovering an opening in the lady officer's special entry scheme that required a hotel management degree. Her five-year military stint kicked off with a posting to Leh, a remote station in the Himalayas. At age 21, she was not only the youngest person there by nearly

25 years but also the only female. She earned the respect of her colleagues by proving she could match them physically, while providing a mix of feminine empathy and supportiveness, to weave relationships of trust and confidence.

Her time in the mountains continues to inform her experience in the business world. In fact, she says HR in the hospitality sector shares several key characteristics with her army life: grass-roots activities, largely untrained staff, and hectic unpredictability. The strongest wisdom Priya has covers her whole career: “It all boils down to how you treat people. You mentor others, so that you are free to develop yourself. Success breeds success.”

She recommends that other exiting officers “leave their high horse behind” and focus on reading and building information. “The more you know, the more you can engage in interesting conversations, wherever you are.”

The importance of character

When we asked what they most valued about their military experience, Devendra, Tom, and Priya hardly mentioned concrete skills or expertise gained in a particular area. Rather, their comments imply that there is no place like the military for building the all-encompassing, intangible traits necessary to succeed (and lead others to success) at any difficult business task — which we have extrapolated as fearlessness, resilience, character, self-discipline, cool, and caring (see sidebar).

We believe companies should challenge their assumptions about the military, looking for the positive and constructive aspects of an individual’s experience. Business skills and knowledge can easily be taught, while character cannot, and that makes all the difference in the world.

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For more on our in-depth interviews with former military personnel who transitioned to business, read the extended version of this post on [**NexTalent**](#).

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