

# Veterans Series: Embracing the Learn and Grow Veterans' Ethos to Understand Leadership: Conversation with Rhonda Stickley

<http://blog.talentcircles.com/2014/01/veterans-series-embracing-learn-and.html>

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*Learn more about best practices in recruiting veteran and military job seekers by joining a Talent Circles sponsored webinar on 2/13/14 at 9:00 PM PST. [Click here](#) to register & learn more.*

*This post is part of a series that already includes conversations with:*

*Chris Norton: [Veterans are social and connected](#)*

*Caleb Fullhart: [An army recruiter changed my life forever](#)*

*Arron Daniels: [I Can Knock It Out of the Park!](#)*

*By [Marylene Delbourg-Delphis](#)*

*[Rhonda Stickley](#) started her second term as President of the [DirectEmployers Association](#) (DE) in October 2013 and although focusing on technology, her heart is very close to an area where DE is extremely active: Military/Veterans-related initiatives. These initiatives are designed to help the Association's members understand the importance of employing America's veterans and provide them with the [information](#) and resources they need.*

*The extent of training and real-world experience of America's Veterans is foreign to the vast majority of employers. By meeting and talking to Veterans, or simply reading about their experiences you will better understand why Veterans' skills are often far easier to translate into civilian jobs than commonly assumed.*

*Companies over the years have learned to embrace diversity. Building up your Military Circle could be part of your efforts. You will realize the value of hiring Veterans by taking full measure of the level of responsibility that the Military ends up giving to its recruits. Sometimes, it's astounding — as is demonstrated profoundly in Rhonda's case.*

## **Why did you join the Military?**

I volunteered during a time when there were not a lot of women entering the military. I had started college and was not enamored with working at minimum wage jobs to pay for College, so I went down to the recruiter's office. I explored several opportunities in order to take advantage of a program offered at that time called [VEAP](#) (Veteran Educational Assistance Program) that would allow for both dollar matching and up to full payment for your education based on the number of years you committed. I had to take a number of exams and I tested very high, which provided me with the opportunity to have the pick of which career field(s) I would enter, and I chose to join the Military Police Corps (MP). I had some requirements however: I wanted a "guarantee" for education dollars, my chosen Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) – MP, and I also wanted to see the world. They agreed, in writing, that I would be stationed somewhere in Europe, that I would be a Military Police Officer, and that my education would be paid for. They met all my requirements and I joined. When I graduated from Basic Training and my Advanced Individual Training (AIT) course (that

is Military Police School), I became an active-duty MP. I did my One Station Unit Training (OSUT) at Fort McClellan, Alabama.

### ***What did you do?***

In 1982 I was assigned to the 7th Army NATO and I spent 3 years in Central Europe, based in [Miesau](#), Germany. I flew all over Europe as part of NATO and the initial deployment of the [Pershing II missiles](#) throughout Europe. While I was there our unit was repeatedly on alert for the high amount of terrorism at the time and we toggled between responding to those alerts and ensuring the safety of our NATO sites. I flew on hundreds of missions with NATO using Boeing equipment and though it did not seem like a big deal to me at the time, it was a lot of responsibility for a 20 year old.

During my off hours I focused my attention on taking classes at the local base through the University of Maryland. My education gave me points towards promotion, which combined with my weapons skills, being very active physically, and being very goal-oriented, allowed me to be identified as someone with leadership potential early in my career. As a result, I moved quickly through the ranks and a Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) or Sergeant/E-5 at the age of 21. With that promotion to Sergeant, my responsibilities also increased and as a result, I was managing a [platoon](#) of 30 men and 3 women. While stationed in Europe, I competed for and won the US Army, Europe and 7<sup>th</sup> Army Battalion Soldier of the Quarter and a Schutzenhaus Medal for a M-60 machine gun competition between the US and German military. I attended advanced training in NATO Nuclear Surety Management and when I was reassigned to the United States at Fort Lewis, WA, I worked at the Battalion S-2 and Brigade G-2. My responsibilities centered on managing a team responsible for the classified documents which directed the military operations of our unit. While stationed at Ft Lewis, I was awarded an Army Achievement Medal for meritorious service and selection as the 1986 Ft Lewis Non-Divisional, NCO of the Year. This was the first time the award had ever been presented to a female NCO. Because of my prior assignments with 7<sup>th</sup> Army and NATO, I also had a Top Secret/Special Background Investigation (TS/SBI) clearance. I was assigned to the role in S-2/G-2 for approximate 18 months, then transferred within the Battalion to plain clothes investigator, investigating crimes on base while also performing the additional duty of Battalion Ethics Officer. I held this last role for a little more than a year until I transitioned off active duty. I needed to make a decision to stay in or get out and ultimately chose to leave active service and finish my time in the reserves and Officer Candidate School.

### ***How easy was it to get a civilian job?***

For me, it ended up being quite easy. At the time Boeing was hiring and I applied for a position they were unable to tell me details about due to its classified nature, but I was ultimately hired. I worked on a program that was called Project WILO. Part of the reason I was hired was because I possessed the degree, skills and TS/SBI clearance level required to work there. These clearances often take six months to a year to obtain and they needed help immediately. At the time it was a classified program and it was widely unknown to the world what we were working on. Ultimately the project I was working on became more commonly known as the B2 bomber program. Project WILO (What's It Like Outside) was named so because you had to go through several levels of security to get in the building, and there were no windows. They were looking for someone with my background, skills and security credentials, so I was fortunate to have a level of responsibility in the workplace that aligned with what I had experienced in the military. They say luck is merely preparation and timing coming together, and I felt very lucky to transition so quickly when many others did not.

### ***Why do you think recruiters are so skittish about hiring veterans? Are they afraid that Veterans, especially young Veterans might be too difficult to manage because they had experienced a lot at a young age? Is it ignorance?***

I think it may be more just ignorance of what veterans bring to the table because often times people don't have any experience working directly with the military. They do not necessarily understand the translation of skills. Products like the [Military Crosswalk](#) may help, but it is truly a foreign experience for many recruiters. When you do not have and understanding, context or shared experience to draw on, it's hard to imagine how even the core skills that are learned in

the military translate to a civilian role. So when you don't know, it may be easier to stick to stereotypes drawn from one bad experience or one story, or to the cliché that if you are in the military, you are inflexible, a rule follower or unable to think independently. The truth is that the drills you go through in the military are not the same as the drills you go through in the work place. Soldier often have multiple responsibilities and many complex situations simply become autonomic. Based on my firsthand experience I think, of course, that a young military person has more ability to be flexible and adapt to changing situations than someone who hasn't been in the military.

Corporations place a large value on what you've learned. The reality is that it's not what you know; it's what you need to know, which is always changing. It's about the ability to acquire knowledge fast enough to move business forward and that's a different skill set than checking a box saying "I went to 'x' university and got my 4-year degree in 'y'." In the military everyone has to continue to learn and adapt. You may not know something today, but you can and will learn it for whatever assignment is next and continuous learning is key.

Many of our countries most prestigious university and executive training programs come straight from the military. Think of GE and their leadership development program. Much of it was based on some of the learning and development techniques used by the Military. For example, the GE Work-out is a form of the military's After-Action Review (AAR) process! Don't get frozen! Adapt and grow!

*Thanks, Rhonda, and as we spoke about the GE Work-out, I recommend that you read a great book that was published over 10 years ago: [The GE Work-out: How to Implement GE's Revolutionary Method for Busting Bureaucracy and Attacking Organizational Problems-Fast!](#)*