

HOW VETERANS CAN THRIVE IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

Written by Andrew Sandoe



Executive Summary

The next five years will not reward workers who merely “find a job.” They will reward workers who can adapt continuously, leverage AI, exercise sound judgment, and turn technology into measurable results.

That is good news for veterans—if the transition system is designed correctly.

In an AI-enabled economy, the central question is no longer simply: “How does a veteran get a civilian job?” The more important question is: How will a veteran thrive after service?

A veteran thrives in the next five years by becoming an AI-enabled operator: someone who combines military-developed human capabilities—discipline, leadership, adaptability, reliability, mission focus, team orientation, judgment, resilience, and execution—with practical AI fluency, industry-relevant credentials, and a clear civilian value proposition.

That combination is powerful because AI does not eliminate the need for human judgment. It increases the value of people who can leverage machines well, check their work, make decisions, and execute in the real world.

Recent labor-market and workforce research supports this view. The national labor market remains stable but uneven. In June 2026, total nonfarm payroll employment changed little, increasing by 57,000, and the unemployment rate edged down to 4.2%.^[1] The veteran unemployment rate was 4.1%, slightly above the comparable nonveteran rate of 4.0%.^[2] Yet younger veterans remain at risk: IVMF reported that veterans ages 18–24 had an unemployment rate of 11.5% in May 2026, above the 8.4% rate for nonveterans in that age group.^[3]

At the same time, AI is reshaping both hiring and work. The World Economic Forum projects that 39% of workers’ existing skill sets will change or become outdated by 2030, while AI, cybersecurity, technological literacy, resilience, flexibility, agility, leadership, and lifelong learning are expected to grow in importance.^[4] LinkedIn reports that 93% of recruiters plan to increase their use of AI in 2026, and 66% plan to increase AI use for pre-screening interviews.^[5] Strada’s 2026 research found that employers are more likely to expect AI to increase entry-level hiring than reduce it, but AI is also increasing the analytical and judgment-based responsibilities expected of early-career workers.^[6]

This is the opportunity. If AI makes work more analytical, more judgment-based, and more dependent on human-machine collaboration, then veterans should be among the best-positioned workers in the country. But that will not happen automatically. It requires a system that can translate military experience, build targeted skills, prepare candidates for AI-enabled hiring, and connect veterans to employers who understand the value of military talent.

That system is VetJobs.

VetJobs already operates through a three-stage model: Assess, Align, Accelerate. In 2025, VetJobs worked directly with more than 42,000 candidates, helped job seekers navigate more than 2 million jobs on the VetJobs–DirectEmployers job boards, hosted Coursera and IBM SkillsBuild training platforms, and facilitated 10,143 confirmed job placements at an average starting salary of \$88,500.[7] Since 2010, VetJobs has placed more than 118,000 veterans and military spouses into quality jobs.[8]

The next strategic step is to extend that model into a deliberate AI Career Advantage System for veterans and military spouses.

The goal should be clear: VetJobs should not merely help veterans match the broader population. It should help veterans outperform the broader population on measurable employment outcomes: time to quality placement, starting salary, retention, advancement, underemployment reduction, credential completion, AI fluency, and employer satisfaction.

Veteran employment is not charity. It is competitive advantage.

The Labor Market is Stable, But the Rules Are Changing

The current labor market is not collapsing, but it is changing beneath the surface. BLS reported that payroll employment changed little in June 2026, increasing by 57,000, and that the unemployment rate changed little at 4.2%.[1] The labor-force participation rate decreased to 61.5%, and 4.7 million people were employed part time for economic reasons, meaning they preferred full-time work but could not obtain it or had their hours reduced. [1]

That last figure matters. A veteran transition strategy that measures only unemployment will miss the real problem. The goal is not simply to move veterans from “unemployed” to “employed.” The goal is to move veterans into work that matches their capability, pays well, offers benefits, supports advancement, and gives them a realistic path to long-term civilian success.

Veterans are still performing well in aggregate, though monthly readings can shift. The Department of Labor reported a June 2026 veteran unemployment rate of 4.1%, compared with 4.0% for nonveterans.[2] Several highlighted DOL subgroup comparisons remained favorable--especially veterans with disabilities, White veterans, Black veterans, and Hispanic or Latino veterans--while other monthly subgroup readings were mixed.[2]

But the aggregate number hides the transition challenge. Younger veterans remain materially more vulnerable. IVMF's May 2026 analysis found that veterans ages 18–24 had an unemployment rate of 11.5%, compared with 8.4% for nonveterans in the same age group. Veterans ages 25–34 also remained slightly above their nonveteran peers.[3]

That is the critical zone. The earliest years after military service are when veterans translate experience, identity, language, credentials, networks, and confidence into civilian career momentum. When that transition fails, the result is not merely unemployment. It can be underemployment, poor job fit, reduced earnings, delayed advancement, and frustration that compounds over years.

VetJobs' opportunity is to intervene at precisely this point—before the veteran becomes a hidden worker, before poor fit becomes discouragement, and before a capable service member gets routed into a civilian job far below his or her ability.

AI Is Not Just Changing Jobs. It's Changing the Definition of Readiness.

AI is reshaping the labor market in two connected ways.

First, AI is changing how people get hired. Recruiters are using AI to search, screen, rank, interview, and communicate with candidates. LinkedIn reports that 93% of recruiters plan to increase AI use in 2026, while 66% plan to increase AI use for pre-screening interviews. [5] That means candidates increasingly must be legible to both humans and machines.

Second, AI is changing what people do once they are hired. The World Economic Forum projects significant labor-market transformation through 2030, including 170 million jobs created and 92 million displaced, for net growth of 78 million jobs.[4] WEF also expects 39% of workers' existing skill sets to change or become outdated by 2030.[4]

This does not mean that every worker must become a software engineer. It means nearly every worker must become more adaptive. AI, cybersecurity, technological literacy, analytical thinking, resilience, leadership, curiosity, and lifelong learning are all rising in importance.[4]

That is where veterans have a natural edge.



The military develops people who learn new systems quickly, operate under pressure, follow and improve procedures, communicate clearly, lead teams, adapt to changing conditions, and complete the mission with imperfect information. These are exactly the capabilities that become more valuable when AI takes over routine tasks and leaves humans responsible for direction, judgment, quality control, ethics, accountability, and execution.

The U.S. Chamber Foundation summarized the human side of the AI economy well: human skills such as trust, judgment, empathy, critical thinking, communication, curiosity, and discernment are becoming more valuable as AI becomes more capable.[9] HBS's Joseph Fuller has made a related point about AI agents: the real challenge is not merely adopting technology, but reorganizing work around human-machine collaboration, with roles, boundaries, supervision, accountability, and performance review.[10]

That is a military-friendly framing. Veterans understand mission, roles, command relationships, rules of engagement, supervision, accountability, and after-action review. In many ways, the AI-enabled workplace is moving toward an operating model veterans already understand.

The veteran who thrives will not be the veteran who says, "AI will not affect me." The veteran who thrives will say, "AI is another tool in the kit. I will learn it, use it, supervise it, and apply it to the mission."

AI Is Not Just Changing Jobs. It's Changing the Definition of Readiness.

A thriving veteran in the next five years will have four layers of career readiness.

Layer One: Military-to-Civilian Translation

The first layer is translation. Veterans must be able to explain what they did in the military in terms employers can understand: revenue grown, risk reduced, people led, equipment maintained, outcomes achieved, customers served, teams trained, costs avoided, etc.

This is where many veterans remain hidden. HBS's "hidden-worker" research explicitly includes veterans among workers whose capabilities can be missed by employer systems. [11] HBS also found that the single largest barrier preventing veterans from entering the civilian workforce is employer action.[12]

The point is not that veterans are bad at communicating. The point is that the civilian labor market often lacks the imagination, vocabulary, and screening logic to understand military experience.

VetJobs solves this by helping veterans convert military experience into civilian value.

Layer Two: AI Fluency

The second layer is AI fluency. AI fluency does not mean becoming a machine-learning engineer. It means being able to use AI responsibly and effectively in ordinary work.

At a practical level, that includes using AI to draft and revise résumés, translate military experience, research industries, prepare for interviews, identify skill gaps, summarize job descriptions, develop learning plans, improve written communication, build project briefs, analyze data, and create first drafts of work products.

It also means knowing AI's limits. Veterans should be trained to verify outputs, protect sensitive information, avoid hallucinations, check assumptions, and apply human judgment. In the AI economy, the best worker is not the person who blindly accepts AI output. It is the person who can direct, interrogate, improve, and validate it.

This should be framed in military terms: AI is not the commander. AI is not the mission. AI is an enabling system. The human remains responsible.

Layer Three: Skills Stacking

The third layer is skills stacking. Veterans should not pursue credentials randomly. They should build combinations of skills that map to real demand.

The point is not credential collecting. The point is targeted readiness.

VetJobs' training ecosystem, including Coursera and IBM SkillsBuild, is well suited to this because it can help candidates build relevant, stackable, market-facing skills rather than chase generic training.[7]

Layer Four: Career Mobility

The fourth layer is mobility. HBS's research on job quality and worker advancement reinforces that initial placement is not enough. A good job is one that creates a path to better work, higher wages, retention, promotion, and durable mobility.[13]

A thriving veteran should not be satisfied with merely getting through the hiring gate. The goal is to enter the right gate.

That means VetJobs should help veterans ask better questions: Is this role aligned with my skills? Does it offer advancement? Is the employer veteran-ready? Will this job build my next credential? Does it put me closer to a high-demand sector? Can I use AI and new technology here? Will the company invest in me?

A job is a starting point. A career is the mission.

Why Veterans Can Outperform the Broader Population in the AI Economy

The argument that veterans can outperform the broader population in the AI economy should not be sentimental. It should be operational.

Veterans have several advantages that map directly to the next five years of work.

First, veterans are trained for ambiguity. AI will make some tasks easier, but it will also create new ambiguity. Workers will need to decide what to automate, what to verify, what to escalate, what to communicate, and when human judgment must override machine output.

Second, veterans understand systems. They are accustomed to operating inside complex organizations with rules, processes, roles, accountability, and mission requirements. AI-enabled workplaces will increasingly require workers who can understand not just a task, but the system around the task.

Third, veterans are trained to learn. Military careers require repeated adaptation to new units, equipment, technologies, missions, locations, standards, and teams. In a labor market where 39% of skill sets may change by 2030, the ability to learn quickly is not a soft skill. It is an economic asset.[4]

Fourth, veterans are accountable. AI can draft, suggest, summarize, and generate. But someone must still be responsible. Employers will need people who can own outcomes, not just complete tasks.

Fifth, veterans can lead human-machine teams. The future workplace will increasingly involve people managing AI tools, agents, workflows, and automated systems. HBS's AI-agent framing—roles, supervisors, boundaries, accountability, performance reviews—sounds very much like a command-and-control problem adapted to a civilian setting.[10]

Sixth, veterans have mission orientation. In an AI-saturated workplace, employers will need workers who can connect tools to outcomes. AI fluency without mission focus becomes toy usage. AI fluency with mission focus becomes productivity, quality, and execution.

How VetJobs Turns Veteran Potential Into Better Results

VetJobs' current model already contains the architecture needed for the next phase.

Assess

VetJobs works one-on-one with candidates to understand employment needs, career readiness, skills, experience, constraints, and goals. In 2025, VetJobs worked directly with more than 42,000 candidates, each assigned a dedicated Career Specialist for counseling and job-placement support.[7]

In the AI-era version of the model, assessment should include an AI-readiness screen. The goal is not to judge candidates harshly. The goal is to identify where support is needed.

Every candidate should leave assessment with a clear answer to five questions:

What civilian roles fit my military experience?

What skills do I already have that employers value?

What gaps must I close?

How should I use AI in my job search?

What is my next best move?

Align

VetJobs aligns candidates with employer partners and available positions. Recruiter Connect Specialists help job seekers navigate more than 2 million jobs on the VetJobs–DirectEmployers job boards.[7]

In the AI-era version of alignment, VetJobs should also help employers improve how they recognize military talent. HBS’s hidden-worker research found that more than 90% of employers surveyed use recruiting–management systems to initially filter or rank middle–skill and high–skill candidates, and that these systems often rely on credentials, experience thresholds, and keywords.[14] HBS also found that many qualified candidates are screened out because they do not match exact job–description criteria.[14]

That is exactly where veterans are vulnerable. If a candidate’s military experience is real but not legible to an applicant–tracking system, the system may reject the veteran before a human being ever sees the value.

VetJobs can solve this from both sides: prepare the candidate and educate the employer.

Accelerate

VetJobs’ training model is the bridge from potential to competitiveness. VetJobs hosts Coursera and IBM SkillsBuild training platforms, and its 2026 Impact Report states that more than 190,000 training courses have been completed since inception.[7]

In the AI-era version of acceleration, VetJobs should create a structured AI Career Advantage pathway. That pathway should not be generic. It should be tied to occupational targets and employer demand.

A veteran entering operations should learn AI for process improvement, scheduling, reporting, analysis, and project management. A veteran entering cybersecurity should learn AI–assisted threat analysis, documentation, scripting support, and security workflows. A veteran entering logistics should learn AI–enabled forecasting, route optimization, inventory analysis, and dashboard interpretation. A veteran entering sales or customer success should learn AI–supported research, communication, CRM hygiene, and account planning.

The goal is to make AI useful immediately.

The VetJobs AI Career Advantage System

1. AI-Ready Intake

Every candidate should receive an AI-readiness assessment as part of intake. The assessment should identify comfort with digital tools, writing support needs, résumé readiness, industry targets, certification needs, and whether the candidate can use AI safely and effectively.

2. Military Skills Translation Engine

VetJobs maintains a structured military-to-civilian translation process that converts MOS, ratings, billets, assignments, leadership responsibilities, deployments, equipment, certifications, and mission outcomes into civilian competencies.

This should be designed for both human recruiters and AI screening systems. The output should include résumé bullets, interview narratives, LinkedIn language, skills tags, and job families.

3. AI Job Search Training

Veterans should learn how to use AI to improve their job search without sounding generic. This includes résumé tailoring, job-description analysis, interview practice, networking messages, employer research, salary research, and career-path planning.

The point is not to let AI replace the candidate's voice. The point is to help the candidate communicate value faster and more clearly.

4. AI Work Simulation

Candidates build small demonstrations of AI-enabled work. For example, a logistics candidate might analyze a sample supply-chain disruption. A project-management candidate might build a project brief and risk register. A cyber candidate might summarize a mock incident report. A health care operations candidate might analyze patient-flow bottlenecks.

These small artifacts can become proof of readiness. They give employers evidence that the candidate can use AI as a work tool, not just list it as a skill.

5. Employer AI and ATS Audit

VetJobs should help employers examine whether their hiring systems unintentionally screen out veterans. That includes job descriptions, degree requirements, résumé filters, keyword logic, AI screening tools, military–skills recognition, and recruiter training.

HBS’s “Dismissed by Degrees” research showed how degree inflation can exclude qualified candidates and make labor markets less efficient. In one example, 67% of production–supervisor job postings asked for a college degree, while only 16% of employed production supervisors had one; HBS estimated that more than 6 million jobs were at risk of degree inflation.[15]

That matters for veterans because military experience often substitutes for, or exceeds, classroom preparation in applied operational roles.

6. Outcome Measurement

VetJobs is measuring whether its candidates outperform broader labor–market benchmarks, including:

Time to quality placement.

Starting salary.

Full-time employment rate.

Benefits access.

Retention at six and twelve months.

Promotion or wage growth within eighteen to twenty–four months.

Credential completion.

Underemployment reduction.

Employer satisfaction.

Candidate satisfaction.

AI fluency improvement.

Where Veterans Should Focus Over the Next Five Years

Veterans should be guided toward sectors where military experience, AI adoption, and employer demand overlap.

The strongest near-term sectors include AI infrastructure and datacenters, cybersecurity, logistics and supply-chain operations, advanced manufacturing, shipbuilding and maritime manufacturing, aviation maintenance, energy and utilities, health care operations, public safety, emergency management, transportation, and skilled trades.[16][17][18]

This does not mean every veteran should enter a technical field. It means veterans should prioritize fields where operational discipline, reliability, leadership, technology adoption, and execution matter.

AI will increase demand for people who connect digital systems to physical work. Veterans are well suited to this. They understand that systems must function in the real world, not just on a dashboard.

The Employer Message

If your company is struggling to find adaptable, accountable, AI-ready talent, look harder at veterans.

But employers must also evolve. HBS's hidden-worker research makes clear that many workers remain hidden because employer systems exclude them.[11] Recruiters and hiring managers must stop relying on brittle proxies: exact civilian titles, unnecessary degrees, uninterrupted career histories, and keyword matches that fail to interpret military experience.

Employers should ask:

What military experience maps to this role?

Are we screening out qualified veterans before human review?

Are our degree requirements truly necessary?

Can our AI tools recognize military skills?

Do our recruiters understand military experience?

Do we measure veteran retention and advancement?

Are we offering real mobility or just entry-level access?

Veteran hiring should not be a branding exercise. It should be a talent strategy.

The Collective Opportunity

IVMF, Hiring Our Heroes, and Hire Heroes USA are Veteran Employment Collective partners with VetJobs. The Collective can lead the national transition conversation by helping define what AI-ready veteran employment should look like.

The Collective should establish a shared agenda around five priorities.

First, protect veterans and military spouses from automated exclusion.

Second, make AI fluency a standard part of transition preparation.

Third, expand paid bridge programs into high-demand sectors.

Fourth, build employer-facing tools for military skills translation.

Fifth, measure quality outcomes, not just placements.

The Collective's message should be: the future of veteran employment is not simply about helping veterans survive labor-market change. It is about helping them lead through it.





Conclusion

The veteran who thrives over the next five years will not be the veteran who resists AI, ignores it, or treats it as a threat outside their control. The veteran who thrives will be the veteran who learns AI, supervises AI, and uses AI to create value.

That veteran will still rely on the oldest and most durable military strengths: judgment, taking responsibility for outcomes, discipline, teamwork, resilience, and leadership. But those strengths must now be connected to a new set of tools.

This is where VetJobs can lead.

VetJobs is already built around the right model: Assess, Align, Accelerate. The next phase is to make that model explicitly AI-ready. Assess the veteran's experience and AI readiness. Align the veteran with employers and roles that value military talent. Accelerate the veteran through targeted training, AI fluency, skill stacking, and career mobility.

The result should be better outcomes than the broader population: faster movement into quality jobs, stronger starting wages, better fit, reduced underemployment, stronger retention, and greater advancement.

The country does not need to invent a new class of AI-ready workers from scratch. It already has one.

They are veterans.

The task is to recognize them, prepare them, connect them, and let them lead.



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