How Employers Can Support Veterans' Mental Health

November 11, 2025 by BPM Team

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Supporting veterans' mental health for recruitment and retention for today's workplace

As Veterans Day approaches, the conversation often focuses on honoring those who have served. It is an important time to recognize not only their service, but also the challenges many veterans face after leaving the military, especially in transitioning to civilian careers. For some, the shift from a highly structured military environment to a civilian workplace can be disorienting. Daily routines, clear hierarchies, and mission-focused teams are replaced by fluid roles, ambiguous expectations, and unfamiliar cultures, which can create significant stress.

This transition can be especially difficult for veterans dealing with invisible wounds such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, or the lingering effects of trauma. These mental health

challenges affect the individual directly and can ripple across teams and organizations, influencing retention, engagement, and overall performance. When workplaces are unprepared to support veterans, these challenges may undermine the very strengths veterans bring to an organization, including leadership, teamwork, discipline, and adaptability.

Veterans have unique experience and skills, but these qualities flourish only in supportive environments. Employers that understand and respond to these needs benefit not only the individuals themselves but also the wider workforce. Research shows that meaningful employment and structured support programs improve well-being, reduce absenteeism, and strengthen organizational engagement.

Understanding the Scope of the Challenge

Data underscores the critical need for support. Nearly 48 percent of Gulf War-era II veterans in 2024 had service-connected disabilities, compared to 31 percent of veterans overall, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Many of these disabilities are psychological or invisible, yet they can profoundly affect daily functioning, performance, and workplace relationships. Veterans with disabilities also face higher rates of unemployment or underemployment due to stigma, inadequate accommodations, or mismatched expectations, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

Employment itself is strongly tied to well-being. A 2024 study by the University of Texas at El Paso found that unemployed veterans were twice as likely to experience depression as their employed peers. Veterans with jobs reported lower stress, stronger relationships, and a greater sense of purpose. These findings emphasize that meaningful employment is more than financial – it serves as a protective factor for mental health.

The economic stakes are also significant. According to Gallup, workers whose mental health is considered fair or poor take an average of 12 unplanned absences per year, compared to 2.5 days for those with good or better mental health. Across the workforce, this represents approximately $47.6 billion in lost productivity annually. Veterans experiencing invisible wounds may contribute disproportionately to this burden if their needs are not addressed. This data highlights that supporting veterans is not just the right thing to do; it is also a practical business decision.

Practical Strategies for Supporting Veterans

Human resources leaders and managers can implement evidence-based strategies that foster lasting support for veterans. These strategies not only improve well-being but also strengthen organizational culture and retention.

1. Train Managers and HR Staff

Supervisors and HR professionals may not fully understand the experiences and challenges veterans face. Training on military culture, trauma-informed approaches, and post-service transition issues can make a significant difference. Educating staff on effective communication, recognizing signs of stress, and providing appropriate accommodations creates a more supportive environment for veterans and improves overall team performance. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Labor stress the importance of training HR staff and managers to recognize and address these unique needs. Properly trained leadership ensures veterans are not only welcomed but are positioned to contribute their full potential.

2. Establish Peer Support Networks and ERGs

Employee Resource Groups focused on veterans provide critical support that extends beyond professional guidance. They offer mentorship, peer networks, and community engagement, helping veterans navigate the civilian workplace and reducing feelings of isolation. Initiatives such as VetNet at Wacker, which I helped launch, provide inclusive policies and accessible mental health resources. While VetNet is one example, similar programs across organizations have been shown to enhance retention, engagement, and employee satisfaction. Peer networks offer safe spaces for veterans to share experiences, seek guidance, and strengthen connections both inside and outside the workplace.

3. Make Mental Health Resources Visible and Accessible

Even when mental health services exist, veterans may not seek them if resources are not clearly communicated or easily accessible. Organizations should ensure that counseling, wellness programs, and other supports are visible and readily available. Clear communication, regular reminders, and integrating resources into onboarding and ongoing employee communications can help reduce barriers. Making resources both tangible and approachable signals to veterans that seeking support is expected, accepted, and encouraged.

4. Normalize Conversations About Mental Health

Leadership behavior is key to reducing stigma. Research from the American Psychological Association demonstrates that when managers openly discuss mental health or share their own experiences, employees are more likely to seek help and feel valued. Embedding mental health conversations into team meetings, performance reviews, and organizational messaging creates an environment where wellness is treated as integral, not optional. Normalizing mental health discussions benefits all employees, not just veterans, and contributes to a culture of inclusion and trust.

5. Start Small, Evaluate, and Scale

Evidence-based HR practices emphasize iterative improvement. Programs should include measurable outcomes such as retention, engagement, and employee well-being. Regular feedback allows organizations to adjust initiatives based on what works and what does not. The Journal of Veterans Studies highlights the importance of evaluation in veteran employment programs. Tracking metrics ensures that programs remain effective, relevant, and sustainable over time. Small, carefully measured steps often lead to the most meaningful and lasting impact.

The Broader Organizational Benefits

Supporting veterans provides advantages beyond individual well-being. Well-supported veteran employees often improve team cohesion, morale, and productivity. Organizations that take proactive steps in mental health support frequently see higher engagement, lower absenteeism, and stronger loyalty across all employees. Veteran programs also serve as a model for broader workforce support, demonstrating the value of a culture that prioritizes mental health and inclusivity.

Credibility comes from experience. Having served in the U.S. Navy, I have personally navigated the transition to civilian work. Leading a veterans ERG within a large organization has deepened my understanding of how structured programs, mentorship, and community engagement can improve outcomes for both individuals and organizations. Sharing these examples is not about promoting a

specific company; it is about demonstrating what is possible when organizations commit to evidence-based strategies that support veterans and the wider workforce.

Conclusion

Veterans bring unparalleled skills, discipline, and resilience to the workplace. These strengths are invaluable but flourish only in environments that provide support and understanding. Research and experience demonstrate that veterans who feel valued report higher well-being, stronger engagement, and greater loyalty. The benefits of supporting veterans extend across teams and organizations, from improved retention to stronger performance.

This Veterans Day, employers have an opportunity to go beyond symbolic recognition. By implementing evidence-based strategies, providing visible support, and creating inclusive workplaces, organizations can help veterans thrive while building resilient, high-performing teams for the future.