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Article

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Application of person–organization fit to military veterans

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Abstract

Purpose – Human resource management professionals strive to establish a high person–organization (PO) fit when hiring, as doing so ultimately reduces turnover and increases employee performance outcomes. However, tailored strategies toward improving the PO fit of military veterans have yet to be explored – a particularly concerning oversight considering the prevalence of veteran hiring initiatives and correspondingly high turnover rates of former servicemembers in their first nonmilitary jobs. This paper aims to explore the PO fit model’s application toward military veterans in nonmilitary organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – A review of veteran transition literature was conducted to identify aspects of military veteran career transition issues, which suggested a perceived gap in fit between their job or organization.

Findings – The review revealed prevailing transition challenges which likely arose, at least in part, due to veterans’ lack of fit in nonmilitary organizations. The findings informed development of a veteran–organization fit model based on a needs–supplies conceptualization of PO fit.

Research limitations/implications – The authors apply the needs–supplies perspective of PO fit to address identified veteran career transition challenges. Importantly, the authors offer organization management scholars concrete steps for assessing the impact of integrating the proposed framework within civilian organizations.

Practical implications – This study sheds light on how PO fit practices can be tailored and integrated by HR professionals for their military veteran newcomers. The authors offer HR practitioners POF strategies for military veteran newcomers in nonmilitary organizations.

Originality/value – This paper offers organization management and HR scholars and practitioners a needs–supply informed approach toward improving PO fit of military veteran newcomers.

Keywords Military veterans, Person–organization fit, Human resource management, Veteran career transition, Onboarding

Paper type Conceptual paper



Human resource (HR) management professionals often prioritize hiring military veterans. Despite the interest and resources allocation, employment outcomes are generally poor for new military veteran employees. Although HR scholars have reported many barriers to employment for military veterans, research considering the role of person–organization fit (POF) for veteran employees has largely been overlooked (Bright, 2021; Stone, Lengnick-Hall, & Muldoon, 2018). The lack of guidance to help organization management and HR professionals more closely align veterans’ POF within civilian organizations has likely contributed to the transition challenges that many veterans experience. Policies supporting military veterans’ POF in the workplace are limited and attempts to hold HR professionals or organization leaders accountable for their veteran employment initiatives are lacking (Kirchner & Minnis, 2018). In fact, military veterans have expressed concern with HR professionals’ lack of knowledge about their service experience, transition issues and general lack of consideration regarding how to support them (Liggans et al., 2018; Tao & Campbell, 2019), and there are no known models for supporting military veterans’ POF. Thus, although efforts to recruit and hire veterans are admirable, low satisfaction and retention of this population invite exploration into innovative strategies to improve employment outcomes.

In this paper, we:

- discuss POF and related perspectives;
- describe the significance of veteran career transitions within the field of organization management;
- identify veteran transition challenges and HR led-support programs;
- offer a veteran POF framework toward assuaging the outlined challenges; and
- present theoretical and practical implications.

As our study intended to identify transition challenges which may be reduced through enhanced POF, we emphasized focus on issues the HR practitioner could more easily address while at the same time considering the various stages of veterans’ career transition experience. The dearth of research related to veterans’ POF encouraged us to examine predominant transition challenges experienced prior to identifying corresponding opportunities to enhance POF. More specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What challenges do military veterans experience while transitioning into nonmilitary workplaces?

RQ2. What factors appear to strengthen military veterans’ perceived POF in nonmilitary workplaces?

Person–organization fit

POF literature has received significant attention over the last 30 years as an extension of the theory of work adjustment (TWA). The TWA emphasizes that individuals and organizations have expectations of one another which need to be met to establish successful work relations (Bretz & Judge, 1994). As a subset of TWA, POF refers to the matching process HR professionals facilitate when onboarding newcomers and aligns with other conceptualizations of the theory (Kristof, 1996). In this case, PO “fit implies a state of congruence between individual and environmental characteristics” (Bretz & Judge, 1994, p. 33). Employees and their employer have been examined through the lens of POF as well as person–job fit, person–vocation, person–person fit and person–group fit (Morley, 2007).

Organizations and HR professionals play a significant role in shaping a strong POF by creating shared cultural norms and values with intent to improve organizational outcomes (Kringelum & Brix, 2021).

POF represents the compatibility between individuals and organizations – whether through:

- individuals fitting in supplementary through characteristics reflective of other employees; or
- individuals fitting in complementary through distinct characteristics, which make the work environment “whole” (Kristof, 1996).

The intent of POF has been to hire employees who will fit into corresponding jobs and organizations (Chatman, 1989). Conventional hiring practices prioritize finding candidates who possess the knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics (KSAOs) required to perform the job; however, more recent research has considered applicant compatibility with the organization’s values, culture and norms (Morley, 2007).

Scholars have considered POF through various conceptualizations. Some have argued POF is achieved through establishing compatibility between employees and organizations – whether the employee brings complementary or supplementary attributes to meet or support the organization’s existing gaps (Kristof, 1996). Others have examined POF through the lens of shared values between employer and employee (Kraimer, 1997), while an additional subset have considered POF from a goal congruency perspective (Van Vuuren, Veldkamp, de Jong, & Seydel, 2007). Another subset of scholars have posited that POF is addressed through a needs–supplies perspective (Edwards, 1991; Kristof, 1996; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987). Through this lens, employee needs are met by what the organization can offer (Edwards, 1991; Kristof, 1996). Though the conceptualizations are related, they often remain distinguished from each other with little attempt made to integrate (Kristof, 1996).

Significance

Perhaps, partly due to civilians’ knowledge gap regarding military service (Pew Research Center, 2011), HR professionals are ill-prepared to support the development of veterans’ POF. Beginning in basic training, service members are immersed into the military’s culture where a new set of norms and values are developed and instilled. Military culture is a combination of characteristics and the military’s structure and is a product of the social environment where values, ideas and goals are shared (Redmond et al., 2015). Rose, Herd, and Palacio (2017) added that the skills, behavior, knowledge, goals and organizational policies and procedures are all part of military culture. Military veterans often experience *culture shock* when transitioning into their first civilian job after military service (Kester & Phillips, 2017). The culture shock veterans experience largely occurs as they attempt to navigate the differences between military service and civilian employment (Kester & Phillips, 2017).

Scholars have largely overlooked factors – as well as viable strategies – for improving military veterans’ POF – particularly as a means toward becoming more inclusive employers. In addition, HR professionals often lack training related to recruiting and onboarding military veterans (Gonzalez & Simpson, 2021), and instead rely on – often inaccurate – intuition regarding which candidate to hire (Cable & Judge, 1997). As Yawson and Lewis (2023) noted, the changing nature of today’s workplace requires insight into the practices which enhance an organization’s inclusivity. A framework aimed at supporting veterans’ POF with civilian employers is an existing gap in the literature which needs to be filled. Still, veteran newcomers who report positive perceptions of their job and workplace

tend to feel a heightened sense of fit (Liggans et al., 2018). Furthermore, when the values, norms, policies, culture and characteristics of an organization and veterans match, HR professionals can reasonably expect an increase in job performance (Griffiths, 2022). HR management professionals striving to hire and retain veterans as part of their diversity and inclusivity initiatives can benefit from understanding how the POF model is applied to those who have served in the armed forces.

Examination of the perceived POF of military veterans is necessary as organizations increasingly prioritize various employment-related initiatives. Bright (2021), Dexter (2020), Ford (2017) and the Burton Blatt Institute (2013) all highlighted the attention being directed toward hiring and retaining military veterans. Gonzalez and Simpson (2021) noted efforts to improve veteran employment outcomes are important to diversity and inclusion efforts. When a diversity management program is in place, veterans experience greater employment outcomes (Vanderschuere & Birdsall, 2019). Tao and Campbell (2019) found that veterans who have role clarity in government jobs have greater satisfaction and are retained at higher levels. Across populations, successful POF positively influences productivity, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behaviors, work performance, job satisfaction, engagement, motivation, reduced turnover, having share norms and values and improving the HRM practices (Bright, 2021; Pudjiarti & Hutomo, 2020; Rose et al., 2017; Sørli, Jørn, Anders, Thomas, & Øyvind, 2020). Although veteran hiring initiatives are admirable, they ultimately disappoint without mechanisms in place to support veterans' career transition.

Veteran transition issues

Veterans have reported both challenges and support opportunities, which appear to impact their POF. The transition from military to corporate culture was the most frequently referenced challenge identified (Abrams & Kennedy, 2015; Dexter, 2020; Ford, 2017; Poteet & Allen, 2021; Shepherd, Sherman, MacLean, & Kay, 2020; & Ward, 2020). The military's hierarchical structure, defined mission and the corresponding sense of purpose offered contribute toward the successful acclimation of new service members into the armed forces (Matos & Galinsky, 2013; Poteet & Allen, 2021). The military's highly-regimented structure – with very explicit policies and procedures – is often quite distinct from nonmilitary organizations (Poteet & Allen, 2021). The distinct work environments can cause undue stress for veterans attempting to leave behind the military's norms and values as they adopt new beliefs along with a new sense of “normalcy” in nonmilitary organizations (Dexter, 2020).

A second, related POF challenge centered around the current military-civilian knowledge gap. As Rose et al. (2017) described, misconceptions held by civilian employers is one of the most daunting experiences veterans must overcome in their civilian professional career. Civilian employers are often uninformed regarding veterans' knowledge and job skills acquired through their service (Dexter, 2020; Kirchner & Akdere, 2019). The knowledge gap appears to primarily place the onus on veterans to clearly describe their training and military experience in terms civilians will understand (Kirchner & Minnis, 2018). Yet, veterans have difficulty communicating how their military background and skills correlate with civilian job qualifications (Burton Blatt Institute, 2013). Whether creating their resume or preparing for job interviews, veterans need to translate how their military work experiences have prepared them for a civilian role (Keeling, 2018; Rose et al., 2017).

Veterans' transition also appears to be influenced by their own mental health and coworker perceptions of them. Keeling (2018) and Liggans et al. (2018) both noted the potential for veterans to have mental health struggles which, left unaddressed, can contribute to their transition challenges. Kukla, Bonfils, and Salyers (2015) similarly found cognitive problems and self-efficacy, and general health were highly impactful on veterans' work.

Conversely, stereotypes about who veterans are, their service experiences and other stigmas and perceptions held by civilians also play a role in impairing veteran workforce transitions (Kirchner & Akdere, 2019; Stone et al., 2018; Ward, 2020). The stereotypes create negative perceptions, harm diversity and create exclusion (Stone et al., 2018) for veterans attempting to acclimate into nonmilitary organizations.

Other less frequently mentioned – though not necessarily less significant – POF transition challenges were also referenced. Some veterans report frustration regarding the lack of opportunity to apply their attributes in nonmilitary jobs and organizations (Maury, Stone, & Roseman, 2016). Veterans also report being underused or performing work that lacks meaning (Memon, Salleh, & Rosli Baharom, 2015). This appears particularly relevant when there is a mismatch between a veteran and their organization's goals and values (Memon et al., 2015). Maury et al. (2016) also reported some veterans feel frustration regarding their pay and, correspondingly, their benefits which are sometimes more costly and/or unclear. Aspects such as actual pay scales, promotion strategies, working titles and details related to health care and other benefits are often confusing and unfamiliar to veterans transitioning into their first nonmilitary job (Maury et al., 2016). Finally, employer recruiting, hiring and onboarding processes were noted as a recurring frustration for veterans (Dexter, 2020).

Supporting person–organization fit

Organizations have shown promise toward improving support for the veteran hires. Stone et al. (2018) noted the significance of training programs for civilians which discuss of veteran transition challenges, military job skills and military culture. Furthermore, HR professionals should be trained to translate service experiences into civilian roles (Stone et al., 2018). Shingenge and Saurombe (2022) added that training programs for staff should include aspects related to managing military- or veteran-related issues in the workplace. These topics help civilians gain deeper insight into the lived experience of service members and help organizations translate and assess military veteran attributes they acquired through their service. Training programs should also examine persistent stigmas and stereotypes about who veterans have become, such as PTSD, mental health issues and violent tendencies, as a result of their service (Stone et al., 2018). Employers may not know when a veteran is struggling or how to handle the situation if there are visible warning signs (Kirchner, Stull, & Holloway, 2019). Through structured onboarding and high-quality training for civilians, veterans reported higher levels of satisfaction and a more successful assimilation while also being retained at greater rates (Ford, 2017; Keeling, 2018; Rose et al., 2017).

Mentorship programs were also impactful in supporting veteran POF. Mentors serve multiple, valuable roles for veterans and correspondingly leads to numerous benefits. First, mentors provide career related support to include increasing newcomers' visibility within the organization (Poteet & Allen, 2021). Mentors also assist with helping veteran newcomers develop their network (Mael, Wyatt, & Janardana Iyer, 2022). At the same time, mentors help foster and recreate the camaraderie that can be lost for veterans (Poteet & Allen, 2021). Broadly, veteran mentorship programs can help foster a culture of inclusivity across the organization (Hunter-Johnson, 2021).

Veteran person–organization fit framework

Our framework was informed through the POF conceptualization regarding employee needs versus what organizations can supply (Kristof, 1996). More specifically, newcomers arrive in organizations with their own preferences, needs and/or demands. These are contrasted by the systems or structures provided (Cable & Judge, 1997; Kristof, 1996). Both employers and employees have expectations and needs which are part of employment agreements (Kristof,

1996). Newcomer KSAOs can best be leveraged – and satisfaction expected – when their job and employment needs are met (Bretz & Judge, 1994). From a needs-supplies perspective, organizations provide the necessary tools and support to meet employee needs, desires and/or preferences as part of supporting POF (Kristof, 1996). HR professionals first must understand newcomer needs to adopt programing and practices which support their onboarding experience. We identified five predominant factors which support veterans' POF and contrasted with systems, policies and support structures that organizations can integrate to meet the identified needs.

The VPOF framework outlines HR professionals' role in alleviating challenges and supporting veteran newcomer fit as they are hired, transition into their role, acclimate to the organization and progress in their career. Thus, the VPOF framework encourages:

- development of HR professionals' knowledge to assess and translate military skills during the hiring process;
- utilization of tools to match military skills and training with civilian roles;
- development of healthy coworker relationships through mentorships;
- training nonmilitary employees about the military; and
- proactive facilitation of career development and advancement opportunities for military veterans.

The framework begins with the HR professional's role in developing expertise regarding how to interpret and translate military skills as they relate to job and organization. During this phase, HR professionals explore skills translators, examine military jobs to contrast with available positions and consider recruitment strategies that will aid in identifying veteran applicants who likely possess the attributes needed to successfully fit into the organization. From there, HR professionals are expected to use career transition tools when making hiring and training decisions. Each applicant or employee has their own unique set of KSAOs which correlate with jobs and the organization's culture. Recognition of gaps in existing KSAOs can thus inform efforts to train and develop the attributes currently missing or in need of further development.

Beyond efforts to align and develop the attributes needed for each job and organization, HR professionals are tasked with improving the integration experience of veteran newcomers. To do so, the framework establishes the expectation of having mentors oversee and provide support to veteran employees. Support can include but is not limited to answering questions, introducing them to important points of contact, teaching the veteran newcomer about organization norms and values, inviting them to gatherings which will help them get to know their colleagues on a more personal level. The mentorship continues at least until the newcomer expresses feeling like an insider.

HR professionals are next responsible for bridging the civilian knowledge gap regarding military service. This gap can be closed by teaching civilians about military service, culture, training and the many job classifications within the armed forces. At the same time, civilians can benefit from instruction covering existing military-related stereotypes and stigmas. The stigmas and stereotypes are identified by HR professionals, military-affiliated employees and civilians who have varying experiences working with members of the armed forces. Regardless, military-affiliated employees who have expertise in any of these areas are encouraged to be part of the development and facilitation of any military-related training. The training sessions should leave civilian counterparts with a deeper understanding of veteran career transition challenges, increased awareness for how they can support veteran transitions and further their knowledge regarding support tools available.

The final requirement is to establish and integrate career planning procedures for military veteran newcomers. Within this phase, HR professionals align veteran newcomers' KSAOs with a mostly structured career path and corresponding development plan. Similar to the armed forces' predetermined approach toward training and promoting service members, the VPOF considers existing KSAOs and the position which the newcomer is hired into as part of laying out how veterans can advance. HR professionals are tasked with explaining to newcomers:

- approximate timeline for advancement into higher level roles;
- attributes needed to successfully be promoted; and
- the process for progressing up in the organization.

The information provides HR professionals with a structured pathway and clear training and development objectives for the veteran newcomer (Figure 1).

Discussion and implications for organization management

This study identified veterans' most frequently reported transition challenges and support structures and applies the needs-supplies perspective of POF to assist HR professionals seeking to enhance veteran employee POF. Through our review of veteran career transition scholarship, a series of five practices were identified which HR professionals can use to improve the integration of military veteran newcomers. Civilian employers lack knowledge regarding military jobs and training (Dexter, 2020). As hiring requires knowledge of assessing candidate backgrounds, the proposed framework encourages HR professionals to first learn about military service and training experiences. At the same time, we encourage current veteran employees to be involved in developing and teaching HR professionals about translating veteran resumes, including their military jobs and corresponding knowledge and skills, into civilian terms. Through veterans' involvement, HR staff can gain insight into how KSAOs were acquired and develop tailored assessments to assist with more accurately evaluating prior military experiences.



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 1. Proposed veteran person organization (VPOF) framework

Veteran career transition scholarship has examined a range of related topics including barriers to employment, transition challenges in nonmilitary organization, civilian knowledge gaps and military friendly practices (Burton Blatt Institute, 2013; Ford, 2017; Dexter, 2020; Kirchner & Minnis, 2018). Still, a deployable framework intended to guide HR professionals interested in enhancing POF of veteran newcomers has not been offered. The VPOF presents a structured pathway for HR professionals to:

- develop employee knowledge about military service and training;
- translate veteran job applicant characteristics which support their fit;
- aid veteran newcomer socialization experiences; and
- establish career pathways for veteran employees.

The framework is informed through application of the needs-supplies conceptualization of POF and accounts for the most commonly cited challenges veterans experience and, correspondingly, the support structures, which have helped military-affiliated employees overcome their employment barriers.

Importantly, the integration and impact of the VPOF on employment outcomes needs to be studied. The reported challenges and support offerings identified were revealed through a systematic literature review which included publications from a range of disciplines. Transition challenges are most prevalent for veterans moving into their first civilian job which likely contributes toward their high turnover rate (Maury et al., 2016). Retention improves for veterans upon entering subsequent civilian jobs. As such, HR professionals should consider the extent to which veteran newcomers need to be acclimated and supported depending on their civilian work experience. We do not intend to suggest organizations will experience dramatically improved job satisfaction, productivity or retention of veteran employees if the framework is integrated; however, as each employment outcome tends to improve with better fit, a reasonable argument can be made to support its inclusion in HR practices (Bretz & Judge, 1994; Iyer, Oostrom, Serlie, van Dam, & Born, 2020; Young, Pogodzinski, Grogan, & Perrone, 2015).

Implications for practice

This paper offers implications for HR professionals interested in improving POF for military veteran newcomers. HR professionals can first leverage the introduced VPOF as a means of identifying gaps in current strategies toward actively supporting veterans' POF. By identifying missing components, HR professionals have a pathway toward more strategically integrating veteran newcomers while also considering current strategies that offer little to no cultural, skill or socialization improvement (Kringelum & Brix, 2021). The framework also encourages development of required knowledge regarding military service and military training. As Redmond et al. (2015) suggested, when the military culture is understood, organizations are better able to offer support and leverage veterans' strengths and skills. The framework serves as a bridge to fill existing demand for more training, qualifications and skills related to military veterans.

By integrating the VPOF, HR professionals stand to benefit by witnessing improved employment and organization outcomes. As veterans are more likely than other populations to be under-employed, a mismatch between their background and the job they are hired into can lead to underwhelming work, a lack of purpose and lower wages (Griffiths, 2022). HR professionals who commit to improving POF should witness enhanced performance, higher levels of productivity, increased motivation and higher satisfaction of veteran employees (Griffiths, 2022; Redmond et al., 2015). The improved matching of KSAOs can also lead to

higher employability (Gonzalez & Simpson, 2021). Similarly, high POF for veteran employees may also lead to attracting other veterans who see the organization as a good fit (Kumar, 2022).

As noted, POF begins with hiring the right applicants. HR professionals can leverage their training on military service to better select veteran applicants who possess KSAOs needed for the position they apply for. Once hired, HR professionals can then shift focus toward filling existing KSAO gaps by training veteran newcomers. At the same time, newcomers are formally introduced to the organization's culture and values and subsequently learn behaviors which can strengthen their POF. Much like basic training, a robust onboarding experience in civilian organizations is needed to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for newcomers to:

- fit into the organization; and
- correctly perform their job.

Mentors play a pivotal role in supporting veteran newcomers through this process, as their insider knowledge can help clarify how and why things are done. The effort thus considers how to improve fit within both the job and organization.

Implications for research

The VPOF serves as a tailored extension to previous research examining POF. Prior scholarship has revealed numerous examples of veteran transition challenges from the military and into the civilian workplace, yet little structure has been offered to assuage these issues from an HR perspective. Our framework provides a distinct set of strategies which are intended to address each identified challenge. At the same time, the framework addresses the call for further examination of HR professionals' role in supporting veteran career transition challenges (Dexter, 2020). HR scholars are responsible for identifying – through research – best practices which can shape HR policy within industry. The VPOF can serve as a bridge toward filling that gap.

Limitations and future research

We acknowledge limitations with applying the framework in organizations. Integration of the VPOF framework requires organization management to willingly invest resources in each proposed strategy. For example, tailored onboarding of military veteran newcomers requires time for development and integration which may be particularly cumbersome for organizations who do not currently possess the expertise or resources needed. The allocation of additional resources may also be a challenge when returns on the investment are largely unknown. To address, HR professionals can begin implementing individual components of the VPOF as part of a longer-term initiative aimed at improving veteran employment outcomes. In addition, universal integration of the framework across all organizations is a challenge, as each has their own needs, priorities and capacity to participate. HR professionals should prioritize aspects which are most needed and feasible toward supporting veteran POF.

As the framework includes both training to prepare HR professionals and action steps needed to be taken by HR professionals, the following studies within organizations should be considered to determine the framework's overall efficacy. First, organization management scholars should provide HR professionals with tests regarding their knowledge of veterans' military-acquired or developed skills and corresponding usage of the knowledge in crafting jobs and integrating new veteran employees into the organization. These assessments would

provide the foundation necessary to determine if HR professionals' understanding of military service correlates with improved POF of former servicemembers who become employees of the organization. Next, to assess the match between military job skills and training with civilian roles, organization management scholars are encouraged to compare and contrast veteran resumes with job descriptions for roles they have been hired into. Concurrently, scholars should seek to identify any correlations between fit and employee satisfaction and retention. These assessments would shed new insight into the significance of matching military training and civilian jobs on employment outcomes. Third, despite the VPOF's integration of a mentorship program for new veteran employees, organization management scholars are encouraged to conduct qualitative studies examining veterans' perceptions of the partnership. In particular, research should compare and contrast the socialization experience of veterans who participated in a formal mentorship program with those who did not. Finally, studies examining how the integration of career development and advancement opportunities influence veteran employee outcomes are recommended, as doing so would strengthen our understanding of how HR professionals can make the greatest impact on supporting veteran POF and improving employee outcomes.

Though the framework is grounded in literature, research is necessary to evaluate the appropriateness of its integration in nonmilitary organizations. Depending on the culture of an organization or industry, particular military veteran backgrounds may not warrant the need for aspects of the framework. Future research should specifically target VPOF components which yield the greatest return on investment. As the framework requires extensive effort to develop, integration of all aspects may not be justifiable in small- to medium-sized organizations without research-informed data to support its impact. We also encourage scholars to examine veteran perceptions of the VPOF strategies which are most beneficial through their transition, as their beliefs will largely influence what is needed for integration by HR professionals.

Conclusion

Veteran employment outcomes will continue to be scrutinized by employers struggling to find, hire, and retain military-affiliated employees. At the same time, additional scholarship which examines military veterans' POF in the civilian workplace is needed. As HR and organization management professionals' express interest in employing military veterans, efforts to ensure these individuals have the knowledge and skills necessary to improve veteran POF are necessary. In this paper, we examine veteran career transition challenges through the lens of the needs-supply conceptualization of POF before presenting our adaptation of a veteran POF framework. Though not yet tested, the framework offers scholars and practitioners opportunities for further scrutiny and possible integration. Organizations which successfully offer an aligned VPOF structure stand to be rewarded with improved veteran recruitment, onboarding and retention.

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