



Effectively Translate Your Military Experience in a Civilian Interview

by

Jim Lose

Executive Senior Partner – Military Transition

For any professional career candidate, prepping for a job interview is complicated. There are scores of details to manage: your clothing style, eye contact, speaking skills, non-verbal cues, handshake strength, and your views on college sports...not to mention your actual capabilities. Nailing each variable requires thorough preparation, self-awareness, a high degree of professionalism, and a thorough understanding of your audience. Just as hiring managers pour through resumes with the mindset to eliminate, so too do they look for problems in the interview as justification for not hiring you.

But for my clients—military officers transitioning from the service to the business world—preparing for an interview is even more complex. It begins with their immersion in a different culture—the United States Military—one akin to but significantly different from civilian business. Most importantly, my clients must translate their military skills, values, and capabilities into concrete business objectives.

To help our candidate officers with the translation, we deploy a multi-tiered process at [Lucas Group](#). Step one, we carefully review their background, assess their career interests, and begin teaching them how to best communicate their skill sets in a business interview. With this portfolio of personalized information in hand, we create a job search plan for each candidate which begins even before their separation.

Next, we delve into their operational background and discover what aspects of their military service allowed them to thrive. Were they a platoon leader? If so, leadership should be part of the package. Did they manage logistics? The world is their oyster, as every company is looking to better manage logistics. Do they prefer more technical jobs? Again, a real benefit, as the translation of technical skills from the military to a civilian career is very comparable. Do they thrive on a team or do they prefer a more independent environment? This important determination shapes our research regarding a company's business culture.

The next step often determines the length of the job search process and the types of positions where our candidates are most likely to thrive. What, if any, geographic restrictions do they have? If being physically close to their family in San Antonio is a top priority, then our options are more limited. The more open candidates are to wide geographic placement, the better their chances are to quickly find the ideal civilian career opportunity.



We also review their current financial situation. Is immediate employment a financial imperative or can we dig deeply and carefully consider all of their opportunities?

One of the primary ways that we bring candidates and companies together is through Lucas Group [Military Hiring Conferences](#) conducted across the country. These are not job fairs. These are guaranteed interview opportunities for our business clients and our candidates. While not the only means of finding employment, they rank highly in placement percentages. It's here where the interview process often begins.

So how do you prepare for the interview? Is it about how you dress; what you say; your military track record; who you know; or how you look? Yes. But how you prepare for and answer interview questions is the primary variable in the interview process.

I work with each candidate on an individualized basis. What works well for a junior officer often differs from what's most appropriate for a nuclear technician. But over the years I've found that a few techniques can benefit all candidates effectively communicate and succeed during the interview process. Regardless of the industry, the company, or the career opportunity, following these practices will enhance your interview prospects. In short, preparation is the answer; not the question.

The following eight tips have proven successful in my candidates' efforts to transition from active military service to a civilian career.

1. Answer the question, "So what?"

Always put yourself in the shoes of your interviewer. Why should that person be intrigued by what you've accomplished? That may be the most important question to ask yourself before the interview. What have you done that matters to an employer? While finding a career after the military is crucial to you and your family, the employer's priority is to determine if you can help them achieve their goals and objectives. Orient your answers accordingly and the interview will be more successful.

2. Interviewing is the art of storytelling

Your career is your story. How you entered the military, an experience that transformed you, the people you led, and your ability to thrive in the most challenging circumstances, all form the tapestry that is you. They are who you are. In addition, stories are an excellent way to translate your military experiences into tangible business skills. Carefully review your professional record. Note the most important achievements. Practice explaining those achievements through storytelling. Your interviewer will remember you.

3. Don't over-detail

While a good story is memorable, too many details are not. Provide pertinent details to answer questions but don't be so thorough that you lose your audience (the person/people conducting your interview). Allow the interviewer to drill more deeply as he or she sees fit. Too much minutiae can work against you.

4. Talk about what you did in the military in civilian terms

Outside of the Marine Corps, very few will know what a MEU (Marine Expeditionary Unit) means. But they will understand emergency response and global logistics. Avoid military acronyms at all costs. They lack meaning to most people and reinforce the image that you've been living in a very different world than the business world they inhabit. Use civilian language—business language—to discuss military accomplishments. Your points will be far better understood.

5. Quantify and use data as much as possible

The business world is driven by performance metrics. So is the military. Use that cultural convergence to your advantage in discussing your accomplishments. Zero loss of equipment, dramatic improvements in logistics, enhancements to operational readiness, and steps to contain costs are all eminently quantifiable. Great stories are effectively punctuated with great data. Employ both and you're in excellent shape to impress your interviewer and land an ideal job.

6. Take ownership of your achievements

For a workforce known for its camaraderie and esprit de corps, veterans almost always speak in terms of us; not me. It's part of their training and, while admirable, that reticence to take credit can diminish accomplishment. Don't shy away from your achievements—whether they are an award, being ranked highly by your peers, or acts of ingenuity and valor. Talk about them and claim credit where it is due. Your accomplishments are important indicators of what you offer a prospective employer. You can be forthright without being boastful.

7. Ditch the “No, Sir” and “Yes, Ma’am”

You want to be polite, not subordinate, in an interview. Addressing your interviewer as a superior and not a business peer sends a subtle signal that you don't belong in the same room...and you do. Employers are looking for leaders and your posture, your language, your dress, and your tone all help to shape that persona.

8. Summarize your accomplishments in the context of goal-setting and achievement

To successfully translate military to business, it's important to explain what you've done and where you're going within the context of goal-setting and achievement. What did you actually accomplish while in the military? Why are you leaving it now? What will you bring to this organization that is distinctive? Wrapping your professional objectives within these concepts makes them readily understandable and translates you and your military experience into business terms. It's an effective technique and one that will leave a very favorable impression with your interviewer.

The vast majority of the veterans I work with are high-achieving people who will become powerful assets to the civilian economy. They have the skills, the work ethic, and the ability to thrive under pressure. These interview tips can help you translate those valuable traits into a fulfilling career.



Like your military career, an employment interview is high pressure. An outstanding interview experience exponentially increases your chances of moving into the next phase of your career. As we're taught in the service, preparation and rehearsals are the keys to success. Know your audience. Research the company's competitive challenges and industry opportunities. Then practice these techniques with a friend or family member, video yourself with your phone or camera, or simply stand in front of a mirror.

Get comfortable telling stories, using data, appropriately taking credit for your accomplishments, and translating those accomplishments into actions meaningful to the interviewing organizations. Nothing replaces excellent preparation. You know that from your military experience. Now embrace it for the next step in your career. It will pay dividends for you and your family.

I'm interested in your experiences and perspectives on this topic. Please send your ideas and comments to me at jlose@lucasgroup.com.