



U.S. Army Reserve 1st Sgt. Tomeka Johnson, senior enlisted for Headquarters and Headquarters Company of 200th Military Police Command, dances during the tie-breaking dance off after the Army Warrior Tasks training at Laudrick Creek Military Reservation, MD, 10 September 2016. The training, held during September's Battle Assembly, consisted of stations covering chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear attack; 9-Line Medical Evacuation; search of a suspect; individual movement techniques, and others. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Staff Sgt. Shejal Pulivarti, U.S. Army)

“Dance With the One Who Brung Ya”

Using Informational Interviews to Enable Career Transition

Col. John Buckley, U.S. Army, Retired

When I was a college athlete studying to be a coach, a professor gave me some advice for developing game-day strategies. He told me a story about legendary Texas football coach Darrell Royal. When asked about his strategy for

college football games, Coach Royal frequently said, “You dance with the one who brung ya.” He meant he would use players and plays that had been successful in previous wins.

Similarly, my Army supervisors and career mentors advised me to rely on my Army culture and training when confronting professional as well as personal issues. They meant I should use those skills that have been successful for me in the past. And, while mentoring a young major during my final deployment to Iraq, I provided similar advice on how he should manage his professional and personal matters. I said, “dance with the one who brung ya.” While replaying my counseling session with this major, I realized I should listen to my own advice as I confronted my retirement and prepared to transition into the private sector. I should rely on my years of successful operational-planning experience to apply structure to this problem and reduce uncertainty, retain personal flexibility, envision a desired future, and outline effective ways to bring that future about.

I knew I had to establish an approach to my private sector transition that would keep me moving in the right direction, but I did not know where to begin. So, I just started making lists, organizing thoughts, and outlining steps to help me define this complex and unfamiliar environment. I composed a vision: *successfully transition into the private sector*. I identified my skills that had potential use in the private sector, framed my employability, scratched out an initial approach towards achieving my vision, and got to work turning my vision into reality.

In the end, integrating *informational interviewing* with my operational planning enabled me to successfully transition into the private sector. Interestingly enough, I accidentally discovered this career exploration tool that all transitioning service members should be familiar with. Like me, they should learn how to apply informational interviewing to enhance their transition. Therefore, I present this missive as an example of how to leverage informational interviews to benefit other soldiers during their transition planning.

Define the Operating Environment

I followed my own advice to the major, and I decided to apply operational planning to my “mission” of transitioning into the private sector. My first step was to define the operating environment. I started studying the various components of my transition. I spoke with representatives from the installation Adjutant General’s Office, Retirement Branch, and the Housing

Office, as well as the ethics advisor, and I attended the Transition Assistance Program to learn more about finding suitable employment after the Army. I identified a local realtor. I spoke to my financial advisor to see how I could best protect my family and myself during this transition. I even started reading magazines about where to retire. My efforts to characterize my operating environment helped to reduce some of my uncertainty. However, I had an information gap when it came to identifying possible employment. I knew I needed to start filling it in quickly, so I began searching job announcements to discover what jobs I could do.

I sifted through LinkedIn and USAJOBS, and I used TheLadders and various other tools to also aid in my search.¹ I discovered many listings that required specific skills I possessed. I found job openings in locations I was interested in settling, and I found openings in big-name firms and in small, unknown companies, as well as in government contracting businesses located right outside the front gate of my fort. However, although I gained extensive evidence of existing opportunities, my research was not entirely fulfilling. My unfocused research into possible jobs I *could* do bore an overabundance of information, but certainly not actionable intelligence. My efforts up to that point seemed futile. My information gap increased as did my frustration, which almost caused me to violate my first rule as an operational planner: remain unemotional.

I decided I needed to talk to old friends and colleagues who had successfully transitioned into the private sector to see how they did it. I thought that if they could transition successfully, then I certainly could. Maybe they could help me narrow my focus and guide me to discover what skills I should leverage, or perhaps they could suggest where I might pursue jobs.

I started contacting old

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infantrymen—former colleagues, bosses, and subordinates—and informed them of my pending transition. I solicited their support, and each one enthusiastically offered their assistance. They shared résumés and provided lessons learned from their own transitions. Some advised me that networking, rather than résumé writing, would help me find a job. I heard about compensation packages; the terrific travel benefits they were enjoying; the benefits and pitfalls of working as a government contractor; the secrets to using USAJOBS; how to leverage TRICARE (the health care program of the U.S. Department of Defense) in salary negotiations; the trials and tribulations of private consulting; and the importance of business cards, note cards, and professional correspondence. Yet, even after this period of research, I still felt unprepared for my transition, because I was still unsure of which job to pursue.

Writing a Résumé

I decided it was time to begin writing a résumé of my own, but I struggled a bit with summarizing my career. I examined example résumés from my former colleagues. I rummaged through my old efficiency reports and awards citations, and I cut and pasted several accomplishments straight into my résumé. My first draft was more than four pages long. However, thanks to one former colleague, Karen, a president of a corporation based in Washington, D.C., I got terrific advice on arranging my thoughts. Her guidance helped me reduce the length of my résumé.

She told me I had to write for my audience. Karen advised me to remove the military jargon and use language a business leader or recruiter with no military experience would understand. She also said I should identify personal core competencies and align them with specific professional competencies. I am an infantryman—a classic “jack of all trades, master of none.” I came up with fifteen competencies. “Narrow them down to four and get back with me tomorrow,” she snapped as she hung up the phone.

I reworded my skills, categorized them, and reduced my list of competencies. I sent my revised résumé to Karen the next morning and received her approval. She explained that my résumé was not *done*, though. It was only a draft, or as she called it, a “baseline.” She counseled me to write a brand new résumé for each position to which I was applying. She said, “Your résumé

must reflect the position you are pursuing. You have to highlight the knowledge and all skills, experiences, and abilities required for that one specific job you are pursuing. You should address *only* those listed in the job description—nothing more!” In other words, she told me to associate my skills precisely with those listed in the job description.

Despite the positive feedback from my former colleague, her last bit of advice left me feeling uncertain. It also seemed like an awful lot of work.

Networking

I had a clear picture of my environment, and a decent résumé properly framing my employability. I assumed all I needed to do at this point was find an interesting job announcement listing requirements I met and include the appropriate skills in my résumé.

The next day, I called another former colleague of mine, Wayne, a public affairs director in Texas. I asked him how he aligned his personal interests and competencies with his new job. He said he didn’t have to. Wayne said he started talking to a friend of his after church one Sunday who also happened to be a business leader in his community. By chance, this discussion led Wayne to a very enjoyable new career. Wayne said he started asking this gentleman some questions regarding his career choice: “What education, experience, and credentials were necessary? Which career-related organizations and agencies are the best with which to network in the community?” Then, they started comparing their careers, education, and credentials, and they found a few similarities. One thing led to another, and Wayne got some advice and a phone number. The rest was history.

Later, Greg, a private consultant in San Antonio and one of my transition mentors, called me and revealed a similar story. He was at a party sponsored by his wife’s employer, when he began talking to a consultant. Greg picked this gentleman’s brain about his career field. “How did you build your credentials as a trusted advisor? How did you retain your security clearance? How do you determine what to charge a client for your services?” Greg listened intently, and soon started establishing his own credentials and building his own clientele. He is now a successful private consultant.

Another friend, Mike, a defense analyst based in Florida, came to Kansas City for the day and I met him

for lunch. He revealed a similar story on how he chose a second career. He did it by talking to people. The key for him was talking to business leaders in fields that interested him. He emphasized that these professionals were not former military leaders. He discovered professionals who spent their entire careers working in their fields of interest in the private sector. He followed numerous leads to successful professionals, just to learn more about specific career fields and companies.

Maybe it was divine intervention, as in Wayne's case. Maybe it was pure luck like it was for Greg. Or, was there something to this informal approach as suggested by Mike? There were some common threads in all three. The first was direct engagement with others. I was certain my Irish luck would not help me, but I figured the "gift of gab" just might—so I decided I would try to talk to people. The second thread was their focus on a career rather than just a job. A job is an activity, but a career is a lifelong ambition. I definitely preferred to set myself up in a new career. I returned to my LinkedIn contacts to find someone whose career interested me. I started with Matt, a senior manager in executive communications.

I had not prepared myself for my conversation with him, but I spent thirty minutes asking about his career, his workplace, and how he developed his management skills. My questions were too unspecific, though, so I did not get many useful answers. Thank goodness Matt was a friend. I think that is why he was kind enough not to tell me I was wasting his time.

Next, I spoke with Ronnie to check on his beloved Texas A&M Aggies, and later we spent the afternoon grilling hamburgers with Steve. Because they were both friends of mine, I again did not prepare my questions with any intention, nor with any investigative purpose relative to their jobs or careers. The conversations were beneficial, however, because I learned about the environments in which they worked. I also increased my private sector and business lexicon, and discovered the importance of specific competencies in their respective fields.

I felt I was gaining momentum in my transition strategy when I reached out to another former colleague, Bob. He had retired as a colonel many years ago and had since gained vast professional experience in multiple sectors. We met for coffee, and he informed me of a new nonprofit organization he and his partner

were creating. The purpose of this nonprofit was to assist military veterans with their transition into the private sector. Bob asked me to schedule a meeting the following week with him and his partner, Rolly, to talk in detail about my transition and their organization.

Refining the Approach

Relying on my Army training experiences, I decided to do a quick after-action review (AAR) of my transition preparation performance before I met with Bob and Rolly. A good analysis of my transition planning would determine my strengths and weaknesses, and where I could use Bob and Rolly's help. I therefore identified some areas to improve upon and to adjust, relative to my transition approach. These ideas were fresh in my mind when I met Bob and Rolly:

- When considering my transition problem, I had incorrectly defined it. The question I started with, "What job could I do?" was wrong. A job is merely a tactical objective. My end state could not be about getting a *job*. Instead, it had to be strategic in nature, and be about succeeding in a new *career*. The question should have been, "*What career will I pursue?*"
- I also realized that my vision was focused only on short-term goals. In other words, it too was oriented on tactics. I needed to revise my vision to be strategic in nature and more accurately reflect my desire to achieve lifelong goals. I had to shape a new career. This idea was reinforced in a Syracuse University study noting that half of transitioning military veterans left their first job in their first year—and nearly 75 percent within their first eighteen months.² It was because military veterans were jumping into the first job that came along, and it was a shortsighted approach. My vision should not have been about successfully transitioning. Instead, my vision should have been *succeeding in a private sector career that I will enjoy*.

- I needed to identify career fields that would satisfy my passion and interests, and allow me to showcase my skills, knowledge, abilities, and attributes. They had to be fields in which I would enjoy the associated endeavors. I had to understand their requirements, work environments, challenges, lifestyles, advancement opportunities, required certifications, and possible pitfalls. To properly do this, I had to fill my information gaps with knowledge I did not have at that time. I had to collect it from others.

- ◆ From this epiphany, I realized my LinkedIn network had become nothing more than a second Facebook page. My network consisted only of former military personnel. I needed to expand my connections to include civilian professionals. It was essential that I find people who worked their entire lives in career fields I wanted to pursue. As I learned from Mike, I needed to ask them questions to help me learn the things I needed to know.

- ◆ I needed to better prepare for my “interrogations,” and focus my questions to collect relevant information on specific career fields. Gaining knowledge of the career fields would help me logically analyze the information and produce actionable intelligence toward finding employment within my chosen career field.

- ◆ Before these “interrogations,” I needed to learn about the people I was meeting, and about their businesses or corporations. I had to be considerate enough to know something about their backgrounds, their accomplishments, and their business cultures. I also had to take into account that they too would have an objective for participating in our discussion.

- ◆ Finally, I realized I had missed a step in this operational-planning effort. I had not developed any courses of action to consider. Shifting to a strategic vision would allow me to develop career options, or courses of action. Thinking through the feasibility, acceptability, and suitability of these courses of action would also allow me to identify branches and sequels to my transition. My military career taught me that branches and sequels were critical components of an operational plan. The planning does not stop at the first objective. You have to be postured to exploit success or confront any potential challenge to your progress. My transition planning was no different. I had to envision how to advance in a career in order to be successful. Now, I was prepared for my meeting.

Informational Interviews

During my meeting with Bob and Rolly, their guidance and counsel reinforced everything I had just concluded in my own personal AAR. Furthermore, they put a name to what I was doing. Bob informed me that these “interrogation” sessions I was conducting were called *informational interviews*. During these meetings, a job seeker looks for advice on his or her potential career, learns about the industry, and gains knowledge

about the corporate culture of a potential future workplace. At the same time, the employed professionals learn about the job seeker, judge his or her professional potential, determine how well he or she will fit in the corporate culture, and build their candidate pool for future hires.³

What I needed to do in my “dance with the one who brung ya,” was to develop a collection plan to support my transition planning. To fully integrate informational interviewing into my operational-planning effort, I needed to determine what critical information I was missing. Doing this would allow me to focus my informational interviews with professionals, continually feed useful information into my planning effort, and allow me to make timely decisions along the way to a successful new career.

My new leading question, or my newly defined problem, helped me settle on four courses of action—career fields—that appeared best aligned with my passion, interests, skills, knowledge, abilities, and attributes. Specifying those career fields enabled me to narrow the focus of my efforts to a much more manageable level. I was then able to purposefully search for the *right* professionals—those who had vast experience in one of my four chosen career fields. I began to research these career fields as I prepared for meaningful informational interviews with these professionals.

My first interview came quickly and unexpectedly. After viewing Ted’s profile on LinkedIn, I received a rather curt note from him asking me why I viewed his profile. I told him I was preparing to transition into a new career. I was intrigued by his profile and noted some unique similarities with my own. I said I was interested in pursuing a business consulting career such as his, and wondered if he might be willing to offer some advice. His answer surprised me, and his interview has been my most meaningful to date. We met for breakfast and had a wonderful conversation about his career and his career choices, as well as some challenges he faced. His insights were particularly beneficial. Ted provided recommendations on education, certifications, and specialized training that would best prepare me for his field. He suggested projects I could complete that might also be helpful, professional organizations to expand my network in this field, and other people with whom I should engage. Thankfully, he took the time to review my résumé and provided candid, brutal,

and disheartening, but fantastic recommendations. My greatest takeaway from this engagement was that I needed to be more humble in my approach and incorporate that in the tone of my résumé.

Another of my career interests is executive communication, so I arranged to interview a new contact, Michael, who was a successful senior communication consultant for a major corporation in Kansas City. He was fascinated that a “war hero” would want to ask his opinion on anything. We met for lunch, and he continued to gush in wonderment as to why a distinguished military man would seek his advice. Once the excitement passed, I was able to ask some probing questions, to which Michael provided tremendous answers. He mentioned that he knew very few military personnel. One former military contact he had was the dean of academics at a nearby university. I then mentioned that, ironically, another of my professional interests was education. Michael got his friend on the phone and arranged for me to meet the university president, the dean of academics, and the athletic director.

Interviewing the three officials in their offices created a different scenario for me. I needed to ensure they realized right away that I was there for firsthand information and frank advice about their respective career fields—I was not looking for a job. I prepared for each interview uniquely, and each interview turned out to be different in tone and content. The president gave me valuable and candid advice, the dean immediately began creating job opportunities for me, and the athletic director unintentionally discouraged me from entering my fourth and final career interest of collegiate athletics.

The interview at the university led me to Ed, an education professional with broad experience in secondary education. He drove one hour to meet with me and explain his career field. He described a typical work week for various education careers, and explained the greatest rewards and frustrations associated with his career. He was also able to articulate for me what skills and personal qualities were most important in secondary education. Of greatest value was his help in translating many of my military experiences into competencies required for an education professional.

About four months from my retirement, my former colleague, Bob, informed me of an interesting opportunity that fit all four of my career field interests. He

arranged for an informational interview with Jeff, a talent director for the company. I thoroughly prepared myself for this meeting, as I had learned to do in multiple operational-planning efforts. I conducted a “war game,” or a simulation of my anticipated interaction with Jeff, so I could visualize the flow of our interaction.

I prepared for probing questions by reading a few relevant books. I studied the company through both positive and negative lenses, and researched Jeff through his LinkedIn profile in order to better understand what was professionally important to the business and to him. I also researched jobs with similar requirements to ascertain performance standards and potential salary ranges. Then, I rehearsed asking the probing questions I thought were important to have answered; they would also demonstrate my knowledge of the subject and the company, as well as my interest in the employment opportunity. Additionally, I thought about and prepared answers for the questions Jeff might ask me, as well as subsequent questions so I could obtain even deeper information on the subject. Finally, I prepared the follow-up plan so I could think through the next steps that I would have to take, including submitting an application, adjusting my résumé, and writing thank you notes.

Conclusion

Eventually, Jeff hired me. After more than thirty years in the military, I started a new career in the private sector, but my accomplishment did not come effortlessly. By adhering to my own advice to “dance with the one who brung ya,” I reduced my uncertainty, retained my personal flexibility, and mitigated the risk to my family and me. Important to this conclusion was my ability to properly structure my problem and narrow my focus to career fields that excited me and best leveraged my skills, knowledge, and abilities. Integrating informational interviews into my operational-planning techniques ultimately created an opportunity that led directly to my second career.

After refining my vision to focus strategically on a career instead of a job and adjusting my network, I concentrated my effort on conducting meaningful informational interviews that resulted in creating actionable intelligence. Along the way, I interviewed consultants, project managers at major corporations, regional

account executives, recruiters, trainers, and chief executive officers from local firms, and I researched the founding principles of those firms. I met most of these individuals through a network I built starting with my friends, colleagues, former bosses, and subordinates.

These professionals unwittingly taught me the terms and phrases necessary for my résumé. I realized the résumé would not get me the job, but a focused and precise résumé was essential to getting an invitation to an interview. So, I spent hours replacing practically every single military word and phrase in my résumé with professional terms that a recruiter and hiring manager would understand. Additionally, these professionals enhanced my interview performances because I was able to articulate matters in a manner relative to the career I was pursuing, and to the specific industry and corporation.

Hopefully, the lessons I share in this paper will help others successfully transition from the military into a private-sector career. I pursued my vision by applying the operational-planning process and tools I had used

my entire military career. Combined, they helped me solve the immediate problem—making a transition into a new career—and establish the framework for potential sequels (achieving success in my new career).

By combining my operational-planning expertise with well-planned informational interviews, I was able to gain critical insight into my career interests in the private sector. I was able to improve my understanding of the communities and work environments comprising these potential careers, and to identify careers to avoid. The informational interviews led me to new relationships, enabling me to expand my network and create a willing and able cast of career mentors who ultimately steered me to the opportunity of a lifetime.

1. LinkedIn is an online professional networking site, accessed 11 October 2016, <https://www.linkedin.com>; USAJOBS is an official U.S. government website that lists available federal jobs, accessed 11 October 2016, <http://www.usajobs.gov>; TheLadders is an online job search service, accessed 11 October 2016, <http://www.theladders.com>. ■

Notes

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2. Rosalind Maury, Brice Stone, and Jennifer Roseman, *Veteran Job Retention Survey Summary* (Syracuse University, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2014), 5-7, accessed 11 October 2016, <http://vets.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/VetAdvisor%20Report%28FINAL%20Single%20pages%29.pdf>.

3. "Informational Interview," Wikipedia, last modified 13 September 2015, accessed 11 October 2016, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Informational_interview.