

American College of Healthcare Executives

Division of Research

Examining the Transition From Military Careers to Civilian Careers in Healthcare

Management: A 2009 Survey

Introduction

Every year, the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE) invites leading executive search firm representatives to attend a half-day conference at its headquarters in Chicago. The conference is intended to introduce the invitees to this professional society and to explore important topics concerning the careers of healthcare executives. In 2007, the topic for discussion was how members of the armed services transition to careers in the civilian sector. At the conference, search firm representatives emphasized that individuals who wish to make the transition to a senior leadership position in a civilian healthcare organization should realize that search firms are accountable to the hiring organization and, in particular, to the search committees constituted to select senior-level executives.

In many cases, members of search committees are reluctant to consider people with a military background as viable candidates, viewing them as reliant on a command—as opposed to a collaborative—leadership style. In addition, hirers sometimes voice concerns that military officers may be deficient in experience developing joint ventures, working with medical staff, dealing with competitors and focusing more on developing policy than on facility operations. On the other hand, military executives are often regarded as possessing unique advantages, including skillful leadership, a focus on strategy, resilience in adverse conditions, technological astuteness, results orientation, physical fitness and high energy.

The search firm consultants and executives indicated that those seeking to transition should be realistic about the position level they can reasonably expect to attain and that search firms are accountable to the employing organization. They suggested that these individuals build on their skills in managing large systems, implementing large projects or becoming involved with technical specialties. However, the single most valuable activity that transitioning executives should undertake is to practice sustained networking—connecting with colleagues several years prior to their planned separation from the military.

In the summer of 2009, ACHE's Division of Research was asked by its Regents who represent affiliates from the various branches of the military services to conduct a survey of ACHE affiliates who had successfully transitioned from healthcare management positions in the armed services to positions in the civilian sector. This paper reports the results of that research.

Methods

Tapping the professional expertise that search firm consultants conveyed at the 2007 conference and through additional in-person interviews, the Division of Research developed an electronic survey consisting of 23 questions. The criteria for selection into the sampling frame was having transitioned from a military position to a civilian-sector position since January 1, 2005; being a U.S. resident; and being an affiliate of ACHE with an e-mail address. The population eligible for study numbered 289, of whom 149, or 52 percent, responded. Two administrations of the e-survey were conducted: the first on September 10, 2009, and the second, to nonrespondents, on September 22, 2009.

Findings

The survey questions and results are provided at the end of this paper. The following paragraphs summarize the findings.

Demographic Profile

Respondents were, on average, 48.6 years of age at the time of the study; 89 percent were male, and 11 percent were female. Eighty percent were white, 9 percent were black, 5 percent were Asian, 4 percent were Hispanic and the remaining 2 percent were Native American.

Last Position in the Military

Of the 149 respondents, 38 percent served in the Navy; 34 percent of respondents from that branch had attained the level of captain or higher. In addition, 30 percent served in the Air Force and another 30 percent served in the Army. Of those from both these branches, 21 percent had attained the rank of colonel and above. The largest proportion (43 percent) of these former Air Force and Army healthcare executives retired at the rank of lieutenant colonel.

Nearly 80 percent of respondents served 20 or more years in the military. Fifty-nine percent stated that the organization in which they held the highest level of command responsibility before leaving the military was a hospital or health system headquarters. More than half—53 percent—stated that in those organizations they served in the C-suite or a senior vice president position. (A few, 30 respondents, indicated that this highest position was not their last in the military.)

We divided the areas in which the respondents served into four areas. Nearly half—47 percent—stated their last assignment was in a Southern or Sunbelt state; 38 percent were based in other states, which included Washington, D.C., and Virginia. Only 9 percent served in a Northern state, and 6 percent were based overseas.

The Search Process

Fully 87 percent of the respondents began their search for a civilian position while they were still in the military. In fact, 58 percent had acquired a civilian position before they left the service. On average, individuals who began their search while in the service spent seven months pursuing the search. Those that began their search upon leaving the military spent an average of four months locating a position.

Respondents were then asked to react to the relative difficulty of activities associated with finding and securing their first civilian position. Nearly all of the activities, which ranged from finding suitable job postings to revising the resume and most aspects of networking, were reported to be either easy or about as expected. However, three activities were somewhat difficult: (1) getting noticed by recruiters, (2) networking with civilian colleagues whom they did not know and (3) negotiating salary. Most of the respondents (69 percent) stated they were willing to relocate; only 23 percent said their spouse was included in the interviewing process.

First Post-military Civilian Position

Recall that some respondents may have taken their first civilian post as early as January 1, 2005. Of the 147 respondents answering the question, 39 percent had left that first employing organization at the time of the survey, 20 percent were in the same organization but in a different position and 41 percent remained in their first post-military position. However, of those who stated they remained in their first position, nearly half (45 percent) indicated in a subsequent question that they had been promoted. Thus, these responses should not be interpreted narrowly. Types of organizations hiring these individuals included not-for-profit (42 percent), investor-owned (34 percent) and governmental organizations (23 percent).

Comparing the types of organizations where respondents are employed shows a net reduction in the proportion of those working in hospitals or healthcare systems. While 59 percent worked for such organizations in the military, 45 percent took their first civilian position there. Many now in the civilian sector are employed by consulting firms and educational institutions. Similarly, while 53 percent of respondents held upper-level executive posts in the military, 27 percent reported taking such positions as their first civilian post. The median salary (including bonus) in the first civilian position was approximately \$91,000.

Just less than half of the respondents (47 percent) took positions in a Southern or Sunbelt state. This proportion closely matches that of the group working in these regions during their military service. However, whereas 9 percent were located in Northern states while in the military, this percentage increased to 22 percent in their first civilian position. The increase reflected in the reduced proportion of those who were located in other states (30 percent) and overseas (0 percent, by definition).

Respondents then told us how difficult it was to perform various functions and accommodate lifestyle changes, including family demands, in their first civilian position. Of 16 suggested concerns, two were cited as posing challenges: (1) finding time to remain fit and (2) organizational politics. Most other issues were considered to be either as expected or easy to achieve. In written comments, respondents cited learning how to maneuver through organizational life and combating negative attitudes about the military mind-set as especially challenging. Fully 78 percent of respondents reported having joined a community organization since they took on their first post-military civilian position. By way of comparison, a 2007 study of ACHE affiliates showed that 88 percent had volunteered for some community organization in the previous 12 months.

What factors were important to respondents in selecting their first military position? The most important features related to self-actualization issues, including “enjoyable, fulfilling work,”

“opportunity offered by the job” and “culture of the organization.” Other important features included opportunity for advancement, salary and the social value of the job. Written comments elaborated on these ideas.

A large proportion of respondents, 69 percent, stated they had been promoted since taking their first civilian position,

The last question asked respondents what advice they would give to military healthcare executives who want to obtain a civilian position. The largest category of response concerned issues about searching for jobs, including advice to search for meaningful work and to acquire specific skills related to successful interviewing. Other important areas included networking and aiming to achieve work/life balance.

In summary, the survey of healthcare executives who had successfully transitioned from military to civilian careers showed that most held higher-level positions in the military than they did in their first civilian post. Moreover, fewer of those who had worked in military hospitals and systems migrated to such organizations in the civilian sector. Most had begun their civilian job search while in the military, and these respondents recommended that those who are currently in the military who want to pursue a civilian career develop a clear concept of the kind of position that would fulfill their professional aspirations and also develop interviewing skills to successfully attain such positions.

A Survey Examining the Transition From Military Careers to Civilian Careers in Healthcare Management

Division of Research

About the Survey

Sent to 289 affiliates who successfully transitioned from the military to a civilian position. Restricted to those who transitioned after Jan. 1, 2005, are U.S. residents and for whom ACHE has an e-mail address.

Number of respondents: 149
 Response rate: 51.6%
 Initial date of survey: Sept. 10, 2009
 Follow-up: Sept. 22, 2009

Part 1: Your last position in the military

1. With which of the armed services were you affiliated?

Air Force	30%
Army	30
Marines	1
Navy	38
Other (specify)	<u>1</u>
	100%

(149)

2. What was your last rank?

Army, Air Force and Marines		Navy	
Noncommissioned.....	8%	Noncommissioned.....	16%
Second Lieutenant.....	0	Ensign.....	2
First Lieutenant	1	Lieutenant Junior Grade	0
Captain	11	Lieutenant.....	18
Major.....	16	Lieutenant Commander.....	18
Lieutenant Colonel.....	43	Commander	14
Colonel.....	20	Captain	32
Brigadier General.....	0	Rear Admiral (lower half).....	2
Major General	1	Rear Admiral (upper half).....	0
Lieutenant General.....	0	Vice Admiral.....	0
General.....	<u>0</u>	Admiral	<u>0</u>
	100%		100%*
	(91)		(57)

*Note: Percentages here and throughout this report may not total to exactly 100 due to rounding error.

3. How many years did you serve in the military?		Mean
<10 years	14%	20.3
10–19 years	9	
20+ years	<u>77</u>	
	100%	
	(122)	

Note: The mean for the Army, Air Force and Marines was 19.9 years. The mean for the Navy and Other was 20.9 years. These means are not statistically different using a t-test $p = 0.50$.

4. In what setting did you hold the highest level of command responsibility before leaving the military?	
Hospital	39%
Health system headquarters.....	20
Clinic/ambulatory care facility.....	17
TRICARE/managed care	9
Public health/community health/ mental health agency.....	1
Education institution/research institute ...	5
Other (please specify)	<u>10</u>
	100%
	(148)

5. What position did you hold in that setting (closest civilian equivalent)?	
Chief executive officer	15%
Chief operating officer	24
Chief financial officer	4
Chief information officer	3
Chief medical officer.....	1
Chief nursing officer	1
Senior vice president	5
Vice president.....	5
Department head/director.....	23
Manager.....	11
Staff	4
Consultant	3
Other (please specify)	<u>0</u>
	100%
	(148)

6. In what location was this assignment?
(See Q7c below)

7. Was this your last assignment before leaving the military?

Yes.....	79%
No, I had a later assignment(s).....	<u>21</u>
	100%
	(147)

7a. What was the setting of your last assignment before leaving the military?

Hospital	35%
Health system headquarters.....	23
Clinic/ambulatory care facility.....	14
TRICARE/managed care	11
Public health/community health/ mental health agency	1
Education institution/research institute ...	6
Other (please specify)	<u>10</u>
	100%
	(147)

7b. What position did you hold in that setting (closest civilian equivalent)?

Chief executive officer.....	10%
Chief operating officer	22
Chief financial officer	3
Chief information officer	3
Chief medical officer.....	1
Chief nursing officer	1
Senior vice president	7
Vice president.....	3
Department head/director.....	27
Manager.....	11
Staff	7
Consultant	4
Other (please specify)	<u>0</u>
	100%
	(147)

7c. In what location was this assignment?

(incorporate responses from Q6 as appropriate)

Northern states	9%
Southern states/Sunbelt region.....	47
Other states.....	38
Overseas	<u>6</u>
	100%
	(143)

North:

Alaska, Connecticut, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Massachusetts, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Utah, Wyoming

South:

Alabama, Arizona, California (southern), Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, New Mexico, South Carolina, Texas

Middle (other):

California (northern), Colorado, Delaware, District of Columbia, Kentucky, Maryland, Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington

Part 2. The search process

8. For how many months did you search for a civilian position while still in the military?

		Mean
Waited until left military	13%	4.9
1–3 months	32	
4–6 months	33	
7+ months	<u>22</u>	
	100%	
	(147)	

9. How many months did you search for a civilian position after you left the service?

		Mean
Completed in service	58%	2.0
0–3 months	23	
4–6 months	12	
7+ months	<u>7</u>	
	100%	
	(147)	

10. Please indicate the relative difficulty of each of the following aspects of finding and securing your first civilian position. If a feature was not part of your job search, click “N/A” (not applicable).

		(row percentages)					
	Means	Very Easy(1)	Easy(2)	As Expected(3)	Hard(4)	Very Hard(5)	N/A
Finding a job coach	3.08	7	7	12	7	8	59
Getting noticed by recruiters	3.37	4	12	22	21	12	29
Finding suitable job postings....	2.95	12	20	30	22	8	8
<i>Resume revisions</i>							
Converting positions’ titles to civilian terms	2.58	18	27	35	16	3	1
Stating achievements in civilian terms	2.71	16	28	27	24	3	1
<i>Interviewing</i>							
Interviewing using civilian terms	2.43	18	35	33	13	1	1
Relating to potential management colleagues.....	2.51	18	33	32	15	2	1
Selling yourself.....	2.54	23	29	23	20	5	1
Changing your “look” (e.g., glasses, hairstyle, shoes).....	2.01	35	30	19	5	2	8
<i>Networking</i>							
With military colleagues you knew	2.20	26	31	23	8	1	11

(continued)

	Means	(row percentages)					N/A
		Very Easy(1)	Easy(2)	As Expected(3)	Hard(4)	Very Hard(5)	
<i>Networking</i>							
With former military colleagues you knew	2.32	22	32	24	12	1	10
With former military members you did not know	2.86	10	19	29	18	4	20
With civilian colleagues you knew	2.65	14	27	29	17	3	12
With civilian colleagues you did not know	3.32	7	17	24	23	18	12
<i>Negotiating</i>							
Position level	2.98	6	22	39	23	5	5
Salary	3.28	5	18	30	31	12	3

11. Were you willing to relocate to obtain a new position?

Yes..... 69%

No..... 31

100%

(147)

12. Was your spouse included in your interviewing process?

Yes..... 23%

No..... 77

100%

(147)

Part 3: Your first civilian position after leaving the military

13. Are you still in your first post-military civilian position?

Yes..... 41%

No, but I am with the same organization

20

I am no longer with that organization

39

100%

(147)

14. Was your first post-military position in:

The Department of Defense

11%

The Department of Veterans Affairs

5

Other federal government

1

State or local government.....

6

Not-for-profit organization.....

42

Investor-owned organization.....

34

100%

(146)

15. In what type of organization is/was your first post-military position?

Freestanding hospital/medical center	21%
Member hospital of a healthcare system/ VA hospital	15
Corporate headquarters of a healthcare system.....	9
Ambulatory care facility/group practice	14
Managed care/HMO/PPO	5
Post-acute/chronic care organization	1
Public health/community health/ mental health agency	3
Consulting firm	12
Association	2
Education institution/research institute	10
Health-related industry (e.g., supplier, pharmaceutical or equipment manufacturer)	5
Other (please specify)	<u>3</u>
	100%
	(147)

16. Which of these best describes the responsibilities of your first post-military position?

Chief executive officer	9%
Chief operating officer	8
Chief financial officer	1
Chief information officer	3
Chief medical officer.....	2
Chief nursing officer	1
Senior vice president	3
Vice president.....	8
Department head/director.....	24
Manager.....	12
Staff	9
Consultant	8
Other (please specify)	<u>11</u>
	100%
	(147)

17. In what region is/was your first post-military position?

Northern states	22%
Southern states or Sunbelt region.....	48
Other states.....	30
Overseas	<u>0</u>
	100%
	(145)

18. What was the annual starting salary of your first post-military position, including bonus, if any?

Less than \$60,000.....	12%
\$61,000–\$80,000.....	26
\$81,000–\$100,000.....	21
\$101,000–\$120,000.....	18
\$121–\$140,000.....	11
\$141–\$160,000.....	2
\$161–\$180,000.....	3
\$181–\$200,000.....	1
Greater than \$200,000.....	<u>5</u>
	100%
	(146)

19. For each of the following, indicate the degree to which it was a challenge in your first post-military position. (If it is not applicable, click N/A.)

	Means	(row percentages)					N/A
		Very Easy(1)	Easy(2)	As Expected(3)	Hard(4)	Very Hard(5)	
Strategic planning.....	2.38	22	29	34	11	1	4
Organizational politics.....	3.15	10	15	34	32	9	0
Diversity issues (race/ethnicity, gender, immigrants, age differences, etc.).....	2.02	34	34	22	5	1	5
Marketing programs and services.....	2.54	14	30	38	11	1	6
Technology.....	2.22	28	33	29	7	2	1
Finding time to remain fit.....	3.39	9	13	25	35	17	1
Requirements for your spouse's involvement in your organization.....	2.75	8	9	23	5	4	51
Spouse's employment.....	2.64	11	8	19	5	4	53
Children's adaptation to community.....	2.37	12	13	20	3	1	51
Relating to							
Board.....	2.67	10	18	29	8	4	31
Physicians.....	2.61	13	22	31	12	3	19
Community groups.....	2.37	15	32	33	5	1	15
Unions.....	2.96	4	5	17	8	2	64
Subordinates.....	2.40	21	25	34	10	1	9
Vendors.....	2.42	13	28	40	4	1	15
Peers.....	2.43	18	32	36	11	1	1

(continued on following page)

Note: The following lists the categorized “Other” written-in responses that were particularly challenging in the first post-military position.

	<i>N</i> Citing	Percentage of “Other” Respondents Citing*	Percentage of All Respondents
Organizational	59	65.6%	41.0%
Politics	8	8.9	5.6%
Financial	15	16.7	10.4%
Age.....	2	2.2	1.4%
Attitudes/perceptions	39	43.3	27.1%
Responsibilities.....	15	16.7	10.4%
Job market.....	7	7.8	4.9%
No problems	5	5.6	3.5%
Total “other” responses ...	90	100.0%	62.5%

*Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 because respondents could cite more than one challenge.

20. Have you joined any community organizations since you took on your first post-military civilian position?

Yes.....	78%
No.....	<u>22</u>
	100%
	(142)

21. How important was each of the following factors in attracting you to your first post-military position?

		(row percentages)				
	Means	Not Important(1)	Not Very Important(2)	Somewhat Important(3)	Important(4)	Very Important(5)
Salary	3.76	3	6	23	47	20
Bonus	2.66	19	28	25	23	5
Location near military base	2.19	41	23	20	9	7
Geographical setting/climate	3.50	6	12	29	31	22
Family nearby	3.28	18	13	20	20	29
Community attractions:						
sports/nature/culture	2.90	13	20	36	23	7
Opportunity offered by the job	4.19	1	1	14	48	36
Opportunity for advancement	3.85	4	6	19	44	27
Culture of the organization	3.99	2	2	20	47	29
Social value of the job	3.59	4	12	22	44	18
Enjoyable/fulfilling work	4.22	1	2	11	43	42

The following factors were written in as important in attracting respondents to their first post-military position.

	N Citing	Percentage of "Other" Respondents Citing*	Percentage of All Respondents
Challenges	6	8.8%	4.2%
Setting.....	27	39.7	18.9%
Age	1	1.5	0.7%
Expediency	4	5.9	2.8%
Opportunity to contribute strengths	6	8.8	4.2%
Increase knowledge	4	5.9	2.8%
Future impact.....	5	7.4	3.5%
Stability	10	14.7	7.0%
Position features	26	38.2	18.2%
Promotion	4	5.9	2.8%
Relationship.....	10	14.7	7.0%
Familiarity	3	4.4	2.1%
N/A/nothing else	4	5.9	2.8%
Total "other" responses	68	100.0%	47.6%

*Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 because respondents could cite more than one factor.

22. Have you been promoted since taking your first civilian position?

Yes.....	69%
No.....	<u>31</u>
	100%
	(142)

23. What advice would you give to military healthcare executives who want to obtain a civilian position?

	N Citing	Percentage Citing*
Soften leadership style.....	7	6.0%
Learn how to discipline workers	1	0.9
Workforce issues, negotiate with unions, prior military are key supporters	6	5.1
Financial (learn coding, study principles).....	5	4.3
Policies or procedures, slower pace of change...	1	0.9
Adaptability	6	5.1
Education, training, certification.....	11	9.4
Networking.....	46	39.3
Job search (seek meaningful work, learn how to interview).....	87	74.4
Other (work/life balance)	44	37.6
Total responses	117	100.0%

*Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 because respondents could cite more than one category.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Age		Gender	
Under 30.....	0%	Male	89%
30–39.....	17	Female.....	<u>11</u>
40–49.....	38		100%
50 and older.....	<u>46</u>		(149)
	100%		
	(144)	Status in ACHE	
Median age	48.6	Member.....	25%
		Fellow	<u>75</u>
			100%
			(149)
Race/ethnicity			
White	80%		
Black.....	9		
Hispanic.....	4		
Asian.....	5		
Native American	<u>2</u>		
	100%		
	(148)		