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The Impact of SkillBridge on Veteran Employment Outcomes

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Introduction

Since its creation in 2011 as a pilot program by the US Department of Defense, SkillBridge has become one of the most touted mechanisms to transition active-duty members of the US military into better-paying jobs in the private sector. This and other programs play a key role in addressing the issue of veteran underemployment, which continued to grow in both absolute and relative terms over the past decade. In addition, by adopting an emphasis on employment-based outcomes this past August, SkillBridge represents a key means for employers to help guarantee such employment in a measurable way.

The need to examine and address SkillBridge, both in terms of its clear advantages and its challenges, is even more important in the wake of recent government layoffs. Thirty percent of federal employees are veterans, and a significant number of military spouses are employed in federal jobs. Therefore, as federal workforce reductions are implemented, the ability to transition service members and their spouses into well-paying jobs in the private sector becomes even more paramount.

This paper examines key elements of how SkillBridge is intended to work and how it is effective. It discusses the numerous barriers to entry, including access to information about the program, availability to enlisted service members versus officers, and restrictions due to staffing shortages and reluctance by local commanders to release interested service members from their assignments. Finally, this paper explores the potential benefits, particularly in terms of retention, of expanding the reach of programs, including those directed toward military spouses.

As the job market continues to evolve and industries such as technology, health care, and logistics face ongoing workforce shortages, SkillBridge has become an increasingly valuable tool for connecting military talent with private-sector needs. For transitioning service members, it offers a chance to gain hands-on experience in high-demand fields while on active duty, easing the shift into civilian employment. Employers also benefit by gaining access to a pool of skilled, mission-oriented individuals who bring leadership, adaptability, and a strong work ethic. When implemented effectively, SkillBridge not only improves individual outcomes but also strengthens the broader labor market by filling critical gaps with qualified candidates.

However, real challenges must be addressed for the program to reach its full potential. Enlisted service members—who often face the greatest employment hurdles after leaving the military—frequently encounter barriers to participation, whether due to lack of awareness, inconsistent command support, or unit staffing constraints. Officers tend to find it easier to access the program, creating a disparity in who benefits.

In addition, military spouses, who deal with high rates of unemployment and underemployment, are not included in the program. Expanding SkillBridge to be more inclusive—both in terms of rank and family members—and creating clearer, standardized pathways for approval would make the program more equitable and effective. It would also help ensure that the economic stability of military families remains a central focus during the transition out of service.

Barriers to Access

Despite its benefits, SkillBridge remains underutilized, with only 32 percent of eligible service members participating in the program, even though more than 70 percent expressed interest in participating.[1] One major issue is accessibility. Many military bases lack partnerships with civilian employers, limiting the number of opportunities for transitioning personnel. A Government Accountability Office report found that 58 percent of military installations do not have sufficient local SkillBridge partnerships to meet demand.[2] This lack of accessibility forces many service members to either relocate for training or forgo participation entirely. In addition, some employers hesitate to engage with SkillBridge because of bureaucratic hurdles in the approval process, further limiting the number of available positions.

Another contributing factor is the lack of alignment between SkillBridge training and service members' career goals. A survey conducted by the RAND Corporation in 2023 revealed that 40 percent of SkillBridge participants believed that the training did not fully align with their desired civilian career path.[3] If SkillBridge programs were better customized to match individual skill sets and career aspirations with employment opportunities, participation rates would likely increase and employment outcomes would improve. This misalignment, combined with the administrative difficulties of securing approval for participation, continues to hinder the program's effectiveness.

Furthermore, transitioning service members often encounter delays in obtaining approval for SkillBridge participation. A 2021 Army transition study found that 47 percent of applicants experienced slow responses from their command leadership, preventing them from finalizing SkillBridge arrangements in time for their separation.[4] Standardizing approval procedures and ensuring consistent implementation across all service branches could help mitigate these issues and encourage higher participation rates.

The lack of employer engagement also exacerbates SkillBridge's underutilization. Although many companies recognize the value of hiring veterans, some are reluctant to commit resources to SkillBridge partnerships because the regulatory requirements are unclear. A 2023 employer survey conducted by the US Chamber of Commerce found that 39 percent of businesses did not understand the process to become an approved SkillBridge partner.[5] Without better outreach and education for private-sector employers, the number of available SkillBridge opportunities will remain insufficient to meet demand.

A final challenge is the misconception among some employers that hiring veterans through SkillBridge involves additional costs or administrative burdens. In reality, SkillBridge participants continue to receive their military pay and benefits while training with civilian employers, reducing the financial risk for businesses. Increased education and outreach to private-sector companies could help dispel these concerns and encourage more businesses to participate in SkillBridge partnerships. If these barriers are not addressed, SkillBridge's potential to significantly improve veteran employment outcomes will continue to be unrealized.

As the job market continues to evolve and industries such as technology, health care, and logistics face ongoing workforce shortages, SkillBridge has become an increasingly valuable tool for connecting military talent with private-sector needs. For transitioning service members, it offers a chance to gain hands-on experience in high-demand fields while still on active duty, easing the shift into civilian employment. Employers benefit as well, gaining access to a pool of skilled, mission-oriented individuals who bring leadership, adaptability, and a strong work ethic. When implemented effectively, SkillBridge not only

improves individual outcomes but also strengthens the broader labor market by filling critical gaps with qualified candidates.

Still, there are real challenges that need to be addressed if the program is going to reach its full potential. Enlisted service members—who often face the greatest employment hurdles after leaving the military—frequently encounter barriers to participating, whether due to lack of awareness, inconsistent command support, or unit staffing constraints. Officers tend to have an easier time accessing the program, creating a disparity in who benefits. Additionally, military spouses, who deal with high rates of unemployment and underemployment, are underrepresented in employment program initiatives.

Expanding SkillBridge to be more inclusive—both in terms of rank and family members—and creating clearer, standardized pathways for approval would make the program more equitable and effective. It would also help ensure that the economic stability of military families remains a central focus during the transition out of service.

The Challenges of the Veterans' Transitions

The journey of transitioning from military to civilian life is complex and unique for each family. To better understand the human impact of SkillBridge and similar transition programs, the broader experiences of military families who are navigating life after service must be considered. In this report, "recently transitioned families" refers to those who have separated from active-duty military service within the past five years. The 2023 Military Family Support Programming Survey (MFSPS) by the Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN) offers valuable insights into the challenges and outcomes faced by recently transitioned families and, therefore, highlights the areas in which programs such as SkillBridge succeed and fall short.

The survey gathered responses from 10,149 military-connected individuals worldwide, with 38.7 percent of responses coming from families that have made the transition from military to civilian life.[6] Almost 19 percent of respondents left the military within the past five years, and, of these, 26.7 percent were retirees, 21.1 percent veterans, 26.7 percent retiree spouses, and 22.1 percent veteran spouses. Almost 11 percent of recently transitioned respondents ended their military careers in lower ranks, 53.0 percent in middle ranks, and 36.2 percent in the highest ranks. Notably, the majority (71.8 percent) of respondents were enlisted personnel.

The Transition Journey

The shift from military to civilian life is not only a change in job or location but also a complete reimagining of daily life. Service members and their families lose the structured, supportive community they have known for years, and the transition can be a mix of challenges and new possibilities.

Findings from the 2023 MFSPS affirm that recently transitioned families relied on a variety of resources to help them adjust. They most often used the Department of Defense's Transition Assistance Program (DoDTAP) at 64.4 percent, followed by the GI Bill at 58.5 percent and community-based resources at 40.5 percent.[7] Many respondents accessed programs such as SkillBridge (32.0 percent) and the Veterans' Employment Training Service (30.4 percent). Recently transitioned veteran family respondents were more likely to use these programs, suggesting that their needs may differ from retired respondents. Regarding the most helpful type of support, 42.3 percent of recently transitioned respondents highlighted informal social support, followed by the programs offered by Hiring Our Heroes (23.1 percent) and Veterans Affairs (15.4 percent).[8] Nevertheless, some respondents needed additional or nuanced transition support, such as improvements to DoDTAP (26 percent), employment assistance (18.7 percent), and support for military spouses (14.6 percent).[9] Many respondents indicated a preference for a blend of in-person and online resources, especially for transition and employment support, although recently transitioned members preferred in-person support. These findings highlight the support ecosystem services that should be improved to facilitate reintegration into civilian life.

Family Well-Being

These experiences contextualize the overarching well-being of recently transitioned families as they navigate a new stage of life. Within the MFSPS population, recently transitioned respondents reported better Family Health Scale[10] scores compared to the overall population: excellent (32.2 versus 27.9 percent), moderate (48.3 vs. 45.6 percent), and poor (19.5 percent vs. 26.5 percent).[11] Recently transitioned families who rated their family health as excellent were notably more likely to recommend military service,

highlighting the connection between strong family health and a positive outlook on the transition process. These health distinctions provide important context for understanding the broader transition experience. Families with excellent health are more likely to navigate the transition successfully, while those with moderate or poor health face additional challenges that can complicate their transition, underscoring their potential need for additional support.

Family Stability

The early years after transition are a crucial time for families to adjust to civilian life. MFAN's findings elevate the role that employment plays in shaping their long-term success.

For many recently transitioned families, employment is a key facet of their economic stability. Nearly two-thirds (64.9 percent) of recently transitioned family respondents were employed, with 52.5 percent working full-time.[12] Respondents who used transition programs were more likely to secure full-time employment—except for participants in DoDTAP, whose employment status mirrored that of the broader group of recently transitioned families. Family responsibilities (50.9 percent) and health reasons (38.6 percent) were the primary factors for respondents not seeking employment.[13] Retired respondents were more likely to report not seeking work at all. Employed respondents generally expressed satisfaction with their jobs, particularly in terms of hours worked (71.9 percent) and work-life balance (71.3 percent).

However, satisfaction with income and skill utilization was lower among recently transitioned service members. Recently transitioned spouses, however, were more satisfied with promotion opportunities and skill utilization, although many reported being dissatisfied with their income and the flexibility of their work schedule. With the exception of GI Bill usage, recently transitioned respondents who used the transition support resources mentioned above were more likely to be satisfied with work-life balance and utilization of their skills. However, they were also more likely to be dissatisfied with their income and the flexibility of their work schedule.

About one-quarter (26.6 percent) of recently transitioned respondents reported no barriers to employment. Of those who did report barriers, 37.9 percent cited family-related challenges (particularly for recently transitioned spouses),[14] 21.6 percent cited lifestyle changes, 20.9 percent cited health concerns, and 16.6 percent cited child care. Over one-third (36.6 percent) of employed recently transitioned respondents reported no signs of underemployment,7 which was more frequently reported by recently transitioned retiree respondents. However, those who accessed the transition support resources mentioned above were more likely to indicate insufficient income as an indicator of underemployment.

Other key dimensions of family stability intersect with overall family well-being, playing an important role after transition. Sixty percent of recently transitioned families reported low or very low scores on the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau Financial Well-Being Scale,[15] a reflection of their broader struggles with stability. Use of the US Department of Agriculture Six-Item Short Form Food Security Scale[16] and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) housing burden scale provided further insight into family stability. Almost 74 percent of recently transitioned respondents were food secure, compared to 80 percent of the overall survey population. In addition, 48.0 percent of recently transitioned family respondents were housing burdened, with 29.9 percent spending more than half their income on housing costs.

Like other findings related to overall stability, respondents with moderate or poor family health were more likely to experience these challenges. Underscoring the pivotal role of family health, recently transitioned respondents with excellent family well-being were more likely to report positive experiences with health care. They were less likely to seek mental health care for a family member and less likely to feel lonely, as measured by the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Loneliness Scale.[17] In contrast, families with moderate or poor family well-being reported more negative health-care experiences and a greater likelihood of feeling lonely or seeking mental health care for a family member. Notably, loneliness (65.1 percent) and the need to seek mental health care for a family member (68.2 percent) were higher among recently transitioned family respondents than the overall survey population, 58.4 percent and 59.1 percent, respectively.[18]

These findings emphasize the diverse experiences of recently transitioned military families and the need for tailored, responsive support systems. As the landscape continues to shift, the understanding of their evolving circumstances must also adapt to ensure their effective reintegration into civilian life.

Expanding Civilian Career Pathways for Military Spouses

Much attention has been rightfully paid to programs such as SkillBridge that assist transitioning service members. However, the unique challenges faced by military spouses should also be addressed. High unemployment and underemployment rates among military spouses persist due to frequent relocations, inconsistent credentialing standards in new locations, and limited access to meaningful employment opportunities. In response, DoD has launched initiatives such as the Military Spouse Career Pathways Program, which provides tailored resources to help military spouses find careers within the federal civilian workforce. The Military Spouse Roadmap, launched by the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Hiring Our Heroes Program, is designed to be the execution platform for this effort.[19]

The Military Spouse Career Pathways Program builds on the recognition that stable spouse employment is a key driver of family well-being and veteran transition success. It offers curated job listings, resume assistance, interview preparation, and tools for long-term career development—targeting barriers that have historically limited access to federal employment. By creating a clear and accessible entry point into government careers, the program strengthens economic resilience not only for the spouses themselves but also for the broader military family. It, however, faces uncertainties similar to those for SkillBridge, such as levels of access and resources that are insufficient to reach all affected military spouses. In addition, with the recent reductions in federal employment, the need for expanded options for spouses, as well as transitioning military members, becomes even more acute.

Incorporating programs such as the Military Spouse Career Pathways Program into the broader conversation about transition support—alongside SkillBridge and DoDTAP—enables a more comprehensive view of what military families need to succeed in civilian life. When spouses excel professionally, families are better positioned to navigate the upheaval of separation from the military, reducing stress and increasing retention in key programs. Furthermore, expanding initiatives that promote career continuity for spouses can yield long-term benefits for workforce diversity, government talent acquisition, and family financial security.

The Importance of SkillBridge

The SkillBridge program stands at the intersection of military transition and civilian workforce development, offering a strategic solution to the complex challenges that service members face when exiting the military. Its demonstrated successes in helping veterans secure meaningful employment, reduce underemployment, and gain hands-on experience in high-demand industries highlight its value not only to individuals but also to the broader economy. Programs that have partnered with SkillBridge, from aerospace to renewable energy, have seen the benefits of integrating disciplined, trained, and adaptable veterans into their operations.

One of the most significant long-term benefits of SkillBridge is its potential impact on veteran home insecurity and financial stability. According to a 2021 HUD report, veterans are disproportionately represented in the homeless population.[20] By ensuring that service members transition directly into stable employment, SkillBridge can help prevent joblessness and financial uncertainty and, in turn, housing instability. Economic security is one of the strongest indicators of successful reintegration into civilian life, and SkillBridge plays a direct role in improving financial outcomes for veterans.

Moreover, SkillBridge enhances workforce diversity and strengthens leadership pipelines in private-sector industries. Veterans bring unique perspectives, leadership experience, and problem-solving abilities that can be leveraged to drive innovation and productivity. Employers who hire veterans through SkillBridge often find that these individuals possess a strong work ethic, adaptability, and teamwork skills that make them valuable assets to any organization. By fostering greater collaboration between military and civilian sectors, SkillBridge plays a crucial role in building a more dynamic and inclusive workforce.

Expanding SkillBridge's scope could also enhance regional economies by filling employment gaps in local labor markets. Many communities face critical shortages in sectors such as transportation, construction, and cybersecurity, and SkillBridge provides a steady supply of experienced workers who can help meet these needs. Ensuring that SkillBridge partnerships are available across a diverse range of industries and geographic locations would increase both the program's effectiveness and its long-term economic contributions.

Despite investments in transition programs, the Department of Defense is missing a critical opportunity to strengthen retention by not fully using spouse and veteran career support as a recruiting tool. As recruitment challenges continue to rise, especially among younger generations who are skeptical of long-term military service, it is vital that prospective enlistees see a clear path to economic security after they separate. If open sources continue to highlight gaps in employment and financial stability for veterans, it will discourage individuals from taking the oath.

Programs such as SkillBridge and the Military Spouse Career Pathways Program should not only be seen as transition supports but also be treated as essential parts of the recruitment and retention strategy. Clear career pathways provide peace of mind for service members, allowing them to focus fully on their mission without constant worry about future financial hardship.

Expanding employer outreach, streamlining the application process, and increasing partnerships with high-growth industries would make the program more effective. Additionally, introducing a follow-up system

to track long-term employment outcomes for SkillBridge participants could help policymakers refine the program and ensure it continues to meet the evolving needs of transitioning service members. In today's competitive labor market, closing these gaps is not just about supporting veterans after they leave. It is a necessary investment in sustaining the all-volunteer force and ensuring that military service remains an attractive and viable path for future generations.

Success Stories

SkillBridge has already demonstrated success in helping veterans transition into stable, well-paying careers. Many companies have reported positive experiences with the program, citing the high quality of veteran hires and their readiness to contribute from day one. For instance, SRS Distribution, a major roofing supplier, has partnered with SkillBridge to train veterans in logistics and distribution roles, providing a direct pipeline to permanent employment.[21] Similarly, NASA's Glenn Research Center has utilized SkillBridge to help service members transition into engineering and aerospace positions, leveraging their technical skills for mission-critical work.[22] These examples illustrate how diverse industries can benefit from the program while helping veterans secure meaningful employment.

Another notable success comes from the renewable energy sector, where companies have leveraged SkillBridge to prepare veterans for careers in solar energy and wind power. Programs such as Solar Ready Vets have provided hands-on experience in installation, maintenance, and operations, ensuring that veterans enter the workforce with competitive skills and industry certifications.[23] Given the growing demand for renewable energy professionals, expanding SkillBridge's involvement in this sector could enhance job placement rates while addressing national labor shortages.

Major corporations such as Amazon and Microsoft have also successfully integrated SkillBridge into their hiring strategies—offering training programs in cloud computing, cybersecurity, and logistics. These companies have reported high retention rates among SkillBridge graduates, highlighting the program's ability to produce job-ready employees who seamlessly transition into the civilian workforce.[24] With continued support from major industry players, SkillBridge could further increase the number of transitioning service members securing long-term careers in high-growth fields.

Expanding Access

Although SkillBridge has demonstrated success in many cases, it has not yet reached its full potential. As the data show, only a fraction of eligible service members are currently accessing the program, often due to command limitations, lack of employer partnerships, or administrative inefficiencies. At a time when industries are experiencing major labor shortages and the veteran population faces persistent employment and housing insecurity, programs such as SkillBridge should be scaled—not stalled.

Expanding access requires a multi-faceted approach: standardizing approval across commands, streamlining the application process, improving employer onboarding, and tailoring program offerings to align more directly with veterans' career goals and needs. Incorporating military spouses and lower-enlisted ranks into the program would increase its equity and ensure that those most vulnerable in the transition process receive adequate support.

According to a Federal News Network analysis, reducing bureaucratic delays and creating a more transparent approval system could encourage greater employer participation.[25] In addition, offering SkillBridge opportunities in emerging fields such as cybersecurity and renewable energy would ensure that veterans are prepared for the jobs of the future.[26] Implementing a centralized SkillBridge database where service members can easily browse and apply for available programs would also enhance accessibility and streamline the transition process.[27]

As DoD continues to address retention issues, programs such as SkillBridge can serve as a recruiting tool—demonstrating to future veterans that their transition to civilian life is a priority and that their sacrifices will be matched with opportunity and stability. In addition, guaranteed access to SkillBridge or related programs such as the Military Spouse Roadmap could be tied to re-enlistment or an extension of military service for at least two years. These approaches would increase economic certainty for service members and their families while providing a significantly better mechanism to manage personnel resources within DoD. They would also help to improve employment outcomes upon transition into the private sector.

Finally, introduction of a follow-up system to track long-term employment outcomes for SkillBridge participants could help policymakers refine the program and ensure that it continues to meet the evolving needs of transitioning service members.

Conclusion

As the labor market evolves and demand for skilled workers grows, SkillBridge offers a practical solution that benefits veterans, employers, and the broader economy. It helps service members leave the military with confidence, enter the workforce with relevant experience, and build stable careers that support their families and communities. With focused improvements and long-term commitment, SkillBridge and the Military Spouse Career Pathways Program can move from being helpful resources to being a central part of military-to-civilian transition policy.

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About the Authors

Kevin Klowden is an executive director at Milken Institute Finance. He specializes in the study of key factors that underlie the development of competitive regional economies (clusters of innovation, patterns of trade and investment, and concentration of skilled labor) and how these are influenced by public policy and, in turn, affect regional economies both globally and nationally. On a national level, he is heavily involved in trade, exports, and capital access for small businesses, including serving as chair of the US Department of Commerce's Trade Finance Advisory Council. He also helps to coordinate the Partnership for Lending in Underserved Markets initiative with the US Small Business Administration, which focuses on funding for African-American and Latino small businesses. He has been highly engaged in California's economy and workforce, including advising and writing on numerous subjects relating to California's workforce, technology, manufacturing, and export issues.

Klowden's areas of expertise include technology-based development, entrepreneurship, and the digitization of the global economy, including trade, infrastructure, media, and entertainment. He was the lead author of *Strategies for Expanding California's Exports*, which examined the vital role trade and exports play in the state economy and its underperformance relative to the country over the past decade. He has authored numerous publications on the California entertainment industry, including the impactful 2014 publication, *A Hollywood Exit: What California Must Do to Remain Competitive in Entertainment—and Keep Jobs*. He has also written on the role of trade infrastructure in economic growth and job creation in the reports *Jobs for America: Investments and Policies for Economic Growth and Competitiveness*, as well as in publications including *The Wall Street Journal*. He has addressed the role of technology-based development in publications such as the biennial *State Technology and Science Index*, *North America's High-Tech Economy*, and location-specific studies in several states, including multiple pieces on job creation and opportunities in the entertainment industry.

Klowden is a frequent speaker on California and national economic issues and has served on multiple advisory boards on business growth, economic development, and infrastructure. He holds graduate degrees from the University of Chicago and the London School of Economics.

Sean Cregan is a finance intern at the Milken Institute, where he focuses on understanding the impact of public policy on economic opportunity within the veteran community. A US Navy veteran, Cregan spent six years in service, including roles as a ceremonial guardsman, assignment at the Pentagon, and deployments within Naval Mobile Construction Battalion Five in California. His two Pacific deployments with the Seabees provided hands-on experience in project management, logistics, and leadership in complex environments.

Cregan is currently a junior studying economics at Georgetown University. As a recently separated veteran, he is particularly interested in addressing the economic challenges facing veterans and underserved communities. His studies are helping build a strong foundation in economics with an eye toward public policy, international development, environmental economics, and poverty reduction. Cregan's unique blend of military service and academic focus positions him to contribute meaningfully to policy and economic development efforts aimed at creating pathways to opportunity for all.

Gabby L'Esperance, is a dedicated qualitative researcher and program evaluator with a commitment to amplifying the voices of diverse communities through narrative-based research. In her role as director of insights at the Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN), she harnesses the power of qualitative methodology to uncover profound insights into the lived experiences of military and veteran families. Through L'Esperance's leadership and emphasis on the value of qualitative methods in understanding military life, MFAN continues to shine a light on the support military families need most and evaluate the programs built to support them. These research and program evaluation findings have been used as a basis for convening stakeholders, developing programs, and invoking positive change for service members, veterans, and their families.

L'Esperance is a subject matter expert on military and veteran family research methods, military family well-being, food insecurity, whole health care needs, military family financial readiness, program evaluation, and more. She regularly shares research findings and thought leadership with varying audiences, including, but not limited to, higher education, military and veteran family stakeholders, government leadership, and funding partners.

L'Esperance earned her doctorate in public administration from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, specializing in nonprofit management and qualitative research. She holds bachelor's and master's degrees from James Madison University. L'Esperance lives in Omaha with her husband and two dogs, where she continues to teach nonprofit management courses at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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