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Exploring positive and negative intersectionality effects: an employment study of neurodiverse UK military veterans

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ABSTRACT

Intersectional studies have examined the impact of personal characteristics upon employment experience, but little attention has been given to specificities of the neurodiverse and the military veteran. Both may possess skills and abilities that are desirable but there are several negative stereotypes that impact the acquisition and retention of work. Additionally, talent sourcing practices by employers can favour neurotypical people with a civilian background. Adopting a multi-method approach, this study explores barriers to employment and how they are compounded at the intersection of being a neurodiverse veteran (NDV). We surveyed 232 people with a medically diagnosed condition and conducted 21 semi-structured interviews to explore NDVs' views about how the recruitment process and HR practices impact their employment relationship. Extant studies often depict the intersection of qualities to be disadvantageous for the populations studied, however, our research suggests that NDVs can have highly beneficial work capabilities. Our practical contribution includes the identification of key positive and negative aspects in the employment of NDVs and how organizations can refine their talent sourcing and management. Our theoretical contribution is made through a framework depicting the influences on NDVs' employment relationships and a set of propositions that illuminate the intersectionality of neurodiverse and military veterans at work.

KEYWORDS

Intersectionality; HRM; neurodiversity; military veteran; reasonable adjustments

Introduction

Both the neurodiverse and military veterans are subject to a variety of negative perceptions.

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Neurodivergents face substantial barriers to finding and retaining employment (Hall, 2010). For instance, HR recruitment procedures have traditionally been designed for the neurotypical and this can discourage or prevent the neurodiverse from applying (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2018). Equally, military veterans encounter difficulty in gaining and maintaining employment (Flynn & Ball, 2020; Nelson et al., 2015).

Yet contrary to these stereotypical perceptions, both groups possess valuable skill sets and characteristics. For instance, people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) tend toward high systemization and proficiency in mathematics and analysis (Baron-Cohen, 2006). Dyslexic adults often have higher cognitive functioning than neurotypical adults (Leather et al., 2011). The coping mechanisms employed by the neurodiverse and their thinking patterns can provide advantage in terms of the specific mindset required for entrepreneurship (Logan, 2009). People with ADHD are often particularly skilled at multi-tasking (Dalton, 2013) and significantly better at idea generation and original creative thinking (White & Shah, 2011) which is highly sought-after by organizations (Taylor, 2021).

Veterans are often well educated and demonstrate loyalty to the organization (Benmelech & Frydman, 2015), they are resilient (Elder & Clipp, 1989), able to cope with stressful situations (Aldwin et al., 1994), less likely to pursue risky business policies (Benmelech & Frydman, 2015), and value service to others more highly than their civilian counterparts (Franke, 2001). Simpson and Sariol (2019) highlight the values of loyalty and duty that play such an important role in the lives of military personnel that are of benefit to companies. Veterans, who have usually been exposed to leadership and responsibility at a young age, also possess good teamwork and leadership skills that suit the business world (Duffy, 2006).

In response, some organisations such as the professional service firm EY (formerly Ernst and Young) and the Australian Government are investing in alternative recruitment techniques to attract neurodivergent talent (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Ovaska-Few, 2018). Similarly, in some countries, retired military personnel are highly valued especially in defence-related functions and the public sector (Tūtlys et al., 2018) where their knowledge, skills and abilities are desirable. Diversity in human capital leads to more varied perspectives and ideas, resulting in team innovation (Han et al., 2014) and can yield strategic benefits from the extension of perspectives, attitudes, and skills (Laursen et al., 2005). Ultimately, more diverse organizations can experience substantially increased organisational competitiveness (Austin & Pisano, 2017).

Therefore, it stands to reason that combining capabilities at the intersection of neurodiversity and veteran status could be attractive for a range of jobs and organizations. Unfortunately, little is known about this group of individuals.

Neurodiversity has been less often studied than other forms of diversity and, with respect to neurodiverse veterans, is an intersectionality that is rarely explored. This is confirmed by a Scopus search of the literature utilizing the terms 'veteran/neurodiverse*' that yielded only 14 returns, none of which had relevance to this study. Consequently, it is incumbent upon HR scholars and practitioners to better understand the capabilities and needs of these marginalized groups in order that organizations may be more able to utilize the often-unique skills that they possess (see: McDowall et al., 2023, p. 16). While there is a growing corpus of literature that explores the challenges that are faced by the neurodiverse in gaining employment, there is a much smaller body of work that explores the challenges that are faced by military veterans. In addition, much of this research emerges from the USA where being a military veteran is a revered status. Gordon et al. (2020) and Parrott et al. (2018) suggest that this contrasts with the UK where veterans are viewed in a far more negative light. Ultimately, there is a paucity of literature that examines neurodiverse military veterans (NDVs), yet neurodiversity is known to be a factor that is prevalent among veterans (British Dyslexia Association, 2021).

Given the outlined strengths of NDVs which can make them highly valuable staff for some organizations, intersectionality research is needed that does not predominantly focus on the negatives that 'oppressed' and disadvantaged groups encounter (Grzanka et al., 2020). Adopting an intersectionality perspective allows us to understand the complex interactions and a stronger 'gestalt' of the target group. We seek to explore how the barriers to employment are compounded at the intersection of being neurodiverse and a military veteran and investigate NDVs' views of how the recruitment process and HR approaches impacts them. In so doing, we also provide insights that can help to improve organizations' abilities to attract, select and retain NDVs.

The paper begins by reviewing the intersectionality literature before focussing on neurodiversity and employment. The context of the military veteran is then presented before the methodological approach is discussed. In terms of theoretical and practical contributions, the findings and discussions lead to the development of a model of NDV employment that depicts several key intersections. The paper closes with propositions for the amelioration of resulting challenges and presents practical contributions to enable improved NDV talent sourcing and management.

Intersectionality

Crenshaw (1989/2018) introduced intersectionality as a means of understanding the ways that '*multiple forms of inequality and disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood within conventional ways of thinking*' (National Association of Independent Schools, 2018, p. 0:12). Since then, it has become widely used in studies of the many interrelated tensions that exist within social systems (Cho et al., 2013; Rice et al., 2019).

Many authors have adopted intersectionality theory as a lens for examining a wide range of subjects including education (Hernández-Saca et al., 2018), managerial identity (Carrim & Nkomo, 2016), mental and physical disabilities (Jackson-Best & Edwards, 2018), law (Cho, 2013), politics (Hankivsky & Cormier, 2011), health and medicine (Wilson et al., 2019), employment (Berghs & Dyson, 2022), leadership (Richardson & Loubier, 2008), along with race and gender (Frederick & Shifrer, 2019; Shaw et al., 2012). McBride et al. (2015) emphasize intersectionality's usefulness within the field of work and employment—a legitimate reason to apply it in our research.

Crenshaw (1989/2018) utilised intersectionality theory to demonstrate the inequalities in the US legal system in terms of race and gender—in this case black women. Crenshaw argued that regarding disadvantage on one axis was fallible as it ignored the specific challenges involved and could render both groups devoid of legal protection. This argument can be extended to other groups at intersections. For instance, neurodiverse individuals might face specific negative perceptions but those who have benefitted from military service may be more resilient to pressures and ensuring stress (Aldwin et al., 1994; Elder & Clipp, 1989). It is important for researchers to be 'intersectionally aware' (McBride et al., 2015). Mooney (2016) provided criteria to the use of intersectionality in the field of employment. She offers the concept of 'nimble intersectionality' that can help researchers '*convey the separate and cumulative effects of being 'different' in more than one dimension across diverse employment settings*' (Mooney, 2016, p.716).

Carastathis (2014, p.304) observed that intersectionality research '*has become the predominant way of conceptualizing the relation between systems of oppression*' and Grzanka et al. (2020, p.304) argued that it has become '*an analytic tool for studying and challenging complex social inequalities at the nexus of multiple systems of oppression and privilege*'. As such, most research aims to identify oppression in specific groups based on a predominant assumption that the individuals at the centre of the intersection want their disadvantages to be identified and addressed. Masking of NDVs would be the more unusual case where individuals do

not want to be seen at the intersection, possibly to avoid some social stigma, and forego help such as reasonable adjustment in their workplace.

There is literature that discusses how intersectionality studies and issues may guide the development of legislation that may directly and indirectly affect organizations (De Beco, 2020; Shaw et al., 2012). However, it is evident that intersectional issues permeate organizations and their operations and are thereby of interest and concern to management scholars and practitioners (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Berghs & Dyson (2022) examination of employment in the United Kingdom, Richardson & Loubier (2008) investigation of the perceptions of leadership capability, Gopaldas (2010) prognostications of consumer culture theory research, Carrim & Nkomo (2016) study of managerial identity, and Acker's (2012) discussion of how organizational processes are 'gendered' are examples of intersectionality applied to management challenges. Common to such research approaches is that the actual groups at the intersections and the context they are embedded in need to be thoroughly understood. Both neurodivergents and veterans are discussed in relation to their employment context below.

Neurodiversity and employment

The terms that have been used in the past to describe the neurodiverse have ranged from defective or degenerative, to mental disease, retardation, or impairment (Silberman, 2015). These historic terms are important to know because they represent a traditional clinical view that measured neurodiverse conditions as a deficit that focuses on an individual's impairment and what can be done to intervene and make them more 'normal'. It was White & Wolfensberger (1969) who introduced the societal model of disability that suggests that it is society that disables by placing barriers in the way of people with a difference.

The term 'Neurodiversity' was coined by Singer (1999) and although rooted in research related to Asperger's syndrome, it has been expanded to include dyspraxia, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, autism spectrum disorder (including Asperger's), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and Tourette syndrome. Anxiety disorders (including Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) are often a co-morbidity but are rarely included in the literature on the subject. Singer (1999) also introduced the term 'neurotypical' to differentiate between those who were previously referred to as 'normal' and those who were not. Its intention was to focus on the neurodivergent's different ways of thinking, rather than on a disability (Ortega, 2009). Neurodiversity, like sexual orientation, has the exceptionality of being an invisible difference that individuals can choose to share or not (Priscott & Allen, 2021).

Conceptually neurodiversity is '*a moving target*' (Chapman, 2020, p.218). It can mean different things, to different people, at different times, in different circumstances. This means that a study into it must make some statements about how the researchers regard it. In this study the authors share the view of Kapp et al. (2012) that it is a movement in which the medical model of causation and cure is challengeable, and that non-visible difference should be celebrated as an inseparable aspect of identity. Neurodiversity is regarded as a form of human diversity that is subject to the same social dynamics as other forms of diversity, and that the narrative that there is a 'normal' or 'typical' type of mind 'is no more valid than that of gender, race or culture' (Autistic UK, 2022).

To this day, the neurodiverse are often excluded from employment (Hall, 2010) with only 22% of employable autistic adults being in employment (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Studies on gender in selection decisions have found that there can be a strong bias towards role congruity (Koch et al., 2015) and it might be that employers often simply assume that neurodiverse people do not 'fit' their positions. Many countries have enacted legislation that makes it a legal obligation for employers to provide reasonable adjustments (RAs) for the disabled, which includes the neurodiverse. RA refers to the removal or reduction of employment barriers or implementation of additional support to enable an employee to remain in or return to work. However, neurodivergent people often choose to avoid requesting additional support for fear of being viewed as troublesome, unable to cope or being accused of asking for special treatment from co-workers (Harwood, 2014; Stuart, 2004).

The term 'masking' is well known within studies on neurodiversity, especially those concentrating on autism. It is used to describe how a neurodiverse person unconsciously or consciously conceals their natural behaviours, traits, or characteristics in order to 'fit in' through a more socially acceptable visage (Allen, 2022; Sedgewick et al., 2021). While masking can have its costs, for instance to forsake reasonable adjustments, those individuals who are resilient and able to cope with high stress levels might choose to mask. Many veterans are seen to be more resilient than civilians given their training and experience (Elder & Clipp, 1989).

Despite the benefits of recruiting neurodivergents, some employers are anxious about the perceived risks. For example, the construction, engineering, and manufacturing sectors have documented their concerns about hiring neurodivergents (Chartered Institute of Leadership and Management, 2000). The need to provide RAs in accordance with UK law can dissuade organizations from hiring neurodivergents (Foster, 2007). There is also concern that accommodating an individual's

requirements represents an extra financial burden (Meager & Higgins, 2011). Hutson and Hutson (2023, p.2) note that comorbidity and '*overlapping conditions makes traditional career trajectories challenging for the neurodiverse community*'. Additionally, colleagues of the neurodiverse can view working with them as emotionally draining (Richards et al., 2019) and can perceive RAs as preferential treatment which leads to a reluctance by the neurodiverse to apply for them (Lopez et al., 2009). This could result in the paradoxical situation that all parties may lose out on potential benefits. Employers and neurotypical staff may not gain the full potential of the creativity and systematisation benefits that neurodiverse people are capable of delivering (Dalton, 2013; Logan, 2009) as these might be struggling at work. In turn, neurodiverse workers may have to cope with challenges without taking advantage of the RAs that they are entitled to.

Military veterans and employment

In the United Kingdom a military veteran is anyone in military uniform who has drawn one day's pay from the Ministry of Defence for service in the Royal Navy, Royal Air Force, or the Army, along with reservists and the merchant navy serving during a conflict. Accuracy in definition is important because a veteran is entitled to priority access to health care under the UK military covenant, the UK Government's commitment to their duty of care (Gov. UK, 2022). Organisations can voluntarily sign the covenant to set out their support to members of the Armed Forces depending on the size and nature of the organisation, but typically support employment of veterans and service spouses/partners and include policies that support reservists (Gov. UK, 2022).

A few studies of military and ex-military personnel have used intersectionality (Meade, 2020) and this supports its adoption within this research study. There is only a small body of literature that examines UK veteran employment (for example, Flynn & Ball, 2020; Parry et al., 2019) and the work of the Forces in Mind Trust, and this is a considerable oversight as they form a highly skilled human resource that is available to civilian employers. To be able to thrive in the global economy organisations need to be more resourceful and effective in using the sources that they have available to them. This is paramount in the strategic application of assets of which human capital is a key element (Vidotto et al., 2017).

Gaining meaningful employment for veterans is restricted by many factors including the possible presence of physical injury and mental health issues (Nelson et al., 2015). Efforts to gain employment can also be hampered by a recruiter's inability to translate a veteran's military

experience into civilian skill sets and this directly impacts their civilian work-life and chances of employment (Abulkheir & Li, 2020). Civilian employers can also find it challenging to understand the many roles and levels of training that exist in military service (Carter et al., 2017). This may be why veterans seek employment where military experience is more likely to apply and why they are well represented in areas that resemble specialist military functions such as protective services, computer/mathematics production, engineering, repair and installation and transportation (Schulker, 2017).

It would be remiss to suggest that there is no foundation to some of the perceptions that are held: for instance, in the UK, veterans aged 16-44 are three times more likely to have mental health problems than non-veterans of the same age (Fossey, 2012) and there are also ongoing concerns related to depression and alcohol dependence (Fossey, 2010). Nevertheless, the positive aspects above indicate that veterans can be a highly attractive target group for employers' recruitment and retention efforts.

The transition to civilian life can be relatively straightforward for most who leave the Armed Forces if they are not in sudden, unplanned transition (Roy et al., 2020). A longitudinal study of UK veterans that measured settled employment determined that 87% successfully manage the transition to civilian life (Iversen et al., 2005). Being employed is of paramount importance because of factors such as maximizing human capital, promoting individual wellbeing, integration, socialization, access to education and training (World Health Organization, 2011) and has been shown to be a social determinant of health (Hamilton et al., 2015; Waddell & Burton, 2006). Many military personnel are rewarded by the educational and lifestyle opportunities that are offered while serving but face substantially lower income and loss of status when entering civilian life (Cooper et al., 2018b). While it is not clear why this is the case, a study on older veterans transitioning into civilian life found that they were aiming to gain employment quickly and, therefore, tended to apply for lower skilled jobs (Flynn & Ball, 2020).

Despite evidence of the skills that veterans can bring to the civilian workplace (Guo et al., 2016) and that firms that are most likely to hire veterans may experience above average stock price developments (Pollak et al., 2019), there is a damaging narrative among much of the general population, academia, and media. Parrott *et al's*. (2018) analysis of tweets showed that US veterans were often regarded as 'heroes', 'charity cases' or 'victims'. Gordon et al. (2020) note that in the UK, the focus is on depression or alcohol abuse whereas in the USA it is dominated by exposure to deployment, physical, or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and mental health issues. This dominant discourse creates a skewed public perception of the 'damaged veteran', impaired in some

manner by their service (HOC Defence Committee, 2018). However, Milroy (2009) has shown that, for the vast majority, the problems that are encountered in civilian life are unrelated to military service. Veterans seeking and maintaining employment also face the prospect of other negative stereotyping by employers: Shepherd et al. (2019) describe employers' perceptions of veterans as unfeeling and unable to read social context, and this has ramifications for their employability.

Neurodiverse veterans and employment

The intersectionality of veterans who are also neurodiverse may be a factor in their employment. Veterans, having experienced a potentially lifelong struggle with their own neurodiversity, may have a limited ability to understand their own transferrable skills to civilian jobs (Logan, 2009). Given that neurodivergents also have fewer chances of employment (Hall, 2010) and that '*unchecked assumptions or biases linked to a traditional job analysis conducted by, with, and for neurotypical individuals may inadvertently result in disadvantaging neuroatypical individuals*' (McMillan et al., 2023, p. 31), the intersection presents a particular difficulty in job searching.

Leaving the military is not just a change of employer, it often involves a move of home and a significant shift in lifestyle, with the social shock of leaving behind the familiar trappings of the forces (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2011). For those undergoing sudden transition through a compulsory discharge, the change into civilian life can be abrupt, complex, and traumatic (Van Staden et al., 2007). Regardless of rank and circumstance, all veterans must navigate ever-changing civilian social experiences, resources, and networks (Stern et al., 2013). Neurodivergents can struggle with change because they often want stability, predictability and systematic patterns in their employment (MacLean et al., 2014).

The literature review has outlined many pertinent issues regarding neurodiverse individuals or veterans in relation to their employment. Adding the intersectionality of a neurodivergent who is also a veteran raises many issues that have been relatively neglected in the literature. These include whether neurodiverse veterans have additional strengths (and perceived challenges) that may influence their ability to gain employment and a clear understanding of the nature of these differences. In addition, research has not sufficiently explored how NDVs can maintain employment and be supported in the workplace.

Following the methodological choices that are discussed next, we present data from NDVs in terms of their employment experience. We draw insights that capture NDVs' perceptions of employers' and the public's attitudes to them. This allows us to develop an NDV intersectionality

model that depicts many key influences that shape their experiences. We contribute to the understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with NDVs' work, develop research propositions, and provide suggestions of future research avenues.

Methodology

This exploratory study utilizes a mixed-methods approach comprising a self-administered survey and semi-structured interviews, and is a common approach for studies in this area (Edan et al., 2021; Richards & Sang, 2016). The use of survey technique facilitated a structured approach to data collection from a higher number of participants than can be reached through other methods (Holtom et al., 2022). The interviews provided rich insight into the complex real-world experiences of actors (Ciulli et al., 2020; Moraes et al., 2020). This pluralistic approach (Chamberlain et al., 2011) afforded a means of gaining an understanding of 'real life' (Öberseder et al., 2011) and of achieving instrumental triangulation (Longoni & Cagliano, 2018).

Ethical approval for this study was gained from the Ministry of Defence Research Ethics Committee (MODREC, 2020). It was a specific condition of approval that findings do not act as a proxy for comment on serving members and so no comment is made in this respect. Neurodiversity statistics for the veteran population are not available. An enquiry through the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, revealed that statistics for neurodiverse conditions that do not exclude service are not currently gathered by the Army Officer Selection Board.

The literature was operationalised into four principal areas based on the Research Questions:

a. What challenges have you faced in seeking employment as a neurodiverse veteran?
b. What unique skills and experience do you think you bring to an organisation as a neurodiverse veteran?
c. How can employers best support neurodiverse veterans seeking employment?
d. What can employers do to best support neurodiverse veterans once they are employed?

Survey

Advice on the construction of the survey was taken from Autistic UK and the veteran's charity All Call Signs. Both gave similar advice related

to the use of font and size, to be explicit and ask questions in the first person. Following a video and written declaration of intention of the research on social media, the online survey was later distributed *via* a Qualtrics link to veteran networks (All Call Signs; UK Veterans in Need), veteran social media groups (Facebook, Linked in), and personal networks. The researchers encouraged further distribution *via* snowballing (Ehrnrooth et al., 2023). Details of the survey are provided in Table 1.

Respondents to the survey were also asked if they would consent to taking part in follow-up interviews and 80 agreed to do so.

Demographics

834 responses were received of which 232 people had a medically diagnosed condition (Table 1) and this formed the survey data set (199 male, 19 female and 22 not disclosed). Ages ranged from 20 to 74. All had left service between 1972 to 2020. The survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics to characterize the type and prevalence of neurodiversity.

Those noted as 'others' in Table 2 were anxiety disorders (such panic and Generalised Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) and dyscalculia. Of the 232, 154 answered the question related to when they received diagnoses as follows: before joining the service (39), during service (41) and, as a veteran (74). Fully understanding the reasons for not seeking in-service-diagnosis is beyond the scope of this study but our data indicated that they include the fear of accelerated medical discharge with the provision of appropriate support and assistance.

The predominance of male to female participants made it impossible to establish whether gender was a factor in seeking a diagnosis before, during

Table 1. Survey questions.

Demographics
Have you been medically diagnosed with a neurodiverse condition?
Which of these conditions apply to you?
Were you diagnosed with this condition before, during or after service?
What was the reason for not seeking a medical diagnosis in service?
To what extent do you agree/disagree that being neurodiverse contributes to employment difficulties for veterans?
What challenges have you faced in seeking employment as a neurodiverse veteran?
What unique skills and experience do you think you bring to an organisation as a neurodiverse veteran?
How can employers best support neurodiverse veterans seeking employment?
What can employers do to best support neurodiverse veterans once they are employed?
What coping strategies have you developed to deal with working in civilian life?
When going through recruitment, did you experience any bias?
In your experience, as a Neurodiverse Veteran were you rated as less capable, less suitable, less likely to be offered a job?
What strengths do you think you bring to work in being Neurodiverse Veteran that others may not?
Were you worried about being discharged from service because of your neurodiversity?
Did you hide your condition in service?
What challenges have you had since leaving service?

Table 2. Neurodiverse veteran condition demographic.

	Condition	n	%
1	Dyslexia	75	32
2	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	44	19
3	Others	40	17
4	Autism	29	13
5	Dyspraxia	21	9
6	Aspergers Syndrome	19	8
7	Tourette Syndrome	2	1
8	Complex Tic Disorders	2	1
	Totals	232	100

or after service. However, age was found to be a determining factor with 90% of those who had received a diagnosis before joining the services being under 40. The data also show that seeking diagnosis is most common in those aged 30-49 where 59% of that age group sought diagnosis while serving. 68% of over 50s and 55% of those aged 40–49 sought a diagnosis after leaving service. It may be that older veterans face a greater challenge with transition to civilian life *and* having to address their neurodiversity. Those who took the survey noted conditions that are outside of the study boundary, and these were discounted. These included PTSD, brain injury, service administered pharma-induced conditions, depression, reflex sympathetic dystrophy, scotopic sensitivity, bi-polar and personality disorders.

Interviews

Participants provided informed consent *via* a front-page agreement on the survey and verbally in recorded interviews. Participants were also informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. All data was anonymised, and interview participants are referred to using the convention P1, P2…P21 in the analyses. It is notable that researcher well-being receives comparatively little attention in the literature (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018; Mallon & Elliott, 2019) and the researchers identified the emotional impact of conducting this investigation. Future researchers should be mindful of this consequence and, similar to this study, employ 'emotionally detached' collaborators to act as '*guardians*[s] *of ethical practice*' for the support and benefit of the researchers and participants alike (Bahn & Weatherill, 2012, p.20).

The participants that agreed to take part in the follow-up interviews were contacted *via* email. From this, 26 interviews were initially scheduled. However, five interviews were cancelled by the participants due to relapses in their condition or other personal circumstances.

The semi-structured interview questions broadly followed the structure of the survey, exploring the challenges of neurodiversity and seeking employment. Further questions were operationalized *in acta* to explore

salient subjects (Charmaz, 2014). This allowed exploration of issues in more depth in relation to the four main themes used in this article: stereotyping at the intersection of NDVs, NDVs perceptions and experiences during talent sourcing and talent management, the use of reasonable adjustments (RAs) and the advantages that NDVs can bring to the world of work. These themes are used to structure the findings.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour, were recorded, and transcribed by the lead researcher (c.f. Opdenakker, 2006). The 62,000 words of narrative were analysed using thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2011). Two researchers independently analysed the interview transcripts to identify the initial thematic codes. The two researchers then cross-compared these initial codes to reach consensus (White et al., 2022) before the major themes were derived in agreement with the other researchers (Thomas et al., 2018). The final interpretations of the data were member validated (Sandelowski, 1993).

Findings

This section presents the findings of the analyses of the survey and interview data detailed in the methodology. It focuses on the challenges that NDVs perceive in finding and maintaining employment and what they propose that employers could do to better support them in seeking and maintaining employment. In the analyses and tables, all figures have been rounded to the nearest integer to aid clarity (Gigerenzer & Brighton, 2009).

Challenges perceived by neurodiverse veterans in finding and maintaining employment

The survey asked NDVs about the positives that they bring to the job market, and they typically identified characteristics such as 'honesty' and 'stamina', and also highlighted the challenges associated with 'overcoming barriers'. Some identified personal skills that included problem solving, creativity, and 'different' or 'out of the box' thinking. However, only 25% gave a positive response. The vast majority expressed the challenges of seeking and maintaining employment as a neurodiverse person. Some individuals stated that there were 'no positives' to being neurodiverse.

Stereotyping of NDVs

During the interview, many participants indicated that being neurodiverse manifested as being stereotyped throughout the entire process of seeking employment:

> …very rarely portray neurodiverse people as anything other than either savant or difficult. That influences the way people think, all we can see is that we didn't get an interview. [P1]

Many discussed the prevailing perceptions and stereotypes of veterans that permeate society and impacted upon their well-being and confidence before the search for employment had even begun. Participant 12 revealed the trauma of once being called a 'baby killer' in an interview—clearly a misunderstanding of what constitutes being a veteran and the different roles within the military. Indeed, several interviewees outlined that staff in their organizations struggled with understanding what a veteran or a neurodiverse person is and that they did not appreciate what it meant to be an NDV. The intersectionality meant that many participants highlighted experiences that had led them to remove or play-down their military service for fear of stereotyping and discrimination. In fact, a substantial minority of interviewees expressed that there was a perception that all veterans would have PTSD. One commented that they were told:

> leave your veteran status at the door there's nothing to be proud of in serving in violent conflict and why you're at it try not to talk too much about mental health issues because nobody wants to hear about that. [P2]

The literature clearly identifies the stigma, that is driven by stereotyping, as a potential negative effect in the employment relationship of neurodiverse people (Whelpley et al., 2021). Several NDVs also faced an additional set of prejudices associated with bring military veterans (Phillips, 2020).

NDVs were consistent in wanting organisations to set aside preconceptions and stereotypes. The most frequent word used in relation to what employers could do better was 'understanding'. This is a profound realization that challenges the dominant conversation or popular misconception that views veterans in general, and neurodiverse veterans specifically, as being problematic (Lopez et al., 2009; Parrott et al., 2018) or that the RA that they are entitled to are prohibitive (Foster, 2007; Ovaska-Few, 2018). Instead, it speaks to the need for a fundamental change in the general mindset to view NDVs with greater appreciation of their value as humans and their contribution to the human capital of the organization:

> Employers have to understand, we process very differently, we learn very differently. [P4]

The lack of understanding and prevalence of stereotyping often manifests in confusion between service life and condition typified by this survey respondent:

> Civilian employers assume that everything about you is service related. My autism has been mistaken for PTSD.

This statement demonstrates the unique difficulty faced by some NDVs where there is not only a lack of understanding of neurodiverse conditions but also service induced conditions. It also speaks to the difficulty of treatment in comorbidity which has been noted by Kumar (2021) where autistic people with PTSD struggle to separate the element of themselves that is related to neurodiversity and that which is related to trauma experience.

HR/talent sourcing NDVs

Almost all NDVs talked about their disinclination to disclose information about their neurodiversity on their CV:

> I wouldn't mention being dyslexic or anything, it would stand against me if someone was reading it. [P6]

Arguably, the participants were presuming that disclosing their neurodiversity on a job application would result in non-selection for interview. Sometimes, their experience was that it was a very real form of prejudice:

> I've submitted applications twice to the same job, with the inclusion/exclusion of dyslexia. The CV with dyslexia was declined, the one omitting it was veiled and I was interviewed on its basis. [P17]

At the intersection of neurodiversity and veteran status, many NDVs recounted their first-hand experience of recruitment agencies and potential employers who were unwilling to even consider veterans for positions:

> Most recruiters or employers see zero transferable skills from the military, and I've even had recruiters slam the phone down on me as they had bias against Military. [P18]

Beyond being a veteran and having to overcome prejudices, the actual selection process can be particularly taxing depending on the neurodiversity:

> I've yet to go through an interview or a selection process for a civilian role where it isn't traumatic for someone with autism… the process is unpleasant. [P5]

Some aspects of the challenges of finding employment are unique to NDVs. It is therefore not surprising that, at the intersection of neurodiverse/veteran, participants sometimes attempt to mask both (c.f. Allen, 2022; Sedgewick et al., 2021). As a veteran they may try to supress their military bearing and behaviours to appear to be a normal civilian, as a

neurodivergent they may mask in order to be viewed as neurotypical. The difficulty of this was typified in this statement:

> I'm struggling with what bits are me, and what bits of the me that I've had to create to feel like I'm normal around other people [P5]

An inability to gain work over an extended time period also negatively affected perceptions of self-worth. In the job, many struggled with management indifference or misunderstanding of their condition and with activities such as mandatory training tests and report writing.

Confronted with the demands of organizational talent sourcing, expressed through constructing CVs, sitting psychometric tests, filling in job application forms, answering rapid fire questions during interviews or explaining military qualifications, NDVs believed they faced more challenges in obtaining work than people who are only military veterans or only neurodiverse.

Applying for a job came with particular challenges for NDVs, including form-filling, or completing screenings. Other issues arose in traditional interviews in relation to confidence: P7 noted that because they were not the image of normal, the recruiter said they looked worried and lacking self-confidence, which was not necessarily the case. In another example, P8 noted that an interviewer believed they lacked empathy because they struggled with processing emotions.

The intersection of neurodiverse and veteran was clearly expressed as increasing the difficulty in gaining and maintaining employment:

> We [veterans] are hard to understand as it is, being neurodiverse makes it ten times harder. [P16]

> They think we [veterans] all have some baggage and [then] to mention dyslexia etc. [P19]

Many expressed a frustration with repetitive or non-demanding work that they were often assigned. Neurodiverse veterans seemed to want to be challenged, stimulated, and occupied.:

> Keep us busy, keep me challenged, keep me focused on something. Shake it up a little bit. Don't keep me in the same job day in day out. [P8]

NDs and reasonable adjustments; ND veterans and resilience

The process of socializing veterans into civilian employment is an aspect of recruitment that requires attention (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2011). It is also a dimension of culture that requires sustained effort beyond the recruitment process, especially if neurodiversity is involved.

Building upon this recognition of the importance of the social dimension of civilian life and work, there was an expression of continued consternation that it is the neurodiverse individual that is expected to adjust to 'normal life'.

Having difficulty in integrating with neurotypicals is a recognized trait of neurodivergents (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Participants discussed the 'social' and 'emotional' challenges of civilian working life at great length. This seems to be the most frequent cause of distress among them as well as the staff that they work amongst. Participants showed that both being neurodiverse and their experience with military structure and regimentation was important:

> I don't pick up on whether people feel or look sad. [P7]

> I have no social skills which I found quite upsetting. [P9]

> I get here at the same time every day. I finish at the same time. You know, I try and keep myself regimented. [P12]

Some NDVs felt that there was an innate reluctance in employers to consider NDVs because they were wary of the reasonable adjustments that some conditions might demand. This caution was typified by the following survey respondent:

> [They are] terrified of organising them [RAs], passing staff from manager to manager/team to team.

Shockingly, another survey respondent said that they were explicitly told they did not get a job because of a '*refusal to provide any reasonable adjustments as proven in the feedback*.' Another survey respondent commented that even when employers did consider RAs it was often '*a weak attempt to help*.'

NDVs also must cope with their job environments. Many struggled with what they perceived as workplace chaos, found open office designs or strip lighting difficult and avoided interpersonal exchanges while wanting to appear normal and fearing what others thought of them. While these were contextual elements that impacted mostly on neurodiverse individuals, several veterans missed the camaraderie from their military days, found that their humour was not sufficiently appreciated and regarded civilians as more self-centred. Despite the consensus that many organisations were averse to people asking for RAs, there were rare examples where companies had reacted positively. Participant 4 described the journey from the military into civilian technical organisations and noted that they were:

> well adjusted and attuned to dealing with autistic spectrum conditions things like ADHD and other neurodiverse conditions. [P4]

This aligns with the findings of Wang (2014) who notes that technology companies have been aggressively recruiting from the neurodiverse community for their specialist skills in pattern recognition and systems management. While this is good news it also speaks to the need for more to be done in other sectors.

However, NDVs seemed to be distinct due to a high degree of resilience acquired by their military experiences. Many participants noted a reluctance to ask for reasonable adjustments even though a '*small adjustment to the working environment allows a neurodiverse veteran to flourish*.' [P19]. While neurodivergents often faced an absence of substantial RAs in organizations, NDVs seem to benefit from their military experiences that increases resilience.

Participant 3 commented on this resilience as being a mindset where the individuals '*just get on with it*', musing, '*that's a squaddie thing to do, isn't it?*' Another said:

> I think there's an element of the training that we all go through in the military, regardless of what your role is or what status whether it regular or territorial of 'just get on with it, just get through, just keep pushing on'. [P5]

Positive intersectionality (attributions that may cover ND/V and NDV)

Success in job-seeking for veterans was dependent upon the type of role they had in the military. Those with higher qualifications and more professional roles tended to find work more easily:

> Medic friends find it a lot easier to find work and get jobs. Infantry friends have struggled. [P6]

A further barrier to better job opportunities was the discord between what the military had provided in training and the absence of 'paper qualifications'. Equally, the success of neurodivergents in obtaining and keeping a job was related to their condition and the job fit. For instance, some neurodivergents can be especially valued for their highly developed analytical skills and pattern recognition (Austin & Pisano, 2017).

Although many voiced negative concerns about stereotyping, talent sourcing and RAs as reflected in earlier comments, there was an alternative view that emerged that rather than being a negative, that the intersection of neurodiversity and veteran provided a positive and unique group of people. The view was that it can be highly attractive for employers to have a neurodivergent individual function in an environment shaped by high stress levels or to gain staff who are loyal and committed as veterans tend to be (Simpson and Sariol, 2019). Indeed, Participant 11

commented on the positive aspect of NDVs who come with their '*own unique combination of different things.*' One survey respondent promoted the positive intersection view by stating that organisations needed to '*embrace the superpower and manage the deconstructive traits.*' For many, the positive elements of NDV intersection offered a desirable individual which one respondent summarised as:

> Intelligence, consistency, resourceful, adaptable, resilient, follows rules (loves), strength, calm when everyone else is stressing, direct, specific, problem solving. [survey respondent]

Those in the neurodiverse community often refer to their uniqueness as being a 'superpower', this too was reflected in comments from NDVs about the positive interaction of their veteran status and neurodiversity, typified by:

> …they don't need to put [NDV] people in the special bracket, they need to put them in the superpower bracket. [P2]

However, the participants also suggested that their voice was not enough. They required organisations to promote the positive benefits that NDVs can bring:

> People need to be guided to roles where their neurodiversity is an advantage not a disadvantage. [P13]

The above demonstrates some possibilities for positive intersectionality in which both being neurodiverse and being a military veteran can be beneficial for the individual and the organisations in terms of the characteristics of the person. For others the intersection produced individuals who had improved task or project focus:

> The armed forces breed honesty, directness and do not encourage politics which I believe actually suits the autistic mind. Civvies like to play politics, have agendas, and not tell you what their problem is…neurodiverse people from a military background may have no idea how to deal with that. [P21]

Neurodivergents are often exposed to particularly difficult situations. At the intersection of NDVs they can profit from their experiences in the armed forces to successfully cope with challenges in their civilian working lives. Table 3 provides an overview of the key findings in relation to the research question and the four principal areas that were determined by the data.

Table 3 also demonstrates the importance of examining the intersectionality of neurodiversity and military veterans. Simply concentrating on veterans would have been less likely to yield insight into the various pressures such as 'trying to act normal', 'hiding condition' or 'sensory

Table 3. Challenges of finding and maintaining employment for neurodiverse veterans.

The challenges of finding employment for NDV	The challenges of maintaining employment for NDV
Stereotyping – The intersection of neurodiversity and veteran status leads to more stereotyping	
Misunderstanding what a veteran or neurodiverse is.	Misunderstanding what a veteran or neurodiverse is.
Direct/indirect prejudice towards forces.	Perception that veterans all have PTSD.
Direct/indirect prejudice toward neurodiverse.	
HR/Talent Sourcing NDVs – The intersection of neurodiversity and veteran status leads to more challenges obtaining and retaining work	
Constructing CVs.	Rigid time keeping.
Psychometric tests.	Management not understanding condition.
Job application forms.	Mandatory training tests.
Rapid fire question at interview.	Writing reports.
Explaining military qualifications.	
NDs trying to 'act normal'.	
Issues conveying feelings.	
Hiding condition (masking/camouflaging)	
Failure to get work increases poor self-worth	
Reasonable Adjustments – While many organizations do not provide RAs, veterans are more resilient to cope with the ensuring challenges	
Employer fear of various conditions requiring RAs.	Getting and maintaining Reasonable Adjustments.
Light-touch RA where more substantial adjustments would have been needed	Some conditions requiring greater flexibility in work patterns/schedules/timetabling.
	NDVs face new/problematic social constructs.
	Sensory elements (strip lighting, open offices).
	Perceived workplace chaos.
	People not understanding NDV humour.
	NDVs struggling to 'act normal'.
	Issues with conveying feelings.
	Interpersonal exchanges.
	Fearing what others think.
	Increased anxiety.
	Missing camaraderie – civilians seen as more self-centered.
Positive intersectionality – NDVs can argue to not only bring the advantages of neurodiverse but also the advantages of military ethics and service	
Understanding the strengths of NDVs	Underusing the strengths of NDVs
Drawing on military experience to demonstrate resilience, loyalty and sense of duty in job applications and interviews.	Boredom.
	Low level or repetitive computer work.
	Misaligning jobs with skills and experience.
Drawing on neurodiverse capabilities to outline the diversity and competency gains for the organization during interviews	

elements' in terms of job seeking and maintenance. Focusing exclusively on neurodiversity would have been less likely to show 'prejudice towards forces', 'low skill jobs because of inability to achieve paper qualifications' or 'missing camaraderie' as challenges in their quest to gain and maintain employment. Our perspective helps to understand these challenges more broadly and leads to a range of theoretical and practical implications that we discuss further in the discussion and conclusions section of this paper.

Table 4 provides clarity, based upon the data from survey and interviews, about the support NDVs suggest could be provided by organisations. Overall, Table 4 indicates the added value of concentrating on the intersectionality of military veterans and the neurodiverse. There are many suggestions that would help both veterans and neurodiverse people to better cope and succeed in their jobs. However, some of the identified

Table 4. Summary of NDVs' comments on suggested support.

NDVs SUGGESTED SUPPORT
Stereotyping of NDVs
Be non-judgmental
Have work based champions
Understand military personnel and actively assist with transition
Treat NDVs as 'normal' people
Be patient – it takes time for NDVs to settle in
Be aware of unconscious bias towards veterans and neurodiversity
HR / Talent Sourcing NDVs
Understand individual needs - one size does not fit all – Deformalize
Avoid psychometric tests and long written applications.
Avoid competency-based interviews.
Be adaptive and inclusive
Advertise inclusively.
Provide variation for pre-interview contact – telephone, email, face to face.
Do not check medical background
Develop accurate plain speaking job specifications
Avoid auto-filtering – not all NDVs skills fit neatly into tick boxes
Design voluntary work placings rather than screenings
Provide guaranteed interview schemes [where veterans are interviewed if they meet essential job criteria with armed forces covenant signatories]
Provide information on the structure/assessment in good time if you interview
Keep people challenged and engaged
Allow people time to settle in
Be patient and understanding
Implement regular wellbeing checks and occupational support
Support medical appointments
Provide emotional support or safe spaces
Use Government funding to retrofit software on computers
NDVs Reasonable Adjustment and resilience
Understand conditions and concentrate on the positive aspects of them.
Simplify provision of reasonable adjustments. Employers need to understand that not all are costly but can have a big impact.
Recognise that some NDVs have comorbidity [the simultaneous presence of one or more diseases or medical conditions in a patient].
Appreciate that people need support in different ways
Provide access to education on coping strategies for work
Upgrade first aid to accommodate mental first aiders [Internal support employees in the workplace who have experience in dealing with mental ill health or distress (See: Saint John's Ambulance, 2023)]
Tailor workplace planning and training
Listen to NDVs – they know how to improve things for themselves
Show patience and understanding
Have a buddy system
Create a climate of camaraderie
Provide access to support networks
Be straight talking – nuances do not always work with NDV.
Simplify the reporting/line management/hierarchy
Provide clarity on progression/career path
Explain changes to structure/progression as it can be distracting
Vary the way that you teach and adjust to the learning preferences and strengths.
Positive Intersectionality
Accept differences rather than trying to mold people into a form.
Use the diversity to develop better ideas, services and products
Appreciate loyalty and sense of duty of veterans
Focus on what NDVs can do, not what they can't do.
Acknowledge there are different ways to work

support measures are clearly more geared to veterans, such as being aware of the conscious and unconscious biases regarding military service, appreciating their loyalty and sense of duty, assisting with the transition to civilian life or creating a climate of camaraderie. Other support

measures are more geared toward neurodiverse persons, such as using appropriate (straight) communication, avoiding psychometric tests, supporting their medical appointments, or acknowledging the differences in working patterns.

These trends in our data align strongly with those organisations that have successfully recruited and held onto neurodiverse staff. For example, the Specialisterne Foundation (2022), who have partnered with IBM, Accenture, KPMG and Suncorp, suggest that best practice falls into two main categories: replacing vagueness and rethinking traditional interviews. However, they are silent on the employment of veterans. Similarly, the Business In The Community article on capitalizing on military talent (BITC, 2017) and the UK Government Armed Forces Covenant (Gov. UK, 2022) suggests that good practices revolve around reaching out to veterans to show support and understanding and to provide familiarity through initiatives such as insight days. However, both are silent on neurodiversity. Our interviews showed that NDVs felt that their employers did not heed many of the good practice recommendations. Overall, the literature also implies that the situation for either neurodiverse or military veterans could improve and, indeed, many organizations could profit if these good practice recommendations were more broadly implemented.

Exploring the intersectionality of neurodiverse and veteran provides a fuller picture of ideas NDVs have about how they could be more effectively supported at work. Below, we discuss our findings and further develop theoretical and practical implications. We use the insights of the above sections and Tables 3 and 4 to develop propositions in the discussion section below.

Discussion

In accord with the available literature that independently explores 'veterans' and 'neurodiversity', this study confirms the many challenges that these identities bring to the search for employment. Chief among these is the dominant, and often misinformed, perceptions that are held by both the public and prospective employers. Our study found that veterans perceived that they are frequently attributed a single identity with few skills and abilities that are pertinent to civilian working life. What is of surprise and concern is the veterans' perceptions that this is also prevalent among recruitment agencies.

From the analyses we identify four key features of the challenges that are faced by NDVs in their transition to civilian life and the search for gainful employment. These comprise 'Intersectional NDV Stereotyping', 'HR talent sourcing is geared to neurotypical, non-veterans', 'Reasonable Adjustments and NDVs' and 'Positive Intersectionality'. Collectively, these

present clear needs and opportunities for future research, as well as indicating areas where practical intervention is required throughout the recruitment process, and they suggest the need for reconsideration of current policy.

Proposition 1: 'Intersectional NDV stereotyping'

The negative stereotypes of veterans and neurodiversity can combine to create disadvantage for neurodiverse veterans seeking employment. The data reveal that veterans believe they are stereotyped. They feel that the public view and that of employers is often that they carry emotional or physical baggage. The perception is that employers are therefore reluctant to recruit them. The mass media often reports extreme cases, and the academic literature, too, focuses on issues such as physical and mental health, and alcohol misuse (Ashcroft, 2017). This is understandable as it is these aspects that require medical and policy intervention to bring stability to some people and therefore is likely to be more present in employer's minds. However, the presence of such a view is damaging to those seeking employment. The participants did not comment on whether they have tried to disavow recruiters of their stereotype, but they did note that they were reluctant to reveal their military service unless they were interviewing for a job that already employed veterans. Our findings support previous research by Priscott & Allen (2021) that has noted the stereotyping of non-visible differences in terms of their cognitive, social, and emotional abilities and sometime emphasis on 'gifted outliers' (Brown & Fisher, 2023, p.36). The data also supports Austin & Pisano (2017) argument that neurodivergent people will choose to hide their differences because of their fear of being stereotyped.

There is a distinct lack of research that combines the neurodiverse with a veteran status and our study adds important insights for employers. Many employers are unlikely to be fully informed on military or neurodiverse aspects and so where these overlap, in either ineffectual recruitment or long-term support, problems for NDVs arise. Independent stereotyping represents a challenge to the individual but when the two stereotypes (neurodiverse/veteran) intersect, they amplify the challenge and create feelings of inequality and discrimination. This can leave NDVs feeling disenfranchised by experiences and by the perception of employers and themselves. Overall, our study allows us to postulate:

Proposition 1: *Intersectionality amplifies the challenging employment effects for neurodiverse veterans due to stereotyping.*

1a. NDVs feel they are confronted with a stronger negative stereotype and experience a greater disadvantage in finding employment compared to people who are solely neurodiverse or solely a military veteran.

1b. NDVs feel they are confronted with a stronger negative stereotype and experience a greater challenge to maintain employment relationships compared to people who are solely neurodiverse or solely a military veteran.

Proposition 2: HR talent sourcing is geared to neurotypical nonveterans

The general approach to talent sourcing and HR management is predominantly geared to neurotypical people. This study aligns with that of Cooper et al. (2018a. p.45) who found that difference is often 'misinterpreted as inability, incompetence or face not fitting.' This is a frustration for neurodivergents as they often possess many talents but are unlikely to score highly in an interview or competency-based selection and promotion process that is geared to neurotypical people (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Cockayne, 2015). In addition, HR management is often focussed on nonveterans. Although the public may have a generally positive view of in-service personnel, they are not regarded in the same way when they become veterans (Phillips et al., 2022). They face issues with selection for employment because of perceptions that they are agentic and unfeeling (Shepherd et al., 2019). This study confirms that veterans can also be disadvantaged in selection by a view that they may have health or social issues (Ashcroft, 2017) or through misunderstanding about their qualifications and transferable skills (Stone & Stone, 2015). Separately these would be two groups that are disadvantaged in many organizations' recruitment and selection approaches resulting in inadvertent loss of variation in skills through old established measures of employability (Blackburn, 2023)

When combined, the two disadvantaged groups seem to face a significant barrier to employment. Given that the decision to employ somebody typically is a binary one, and that decision-makers often have a role congruity bias (Koch et al., 2015). The intersection of being both neurodiverse and a veteran represents not simply more factors that can be seen as negative in the hiring decision-making but these multiple factors can conspire in a way that employers simply do not want to employ NDVs.

Beyond stereotyping, it is the lack of understanding that disadvantages neurodiverse and veterans in the selection process. A typical modern recruitment process may rely upon automation to reduce numbers to be considered for interview. This study and others such as Sumner & Brown (2015) and Wiggleton-Little & Callender (2023) has indicated that this is

problematic for the neurodiverse as their answers are likely to be atypical and therefore may be rejected by algorithms. If they are dyslexic or dysgraphic their written application may have errors. Once at interview they may be subject to a competency-based dialogue that relies on open questions, these offer a challenge to neurodivergents who may take a literal rather than implicit meaning or concentrate on detail or find tangents (Lup & Canonico, 2020). If they make it to interview, they may not display the social norms that many interviewers have been trained to recognise. For example, an autistic person may struggle to make eye contact or not read nuances of body language. For the veteran the battle for employment can begin with systems and HR being unable to recognise military qualifications or experience (Stone & Stone, 2015). In interview the veteran may also struggle to civilianise and articulate the extent of the skills or the full breadth of specialist knowledge they have gained. Often systems also do not consider 'soft' qualities such as loyalty, sense of duty and resilience.

Also, beyond stereotyping, once in employment the neurodiverse can be misread. This study, like that of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2018), has highlighted that some may struggle with areas such as social interaction or being able to 'read' emotions. It is always important to note that neurodiversity covers an array of conditions, which are also on a spectrum of severity. The neurodivergent that some might think of as 'aloof' may just be unsure how to interact in a situation or how to react to a metaphor or piece of jargon (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2018). Without the understanding of management and co-workers they could be disadvantaged in maintaining employment. One indicator is that neurodiverse people encounter challenges to access training and learning opportunities or appropriate career development (Sumner & Brown, 2015) due to most HR approaches concentrating on team and job concepts geared to neurotypical people. A key aspect of the intersectionality to the neurodiverse is that if they are also veterans, they are likely to be more resilient and loyal to their companies in their employment struggles. This particular intersectionality and its effect on the employment relationship has hitherto been neglected in research.

Veterans come from a range of disciplines and ranks. They may have a particular way of doing things, talking, joking, and responding that are alien to those who have not served in the forces (Brewster et al., 2020). They can be seen as straight talking and impatient because of their training and 'can do' attitude (Shepherd et al., 2019). They too may miss the subtleties of civilian social interaction or nuances of cultural norms. An NDV has both these elements in combination that act to create a unique set of characteristics. The above leads us to propose:

Proposition 2: *Intersectionality amplifies the challenging employment effects for neurodiverse veterans due to talent sourcing focusing on formal qualifications and talent development practices on standard job and team concepts.*

2a. NDVs experience a greater disadvantage in the selection process compared to persons who are solely neurodiverse or solely a military veteran.

2b. NDVs experience a greater challenge in maintaining their jobs compared to persons who are solely neurodiverse or solely a military veteran. Retention and job performance is moderated by NDVs resilience and loyalty to their employers.

Proposition 3: 'Reasonable Adjustments and NDVs'

This study shows that neurodiverse veterans can be reluctant to request reasonable adjustments because of misconceptions around what they are and their use. Previous studies have noted that the neurodiverse are also reluctant to ask for reasonable adjustment (Harwood, 2014; Stuart, 2004). This is understandable in the light of research by Foster (2007) that shows that organisations can be reluctant to hire neurodivergents. This is a frustrating situation for those who are neurodiverse *and* a veteran. Individually, both groups may have specialist needs that might be met by RAs to reduce employment barriers. Our data reveal a need for NDVs to be assured that HR professionals understand the consequences of being in a combined group (neurodiverse/veteran) to encourage the RA requests to be made. Ironically, the very fact that veterans often have had to cope with challenging situations while in the armed forces (Aldwin et al., 1994; Elder & Clipp, 1989) has often led to a mindset of resilience and endurance which dissuades NDVs from asking for RAs. Therefore, it is particularly important that HR understands neurodiversity, veteran employment and the unique subset that is the NDV, to be able to encourage requests and to make adjustments where required. In addition, the data show that co-workers act as a barrier to NDVs asking for reasonable adjustments. Efforts to inform and train all employees about diversity and inclusion would be beneficial to counter this effect. Our research allows us to formulate:

Proposition 3: *The intersectionality of neurodiverse veterans reduces their willingness to ask for reasonable adjustments.*

Proposition 4: 'positive intersectionality'

Employing a neurodiverse veteran can be a positive contribution to organisational effectiveness. By design, Crenshaw's (1989/2018) original

concept of intersectionality was to examine discriminations and inequality. In doing so it concentrates on the negative aspects of intersectionality. Mcbride et al.'s (2015) commentary on the usefulness of intersectionality within the field of employment mirrors the findings of the researchers but with an important variation. The key difference here is the revelation that a study into intersectionality can be used as a basis to note the advantages of two intersecting groups. This contrasts with the dominant paradigm. Here, participants often pointed to the specialist and unique aspects of their training, knowledge and skills that can offer a distinctive and valuable contribution to business. Where two groups intersect this can bring invaluable benefit to organisations. NDVs combine the advantages of veterans who show strong resilience, loyalty, stress-resistance, and service-orientation (Benmelech & Frydman, 2015; Simpson & Sariol, 2019) with those of neurodiverse people who are variously attributed high levels of structuration, multi-tasking capabilities, ideation, and creativity (Dalton, 2013; White & Shah, 2011). The intersectionality of NDVs may combine to increase their retention despite their extensive challenges at work. For HR the task is to refine the focus from the ordinary things that neurodiverse veterans do not perform so well, to a concentration on the extraordinary things that neurodiverse veterans can do better than others. Given the preamble of selective and appropriate use of NDVs, we suggest:

Proposition 4: *Intersectionality, as expressed in neurodiverse veterans, can have a positive contribution to organisational effectiveness.*

4a. NDVs have some unique capabilities that can result in more effective task fulfilment compared to neurotypical employees. This relationship is moderated by the level of HR and co-worker support and the job fit of NDVs to their jobs.

4b. NDVs have some unique capabilities that can result in longer employment continuity through higher levels of resilience compared to neurodiverse, non-veterans.

Modelling neurodiverse veteran intersectionality

Unfortunately, neurodiverse people are often attributed a particular identity and therefore viewed as presenting the same, often negative, proposition for employers (Silberman, 2015). This is the case for some veterans, too, although the actual stereotype varies. There is often little understanding of the skills and knowledge that has the potential to enrich an organization's human capital. It is apposite to recognise that some manifestations of neurodiversity in some individuals could require concerted

effort to accommodate, as it could with veterans. However, the participants in this study have already provided some guidance for addressing this in their accounts of their own conditions.

The denouement of our findings therefore centres upon 'understanding'; that is sympathetic attentiveness and tolerance. 'Understanding' is not only the word that neurodiverse veteran's most often used when describing what they required to make the transition from military to civilian life, but it also appears to be one of the defining characteristics of how they experience working life. The vast majority have an 'understanding' of why other people have misconceptions of what it means to be a 'neurodiverse veteran' and they also have 'understanding' of their own condition, its limitations and have developed coping mechanisms for dealing with it. Consequently, as demonstrated by the data presented in this study, candidates may already have the means of working with employers in addressing the RAs that they are legally entitled to receive, thus reducing the perceived burden upon an organization. Based on our data we propose Figure 1 below that explores the special employment context that NDVs face.

Figure 1 graphically represents the perceptions, experiences, and intersectional issues of NDVs that are detailed in the representative quotations and Tables 2 and 3; these form the centre of the model. The figure differentiates the views of the public and employers of veterans and the neurodiverse to reflect the literature and our research. Fundamentally, the lack of understanding of neurodiversity and of veterans' capabilities is replicated in the prejudice that is found throughout the employment process. Talent sourcing and maintenance of employment is often a challenge for the neurodiverse and veterans alike: which raises questions about whether the 'traditional' processes are most apposite for those organizations that are seeking to increase the capabilities of their human capital and not merely increase their capacity. The figure shows that at the intersection, the individual aspects of being neurodiverse and a veteran constitute more than just an addition of the employment consequences of the two single states. Unfortunately, they may also conspire to create a situation where neurodiverse veterans can be particularly disenfranchised by an employment focus that does not utilise their often-considerable skills and experience, or where they may withdraw from seeking employment altogether with the associated negative consequences (De Witte et al., 2012; Fossey, 2012). This trajectory of decline, once embarked upon, is difficult to reverse, along with the social, mental, and physical decline that accompanies it (Bambra & Eikemo, 2009).

Organisations often note the need to invest in people in terms of education, skills, and knowledge transfer. To benefit from such an

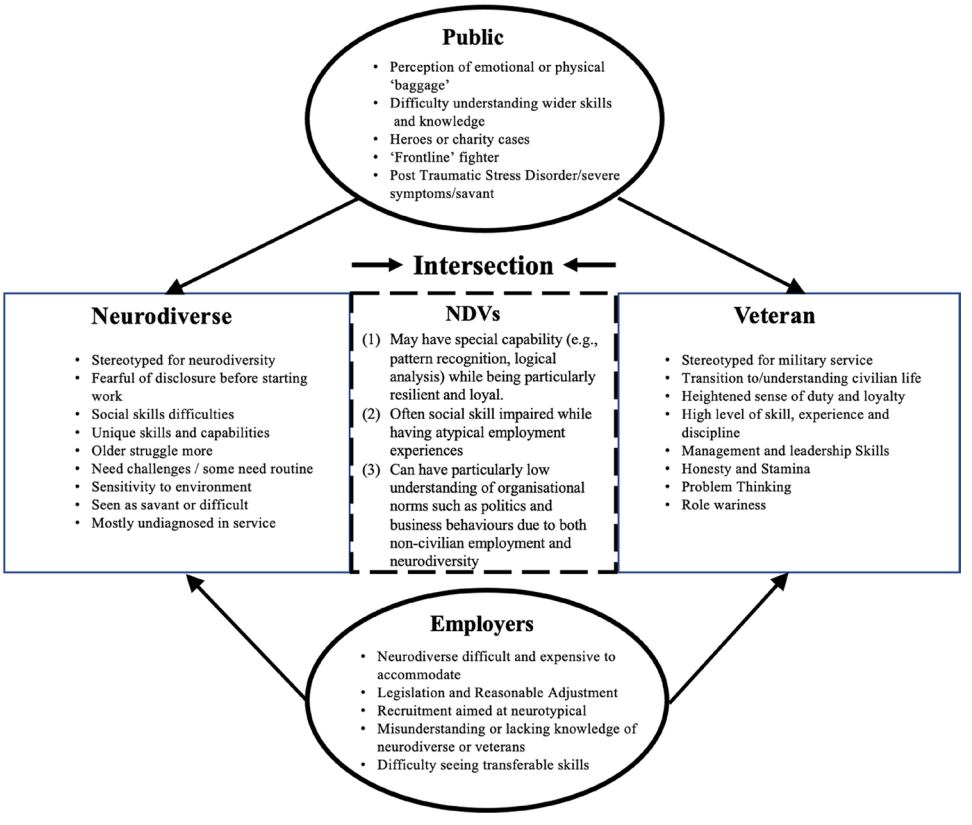


Figure 1. Neurodiverse veteran intersectionality model.

investment, organisations need a willing and capable workforce. Our study reveals that NDVs could be a source of organizational strengths but also charts the many obstacles perceived by NDVs. Progress requires a change of mindset from one that regards the intersection of neurodiversity and veteran status as a disadvantage, to one that embraces it as a potential strategic and competitive advantage.

Conclusion

Successful recruitment is a challenge for both those that are seeking gainful employment and for employers that wish to attract knowledgeable and skilled staff. The difficulties for prospective employees and employers are more pronounced when the subjects of the process are military veterans or are neurodiverse. For those who are neurodiverse veterans the situation is magnified considerably and our work has provided hitherto unexplored nuance to the situation of NDVs when seeking or holding on to employment. Navigating this landscape of prejudice and misunderstanding is essential for all parties.

To address this, our study explores the opportunities and challenges that face UK neurodiverse veterans in gaining employment. Drawing upon intersectionality theory, a survey of 232 neurodiverse UK veterans and 21 follow-up interviews was administered. The data were used to understand the complexity of issues that transpire, and which may not be revealed through the study of veterans or neurodiversity in isolation.

This study expands our empirical and practical understanding of the intersectionality of neurodiversity and veterans by identifying several hitherto neglected relationships that indicate substantial effects in the context of employment. This allowed us to generate a range of practical insights that can help organizations to refine their approaches to attract, source and manage neurodiverse veterans. As organizations such as RAND outline, employers and the government should invest in activities to support the transition to civilian life (Guo et al., 2016) and to counter bias and prejudice. Employers should, therefore, develop organisational approaches that match NDVs' capabilities and preferences to their jobs and tasks. This would allow firms to be employers of choice for this segment of the labour force. It would enhance their chances to attract and retain NDVs to reap the benefits of veterans' strong resilience, loyalty and service-orientation. If employers also attract those neurodiverse veterans who are highly organized and creative, it would likely be beneficial for them. While training for interviewers, reviewers and staff is important, it could be argued that this can take time. Going beyond insights from organizations that focus either on neurodiverse (Specialisterne Foundation, 2022) or on military veterans' employment (BITC, 2017), Table 4 offers a useful practical contribution into how to expedite changes. For example, removing some of the certificated qualification requirements for NDVs that act as a barrier to gaining employment could be a positive step forward. In a similar vein, offering NDVs a guaranteed interview scheme rather than relying on psychometric funnelling that can penalise atypical answers will provide greater inclusivity. Equally, organisations could explore techniques that highlight strengths rather than weaknesses (as some competency-based interviews do). Approaches could entail practice-based tasks and those that avoid hypothetical questions as these can confuse neurodivergents. HR managers can take a central role by appointing champions that can sensitise teams to the different communication patterns of NDVs and help them realise the significant benefits of neurodiversity in teams.

We used a relatively neglected context of our study of intersectionality and employment. In doing so, one of our theoretical contributions was that our findings allowed us to develop a set of propositions that might

inspire other researchers in their investigations of this important topic. In addition, Figure 1 provides a more holistic picture of the employment situation of NDVs than has hitherto been developed and can both enhance recruiters understanding of this target group as well as allows them to identify more positive characteristics associated with this particular intersectionality. Therefore, it enabled us to recast the attention from the predominantly negative stereotypes of NDVs to some positives. Given that intersectionality research often explores social inequalities with a focus on negative consequences (Grzanka et al., 2020) our study encourages context-sensitive research that also looks at the potential advantages of intersectionality in the web of individual, team, organizational and societal relations that NDVs are embedded in.

Much of intersectionality research focuses on characteristics that are typically reasonably clear to identify such as race or gender. However, some types of neurodiversity can be masked (See Miller et al., 2021 in relation to autism) and the veteran status may also be hidden to some co-workers once the employment has started. While intersectionality research is often a key way to conceptualize systems of oppression (Carastathis, 2014) our work suggests that the psychological issues why people are masking and what effect this may have on them and others, are important to explore. This implies a further theoretical contribution. Our work encourages researchers to go beyond traditional ways to think about intersectionality to incorporate open and non-visible, physical, behavioural, and psychological aspects in the conceptualization and design of their work. In fact, where individuals can mask their neurodiversity they create a paradox identified by Priscott & Allen (2021). In such situations, organisations cannot identify those that would bring greater benefit to the workforce if the neurodiverse within that workforce are reluctant to share their condition with them. Thereby potentially trading a psychological advantage with a work (and outcome) disadvantage.

While there are several disadvantages for NDVs, our study captures complex interdependencies and effects. Our framework mirrors the perspectives of NDVs in terms of their beliefs about how the public and employers see them, gives a more nuanced view of the experiences of neurodivergents and veterans, and those that combine both. It serves to augment our insights and may lead to an enhanced understanding of the situation of NDVs. Our work shows that more holistic study designs, including a sensitivity to individual preferences may enhance the quality of intersectionality insights.

Our research findings highlight further practical insights such as the need for increased 'understanding'. This manifests both within the need for neurodiverse veterans to clearly translate their military skills and

experiences on their curriculum vitae, and for recruiters to better understand the nature and terminology of military training and education. In this regard, recruitment agencies are identified as playing a particularly important role. The research participants frequently identified recruitment agencies as being 'biased' and difficult to work with. We proffer that agencies could gain some valuable strategic capability in becoming more adept at facilitating the gainful employment of neurodiverse veterans and veterans and neurodivergents in general. The large numbers of, usually highly skilled, people that leave the armed forces would appear to be a population that would mutually benefit recruitment agencies that can successfully broker the transition to civilian employment.

Future research is needed to better understand the complexities that beset those that leave the military and other professions for civilian employment. Valuable insight may be garnered through examination of the institutional voids that impede successful transition and which lead to practical interventions. Recruitment agencies are a specific focus for investigation of recruitment capabilities, processes, and practices. Further study of these organizations may make use of intersectionality theory to understand how candidate identities and capabilities may be more accurately assessed and positively represented to potential employers. In addition, future studies could use intersectionality to examine neurodiversity and other populations in employment.

The study design focuses upon UK-only participants and choice of interpretive methods. However, the experiences of veterans and the neurodiverse appear to be highly context-dependent and therefore necessitated the targeting of a discrete population. The findings were instrumentally triangulated, and member validated. A further limitation is that our approach generated data from individual neurodiverse veterans rather than their co-workers, managers, or employers, veterans or neurodiverse only. While this allowed us to access rich and varied information across a variety of employment settings, further research should endeavour to substantiate the conclusions of this study by broadening the respondent base and by extending intersectionality research into other contexts. Overall, the study attempts to shed more light on the situation of neurodiverse veterans and depicts not just the drawbacks but also the many positive characteristics that this group of people possess. Having isolated how fundamental 'understanding' by all parties is, we hope to have contributed to enhance it.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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