

UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY FROM COMBAT TO EDUCATION AND CAREERS

“THESE WARRIORS NEVER QUIT. WE DIDN’T DO IT ON THE FIELD OF BATTLE, AND WE WON’T DO IT HERE. REGARDLESS OF WHETHER WE’RE INJURED, WE’RE STILL HUMAN BEINGS.”

— CPT Ivan Castro, who is blind

The term “disability” holds different meanings for different people—and is defined differently depending on the context. In the military, disability is a rating one receives after becoming wounded, ill, or injured, specifically for benefits and compensation. In education and the workforce, disability is generally defined by a functional limitation and an associated need for an accommodation to a program, service, or environment in order to prevent discrimination.

The military services emphasize helping wounded, ill, and injured personnel understand their physical and behavioral challenges and how they may impact future academic and workforce success. Most Veterans do not identify as or consider themselves a “person with a disability.” The psychological process for accepting injuries and disabilities takes time, especially for those with a military background. At first, Veterans may view their disability—and asking for help—as a sign of weakness.

Veterans with newly-acquired injuries (both obvious and unseen) are often just developing an understanding of how their disability may impact their previous level of productivity. Many of these individuals may simply need time to adjust and to figure out what they need to be successful. Often, this may simply happen in time.

DISABILITY ≠ WORKFORCE INABILITY

Contrary to what many believe, it is not a disability that is accommodated, but rather the functional limitation experienced by the person living with the disability. Often the best workplace accommodations are born out of trial and error and good management techniques.

Due to the fact that disability is a very personal experience, no two individuals with the same disability will be impacted the same way and may or may not require an accommodation to be successful or feel comfortable sharing disability-related information.

As a whole, the military community is a resilient and resourceful group of professionals. Many experiencing the impact of an injury acquired during their military service come to the workforce with an understanding of what they need for success. Others may need some time to figure out what works and what doesn’t. Time, patience, and education go a long way.

DISABILITY IS NOT ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL

As the American workforce ages, the likelihood of acquired injury and need for workplace accommodation increases. Therefore it is necessary for today’s businesses and academic institutions to develop a universal understanding of flexibility and accommodations.

While it may be a challenge to create safe and productive workplaces and academic environments that take into account true diversity, it is often good management practices and common sense that facilitates the inclusion, retention, and promotion of this valuable human capital.

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