

Issue BRIEF

EMPLOYMENT RESOURCES FOR VETERANS

The departments of Defense (DoD), Veterans Affairs (VA), and Labor (DOL), as well as state, local, private, and not-for-profit entities, provide a range of veterans' re-employment services. Examples of these services include:

- The Transition Assistance Program (TAP), which provides pre-transition counseling, career planning, and employment workshops (VA 2014)
- The Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS), which funds employment services for new veterans through Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSGs), including the placement of local veterans' employment representatives and disabled veterans' outreach program specialists in workforce centers nationwide (DOL 2014)
- Unemployment compensation for ex-service members (UCX), which provides income support while veterans search for a new job

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The Transition to Civilian Life: Testing Program Changes to Boost Veteran Employment

With the size of the United States military in steady decline since 2010, hundreds of thousands of veterans are making the transition into the civilian labor market. But despite having experience and skills that may be very attractive to private employers, new veterans sometimes struggle to find jobs and do not seek help from the public workforce system. Indeed, in recent years, the unemployment rate for recent veterans has been up to 5 percentage points higher (in May 2012) than the rate for nonveteran adults (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015). Although the rates are closer today, helping veterans become re-employed remains an important challenge.

Though often underused, a wide range of job programs are available to help ex-service members make the transition to civilian life (see the "Employment Resources for Veterans" box). These programs are an important resource as new veterans begin looking for civilian jobs. To ensure that the programs meet the needs of these veterans, program administrators must continually look for ways to refine the programs—and to test those refinements to ensure they yield the desired results.

Rapid-cycle evaluation (RCE), a series of structured tests, can provide valuable insight into whether changes to these programs are effective. This brief discusses how to use RCE to assess modest changes to re-employment programs that serve veterans and to quickly determine whether the changes truly enhance the programs.

FEW UNEMPLOYED VETERANS USE RE-EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

Re-employment information is available through TAP and when people apply for UCX, but few veterans use re-employment services. A Prudential survey (2012) revealed that only 55 percent of service members leaving the military reported attending a TAP seminar, and only 6 percent reported using JVSG resources.¹ The fact that many veterans exhaust their UCX benefits before finding a job could be due in part to their low take-up of these services.

When asked about barriers to re-employment, veterans cited the bad economy and difficulty translating military experience into marketable skills for a civilian job, according to the Prudential survey. Many also mentioned their unfamiliarity with job searching and their lack of direct work experience in the civilian market (Crenshaw and Wright 2013). Alternative or more intensive outreach strategies could increase the use of JVSG resources and other re-employment programs, which in turn may help veterans address these challenges.

TESTING CHANGES TO RE-EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS

Before institutionalizing changes to employment programs for veterans, administrators need to know which changes are effective, or if the changes will work for all veterans or just for certain groups. An iterative program evaluation framework like RCE can help answer these questions. RCEs enable administrators to test modest program changes, examine the results, adjust the changes if needed, and test them again (Figure 1). The results can help staff make evidence-based decisions as they seek to improve their programs.

Step 1. Diagnose the problem

Begin with a diagnosis of the problem. What factors limit the re-employment success of ex-service members? The problems may vary by veteran characteristics, individual programs, and geographic locations, and so it's critical to start with a sound diagnosis (or at least a strong hypothesis). Factors that contribute to the problem may include:

- *Overconfidence.* Veterans may believe it will be easy to find a new job and not anticipate the challenges they may face using their military skills and experience to get a civilian job
- *Anchoring.* Veterans may be reluctant to consider jobs that do not closely match their previous military responsibilities, or they may have unrealistic expectations about compensation or the types of jobs they qualify for.
- *Competing priorities.* Other immediate concerns (such as dealing with health problems or settling in a new location) may keep veterans from beginning or prioritizing their job search.
- *Biases.* Veterans may be reluctant to use workforce services because of a tradition of self-reliance or a perception that such services are not for “people like me.”
- *Limited knowledge.* Veterans may not know the best strategies for finding a job in the civilian labor market or may not fully grasp current labor market conditions.
- *Choice overload.* Veterans may become overwhelmed by the number of options or the complex, unfamiliar, and highly decentralized process of searching for a civilian job.
- *Prolonged job search.* The longer jobseekers are unemployed, the less effort they tend to devote to their job search and the less likely they are to use re-employment assistance.

Rapid-Cycle Design and Evaluation



Figure 1

Step 2. Identify populations of interest

It often makes sense to identify specific populations to target with program improvements (for example, veterans with significant barriers to employment, such as a service-connected disability, lack of a high school diploma, homelessness, or a criminal record). Because each subgroup may respond differently or encounter unique challenges, define your target populations before deciding what program changes to test.

Step 3. Define the program changes

Many challenges can be overcome through small adjustments to a program, and these are precisely the kinds of changes RCE is designed to test (see Table 1). In re-employment programs, such changes could help veterans engage with services quickly, find opportunities that are well-matched to their skills, use strategies that are effective in the private sector, and persist in their job search. Test these types of changes using RCE to determine which work best in breaking down barriers to employment, educating veterans about the civilian job market, and improving their attitudes or approach to job searching.

The goal is to test a program change that, if found effective, could be integrated within the existing service infrastructure. For complex changes that may require refinement, consider conducting a small pilot test before launching a full RCE.

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¹ TAP is administered by DoD, VA, and DOL. The Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 made TAP mandatory for service members in transition (P.L. 112-56). Given this mandate, the percentage of veterans taking part in TAP is likely to have increased since the Prudential survey.

Potential improvements to re-employment programs for veterans

Enhanced outreach can strengthen veterans' engagement in employment services and the labor market. Experiment with:

- Mode of outreach (letters, e-mails, text messages, tweets)
- Message content (step-by-step job search guidance, information about the adverse effects of delaying a job search, motivational messages, appeals to veterans' sense of duty, testimonials from veterans who benefited from employment services)
- Timing (a few weeks after UCX application vs. a few weeks before UCX benefits end)
- Compound approaches (letters and text messages vs. emails and robocalls)

Service enhancements are add-ons to existing programming, such as:

- Self-guided workbooks
- Modularized workshops and job search coaching
- One-on-one intake and re-employment assistance evaluations
- Sustained assistance during periods of unemployment
- Automated translation of military skills into civilian terminology for resumes and job searches

Wraparound services and supports can strengthen program engagement and persistence; they may include:

- Motivational text messages
- One-on-one follow-up
- E-mail and phone reminders
- Links to support groups or job clubs for veterans
- Motivational incentives such as the chance to win a small prize

Table 1

Step 4. Plan and conduct the RCE

After diagnosing the problem, identifying the groups to target, and defining the program changes to test, the next step is to set up and deploy the RCE. Start by developing an RCE strategy that specifies the number of participants in the RCE, any existing sources of data, and indicators of success.

The strategy should also specify how the test will be set up. RCE requires that program changes be tested on some, but not all, of the target population defined in Step 2. This means two groups of participants are needed: those who receive the change and those who do not. One way to create these groups is by randomly selecting participants to either receive the change or not and comparing their outcomes; this is a quick and effective way to see whether a change works. Once the evaluation strategy is finalized, you can begin testing the program changes.

Step 5. Evaluate the results and determine your next steps

After testing, you and your research collaborators will analyze and disseminate the results. Depending on the findings, you may want to

implement the tested changes on a broad scale or refine the changes and test them again.

Figure 2 shows the planning, implementation, and analysis phases of an RCE to test software products for veterans. A number of states are using software designed to help veterans get jobs. Some of these tools automatically translate military work descriptions into civilian language, build private-sector resumes for ex-service members, and even search online job listings for opportunities based on the automated translation. Administrators seeking to improve the effectiveness of these tools can use RCE to test changes to the software. And because software can replace some, but not all, of the activities typically performed by employment specialists, you can use RCE to identify the most effective combinations of software and personal employment services to implement on a broader scale.

DETERMINING WHETHER RCEs ARE FEASIBLE

For organizations that want to provide new veterans with reliable and effective re-employment services, making changes to existing programs can be challenging. Low-cost program evaluation

techniques, such as RCE, can help administrators make confident decisions based on evidence. But RCE is not feasible in all situations. To determine whether RCEs are practical for you, consider the following questions:

- What would you like to improve about your program?

- What is the quality of your existing data—specifically, are you currently and consistently measuring the outcomes you want to test?
- Have you partnered with an organization like Mathematica to assist with RCE design, implementation, and analysis of findings?

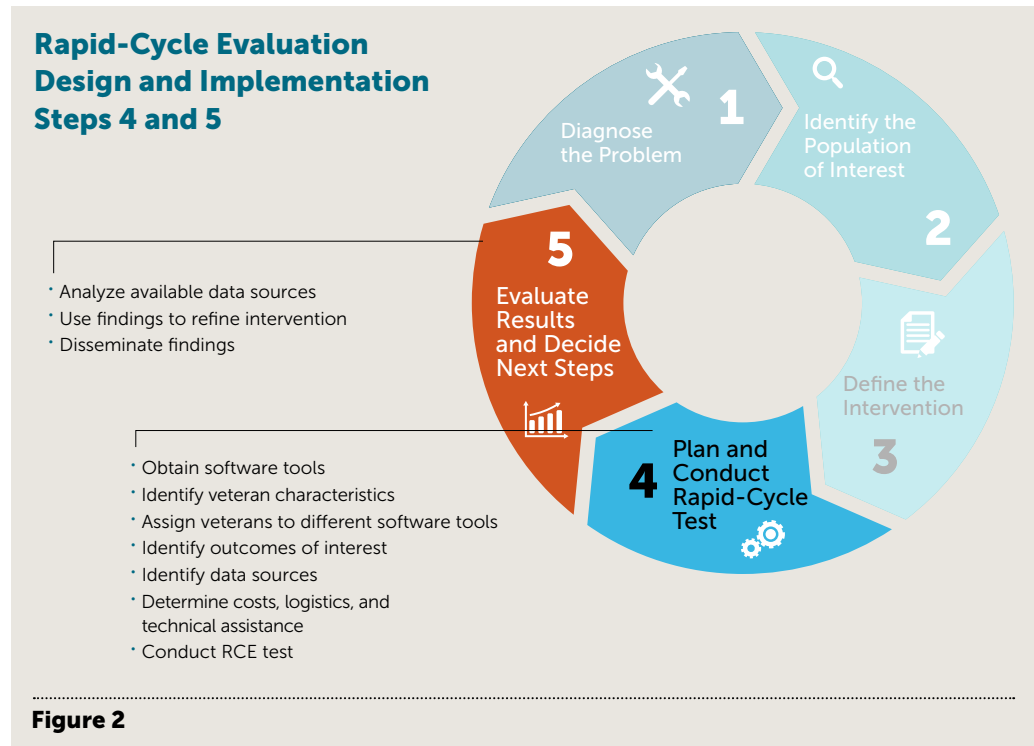


Figure 2

To learn more about how your agency or foundation can develop and implement a successful RCE to improve re-employment services for veterans, contact Scott Cody, vice president, Data Analytics Division, Mathematica Policy Research, at (617) 715-6937 or at SCody@mathematica-mpr.com.

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