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Capitalizing on strengths and minimizing weaknesses of veterans in civilian employment interviews: Perceptions of interviewers and veteran interviewees

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ABSTRACT

Like all job applicants, veterans have to face the ubiquitous employment interview and pass this potential hurdle to civilian sector employment. So, because of the uniqueness of transitioning from the military to civilian employment, the present paper sought to identify perceived interviewing strengths and weaknesses of veteran interviewees from (a) the perspective of civilian sector human resource professionals (i.e. hiring personnel) with experience interviewing veterans (Study 1, five focus groups, $N=14$), and (b) veterans (Study 2, $N=93$). Qualitative analysis of the focus group transcripts resulted in the emergence of two theme categories: (1) veteran interviewee strengths and (2) veteran interviewee weaknesses. This information guided the development of a 10-item survey that was completed by 93 veterans (Study 2). In its totality, the results (from both Study 1 and Study 2) indicated that communication of soft skills, confidence, and professionalism were perceived to be strengths that veterans displayed during civilian employment interviews, and conversely, the ineffective translation and communication of relevant technical skills acquired in the military, use of military jargon, and nervousness were considered to be weaknesses. Recommendations to capitalize on the strengths and mitigate the weaknesses are presented.

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What is the public significance of this article?— The employment interview is a potential hurdle faced by all job applicants, including veterans. Consequently, the present paper sought to identify and examine interviewing strengths and weaknesses of veterans as perceived by human resource professionals and veterans and based on the results, provides recommendations to improve veterans' performance in employment interviews.

Introduction

Employees who can work effectively with others in teams, deliver results under pressure, and inspire leadership in others are sought by civilian sector organizations (Berger, 2018; Cole et al., 2021). Perhaps more than any other organization, the United States (US) military devotes considerable resources to developing service personnel's teamwork and leadership skills (National Veterans' Training Institute [NVTI], 2014).

Despite the skills and benefits that veterans bring to organizations, one of the most significant challenges faced in their transition process is finding a career in the civilian sector (Dexter, 2020; Keeling et al., 2019; Prudential, 2012). Multiple reasons have been advanced for the issues veterans confront in securing a civilian job. First, civilian employers may not fully understand the value of military experience for civilian jobs (Dexter, 2020; Gonzalez & Simpson, 2021). Second, veterans may find it difficult to articulate the relevance of their military-specific skills to the civilian setting and workforce (Mael et al., 2022; Shields et al., 2016). Third, veterans may have difficulty securing civilian employment due to a lack of preparation and planning for the civilian life (Keeling et al., 2018; Keeling et al., 2019). Finally, veterans may be discriminated against by civilian employers based on negative stereotypes such as perceived mental health concerns (Keeling et al., 2018; Keeling et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2018).

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A major hurdle that all job applicants, including veterans, face in the civilian-sector hiring process is the employment interview, a method used by employers to assess a job candidate's knowledge, skills, and/or other characteristics determined to be predictive of successful job performance (Levashina et al., 2014). The ubiquity of the employment interview has prompted the observation that “it is rare, even unthinkable, for someone to be hired without some type of interview” (Huffcutt & Culbertson, 2011, p. 185). In addition to being one of the two most widely used selection techniques (with the other being the application form), employment interviews are also often assigned significant weight in the hiring decision, which can disadvantage veterans if they do not perform as well as their civilian counterparts. The importance of interviews in the veteran hiring process is evidenced by the effect of interview training on post-military employment and career advancement. That is, previous research indicates that veterans who completed a program with an interview skills component were more likely to find a job after leaving the military (Perkins et al., 2022) and to leave their job for a better one (Morgan et al., 2022).

Because of the uniqueness of transitioning from the military to civilian employment, coupled with the limited research on the topic, the present paper sought to examine the strengths and weaknesses of veterans in job interviews. A recurring theme that emerges in this extant albeit limited literature is the role and importance of social skills. One of veterans' weaknesses appears to be their ineffective communication of their military experience and skills to prospective civilian employers (Hart, 2018; Mael et al., 2022; Shields et al., 2016). The inability to effectively communicate such information is likely to lead to an underestimation of the veteran's true potential to perform the job. Another social aspect which may negatively affect how veterans are perceived in the interview is their military behaviors. These include having a rigid posture, providing brief answers, and using words such as “Sir” and “Ma'am” (Caldwell & Burke, 2013; U.S. Veterans Magazine, 2022). However, because such behaviors are intended to show respect and professionalism, they may also be perceived favorably by some interviewers and can therefore also be considered a strength.

So, given the ubiquity and significance of interviews in the hiring process, coupled with the limited literature on this method in the context of veteran employment, the present paper sought to identify veteran interviewees' strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of both interviewers and veterans.

Employment interviews and impression management

To understand how interview performance can be improved, it is important to first consider the nature of employment interviews and what they assess. Employment interviews are considered to be a method of assessment that allow specified stakeholders to evaluate job candidates on competencies, knowledge, or skills that have been identified as being important or critical to work/job performance. In the field of industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology, specifically personnel psychology, and human resource management, interview structure is recognized as a critical design feature that affects the validity (i.e., appropriateness of inferences drawn from test or assessment scores) of employment interviews. Interview structure pertains to the standardization of the interview whereby all candidates are subjected to the same interview process. Whereas standardization can occur along several dimensions or characteristics of the interview, the two most common are the standardization of questions (i.e., interview questions are the same across all candidates), and the standardization of the scoring of responses (i.e., the same predetermined scoring scheme is used to rate the responses of all candidates; Huffcutt & Arthur, 1994). However, in spite of the psychometric superiority and validity of structured interviews (e.g., Sackett et al., 2022), unstructured interviews – a format in which the interview is unstandardized with different candidates being asked different questions with no predetermined scoring process – continues to be the most widely used interview format. Indeed, Sackett et al.'s (2022) reanalysis of the comparative criterion-related validity of commonly used predictors reports a rho of .42 for structured interviews which is comparable to that for job knowledge tests ($\rho = .40$; ignoring the obvious construct/method confound [Arthur & Villado, 2008]). In contrast, a rho of .19 was obtained for unstructured interviews – a general pattern of results reported in other meta-analyses of the criterion-related validity of interviews (e.g., Huffcutt & Arthur, 1994).

As a method of assessment, interviews can be designed to measure a host of job-related content (Arthur & Villado, 2008) such as (a) general attributes and characteristics (e.g., general mental ability, personality traits, interests, goals, and values), (b) experiential factors (e.g., experience, education, and training), and (c) core job elements (e.g., declarative knowledge, procedural skills, abilities, and motivation; Huffcutt, 2011). However, because the employment interview is a *social interaction* between the interviewer and the job applicant, interview

outcomes may also be influenced by various non-job-related interview content factors, such as (a) social effectiveness skills (e.g., self-presentation), (b) personal factors (e.g., interview self-efficacy and interview motivation), and (c) demographic characteristics (e.g., race and background; Huffcutt, 2011). This is even more likely the case for unstructured interviews which, as previously noted, are the most common form of employment interview (Huffcutt & Culbertson, 2011).

Although veterans cannot control factors such as their veteran status during the employment interview, they may be able to utilize impression management tactics to enhance their interview performance and, consequently, their hiring outcomes. Impression management is a conscious process in which people attempt to influence others' perceptions of them (Paulhus, 1991). So, for instance, if veterans can understand the communication styles that are perceived favorably by civilian interviewers, they then may be able to leverage this information by modifying their communication styles (e.g., avoiding jargon), and their self-presentation and self-promotion tactics to receive higher interview ratings (Barrick et al., 2009; Kristof-Brown et al., 2002; Swider et al., 2011) and subsequently, improve their hiring outcomes.

In summary, the present paper sought to identify the perceived interviewing strengths and weaknesses of veterans in civilian employment interviews. By identifying these strengths and weaknesses – from the perspective of interviewers and veterans – interventions can then be developed and implemented to remedy the latter with the expectation that they will improve veterans' performance during these interviews and, ultimately, their hiring outcomes. The objectives of the present work were accomplished by implementing two studies. Study 1 entailed focus groups with civilian sector hiring personnel who interviewed veterans on a regular basis. The strengths and weaknesses results of Study 1 guided the development of a survey that was completed by a sample of veterans in Study 2. These studies were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University (IRB2020–0925 M and IRB2020–0709D).

Study 1

Study 1 sought to identify the strengths and weaknesses of veterans in civilian employment interviews from the perspective of hiring personnel who routinely interviewed veterans for civilian positions. This objective was accomplished by conducting a number of focus groups.

Method

Participants

Human Resource (HR) professionals (i.e., hiring personnel) with prior experience interviewing veterans ($M = 9.91$ yrs, $Mdn = 6.33$, $SD = 8.73$) were recruited to participate in 90-minute virtual focus group sessions by contacting industry partners ($N = 10$) of the authors' affiliated universities via e-mail. Twenty initial responses were received from prospective participants (i.e., HR at these organizations) of whom, as per our a priori goal, 15 eventually participated in the focus groups. In qualitative research, best practice is to collect data till saturation which is defined as the point at which no new themes or findings emerge from the collection of additional data (Charmaz, 2008). However, due to administrative and logistical constraints, our goal was an a priori sample size of 15. Between January to March 2021, 14 HR professionals¹ across different industries in the United States agreed to participate in 5 virtual focus groups with 2 to 4 participants each. Participants were primarily male (79%), White (86%), and veterans (57%). Participant demography is presented in Table S1 in the supplemental materials.

Procedure

Prior to participating in the focus groups, participants read an information sheet that served as the consent form and then completed an online demographic measure. Focus groups were conducted virtually via Zoom.² Using a semi-structured format, a moderator asked a number of questions about the participants' personal interviewing-related experiences. These questions are presented in Appendix A in the supplemental materials. In response to the questions, participants discussed their experiences and provided commentary when others described their own experiences. During the focus group discussion, the notetaker summarized the key points made by participants on virtual sticky notes and comments using Mural, an interactive visual collaboration board. Upon completion of the focus group session, participants were sent a \$15 gift card as a token of appreciation, and for internal feedback purposes, they were also sent a survey to collect information about their focus group experience and any additional information they wanted to share or provide.³

Conventional content analysis

Conventional content analysis, a qualitative research method that allows researchers to directly derive codes from the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), was conducted using the Atlas.ti 9 software to analyze the focus group transcripts. In the initial round of coding, two

engineering graduate students (Coder #1 was female and Coder #2 was male) unfamiliar with the psychology literature, but with prior coding experience and familiarity with the study topic independently coded the transcript of Focus Group #1. The coders highlighted quotations and assigned highly specific codes. Upon completion of this initial coding round, the coders discussed their codes and merged their related codes to generate an initial codebook.

In a second coding round, Coder #1 coded the transcripts of Focus Groups #1 and #2, and Coder #2 coded the transcripts of Focus Groups #3 and #4 using the initial codebook and new codes were added when needed. Then, Coder #1 and Coder #2 met to merge, relabel, and create a revised codebook. A third coder (Coder #3), an I-O psychology female graduate student, reviewed the revised codebook, relabeled codes using terminology consistent with the military and I-O psychology literature, and generated a framework to organize the codes. Then, Coder #3 met with Coders #1 and #2 to discuss the revised framework. After the coders reached consensus, Coders #1 and #2 used the revised codebook to recode the focus group transcripts. Finally, to finalize the codebook, Coder #3 reviewed the recoded transcripts to ensure codes were applied consistently across the transcripts and the codebook was comprehensive. To reduce redundancies, Coder #3 removed duplicate codes if a code was applied more than once to a participant's response to a question.

Results and discussion

The analyses revealed two theme categories, (1) *veteran interviewee strengths* and (2) *veteran interviewee weaknesses*. The themes associated with each of these categories are next discussed.

Veteran interviewee strengths

Three veteran interviewee strengths emerged from the analysis of the focus group transcripts. These were *communicating soft skills*, *confidence*, and *professionalism*. It is important to note that too much confidence, that is over-confidence, and inauthentic professionalism were perceived by some participants as weaknesses; therefore, these contrasting perspectives are also presented within the same respective theme.

Communicating soft skills. Focus group participants noted that communicating soft skills and values ($f^4 = 9$) was a strength of veteran interviewees. One soft skill that participants reported veterans effectively communicated in civilian employment interviews was adaptability, which is an employee's ability and skill in

responding to change, ambiguity, and stress in a work environment (O'Connell et al., 2008). To the extent that adaptability is malleable and can be developed (Heslin, 2005), military service provides ideal opportunities to develop it due to the extensive formal (e.g., lecture) and experiential (e.g., learning on the job) learning experiences (Stone & Stone, 2015). Participant 13 from Focus Group 5 noted that on the job, veterans demonstrate "the ability to quickly confront a learning curve."

Relatedly, Participant 4 from Focus Group 2 noted that in interviews, veterans are "adaptable to talking about how they work in different team environments." As organizations become increasingly diverse and globalized, they continue to seek employees who are able to work cohesively with demographically and culturally diverse individuals. Since military personnel come from a wide range of socio-demographic backgrounds and regions across the US and are trained to find ways to effectively work together to achieve mission goals, veterans may have an advantage over their civilian counterparts in this sphere. For example, Participant 5 from Focus Group 2 said they look for "respectful" employees because employees are often-times working "on a project with 15 US guys and 20 to 30 country nationals," and this skillset "come[s] across during the interview process with the veterans."

Furthermore, participants also reported that veterans' leadership capabilities come across in interviews. The US military invests heavily in researching and implementing best practices to develop effective leaders (NVTI, 2014). For instance, the US Army provides a variety of self-development tools (e.g., Project Athena), formal coursework (e.g., Basic Leadership Course), programs (e.g., Sergeant Majors Academy), mentorship opportunities, and on-the-job leadership training to develop officers and enlisted personnel (U.S. Army, 2022).

Since leadership experience is valued in civilian employment settings, veterans' exposure to a culture which reinforces the importance of leadership may prepare them for leadership roles more so than entry-level college graduates and early-career civilians. If veterans are able to articulate these experiences through storytelling, they may improve their interview performance.

In summary, veterans were perceived to effectively communicate their adaptability, teamwork, and leadership skills during civilian employment interviews. It is important to emphasize that these soft skills are common competencies sought by employers (Berger, 2018; Cole et al., 2021) that veterans acquire through their military training, education, and on-the job experience (Hardison et al., 2017).

Confidence/over-confidence. Confidence turned out to be an interesting theme because although focus group participants noted that some veterans demonstrate self-confidence ($f=9$), extreme levels of it, that is, over-confidence, was perceived negatively. Pertaining to confidence, Participant 4 from Focus Group 2 noted that self-confidence is a sign that a candidate is a “good fit” for their organization. In Focus Group 1, both Participant 1 and 2 reported that veterans demonstrate “presence,” which could be a signal of competence. However, as previously noted, interviewers also frequently reported *perceiving* veteran interviewees to demonstrate *over-confidence* during civilian employment interviews. It has been observed that veterans are trained to think of themselves as distinct from civilians (Herman & Yarwood, 2014), which may then manifest as a belief in being superior to civilians. If this self-perception translates into an over-estimation of the perceived value of their experience and/or skills to interviewers, then they run the risk of being perceived as overselling themselves. Whether veterans are *really* over-confident or not is a question we cannot answer in this work; however, being *perceived* as such is potentially problematic because interviewees perceived to think too highly of themselves are seen as less likable and competent than those who are not (Coppola, 2021).

Although interviewers generally view interviewee confidence as a positive attribute, both over- and under-confidence are perceived negatively (Parton et al., 2002). Indeed, Participant 2 from Focus Group 1 described how confidence is a “tightrope [that] you could fall on either side of.” When interviewees fall on either side of this tightrope (over-confidence and under-confidence) during an interview, it is perceived negatively. Indeed, veterans who are highly decorated or are of a high rank in the military may be at an even greater risk of displaying behaviors that may be perceived as unduly over-confident. Participant 1 from Focus Group 1 noted that they have seen a Colonel “blow it just because they [thought] more highly of themselves.” In summary, some veterans, especially those who are of high rank and/or are highly decorated, could benefit from an increased awareness of how they could be perceived by civilians as being particularly over-confident and the potentially undesirable effects of this on their performance in civilian employment interviews. Thus, the challenge appears to be a balance between coming across as self-confident (positive) but not in the extreme to mitigate the risk of coming across as over-confident (negative). Furthermore, because these data represent the *perceptions* of the interviewers, it is important to realize that in instances where the same attribute is viewed as a strength by some, and a weakness by others,

where one comes down on the “tightrope” of confidence may be a function of fit with the organizational culture.

Professionalism/inauthenticity. Professionalism was reported as a strength of veteran interviewees ($f=12$). However, like confidence, there seemed to be a negative pole of this where focus group participants also frequently perceived that veterans demonstrate *inauthenticity*. Pertaining to professionalism, participants noted that veterans demonstrate an ability to communicate with interviewers in a respectful manner. Although being overly formal was perceived negatively by some focus group participants, others perceived it positively. For example, Participant 14 from Focus Group 5 noted that veterans are consistent about “thanking [hiring managers] for their time.”

Another way that veterans demonstrate their professionalism is through their body language. For example, Participant 1 from Focus Group 1 perceived veterans to be “poised,” and Participant 5 from Focus Group 4 noted that veterans demonstrate professionalism by “shaking hands and not sitting until the rest of the interview panel sits.” These nonverbal signs of professionalism may result in interviewers viewing the job candidate more positively.

However, as previously noted, focus group participants also frequently perceived that veterans demonstrate *inauthenticity*. Prior work has found that job candidates are significantly more likely to be perceived positively by interviewers and receive an offer if they strive to present, and are perceived as authentic (Swider et al., 2011). In the military, service personnel are taught how to present themselves, what to value, and how to behave to conform to the highly formal and hierarchal culture of the military (Collins, 1998). Throughout their time in the service, compliance with the rules, procedures, and authority of superiors is reinforced through rewards (e.g., medals) and defiance is punished (e.g., dishonorable discharge). When service personnel make the transition to civilian life, they may continue to present themselves and behave in a formal manner. However, overly formal behavior was reported by Participant 7 from Focus Group 3 as being “too robotic.”

Veteran interviewee weaknesses

Three veteran interviewee weaknesses emerged from the analysis of the focus group transcripts. These were *ineffective translation of relevant technical skills and over-explaining*, *use of military jargon*, and *nervousness*. Because the employment interview is an interpersonal interaction between the interviewee and interviewer, ineffective communication and negative impressions of

an interviewee can pose a significant barrier to obtaining employment (Barrick et al., 2009; Kristof-Brown et al., 2002; Swider et al., 2011). Indeed, regardless of the relevance of communication skills to a particular job, effective communicators are more likely to receive an employment offer than ineffective communicators (Riggio & Throckmorton, 1988).

Ineffective translation of relevant military technical skills and over-explaining. Although communicating soft skills was observed to be a strength, the *ineffective translation of relevant military technical skills* ($f = 35$) was also the most frequently mentioned verbal communication challenge. A conceptually related verbal communication issue, which was also the second most frequently cited, was *over-explaining* ($f = 11$). Pertaining to ineffectively communicating their relevant skills when describing their military experience to civilian interviewers, veterans were reported by focus group participants to struggle to connect the technical skills acquired in the military to civilian job roles. In employment interviews, effectively communicating information in a manner understood by an intended audience has been shown to be one of, if not, the most important consideration in interviewer evaluations of interviewees (Hollandsworth et al., 1979).

One reason for this issue may be that veterans may not have sufficient information about civilian jobs to fully understand how their military experience relates to these jobs or roles. Consonant with this, in a study of veterans' experiences in transitioning to civilian careers, 60% of 1,845 veterans reported that one of the greatest challenges in finding a job is explaining how their military skills translate to the civilian workforce (Prudential, 2012). Therefore, even when technical skills and experiences acquired in the military *do* translate to the civilian sector, the inability to effectively communicate the relevance of their past work experience and technical skills in an interview may result in veterans being perceived as unqualified for the job for which they are interviewing. In summary, in preparation for the interview, veterans should seek to better understand and communicate how their military experience and skills are germane to the position for which they are applying.

Pertaining to engaging in *over-explaining* in trying to communicate the relevance of their military skills, Participant 2 from Focus Group 1 described how challenging the issue of over-explaining was for him during his own transition from the military to the civilian sector. Thus, over-explaining may be an attempt to make civilian interviewers, who are unfamiliar with the military, better understand their prior work context. However, veterans may come across as "rambling"

(Participant 1 from Focus Group 1) if they engage in over-explaining. This can result in the interviewer becoming impatient. For example, Participant 1 from Focus Group 1, said that when over-explaining occurs, she thinks to herself, "keep it moving sparky." In summary, over-explaining can detract from the overall message of the interviewee's responses to interview questions due to the interviewer becoming frustrated by the length of time spent answering questions.

Use of military jargon. The *use of military jargon* ($f = 9$) was also frequently cited as a verbal communication problem. Military personnel use many acronyms and work-related slang which are distinct from civilian verbal communication (Shields et al., 2016). Since these acronyms and slang are embedded in veterans' vocabulary to describe their work, veterans may frequently use these terms during civilian employment interviews which may result in a communication gap between the interviewee and interviewer. For example, veterans who are transitioning into civilian roles may mistakenly assume that non-veteran interviewers understand the ranks and titles used to describe their roles. Participant 5 from Focus Group 2 noted that terms such as "*full bird*" and "*E6*" are confusing to non-veteran interviewers. If veteran interviewees cannot find alternative, civilian-friendly language to describe their military experience, it may result in lower interview performance ratings and subsequently, poor hiring outcomes for them.

Nervousness. Interviewers of veterans frequently noted that veterans demonstrated nonverbal cues of *nervousness* ($f = 11$). In employment interviews, interviewees who display anxious behavior (e.g., fidgeting, biting lips, or rigidity) are more likely to be rated negatively than those who do not (Carless & Imber, 2007). However, due to the perceived and stereotypical association of veterans with psychological issues (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder) as perpetuated by the media (Parrott et al., 2020, 2022), veteran interviewees who display signs of anxiety may be unjustifiably rated more negatively during civilian employment interviews than anxious non-veteran interviewees.

In veterans, nervousness was reported by Participant 14 from Focus Group 5 to manifest as "*rigidness*" and "*formality*." Military culture encourages soldiers to suppress emotions and outward signs of emotional distress (Stanley & Larsen, 2021). Therefore, this rigid and formal behavior of veteran interviewees may be an attempt to disguise outward signs of emotional distress. However, since the personality characteristics agreeableness and emotional stability are valued in corporate

settings (Sackett & Walmsley, 2014), perceived personality cues of disagreeableness (e.g., not smiling) and low emotional stability (e.g., tension, anxiety) can result in lower interview scores and worse hiring outcomes.

Study 2

In Study 1, focus group participants, specifically, HR professionals (i.e., hiring personnel) with prior experience interviewing veterans provided insights into the interview-related strengths and weaknesses exhibited by veterans during civilian interviews. As a follow up, Study 2 sought to obtain additional insights about these strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of veteran interviewees. Obtaining information from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, specifically interviewers and interviewees, should provide a more complete picture of the specified strengths and weaknesses and also a more robust understanding of these factors. To that end, the strengths and weaknesses themes that emerged from Study 1 were used to inform the development of a survey that was completed by a sample of veterans. Following up with a quantitative approach not only allowed us to obtain data from a relatively larger sample but also permitted the empirical examination of the construct validity of the themes. That is, we examined the extent to which the strengths and weaknesses themes covaried and displayed conceptually meaningful relationships with a number of variables, specifically pertinent demographic variables (e.g., years of service, rank, participation in veteran transition programs, and employment status) and two personality variables, emotional stability and agreeableness. The examination of emotional stability was due to emergence of nervousness as a theme in Study 1, and agreeableness was included because of the emergence of interpersonal themes (e.g., communication and professionalism). Finally, although they used different approaches, the totality of the results of Studies 1 and 2 allowed us to comment on the extent to which interviewers and interviewees had similar or different perspectives on the interview strengths and weaknesses of veterans.

Method

Participants and procedure

The data were collected online using Qualtrics over a period of 20 months. First, participants were recruited by widely distributing a flyer that described the study along with a signup link to various sources including, relevant social media groups (i.e., Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram), the American Psychological Association Division 9 (Military Psychology) listserv (with

instructions to share with any and all interested parties), associates at several Department of Defense-associated entities (e.g., research labs, consulting firms, and contractors; also with instructions to distribute to any all interested parties), contacts at the Texas Veterans Commission, contacts at the Department of Veterans Affairs (who informed us they were not authorized to distribute such fliers), and our university-wide⁵ bulk mail (we have a relatively large military presence on campus). This resulted in 396 initial responses out of which 356 were emailed the Qualtrics survey link after meeting the inclusion criteria (i.e., US veterans [self-proclaimed], 18 years or older, and could read and write English).

Bi-weekly follow-ups were sent via the Qualtrics survey distribution system until the survey was closed in April 2023. Upon opening the link, participants first gave their consent before proceeding to complete the measures. Of the 356 who were emailed the study link, responses were obtained from 122 participants, 27 of whom were removed due to missing data and 2 due to failing the veteran data check items (Arthur et al., 2021). Specifically, to ensure that participants were indeed humans *and* veterans, a captcha was used for the former. For the latter, four veteran-specific questions⁶ were repeated at different points in the survey (i.e., each question was presented twice) and because they were restricted from returning to their previous answers for these questions, participants whose responses to the four questions did not match were eliminated from the final sample. Consequently, the final sample consisted of 93 veterans. It was predominantly male (70%) and White (62%), with ages ranging from 22 to 80 years ($M = 40.4$; $SD = 11.82$). On average, veterans left the military service 7.15 years prior to the time of the data collection ($Mdn = 3.00$; $SD = 10.56$). Table S2 in the supplemental materials presents detailed demographic information for the sample.

Survey

As part of a larger data collection effort, participants completed a measure collecting information on their strengths and weaknesses during civilian interviews, demography, and emotional stability and agreeableness. Specified demographic variables and emotional stability and agreeableness served as correlates of perceived interview strengths and weaknesses to gain additional insight into these themes.

Strengths and weaknesses. A total of 10 items were developed based on the themes identified in Study 1 (see Table 1). Each theme was measured using one to three items. Participants were asked to rate the extent to

Table 1. Items and corresponding themes.

Theme	Item
1. Communicating soft skills	1. am able to effectively convey my teamwork experience 2. am able effectively convey my leadership experience 3. am able to effectively convey my experience in conflict resolution
2. Confidence/Overconfidence	4. feel confident 5. try not to come across as being arrogant
3. Professionalism/Inauthenticity	6. am professional
4. Ineffective translation of relevant technical skills acquired in the military and overexplaining	7. find it difficult to explain how my military experience can be applied to civilian jobs 8. am able to effectively promote my skills (R) ^a
5. Use of military jargon	9. find it difficult to limit the excessive use of military jargon/acronyms
6. Nervousness	10. feel stressed

Note. ^aReversed-coded.

which the items are descriptive of them during civilian interviews using a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). The decision was made to keep the measure short to minimize the risk of incomplete responses that may have been engendered by a lengthy measure (Liu & Wronski, 2018).

Emotional stability and agreeableness. Because the measures completed in the present study were part of a larger data collection effort, emotional stability and agreeableness were not directly assessed using a personality measure. Instead, items from the Symptom Checklist 90-R (SCL-90-R; Derogatis et al., 1973) which participants had completed, were used to obtain these two personality construct scores. Participants rated the extent to which they were bothered by a list of problems during the past week using a five-point Likert scale (0 = *not at all*; 4 = *extremely*). Six of these items were selected as indicators of emotional stability and two as indicators of agreeableness based on their high similarity to personality items of the IPIP-NEO-300 (Goldberg, 1999). Table S3 in the supplemental materials presents the selected SCL-90-R items and the corresponding IPIP-NEO-300 items. Emotional stability and agreeableness scores displayed internal consistency estimates of .77 and .88 respectively.

Demographics. Participants reported their age, sex, education, years of service, and rank. They also reported whether they were employed and whether they had been deployed during their term of service. Finally, they reported whether they were members of a veteran

organization and whether they had participated in a veteran transition program.

Results and discussion

As the results in Table 2 indicate, the magnitude of the correlations between the different themes ranged from .00 to .54, suggesting that the six themes are distinct. As one would expect, strength themes intercorrelations were all positive ($r = .24-.54$) indicating that veterans who have higher levels of one strength tended to have higher levels of other strengths. In response to a reviewer's observation that this result "may also be evidence of general response patterns and biases from individuals," we note that this is unlikely because the strengths displayed close to zero correlations with two of three weaknesses (discriminant validity). If common response bias was indeed present, we should have instead observed stronger and negative correlations between strengths and weaknesses.

Related to the preceding, weaknesses displayed a similar pattern of convergence ($r = .31-.35$). Furthermore, the association between strengths and weaknesses themes ranged from $-.45$ to $.13$. Difficulty explaining military experience (i.e., technical skills and overexplaining) displayed the strongest relationship with the strengths themes ($r = -.45 - -.21$). And as previously alluded to, the remaining correlations between strengths and weaknesses themes were small and not significant ($r = -.03-.13$). Overall, these results provide initial evidence for the validity of the strengths and weaknesses themes.

Table 2. Theme descriptive statistics and intercorrelations.

Theme	N	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Communicating soft skills	93	3.90	0.68					
2. Confidence	93	4.04	0.78	.54*				
3. Professionalism	93	4.34	0.80	.24*	.32*			
4. Technical skills and overexplaining	93	2.71	0.85	-.45*	-.38*	-.21*		
5. Use of military jargon	90	2.87	1.27	.13	-.01	.00	.31*	
6. Nervousness	92	3.42	1.15	.05	-.03	.03	.35*	.32*

Note. * $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlations between themes and other variables.

Other variables	N	M	SD	COM	CONF	PROF	TECH	JARG	NERV
Age	92	40.40	11.82	.17	.23*	.14	-.20	-.02	-.05
Sex ^a	92	—	—	.12	.11	-.04	-.06	-.03	.11
Education	92	6.00	1.30	.09	.11	.07	-.25*	-.05	-.10
Employment ^b	90	—	—	.25*	.28*	.16	-.10	.01	.07
Deployment ^c	69	—	—	-.15	-.22	.04	.06	-.16	-.26*
Years of Service	71	12.89	9.00	.09	.16	.03	.03	.25*	.15
Rank ^d	89	1.82	0.90	.16	.10	-.15	-.08	.24*	-.01
Membership in Veteran Organization ^e	71	—	—	.04	-.01	.12	-.16	.21	-.05
Participation in Veteran Transition Programs ^f	70	—	—	.11	.17	.12	-.16	.27*	.10
Emotional Stability	88	2.80	0.99	.27*	.43*	.23*	-.24*	.05	-.08
Agreeableness	84	3.05	1.10	.25*	.35*	.31*	-.23*	-.02	-.04

Note. * $p < .05$ (two-tailed). COM = communicating soft skills, CONF = confidence, PROF = professionalism, TECH = technical skills and overexplaining, JARG = use of military jargon, NERV = nervousness. ^a0 = male and 1 = female. ^b0 = unemployed and 1 = employed. ^c0 = had not been deployed and 1 = had been deployed. ^d1 = E, 2 = W, and 3 = O; ^e0 = not a member and 1 = a member. ^f0 = did not participate and 1 = participated. ^gRank as operationalized in the raw data display a similar pattern of results.

The validity of the six themes was further assessed by examining the extent to which they covaried and displayed conceptually meaningful relationships with the demographic (i.e., years of service, rank, participation in veteran transition programs, employment status) and personality (i.e., emotional stability and agreeableness) variables. As the results in Table 3 indicate, sex was not related to any of the six themes ($r = -.06$ – $.12$). On the other hand, age was positively related to confidence ($r = .23$). Furthermore, education was related to difficulty of explaining technical skills ($r = -.25$) such that those with higher education found it less difficult to explain their military experience. Participants with more years of service and higher rank found it more difficult to limit the excessive use of military jargon ($r = .25$; $r = .24$). Furthermore, participants who were employed were more confident ($r = .28$) and had a better ability to communicate their soft skills ($r = .25$). Likewise, participants who had been deployed during their term of service felt less nervous in interviews ($r = -.26$).

Pertaining to involvement in veteran organizations, being a member in a veteran organization was not significantly associated with any of the themes and having participated in veteran transition programs was related to only the use of military jargon ($r = .27$) such that those who participated in these programs reported more difficulty with limiting their use of military jargon. Concerning personality, participants with higher emotional stability and higher agreeableness had higher levels of strengths (all three themes) and lower levels of weaknesses (specifically the ability to communicate military experience). In summary, overall, the results provided additional evidence for the validity of the themes, and were generally supportive of a convergence and consistency between the interviewers' and veteran interviewees' perceptions of the employment interviewing strengths and weaknesses of the latter.

General discussion

The themes that emerged using a qualitative approach in Study 1 were empirically examined in Study 2. Overall, the results were conceptually sound. First, the weaknesses and strengths framework was meaningful across the two studies. That is, the themes that were grouped as strengths or weaknesses in Study 1 positively converged in Study 2 and the themes that emerged as weaknesses were negatively related to the themes that emerged as strengths. Second, the strengths and weaknesses themes displayed meaningful associations with the pertinent demographic and personality variables. Although there is limited research that serves as the basis for a full interpretation of these associations, one can postulate possible explanations. For instance, the finding that veterans with higher educational attainment tended to experience less difficulty explaining technical skills is in line with literature indicating that educational attainment is positively related to verbal ability (Gesthuizen & Kraaykamp, 2002). This ability may influence the veteran's ability to explain and communicate technical ideas in a job interview. Likewise, the positive association between years of service and rank and the difficulty to limit the use of military jargon can be explained by the veteran's exposure to this jargon. As the exposure becomes stronger (i.e., as one rises through the ranks [i.e., higher ranks]) or longer (as one spends more years in service), it becomes more difficult to limit the use of jargon in interviews.

Furthermore, the finding that participants who were employed reported higher confidence and ability to communicate their soft skills may be because these participants acquired these strengths during their employment. Alternatively, one could also postulate that participants were more likely to be employed in the first place because they possessed these strengths. The finding that being a member in a veteran

organization or having participated in veteran transitions programs did not display significant correlations with most of the themes was surprising. Conceivably, perhaps veteran organizations to which veterans of the present sample belong may not train or have limited effectiveness in training them on the specific weaknesses and strengths examined in the present studies. An exception to this pattern was the positive relationship between participation in veteran transition programs and the difficulty to limit the use of military jargon which may be due to self-selection. That is, veterans who display this weakness are more likely to seek these programs. Finally, previous research has found a positive association between emotional stability and agreeableness and performance in interviews (Salgado & Moscoso, 2002). Therefore, to the extent that weaknesses and strengths are indicators of bad and good job interview performance respectively, the finding that emotional stability and agreeableness are positively related to strengths and negatively related to weaknesses is conceptually interpretable and meaningful.

Pertaining to the practical implications of the findings of the present work, based on the *totality* of results, several recommendations can be made to readily inform veterans on how to approach and prepare for civilian employment interviews, and veteran organizations on how to train and prepare veterans for interviews. First, it should be noted that although veterans may initially have limited experience with civilian employment interviews, for some veterans, especially officers, they have had experience with interview boards in the military, which they can bring to bear when engaging in civilian employment interviews. That noted, veterans should capitalize on their strengths namely by communicating skills which are highly valued by civilian organizations such as adaptability, teamwork, and leadership.

Veterans can also attempt to rectify their weaknesses. For instance, avoiding the use of military jargon; and practicing describing their military experiences using civilian-friendly language. Table 4 presents the perceived strengths and weaknesses themes along with recommendations for capitalizing on the strengths and rectifying the weaknesses. In addition to these recommendations, veterans could also engage in mock interviews and interview coaching (Maurer & Solamon, 2006; Maurer et al., 2001; Perkins et al., 2022; Tross & Maurer, 2008) where they practice and receive feedback on their interviewing performance. From the perspective of organizations, for a whole host of reasons (e.g., see Levashina et al., 2014), the recommendation would be to use structured instead of unstructured interview. The use of structured interviews will by definition also entail the training of interviewers to ensure the accuracy and validity of their interview ratings. In addition, this training would also provide the opportunity to familiarize interviewers with some of the unique potential challenges with interviewing veterans such as those outlined by Eckhart (2023) and U.S. Veterans Magazine (2022).

Limitations and directions for future research

The main limitations of the present studies lie in the samples used. First, the sample sizes of the studies were small ($N = 15$ and $N = 93$ for Study 1 and 2 respectively). This may have introduced some instability in the results. That said, a reviewer's comment prompted us to run a post-hoc power analysis for Study 2. These power analyses, using an alpha of .05, indicated that this sample size has a power of .16 to detect a small effect ($r = .10$), a power of .85 to detect a medium effect ($r = .30$), and a power of 1 to detect

Table 4. Veteran interviewee strengths and weaknesses themes and associated recommendations.

Themes	Recommendations
Veteran interviewee strengths	
Communicating soft skills	Adaptability, teamwork, and leadership skills are highly valued by civilian organizations. Veterans should therefore effectively communicate these skills as well as the experiences that have resulted in their development.
Professionalism	Veterans should seek to behave in a professional manner. Exemplar behaviors noted by focus groups participants included "being respectful," "thanks [hiring managers] for their time," being "poised," "shaking hands and not sitting until the rest of the interview panel sits." To avoid being perceived as inauthentic, veterans should not be "overly formal" and should highlight their unique and desirable interests and attributes that are distinct from their military identity.
Confidence	Veterans should draw a balance between coming across as self-confident (positive) and coming across as unduly over-confident or arrogant (negative). The right level of confidence can be approximated by seeking feedback from other people when practicing interview questions.
Veteran interviewee weaknesses	
Technical skills and over-explaining	Prior to and in preparation for the interview, veterans should seek to better understand and then clearly and concisely communicate how their military experience and skills are germane to the position for which they are applying.
Use of military jargon	Veteran interviewees should find and use alternative, civilian-friendly language to describe their military experiences to non-veteran interviewers. The use of jargon, not understood by civilians, may result in lower interview performance ratings.
Nervousness	To reduce their levels of nervousness in interviews, veterans may try a variety of interventions that address different aspects of nervousness such as cognitive restructuring (cognitive aspect), practicing interview questions (behavioral aspect), and mindfulness training (physiological aspect; Constantin et al., 2021).

a large effect ($r = .50$). Therefore, the sample size of Study 2 has sufficient power to detect a medium to large. Second, the samples were convenient, not random samples, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. That said, the conceptual and empirical validity of the themes across the two studies indicates that the findings can still serve as a starting point for future research. Thus, the replication of Study 2 with larger and more representative samples would be informative. Such a study could also increase the number of items in the survey and be multi-source as well, using both veterans and interviewers to complete the strengths and weaknesses measure.

Conclusion

In conclusion, because of their ubiquitous gatekeeping role, the present work sought to obtain insights about the strengths and weaknesses of veterans in employment interviews – from the perspective of both interviewers and veteran interviewees, and concluded with a list of specific recommendations for veterans on how to capitalize on their interviewing strengths and rectify the weaknesses. Finally, activities such as participating in interview coaching and mock interviews might be means by which veterans can practice enhancing their interviewing strengths and mitigating their weaknesses.

Notes

1. There was a total of 15 focus group participants but one participant was excluded from the final analysis because they were the only participant who attended their session and also admitted that they did not have considerable experience hiring veterans.
2. As previously noted, the focus groups were run during the COVID pandemic (i.e., January to March 2021).
3. The preponderance of comments were along the lines of “thanks for doing this work.”
4. f = frequency of mentions in response to each question asked.
5. Texas A&M University.
6. There were two closed questions (“Are you currently serving in the Armed Forces in any capacity?” “Which branch(es) did you serve in the Armed Forces?”) for which participants had to select a response from a list, and two open/constructed-response questions (“What was your first year of service?” “What was your last year of service?”).

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of Study 2 are available from the corresponding authors upon reasonable request.

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