

5 Things I Wish I Knew When I Left the Military

By Ruth Bayley

1. You know more than you think you do!

A career in the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) certainly teaches you a lot of useful things! You may be surprised at how easily your trade, professional and people skills will transfer to a civilian career.

Most people leaving the ADF have built good solid trade or professional skills through their ADF training and practical work experience. This is no real surprise to people in the outside world as the ADF is well known for providing good technical training. Your trade and professional skills are not always captured into a recognised civilian qualification, but they are definitely there.

What is less well known is the fact that most people leaving the ADF have also built a good portfolio of “soft skills” in areas like communication, negotiation, leadership and customer focus to get things done. The extent of your skills and experience in this area may be a bit of a surprise to potential civilian employers, who often have an image of life in the military built from Hollywood movies. Don't sell yourself short on your people skills. Be ready to explain to potential civilian employers just what you can do, and give them examples they can understand.

You should consider using your available resettlement schemes to update your qualifications to a recognised civilian standard. Talk to your career transition coach about the options that might be best for you.

2. Get rid of those TLAs – RFN!

All workplaces do it to some extent, but Defence has to take the cake for using three letter acronyms (the good old TLAs!) for just about everything. The problem is, the TLAs might make sense to you and your ADF colleagues, but no one else can understand what you are talking about (and they are probably too busy or too embarrassed to ask you to explain)! So you need to go through your CV with a fine tooth comb and remove all acronyms and jargon so that anyone can understand your skills and experience, without the need for an acronym translator. Once you think you've done this, get a civilian friend to go over your CV with you just to make sure that you are being clear, in plain civilian English.

The next thing to work on is the way you talk – once again, hunt down and eradicate those TLAs as well as any military specific phrases that civilians just don't get. The best way to do this is to ask a civilian to help you! You also need

to be aware of some of the more old fashioned phrases that are perfectly acceptable in the military, but that grate on civilian ears. Manpower and subordinate are two examples. Instead try words like staffing levels and team member.

A professional career transition coach can be really useful in helping you to clean up your CV and the way you talk at interviews, and even in casual conversations with potential civilian employers. That way you won't scare them off by sounding like you are talking a foreign language.

3. Former ADF members are a great network!

And they live everywhere, and do just about any job you can imagine. Keep in touch with military colleagues who have already left the forces before you. They are a great source of information and support for you. They may be able to refer you to people who can help you make a successful transition to civilian life, or they may even be able to help you get a job. They have been there and done that before you, and so will have good advice to offer. Don't be afraid to ask them a lot of questions!

4. Your former rank is not tattooed on your forehead!

To be blunt, most civilians don't care what your former rank used to be. Most of them don't even understand military ranks anyway, and find the whole thing a bit confusing. Potential civilian employers are much more interested in what you can do for them than what your rank once was.

Now this is not to say that rank is irrelevant in every way. You will obviously have built particular skills that relate to the rank you achieved, with senior non-commissioned officers and officers having more opportunities to develop their leadership skills, for example. To help with the transition to civilian life, you need to be able to explain clearly and in plain English (see point 2 above), using examples a civilian can understand, the skills and knowledge that you have acquired over your service career. It is easy when talking to other ADF members to rely on a shared understanding of what it means to be a Sergeant so that you don't have to explain your capabilities, but civilians do not share that understanding! So if you can't explain it to them, they probably won't get it, and you won't get the job.

Also, don't limit yourself to the traditional hierarchical way that the ADF makes promotions when you apply for civilian jobs. Go for jobs where you know you can perform well, even if they seem to be "promotions", at least on paper. See point 1 – you know more than you think you do. The skills and knowledge brought by former military members are usually highly sought after by smart civilian employers.

Again, your career transition coach can help you decide what jobs might suit you.

5. You can learn quickly on the job.

The posting cycle that you have endured for the duration of your military career has given you something that you might not recognise – and that's the ability to learn very quickly on the job. Let's face it, every couple of years you have had to pick up, pack up and learn a new job! So in comparison to a lot of civilian job applicants, you have regularly demonstrated the ability to quickly get your head around a new set of responsibilities, to ease into a new work team and to get yourself up to speed. This is a very attractive and valuable skill to civilian employers, who are looking for staff who can learn fast and turn their hand to whatever is required.

Make the most of this aspect of your military career when you apply for jobs and at interviews. It is something that most ADF members just take for granted, and probably don't even think about as a particular skill, let alone mention to a potential employer. And most civilians think that you have had just one job – "being in the military" for all those years - without realising that this may have involved quite a number of different jobs.

Talk with your career transition coach about the other hidden skills you may possess that will interest a civilian employer.

The ADF provides funding for career transition services and for upgrading qualifications to certain military members. Check with your local unit representative to see what support might be available for you.

Ruth Bayley

Ruth was a member of the Royal Australian Air Force for almost 14 years before successfully making the transition to civilian employment.

Ruth's next job after her RAAF career was in the Australian Public Service. After positions in the Australian Public Service she then went on to found Bayley and Associates, a flourishing private Registered Training Organisation based in Canberra. Ruth now employs almost 20 staff and contractors – many of whom are former ADF members!

Visit www.bayleyteam.com.au for more information on qualifications and accreditations.