ALLIES ADVANCING VETERAN TALENT

FINDINGS FROM THE 2026 ALLIES INDUSTRY SURVEY

# Career Progression in Canada's Defence Industry







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# A Message from ADGA Group and Invest Ottawa

Canada's defence industry has long recognized the value veterans bring to our workforce. Here in Ottawa, where Canada's defence community, government and industry intersect, we see that value every day. Through ADGA's longstanding role in Canada's defence sector and Invest Ottawa's work supporting the region's defence and security ecosystem through its Defence Innovation Hub, we also see the importance of developing the people and capabilities our industry needs.

Through ALLIES, we wanted to look further – at what happens after veterans transition into civilian employment and what helps them continue to develop and progress.

The veterans who contributed to this research shared both successful experiences and areas where more can be done. Their perspectives point to practical opportunities for employers to better recognize military experience, make career pathways easier to navigate, and strengthen access to the relationships and development opportunities that support career progression.

While this work began within Ottawa's defence community, we hope the findings will contribute to a broader conversation across Canada's defence industry and beyond – encouraging organizations to reflect on their own practices, build on what is already working, and continue strengthening how we develop and retain veteran talent.

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# About ALLIES

ALLIES—A Leadership Lab for Impact and Executive Sponsorship—is an industry-led initiative focused on veteran career progression after transition into civilian employment.

Convened by ADGA Group in partnership with Invest Ottawa, ALLIES brought together veterans, executive sponsors and organizations from across Canada's defence industry to better understand what supports career development and progression – and where employers can do more.

The initiative began with a cohort of veterans and industry leaders in Ottawa and expanded through the 2026 ALLIES Industry Survey, which gathered perspectives from 84 CAF veterans working, or recently working, in Canada's defence industry.

## Participating organizations

# The Importance of Veteran Career Progression

Veterans bring operational knowledge, leadership experience, technical expertise and an understanding of the missions Canada's defence industry supports. Considerable attention has been paid to helping CAF members transition to civilian employment and helping employers recruit veteran talent. **ALLIES set out to examine another part of that experience.**

## What happens once veterans are hired?

The ALLIES Industry Survey explored how veterans working in Canada's defence industry experience civilian career progression: how their military experience is recognized and leveraged, how they learn to navigate civilian career systems, what enables or inhibits advancement, and what organizations can do to better develop veteran talent over time.

The research shows considerable evidence of successful civilian careers. At the same time, it reveals recurring differences in how military experience is understood, how visible career pathways are, and how consistently veterans gain access to the relationships and opportunities that support progression.

How to read the findings: This was an exploratory industry survey and should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all veterans working in Canada's defence industry. The sample skews toward experienced veterans. That limits conclusions about newly transitioning veterans, while providing useful perspective from people who have had time to navigate civilian organizations and reflect on what has influenced their progression.

## Who we heard from

The final ALLIES Industry Survey received 84 completed responses from CAF veterans working, or recently working, in Canada's defence industry.

Respondents represented a broad range of military backgrounds, ranks, civilian career stages, organization types and regions. The sample was notably experienced, including many veterans with long military careers and significant time in civilian industry.

- Civilian roles ranged from technical and individual-contributor positions to program and project management, business development, consulting, management, director and executive roles.
- Organizations included large defence primes, mid-sized defence organizations, SMEs and startups, consulting and professional-services firms, government/public-sector environments and other defence-related organizations.
- Responses came from across Canada, with particularly strong representation from the National Capital Region.

# The Central Finding

## Hiring veterans and developing veteran talent are distinct parts of the employment experience.

**FOUNDATION**

75%

said their military experience is valued by their organization

**OPPORTUNITY**

51%

said their organization does not know how to assess military leadership experience

**AMBITION**

64%

would be likely or very likely to pursue greater responsibility if the opportunity arose

## Many of the practices veterans identify as helpful are good talent-management practices:

- ✓ Effective onboarding
- ✓ Supportive managers
- ✓ Clear career pathways
- ✓ Mentorship
- ✓ Sponsorship
- ✓ Professional networks
- ✓ Development opportunities
- ✓ Meaningful career conversations

The opportunity is to apply them deliberately, with an understanding of the veteran experience.

# 4 Things We Learned

1

## Military experience is valued – but its full value is not always understood or leveraged.

One of the clearest distinctions in the research is between **valuing military experience** and **knowing how to assess it.**

Respondents generally describe their military backgrounds as valued by their organizations. The picture becomes less consistent when it comes to whether military leadership experience is fully understood, whether previous experience is considered in advancement decisions, and whether organizations know how to translate that experience into civilian roles and capabilities.

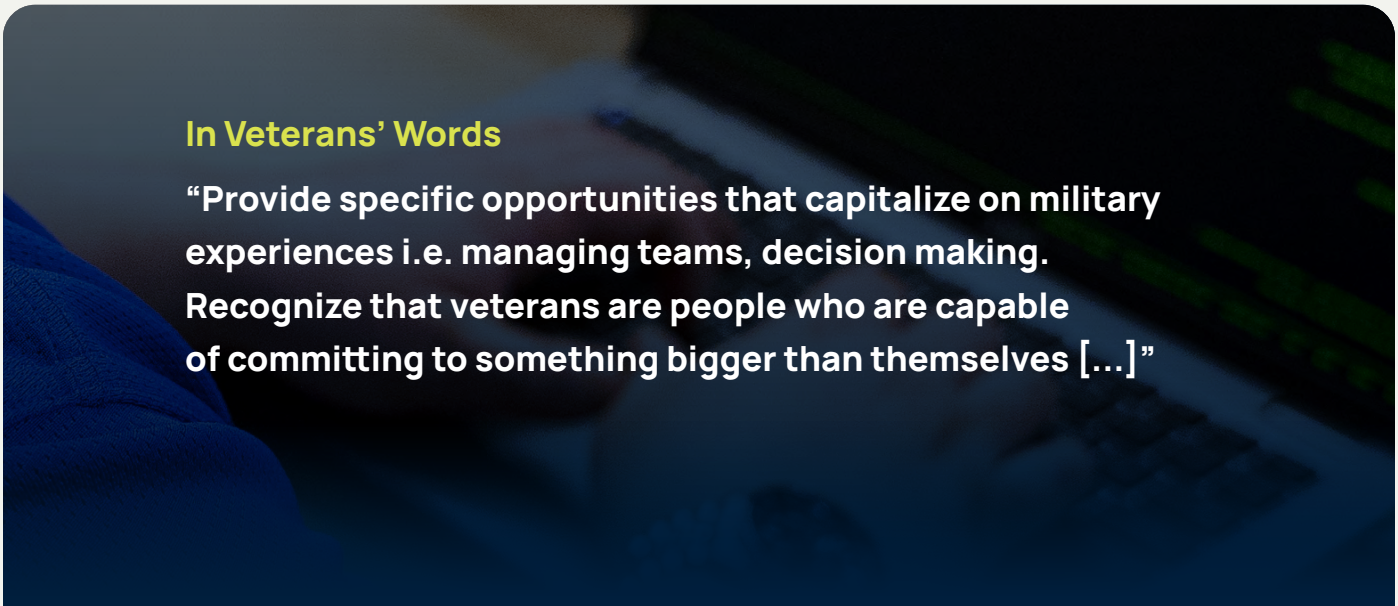
Written responses point to challenges interpreting military occupations, education and qualifications, levels of responsibility, leadership scope and experience in relation to civilian competencies and levels of seniority.

### What this means

Veterans have a role in communicating their experience in civilian terms. Employers have a corresponding opportunity to strengthen the ability of managers, HR professionals and leaders to look beyond rank and occupation and assess the competencies, scope, complexity, accountability and outcomes underneath them.

### What may be under-recognized

Respondents repeatedly identified leadership under pressure, decision-making, operational planning, risk management, team leadership, adaptability, accountability, mission focus and stakeholder management as transferable capabilities that may not always be visible from a military title, rank or occupation.



**In Veterans' Words**

**"Provide specific opportunities that capitalize on military experiences i.e. managing teams, decision making. Recognize that veterans are people who are capable of committing to something bigger than themselves [...]"**

2

## Civilian career progression can be difficult to see and navigate.

Moving from a military career into a civilian organization involves learning a different professional system.

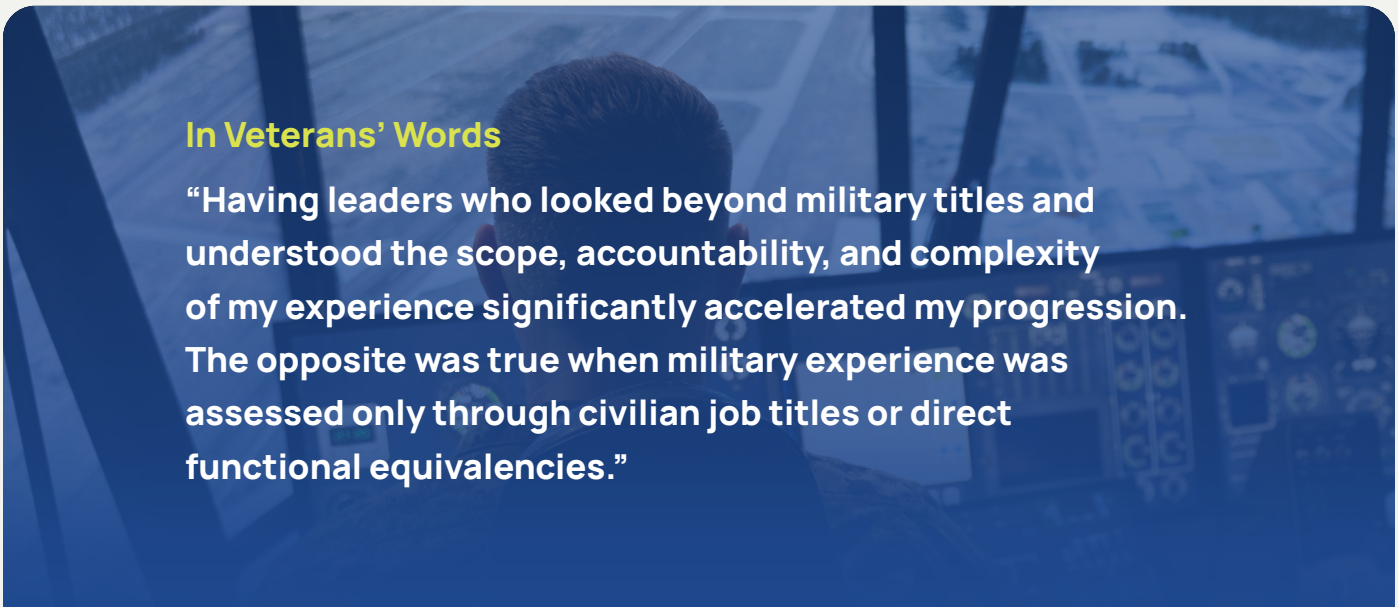
Respondents report varying levels of understanding of available career pathways, how advancement decisions are made, what experience is required for future roles, how internal mobility works and how to access development opportunities.

They learn by observing, networking, finding mentors, developing relationships with managers and senior leaders, asking for opportunities and learning organizational culture. Much of the system is therefore learned informally.

Importantly, career satisfaction and career-path clarity are not the same thing. Veterans can be satisfied with their current roles while still having limited visibility into where they could go next or how to get there.

### What this means

Organizations do not need to guarantee advancement, but they can make advancement easier to understand by providing greater transparency around career pathways, internal opportunities, expectations for progression, development options and how decisions are made.



### In Veterans' Words

**"Having leaders who looked beyond military titles and understood the scope, accountability, and complexity of my experience significantly accelerated my progression. The opposite was true when military experience was assessed only through civilian job titles or direct functional equivalencies."**

3

## Relationships and visibility are part of career infrastructure.

While experience and performance matter, the survey suggests they are not the only things that matter.

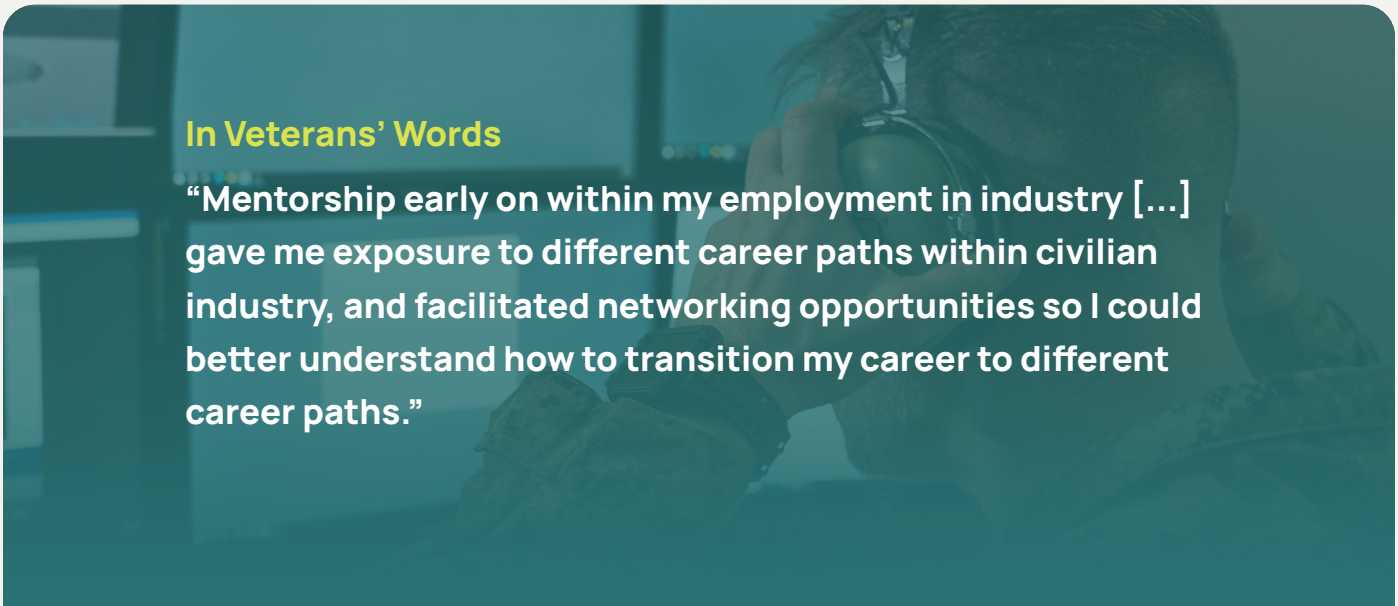
Supportive managers, mentors, sponsors and advocates, professional networks, access to senior leaders, organizational visibility and opportunities to demonstrate capability recur throughout the responses as career enablers.

**Managers appear particularly important.** Respondents describe managers who took time to understand their backgrounds, recognized capabilities that were not obvious from their current roles, encouraged development, created opportunities, connected them with others or advocated for them.

Mentors can help veterans understand civilian organizations, explore career paths and build professional networks. Sponsors and advocates can help create visibility and access to opportunities.

### What this means

Relationships and organizational exposure can be especially valuable for veterans entering civilian industry without an established professional network. Employers can create opportunities for veterans to build relationships beyond their immediate teams, connect with mentors and senior leaders, and demonstrate their capabilities through new assignments and projects.



### In Veterans' Words

**"Mentorship early on within my employment in industry [...] gave me exposure to different career paths within civilian industry, and facilitated networking opportunities so I could better understand how to transition my career to different career paths."**

4

## Veterans carry much of the responsibility for navigating the system.

When veterans describe what contributes to civilian career success, their answers place considerable emphasis on individual initiative: learn the culture, build a network, find mentors and sponsors, translate military experience, communicate career ambitions, identify opportunities and advocate for development.

Those are useful strategies. Taken together, however, the responses also reveal how much of the navigation burden currently rests with the individual veteran.

### What this means

The findings point toward shared responsibility. Veterans remain active participants in their own careers. Organizations can create conditions in which pathways, expectations, opportunities and the value of previous experience are easier to understand and access.

The goal is to make successful progression less dependent on chance, individual circumstances or someone's ability to decode the system alone.

### In Veterans' Words

**"Make time early in your new career within the defence industry to understand the different career pathways available to you… It's not enough to simply perform your new role well, you need to advocate for yourself and make sure you are a 'known entity' to senior personnel."**

# Creating the Conditions for Progression

The findings point to several areas where defence employers can strengthen how veteran talent is recognized, supported and developed throughout a civilian career. Based on the experiences shared through the ALLIES research, six practices provide a practical framework for employers:

### Hire

Recognize the capabilities, experience and potential veterans bring from military service.

### Orient

Make the organization, career pathways, internal mobility and advancement processes easier to understand.

### Recognize

Assess military experience beyond rank and occupation, including leadership scope, accountability, complexity and outcomes.

### Connect

Create opportunities to build relationships with peers, managers, mentors, sponsors, networks and senior leaders.

### Develop

Have meaningful career conversations and provide development, stretch opportunities and chances to demonstrate broader capability.

### Advance

Continue to consider broader experience, demonstrated capability and aspirations after the initial hire.

## The takeaway

These practices are not unique to veterans. They are strong talent management practices that benefit employees more broadly.

**For veterans, however, their deliberate application can help bridge the transition between two professional environments with different structures, terminology, networks and approaches to career progression.**

Applied consistently, they can help veterans translate their experience, build new professional networks and navigate opportunities for growth throughout their civilian careers.

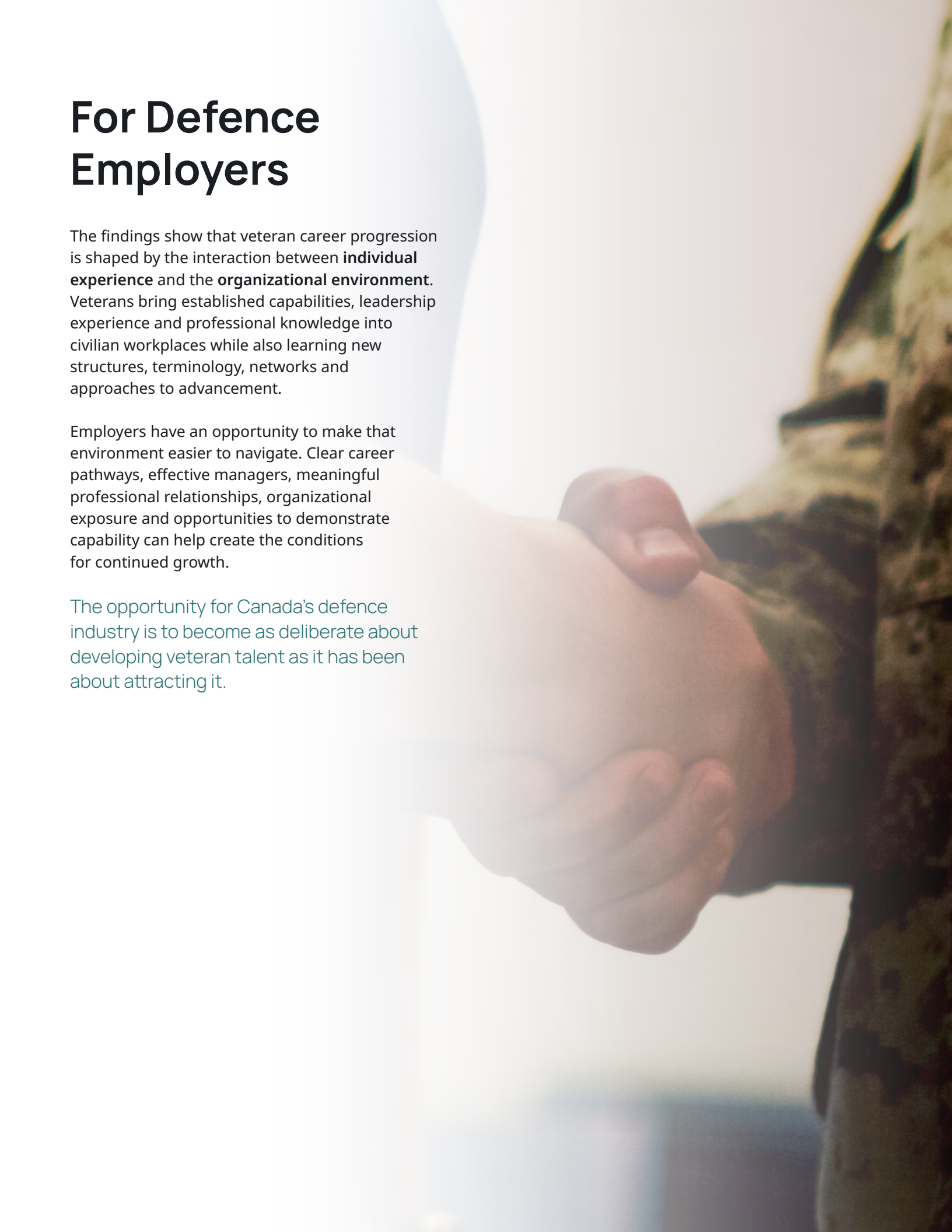


# For Defence Employers

The findings show that veteran career progression is shaped by the interaction between **individual experience** and the **organizational environment**. Veterans bring established capabilities, leadership experience and professional knowledge into civilian workplaces while also learning new structures, terminology, networks and approaches to advancement.

Employers have an opportunity to make that environment easier to navigate. Clear career pathways, effective managers, meaningful professional relationships, organizational exposure and opportunities to demonstrate capability can help create the conditions for continued growth.

The opportunity for Canada's defence industry is to become as deliberate about developing veteran talent as it has been about attracting it.



# Explore the Survey Data

This report focuses on the themes and implications that emerged most clearly from the ALLIES Industry Survey. We are also making the aggregate survey data available so employers, researchers, veteran-serving organizations and others can explore the results from different perspectives and identify additional insights.

We hope making the data available will encourage others to build on the ALLIES research and deepen our collective understanding of veteran career development in Canada's defence industry and beyond.

Download the Survey Data

**The data could support further exploration of**

- questions such as how military experience is utilized after hire
- how career aspirations relate to access to advancement opportunities
- the role of mentorship and sponsorship in career progression
- whether experiences differ across career stages, military backgrounds or types of organizations

Initiate

## Acknowledgement

Special thanks to Initiate Marketing for their generous pro bono contribution to ALLIES; the design of the ALLIES findings report and accompanying webpage as part of their broader commitment to giving back and supporting the communities they serve.