

NVTI Podcast Series

Encouraging Veterans to Seek Employment

Episode #31 | August 3, 2026

Narrator:

Welcome to the National Veterans' Training Institute podcast series, where we discuss pressing issues affecting today's veterans.

Rebecca:

Welcome to today's NVTI podcast, Encouraging Veterans to Seek Employment. My name is Rebecca and I will be your host. Our conversation today will give you some valuable tips that you can employ to help encourage the veterans you work with to pursue employment. And we'll also share some real life success stories. We'll begin by introducing our contributors. Please share your name, where you are from, and a little bit about your role and work.

Kendra Henry:

My name is Kendra Henry and I'm a consolidated DVOP LVER. I've been in this position for the past six years and cover all of the counties in northeastern North Dakota. I spent 12 years in the Air Force. Most of that I was in COM. Grand Forks Air Force Base was my last duty station and I stayed in the local area after separation.

Michael Gardner:

My name is Michael Gardner. I am the veteran representative for the Otero and Lincoln County areas in southern New Mexico. I also cover Holloman Air Force Base. I spent just over 10 years in the United States Navy as an operations specialist. I've been in this current position for going on five years now. Being able to assist veterans in transitioning service members with employment-related matters has been a very good and challenging career so far.

Christopher Smith:

I'm Christopher Smith. I'm a CODL up here in Bismarck, North Dakota. I cover the counties Southeast Western North Dakota. Been doing this job five years. I spent 20 years, four months active-duty army and working with the veterans has been an eye-opening experience working with the same people I served with.

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Matthew Steele:

My name is Matthew Steele. I am a consolidated DVOP and LVER in Northwest Tennessee out of Huntington American Job Center. I've been in the position now for almost three years. I was in the US Navy as a master at arms for over 10 and a half years before I was medically retired out of Washington State. Assisting veterans in my area has been extremely challenging and rewarding experience.

Rebecca:

Thank you all for joining us today. Can you provide a little bit of a background on common reasons that a veteran might choose to seek out services but hesitate to pursue employment opportunities?

Michael Gardner:

Yes, ma'am. Many veterans, for my opinion, seek out our assistance because they're facing challenges that extend beyond just finding a job. For many, employment is not the most immediate priority. They may be experiencing housing issues, food insecurity, medical concerns, mental health challenges, transportation difficulties. Some others have just become discouraged with the repeated unsuccessful job searches and face difficulty translating their military skills to the civilian side.

Kendra Henry:

I've seen it for several reasons. The veteran could have been out of the workforce for an extended period of time for various reasons, whether that be school, disability, taking care of their children, justice impactment. And now they're seeking employment for whatever reason and they're overwhelmed with even where to start. They also could have more immediate needs such as homelessness or food insecurity and need the referrals to those other resources to resolve those issues first before they can focus on seeking employment.

Christopher Smith:

Some other ways I've seen is just that veteran not knowing just where to start with looking for anything so everything just hits them all at once and becomes overwhelming. So once they reach out to us through contacts, we can make it easier for them to get pretty much a plan going to get the other assistance that they need before they start job seeking.

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Matthew Steele:

Also, the veteran may think that the position is beneath them that you found for them. It may not be in the field they want to go into, or also the position may not pay enough, or they may be receiving a type of benefit of some kind, and they may fear that employment may take that benefit away.

Rebecca:

When working with veterans whose immediate needs involve housing, food, health care, or other basic necessities, how do you keep them focused on future employment goals while they're getting services to meet those needs?

Michael Gardner:

The first step is addressing the immediate crisis. It's difficult for anyone to focus on employment when they're worried about where they'll sleep or how they'll feed their family. Knowing your local partners and who to refer the veteran to is very important. It builds trust between you and the veteran. Once those needs are being addressed through community partnership and supportive services, then we can begin discussing employment as part of a long-term stability plan.

Christopher Smith:

While they're looking for the other immediate needs, I always remind the veteran, yes, you need to get everything else taken care of, but at the same time, look for employment as you're receiving the other resources because you could just walk in to receive food assistance and at the same time could walk into a job at the same time. So keeping them focused to always be looking when they're receiving other assistance also helps them look at the bigger picture as they're doing everything else.

Matthew Steele:

And as I said, you need to address the barriers that are keeping them from being job ready. You need to address the barriers before you can even think about starting to apply for the jobs. You need to truly understand the needs of that veteran. And you won't be able to have a successful employment experience or even be able to begin getting the veteran to focus. Like Michael said, if they're concerned with where your next meal is coming from or where they're going to

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sleep without addressing the entire problem at hand, you're only putting a band-aid on a much larger issue.

Kendra Henry:

A big part would be not only just checking in with them, checking in with the other case managers they're working with during this period while they're trying to meet those needs. A lot of times I'll run into a veteran that has, say, a transportation barrier, so I'd coordinate with one of their other case managers to bring them over to my office to work on that resume or work on that job search piece as part of the follow-up for their appointment with that other case manager.

Rebecca:

It's clear that building a relationship with the veterans you serve is essential to their success. What techniques help build trust and rapport with veterans who may need additional encouragement or motivation to seek employment?

Kendra Henry:

The most important part is just to listen. The veteran might get off topic for a few minutes or just really need to vent about their situation, and we might know the perfect solution or resource right in that moment. But if we're not letting them feel heard first, there's a chance that they're not going to be receptive to what we're trying to tell them.

Christopher Smith:

A lot of it is just making sure the veteran is heard and listened to and understood. Like Kendra said, letting the veteran voice, what they're feeling, what they're working with, what they see in front of their eyes opens up a lot more than just trying to jump in right away with the fixes before you actually even hear them and what they're going through. Then the way I do it is I repeat back key things after they're done speaking, repeat back what they said so they know that you're listening, understanding what they are saying.

Matthew Steele:

Big thing is building that rapport and taking time to listen and hear them. Sometimes just giving them the time they need to vent and know that they're not alone. I'd say a good portion of my veteran clients don't get to talk about experiences that they have with other veterans. By

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having that shared background and experiences and letting them know that you understand where they're coming from and can relate to their situation and what they're going through and the experiences that they're having, they open up a lot more and you can open so many more doors for you than just treating them as another case to manage.

Michael Gardner:

And a lot of what I have to say kind of piggybacks off Kendra, Christopher and Matthew. Trust is built through consistency, right? Constant contact, honesty, active listening. Many veterans have worked within the culture that values accountability and teamwork. In my opinion, they appreciate straightforward communication and realistic expectations. I focus on understanding their story, getting to know their strengths and their goals before discussing employment opportunities. When veterans know that someone is genuinely invested in their success, they are more often and willing to engage in this process.

Rebecca:

We know that the path from military service to civilian employment isn't always simple. What challenges are veterans likely to face when transitioning from military culture to civilian workplace culture? And do you have any tips you can share on helping veterans navigate workplace expectations and professional norms?

Christopher Smith:

When I work with veterans that are just getting out, I acknowledge with them that yes, you just lost your identity when you got out of the military. Now you're working to find what you what's going to fit for you and how that identity is going to feel. I tell them, you may end up taking a job that's not exactly what you want right away to get the foot in the door to the job you want, so don't expect to come out into manager or supervisor positions. Be willing and humble to start back at the bottom and work your way up. What we know in the military isn't going to always 100% transfer into civilian side to get back into the leadership roles. So be willing to humble yourself and step down a little bit to work back up to what you were before.

Michael Gardner:

For many veterans, the transition from military service to the civilian workforce involves more than simply finding a job. Military life is built around structure, clear expectations, teamwork, and a mission-focused culture. Whereas civilian workforce often functions differently with a

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little less formal communication, a different type of leadership style, and new expectations that can take time to navigate. Another common challenge is explaining military experience in a way that resonates with civilian employers. Veterans have developed valuable leadership, technical and problem-solving skills, but they don't always know how to describe those experiences using languages employers recognize. One of the most important ways we can help is by translating the military duties into civilian skills and qualifications. We also work with veterans on workplace communication, interviewing techniques, resume development and professional networking. These tools help build confidence and make the transition into civilian employment a little smoother and more successful.

Matthew Steele:

Civilian employment often seems to lack the same bond and camaraderie that we experienced or we were used to when we were in the military. And one of the ways that I try to assist my veteran clients is by reiterating and managing their expectations to their new workforce. The cultures are very different and if you're not careful, you can get yourself into a lot of trouble or you can find yourself not fitting in with your new colleagues because you still need to adjust to your mindset and your expectations, interpersonal relationships. And I try to manage and prepare their workplace expectations and explain that you're not in military anymore and you need to be aware of the things that you say or do in the workplace because the things that you used to be able to say and do are a lot different now. And sometimes that adjustment period takes time.

Kendra Henry:

That is just the thing. The best way I can describe what the transition feels like is culture shock. But here's the thing, culture shock is one of those things that the military taught us how to handle. Much like how service member would do their research on where they're being stationed next or being sent to next, and they would learn about the culture, they learn about the language, they'd reach out to people who are already in that area to learn more about what's going on. You can do the same thing with civilian work culture. The first thing I would always recommend is to reach out to your DVOP. That DVOP has been through that transition; they'll be a wealth of knowledge for them. Next part would be to seek out veterans either in their new workplace or, at a minimum, veterans who work in the field they're trying to go into. I was very fortunate when I started my position at the American Job Center because my supervisor is a veteran too. He was very understanding on having to explain those extra things

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to me, like you have to take your lunch break or how sick leave worked. And that very much benefited me as I was transitioning into civilian workforce.

Rebecca:

There are many tools out there to help veterans identify transferable skills. But for veterans with employment gaps or who want to change career fields, how do you help them market themselves to employers? What role do retraining, education, workforce development programs play in helping veterans find meaningful careers? And what can you do to help veterans want to engage in these programs?

Matthew Steele:

Helping the veterans understand how to transfer their military skills in a way that civilian employers will understand. Recently, I've had a lot of success utilizing different AI tools to look up specific veterans, former MOSs or their jobs in the military and translating their skills through AI to be understandable in ways to get it onto their resume. The same tools can also be used to inform them of the jobs and careers that they may not have been aware of. Because some of them, when you put them into the systems, it generates and populates lists that match those skills once you transfer them into a way that makes more sense on paper than just, you know, I was a leader or I did this job in the military.

Michael Gardner:

I focus on what veterans can do rather than what they haven't done. Employment gaps can often be explained by military service, caregiving responsibilities, education, or other life circumstances. The key is helping veterans present their experience honestly while emphasizing their skills, accomplishments and readiness to work. Training and other workforce development programs are extremely valuable because they provide veterans with industry-recognized credentials and opportunities to enter a new career field. Programs such as WIOA funding training, apprenticeships, on the job training, vocational rehabilitation services, and community college programs can create pathways into meaningful careers.

Kendra Henry:

One of the big things is exploring soft skills, especially those that were developed through additional duties, hobbies, or even volunteer work. I had a veteran who went to college right after separating from the Air Force, and he didn't work for that period of time. However, during

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that, he volunteered at a youth center teaching kids how to play Dungeons and Dragons. We had a lot of skills that he had with working with children, program management, conflict resolution, and much more. So, between those skills that he had and the new degree, it led for him getting hired at our local library. With that, there are many different opportunities for education and retraining. As was already mentioned, we have the GI Bill, we have VA, VR&E, we have WIOA, we have State Vocational Rehabilitation, and there are so many different ways to explore that retraining or upskilling that traditional college apprenticeships, work experiences, and on-the-job training and certifications can give you. Letting veterans know that some of these resources are available to them in and of itself can be encouraging, especially if they don't know, if they don't have their GI Bill for whatever reason.

Christopher Smith:

Pretty much, everything I was going to say comes out for everyone before me. But one of the ones I also like to focus on with veterans is if they did any volunteer work, what they picked up during the volunteer work also helps bridge a little bit of some of the knowledge that as you volunteer, you do learn things that you don't think so because it's not a paid employment. So, you did pick up some soft skills through that area.

Rebecca:

We know that some individuals, they just may not be ready for full-time, long-term employment right away. How can volunteer work, part-time employment, other transitional activities help veterans prepare for long-term employment? And what benefits do these opportunities provide for both mental health and career readiness?

Michael Gardner:

That's right, Rebecca. Not every veteran is ready to jump directly into a full-time career, and that's fine. For some, the transition from military service includes overcoming personal challenges, rebuilding confidence, or addressing barriers that make immediate full-time employment unrealistic. That's where transitional opportunities can make a significant difference. Volunteer work, part-time employment, internships, temporary positions, and OJTs allow veterans to reestablish a daily routine, develop civilian work experience, and rebuild confidence without the pressure of immediately committing to a full-time career. These opportunities also help veterans strengthen workplace communications, expand their professional network, and gain current references that can make them more competitive in the

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job market. From a mental health perspective, meaningful work and community involvement can reduce the isolation, can provide a renewed sense of purpose, can improve overall well-being. Many veterans miss the camaraderie and the mission-driven environment and experience they had during their military service. Volunteering or working part-time can help restore some of that belonging as well as creating a positive momentum towards a larger employment goal. Ultimately, these transitional experiences aren't a detour. They're often just an important step towards that long-term success. They help veterans build that confidence and demonstrate reliability to future employers and prepare for sustainable, meaningful careers when they're ready to make that next move.

Kendra Henry:

Not only is it going to help them build marketable skill sets, volunteering or part-time work is going to assist them with easing back into a routine, work on interacting with coworkers and customers, explore types of work that might be a good fit for them. This really boosts their confidence and when they're looking for a part-time or more permanent position. But it's also a great way for the veterans just to add a pro-social activity into their routine. I was working with 100% T&P veteran who's looking to reenter the workforce after nearly 20 years of being a stay-at-home dad. His youngest was just heading off to college and he needed something to get out of the house. As we talked about resumes, applications, what he might be interested in doing, it turned out that he was a sports dad and his kids were in Scouts. So, he spent a whole lot of that time that he was a stay-at-home dad volunteering in different capacities and had built many valuable skill sets to bring to the table. And it was very easy to find him a position after that.

Christopher Smith:

Between part-time work and volunteer work, it gets them back into the routine, helps them out mentally, just being able to be out of the house and connecting with people and getting back into the community and being productive in whatever capacity they're doing. It also helps them out physically by actually getting them to be physical and doing some work. As long as learning soft skills that can eventually help them into full-time employment.

Matthew Steele:

Temp agencies, part-time work, skills development programs, they provide them opportunities that best fit their situations, refer them to other agency partners that may be able to provide

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any additional resources that us in our roles do not have access to. So that way they have the best programs and tools at their disposal.

Rebecca:

Building off of this idea of taking small steps like volunteer work, let's briefly talk about the importance of focusing on small victories during a veteran's employment journey. How can you use incremental successes to build a veteran's confidence and career momentum?

Christopher Smith:

Building off of small victories, like one of the big ones I use is during my first appointments with veterans is have them just bring in a rough draft to their resume. And once they do that, it starts to give them a little dopamine rush of success right away to get them in the mindset of I can do this. Just taking small increment steps to keep them going and give them that rush of I got this, I can do this. I already did the resume. Now what next? And it just starts to build that slow momentum for them. They want to do more and show that they can do it, and they see they can do it at the same time.

Michael Gardner:

Very much what Christopher just said, right? Small victories matter because they create momentum. Completing a resume, attending a hiring event, submitting an application, earning a certification, or participating in an interview are all accomplishments worth recognizing. Veterans often focus solely on the end goal of employment, right, getting that job. But I try to acknowledge the process along the way that helps them build confidence and reinforces positive behaviors. Success is usually the result of many small steps taken constantly over time to find that good job for them.

Matthew Steele:

Also, they're adding more to their resume, getting higher skills and moving up potentially in a company to higher roles at the same time you're building that rapport with the employer and showing, hey, look, here's a veteran that I gave you. That contacted you. I referred them to your company. They applied and you thought they were great and you hired them and look now they're successful and look how good they're doing. Not only are they one of your top performers, but within so many months, potentially, you've already had them in a team lead position or a management position and you just hired him. You know originally to be someone

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potentially on the floor and you just gave them a little bit and they ran with it because that's just how a lot of veterans are and that creates that pipeline. And they know that if, you know, as a business, if they need someone, they can come to us. And if they need a hard charger, they know the American job centers and they can reach out to their local LVERs and they're probably going to have at least a couple people that we might be able to refer them. They're that same type of hard charger mindset that can, if I just give these guys just that little bit of a chance, they're just going to run with it.

Kendra Henry:

I think it's very important to celebrate those small steps in this process because you can build off of those be like, you get to move into your new apartment tomorrow. That's great. Do you want to start looking for places that are hiring close by? Or even though you didn't get that new position, you made it to the interview. Do you want to do some mock interviews to be better prepared for the next one? And just kind of continuously encourage them through that process.

Rebecca:

Can you share a success story of a veteran who overcame significant barriers and ultimately found meaningful employment? And what do you think had the biggest impact on that person's success?

Kendra Henry:

I had a veteran referred to me through our Veterans Treatment Court. In addition to dealing with that justice involvement, he had a substance abuse disorder and he recently became homeless due to that incarceration. So, we got him quickly working with HUD-VASH and SSVF to resolve the housing situation. He had a wealth of experience as a millwright, but he was searching for temp work at the time and applying through staffing agencies. Mostly because he was just trying to find a quick position, get making money, and get back to work. But also with being a millwright, they need their own tools and those can be very expensive tools. I was able to connect him with our HVRP program in the state. They were able to assist him with getting tools and work clothes. So we were able to focus on applying for positions in his field and he got picked up pretty quickly. There was a setback. He did end up getting laid off from the first employer right after the project he was working on ended. But literally the day he came into my office to file for unemployment, I suggested applying for a different position with a different company and he was hired that day. He recently graduated from our Veterans Treatment Court

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and attributed a big part of his success to myself and the HVRP advisor for assisting him with a good job. And I think one of the biggest pieces of success is being able to wrap around all those resources and continually encouraging him through all these pieces, through all the setbacks, and helping him move forward. But he is doing fantastic on his own now and he knows where to reach back to if he runs into any issues.

Matthew Steele:

I had a veteran and she recently fell on hard times. A lot of stuff happened at once between personal life and her career. She was behind on rent, and behind her car payment due to losing her job, due to a lot of those personal things that occurred. We were able to connect her with two of our local resources: West Tennessee Veterans Coalition and Friends of the Troops out of Chattanooga, Tennessee, and they were able to assist that veteran with over \$4500 in relief to get them caught back up on not only their rent, but their car payment. And on top of that, they were also able to find a job in the exact same time frame to get them qualified for that relief. And that got them back on their feet, back out of that negative situation and able to focus back on the path they needed to focus to address the situations in their life.

Michael Gardner:

One veteran that I worked with had been underemployed for an extended period of time and faced minor legal issues that created a challenge during his job search. Despite applying to numerous positions, he received very few responses and became very, very discouraged. We worked together on resume improvements and interview preparation and identifying opportunities that matched his experience and qualifications. Took a little bit of time...but eventually, he actually secured a position as one of us, as a CODL. We call him veteran representatives here in New Mexico. The biggest factor in his success was his persistence, right? He kept getting that no, but he continued applying, improving his job search strategy, and remained engaged with the employment services even when they progressed very, very slow. His willingness to keep moving forward ultimately led him to gain meaningful employment in a career where he now helps other veterans.

Rebecca:

Once a veteran becomes employed, how can you, as a veteran service provider, help them stay engaged and succeed in their new role? What strategies help them to navigate challenges after

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they're hired? For instance, if a veteran decides they want to change roles, how can you support them in making that change while also maintaining the motivation momentum?

Kendra Henry:

It really starts with that follow-up and consistent contact, checking in with them on those first few months on the job to make sure they're going well. This shows that your door is still open to them. If they want to change roles, this could be helping them balance that current position with doing more work search, or it could be helping them explore those education and training opportunities so they can broaden the position that they want to apply for.

Matthew Steele:

We have the mandatory 30, 60, and 90 day follow-ups, and we keep that consistent contact with our client. But the other thing too, and what I always strive to make sure that all my clients know is that, hey, regardless of if that job works out or not, I'm here, my door's always open, my phone is always on, my e-mail is always open. So, if you need further assistance after this, or if you even get into this role and you find out it's not the right one for you, reach back out, make an appointment, sit down and we'll figure it out and we'll readdress it. And we can start over if we need to.

Christopher Smith:

Like everyone else said, so far, consistent contact is big with the veterans, showing that you're still invested in them and that you're going to stay there with them. I also, from time to time, if the veteran during our talks has shown that he is a little apprehensive, I've popped in and done employer visits, see him on the job, talk to their supervisors, see how they're doing. If they come down, do they want a different role? Let them know that it's still open, I'm still open for them, for any assistance they need or let them know that they can still work and look for work at the same time. And we can work around their schedule if they need my assistance, work with their schedule and my schedule to do the meetings where the veteran's at that time.

Michael Gardner:

And I agree with everything the other three veterans just said on here. Employment isn't the end of the journey. The follow-up services are, in my opinion, just as important. A veteran may incur challenges as they adjust to this new job. We stay in contact, we discuss workplace concerns, and provide support when appropriate. Sometimes veterans just need help

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understanding workplace expectations and resolving conflicts or planning their next career move. If a veteran wants to pursue a different role or an advancement opportunity, we can help them update their resume, identify training opportunities, and develop a new career plan. The goal is to maintain momentum while ensuring that the next step supports their long-term career objective.

Rebecca:

Thank you all so much for joining us today and for this important conversation. And you shared good advice and guidance with us, but I'd like to invite you to share one final thought: What would you say to someone who is working with a veteran who's having difficulty staying engaged in the employment seeking process?

Kendra Henry:

Each case is going to be unique. Sometimes the best thing you can do is provide the tools and resources for the veteran and when they're ready to use them, they'll use them. Sometimes you're going to have to get creative and think outside the box to keep them engaged. And sometimes the solution is being that person that finally listened to what that veteran is saying. If what you're trying isn't the answer, regroup and come up with a new strategy. Don't let the challenge discourage you.

Christopher Smith:

The way I put it is: take the time to listen and start building that rapport. If what you're doing isn't working, you're confused on what you should do next, reach out to federal veteran employment reps, supervisors. There's plenty of us throughout the United States you can reach out to get advice on how to work with a client that is stonewalling you or not wanting to work with you. Sometimes it's just a different approach or a different veteran employment rep stepping in to give guidance on something that you just happened to oversee.

Michael Gardner:

My advice would be to remain patient and remember that employment is often only one piece of a much larger picture. Progress doesn't always happen in a straight line. Sometimes veterans need time to address personal challenges before they're ready to fully engage in employment activity. Continue to build relationships, celebrate small successes and focus on what a veteran can accomplish today rather than what they haven't accomplished yet. Consistent

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encouragement, realistic goals, and genuine support can make a tremendous difference. Often the most important thing we can do is continue showing up and reminding veterans that someone believes in their ability to succeed.

Matthew Steele:

The best advice that I could give someone starting this role is that, though this will be a challenge, and not every veteran is going to be the same, and all the needs are going to be different, sometimes this is can be and has been the most rewarding thing you can do and you consistently do it and you show up and provide that experience to these veterans that need it. And you'll constantly be rewarded and just keep your head up, and take a step forward every day because what we do is important and every veteran that we see is important.

Rebecca:

Thank you all for sharing this important information with us today. For our listeners, if you'd like more information about serving veterans, please visit nvti.org to access resources such as this podcast. We're constantly adding new material, so please check back often. We also, of course, invite you to continue the conversation at the Making Careers Happen at Veterans Community of Practice. Thanks so much.

Narrator:

This podcast is brought to you by the National Veterans' Training Institute, whose mission is to further develop and enhance the professional skills of veterans employment and training service providers throughout the United States. This program is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor Veterans Employment and Training Service and administered by Management Concepts. For more episodes, visit the NVTI website at www.nvti.org.