

Grass Isn't Always Greener When You Leave Military

by Maj. Alan Brown

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After five years of Army active duty, I was convinced I'd have greater earning potential as a civilian. Several of my Army buddies corroborated this belief, landing civilian jobs sporting salaries 20-30% higher than their military pay. As a newly-promoted 27-year-old captain, I was confident I'd have my pick of lucrative job offers immediately after hanging up my uniform.

I was mistaken.

When I resigned from active duty in January 2001, I had no idea how complicated and eye-opening the transition would become. In hindsight nearly 12 years later, my transition got off to a rocky start because I failed to plan accordingly and was out of touch with the job market.

Aside from a properly accessorized power suit and a clean but perfunctory resume, my individual planning was minimal at best. I was, after all, a successful Army officer who had always been responsible for key aspects of my units' mission successes. I had been in charge of soldiers, civilians and thousands of dollars' worth of equipment. I was a leader who could adapt and learn on the fly. And that's what I believed the corporate world was actively seeking.

My timing, however, was terrible, a formidable opponent to my overconfidence. The dotcom bubble was rapidly deflating across the country. Companies were beginning to tighten their belts, which meant layoffs, fewer job openings and a growing number of qualified applicants. Despite all this, I eagerly jumped into the crowded pool, confident in my ability to quickly swim to the top and be hired. Had I paid more attention to the obvious signs, I might've approached my transition differently, and with more realistic expectations.

Poor timing wasn't my only misstep. I also lacked focus regarding what I wanted to do as a civilian. Of course I wanted to work for a successful company. And of course I wanted to be in charge of something or someone. I didn't think it mattered what company I worked for or what industry I entered. I could adapt to a new organization and the accompanying set of duties and responsibilities, just like I had in the Army.

My lack of direction quickly became a liability. Companies wanted to see that I was excited to work for them. When they sensed that I hadn't invested much time to learn about their corporate niche, they quickly lost interest. I found it difficult to convincingly answer the basic question of, "Why do you want to work for us?" While I was successful illustrating the value of my Army leadership experience, my lack of focus on a specific position or industry turned off many prospective employers. With a bit more deliberation and soul searching, I could have narrowed my search and presented myself more convincingly to employers.

Still, no amount of planning could have prevented what eventually happened. After sending out nearly 100 resumes and attending eight interviews, I accepted a management training position in March 2001 with a leading uniform-services company. But as the economy continued its freefall, the company decided to take measures to protect its bottom line. A couple of weeks after 9/11, and a mere six months after I was hired, I received my pink slip. The corporate line: I was the most junior manager. I was asked to pack my desk, collect my paycheck and have a nice life. The fact that the same thing was happening to others did nothing to ease the sting. I went right back to where I started, with some hard-earned lessons and a bruised ego.

Thankfully, my transition came full circle a year after it began. The challenges of becoming (and remaining) employed led me to reconsider the whole transition idea. Perhaps someone was trying to tell me something. While the economy still struggled, the Army had a new mission after 9/11 and was hiring at a brisk pace. I returned to active duty exactly a year after my initial separation date. I've since remained in the Army and will soon pass my 16-year mark. Four years from now, I'll be eligible to make the civilian leap again. But when that time comes, I'll attack the challenge with a clear plan, a more focused job search and realistic expectations.

Maj. Alan Brown is an active-duty Army public affairs officer, currently serving at USAA on a one-year Training-with-Industry fellowship in Corporate Communications. This is the first in a series of three blogs in which he will share lessons learned during his 2001 military-to-civilian transition.