

Making the Move from Military to Civilian Work

Retired US Marine Corps Reserve officer Col. Allen Weh is now president and CEO of [CSI Aviation Services Inc.](#), a worldwide aircraft charter and leasing service in Albuquerque. As a veteran and businessman, Weh has overcome the hurdles of making the transition into the civilian workforce and attributes his business success to the skills he learned in the military. Weh was recently appointed national chairman of the [National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve](#) by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

Weh has counseled many people serving in the military on what to expect in the civilian labor market. Here are his words of advice for others making the transition.

Don't Expect to Become an Overnight Success

"You can't go from being a unit commander to being a [company] president overnight," Weh says. From 1971, when he retired from active duty, to 1979, when he founded CSI Aviation, Weh wasn't sure what he was going to do. So he went to graduate school. "When you don't know what you want to do, you can get a credential that will help you when you do figure it out."

After earning his master's in counseling with a concentration in business from the University of New Mexico, he worked for two years as director of public affairs for a major mining company. His transition took time and a concentrated effort to discover where and how to apply the skills he had learned. But when the opportunity was ripe to begin his own business, he dared the entrepreneurial risk. It took five years to turn his company into a well-oiled, profitable business.

More Casual But No Less Serious

Making the initial transition into the civilian workplace can be uncomfortable for veterans who are accustomed to their peers' professional attitudes. Don't misinterpret the lack of seriousness in the business world for lack of professionalism. Weh's advice is to loosen up.

"In military life, there's discipline, respect and protocol behavior, but civilian business is a little more casual," he explains. "And that's OK, because there's still a chain of command, and there are still people who are in charge -- people to kick butt and take names. It's done with a little more casualness, but no less seriousness."

It's All About the Bottom Line

Since you've been busy serving our nation in one of the largest nonprofit organizations, entering a capital-driven business may be a shock. Your new job may require you to increase your company's earnings.

"It is a foreign feeling to work for a company that makes money and charges for its services, but there is nothing wrong with making money," says Weh.

Understand Your Interviewer

It can be challenging for corporate heads or HR managers to understand veterans' backgrounds or how to help ease their transition into an office environment. Weh believes that "now that the percentage of veterans in the overall population has decreased, there is a possibility, if not a great probability, of a veteran working for an employer who has never served a day in uniform."

Some employers might not know how to maximize a veteran's potential and may actually be intimidated by a military background. Weh recognizes that veterans know how to arrive on time and follow through on tasks; they are well-groomed, organized, unafraid of hard work and immune to absorption in petty matters.

Don't Forget to Network

Stay in contact with old military buddies, because they might be able to assist you with your job search. Weh benefited from [networking](#) with a Marine Corps Reserve buddy who owned the largest bank in the state of New Mexico. "My friend gave me the startup capital for CSI, which I wouldn't have otherwise received," recalls Weh. "He called it a 'character loan.'"