

# Do Military Skills Translate to Civilian Leadership?

**An Interview with John McFarland, Senior Associate**

For as long as there have been soldiers there have been veterans, and thus discussions about how best to transition service members into civilian life once their time in the military is up. The concept of transitioning is especially challenging for military officers, as they seek civilian roles that are commensurate with their level of leadership experience, skills, and knowledge.

One former officer who has transitioned quite well into the corporate realm is John McFarland, a senior associate with Witt/Kieffer's Healthcare practice, based in our Atlanta office. Following graduation from West Point, John spent eight years in the U.S. Army. His military leadership positions ranged from Platoon Leader to Company Commander to Division Budget Officer. He took time from his client service commitments to answer questions about his own military-to-civilian career transition and share lessons applicable to other veterans.

*What advice do you have for veterans who are looking to transition into the private sector?*

**McFarland:** As in any military tactical and/or operational situation, understanding the environment beforehand is critically important. Transitioning to the private sector is no different. To be successful, you need to know where you want to go, what it takes to succeed in the environment, and what steps need to be taken to get there. So my advice to candidates is simple: do your research and make a plan to succeed.

Second, networking is key. Networking can align you with those who can be helpful mentors or sounding boards, and connect you with key individuals that can help you transition successfully.

Finally, military professionals need to continue to learn, grow, and ask questions in a new role. No one expects you to have all the right answers - I found that out when I joined the corporate sector. But they do expect you to be able to ask the right questions when you don't know the answers.

*What valuable skills did you develop in service to the country that have translated to your professional career?*

**McFarland:** There were many, but I think one of the most notable was leadership. By this, I mean not just leading others but also leading oneself each day in terms of being disciplined and accountable, prioritizing, and fighting through adversity. I think the hardest type of leadership is being accountable for how you perform

and what you do. In the military you're constantly held accountable for your performance and how it relates to your soldiers' successes and failures. If you can lead yourself, you're on the right track with leading others.

Then there's prioritization. The military constantly focuses on prioritizing since it is such an essential skill in combat and other situations. As soldiers, we trained constantly to know, almost inherently, what is important at any given moment to be effective and move forward. This skill helps me daily in the professional world.

And I learned to fight through adversity. We all have to deal with adversity, and how we respond tells the story of our lives. In military training, I was often "broken down" so I could learn to get back up and keep going. All of the skills mentioned above have served me well.

Of course, there were many concrete on-the-job skills that I learned as well—for instance, through being a Company Commander and Division Budget Officer I learned a great deal about operational and financial management, which helps me greatly in recruiting healthcare leaders today. Military careers provide a tremendous amount of pure knowledge and expertise that are useful in any setting.

*In executive recruiting in healthcare, what stands out about veterans as candidates? What might make them appealing to search committees or hiring managers?*

**McFarland:** Veteran candidates are generally strong and usually bring a wide array of experiences and skill sets. Something that can make them even more appealing to future employers is making sure they articulate the outcomes they've helped drive and achieve. They should cite examples that are quantifiable and relatable to the healthcare space. Military veterans tend to have a lot of successes on their resumes, but the key is to explain to healthcare and other organizations how these types of successes can be replicated in a non-military environment.

*The article above appeared on Witt/Kieffer's blog, Witt & Wisdom, on June 25, 2015.*

## About the Author

**John McFarland** is a senior associate in Witt/Kieffer's Healthcare practice, based in Atlanta. John identifies leaders for a full range of senior-level executive searches within the practice. Prior to joining Witt/Kieffer, John worked for Ernst & Young, where he was a senior consultant and project manager for health systems and other major clients. In his most recent role, he provided management support and overall facilitation for the ICD-10 program at one of the nation's largest not-for-profit healthcare providers. He also advised and helped manage a major professional services IT transformation program, driving decisions between teams and overseeing standards, cost, and communication.

For more information, contact: [jmcfarland@wittkieffer.com](mailto:jmcfarland@wittkieffer.com).

## About Witt/Kieffer

Witt/Kieffer is the preeminent executive search firm that identifies outstanding leadership solutions for organizations committed to improving the quality of life.

Visit [wittkieffer.com](http://wittkieffer.com) for more information.