

# How strengths-focussed coaching can help military personnel in their transition to ‘civvy street’

Alison Zarecky, Transition Coach, Overton, Hampshire, UK

Contact Email: [alison@alisonzarecky.com](mailto:alison@alisonzarecky.com)

## Abstract

This paper aims to show how a positive psychology strengths approach can be useful in helping transitioning military personnel in their transition to “civvy street”. This qualitative study entailed an action research methodology, using a strengths cards intervention based on the Values-in-Action Inventory (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Thematic analysis was used to analyse data from both semi-structured interviews and coaching sessions with six participants over a 4-6 week period. The findings show how the strengths intervention prompted a discussion and an exploration of participants’ identity, which led to a greater awareness and understanding of perceived individual versus collective military identity. Thus a greater awareness of strengths helped participants gain clarity on who they felt they were and what they wanted from their next career. A strengths vocabulary also provided a common language to help them effectively communicate their strengths potential employers.

**Key Words:** Strengths; coaching; transition; military; identity; career; action research.

## Introduction

When military personnel retire from active service, they can find transitioning to “civvy street” both complex and challenging (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011; Black & Papile, 2010; Clemens & Milsom, 2008). Given that the military is a sub-culture in its own right with substantial points of difference from the rest of society; this can be described as a cross-cultural transition (Black, Westwood & Sorsdahl, 2007). The recent research from FiMT (Forces in Mind Trust, 2013) confirms a vast underestimation of this cultural change.

A number of key factors make this transition particularly challenging. Firstly, there is the overarching and almost invasive nature of military service, which delivers almost every aspect of life: work, accommodation, food, medical care, social life, and uniform, even military prison. Secondly, in no other profession (except perhaps the police) is one expected to potentially take a life, as well as being prepared to sacrifice one’s own, in contrast to most civilian jobs. Thirdly, the amount of time working for one organisation is unusual, and is becoming increasingly rare in the current civilian employment arena. Whilst some military personnel may leave after just a few years, others may serve 16 or 25. For many, the idea of starting again can be a daunting prospect.

I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with injured military personnel with the British Army’s Recovery Capability (ARC) with wounded, injured and sick soldiers, as well as being in a military family myself, and have followed the transition journeys of many friends and acquaintances who have left the armed forces. These experiences have impressed upon me the immense sense of pride in being soldiers, and how some can view civilians as an alien species with a different set of values to themselves. There appears to be a very strong sense of group identity and camaraderie. Despite this, my own observations are that they can appear to lack awareness of their own individual strengths, and

collective military strengths, as well as the confidence and clarity in what to do next – although this is rarely admitted by them.

This led me to explore how coaching using a strengths focus might be useful in their transition to civilian life. I have been struck with the positive attitude of military personnel, making them a potential asset to any organisation. Despite this, it can prove difficult for them to translate their military strengths and skills to civilian life, notwithstanding the programmes and help available to them. This is in part due to a disjuncture between military versus civilian qualifications and training (Holland & Groves, 2011; FiMT, 2013), coupled with a difficulty in identifying what strengths they have to offer to a potential employer and how to communicate these in a way that is understandable to civilians. Moreover, it can be equally difficult for civilian organisations to understand these skills, unless they relate to more obviously transferable trades (e.g. military pilot to civilian pilot).

I wanted to find out whether an exploration and identification of personal strengths could be a useful means of helping transitioning military develop a better sense of self, which in turn might then help them head in the right career direction. Given that a key finding from positive psychology research is how using one's strengths increases well-being (Peterson *et al*, 2009; Minhas, 2010, Govindji & Linley 2007), it seemed logical that jobs which use key strengths are more likely to be rewarding for both the worker (in terms of increased well-being) and the employer (in terms of likelihood of high performance and excellence).

I therefore set out to show how coaching might play a role in facilitating a reflection process to increase self-awareness, and act as a sounding board to clarify potential employment avenues, to enable people to see where they might fit in a civilian environment, benefiting both themselves and society. This paper presents two significant findings from the research.

## Literature

The most obvious start-point for the literature review was strengths research from Positive Psychology, transition theory, and any related military research, specifically military identity or military transition, and how all of these related to coaching. I found very little in coaching literature regarding strengths-use in coaching, and nothing relating to strengths cards interventions or strengths-use in transition. I therefore broadened my literature search to include other disciplines: business literature (specifically strengths-use in outplacement); education and psychology, as there is a relatively recent movement towards a strengths-approach; as well as strengths counselling models (Scheel *et al*, 2013, Littman-Ovadia *et al*, 2013), to provide insight into how a strengths intervention might be carried out in a coaching environment.

In trying to relate strengths to career direction, there were some useful recent insights: Forest *et al* (2012)'s research suggests that using strengths results in increased well-being and harmonious passion at work. This is supported by Silvia and Kashdan (2009), Gander *et al* (2012) and Biswas-Deiner (2010) who posit that strengths interact with an individual's interests and passions. This lent support to the concept that identifying one's strengths and then finding jobs that utilised these may be helpful in identifying motivating career opportunities. This is supported by research by Trenier *et al* (2011), who have used a strengths approach to both outplacement and recruitment at Aviva (Trenier, 2010; Trenier *et al*, 2011; Stefanyszyn, 2008, Linley *et al*, 2011).

As a researcher I was interested in how participants saw themselves both now and in a future civilian job, and whether discussing their strengths during coaching would be helpful in this exploration of self. It therefore seemed crucial to build a better understanding of the specifics of a collective military

identity compared to an individual identity. This phenomenon can perhaps be better understood by considering the armed forces as a sub culture with its own distinct set of shared values and norms, which differ from those of mainstream society (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003). Recruits are required to change from an individual to a collective military identity (Akelof & Kranton, 2005), involving embracing those core values. The environment is termed “*command and control*” (Alberts & Hayes, 2006), where the emphasis is on taking orders rather than questioning authority. While this may often be necessary in a military environment, this characteristic seems counterintuitive to a career transition process, which necessitates more autonomy and independence, as well as thinking creatively about transferring skills and strengths to a new environment. This led me to explore the literature on the role of identity and narrative in career transition (Savickas, 2007; LaPointe, 2010; Ibarra, 1999; Brott, 2001; Duys *et al*, 2008) which suggests that a narrative discussion around identity would be a fruitful avenue to pursue for assisting clients with exploring career change options in terms of potential identities. This was also echoed in the counselling literature relating to strengths (Smith, 2006; Scheel *et al*, 2013), as well as recent sports coaching research with injured military transitioners (Carless *et al*, 2013), which supports the importance of narrative in a military to civilian transition. Given that coaching is useful in helping people in transitions (So, 2010; Talbott, 2013), it could be helpful here in assisting clients formulate their own transitional narrative.

Given the variety of models of change I concentrated on the relevant theories that support either a voluntary or involuntary transition to use as a framework in which to set the strengths intervention. These models possess a commonality by interpreting transition as a letting go of the past, a period of experimentation/renewal or difficulty, followed by an eventual gaining or rebirth. The theories consider the emotional reactions to career transition, which is comparable with Bridges’ (2000) idea that transition equates to the internal change within a client, while the change itself is the external element. I was interested in where a strengths intervention might fit into these theories and how such an intervention might help clients in transition. The research suggested to me that it may be useful to use a simple transition diagram as a coaching tool with the participants as a prompt to their self-narrative.

In order to glean some insight into how to carry out a strengths intervention, counselling literature proved useful: Scheel *et al* (2013) conducted qualitative research into how therapists use strengths interventions. Wong’s (2006) strength-centred theoretical model has four phases: identification of strengths, identifying future areas for development to achieve goals, encourage client to try out strengths and refine their use, and summarizing gains and generalising strengths moving forwards, and Smith’s (2006) 10 stage strengths counselling model (creating the alliance; identifying strengths; assessing presenting problems; encouraging hope; empowering; framing solutions; building strengths; changing through meaning-making and reframing; building resilience; evaluating and terminating). The elements of these models seem highly relevant, such as engagement in conversations that build solutions with clients and instilling hope/optimism. The basic premise of building key strengths (such as courage, insight, optimism, perseverance) is also important to coaching, as well as building a sense of autonomy (Creed & Blume, 2013) and finding purpose (Frankl, 1963). The client’s strengths are thus the foundation on which to proceed through the change process (Freidman, 1992). These models therefore offer a framework which could potentially be adapted for coaching.

In summary my choice of research area entailed a broad literature search into the above key areas. It then became clear that a research gap existed relating to specific coaching approaches to strengths interventions and how they may be of use in transition coaching, particularly for military personnel. My research intended to cast some light on how this intervention might assist in the transition process.

## Methodology

As my research question was how a strengths intervention might be of use in helping transitioning military personnel find career direction, it was necessary to either locate coaches who currently use strengths interventions with military transitions or to conduct both the coaching and the research myself. The former proved fruitless, due to the specific nature of the strengths intervention, which led me to conduct both the coaching and research myself. My starting point in formulating a research methodology was my own ontological and epistemological position, in line with Guba and Lincoln (1994), who cite the need for a coherent fit between the research question, method employed and subsequent data analysis and interpretation.

I consider the world as dynamic, and made up of multiple perspectives that cannot be reduced to a single, measurable truth or focus. Each of us has our own view of the world, which we communicate by recounting our experiences via language. Thus my ontology is constructivist. My epistemology is interpretivist, as I believe we can only access these individual realities by our own interpretation: I set out to cast light on participants' worlds through a shared investigation and exploration of meanings. I also believe that these realities are constantly being revised and reconstructed (Bryman, 2012). I therefore chose a qualitative research method in order to explore this complex phenomenon.

### Why action research?

Action Research is a cyclical process of change involving four processes of observing/evaluating, reflecting, planning and action (McNiff and Whitehead, 2010). This fits with my interpretive paradigm, owing to its subjectivity as well as having a transformational aspect, as it is concerned with change or the solution to a problem (Reason & Torbert, 2001). Action research allowed me to carry out both coaching and research with participants, enabling me to evaluate a strengths intervention first hand, and then work with them over a number of weeks to see if and how they used this new self-knowledge. It was as much about how people "*see things*" as to how they "*do things*" (Silverman, 1998). A key benefit of action research is the fluidity of the cycles which provides flexibility to "*design the plane while it's flying*" (Herr and Anderson, 2005, p. 69), ensuring that the learning is explored fully. Being a flexible, iterative approach it is well suited to addressing a complex process such as military transition. The first cycle of action research involved a coaching session using the strengths cards intervention, followed by a research session gaining feedback from participants. This entailed participants using the cards to identify what they considered to be their strengths. In practice this led to them dividing the cards into a number of piles: their key strengths, their military strengths (and whether these were true strengths or learned behaviours), unrealised strengths (things they feel they have not been able to develop in the military). This was similar to the Realise2 framework (Linley, 2008). The second cycle involved a discussion about their strengths in conjunction with their interests or passions, and using this to generate job ideas. In practice this led to participants drawing up ideal job criteria based on their strengths and using this to rank potential jobs as to how much each one involved using their strengths. I collected data after each coaching and research session and each cycle, and used the learning to feed back into the next session and action research cycles in order to explore more effective ways of carrying out a strengths coaching intervention.

A potential disadvantage was that action research can be accused of lacking in rigour (Herr and Anderson, 2005). Therefore it was imperative to ensure a sound theoretical framework and trustworthiness of data, in line with Braun & Clarke (2006) and Levin (2012), who stress the need for academic integrity in action research.

### Selection of Participants

I used a multi-method recruitment approach in order to ensure that I reached the specific audience in the required timescale: I utilised social networking sites such as LinkedIn, texts, emails and personal phone calls to current military and ex-military contacts. These methods provided me with 6 participants.

My intention was to find out from my participants what they wanted in terms of coaching them in transition, to form a fruitful collaborative alliance (Webb and Scoular, 2011) and engage with them with sufficient empathy to allow them to share their hopes, fears and challenges. It was therefore important to carry out a strengths intervention in a way that was both engaging and effective. I rejected an online delivery method because I believe that presenting people with a report outlining their strengths can be a label, in keeping with Ford & Harding's (2007) view on psychometrics as an "iron cage". Also, my previous experience of such tests indicated that clients can either reject the results as "not me", or accept them as "the holy grail" of what they should do – either way it appeared to prove disempowering and did not prompt much self-reflection – which was not something the participants generally seemed used to doing in their "command and control" culture. It also did not sit comfortably with my constructivist-interpretivist paradigm: I wanted the participants to be free to construct and interpret their own view of their strengths. I therefore chose to use a card-based approach, using a set of 24 illustrated strengths cards based on the VIA (Values-in-Action Inventory, Peterson & Seligman, 2004) sourced from [www.mindspringuk.co.uk](http://www.mindspringuk.co.uk). Each card featured one strength (creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective, courage, persistence, integrity, vitality, love, kindness, social intelligence, loyalty, fairness, leadership, forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-control, appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humour, spirituality), together with a colourful illustrative photograph. On the back was an explanation of the particular value or strength. 24 seemed a manageable number, and the terminology was easy to understand and holistic in nature. My intention was to use these cards to prompt discussion, reflection and exploration of participants' strengths, and see how this might assist them in their transition to civilian life.

### **Data ethics**

I followed best practice in providing full information to participants via a participant information sheet. The purpose of the research was made explicit (i.e. to explore how a strengths intervention might help transitioning military find career direction), and participants were invited to take part as co-researchers. This included an ethics form and a consent form which was signed by all participants. Participants were coached and interviewed in individual face to face sessions. I preserved participants' confidentiality by changing their names and any readily identifiable details and deleted recordings after use.

### **Data collection**

Being a constructivist, I believe there is little need for triangulation of data, as there is no single reality. However, the value of collecting data from various perspectives and methods can also be considered to be adding richness to the data through multiple perspectives (Mason and Dale, 2011). Hence I captured data from various sources: I transcribed both coaching and research sessions from a voice recorder, and typed up the transcripts myself, as both sources of data provided a wealth of rich data to help illuminate the problem. I used a reflective diary to reflect on the data gathered at each stage. I found that I needed to do this both after each session as well as each cycle, as each participant had different ways of doing the strengths intervention, and touched on different topics which in turn prompted different inputs and reactions from me as a coach. I also used this reflexivity to generate new thinking and questions, as well as reflecting on my own assumptions and biases, and fed this back into the next cycle of research. This supports the importance of reflective practice in action research (Wolcott, 1994; Hughes, 2012). Using critical friends (Kember *et al*, 1997) was invaluable here in creating an on-going periodic dialogue to discuss or defend findings and their reliability, as well as offering different perspectives. I used semi-structured questionnaires for the research in line with my constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. I drew on the literature, particularly where there were controversies or gaps, in line with Mason and Dale (2011). The semi-structured nature provided consistency while also allowing participants freedom to express themselves.

As the purpose of action research is to produce useful solutions to problems, I viewed the emergence of themes and reporting of different solutions to offer meaning as well as some practical answers, in

line with Argyris (1985). I therefore used thematic analysis to analyse my data. This enabled me to identify, analyse and report my data themes or patterns in a creative way, without being tied to a more restrictive method. Furthermore, it was effective in interpreting various elements of the research (Boyatzis, 1998), which was useful as I had a number of different elements to interpret, without being initially sure of their individual importance. Thematic analysis is a widely used method in qualitative research (Boyatzis, 1998; Roulston, 2001, Tuckett, 2005), as well as being compatible with my constructivist paradigm.

## Findings

### Exploration of identity leading to a reconciliation of authentic self and military self

Participants used the strengths cards intervention as a means of exploring what they deemed to be their own separate identity, the authentic “*them*”, and how they fitted in with the military identity. They all expressed a desire to separate themselves from the military collective identity (McAdams, 1999; Neimeyer, 2004, 2006). For example Simon wanted to build his confidence and separate himself from his perceived institutionalisation:

*There’s a humility, an under-confidence, and it’s trying to build yourself up, it’s trying to step away from thinking that you’re the same as everybody else. There are many strengths to take from it. So, I’m asking myself which is institutional thinking and which is me?*

This highlights a view expressed by 4 participants that transitioning military can be under-confident, and the need to change one’s thinking. This provoked a reflection on which strengths they had developed, and which they had been obliged to suppress.

### Transferable strengths and level of fit with the military

A strong theme emerged of the participants’ desire to transfer strengths built up in the military – almost as a legacy – and it seemed irrelevant to them as to whether they were true strengths, or what Linley (2008) terms “*learned behaviours*”, as they claimed to receive huge pleasure in doing something well, regardless of, or perhaps in spite of, how difficult or challenging it was. This desire to keep hold of the positive aspects of the military, whilst at the same time looked forward to losing what they perceived as negative struck me as healthy and balanced, and helpful for transitioning. It is also in keeping with Schutt’s suggestion of using an appreciative enquiry method to carry the best parts of oneself forward by building on existing strengths (Schutt, 2007). Thus there was a process of reconciliation of the authentic self and military self through the transition.

The level of fit with the military appeared important: some participants felt that they were a good fit in some respects, but believed they had kept their personal identity separate. For example Frenchy stated: “*I was told to always treat your current tour as your last tour, with a plan to leave. You keep your options and eyes open, you keep open-minded*”. This appeared to have the effect of facilitating their transition mentally. Conversely others whose identities appeared more entangled with the military identity, and what they felt they “*should*” be, seemed to need to spend more time making sense of this in order to move forwards.

The six core military values (courage, integrity, leadership, loyalty, discipline and selfless commitment to others, MOD, 2008) had a significant impact on all participants, and seemed to be uppermost in their minds as they compared themselves unprompted to what was expected of them, which then led to a useful coaching conversation about how they saw themselves both now and moving forwards into a civilian job. John appreciated the core values as transferable strengths, and was keen to use them to aid his transition:

*You can take a lot of the core values with you, they’re so embedded as part of your psyche, it’s very difficult to change them. So these military values are really good values, really good strengths to help you transition, transferable strengths that you can take to civilian life.*

This raises the concept of transferable military strengths, which is supported by the research of Haynie and Shepherd (2011) and Holland and Groves (2011) who highlight military strengths that are transferable to business. This goes beyond the 6 core values, they suggest, and includes things such as teamwork and risk/resource management. All participants certainly came across as having a positive, “*can-do*” approach, and a strong work ethic. However, this was not something that they seemed aware of, perhaps because it is something everyone possesses in their military world, and as such is taken for granted. It was only on exposure to civilian organisations that this became apparent to them. This suggests a potential role for coaching in helping clients become more aware of these assets. For example, when I asked John what he felt had gone wrong at a recent interview (his first in 16 years), he said:

*I think the fact that I've served for 16 years and I don't know enough about the outside world. They want people with experience of the field they're working in, and I haven't. It's the commercial knowledge and awareness, which we don't have, and we can't get it.*

Thus, the concept of a military identity came across as more encompassing than just the 6 core military values. It appeared that the participants now had the desire to separate themselves from this collective identity and reassert what they considered to be their true selves. For some this appeared to be a rediscovery, or re-affirmation, and for others an insight. Either way, this process appeared to be an important way of developing their identity concept in the transition process. This chimes with Haynie and Shepherd's (2011) research, and resulted in them orienting themselves away from the past, which was manifested in rejection of some aspects of the military, and retention of those perceived as helpful to them in their journey – illustrating their need to create a meaningful, new identity.

### **Using strengths to find career passion**

Participants also discussed their strengths in relation to current and former military roles they had been in, and how much those roles had been enjoyable or energizing to them. They then projected their strengths onto different career paths, and used this to debate their suitability. This in turn facilitated a discussion about their passions and what was meaningful in their lives. As a coach I found this an effective way of accessing their motivations and passions. This chimes with the concept that strengths provide a common vocabulary which leads to a more meaningful conversation (Kauffman, 2006). Discussing the reasons for their choices increased participants' self-awareness, in keeping with Kauffman (2006) and Trenier, (2011). It seemed important for the participants to go through this process of sense-making as a prelude to discussing future career possibilities. This is in keeping with Haynie and Shepherd's research (2011) with injured soldiers, which shows how devising a coherent narrative about themselves and the world was instrumental in providing a foundation for a new career identity, which focussed on meaning and a sense of purpose. Kate illustrated this:

*This is really useful early on to work out what direction you want to go in. You need to almost be reminded of where you are, you need to really take stock, and I think the Army are really bad at that, we're mainly activists – we do and do and do, and we don't reflect.*

She described “*a light going on*”, when she realised she had lost sight of what she really wanted, and saw this as an opportunity to reconnect with her true self. Like the other participants, she viewed her strengths as resources to help her achieve her goals. She generated a personal narrative to enable her to gain insight into why certain past jobs had not been enjoyable, as opposed to others where she had been “*in her element*”, and to create a future vision of what she felt would be a match to her skills and strengths. This was aided by the self-selecting nature of the cards intervention, which seemed to help participants embrace their weaknesses as part of them. Thus weaknesses were viewed with humour, in an empowering way, leading to meaningful conversations regarding how these weaknesses might

impede their progress and success in their transition. This supports the notion of discussing weaknesses alongside strengths, in keeping with the views of Biswas-Deiner (2010) and Linley (2008).

### **Level of input from the coach**

It was important to match the level of structure and guidance to the individual. Participants differed greatly in how much they either needed or wanted this: John for example was happiest left to generate his narrative, whereas at the other end of the scale Dave wanted both structure and procedure in the process, and felt uncomfortable with too much freedom. This resulted in a balancing act from me as a coach, in order to facilitate a useful narrative from the participants' perspective. In cycle 2, I found that more structure was required for this narrative, perhaps because we no longer had the framework of the strengths cards intervention. It was useful to have tools in my coach's toolkit (such as a transition model, a values exercise, wheel of work) to provide a relevant focus for the discussion.

### **Strengths focus for job search process**

The participants shared a desire to project what they considered to be the right image in their interviews and new job. This appeared to be a work-in-progress as they felt their way through the transition. The participants used language such as fitting into a "*military mould*", and referred to who they "*should*" be in the military to describe their feelings of having to conform. This preceded a narrative on how to break out of this mould. They recognised that they had a lack of commercial awareness, and viewed their strengths as a means of counteracting that as far as possible.

### **Using strengths vocabulary to guide job choice**

Strengths provided a useful vocabulary for participants to both communicate and self-promote in their transition process. This helped participants communicate their reaffirmed self-awareness, which provided them with positive language in writing their CV, their social networking pages, as well as for interviews. It was also useful for matching potential jobs to their strengths, as explained by Simon:

*It's lovely to know your strengths and read a job application and think 'I can do that, I can do that, and I can do that, because I've got that strength and that one, and that one'.*

This is in keeping with Trenier's approach (2010) of applying strengths to the job search, emphasising where clients are authentic, gain energy and passion, and can combine this with their skills. The language of strengths provided participants with a sophisticated way of communicating what John described as "*shades of grey as opposed to a more black and white view*". Even John, whose career as a learning and development specialist had provided him with many opportunities to increase his self-awareness, found this extremely useful in the level of detail it provided him. He successfully used this in his interviews to secure his "*dream job*". This is supported by CAPP's claims (2011) that this approach provides an increased ability to make strong job applications and have greater clarity about future career choice. In terms of results, John, Kate, Mark and Frenchy all secured their chosen employment. Simon and Dave were at earlier stages of transition, and were not at the point of applying for jobs yet.

### **Using strengths vocabulary to bridge the military-civilian language barrier**

Some participants found the language of "*civvy street*" strange and alien: Simon commented: "*They (career consultants) talk about 'what's your brand?' which makes me want to stab myself in the eye*". As a coach, I wanted to help them translate this language. When asked if there was a way of making this easy, Simon said:

*That's the hardest thing. You're institutionalised to a point, but you've got to show that you're commercially aware enough, and explain military to non-military. Say they ask you about leading a team in a high pressure environment with time constraints, and the answer is about being shot at in Afghanistan, how do you relate that to a commercial environment with different pressures?*

He decided that taking a humanist approach would be effective in achieving this: taking the focus off the actual events effectively translating it into “*civvy speak*”. This suggested a useful way of bridging the gap in knowledge and understanding: how to explain to a civilian what you do while minimising any jargon. He also saw this as an opportunity to get his strengths across: “*I need to have a good look at the words the industry is using. Knowing how to put things across in the right language.*”

However for some, the military jargon appeared so ingrained that this was difficult to do, according to John:

*It's about unlearning the old language and learning a new one. They use jargon, and I don't understand it. It's not even English. I realised that some of the things I said (at interview) were slightly alien too.*

He joked about the requirement for a military-civilian dictionary. He decided to use humour to dissipate any tension around this issue, and bring it out in the open.

In summary, the strengths cards intervention provided a useful springboard for a narrative discussion around making sense of the past and present, as well as generating future ideas for career and lifestyle as a whole. This, in combination with a discussion around values and interests, helped participants clarify what their purpose or passions were, and how this might translate into a job. It also helped bridge the military-civilian communications gap by providing a common vocabulary. The intervention provided an efficient way of accessing a lot of deep information in a short time.

## **Conclusion**

The research showed that a strengths cards coaching intervention was useful in helping transitioning military personnel explore and reconcile their own authentic identity with their perceived military identity. It also provided a useful language to bridge the communications gap between military and civilian cultures, both in terms of both vocabulary and providing them with a fuller, more sophisticated picture of themselves in terms of their strengths.

In terms of usability, participants were easily able to identify their strengths and weaknesses with this tool. They did however require a framework to help them, for which the Realise2 structure (realised strengths, unrealised strengths, learned behaviours and weaknesses) (Linley, 2008) was effective.

The tool was found to be engaging: the colourful pictures and tactility of the cards were well-received, and the holistic nature was considered highly suitable to their situations. However, one participant found the cards too “*touchy-feely*”. This implies that this approach may not be suitable for all clients, and that a choice of an online delivery method together with a more structured approach should be offered.

There were positive outcomes for all the participants. All reported that the strengths cards exercise had been effective in helping them reaffirm or regenerate their authentic self. Four of the participants had identified and secured a satisfying career direction, and the two at an earlier stage of transition felt they had gained more clarity on their desired career direction.

The six military core values were generally appreciated as key strengths that they wanted to carry forward, even if they identified some of them as learned behaviours. This suggests a possible “*military strengths constellation*”. However, other traits emerged from participants were the ‘can-do’, positive, solution-focussed, upbeat attitude, camaraderie, as well as a strong work ethic, and total commitment to what they do. This seems to be something specific to the military that could be eminently transferable to the commercial arena. However, accompanying this was the phenomenon of “*strengths blindness*”,

where participants did not always see their own strengths due to the fact that most of their peers have them, so they seem “*a given*”. Some participants also had a sense of liberation of being able to reconnect with “*lost*” strengths they had not been able to use in the military, which generated additional opportunities and resources for them. This implies that coaches can play a part in helping military clients see their strengths more clearly in order to both appreciate them and use these to their advantage on their career journey. The significance of this is that coaches need an understanding of this narrative process and its importance, allowing space for clients to do this in their own way as well as providing sufficient guidance to facilitate the process. This emerged as a key step in the career transition process, in keeping with previous and current research. Finding more evidence that such “*military strengths*” exist, and how this translates into a civilian workplace would be a useful area for future research.

The self-selecting nature of the strengths cards may give an advantage over an online method of strengths identification, as it was instrumental in helping participants construct a meaningful narrative about past, present and future, as well as having the effect of participants readily accepting their weaknesses as part of them. It also raises the need for coaches to be able to handle strong feelings that this method may generate (either positive or negative), in keeping with the research of Clifford (2011) whose findings were that working with strengths can provoke strong emotions and that not all participants were comfortable with this. This may indicate that coaches trained in psychology or counselling may be more suited to this approach.

In summary, this piece of research has shed a small spotlight on a complex issue, in order to address some of the challenges transitioning military personnel face. Future research opportunities would be to explore a strengths approach to transition with a broader sample of participants (e.g. younger) over a longer period of time. Using a strengths intervention was highly effective in facilitating a greater awareness of participants’ strengths, a means of reconciling with the past, reconnecting with their authentic self, and a means of communicating their military strengths and expertise to potential employers.

## References

- Akerlof, G. A., and Kranton, R. E. (2005). Identity and the economics of organizations. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 19(1), 9-32.
- Alberts, D. S., & Hayes, R. E. (2006). *Understanding command and control*. Washington: CCRP Press.
- Argyris, C. (1985). *Making knowledge more relevant to practice: Maps for action*. In: Lawler, E.E. Mohrman, A.M., Mohrman, S.A., Ledford, G.E. & Cummings T.G. and Associates., *Doing research that is useful for theory and practice*, pp. 79-125, Maryland, US: Jossey Bass.
- Biswas-Diener, R., Kashdan, T. B. & Minhas, G. (2011). A dynamic approach to psychological strength development and intervention. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 6(2), 106-118.
- Biswas-Deiner, R. (2010), *Practicing positive psychology coaching: assessment, activities and strategies for success*, New Jersey: Wiley.
- Black, T. G., Westwood, M. J., & Sorsdahl, M. N. (2007). From the front line to the front of the class: Counseling students who are military veterans. In J. Lippincott & R. B. Lippincott (Eds.), *Special populations in college student counseling*. pp. 3–20. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Black, T. G. & Papile, C. (2010). Making it on civvy street: An online survey of Canadian veterans in transition, *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 44 (4), 383 – 401.
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*, CA: Sage.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2). 77-101.
- Bridges, W. (2009). *Managing transitions: Making the most of change*, (3<sup>rd</sup> Edn.) US: Da Capo Press.

- Bridges, W. & Mitchell, S. (2000). Leading transition: A new model for change. *Leader to Leader* 16(3), 30-36.
- Brott, P. E. (2001). The storied approach: A postmodern perspective for career counselling, *The Career Development Quarterly*, 49, 304-313
- Bryman, A. (2012), *Social research methods* (4<sup>th</sup> Edition) Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Carless, D. Peacock, S. McKenna, J. & Cooke, C. (2013), Psychosocial outcomes of an inclusive adapted sport and adventurous training course for military personnel, *International Journal of Disability and Rehabilitation*, p.1-8.
- CAPP Aviva case study, (2011). Retrieved 4 Feb 2013 from: [www.cappeu.com](http://www.cappeu.com)
- Clemens, E. V. & Milsom, A. S. (2008), Enlisted service members' transition into the civilian world of work: A cognitive information processing approach. *The career development quarterly* Vol. 56, 246 -256
- Clifford, T. (2011). What happens when coachees explore their strengths? *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, Special Issue No. 5, 139 -153
- Creed, P. A., and Blume, K. (2013). Compromise, well-being, and action behaviors in young adults in career transition. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 21(1), 3-19.
- Drummet, A. R., Coleman, M. & Cable, S. (2003), Military families under stress: implications for family life education, *Family Relations*, 52(3), 279-287
- Duys, D.K., Ward, J. E., Maxwell, J.A. & Eaton-Comerford, L. (2008). Career counseling in a volatile job market: Tiedeman's perspective revisited, *The Career Development Quarterly*, 56, 232 – 241.
- Ford, J., & Harding, N. (2007). Move Over Management We Are All Leaders Now, *Management Learning*, 38(5), 475-493
- Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) & Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI) Report (2013). *The Transition Mapping Study: Understanding the transition process for service personnel returning to civilian life*. Retrieved 20 August 2013 from: [http://www.fim-trust.org/images/PDFs/FiMT\\_report\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.fim-trust.org/images/PDFs/FiMT_report_FINAL.pdf),
- Forest, J., Mageau, G. A., Crevier-Braud, L., Bergeron, É., Dubreuil, P. & Lavigne, G. L. (2012). Harmonious passion as an explanation of the relation between signature strengths' use and well-being at work: Test of an intervention program. *Human Relations*, 65(9), 1233-1252.
- Frankl, V. E. (1963), *Man's search for meaning: an introduction to logotherapy*, New York: Washington Square.
- Freidman, S (Ed.) (1992), *The new language of change*, New York: Guilford.
- Gander, F., Proyer, R. T., Ruch, W. & Wyss, T. (2012). The good character at work: An initial study on the contribution of character strengths in identifying healthy and unhealthy work-related behavior and experience patterns. *International archives of occupational and environmental health*, 85(8), 895-904.
- Govindji, R. & Linley, P. A. (2007). Strengths use, self-concordance and well-being: implications for strengths coaching and coaching, *Psychologists International Coaching Psychology Review*, 2(2), 143-153.
- Griffiths, K. & Campbell, M. (2009). Discovering, applying and integrating: The process of learning in coaching. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 7(2), 16-30.
- Guba, E. G. & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994), Competing paradigms in qualitative research. *Handbook of qualitative research*, 2, 163-194.
- Haynie, J. M. & Shepherd, D. (2011). Toward a theory of discontinuous career transition: investigating career transitions necessitated by traumatic life events, *Journal of applied psychology*, 96(3), 501-524
- Herr, K and Anderson, G L (2005). *The action research dissertation: A guide for students and faculty*, London: Sage

- Holland, T., and Groves, L. (2011). The transferability of vocational education and learning from the military context to the civilian context. Retrieved 1 August 2013 from: <http://avetra.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/91.00.pdf>
- Hughes, J. (2012). Effective action research: developing reflective thinking and practice (2nd ed.). *British Educational Research Journal*, 38(4), 697-699.
- Ibarra, H. (1999). Provisional selves: experimenting with image and identity in professional adaptation, *Administrative science quarterly* 44: 764 – 791.
- Kauffman, C. (2006). Positive psychology: The science at the heart of coaching. *Evidence based coaching handbook: Putting best practices to work for your clients*, In: Stober, D. R., and Grant, A. M., (2005) *Evidenced Based Coaching Handbook*, 219-253. New Jersey: John Wiley.
- Kember, D., Ha, T. S., Lam, B. H., Lee, A., Ng, S., Yan, L. & Yum, J. C. (1997). The diverse role of the critical friend in supporting educational action research projects. *Educational Action Research*, 5(3), 463-481.
- LaPointe, K. (2010) Narrating career, positioning identity: Career identity as a narrative practice *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 77(1), 1–9.
- Levin, M. (2012). Academic integrity in action research, *Action Research*, 10(2), 133-149.
- Linley, P. A. (2008), *Average to A+: realising strengths in yourself and others*, Coventry, UK: CAPP Press.
- Linley, P. A., Garcea, N., Harrington, S., Trenier, E., & Minhas, G. (2011). Organizational applications of positive psychology: In Sheldon, K., Kashdan, T. & Steiger, M. (Eds.) *Designing positive psychology: Taking stock and moving forward*, 365-384. Oxford: Oxford University Press,
- Littman-Ovadia, H., Lazar-Butbul, V., and Benjamin, B. A. (2013). Strengths-based career counseling: overview and initial evaluation. *Journal of Career Assessment* 1-17
- Mason, J. & Dale, A (2011), *Understanding social research: thinking creatively about method*, London: Sage
- McAdams, D. P. (1999). Personal narratives and the life story. In L. Pervin and O. John (Eds) *Handbook of personality: theory and research* (2<sup>nd</sup> Eds.) 478-500 New York: Guilford Press.
- McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J. (2010). *All you need to know about action research* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edn.) London: Sage.
- Minhas, G. (2010). Developing realised and unrealised strengths: Implications for engagement, self-esteem, life satisfaction and well-being, *Assessment and Development Matters*, 2(1), 12-16.
- M.O.D. (2008). Values of standards of the British Army. Retrieved 16 March 2014 from: [http://www.army.mod.uk/documents/general/v\\_s\\_of\\_the\\_british\\_army.pdf](http://www.army.mod.uk/documents/general/v_s_of_the_british_army.pdf)
- Neimeyer, R. A. (2004). Fostering posttraumatic growth: A narrative elaboration. *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(1), 53-59.
- Neimeyer, R. A. (2006), Re-storying loss: fostering growth in the post-traumatic narrative. In L. Calhoun and R. Tedeschi (Eds.), *Handbook of post-traumatic growth: research and practice*. 68-80 Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Peterson, C. & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004) *Character strengths and virtues: a handbook and classification*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Peterson, C. Park, N. Hall, N. & Seligman, M. E.P. (2009), Zest and work. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 30, Iss.2, 161-172.
- Reason, P., & Torbert, W. R. (2001), The action turn: Toward a transformational social science. *Concepts and Transformation*, 6(1), 1-37.
- Roulston, K. (2001). Data analysis and ‘theorizing as ideology’. *Qualitative Research*, 1(3), 279-302.
- Savickas, M. L. (2007), The self in vocational psychology: Object, subject and project, *Paper presented at the 8<sup>th</sup> Biennial meeting of the Society for vocational psychology*, May 30- June 1, Akron, OH.
- Savickas, M. L. & Walsh, W. B. (Ed), (2003). Toward a taxonomy of human strengths: Career counselling’s contribution to positive psychology. In **WB Walsh (Ed.)**, *Counselling psychology*

- and optimal human functioning. *Contemporary topics in vocational psychology*. pp. 229-249. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Scheel, M. J., Davis, C. K. & Henderson, J. D. (2013). Therapist use of client strengths: A qualitative study of positive processes, *The Counseling Psychologist*, 41(3), 392-427.
- Schutt, D. A. (2007). A strength-based approach to career development using appreciative enquiry, Broken Arrow, OK: National Career Development Association.
- Silverman, D. (1998). Qualitative research: meanings or practices? *Information Systems Journal*, 8(1), 3-20
- Silvia, P. J. & Kashdan, T. B. (2009). Interesting things and curious people: Exploration and engagement as transient states and enduring strengths, *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 3(5), 785-797.
- Smith, E. J. (2006). The strengths-based counselling model, *The Counselling Psychologist*, 34(13), 13-56
- So, T. (2010). What empirically tested research underpins career transition interventions? Retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> March from <http://www.meylercampbell.com/pdfs/DraftResearchReport.pdf>
- Stefanyszyn, K. (2008), Norwich Union changes focus from competencies to strengths, *Strategic HR Review*, 7 (1) 47.
- Talbott, C (2013). *Career Transition Coaching Skills*, East Sussex, UK: Routledge.
- Wong, Y. J. (2006). Strength centered therapy: a social constructionist, virtues-based psychotherapy, *Psychotherapy: Theory, research, practice & training*, 43 (2) 133-146.
- Trenier, E. (2010). Using strengths to guide career transition, *Assessment and Development Matters* Vol. 2, Iss. 2, 5-7.
- Trenier, E., Wilson, A. & Rebow, J. (2011). Standing out from the crowd: Using strengths in career development. *Assessment and Development Matters*, 3(1), p.11.
- Tuckett, A. G. (2005). Applying thematic analysis theory to practice: A researcher's experience. *Contemporary Nurse*, 19(1-2), 75-87.
- Webb, L. A. & Scoular, T. (2011). Reflection on reflection on reflection: collaboration in action research. *Educational Action Research*, 19(4), 469-487.
- Wolcott, H. F. (1994). *Transforming Qualitative Data: Description, Analysis and Interpretation* CA: Sage.
- Wong, Y. J. (2006). Strength centered therapy: a social constructionist, virtues-based psychotherapy, *Psychotherapy: theory, research, practice & training*, 43(2), 133-146.

Alison Zarecky is a transition coach and facilitator working with people in career and life transitions. She has a particular specialism in military transitions, creating transition workshops for the British Army's wounded, injured and sick soldiers, as well as ex-patriot transitions, spending 3 years living in Brunei, Borneo as a life coach and workshop facilitator, and delivering PSHE's (Personal, Social and Health Education) for students. Previously she was marketing manager at Norwich Union/Aviva Healthcare.