

42. Melissa Boatwright and Sarah Roberts

[00:00:00] **Sonali:** Melissa and Sarah. I'm so excited to have you on my podcast today to talk about the women veteran opportunity report. Welcome.

[00:00:10] **Sarah:** Thanks so much for having us. Yes. Thank you.

[00:00:14] **Sonali:** I would love to start with a brief introduction for both.

[00:00:19] **Sarah:** My name is Sarah Roberts. I lead LinkedIn's military and veterans program. I'm also an army veteran and transitioned out over a decade ago and have been working in the technology space, supporting the military community and some really unique and different ways. And I've also worked in the nonprofit space. Supporting veterans working on community building. So really excited to be here and just delighted to be able to do this with Melissa, because we've worked on several of these really impactful projects together using LinkedIn's data to tell a story around the military community. So thanks for having us. [00:01:00]

[00:01:01] **Melissa:** And I'm Melissa Boatwright. I also work at LinkedIn and for the last three plus years at LinkedIn I've led what we call insights teams, which are basically teams of analysts that have access to the aggregated 750 million members on the platform. They analyze the data and play back some themes to help our business, to business clients. And we share information to either help them. The most out of their investment in LinkedIn or make better business decisions. And so the reports that Sarah and I have worked together, definitely in the realm of how do we help people who want to hire more members of the military community, do it and do it well. Prior to LinkedIn, I worked in a variety of like comms and marketing engineering type roles. And then prior to that, I was in the air force as a broadcaster and spent 10 years doing that similar to Sarah now for about 14 years. And [00:02:00] I've been serving as an air force reservist at that entire time. So I'm stationed out of California.

[00:02:06] **Sonali:** Thank you both. You know, that I have a very special place in my heart for a female vets. So I want to start by asking what is the women veteran opportunity report and why did you write it?

[00:02:21] **Melissa:** So a few years ago, when I first joined LinkedIn, LinkedIn had already put out a few kind of veteran reports, but they were really demographic in nature or kind of like top level data. Where do veterans live? What job fields are they in? Like what do they do? And I had joined LinkedIn as the first veteran on this data analytics type team. And then within about a year, I was able to hire four or five other vets. So we started kind of talking to other people that knew the data a little bit better than us, and we'd come up with this idea for the veteran [00:03:00] opportunity to report. And really what we were trying to do initially was help. Sort of show in data, the strategy that we knew a lot of veterans were using anecdotally, which is just take any job you can get after you get out of the military and then work your way up from there.

[00:03:17] But does that impact, does that oppress people's earning potential over time because they don't actually come into organizations at the right level in the right jobs. And so we wanted pressure test this theory of underemployment so in November of 2019, the veteran opportunity report launched. As two female, that's leading the project, we were like, wouldn't it be great if we could talk about what does this look like for women veterans? Because we make up such a small percentage of the population that our experience gets drowned out in the, the male experience of the data.

[00:03:57] And so we asked to the team. Can you [00:04:00] divide the data by gender? LinkedIn has we call gender inferring algorithm based on names. If we have a certain level of confidence in the gender of that name, then the system will code as a gendered person. I was sitting in a meeting. I think Sarah was on it. And I looked at the data for the first time and it hurt my heart . We know that us women, veterans have a propensity to serve or be in male dominated career fields. Right. Nobody joins the military cause they think they're going to be around a bunch of women all the time. And yet by volume, the highest career fields after the military for women, veterans were teaching. Nurse administrative assistant. Those are all noble and good careers. That is not the question, but is that why women joined the military was to then go into [00:05:00] careers that they could have already gone into without the military, perhaps?

[00:05:06] We decided to use women veterans day, which is a fairly recent holiday to launch the women veteran report.

[00:05:14] **Sonali:** I want to put a pin in the stark difference in why the women joined the military in terms of their career choices and the types of career they transition into after service. It's coming up to almost two years since the first

veteran opportunity report was released. I'm curious to know if you have noticed any changes in particular, has anything been action?

[00:05:47] **Sarah:** Yeah, that's a great question. I think when Melissa and I first launched the report in 2019, we were asked to present the data at lots of high-level [00:06:00] leadership events and moments. The way that LinkedIn was able to look at the data and share something that hadn't really existed in this space before was extremely meaningful. And it actually helped encapsulates everything that we felt we knew existed, but we were able to actually tell it with data. And so what I've seen sort of evolve in this space is this conversation around under employment. In so many ways in the military space, we talk about high employments. We don't talk about underemployment and to Melissa's earlier point C. Leaders that have left the military, regardless of what their ranks, skillset and experiences taking a significant step back in order to find the next step they could take forward has huge implications for their economic opportunity.

[00:06:54] . The other piece that has been really inspirational for me is this [00:07:00] idea around veterans have a high propensity to go into certain industries that oftentimes have a stereotype of being military friendly. So you think department of defense, maybe the airline industry. Supply chain logistics, some of those types of areas. And so what we really wanted to share with partners and employers was this idea of when you create jobs that are specific for veterans, you're already limiting them. We know a large percentage of service members want to do a complete career shift and take a significant pivot from what they've done in the military. How can we open the aperture and open up all jobs to transitioning military members and lead with more of a skills-based mindset more versus. This is what you've done.

[00:07:49] . So some of the things that have happened as a result of that, as I've seen both employers start to think more creatively about how they open up their military program jobs that they've been [00:08:00] supporting.

[00:08:00] I've seen. Different partners put together tech advisory council. So they can be really thoughtful about opening up opportunities for veterans to pursue technology degrees. It doesn't feel as fast or immediate as I would like to see, but those are all really positive trends. Recognizing that we do still have a ways to go.

[00:08:20] **Melissa:** Can I just add, so part of what we did to help understand the nuance of the industry. So what we found is when you dig into the data, the experience of veteran employment, like Sarah said, is so much different.

[00:08:33] If you're an airport, Mechanic in the air force and you want to continue to be an aircraft mechanic and you get a job at American airlines or Boeing or something. Well, that's a very different career journey than saying if you were an aircraft mechanic, but actually you wouldn't be in marketing where it is more likely that a non veteran who just graduated college with no experience in marketing will get the job [00:09:00] than a veteran.

[00:09:02] With marketing experience in a marketing degree? Well, because it's just such a hard leap for people to make that veterans can be successful in marketing roles. LinkedIn has about 7,000 talent solutions, customers, people that buy products related to hiring, developing, and growing talent in their organizations.

[00:09:20] And we gave, we built 4,500 different reports just for those clients. To say, this is what your version of the report looks like. This is where veterans work in your organization. This is how quickly they get promoted relative to their non veteran peers. And I think to Sarah's point, like for some of our customers who are big hirers, it made a material shift.

[00:09:47] They told us, we changed the way that we think about hiring veterans because of like your partnership with us.

[00:09:54] **Sarah:** I was just going to add one piece we talk about the network gap that exists between [00:10:00] transitioning service members.

[00:10:02] Just the broader workforce in general. And so having that data to basically break down that veteran networks are more veteran centric and civilian networks have less than 1% or around 1% of veterans in their networks does impact their access to economic opportunity. Part of it is to diversify your network and there's a call to action for employers to be thoughtful about including veterans in their network, accepting them. And for veterans before they transitioned to really take a proactive approach to diversify their networks, to connect with industry professionals so that they can start to. Connect you opportunities

[00:10:42] **Sonali:** it almost seems to me that there, there is some sort of a connection here between underemployment disparate networks and the, the

aperture not being wide enough to offer the right skilled spaced opportunity.
[00:11:00] Would you.

[00:11:05] **Sarah:** Yeah, I think so. I think it's and I think that's another really positive shift that maybe we're starting to see to some degree is, from a LinkedIn standpoint, really starting to think about leading with skills-based hiring versus purely looking at just your education and where you went to school in your degree.

[00:11:25] **Sonali:** Melissa, when I read the report, I was curious to know more about, what do you mean in terms of intersectionality and overlapping challenge?

[00:11:37] **Melissa:** So there's a theory of intersectionality that was developed by Dr. Kimberly Crenshaw in like the late eighties. It's still kind of a nascent theory in terms of continuing to build kind of examples of what's out there.

[00:11:53] It was specifically talking about the intersection of race. And so this is. Inspired [00:12:00] by that notion that when an individual has multiple identities that have in some cases been overtly oppressed in other cases have just stigma around them.

[00:12:17] Acknowledged or unacknowledged that those identities interlock to create a different level of difficulty. If I take the example of women, veterans, face many of the same challenges that women in the workforce.

[00:12:37] , women who are parents are trying to figure out how to balance childcare. We know that there are these things about our identity as women that we face in our struggle, but we're a tiny percent of women, right?

[00:12:51] This broader story of what affects women, isn't quite our story. And so , when people think of a woman, they don't think of a woman veteran.[00:13:00] You think about the veteran community. At least 85% male. And the veteran community has challenges around like social stigmas where people think we have higher propensities for post-traumatic stress.

[00:13:18] And so they feel like we're unstable. They feel like we're dangerous. They feel like we're violent. They think we're really rigid in our structure and our thinking and that we can't be very flexible or creative. And so we carry kind

of these stigmas as well. In addition to the stigmas that we carry as are the challenges, the discriminations that we carry as women.

[00:13:43] But we're also not what people think of when they think of veterans. So both of those identities have good characteristics with them as well. Good thoughts, you know, women are, you know, thought of stereotypically to be more nurturing. Veterans are often thought of as being heroes. [00:14:00] But when people think of veterans, they don't think of women veterans generally speaking.

[00:14:04] And so we also don't then get the benefit of any of those. Positive sentiments that people have in the community. Some people call it like an inner locking of oppression. Black trans women face these face in many cases, many more diverse.

[00:14:24] Dangerous situations because of the intersectionality of their existence in the world. But what we really worked hard on is this is the first time we've seen corporations look at intersectionality and its impact on access to economic opportunity. And so that's what we mean is like these identities that we hold have come compound, the difficulty we face in gaining access to economic opportunity.

[00:14:53] **Sonali:** What would you say are the top three challenges that a female women [00:15:00] veterans experience as they transition out of the military?

[00:15:04] **Sarah:** The first piece is the network gap. So there's naturally fewer women in the military. There are significantly fewer women in leadership roles within the military. And then you transition that outside of the military. Who are you left to network with? So that's already a limiting factor in and of itself. Women are outreached at a less, at a lower percentage they're applying less, they're being recruited less. The other component is the leadership gap that exists.

[00:15:35] Because there's fewer women in leadership roles in general, and then there's fewer women leaders in the military that you're trying to connect those dots. And who do you see. That looks like you, that you could lean into learn from aspire to be like leverage as a mentor connect with those opportunities to just get so much more limited. Then you layer that on top of that intersectionality component and being a [00:16:00] woman veteran.

[00:16:00] **Melissa:** The one thing that I would add. the department of labor recently released demographic stats on the veteran community. The women veteran population is the most diverse population like subset of populations in the United States.

[00:16:19] So about 45% of military of women, veterans are also women of color. So when you then layer on women report feeling more stressed, more worried about their financial security, when they make the transition than male veterans do. And you layer that on with white women make 70 cents on the dollar of white of white men.

[00:16:42] Latino women make something like 50 cents black women. Now we're down to 30. So there is legitimate. Financial hardship associated with this journey and the identity is that we were

[00:16:59] **Sonali:** [00:17:00] that nicely segues into my next question. You both transitioned from the military a few years ago. How has that ecosystem changed if at all?

[00:17:13] **Melissa:** I think Sarah and I transitioned out of the military around the same time. I transitioned out of the military, I went home to Wyoming to live with my parents because my dad was deploying to Afghanistan.

[00:17:25] And so I don't feel like I really joined the workforce until about 2009, 2010, which was a few years after I had left the military because I had had a plan for how I was going to transition. It was going straight to grad school. And being with my mom. Well, my dad deployed. So there's a disclaimer that the early stages of my transition were very different than what we see today.

[00:17:50] For me, there were sort of two main challenges in the early days. One was just my own journey. I had extraordinary imposter syndrome. People didn't even talk [00:18:00] about this back then. So I think that's a big shift is like some of these challenges that we face as professionals that aren't actually unique to us are now being named. The second thing for me, the narrative around the veteran community was all about unemployment. It was all about their heroes. We should honor them. We owe so much to them, but there was no like, okay, so how, what are you going to do then? Or it was, oh my gosh, they're so broken. Like we owe them so much gratitude and there was no conversation about all the like beautiful swath of veterans in between those versions of our story. There's a beautiful quote by this woman named Sherman

Nanda and Gaza DG that says the problem with stereotypes isn't that they're untrue. It's that they're incomplete. I think those are like the two biggest societal shifts that I've seen in the last 10 years.

[00:18:54] **Sarah:** When I transitioned, I think the piece that [00:19:00] existed because LinkedIn wasn't really a thing where there were head hunters and I was getting out from a deployment.

[00:19:07] And in Germany and there was nothing that existed. How the heck was I going to find a job? I also moved into mom and dad's basement with my husband and we started the job search and it took us like six months. And in between that, we were working with those military affiliated head hunters who do great work.

[00:19:27] But going to those career fairs, the opportunities that. We were presented with were very male dominated. I'm talking oil and gas industry in Texas working on an oil field or a GE wind farm or something to that effect. And. There were not opportunities in technology or in west coast cities, which is where my family's from and where I wanted to go back to.

[00:19:53] And there were not opportunities for dual military couples to find a job in the same geography, let [00:20:00] alone the state. So that was limiting in and of itself. In my generation, there were fewer women. And I remember my commander telling me, as I was getting ready to deploy, he said, you and your spouse are going to make a decision as to whose career you're going to follow. It shouldn't be yours because you're the finance officer. He was combat arms. And so that already felt limiting to me and that imposter syndrome. Oh my gosh. It's so real. When I was working with some of those head hunters, the exact same conversation came up. My husband and I both west point graduates sitting next to each other. He looked at me and he said, It's going to be really hard for you to find a job, especially on the west coast, you're going to need to decide who's career. You're going to follow. It looks like he's going to have a better chance of finding a job. That aside, the networking piece also didn't really exist. The way I invested in looking for opportunities was a lot of Starbucks coffee and [00:21:00] sending emails to people who shared a military background and ask them to meet for coffee. When I was hired into my first job, I was hired alongside college grad. I'm 27, 28 years old and I'm being hired. In the same type of role as a 22 year old and I've been deployed. I was a commander in combat. I had a broad star, like I had done all of these things and yet I felt like I was taking a huge step back to start my next career.

[00:21:27] It goes back and begs the question, like how much did my service really set me up for success?

[00:21:31] **Sonali:** Sarah, I want to go back to you. I feel like I know the answer, but I'll ask you the question anyway. What was the transition experience for your husband?

[00:21:41] **Sarah:** Yeah, that's a great question. His transition experience that we moved together into my mom and dad's basement. He went to a head hunter hiring fair. He was hired into a job in sales that basically gave us a geography of three states, Oregon, Washington, [00:22:00] Alaska. We had to live within that territory. He was hired within probably 30 days of our transition. It took me longer because I then had this limited geography, , was already a barrier in and of itself.

[00:22:15] It took me probably about two years. In the corporate world to ever feel comfortable or fully transitioned. It was really difficult for me to feel one, like I fit in , people were showing up to work at like nine 30 and I was there at seven 30 because I thought that's what you do.

[00:22:33] I wouldn't take my lunch breaks. I'd sit at lunch. I was awkward. I was very awkward because I came with this very type a mindset on you are here to get work done. There's no fun, no frills. I was like that awkward teenager in big shoes, stumbling around and I just didn't know how to fit in.

[00:22:53] **Sonali:** So now fast forward a decade. I'm curious to know your thoughts on what the [00:23:00] ecosystem looks like in terms of the support it offers.

[00:23:03] **Sarah:** I think it is overwhelming and confusing and I transitioned where there were very limited resources. And while that was bumpy in and of itself, I didn't have. The additional layer of having to navigate through the sea of Goodwill. Lots of VSS started to populate all with a mission of doing great work, to support the military community. I think that it did compound who do I go to for what there is a niche for every single thing, whether it's interview, resume writing, you know, career fairs apprenticeship.

[00:23:37] So there is a lot of noise out there to navigate through the best piece of advice that if I were to transition now that I would give to myself, is research, research, research.

[00:23:49] And then you have the ability to start your transition earlier, which again, when I got out didn't exist, I literally went did my 10 day transition, got my DD two 14 and I was flying back home [00:24:00] from Germany. And now you can start your transition 12 months in advance. And then the other piece is networking. The ability to network with people and ask for help and join groups and lean into you know, research that didn't necessarily exist when I transitioned.

[00:24:17] **Melissa:** Yeah. I would liken it to a grocery store. You know, you go to these gigantic grocery stores and you're kind of overwhelmed by how big they are and how long it takes you to walk from one side to the other.

[00:24:29] And then you forgot the ice cream scenario. You have to backtrack. And it gets really frustrating. You're like, geez, I wish this thing wasn't so big. And then you go to trader Joe's and they don't have that one thing that you need. And you're like I wish I would have gone to the other grocery store cause now I have to go to both grocery stores. And so I don't know that there is, or will ever be now kind of like this smooth, seamless experience, there's 20 million veterans in the United States. There's 20 million different ways to do this.

[00:24:59] And so it [00:25:00] makes sense that we went from like hardly any to support. And now we have something like upwards of 80,000 veterans service organizations in the United States. But the three pieces of advice I would give is one to Sarah's point about like, what do you want to do? I think sometimes at least my experience in the military is I was just living in the moment.

[00:25:21] You move really often. So you're constantly trying to reorient yourself on what you should be doing there you're often alone or away from your family. So take the time. To think about what you want to do and what motivates you. And by the way, that answer, it's totally fine. A second way to navigate sort of their resources is in as much as you understand where you need, where you want to be like physically where, so if it's Washington or California or Washington, DC, look for resources in that area. Because once you get [00:26:00] connected in San Francisco, I had this experience where once I met one veteran, then it was within a month, I knew them all. And then the last thing I would say is just a big plus one to what Sarah said around using LinkedIn and networking or veteran potty. If you prefer that as a platform, but doing something where you can go find other veterans

[00:26:17] **Sonali:** it has been so much fun and informative chatting with both of you. Thank you so much for your time.

[00:26:26] **Melissa:** Thank you so much. Lovely. Sarah. It's always wonderful to chat about this stuff with you. So I'm glad we could do this together.