



**Australian Government  
Department of Veterans' Affairs**

# **Veteran self-employment experiences and wellbeing impacts**

**Report on qualitative research results**

**26 March 2025**

## Acknowledgments

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ORIMA pays respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples past and present, their cultures and traditions and acknowledges their continuing connection to land, sea and community.

We would also like to acknowledge and thank all the participants who were involved in this research for their valuable contribution.

**Disclaimer:** This report has been produced using funding provided by the Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA). However, the views and recommendations in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of DVA or reflect requirements under extant policy. The information contained in this publication includes views of those external to the Australian Government and these do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government. The Australian Government does not provide any guarantees and assumes no legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, currency or completeness of the information contained in this publication.

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## Quality and Compliance Statement

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This project was conducted in accordance with the international quality standard ISO 20252, the international information security standard ISO 27001, as well as the Australian Privacy Principles contained in the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth). ORIMA Research also adheres to the Privacy (Market and Social Research) Code 2021 administered by the Australian Data and Insights Association (ADIA).

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*Appendix A: Programs and supports*

## Executive Summary

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The Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs commissioned ORIMA Research to conduct a qualitative study on the experiences of self-employed veterans and the impact of self-employment on their wellbeing. The research aimed to inform policy and program improvements to support veteran wellbeing during their transition to civilian employment.



The qualitative research involved 25 participants across 23 in-depth interviews conducted online via Microsoft Teams from October 2024 to January 2025. Participants included 19 self-employed veterans and representatives from four stakeholder organisations.

### Key research findings

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#### Awareness and perceptions of self-employment



Veteran participants reported discovering self-employment opportunities incidentally, with limited pre-existing awareness or aspiration to this pathway. Upon experiencing self-employment, they found it rewarding and were able to leverage transferable military skills and experiences. While there were challenges being self-employed, most found it a positive experience overall.

#### Characteristics and journeys of self-employed veterans



The self-employed veterans included in the research varied in demographics, types of businesses and pathways to self-employment. Motivations for self-employment included autonomy, making a positive social contribution and financial aspirations. Transition experiences influenced the ease of moving into self-employment, with knowledge and planning being important factors.

#### Impact of self-employment on veteran wellbeing



Overall, self-employment was found to enable positive wellbeing, including in relation to mental, social, physical, financial, relational and developmental domains. Key protective factors which were found to enhance the likelihood of positive wellbeing outcomes included resilience, adaptability, purpose, positive relationships and networks, and financial security. Conversely, excessive business demands which limited capacity for flexibility and autonomy, and financial instability were found to pose risks to wellbeing.

#### Enablers and barriers to self-employment



There were unique enablers and barriers to entering self-employment, and to continuing in self-employment over time. Key enablers to entering included having personal attributes aligned with self-employment, basic business knowledge and supportive networks. Key barriers to entering included having limited awareness of self-employment as a viable option, challenges in translating military skills to civilian business contexts, and having limited financial capital to support business establishment.

#### Self-employment programs, supports and resources



Awareness and uptake of existing self-employment programs was limited among participants, particularly due to challenges accessing information about what was available. The research identified opportunities to increase consideration of self-employment as well as facilitate enablers and reduce barriers to pursuing and continuing in self-employment (detailed in Chapter 7).

# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1. Background

Research has suggested that **employment, particularly ‘good work’, is important for supporting health and wellbeing**, including for the veteran community. ‘Good work’ refers to work that is engaging, fair, respectful and balances job demands, autonomy and job security, and which is characterised by safe and healthy practices, and strikes a balance between the interests of individuals, employers and society.<sup>1</sup> Research has indicated that good work provides individuals with a sense of purpose, opportunities for social connection, as well as the financial and material resources that are necessary to meet one’s needs and goals.<sup>2, 3</sup>

An initial review of relevant literature found that **self-employment and entrepreneurship** in particular led to positive wellbeing outcomes for veterans, including:

- **Enhanced autonomy** – through flexibility to pursue enjoyable activities and having control over time and environment (including to effectively manage mental and wellbeing);<sup>4, 5, 6</sup>
- **Feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction** – through running a business, which improved confidence and self-worth;<sup>5, 6, 7</sup> and
- **Improved mental health and wellbeing** – through a renewed sense of purpose and identity in civilian life through business ownership.<sup>4, 5</sup>

However, the research also indicated there was a need for **further evidence and data** on the positive and negative impacts on veteran wellbeing and challenges of veteran entrepreneurship long-term, particularly in Australia.<sup>4, 5, 8</sup> It also suggested that further evidence was required in relation to entrepreneurial programs for veterans and those transitioning to the civilian sector.

In Australia, veteran self-employment has been supported through a **range of programs** delivered through the Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR); the Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA); and through non-profit or ex-service organisations (see Appendix A). However, anecdotally, uptake of these services by veterans has been varied, with data on the number and demographics of self-employed Australian veterans not readily available.

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<sup>1</sup> The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) (2022). “Consensus Statement on the Health Benefits of Good Work” <[https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/afoem-realising-the-health-benefits-of-work-consensus-statement.pdf?sfvrsn=baab321a\\_16](https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/afoem-realising-the-health-benefits-of-work-consensus-statement.pdf?sfvrsn=baab321a_16)>

<sup>2</sup> Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA) (2022). “Corporate Plan 2022-23” <<https://www.dva.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-08/corporate-plan-2022-23.pdf>>

<sup>3</sup> DVA. (2022). “Veteran employment – summary of activities August – December 2022” <[https://www.veteranemployment.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/Veteran\\_Employment\\_Summary\\_August\\_-\\_December\\_2022.pdf](https://www.veteranemployment.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/Veteran_Employment_Summary_August_-_December_2022.pdf)>

<sup>4</sup> Becker, K., Smidt, M., & Gai, S. (2022). “A systematic review of the veteran employment research”. Brisbane, Australia: University of the Sunshine Coast. <[https://www.veteranemployment.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/Rapid\\_Evidence\\_Assessment\\_on\\_Veteran\\_Employment.pdf](https://www.veteranemployment.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/Rapid_Evidence_Assessment_on_Veteran_Employment.pdf)>

<sup>5</sup> Lyonette, C., Barnes, S.-A., Owen, D., Fisher, N., Newell, K., Kapur, R., & Wing, M. (2018). “Self-employment and the Armed Forces Community” Forces in Mind Trust. <<https://www.fim-trust.org/wp-content/uploads/self-employment-armed-forces-community.pdf>>

<sup>6</sup> de Klerk, S., Becker, K., de Villiers Scheepers, M. J., & McCormack, M. (2022). “Mapping how military veterans transition to self-employment” University of the Sunshine Coast. <<https://research.usc.edu.au/esploro/outputs/99599808902621>>

<sup>7</sup> McDermott, M. J., & Jackson, J. (2020). “A qualitative study: Military veterans and franchise ownership”. The Qualitative Report, 25(3), 769–784. <<https://nsuworks.nova.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3287&context=tqr>>

<sup>8</sup> Heinz, A. J., Freeman, M. A., Harpaz-Rotem, I., & Pietrzak, R. H. (2017). “American Military Veteran Entrepreneurs: A Comprehensive Profile of Demographic, Service History, and Psychosocial Characteristics”. Military Psychology, 29(6), 513–523. <<https://doi.org/10.1037/mil0000195>>

DVA identified the need for **further research to increase understanding of veteran self-employment experiences as well as the impact of self-employment on veteran wellbeing**. ORIMA Research was commissioned by DVA to conduct qualitative research with veterans and relevant stakeholders to inform improvements to departmental policies and programs, with the aim of enhancing veterans' wellbeing following their transition to civilian employment.

## 1.2. Research objectives

The primary objective of the research was to identify **the impacts of self-employment and entrepreneurship on veteran wellbeing to inform improvements to DVA policies and programs** for veteran wellbeing. More specifically, the research sought to:



Understand what **motivated** veterans to enter self-employment and what fields of business they entered into, following their transition from the Australian Defence Force (ADF);



Identify particular **factors or personal characteristics** that might have influenced veterans to enter self-employment;



Identify the **risks and protective factors** of self-employment that impacted veteran wellbeing;



Explore veterans' **awareness and uptake** of existing departmental or other self-employment programs; and



As relevant, explore other **supports veterans may need** when transitioning to self-employment.

## 1.3. Research methodology

The research was qualitative in nature comprising a total of **25 participants** via 23 in-depth interviews. These interviews were conducted online between **30 October 2024 – 23 January 2025** via Microsoft Teams. This included:

- 19 one-on-one in-depth interviews with n=19 **self-employed veterans** (i.e. ex-ADF personnel whose primary occupation was or previously had been self-employment). Interviews were up to one hour in duration and participants were reimbursed with a voucher for their time; and
- 2 one-on-one and 2 paired in-depth interviews with **representatives from stakeholder organisations** (i.e. veteran support organisations that engage with and/or assist self-employed veterans). Interviews were up to 45 minutes in duration.

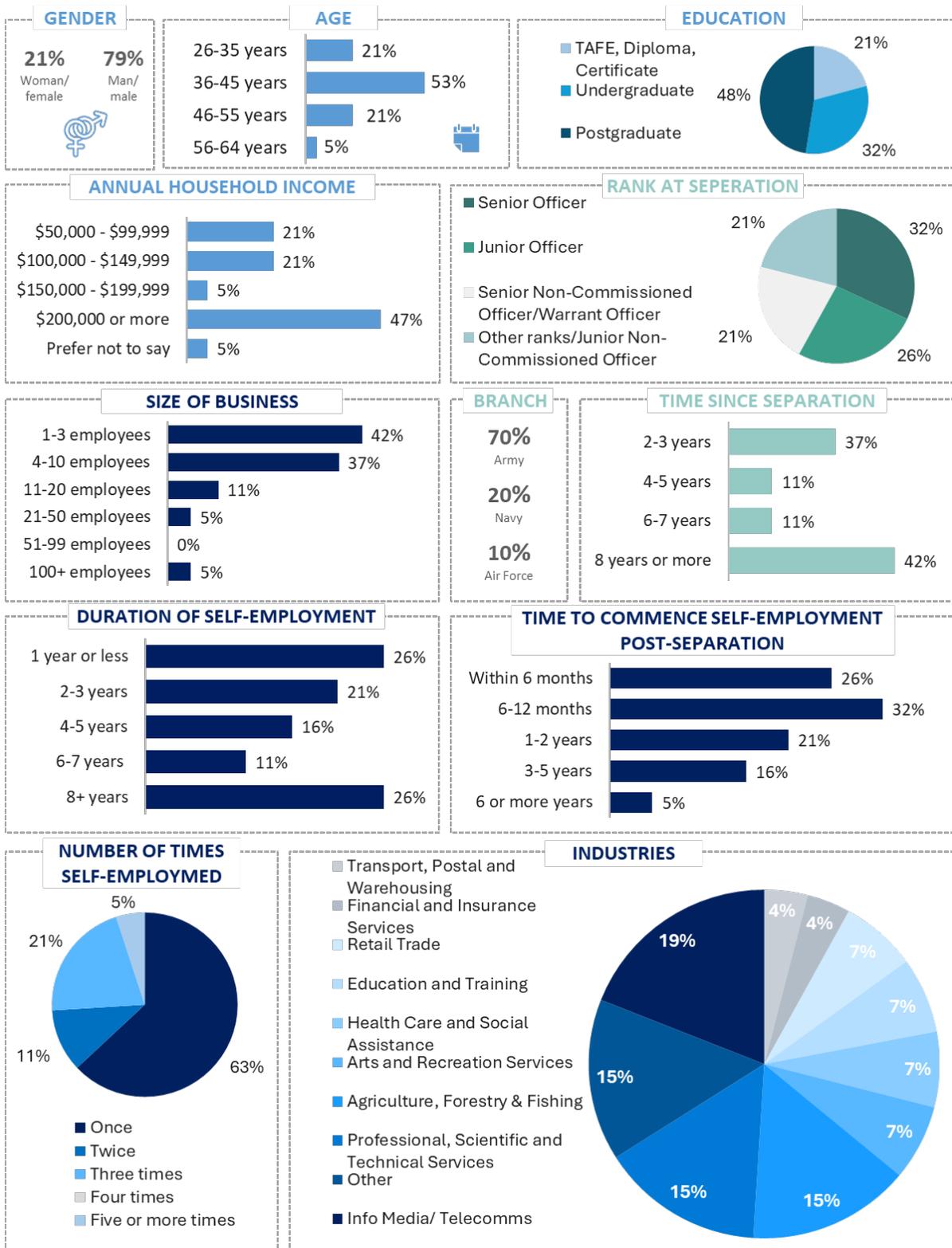
## 1.4. Participant demographic profile

Before beginning the interviews, veteran participants completed an anonymous online demographic questionnaire. Data from this questionnaire is included in Figure 1 overleaf to provide a summary of the cohort of veteran participants included in the qualitative sample.

The demographic profile of research participants shows that **self-employed veterans from a range of demographic backgrounds participated in the research**.

Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding or questions permitting multiple responses. The data below is based on n=19.

**Figure 1: Demographic profile of research participants**



## 1.5. Recruitment

A number of organisations assisting and supporting veteran self-employment were identified and invited to participate in the research. ORIMA Research invited stakeholder participation in the interviews, and requested their assistance in contacting veterans within their networks to invite them to participate.

For recruitment of veterans, DVA and the four stakeholder organisations that agreed to participate disseminated invitations, either via:

- **Promotional materials** shared through their established communication channels (social media, member newsletters, etc) – these materials included information about the research, ORIMA’s contact details and a link to an online expression of interest (EOI) form that allowed self-employed veterans to self-nominate to participate in the research; or
- **Direct invitation** – with the organisations providing the individual with ORIMA’s contact details and inviting them to self-nominate to participate in the research by contacting ORIMA directly.

All potential research participants who contacted ORIMA or completed an EOI spoke with an ORIMA consultant to confirm their eligibility for the research and arrange a time for participation.

## 1.6. Analysis approach

A **manual, systematic but tailored approach** to qualitative analysis was adopted. The same team of specialist consultants conducted all the moderation, analysis and reporting to ensure the analysis was done with a full appreciation and understanding of the context in which responses were provided (e.g. non-verbal cues, language and tone). The qualitative analysis process was based on grounded theory – whereby hypotheses are formed based on the data collected through observation and interviews / focus groups, allowing insights and patterns to emerge through inductive reasoning.

For each session, extensive verbatim notes and quotes were taken by a note-taker. Regular analysis sessions were run and attended by all consultants involved in the project to **cross-check and validate emerging findings**. These involved indicative thematic analysis of results, which then formed the basis for building on and validating emerging findings and insights. As the research progressed, key themes and findings were iteratively developed and refined, to draw out deeper insights.

## 1.7. Presentation of findings

Qualitative research provides insights on the breadth and depth of participant views on a topic. However, it does not allow for quantifying the size and prevalence of views – as such, the exact number of participants holding a particular view on individual issues cannot be exactly measured.

Where relevant, the following terms have been used throughout the report to provide a qualitative indication and approximation of the size of the research audience who held particular views:



Most – refers to findings that relate to more than three quarters of the research participants;



Many—refers to findings that relate to more than half of the research participants;



Some—refers to findings that relate to around a third of the research participants; and



A few—refers to findings that relate to less than a quarter of research participants.

The most common qualitative findings are reported – except in certain situations where only a few have raised particular issues, but these are considered to be important and to have potentially wide-ranging implications/applications.

The term ‘**participant**’ is used throughout this report to refer to those who participated in an interview. When the term ‘participants’ is used without specifying membership to either the veteran or stakeholder cohort, this term refers to participants across cohorts.

Participant quotes are included throughout the report to **support the findings under discussion**, as indicated by quotation marks. The report also features case studies summarising specific participant experiences. To protect anonymity, all participant stories have been de-identified and pseudonyms applied (marked with asterisk \*). In some cases, details have been slightly modified to further protect participant confidentiality and/or to clarify the narrative.

## 1.8. Limitations and considerations to interpreting findings

The research was qualitative in nature and therefore aimed to gain insights into the **breadth and depth of participants’ experiences** and the factors that enable or are barriers to self-employment. It was not intended to be statistically representative.

The research adopted an **opt-in, purposive sampling approach** facilitated by stakeholder organisations to reach those in the small population of interest and ensure participants had the prerequisite experiences relevant to the research questions. This may have resulted in a sampling skew towards those with a strong interest in the topic and/or more positive experiences and perceptions of self-employment. Therefore the findings may not necessarily reflect the perspectives of those less connected veteran networks or who have exited self-employment and disengaged with these networks.

## 1.9. Glossary of terms

The following terms are used throughout this report<sup>9</sup>:

- **Australian Defence Force (ADF):** Australia’s national military organisation comprising the Royal Australian Navy, Australian Army and Royal Australian Air Force, as well as the Australian Defence Force Headquarters, Joint Capabilities Group and Joint Operations Command.
- **Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA):** The Australian Government department that provides support, services and information to serving and ex-serving ADF members and their families, and war widows/widowers, among others.

<sup>9</sup> Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide (2024), “Executive summary, recommendations and the fundamentals: Glossary”, pp.195-202, <<https://defenceveteransuicide.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2024-09/final-report-volume-1.pdf>>

- **Separation/discharge:** These terms describe the cessation of all forms of ADF service, voluntarily or involuntarily.
- **Transition<sup>10</sup>:** The journey of a veteran and their family from an ADF service-centred life to a predominantly civilian life.
- **Veteran:** A person who has served in the ADF, whether in the permanent forces or reserves, and has since separated or transferred from the ADF.  
*Note:* throughout the report we have respectfully referred to all those who have separated from the ADF as ‘veterans’, but we acknowledge that there are different preferences in language among participants, and that not all ex-ADF personnel identify with the language of ‘veterans’.
- **Veteran community:** This term encapsulates veterans and their spouses or family members.
- **Veteran support ecosystem<sup>11</sup>:** This term encapsulates the different stakeholders who support the wellbeing of veterans, such as DVA, Defence, veteran support organisations, the veteran community, different levels of government and providers.
- **Veteran support organisation:** An organisation that provides services to serving and ex-serving ADF members and families (can also be known as ex-service organisations).

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<sup>10</sup> DVA (2023) “Veteran Transition Strategy”, pp. 30, < <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/veterans-transition-strategy> >

<sup>11</sup> DVA (2024) “Corporate Plan 2024–25”, pp. 10, < <https://www.dva.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-08/corporate-plan-2024-25.pdf> >

## 2. Awareness and perceptions of self-employment

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*This chapter provides an overview of participants' awareness and perceptions of self-employment and entrepreneurship before and after commencing self-employment, and their overall experiences of self-employment.*

### 2.1. Overall findings

Overall, most participants found out about self-employment opportunities incidentally and/or through experience. The research found there was **limited awareness of and aspiration towards self-employment** prior to this.

After being self-employed, veteran participants felt that it was a positive and rewarding experience, despite the challenges. They reported that some of the key skills, characteristics and experiences that veterans acquired from military service were highly transferable to self-employment which contributed to positive experiences.

While participants acknowledged that self-employment may not suit all veterans' traits and skills, they felt it had been valuable and beneficial for them, and they would recommend that other veterans consider it.

*"When I first left, [self-employment] wasn't even on my mind. I was a nine to five person - until I dug a little deeper trying to piece together, 'what is it that I'm missing?' I find it rewarding, and I would absolutely recommend self-employment to other veterans" – Veteran participant*

### 2.2. Awareness before entering self-employment

Overall, many participants had limited awareness and understanding of self-employment before entering into it. Specifically, participants reported limited awareness or understanding of:

- **The range of benefits to self-employment** – including for the individual and the wider community (e.g. of contributing to society through a business);
- **The translatability of their skills and experiences from the ADF to civilian self-employment** – including for Defence industries and non-Defence industries related self-employment; and

*"Veterans don't understand their civilian skill sets. So, 90% of them try something different rather than using their skillset and starting a business with mates" – Veteran participant*

- **Pathways for veterans to enter self-employment** – such as, how to develop and evaluate potential business ideas, and options for "getting a foot in the door" (e.g. utilising their skills as a sole trader or independent contractor).

Participants reported generally becoming aware of self-employment incidentally via/as a result of:

- Starting a project to **address a need or pursue a passion** – for some this "accidentally" morphed into a business opportunity;
- Being **invited by a business partner** to join a venture;
- **Further studies** – such as through MBAs or other courses;
- **Word-of-mouth** – e.g. from friends, family or other self-employed veterans; or
- **Transition seminars** (for a few who had separated more recently).

### Case study 1: Stumbling into self-employment

When Max\* separated from the military, he felt that traditional employment was the logical next step post-service, yet after multiple attempts, including a stint at a prestigious consulting firm, it became clear that the fit was not right for him. Rigid bureaucracy and underutilisation of his skills left him unfulfilled and wanting something more aligned with his values and capabilities. However, **self-employment had never entered his mind.**

Without any prior intentions of starting a business, after losing a submission for a contract Max sat down with two ex-navy colleagues to explore the bigger picture of veteran rehabilitation. Without realising what they were doing, they found themselves sketching out a business plan for a consultancy dedicated to aiding veterans' transition into the workforce.

What began as an exploration of an interest area, became a rewarding enterprise. The firm not only leveraged his leadership and problem-solving skills but also provided a profound sense of purpose. Max found that his business venture provided a sense of fulfillment and excitement that traditional employment had failed to deliver, enhancing his wellbeing and reshaping his post-military journey.

*“Did I ever think I would have a business? No. Did I ever think I'd work for myself? No. But now I thoroughly enjoy it”*

## 2.3. Perceptions of veteran self-employment

Most participants formed their perspectives of self-employment based on their direct experience. Given their initial limited awareness and understanding, most participants reported **self-employment had not been a prior aspiration and consideration.**

Most veteran participants reported that self-employment and entrepreneurship was generally **highly positive and rewarding.** While participants reported that owning and managing a business came with a range of challenges and stressors, they felt that the positive experiences outweighed the negative experiences. Many participants reported they would personally recommend self-employment to other veterans. However, they also recognised that self-employment was highly individualised and may not be the ideal path for every veteran.

*“I didn't expect to have as many challenges as I did, but I've grown a lot in the process and overall on a balance it's been a really positive experience” – Veteran participant*

Overall, participants felt that veteran self-employment and entrepreneurship offered a number of **benefits**, including for:

- The **individual** undertaking self-employment – including to their mental, social and financial wellbeing (see Chapter 4.2 for individual impacts identified in the research);
- **Other veterans** – including through businesses being set up to deliver services specifically for veterans or by employing other veterans as part of the business; and

*“I have been involved in and around lot of veterans that have struggled, especially with transition, and we are able to help them find their place” – Veteran participant*

- The **wider community** – due to the skills and experiences of veterans being fully utilised to contribute to the labour market and community. Some participants felt that the “service-

oriented” ethos common among veterans resulted in high quality services being offered to the wider community.

## 2.4. Veteran alignment to self-employment

Participants felt there were a range of characteristics, skills and experiences gained from military service that made many veterans **well aligned to the demands and nature of self-employment and entrepreneurship**, regardless of the type of self-employment they pursued. Given these transferable skills and characteristics, most participants **felt self-employment was a good fit for veterans**. While veteran participants reported that they recognised the alignment of these skills in hindsight, they did not necessarily identify how they would be suited to self-employment before entering it. These included:

- **Adaptability** – participants felt that veterans were uniquely trained to adapt to rapidly changing and complex situations, similar to those faced in business;
- **Discipline** – participants reported that structure, commitment and self-motivation were important for building a successful business;

*“In self-employment discipline is an important trait... financially and with the way you relate with your clients... you need to have focus... my army experience helped me with discipline” – Veteran participant*

- **Resilience** – participants felt that the challenges faced in military training and service built a high level of resilience which was felt to be important for responding to the dynamic challenges of running a business;
- **Mission-focused** – participants felt that veterans learned to adopt a planned, mission-oriented approach to executing tasks which was important and useful in the context of business for setting clear goals, objectives and planning strategies to achieve them;
- **Risk calculation and appetite** – participants felt the military honed skills in assessing and managing risk, which was felt to be important in adopting a healthy risk appetite for running a business;
- **Teamwork** – participants felt that the ability to build, work with, and manage a team was developed in the military and supported working with employees in a business context;
- **Project and resource management** – a few participants felt these skills were developed in certain roles in the military (e.g. team leading, logistics) and could be directly used in the context of self-employment; and

*“I’m a project manager... my experience came from within defence... and getting myself certified as a project manager and doing complex project management in defence” – Veteran participant*

- **Leadership** – particularly among those trained in leadership roles in the ADF which was felt to be related to setting the direction and purpose of a business.

*“Being [in an ADF leadership role] I knew how to manage people and lead people... so that has helped along the way” – Veteran participant*

### Key opportunities and implications of findings

- There are opportunities to raise awareness and consideration of self-employment among the veteran community earlier in the transition journey to facilitate informed career planning, including informed consideration of self-employment and entrepreneurship.
- There are aspects of service which make veterans well-aligned to self-employment – there are opportunities to help veterans understand their own strengths and their potential alignment to self-employment to support informed transition and career planning.

## 3. Characteristics and journeys of self-employed veterans

*This chapter provides an overview of the current characteristics of self-employed veteran participants and factors influencing their transition to self-employment.*

### 3.1. Overall findings

The research found that there were no “typical” patterns to the characteristics of self-employed veterans. As seen in Figure 2, self-employed veteran participants came from diverse demographic backgrounds, undertook different types of self-employment, and entered self-employment at different stages in their career journey.

**Figure 2: Varied characteristics of self-employed veterans**



Additionally, the research identified there were differences in veterans’ service and transition journeys which impacted on their transition to civilian self-employment.

*“Gosh, you couldn’t pick it. There’s a thousand different variations of what a veteran is or their experience, whether they medically or voluntarily discharged, whether they started a business in defence, whether they came to [self-employment] years later... it is really, really diverse” – Stakeholder participant*

### 3.2. Characteristics of self-employed veterans

#### 3.2.1. Who pursued self-employment

Stakeholder participants reported that there was a **wide variation in the types of veterans who pursued self-employment**, including in terms of their demographic characteristics (e.g. age, gender), rank during service, service length, type or even separation experience. They also reported that self-employed veterans were spread across different States and Territories and regional and metropolitan areas.

Some participants pursued self-employment independently, while others had business partnerships and/or were invited to start the business by someone else.

### 3.2.2. Why self-employment was pursued

Participants reported that there were a range of reasons why veterans chose to enter self-employment, including:

- Wanting **autonomy and control over work** – e.g. flexibility to manage time, work-life balance and to have control over the direction of the business and workplace culture;
- Having a **passion** for a specific idea/entrepreneurial pursuit and/or **identifying a particular gap or opportunity** in the market;
- Wanting to **contribute positively to society** – which participants viewed as being linked to upholding a service-oriented ethos aligned with military values; and
- Having **financial aspirations** – some participants viewed entrepreneurship as providing greater earning potential.

### 3.2.3. When self-employment was considered and pursued

**Self-employment was considered and pursued at different stages** by participants, including during active service, during transition, immediately post-separation and after first attempting traditional employment post-separation.



Some participants reported that they went straight into self-employment fulltime, while others transitioned over time and maintained active service or traditional employment while building their business (particularly if setting up a not-for-profit business with more limited earning potential).

### 3.2.4. What type of self-employment was pursued

Participants reported that veterans pursued a range of types of self-employment, including in relation to:

- **Industries** – e.g. IT, fashion and textiles, hospitality and professional services. While some pursued self-employment in the Defence industry or directly related to the skills they used in the military, others pursued unrelated/entirely new ventures;
- **Types of work** – e.g. consulting, coaching, product development; and
- **Business size** – e.g. sole trader, partnership, small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) and larger enterprises. Although SMEs were most commonly reported.

*“We’ve had veterans go from bakers to hunting supplies, there is absolutely no main area that they specialised in. We do try to encourage them to use the skills they have, even if it’s differently to how they used them before...however we do have those that go “no, no, I’ve done that for 20 years, don’t want to do that again”, and they find something totally different”*  
– Stakeholder participant

### 3.3. Transition to self-employment

Overall, the research found that experiences of transitioning to self-employment after military service were highly individualised. For some veteran participants the journey was an easy and/or positive experience, for others there were many challenges and pain points. The research identified a range of factors which impacted the transition to self-employment, including:

- **Experiences with the transition from military service overall** – a few who felt their transition was well-supported and managed felt “confident” and “positive” which resulted in positive mindsets for entering self-employment. However, those who felt “overwhelmed”, “uncertain” or “abandoned” reported additional challenges planning for and entering self-employment;

*“Transition was relatively seamless for me. My chain of command was very understanding and supportive of my transition and provided time for me to do a range of administrative processes for it” – Veteran participant*

- **Length of service and entry time into service** (i.e. time out of civilian life) – those with more time out of predominantly civilian life had to make larger readjustments, while also adapting to the self-employment context;

*“Transition was pretty challenging... when you’re in an institution for a long period of time, you become a bit attached to institution. It’s always a part of your identity. You’re letting go of an old version of you to start a new version and you have no idea where it’s going to go... which is difficult” – Veteran participant*

- **Voluntary or involuntary separation** – those separating voluntarily reported this enabled them to proactively plan and prepare for employment following separation (e.g. organise financial resources or access education and training to support self-employment) and/or had more positive attitudes about transitioning (e.g. readiness and optimism). In instances of physical or mental health issues impacting transition, participants reported that this exacerbated the stress of a significant life change which impacted readiness for employment; and

- **Time of separation and extent of programs available** – participants who separated longer ago (e.g. 8 years or more) reported more limited availability of structured transition resources than those who separated more recently (e.g. <7 years), including resources related to self-employment (e.g. transition seminars, King’s Trust program and leave provided for education and training). Those with access to resources reported more positive experiences and ease of transition to self-employment.

*“I had no information about self-employment. I know they have VSOs [Veteran Support Officers] and transition seminars now, but we had none of that back then in 2014, it was absolutely the Wild West back then” – Veteran participant*

#### Key opportunities and implications of findings

- There are a range of veterans pursuing different types of self-employment at different points in their career journey. Information about self-employment should convey the breadth of opportunities and pathways available to support accurate understanding and consideration of opportunities.
- There are factors about veterans’ transition from active service to civilian life which impact on the ease or difficulty of their transition to self-employment which should be considered in advice and resources in relation to self-employment where relevant.

## 4. Impact of self-employment on veteran wellbeing

*This chapter presents findings about the reported impacts of self-employment and entrepreneurship on veteran wellbeing and identified risks and protective factors.*

### 4.1. Overall findings

Overall, the research found that self-employment could be an **enabler to holistic wellbeing** for veterans. While participants reported that self-employment could be challenging, they felt that the positives outweighed the negatives.

The research identified a range of **risk and protective factors** which influenced the likelihood of self-employment having a positive impact on wellbeing. Participants felt that self-employment had positive impacts when protective factors were present, and risk factors were limited.

### 4.2. Impacts of self-employment on veteran wellbeing

Most participants reported a range of positive impacts on their wellbeing from being self-employed. Across participants in the research, most identified one or more impacts in relation to physical, mental, social, developmental and/or financial wellbeing. The research found that the impacts identified were relevant to and spanned several of the domains within the DVA’s Wellbeing Framework (seen in Figure 3 below). These are outlined further in the table overleaf.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 3: Veteran Wellbeing Framework**



<sup>12</sup> Note: the intent of the Wellbeing Framework is to identify the *factors/ domains* that impact on the wellbeing of individuals and families to guide the development and delivery of initiatives, programs and service offerings. The findings in the research table present the specific *impacts and outcomes* on wellbeing, which may relate to multiple factors and domains in the model.

Participants reported the following impacts of self-employment:

<p><b>Meaningful activity and respect</b> (linked to domains 'Recognition and respect'; 'Meaning and spirituality'; and 'Employment and meaningful activity')</p>	<p>Most participants felt that self-employment had a positive impact on their sense of meaning and respect due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Experiencing <b>enjoyment and satisfaction</b> – most felt self-employment was “rewarding”, “interesting”, or “exciting”, particularly for those who enjoyed the experience of overcoming challenges; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>“I’m my own boss and make my own business, I’m not a subordinate. I have turned my passion into a career, which makes work feel enjoyable and fulfilling” – Veteran participant</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>✓ Positive <b>service to community</b> – participants reported a sense of satisfaction from delivering services/products, or from employing other veterans in a safe environment; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>“I can provide a pathway... I employ my friends, I employ people I used to serve with and it's incredibly satisfying” – Veteran participant</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>✓ Having control over a <b>positive workplace culture</b> – participants valued having the opportunity to create the conditions for themselves and/or their employees to thrive in line with their own morals and principles; and</li> <li>✓ Contributing to a <b>positive and empowering view of veterans</b> – that is, more broadly combating stigma and the view that veterans are “broken” by contributing to alternate narratives about their strengths, and contributing to the community through entrepreneurship.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Social support &amp; connection</b></p>	<p>Most participants felt that self-employment had a positive impact on social wellbeing and connection due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Enhanced connection and sense of belonging</b> – to the business, and veteran business communities; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>“Our culture is pretty positive, we all have a sense of humour, about half of our employees are veterans” – Veteran participant</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>✓ The <b>flexibility</b> of self-employment facilitated <b>more time with family and friends</b> – particularly compared to their time in the military where they may have been separated from them for substantial periods; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>“A benefit of self-employment is that my family get to see me more often... unlike when I was in the army, I was unavailable more often. I am now able to spend more time with my son and be a part of his development as a child” – Veteran participant</i></li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>x A few participants reported that the <b>challenges of managing their work life balance</b> when the demands of the business were high sometimes had negative impacts on their interpersonal relationships. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>“Self-employment is a terrible idea for your family. You're always working long hours. You're always putting things second so that you can achieve something for a client or support one of your staff members. I feel bad when I miss my kids' things” – Veteran participant</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Forming <b>positive relationships with employees</b>; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>x However, a few sole trader participants reported experiencing a sense of <b>isolation</b>, which contributed to feelings of <b>loneliness</b>. Having access to support networks would have helped them.</li> </ul> <p><i>“My business is literally just me. It’s a lonely existence and it sucks at times because you won’t have conversations with people” – Veteran participant</i></p> </li> </ul>
<b>Health</b> (mental and physical health)	<p>Most participants reported that self-employment had a positive impact on their mental and physical health due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Feeling a sense of <b>agency, autonomy and empowerment</b> – to make choices about the business, the culture and values being adopted, and having flexibility and autonomy over their own time, including to do things they enjoy; <p><i>“It’s given me autonomy, which is a big one for me. If I don’t want to do anything next week, I won’t book anything in and go for a holiday. It gives me that sense of freedom” – Veteran participant</i></p> </li> <li>✓ Having a <b>positive sense of purpose and identity</b> – participants reported that a particular challenge for veterans leaving active service was finding a new or renewed sense of purpose and identity in civilian life, which most reported that their business or entrepreneurial pursuit had given them; and <p><i>“I was medically discharged and I’ve had my own journey of mental health so ultimately self-employment gave me that sense of purpose... I’m making my own journey, and I can make it whatever I want it to be” – Veteran participant</i></p> </li> <li>✓ Having <b>flexibility to manage their own mental and physical health and wellbeing</b> needs (e.g. attend gym, rehabilitation appointments).</li> </ul> <p>However, some participants felt that self-employment occasionally created:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>x <b>Stress, anxiety, and emotional challenges</b> – associated with pressures of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o High demands on their time and energy; and</li> <li>o Owning the uncertainties and risks – particularly if they were responsible for others (e.g. employees or dependents).</li> </ul> <p><i>“You take a level of risk with self-employment, which is stressful and fatiguing... and you can never indemnify yourself completely from it” – Veteran participant</i></p> </li> </ul>
<b>Financial</b> (linked to domains ‘Income & finance’; and ‘Home & housing’)	<p>Many participants felt that self-employment had a positive impact on their long-term financial wellbeing due to <b>increased earning potential</b> (compared to traditional employment) and <b>experiences of financial success</b>.</p> <p><i>“There’s a capacity to make shit loads of money... when I look at my bank account, it makes me smile” – Veteran participant</i></p> <p>However, most reported periods of short-term <b>financial strain and stress</b> as the business developed. One participant reported losing all their finances, which created high-levels of stress on their day-to-day living.</p>

## Development and growth

(linked to domains 'Education and skills' and 'Employment and meaningful activity')

Many participants felt that self-employment had a positive impact on their personal development and growth due to:

- ✓ Having freedom to **fully utilise and/or reorient their skills, knowledge or experiences** into a different context or field – having ability to choose direction of the business, to set and achieve goals, and problem solve, which helped to build their self-reliance and confidence;
- ✓ **Continuous growth and learning** – by adapting to challenges and learning new knowledge about business and entrepreneurship to continue to support the success of the business; and

*“My experience of self-employment has been interesting, despite the setbacks I’ve had over time, I have learnt a lot and continue to learn a lot about my capabilities” – Veteran participant*

- ✓ **Intellectual and creative freedom** – to explore, innovate and continuously improve.

*“I can just sit down and foresee what I should do to make my designs more creative, and make the client love it. I am satisfied when I can satisfy my clients, that’s an achievement for me” – Veteran participant*

### 4.3. Risk and protective factors to wellbeing in self-employment

The research identified several risk and protective factors which impacted the likelihood of individuals experiencing positive wellbeing outcomes from self-employment. **Protective factors** refer to the characteristics or conditions which enhance the likelihood of positive wellbeing outcomes, while **risk factors** increase the likelihood of negative outcomes. In the context of those pursuing self-employment, protective factors included the **individual characteristics** or **contextual conditions** which enhance veterans’ ability to thrive in this environment, while risk factors undermine the ability to thrive. The research identified that the presence of strong protective factors can mitigate the impact of risk factors.

Protective factors identified in the research, included:

- Individual protective factors, specifically:
  - **Resilience and adaptability** – participants reported that these characteristics were important for entrepreneurs to adapt and sustain their efforts in response to the changing circumstances of their business, recover from setbacks and failures, and identify opportunities to learn and grow;
 

*“I’m exceedingly stubborn, you 100% need to have that in self-employment... you’ve got to be prepared to be thrown in the deep end straight away. I may have no idea what I’m doing here but I can make this work” – Veteran participant*
  - A strong and positive sense of **purpose and meaning** – participants reported that this contributed to a long-term goal and “mission” oriented perspective, which helped to maintain motivation and reduce the impact of short-term stressors or setbacks;
  - **Comfort with risk and uncertainty** – participants reported that self-employment is less structured than the military environment and that business owners need to make decisions knowing that there may be risks;

*“Self-employment is a daunting experience, but I had my appetite for risk and risk control, and I'm fairly good at acknowledging the risks and putting in a lot of controls and checkpoints around that” – Veteran participant*

- Contextual protective factors, such as:
  - **Positive relationships** – that is, having supportive family relationships, mentors and peer networks (with other veterans or non-veteran business owners) to provide reassurance, advice and encouragement during challenging times, as well as realistic advice;

*“My wife backed me 100% and believed in me... if I didn't have that I wouldn't have been as confident. She also ran a few [businesses] over time, so I was able to use her to make sure I was doing the right things” – Veteran participant*

- **Financial security** – participants reported that having financial fallback options and other basic needs met for themselves and their families (such as access to secure housing) decreased their stress and anxiety about the potential impacts of failure in business.

Conversely, risk factors identified in the research included:

- **Excessive business demands** – leading to reduced autonomy, which reduced sense of control and flexibility as well as the practical ability to maintain protective social relationships and physical or mental health supports;

*“I'm a sole trader, so when you miss events because you don't have time... you become more withdrawn and for someone like me that has those mental health issues, it's not great” – Veteran participant*

- **Financial instability** – participants reported that failure and setbacks were often part of self-employment and entrepreneurship, but that without sufficient financial capital, financial failure could lead to more severe consequences for individuals and their family. This enhanced the likelihood of negative wellbeing impacts in these situations; and
- **Having limited business knowledge or understanding** – which increased feelings of overwhelm, uncertainty, worry and decreased the ability to proactively respond to self-employment challenges.

### Case study 2: From failure to success

Alex\* unexpectedly and immediately separated from the ADF in the mid-2010s. Alex only had \$800 left in his bank account when he left and needed to find employment quickly. He felt that he didn't have any employable skills or qualifications post-service, so his first foray into self-employment was driven by necessity rather than choice. The only skill set that Alex could think of was his physical fitness from his service, so he decided to work for himself as a fitness trainer.

*“I was panicking ‘what the hell do I do if leave?’...there was no other choice. I had no employable skills and no other income, so I had to create my own job”*

With minimal finances and no formal business education, he faced significant hardships in the first year of self-employment. At the same time, he was struggling with his mental health and was in and out of hospital, but was unaware of the financial supports that were available for veterans in his situation. The limited time to plan and prepare for this unexpected separation, coupled with the pressure to generate income immediately, led to a business that was ill-prepared and under-resourced. This period was marked by financial instability, stress, and had a detrimental effect on

Alex's mental health and personal relationships. Luckily at this time an employment opportunity in an existing business came up which helped to resolve his immediate financial challenges.

Later Alex went to study at university but felt unmotivated. It was at this time that an opportunity to enter another business with a friend emerged.

*"Later I accidentally fell into it...I helped some friends and then they told people and then all of a sudden, we had 300 clients in a few months, and we went 'oh, this is a business'"*

Alex's second attempt at self-employment was underpinned by several protective factors that contributed to his success. This time, financial security from a retrospective DVA claim, coupled with the business acumen gained from past experiences, paved the way for a venture that not only thrived financially but also provided a strong sense of purpose and autonomy. His business also positively impacted the veteran community, fulfilling a crucial service gap.

*"My business partner and I had the same path, we made every mistake you could make in business, so this time we knew how to do it properly. He had been paid \$6,000 from DVA [for a service-related injury/illness]...having money behind us gave us the time to set up everything properly, whereas the first time was rushed and desperate"*

*"The first time, all the challenges were because I had no knowledge of what a business required. Whereas the second time I did the opposite of all of that, and it worked out well. I was also older by the second attempt. The military mindset went away by then, whereas the first time wasn't so easy"*

With more experience and financial resources, Alex had greater autonomy and control over his business the second time around. This control allowed him to work in a manner that suited his lifestyle and personal preferences, contributing to a happier and more balanced life.

### **Case study 3: Misalignment with traditional employment**

Jayden's\* separation from the military marked a significant turning point in his life. His time in service was challenging, partly due to undiagnosed neurodiversity, and leaving the forces was a bittersweet transition. The military had been integral to his identity, and stepping away from it necessitated considerable self-reflection and prompted him to seek mental health support to navigate the change.

As he embarked on tertiary education, Jayden discovered that his understanding of leadership and team dynamics seemed to be a unique and valuable skill set. This realisation sowed the seeds for a future business opportunity, although the idea of entrepreneurship did not occur to him seriously at the time.

After completing his studies, Jayden joined a large consultancy firm. However, the mismatch between the company's stated values and their actions soon led to dissatisfaction and he decided to leave.

Encouraged by peers in the network he had met during his studies, Jayden began to entertain the idea of starting his own business. He recognised an opportunity to capitalise on his unique skill set teaching others, while operating on his own terms and in alignment with his personal values.

Self-employment proved to be positive for Jayden's wellbeing. It afforded him the autonomy to make choices that accommodated his neurodiversity and flexibility to establish an identity beyond his military service. The flexibility to manage his schedule meant he could partake in hobbies that further reinforced his sense of self.

Despite the positives, Jayden acknowledged the ongoing challenge of balancing financial sustainability with personal pursuits. The ability to detach from work and make choices that foster a holistic life remains a delicate equilibrium to maintain.

#### **Key opportunities and implications of findings**

- There are individuals who thrive in self-employment and entrepreneurial contexts which lead to positive impacts on their wellbeing – there are opportunities to ensure that the option of self-employment and realistic expectations about it are shared with veterans.
- There are opportunities to support the likelihood of positive wellbeing impacts for veterans in self-employment by enhancing protective factors and addressing risk factors – specific strategies and activities are further detailed in Chapter 7.

## 5. Enablers and barriers to self-employment

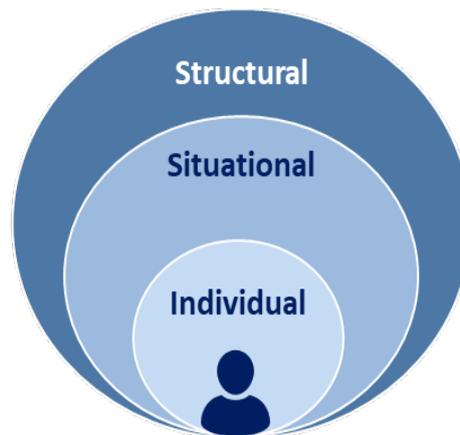
*This chapter discusses veteran participants' enablers and barriers to commencing and continuing with self-employment and entrepreneurship.*

### 5.1. Overall enablers and barriers to self-employment

The research identified a range of enablers and barriers to self-employment. As shown in Figure 4, these were evident at the following levels:

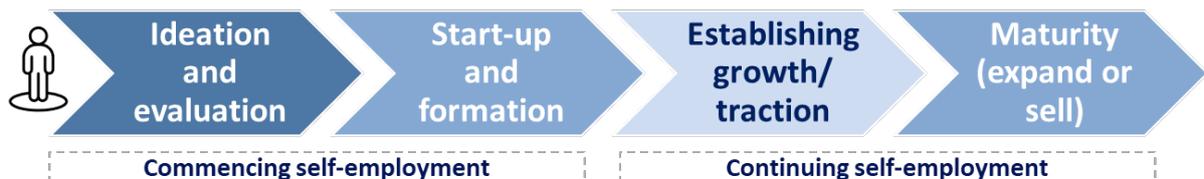
- **Individual** – factors that were personal or related to individual attributes (e.g. knowledge of business);
- **Situational factors** – factors that stemmed from specific events, interpersonal relationships and/or direct context and environment (e.g. socio-economic background, timing of self-employment and experiences of separation); and
- **Structural** – structural or practical factors influencing career planning and self-employment.

**Figure 4: Levels of enablers and barriers to self-employment**



The research identified there were distinct **phases of business development** (as seen in Figure 5), with unique enablers and barriers, including to commencing self-employment, and to continuing in self-employment as the business matured.

**Figure 5: Phases of business development**



The following two sections provide specific findings in relation to the enablers and barriers to commencing self-employment (section 5.2) and continuing in self-employment (section 5.3).

## 5.2. Enablers and barriers to entering self-employment

### 5.2.1. Individual factors

The research identified the following **individual enablers** which contributed to veterans successfully **entering** self-employment:

- ✓ Having **characteristics suited to self-employment** – as previously discussed such as adaptability, resilience and a good risk appetite, or having transferable knowledge, experiences or skills developed in the ADF;

*“My ability to adapt or the ability to deal with not knowing has definitely set me up for success. I am comfortable with the unknown... and I have the mindset of ‘I’ll try this and see what happens’” – Veteran participant*

- ✓ Having **basic business knowledge or experience** – including through prior exposure to family or partners in self-employment, or through education and training received before, during or after service.

*“I did a part time MBA while serving, which gave me some perspective, and I knew what was commercially important, which helped me succeed in my business” – Veteran participant*

Participants identified the following **individual barriers or inhibitors** to veterans **entering** self-employment:

- x **Limited awareness or consideration of self-employment and entrepreneurship opportunities** – most participants reported they were not aware of this option as a career pathway post-separation, and felt that it had not been proactively encouraged (particularly for those who separated more than 8 years ago), leading veterans to pursue more traditional forms of employment which may not align with their needs;

*“I had never considered self-employment while in the army. I didn’t really get much information about self-employment as a part of my transition. I considered it when I spoke to my civilian friends” – Veteran participant*

- x **Limited awareness of value and relevance of military knowledge or skills** for entrepreneurship – specifically, understanding the transferability of their skills, experiences and/or characteristics developed during active service, or how they could be utilised and marketed in self-employment; and

*“Helping translate the skills you’re taking from your time in the military to self-employment is a step that’s not there for most people in the army” – Veteran participant*

- x **Limited confidence or self-efficacy in business/entrepreneurial/commercial knowledge** – which created stress and/or reduced their willingness to pursue self-employment and manage their business effectively.

*“I just didn’t have the background I needed to feel confident entering self-employment. You don’t get self-employment background in the military, like how to run a business, how to do accounting, how to do finance” – Veteran participant*

### 5.2.2. Situational factors

The research identified the following **situational enablers** which contributed to veterans successfully **entering** self-employment:

- ✓ Having access to **advice from others who had been self-employed** – such as family members, friends or other self-employed veterans who could provide practical, relevant advice and encouragement based on their prior experiences;
 

*“Speaking to my mentor and to friends and family made self-employment easier, because I got a lot of advice from people who had that same experience. I didn’t jump into it blindly; I learnt from people with a lot of experience” – Veteran participant*
- ✓ Being **encouraged and supported by others** – which enhanced confidence and comfort in entering self-employment, particularly when encouraged by their family or close friends;
 

*“I had support from my family, and having that encouragement to go ahead with my business made it easier” – Veteran participant*
- ✓ Being invited to join in **developing an established idea or business** – this reduced initial challenges to entering into business by being with a partner with a pre-established idea, or by taking over a sole trader or small business with existing networks and clients;
- ✓ Having access to **sufficient personal finances** – particularly to support living costs and costs of running a new business until it is profitable and stable;
- ✓ Having **opportunities to gradually transition into self-employment** – for example, starting as a part-time contractor, consultant or sole trader, or working part-time in the ADF Reserves while establishing the business. Veteran participants reported that this offered them an opportunity to gradually build their client networks, understanding of the market, business model and/or skills and confidence while having an alternate source of income. This was an especially important enabler for those pursuing not-for-profit business models.

### 5.2.3. Structural factors

The research identified the following **structural enablers** which contributed to veterans successfully **entering** self-employment:

- ✓ Having **sufficient time to plan and prepare** – including:
  - ✓ **Voluntarily separating** – e.g. those who had a planned separation reported having more time to assess the requirements to enter self-employment and plan their next steps accordingly
  - ✓ Having **support from military command to plan and prepare** for self-employment – for example, being provided time and flexibility to pre-emptively plan, take time off to attend transition seminars or complete administrative tasks to set up the business; and
 

*“The number one thing that enabled me was being able to take long service leave... to plan my transition” – Veteran participant*
- ✓ Having **access to external grants or investment opportunities to support start up** (especially when they had limited personal finances) – including grants and investments, or access to veteran support payments, to mitigate some financial instability and risk in the early stages of business development.

The primary **structural barrier** reported by participants to veterans considering and entering self-employment was having **limited external prompts or encouragement to consider self-employment** compared with traditional employment – for example, through transition seminars, communications about employment and training opportunities, or through the Veteran Employment Program. Additionally, a few participants who did not have sufficient personal finances reported challenges

obtaining start-up funds which delayed their capacity to launch or grow the business. As such, they had to seek out part-time work to obtain sufficient financial resources and capital.

*“There was so much red tape to apply for the business grant – as a single parent I had Centrelink and was working this many hours in [my job], but that meant I didn’t meet the eligibility criteria. But if I reduce my hours who’s going to feed my kids? The impact is that you want to give up” – Veteran participant*

A few participants also reported that concerns among medically separated veterans about losing access to their payments reduced their ability to enter self-employment.

## 5.3. Enablers and barriers to continuing in self-employment

### 5.3.1. Individual factors

The research identified the following **individual enablers** which supported veterans to continue in self-employment:

- ✓ **Having passion for the business or a clear sense of purpose** – which many participants found empowering. This enabled and motivated them to continue their businesses during challenging times;
- ✓ Capacity/desire for **continuous learning and adaptability** in the face of dynamic business challenges – which supported them to thrive in self-employment.

Participants reported the following **individual barriers or challenges** to continuing self-employment:

- x **Limited business knowledge or acumen for different stages of business development and growth** – for example, needing to promote or “sell” self or businesses which was not necessarily a skill developed in the military or that participants were comfortable with;

*“A challenge was the lack of knowledge around the financial and commercial side of running a business...things like generating revenue, profit and loss and managing the overhead” – Veteran participant*

- x Experiencing difficulties **navigating civilian norms and business culture** for those who had recently separated – e.g. a few veteran participants reported ongoing challenges with feeling comfortable with civilian business norms, such as marketing themselves or adopting a profit-oriented perspective, including when engaging civilian clients or employees; and
- x **Limited awareness of supports available** to help grow or develop the business.

### 5.3.2. Situational factors

The research found that the **situational enablers** which supported veterans to continue in self-employment largely aligned to those which supported them to commence self-employment, specifically having access to good support networks and mentors/business advice.

*“I’ve got some mentors with organisations that are now sort of 250 in size... and they assist with questions I have about the business, like I’ll tell them ‘this is what I’m doing, these are mistakes I think I’m making, can you give me a hand?’” – Veteran participant*

Participants reported the following **situational barriers or challenges** to continuing self-employment:

- x Navigating **financial volatility or instability** of market – due to competitive market landscape;
  - “A drawback to self-employment is working in a competitive environment, there’s a pressure to always remain connected and relevant daily” – Veteran participant*
- x Challenges finding **strategic positioning of business** – particularly challenges due to stereotypes/ stigma about veterans when positioned as a ‘veteran owned’ business; and
  - “Not all veterans are broken... we want people to choose a veteran business because of the character, integrity and commitment of the people behind the business, not to pat them on the head because they've got PTSD or depression or something” – Stakeholder participant*
- x **Starting from behind compared to civilian business owners** – a few participants felt they had to play ‘catch up’ in terms of having established business networks to leverage as they grew and expanded their business.

### 5.3.3. Structural factors

The research identified that the key **structural enabler** which supported veterans to continue self-employment was having access to **financial resources to support sustainable growth and expansion of business** – e.g. through grants, investors or capital.

Female veteran participants reported facing additional **structural barriers** to progressing and networking as women due to a perceived “boys’ club” mentality within both business and veteran networks.

*“I applied for [a program] and it was just the most misogynistic ‘look at how good we are’ kind of show. We need to listen to a wide range of people, not just the voices in the boys’ club” – Veteran participant*

#### Key opportunities and implications of findings

- There are opportunities to leverage enablers and address barriers to increase the likelihood of entering self-employment among those whom it is suited to – particularly raising awareness and consideration of self-employment, and understanding of veterans’ alignment of skills and experiences with self-employment opportunities.
- Enhancing enablers and reducing barriers, especially during key challenging or “make or break” points in the business development journey, is likely to support the retention and continuation of veterans in self-employment.

## 6. Findings about current self-employment programs

*This chapter discusses findings about programs, policies and resources to facilitate veteran self-employment, including findings about current programs and opportunities for future strategies.*

### 6.1. Awareness of current programs, resources and supports

Overall, the research identified that **there was limited awareness of the full scope of self-employment programs and supports available**. While most veteran participants were aware of the organisations they had been recruited to the research through, they were not necessarily aware of other programs or financial supports that were available.

Most participants reported receiving information about self-employment supports via:

- **Word-of-mouth** – including friends, family, other veterans, mentors and/or when engaging directly with veteran support organisations;
- **Social media** – particularly LinkedIn; and

*“I saw one of my connections on LinkedIn posting about getting a new certification and found out about a mob that does business stuff for veterans... so I reached out and got connected” – Veteran participant*

- **Transition events and communications** – a few veteran participants who had separated more recently (e.g. since 2016) reported hearing about self-employment programs (e.g. King’s Trust and Frontline Labs training program) through transition seminars or internal Defence communications.

Some participants were **aware of**:

- **Veteran member networks and training** offered through the Veteran Community Business Chamber (VCBC) and Australian Industry and Defence Network (AIDN); and
- **Early ideation and business formation training and resources** – such as the business intensive training programs, online classes and resources offered through King’s Trust and Frontline Labs, and/or through local universities or TAFE courses.

*“You’ve got people like VCBC providing networks and veteran community connections to veteran entrepreneurs, but there’s also King’s Trust... and Frontline Labs with programs for starting a business” – Veteran participant*

However, most participants reported more **limited awareness of government-based self-employment supports**, including those available through the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), DVA and Business.gov.au. While some veteran participants were generally aware of the Veteran Employment Program, they were not aware of any targeted supports for self-employment within this program.

*“Self-employment supports? No, not that I’m aware of any. I’ve never seen anything come up on LinkedIn or anything like that to say ‘hey, here’s this program’” – Veteran participant*

### 6.2. Experience and uptake of current programs

Overall, only some veteran participants had accessed and used self-employment supports, such as veteran business networks, training programs or grants. Most participants reported **relying on**

learning through experience and ‘trial and error’ or on existing resources that were readily available.

*“I learnt by trial and error... when you have no experience on what to do in the business, you experience everything for the first time, and it takes time to learn” – Veteran participant*

There were **mixed perceptions** of the usefulness of current programs among the few veteran participants who had accessed them. Participants felt that the **training and resources** available to support initial assessment of business ideas and business establishment were particularly **useful when starting out** to provide foundational business knowledge and rigorously test ideas to maximise the likelihood of success. They also felt the **opportunity to connect with and hear from other veterans** who were undertaking similar pursuits through the programs was valuable to support networking and confidence. Others felt that existing training was **not aligned with the needs of those further along the business journey** (i.e. focussed on business start-up rather than continuation). Additionally, a few participants who had attempted to access financial supports and grants for entrepreneurs reported challenges with navigating eligibility criteria and application administration.

*“I did a program with [a veteran organisation] to help with my business... I had a mixed reaction to it... I met an interesting group of people but didn’t get huge value from it... it was mainly for people just starting out” – Veteran participant*

There were participants who reported having strong **motivation** to use programs and supports to develop their knowledge, networks and financial resources. However, some participants reported feeling sceptical or unsure that veteran self-employment programs would be useful to them or aligned with their specific needs, or they did not yet recognise they had a need. Some participants reported they preferred to learn through experience rather than through a formal program.

### 6.3. Program delivery

Stakeholder participants reported receiving positive feedback from veterans about their programs and had observed many success stories. However, the participants identified the following **challenges delivering their programs**:

- **Self-employment not being included in transition packages/discussions** – which reduced the mechanisms for them to inform and encourage veterans about self-employment;

*“There needs to be something in the transition phase about introducing self-employment as an option, that would be an improvement” – Stakeholder participant*

- **Limited available data about self-employed veterans** – which they reported made it harder to target and tailor programs, resources or workshops to the areas of need; and

*“We haven’t got the data on where veterans are and also what their employment status is. There was just no data available” – Stakeholder participant*

- **Limited funding available to support not-for-profit organisations** – which limited their resources and capacity to deliver supports to all the areas where it may be needed.

#### Key opportunities and implications of findings

- There are opportunities to raise awareness and understanding of the available programs and resources for veterans, as well as communicating the value and relevance of these to those who may benefit from them.

## 7. Opportunities for future self-employment programs

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*This chapter discusses findings about programs, policies and resources to facilitate veteran self-employment, including findings about opportunities for future strategies.*

### 7.1. Overall findings

Overall, participants felt that there were opportunities to **raise awareness of self-employment and facilitate pathways into this career option** given the potential benefits for those who were well suited to it. There was a high perceived value of veteran-run and led initiatives, particularly for those who were also navigating the transition from military culture and experiences to civilian norms. However, given the diversity in when and what type of self-employment was pursued, participants felt it was appropriate to promote and/or facilitate veteran-specific and broader self-employment programs and supports to cater to different needs. Participants felt that having a **centralised source of information** was important to improve veterans' awareness and access to self-employment resources when needed, and promote independent information seeking.

### 7.2. Opportunities for future self-employment programs

Overall, participants reported that the following types of activities and resources would support consideration of self-employment and likelihood of success:

- **Awareness raising activities** – including giving early access to information about the benefits and challenges of self-employment, pathways into self-employment, and the transferability of veteran skills to support informed decision making about employment;
- **Networking/social support** – including opportunities to connect with the veteran business community, see what others are doing, share business knowledge and advice, encourage positive social connection and belonging, and build confidence. While this was not necessarily the core focus of existing initiatives, many participants reported that this was a benefit of current veteran-specific business programs that facilitated opportunities for the veteran community to interact;
  - Participants felt that it would be highly beneficial to have opportunities to connect specifically with other veterans who were in similar situations or facing similar unique challenges, including female veteran business owners or those in non-defence related industries;
- **Mentorship** – including matching individuals with veteran and/or non-veteran business mentors for advice and support. While some were comfortable and confident establishing mentor relationships and only needed opportunities to connect, a few participants felt having a more structured mentorship program would be useful to raise their awareness of how to reach out to and engage potential mentors;

*“Networking is so useful. Just knowing that other people were doing this as well, that I wasn't crazy to think I can do this and work for myself” – Veteran participant*

*“Having a mentor, someone with experience, I think it's a positive idea. It's important to get people's experience. I have a mentor, someone else on a similar journey. It's very positive” – Veteran participant*

- **Developing and improving business knowledge** – including basic business and financial knowledge at the ideation and start-up phases, as well as at the business growth and maturation phases (e.g. ongoing skills training, including how to manage finances or how to manage employees for small, medium or large businesses as they grow). This type of support was largely being offered through existing programs. Although programs were generally felt to be focused on the early phases of starting up a business;
- **Financial support or investment** – including at the business start-up and business growth phase. Participants felt this could include facilitating opportunities to connect with potential investors, providing information and advice on what business grants are available, and/or, providing help and advice to identify what other financial assistance they are eligible for. Participants felt that steps should be taken to streamline the process for applying for these types of financial supports to make them worthwhile (i.e. do not require excessive time investments); and  
*“I would be interested in some financial support, someone who could help me to push my business forward... if had extra funding, I know the level at which the business could be at right now” – Veteran participant*
- **Advocacy of veteran-owned businesses** – including broad promotion of the strengths of veterans and the benefits of procuring goods/services from veteran businesses.

### 7.3. Program elements to support success factors

Participants reported that the types of information, resources and programs that they would value differed at different phases of their:

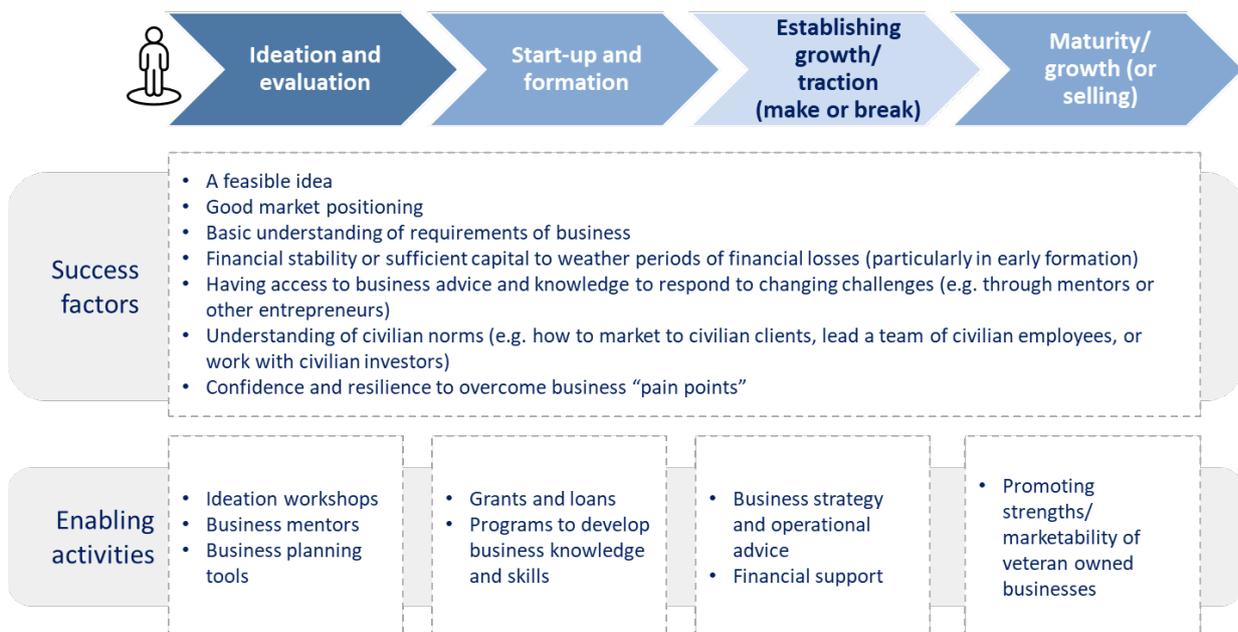
- Transition – including during:
  - Active service – anytime while someone is training or serving in the military. This phase includes when individuals may begin initial contemplation of transitioning and career planning but have not yet taken any steps;
  - Initial transition – this is the period from commencing a separation pathway and engaging the necessary processes (voluntarily or involuntarily) to the period directly after separation when they can access transition support services (i.e. up to 24 months after separation);
  - Life beyond separation – this may include any time after ceasing access to transition services (i.e. 24 months after separation); and
- Business development.

These are summarised in Figure 6 and Figure 7 overleaf.

**Figure 6: Factors and activities to enable success in self-employment, during transition journey**



**Figure 7: Factors and activities to enable success in self-employment, during business journey**



## 7.4. Roles and responsibilities

Overall, the research found that the **veteran community** currently played an important role in enhancing the wellbeing and success of other veteran entrepreneurs. Participants preferred government departments to play a more indirect role in program delivery by facilitating and enabling the veteran self-employment initiatives, while playing a more direct role in supporting and informing veterans during separation and transition.

*“It’s about empowering those amongst us who support other veterans...we are all about making businesses stronger and more viable...and there’s massive opportunity – the problem is funding and capability” – Stakeholder participant*

The research identified different roles and responsibilities within the veteran support ecosystem at the individual level, the community level and the structural level. The findings highlighted the importance of each level in fostering a conducive environment for veteran entrepreneurs.

At the **individual** level, the role of veteran entrepreneurs included:

- Being proactive in being **informed and connected** to opportunities within the veteran support ecosystem to support their self-employment ventures; and
- **Maintaining personal wellbeing and seeking appropriate support when needed.**

Within the **veteran community**, the roles identified included:

- **Networking platforms** – providing sense of community and connection, as well as providing practical business advice or connecting other veteran business owners with business opportunities (e.g. potential partners, suppliers);
- **Veteran-run organisations designed to support veteran community** – in addition to stakeholder participants, some veteran participants had started their business for the express purpose of supporting the wellbeing of other veterans, and a few saw how their business could play a direct role in supporting self-employment and entrepreneurship, and linking veterans to information; and

*“Definitely have veterans there to run the programs... we don’t want someone who doesn’t understand us... it’s got to be veteran to veteran” – Veteran participant*

- **Senior/successful veteran entrepreneurs** – as mentors and investors. A few veteran participants who had experienced success reported wanting to find opportunities to “give back” and support other emerging veteran entrepreneurs.

Participants felt that DVA should have a more indirect role in supporting the veteran business community, including as a:

- **Facilitator and connector** – communicating about and connecting veterans with existing support programs and resources rather than directly running these programs; creating partnerships and enhancing collaboration between existing stakeholders and businesses that aim to support veteran entrepreneurs;

*“DVA should have a coordinating role, they shouldn’t do the program themselves... they need to partner with people who run these programs” – Veteran participant*

- **Information resource** – providing a centralised source of easily navigable information or clear links to information about what programs, resources and opportunities are available (both veteran and non-veteran specific) to veterans;
- **Financial facilitator** – including providing funding or grants to veteran-run organisations designed to support self-employed veterans, or connecting veteran entrepreneurs with investors or other grant opportunities;

*“DVA could potentially fund part of it, fund the administration of the program but it should be a third party of some sort that runs it” – Veteran participant*

- **Advocate for the strengths of veteran businesses** (across the spectrum of industries they enter) – e.g. promoting positive and strengths-based narratives about veteran entrepreneurs, including the benefits of procuring goods and services from veterans; and
- **Facilitator of data collection** – gathering and sharing data with stakeholders about self-employed veterans to facilitate effective tailoring and targeting of programs and activities designed to support self-employed veterans. This could include collecting data on the number and demographics of self-employed veterans through tailored survey questions or by linking data. However, it should be noted that there are limitations in relation to linking broader pre-existing data sets to veteran status, which impacts on the capacity to fully leverage opportunities to quantify veteran self-employment.

#### Key opportunities and implications of findings

- New departmental programs are not necessarily required to enable veteran wellbeing in self-employment – rather there are opportunities to facilitate, empower and collaborate with existing initiatives in the veteran community.
- There are opportunities to make information about the veteran support ecosystem easier to find and access (e.g. by centralising information about what organisations, programs and resources exist) – both for those providing services and for those accessing them.

## 8. Conclusions

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### 8.1. Conclusions

Overall, the research identified that self-employment and entrepreneurship was an **enabler to veteran wellbeing and thriving** and had a range of positive impacts on their mental, social, physical, financial, relational and developmental wellbeing, particularly when protective factors were in place. Positive impacts of self-employment included providing a sense of purpose, autonomy and satisfaction post-separation. While participants acknowledged the challenges and stressors of self-employment, the benefits were felt to outweigh the barriers.

The research found that veterans possessed a range of skills and attributes acquired during military service that are **highly transferable** to, and which contributed to success in, self-employment. However, despite feeling that many veterans are **well-suited to self-employment**, the research identified there was **limited initial awareness and consideration of self-employment as a viable career option** among veterans.

The research identified that there were **unique enablers and barriers** to veterans entering self-employment and continuing along this pathway. Individual characteristics (such as being resilient, adaptable and having a good appetite for risk) made individuals more well-suited to the challenges of self-employment. However, limited awareness of the opportunities for self-employment and personal suitability for this option were barriers. Financial and social environments were also important considerations which impacted success of self-employment and the impact on wellbeing.

The research identified opportunities to improve **information, programs and resources in relation to self-employment**. The research found different types of information, programs and activities were valued at different stages of veterans' self-employment journeys (e.g. networking, mentorship, business knowledge development, financial support, and advocacy for veteran-owned businesses). Veteran participants expressed a need for a centralised information source that simplifies the search for relevant programs and resources. Participants felt it was appropriate to promote and/or facilitate veteran-specific and broader self-employment programs and supports to cater to different needs.

The **veteran community and veteran-run organisations** were felt to play a crucial role in supporting self-employed veterans. Rather than playing a direct role, research participants expected DVA could facilitate and enable the veteran self-employment support ecosystem, particularly during the transition from military to civilian life.

### 8.2. Opportunities and considerations for policies and programs

The research identified the following opportunities to facilitate veteran wellbeing via self-employment:

- Introduce or continue introducing self-employment as a viable career option as early as possible and at various stages of the transition and employment journey;
- During transition, empower veterans to identify skills, experiences, characteristics and situational factors which may impact suitability for different types of employment (including self-employment) and provide transparent information about the benefits and challenges of self-employment to support informed decision making;

- Facilitate access to information about available self-employment resources and programs that may be relevant to veterans pursuing self-employment at different phases of their journey – e.g. through centralised, easy to access format (platforms may already exist to facilitate this); and
- Promote, facilitate and collaborate with existing programs, services and businesses designed to support self-employed veterans – including through supporting access and connections (e.g. with other self-employed veterans), facilitating access to data and advocating for the strengths of veterans and veteran-owned businesses.

## **Appendix A: Programs and supports**

### Examples of government support programs

Program	Source	Supports
<b>Veteran Employment Program</b>	Department of Veterans' Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supporting <i>Veteran Owned Business Grant Program (SVOB)</i> (for organisations to deliver support/ programs to self-employed veterans)</li> </ul>
<b>Self-Employment Assistance (SEA)</b> (replaced <i>New Business Assistance</i> in 2022 with NEIS (New Enterprise Incentive Scheme))	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exploring self-employment workshops</li> <li>Business plan development</li> <li>Free accredited small business training</li> <li>Business advice sessions</li> <li>Business health checks</li> <li>Small business coaching</li> <li>Financial supports</li> </ul> (Previously under <i>New Business Assistance</i> serving members of ADF could access: <i>Exploring Being My Own Boss</i> workshops and NEIS training)
<b>Business.gov.au</b>	Department of Industry, Science and Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collates information and resources from 3 levels of government into 1 website to reduce the number of websites businesses need to visit.</li> </ul>
<b>Small Business grants</b>	State/ Territory governments	

### Examples of non-government support programs\*

Program	Source	Supports
<b>King's Trust Australia's Enterprise Programme</b>	King's Trust Australia	Access free programs and tools to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Launch your idea</li> <li>Learn online</li> <li>Get connected</li> <li>Grow your business</li> </ul>
<b>Veteran Community Business Chamber</b>	Veteran Community Business Chamber	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Platform for networking</li> <li>Advocacy &amp; exposure</li> <li>Professional development</li> </ul>
<b>Veteran Entrepreneur Training</b>	Frontline Labs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Funded courses and vocational training</li> <li>Business development grants and ongoing mentorship</li> </ul>
<b>Prep 4 Pathways</b> (webinar series)	Soldier On Australia	Focus on employment, with some business support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Webinar – <i>How To Build a Successful Career in Self-Employment</i></li> </ul>
<b>Defence Entrepreneurship Program</b>	Flinders University	Educational program focusing on startup support in Australian Defence Industry

\*Please note: this is not an exhaustive list of non-government programs and supports