

Reflections on Growth, Identity, and Career Readiness

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Introduction

When I started studying Information Technology at Old Dominion University, I already had much relevant experience as an IT professional working in the U.S. Navy. This made my experience unique; I was not first learning the concepts; I was recontextualizing them, matching theory to experiences under extraordinary stress. Military service provided me with many more than technical skills; I learned resilience, how to hold to my leadership values, and how to adapt to stressful environments.

This reflection examines how the professional and academic skills and experiences I have acquired have advanced me towards career readiness. I will reference knowledge gained from service in the Navy, coursework at ODU, and acquisition of interdisciplinary understanding to apply in the future while working toward my career goals in civilian IT. I will connect these experiences while referencing scholarly work on interdisciplinarity, ethics in leadership, career readiness, professional identity development, and professional psychology of high-pressure environments.

Military Experience as a Foundation for Career Skills

The most significant professional growth experiences occurred when I was deployed to the USS Bataan, where I served as the only Information Technology (IT) specialist in my squadron, with dual role responsibility. I was the only consumer link between Automated Data Processing (ADP), the ship's Information Technology Systems (ITS) division, and my squadron's operational team. The task was high stakes, evident, and required technical and interpersonal competence.

My leadership relied on me to fix the Theatre Battle Management Core System (TBMCS), a key air command and control platform, when it failed during deployment. This was further complicated because my leadership was unclear about the system's technical

requirements and limitations. They essentially wanted to get some immediate results with little guidance, and it did not take long for me to realize this would require far more than just my technical knowledge.

Navigating this situation required reconciling competing priorities from multiple leaders, overcoming communication points between departments, and collaborating across operational lines. I had to work with people on the night shift with whom I had only a few opportunities to speak, but I was also reporting my status to officers with different expectations. This work was similar to Arvidson's (2024) assertion that interdisciplinary work takes place in environments that require people to cross perspectives from different domains of work, and do so without a precise path forward. My ability to troubleshoot TBMCS was not just about code, system access, or being set up to connect to a network; it was about connecting operational requirements to actionable technical capabilities. I also had to find a way to facilitate cooperation among people speaking different "professional languages."

From a career readiness perspective, these experiences developed my adaptability, self-directed learning, and professional communication. I learned how to independently research, learn and implement new systems quickly, and communicate worthy knowledge of technical limitations to non-technical audiences. Green et al. (2023) identify career readiness as developing practical and applied technical skills grounded in academic knowledge and transferable skills, such as problem-solving and teamwork. During this deployment, I developed all of them in a much more difficult and unforgiving situation than most civilian jobs, giving me a base of resilience and skill that continues to shape my professional identity today.

Resilience and Leadership in Toxic Environments

Although deployment gave me valuable skills, it also opened the door to toxic leadership behaviors. On multiple occasions during meetings, I was accused of missing

equipment, five HP laptops and two Toshiba laptops, even though I had never been tasked to manage them. I was threatened with NCIS investigation, told there would be mast, and called "incompetent" and "a thief" by my Department Head. There was a complete lack of substantiation behind those claims, but it took a toll on my mental health, causing me to self-harm.

This was a challenging time for my resiliency. Grossman and Christensen (2022) highlight that contexts such as military deployments in high-stress situations can produce powerful psychological reactions. These situations challenge an individual to create coping responses, for strength or undermine, that allow for continued performance over a prolonged period. In my situation, I learned to focus on documentation, professionalism, and to seek supportive relationships. I also promised myself that I would never emulate this leadership style again in my career.

Gamarra and Giroto (2022) stress that ethical leadership takes place on a foundation of integrity, fairness, and respect, none of which were anywhere to be found in my chain of command. Encountering the extreme opposite allowed me to consolidate with clarity, my definitions of leadership: I will ensure I lead from a place of empathy, transparency, and accountability, and provide little room for my teams to misunderstand expectations and rely on the support I will build. This is not just my conviction; it is a professional asset and will help build a healthier workplace culture in our IT contexts.

Interdisciplinary Learning and Academic Growth

Transitioning from the Navy into academia at Old Dominion University required me to connect my hands-on technical expertise to the theoretical models taught in the classroom. In the Navy, I frequently executed tasks out of necessity, implementing troubleshooting on systems and processes without necessarily relying on the academic or theoretical understandings of why. At ODU, networking, systems analysis, and cybersecurity courses

provided the "why" behind the "how," helping me understand the principles to apply to my previous endeavors and their role in the overall IT infrastructures.

The most valuable feature of my degree has been the program's interdisciplinary nature. Tanner (2022) states that interdisciplinary research and learning involve synthesizing methods, perspectives, and concepts within and across disciplines to solve complex problems. This has meant applying insights from ethics, leadership theory, psychology, and communication studies to my technical work. For example:

- **Ethics:** Learning about ethical responsibilities in IT has helped me process and critique the leadership failures I experienced in the Navy, reinforcing my commitment to integrity, transparency, and fairness. These values are now central to my professional identity.
- **Psychology:** Understanding human stress responses has allowed me to recognize early signs of burnout in myself and colleagues, making me more proactive about managing workloads and promoting mental well-being in team environments.
- **Communication Studies:** Developing the ability to translate technical jargon into plain language has improved my interactions with non-technical stakeholders, ensuring that critical information is understood and acted upon effectively.

As Arvidson (2024) mentions, interdisciplinary spaces have poorly or vaguely defined boundaries, and participants must be comfortable with working in a great deal of ambiguity while also being able to synthesize multiple inputs. My military job was practically an interdisciplinary role long before I understood the term; I routinely combined operational, technical, and social skills to accomplish our objectives. This capacity to combine various disciplines has ultimately been a pillar of my career readiness. It has equipped me to address or solve problems across different domains, enabling me to take on leadership responsibilities in complex IT environments.

Professional Identity Formation

Through my coursework, I have gained a deeper understanding of how professional identity and formal and informal learning influence that development. Orsmond et al. (2022) refer to professional identity formation as a "legitimate peripheral participation" process. When a person exists in a community of practice, they begin on the margins and move towards full participation as they develop skills, knowledge, and confidence.

My own journey reflects this gradual progression. When I joined the Navy, I started as a junior IT technician with a limited view of how everything fit into the larger operation. I did not know how long I would be in the service, if I belonged to the greater IT community. Over time, with a series of problems to solve, working with both technical and operational teammates, and achieving some significant milestones for myself, like three warfare devices, I became the subject matter expert on several critical systems for my squadron.

As I began transitioning into academia, I found myself on the periphery, relearning familiar concepts and previously learned material with the rationale and justification behind the materials. My networking, cybersecurity, and systems analysis coursework added depth to my practical technical skillset, while my coursework in and across various disciplines added to my knowledge of leadership, ethics, and human factors of technology. I like to think that I am well on my way to being a subject matter expert in cybersecurity. My career development from novice to recognized contributor has increased my confidence, clarified my career interests, and reaffirmed my commitment to lifelong professional growth.

Lessons Learned from Artifacts in My Portfolio

My portfolio contains artifacts that represent the intersection of my skills, experiences, and academic growth. These include:

1. **A technical troubleshooting report** from my Navy deployment that demonstrates my ability to diagnose complex systems and work collaboratively under pressure.

2. **A research paper on ethical considerations in IT** connects leadership theory to real-world challenges in technology management.
3. **A network design project** from ODU coursework that required integrating security protocols with operational needs, mirroring the interdisciplinary challenges I faced in deployment.

Creating artifacts reinforced lessons in project management, documentation, and audience-specific messaging. Some projects were uncomplicated because they matched my skill set; others, especially research-based projects, required me to leave my comfort zone and develop new academic writing and formatting skills according to APA.

Building for the Future: Career Readiness Plan

Concerning the future, my career plans include graduating with a Bachelor's Degree, obtaining CySA+ and CASP+ certifications, and pursuing cybersecurity roles in civilian IT. I referenced my military experience, as well as my academic preparation, to arrive at these career goals. Green et al. (2023) characterize career readiness as a dynamic process that incorporates continuous learning, adaptability, and integrating a host of skills. I have the adaptability from the Navy, ODU gave me the academic foundation, and I have the personal resilience to keep going. One of the most important lessons I learned was the value of balance. Whether I am spending time at Onelife Fitness, gaming, or watching anime (Hunter x Hunter reigns supreme), I can recharge in these leisure moments. Burnout is a real risk in IT, and I want to take care of myself as fiercely as I take care of networks.

Conclusion

Upon reflecting upon my experience, I see a clear thread of adaptability in the face of uncertainty, commitment to ethical leadership, and integrating multidisciplinary knowledge into the narrative of my professional identity. The Navy gave me the hard skills and grit. ODU expanded my understanding and sharpened my toolkit. I now have the skills to bring

the real world into my learning, which is also the other way around. I am not just career-ready, I am life-ready. I now know how to navigate through complexity, deal with severe stressors, lead from an ethical place, and continue learning. Most importantly, my story is not simply about performing through difficult circumstances, but that I used those experiences as a launch pad for my development and growth.

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