

Virtual reality helps veterans prepare for new jobs

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The Virtual Training Agent for Veterans, or VITA4VETS, is a virtual simulation practice system designed to build job interviewing competence and confidence, while reducing anxiety. Juan Gutierrez, a 33-year-old Navy veteran with experience in aviation electronics tries out the new system. Credit: USC ICT

The U.S. Army Research Laboratory and its partners recently developed a new way for veterans to seek employment.

The Virtual Training Agent for Veterans, or VITA4VETS, is a virtual simulation practice system designed to build job interviewing competence and confidence, while reducing anxiety. Although Army researchers and developers at the University of Southern California's Institute for Creative Technologies, Google.org and the Dan Marino Foundation originally developed the training system to help those with autism prepare for job interviews, they soon realized its potential to help veterans.

While several companies advertise they hire vets, transitioning from military service life to a civilian workplace can be challenging. One day they are a Soldier, Sailor, Airman or Marine - then the next day, they are back to being "just a citizen." The prevalence of militarisms in speech and thought override the ways of conceptualizing the civilian world.

The researchers and developers said they understand returning home can be arduous in itself, but preparing to find employment can be even more taxing.

That's where they believe VITA4VETS can help improve one's interviewing skills and instill a sense of discipline.

Juan Gutierrez, a 33-year-old Navy [veteran](#) with experience in aviation electronics was satisfied with the new style of interview.

"Answering questions with a virtual human rather than a real human helped me feel less nervous, and I could practice different responses and there were no repercussions with the avatar," Gutierrez said.

Gutierrez said he had more confidence and the experience was as much an interview for a potential employer as it was for him.



The Virtual Training Agent for Veterans, or VITA4VETS, is a virtual simulation practice system designed to build job interviewing competence and confidence, while reducing anxiety. Virtual humans conduct the interviews in a variety of locations to provide comfort to the user. Credit: USC ICT

"I learned I could ask questions too. Instead of feeling nervous—like I am being tested, it was a way for me to be honest and learn if it (the job) is something I'd like to do. Overall, VITA helped me feel confident with my interview," said Gutierrez.

In 2016, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 20.9 million men

and women were veterans, accounting for about nine percent of the civilian non-institutional population age 18 and over. Of those 20.9 million, more than 450,000 were unemployed.

The military provides transition training, but when one considers the unemployment statistics and challenges servicemembers face, it underscores the urgency for creating methods to better prepare veterans for civilian employment.

"Although many veterans have the necessary talent and temperament for vocational achievement, they may find it challenging to express the ways in which their skills and experience are able to translate to the private sector," said Matthew Trimmer, project director for VITA4VETS at USC ICT.

Currently available through U.S. VETS in Los Angeles, VITA4VETS leverages virtual humans that can support a wide-range of interpersonal skill training activities. It uses six characters that span different genders, ages and ethnic backgrounds. Each character is capable of three behavioral dispositions or interview styles and can be placed in a variety of interchangeable background job contexts, all controllable from an interface menu.

According to Trimmer, offering a variety of possible job [interview](#) roleplay interactions supports practice across a range of challenge levels and allows for customizable training geared to the needs of the user. Trimmer also said the approach has been known to produce positive results, indicating increased confidence with practice and high job acquisition rates.

"If focusing on one portion of said issue can provide any support to those that have served us, then it is one step closer to better assisting the overall transition process," Trimmer said.

According to the U.S. Vets in Los Angeles, 93-percent of veterans have obtained employment using the VITA4VETS application.

Provided by U.S. Army Research Laboratory

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