

Special Operations Veterans: An Untapped Resource for Global Business Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Organizations operating in increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous global environments require leaders capable of making high-quality decisions under conditions of uncertainty while effectively leading culturally diverse teams. Despite these organizational demands, Special Operations Forces (SOF) veterans remain an underexamined talent population within international business research. This study investigates how competencies developed through Special Operations service align with leadership capabilities valued in global business environments. Guided by strategic human capital and cultural intelligence perspectives, the study employed a convergent mixed-methods design integrating quantitative survey responses with qualitative interviews from 11 Special Operations veterans affiliated with Veterans of Foreign Wars posts in San Antonio, Texas. Quantitative findings indicated consistently high levels of perceived preparedness across leadership, adaptability, ethical decision-making, teamwork, cross-cultural communication, and mission execution. Qualitative thematic analysis reinforced these findings by identifying four recurring themes: adaptive leadership under uncertainty, cross-cultural effectiveness, disciplined team performance, and mission-focused strategic execution. Joint display analysis demonstrated substantial convergence between numerical trends and participant narratives while also highlighting contextual factors influencing the transferability of military-acquired competencies to civilian organizations. Although the exploratory sample limits statistical generalizability, the integrated findings suggest that SOF veterans possess leadership capabilities that closely align with competencies required for multinational organizations navigating dynamic business environments. The study contributes to strategic human capital literature by proposing mechanisms through which military-developed competencies may create organizational value and offers practical recommendations for recruitment, onboarding, leadership development, and veteran talent integration within globally operating firms.

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1. Introduction

As the global war on terrorism has ended, new emerging threats are erupting in Ukraine and Israel. A need for greater understanding of international business environments is a must for companies seeking to expand into emerging markets and conflict areas. The last 20 years of war resulted in numerous Special Operations veterans, but they account for less than 10% of the veteran population (USSOCOM, 2023). They trained for selection, trained in their specialties, and led teams across nations while undergoing constant change in volatile environments. This investigation employed a convergent mixed-methods design in which quantitative and qualitative evidence were intentionally integrated to develop a comprehensive understanding of leadership competency transfer.

Once these Special Operations veterans are told to stand down after successful careers, many are underutilized in business in spite of their skills, values, and wisdom gained on the global battlefield. Multi-national corporations tend to overlook these valuable agile human assets for more polished civilian business personnel. Most Special Operations veterans speak multiple languages and have traveled extensively amongst the world's military and civilian population. These are valuable skills for entrepreneurs (Cater & Young, 2020). Multi-cultural and multi-lingual business personnel achieve quicker and more amicable agreements during international negotiations. They were trained not to be the Ugly American and to respect cultural and religious differences to achieve sometimes impossible missions in the name of Uncle Sam (Burdick & Lederer, 1958). Recent scholarship indicates that successful global leaders demonstrate cognitive complexity, cultural adaptability, and the ability to build trust across geographically dispersed and culturally diverse teams operating in volatile and uncertain environments (Ang et al., 2020, Markasović, 2024).

In 2022, 3M made almost \$35,000,000,000 (Statista, 2024). Of this thirty-five billion, \$15.8 billion or almost half of the revenue gained was from outside of the Americas. Markets outside of the United States can move a company to greatness. That same year General Electric (GE) earned \$75,800,000,000 (Statista, 2024). Of this total revenue \$42.3 billion was from outside of the Americas. Whirlpool's total revenue was \$19,200,000,000 in 2022 (Statista, 2024). Whirlpool revenue from outside of the United States during this same time frame was \$8 billion. Organizations with extensive international operations depend on leaders who can effectively navigate diverse cultural environments, evolving geopolitical conditions, and the complexities associated with conducting business across national boundaries.

This mixed-methods research study will explore how Special Operations Forces veterans perceive the transferability of military-acquired leadership competencies to international business environments based on the skills, values, language, and wisdom learned during the training received in regional studies, civil affairs, psychological operations, languages, and negotiations of Special Operations veterans (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research participants came from members at Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post 76, Post 9186, and Post 8541 in San Antonio, Texas. For this the research, international business operations are defined as "International business focuses on any commercial activity or transaction between companies, organizations, individuals, or government entities that crosses borders into different countries and regions" (Pearson, 2024).

1.1. Literature Review

The successful transition of military personnel into civilian leadership roles has emerged as an increasingly important area of inquiry within international business, human resource management, organizational behavior, and leadership research (Hong & Minbaeva, 2022, Mammadov & Wald, 2025). Although veterans possess extensive experience operating in

uncertain, high-pressure environments, empirical investigations examining the transferability of Special Operations Forces (SOF) competencies to global business leadership remain comparatively limited. Existing research has largely focused on employment outcomes, workforce reintegration, mental health, or entrepreneurial activity, while considerably less attention has been devoted to understanding how elite military leadership competencies translate into strategic organizational capabilities within multinational enterprises.

Organizations operating in global markets increasingly require leaders capable of navigating volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) (Mammadov & Wald, 2025). Contemporary business environments are characterized by geopolitical instability, technological disruption, rapidly changing customer expectations, supply chain vulnerabilities, and cross-cultural collaboration. These conditions demand adaptive leaders who can integrate strategic thinking with effective decision-making under uncertainty while maintaining organizational resilience and ethical leadership practices. Consequently, organizations have expanded their search for leaders possessing competencies that extend beyond traditional managerial experience to include adaptability, cultural awareness, resilience, and mission-focused execution.

Special Operations Forces personnel represent a unique leadership population developed through some of the most rigorous selection, assessment, and professional development processes in the military. Beyond tactical expertise, SOF operators receive continuous education emphasizing decentralized leadership, collaborative decision-making, cross-cultural engagement, strategic communication, problem solving, and operational planning in highly uncertain environments. These experiences often require independent judgment, rapid adaptation to changing operational conditions, and effective leadership across multinational and interagency partnerships.

Research examining military leadership consistently demonstrates that veterans possess competencies highly valued within civilian organizations, including integrity, accountability, teamwork, discipline, resilience, and commitment to organizational objectives. Nevertheless, numerous studies indicate that these competencies are frequently underrecognized during civilian hiring because military experiences are not consistently translated into language understood by private-sector employers. This disconnect contributes to underemployment despite veterans possessing leadership capabilities that closely align with organizational leadership requirements.

The concept of competency translation has therefore become increasingly significant within veteran workforce research. Effective competency translation involves communicating military leadership experiences using terminology that accurately reflects civilian organizational functions, strategic responsibilities, and measurable business outcomes. Organizations capable of recognizing transferable leadership competencies may gain access to an experienced talent pool possessing advanced leadership capabilities developed under demanding operational conditions.

International business research further emphasizes the growing importance of cultural intelligence (CQ) for effective global leadership. Cultural intelligence represents an individual's capability to function successfully across culturally diverse settings through cognitive understanding, motivational engagement, behavioral adaptability, and metacognitive awareness (Ang, & Van Dyne, 2015, Mammadov & Wald, 2025). Leaders demonstrating higher levels of CQ are generally more effective in international assignments, multicultural teams, expatriate management, and cross-border negotiations. SOF personnel routinely operate alongside foreign military forces, local government officials, indigenous populations, humanitarian organizations, and multinational partners, providing repeated opportunities to

develop cross-cultural competence under authentic operational conditions. These experiences suggest substantial overlap between military operational requirements and competencies associated with effective global leadership.

Strategic human capital theory similarly provides a useful lens for understanding how military-developed competencies may generate organizational value (Hong & Minbaeva, 2022). The theory proposes that organizations achieve sustained competitive advantage by acquiring, developing, and retaining valuable, rare, difficult-to-imitate, and organizationally embedded human capital. Leadership competencies developed through prolonged exposure to complex operational environments, including adaptive problem solving, ethical decision-making, resilience, and collaborative leadership, may constitute strategic resources that enhance organizational performance when effectively integrated into civilian enterprises (Dhanda et al., 2025).

Recent leadership scholarship has also emphasized dynamic capabilities as an organizational mechanism through which leaders facilitate adaptation to changing competitive environments. Dynamic capabilities describe an organization's capacity to recognize emerging opportunities and threats, mobilize resources to capitalize on those opportunities, and continuously adapt its strategies, processes, and competencies in response to changing internal and external conditions. Leaders possessing extensive experience operating within uncertain environments may strengthen these organizational capabilities by fostering learning, innovation, and adaptive decision-making. The operational experiences of SOF veterans suggest potential alignment with these capabilities, particularly within organizations facing rapidly evolving global markets.

Despite growing recognition of veteran leadership potential, empirical research specifically examining Special Operations veterans remains comparatively sparse. Existing studies often aggregate veterans into a single population without accounting for substantial differences in selection processes, operational experiences, leadership responsibilities, or international exposure across military occupational specialties. Consequently, relatively little evidence exists regarding how elite military leadership experiences specifically contribute to organizational effectiveness in multinational business settings.

Furthermore, methodological limitations remain evident throughout much of the existing literature. Many studies rely exclusively on quantitative surveys or qualitative interviews, limiting opportunities to triangulate findings across multiple forms of evidence. Mixed-methods approaches provide a more comprehensive understanding by integrating numerical trends with participant experiences, thereby strengthening interpretive validity while providing greater contextual richness (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Such designs are particularly valuable when investigating complex leadership phenomena involving attitudes, experiences, behaviors, and organizational outcomes.

The present study addresses several of these gaps by employing a convergent mixed-methods design to examine how Special Operations veterans perceive the transferability of military-developed competencies to global business leadership. Quantitative survey findings are integrated with qualitative interview data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of leadership preparedness, cross-cultural competence, adaptability, ethical decision-making, and strategic leadership. Rather than examining employment outcomes alone, this study focuses on identifying mechanisms through which military leadership competencies may contribute to organizational effectiveness within international business environments.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

This investigation is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives: Strategic Human Capital Theory, Cultural Intelligence Theory, and Dynamic Capabilities Theory. Collectively, these frameworks explain how military-developed leadership competencies may influence organizational performance within globally integrated business environments.

Strategic Human Capital Theory proposes that employees represent strategic organizational assets whose knowledge, capabilities, and experiences create sustainable competitive advantage when they are valuable, difficult to replicate, and effectively integrated into organizational processes. Leadership competencies developed through Special Operations training—including adaptive leadership, ethical judgment, resilience, mission planning, collaborative teamwork, and decision-making under uncertainty—constitute forms of strategic human capital that organizations may leverage to improve operational effectiveness, innovation, and long-term performance. This perspective provides the primary theoretical explanation for why SOF veterans may represent an underutilized leadership resource within multinational organizations.

Cultural Intelligence Theory complements this perspective by explaining how leaders successfully function across culturally diverse environments. CQ encompasses cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral capabilities that enable individuals to communicate effectively, establish trust, and adapt their leadership behaviors across diverse cultural contexts. Because SOF personnel routinely collaborate with multinational partners, host-nation governments, indigenous populations, and coalition forces, their operational experiences may facilitate the development of cultural competencies directly relevant to international business leadership. Accordingly, CQ provides an explanatory mechanism linking military operational experiences with successful cross-cultural organizational leadership.

Dynamic Capabilities Theory further extends the conceptual framework by emphasizing the role of leadership in enabling organizations to adapt to rapidly changing environments. Leaders contribute to organizational resilience by sensing environmental changes, mobilizing resources, fostering innovation, and transforming organizational capabilities in response to emerging challenges. The operational environments encountered by SOF personnel require continuous adaptation, decentralized decision-making, and rapid learning under conditions characterized by uncertainty and complexity. These experiences parallel many of the adaptive leadership demands faced by organizations operating within contemporary global markets.

Integrating these theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive conceptual foundation for interpreting the study findings. Strategic Human Capital Theory explains why elite military competencies represent valuable organizational resources, Cultural Intelligence Theory identifies mechanisms supporting effective leadership across international and multicultural contexts, and Dynamic Capabilities Theory illustrates how adaptive leadership behaviors contribute to organizational resilience and sustained competitive performance. Together, these complementary frameworks provide a robust explanation for the potential contribution of Special Operations veterans to global business leadership while informing the interpretation of both the quantitative and qualitative findings presented in this study.

1.3. Research Questions

Researcher proposed the following research question, “What are the experiences gained in skills and values of Special Operations Forces veterans that are directly applicable to multinational corporation’s business objectives and goals when conducting business outside the

United States?” A second research question is “How effective are each of these skills and values at conducting international business outside the United States?” A final research question is “What are the strengths and the weaknesses of each of these skills, values, and wisdom in relation to international business outside of the United States?” Each of these three questions identify advantages of hiring Special Operations veterans for international business ventures.

1.4. Phenomenon

The phenomena of Special Operations veterans skills in crisis management, conflict resolution, leadership, cross-cultural communication, and risk resolution is of great value to this research and international businesses seeking to gain a stronger foot in emerging markets. The phenomena of loyalty, duty, honor, and selfless service instilled in the body and soul of veterans is also of importance to this research and multi-national corporations seeking to improve their earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization (EBITDA). Wisdom and experience gained while leading multi-national missions requiring interagency coordination utilizing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) resulted from a need for continuous improvement in operations.

1.5. Operationalization of Phenomenon

Operationalization of the phenomena of skills and values resonates in business operations in identifying, negotiating, delegating, implementing, and gaining buy-in from stakeholders. These same skills and values operationalize programs and products for continuous improvement, planning and coordinating complex multi-site matrix operations and data driven logistics. Multi-national corporations gain market share using these same skills and values during operations in emerging markets.

The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical research standards designed to safeguard participant rights and maintain the credibility of the research process. Approval was obtained through the appropriate institutional review procedures before participant recruitment and data collection commenced. Before participating in the study, prospective participants received information describing the objectives of the research, the data collection process, and any anticipated benefits or risks, after which they independently elected to take part in the study. Participants were also advised that their involvement was optional and that they could discontinue participation at any stage without penalty. To preserve privacy and confidentiality, all personally identifiable information was excluded from the dataset, and findings were reported using aggregated results and anonymized responses to reduce the risk of participant identification.

2. Research Design

The research utilized a convergent mixed-methods approach in which quantitative survey responses and qualitative interview data were gathered during the same phase of the study, examined separately using appropriate analytical procedures, and integrated during the interpretation stage to develop a comprehensive understanding of the research questions. A convergent design was selected because it permits corroboration of quantitative findings with qualitative narratives while providing a richer understanding of leadership competency transfer than either method alone (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants consisted of 11 United States Special Operations Forces veterans recruited through convenience sampling from three Veterans of Foreign Wars posts located in San Antonio, Texas. Eligibility required completion

of at least two advanced SOF qualification programs and post-military civilian employment involving international business or multinational organizational interaction (Dexter, 2020).

The quantitative and qualitative datasets were analyzed independently to preserve the methodological integrity of each approach prior to integration. Quantitative survey responses were summarized using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and response distributions, to characterize participants' perceptions of leadership preparedness, cross-cultural competence, adaptability, decision-making, communication, and other competencies associated with successful organizational leadership (Keats, 2010). Because the study employed an exploratory design with a small convenience sample, the quantitative analyses were intentionally limited to descriptive interpretation rather than inferential statistical testing.

Convenience sampling was selected because the study sought access to a highly specialized and relatively difficult-to-reach population of former U.S. Special Operations Forces veterans with civilian workforce experience. Unlike probability sampling, convenience sampling enabled the recruitment of participants who were readily accessible through established veteran networks and organizations, thereby facilitating timely data collection while ensuring participants possessed the characteristics necessary to address the research questions. Recruiting through Veterans of Foreign Wars posts in the San Antonio region also provided a practical and ethical means of engaging veterans who had voluntarily chosen to participate in veteran support organizations. Given the exploratory purpose of the study, the objective was to obtain rich, experience-based perspectives rather than to produce a statistically representative sample of the broader SOF veteran population.

2.1. Inclusion Criteria

Participants were required to meet all of the following criteria:

- Be at least 18 years of age.
- Be a former member of a U.S. Special Operations Forces unit (e.g., Army Special Forces, Rangers, Navy SEALs, Air Force Special Tactics, Marine Raiders, or other recognized SOF component).
- Have completed active military service.
- Have transitioned into civilian employment, entrepreneurship, or another civilian professional role (Slyusarenko, 2018).
- Be able to read and understand English.
- Be willing to provide informed consent and participate voluntarily in both the survey and interview components of the study.

These criteria ensured that participants possessed direct experience with the military-to-civilian transition and could provide information relevant to the study's purpose (Ward, 2020).

2.2. Exclusion Criteria

Individuals were excluded if they:

- Were currently serving on active duty.
- Had never served in a U.S. Special Operations Forces unit.
- Had not yet transitioned to civilian employment or civilian professional activities.
- Declined or were unable to provide informed consent.
- Did not complete sufficient portions of the survey or interview to permit meaningful analysis.

These exclusion criteria helped ensure consistency across participants and maintain alignment with the research objectives.

The qualitative component of this study was designed to generate an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences rather than estimate population parameters. In qualitative research, sample adequacy is determined primarily by the richness of the data and the extent to which thematic patterns become sufficiently developed, rather than by statistical power. Small samples are common in qualitative studies involving specialized populations, particularly when participants possess unique expertise or experience. Because former SOF veterans represent a relatively rare and difficult-to-access population, a sample of 11 participants provided sufficient depth to identify recurring themes related to leadership, cross-cultural competence, adaptability, and organizational value. Consequently, the qualitative findings should be interpreted as contextual insights that contribute to theory development rather than as statistically generalizable conclusions.

2.3. Interview Questions

Interview items were developed following an extensive review of literature examining global leadership competencies, military-to-civilian transition, cultural intelligence, and strategic human capital. Subject matter experts reviewed the instrument to establish content validity prior to field testing.

Q1. Overall, I look back on my advanced military Special Operations training of Ranger School, SERE school, SF Qualification Course, CD Qualification Course, Military Free Fall School, Psychological Operations, Regional Studies, Language Training, Civil Affairs, Advanced Civil Education (ACE) and/or similar program as?

Outstanding ☐ Great ☐ Pretty Good ☐ Not Very Good ☐ Awful

Q2. As you started the transition from the military to the civilian world, how well prepared academically from advanced Special Operations training of Ranger School, SERE school, SF Qualification Course, CD Qualification Course, Military Free Fall School, Psychological Operations, Regional Studies, Language Training, Civil Affairs, Advanced Civil Education (ACE) and/or similar program did you feel to take that step?

Extremely prepared ☐ Very well prepared ☐ Mostly prepared ☐ Somewhat prepared ☐ Not prepared at all

Q3. How well did the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare center courses and/or similar program prepare you in the following academic areas related to International Business?

	Well Prepared	Mostly Prepared	Somewhat Prepared	Not Prepared	Not Sure
a. Technical Education					
b. Career					
c. Negotiating					
d. Crisis Management					
e. Change Management					
f. Strategy					

	Well Prepared	Mostly Prepared	Somewhat Prepared	Not Prepared	Not Sure
g. Objectives & Key Results					
h. Team Building					
i. Stakeholder Management					
j. Think Creatively					
k. Critical Thinking Skills					

Q4. When you were in the military, how relevant did you feel your learning of advanced Special Operations training of Ranger School, SERE school, SF Qualification Course, CD Qualification Course, Military Free Fall School, Psychological Operations, Regional Studies, Language Training, Civil Affairs, Advanced Civil Education (ACE) and/or similar program was?

☐ Extremely relevant ☐ Very relevant ☐ Somewhat relevant ☐ Not at all relevant ☐ Not sure

Q5. Which of the following courses did you complete while at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center?

- ☐ Psychological operations
- ☐ Regional Studies (What major region? _____)
- ☐ Language Training (Basic Military Language Course (What language/s? _____))
- ☐ Civil Affairs Qualification Course
- ☐ Negotiations
- ☐ Advanced Civil Education (ACE) (What Master's degree? _____)
- ☐ Ranger School
- ☐ SERE
- ☐ Special Forces Qualification Course
- ☐ Combat Diver Qualification Course
- ☐ Military Free Fall School
- ☐ Other: _____

Q6. After leaving the military have you worked in a civilian position?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Questions about your civilian employment after the military

Q7. What are the experiences gained in skills and values while in the military that are directly applicable to multi-national corporation's business objectives and goals when conducting business outside the United States?

Q8. How effective are each of these skills and values at conducting international business outside the United States?

Q9. What are the strengths and the weaknesses of each of these skills, values, and wisdom in relation to international business?

Q10. Which of the following areas best represents the field you are working in? (Please mark all that apply (Washington State University, 2010))

☐ Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources	☐ Information Technology
☐ Architecture and Construction	☐ Law, Public Safety, Correction & Security
☐ Arts, A/V Technology & Communications	☐ Manufacturing
☐ Business, Management & Administration	☐ Marketing, Sales & Service
☐ Education & Training	☐ Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics
☐ Finance	☐ Transportation, Distribution & Logistics
☐ Government & Public Administration	☐ Doesn't apply
☐ Health Science	☐ Unemployed
☐ Hospitality & Tourism	☐ Defense Contractor
☐ Human Services	☐ Other _____

Q11. Give one example where your skills directly influenced an international business outcome you were involved with?

Q12. Explain any challenges you have faced adapting or transitioning military skills to the civilian business world?

Q13. Give one example where you applied your skills and/or values while working on strategy in the international business world?

Q14. Give one example where you utilized cross-culture communication in the international business world?

Q15. Give one example where you utilized cross-cultural knowledge in the international business world?

Q16. Give one example where you utilized language skills in the international business world?

Q17. Give one example where you utilized negotiating skills in the international business world?

Q18. Give one example where you utilized wisdom in the international business world?

Q19. Give one example where you utilized crisis management, conflict resolution, leadership, and/or risk resolution in the international business world?

Q20. Give one example where you exhibited loyalty, duty, honor, and/or selfless service in the international business world?

2.4. Desired Interview Outcomes

The desired outcome of these interviews is to support the theory of Special Operations veterans may provide value in international business settings. Special Operations veterans received training in independent variables such as regional studies, civil affairs, psychological operations, languages, and negotiations versus job performance in business operations (dependent variable), controlling for personal bias (moderating variables) for Special Operations Veterans at Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post 76, Post 9186, and Post 8541 in San Antonio, Texas (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, Micoulaud-Franchi et al., 2014). These outcomes must capture the essence of the skills, values and wisdom gained by Special Operations veterans when used in the international business setting. The interviews will establish the detailed insight into operational advantages of utilizing military veterans.

2.5. Field Test Selection Criteria

To field test the selection criteria for “What are the experiences gained in skills and values while in the military that are directly applicable to multi-national corporation’s business objectives and goals when conducting business outside the United States?”, participants will come from members at Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post 76, Post 9186, and Post 8541 in San Antonio, Texas. The members must have completed at least two of the following courses while at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center: regional studies, civil affairs, psychological operations, languages, negotiations, and/or ACE master’s degree. Exclusion criteria included Special Operations veterans that completed only one SOF course. Interviews and surveys were field tested at the same three VFW posts in San Antonio. Formal member checking was not conducted because of logistical constraints following data collection. Consequently, credibility was supported through systematic coding procedures, careful documentation of analytic decisions, and transparent reporting of the findings.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Variable	n
Total Participants	11
Special Forces	9
Civil Affairs	8
Psychological Operations	8
Ranger Qualified	7
Currently Employed	10
International Business Experience	11
Average number of overseas deployments	4
Current industry	Defense and Foreign Sales

2.6. Trustworthiness and Reliability

Because the qualitative component of this convergent mixed-methods study sought to understand participants lived experiences during the military-to-civilian transition, emphasis was placed on establishing the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings rather than statistical reliability (Ward, 2020).

To enhance the rigor of the qualitative component, the study incorporated established procedures intended to strengthen trustworthiness throughout the research process. Consistent

with accepted qualitative research standards, attention was given to the principles of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transparency. Credibility was supported by using a structured interview protocol, encouraging participants to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences, and comparing qualitative findings with quantitative results during the mixed-methods integration process. Dependability was promoted through the use of a consistent data collection process and a documented analytical approach that provided a clear record of coding decisions and theme development. Confirmability was addressed by grounding interpretations in participants' responses rather than researcher assumptions, while maintaining an audit trail that documented methodological decisions and analytical procedures. Transparency was further enhanced by providing a detailed description of the research design, participant selection, data collection procedures, and analytical methods, enabling readers to evaluate the consistency and methodological rigor of the study and supporting the reproducibility of the research process.

2.7. Qualitative Credibility

Credibility was supported by using a standardized semi-structured interview protocol that allowed all participants to respond to the same core questions while permitting elaboration when appropriate. Participants were selected because they possessed direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation, thereby providing information-rich perspectives relevant to the study's research questions. Qualitative themes were developed through systematic comparison of participant responses and were interpreted alongside quantitative descriptive findings to identify areas of convergence and divergence.

2.8. Coding Consistency

Interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times before coding commenced to promote familiarity with the data. Coding followed an iterative process in which initial codes were refined, merged, or expanded as patterns emerged across participants. Previously coded transcripts were revisited throughout the analysis to ensure that coding decisions remained consistent as the coding framework evolved. The qualitative data were coded by a single researcher, therefore, formal intercoder agreement statistics were not applicable. To enhance dependability, coding decisions were documented throughout the analytic process, previously coded transcripts were reviewed for consistency, and themes were refined iteratively as analysis progressed.

3. Results

Due to the exploratory nature of the study and the small sample size ($N = 11$), quantitative findings are presented descriptively rather than inferentially. Frequencies, percentages, and thematic convergence were used to identify patterns across participants. Findings show strong preparedness, with over 80% rating their training as outstanding. Skills such as strategy, crisis management, and negotiation were universally rated high. Descriptive statistics were calculated to assess the overall level of preparedness across key skill domains, including technical education, strategy, negotiation, crisis management, change management, and leadership-related competencies (Wong et al., 2021).

Although the quantitative survey results provided useful descriptive information, the small sample size substantially limits the strength of statistical inference. With only 11 participants, statistical power is insufficient to support reliable hypothesis testing, detect small or moderate effects, or estimate population parameters with precision. In addition, the use of convenience

sampling introduces potential selection bias because participants were not randomly selected from the broader population of SOF veterans. As a result, the quantitative findings should be interpreted as descriptive and exploratory rather than confirmatory. They are valuable for identifying preliminary patterns and informing future research but should not be generalized beyond the study sample. Future investigations should employ larger, more geographically diverse, probability-based samples to evaluate the robustness and generalizability of the relationships identified in this exploratory study.

Survey responses consistently reflected high levels of perceived preparedness across individual competencies. Because each survey item assessed a distinct leadership competency rather than a common latent construct, findings are presented using item-level frequencies and percentages rather than composite summary statistics. At the individual skill level, the highest-rated competencies included technical education, strategy, and critical thinking, all of which consistently received ratings of “well prepared.” Lower variability across responses suggests a ceiling effect, where most respondents selected the highest rating category.

3.1. School/Training Differences

Quantitative Analysis

Table 2: Training Evaluation

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Outstanding	9	81.8%
Great	2	18.2%

Table 3: Preparedness

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Extremely Prepared	7	63.6%
Very Well Prepared	4	36.4%

Table 4: Relevance

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Extremely Relevant	8	72.7%
Very Relevant	3	27.3%

Table 5: Skills Preparedness

Skill	Well Prepared (%)
Strategy	100%
Crisis Management	100%
Negotiation	100%
Change Management	91.0%
Technical Education	91.0%

Table 6: Item Level Distributions

Competency	Well Prepared	Mostly Prepared	Somewhat Prepared	Not Prepared	Not Sure
Technical Education	10	1	0	0	0
Negotiating	11	0	0	0	0
Strategy	11	0	0	0	0
Stakeholder Management	10	1	0	0	0
Career	10	1	0	0	0
Crisis Management	11	0	0	0	0
Change Management	10	1	0	0	0
Objective Key Results	10	1	0	0	0
Team Building	11	0	0	0	0
Think Creatively	10	1	0	0	0

3.2. Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data obtained from participant interviews were systematically examined through a structured thematic analysis process to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and themes within the responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Responses were initially coded through open coding procedures, followed by categorization into broader thematic groupings. Codes were reviewed multiple times to ensure consistency and thematic saturation. Emergent themes included cross-cultural leadership, crisis management, adaptive leadership, values-based leadership, and transition challenges. Analysis of interview responses revealed several consistent themes (Sarafan et al., 2020, Wong et al., 2021):

3.2.1. High Preparedness and Training Relevance

Participants overwhelmingly reported that their military training was highly relevant to international business operations. Skills developed through negotiations, crisis management, and strategy were frequently cited as directly transferable.

“I conducted multiple contract negotiations in various countries... All contracts were designed to make more money for the U.S. company.” (Participant 3)

“Constant challenge as to remain flexible and ready while considering training of international clients” (Participant 6)

“Constantly utilize my aviation and SOF skills to teach pilots in Africa and South America.” (Participant 7)

3.2.2. Cross-Cultural Leadership Capability

Participants emphasized their ability to operate effectively across cultures, often attributing success in business negotiations and partnerships due to their exposure to diverse environments during military service. Participants demonstrated strong cross-cultural experiences and reported confidence operating across diverse cultural environments (Schnell, 2014).

“During business meetings in Korea, I spoke in Korean to negotiate a multiyear contract shipping 15 tons of supplies to Korea per year with more responsibility and less oversight” (Participant 1)

“Negotiated in Spanish for Colombian security personnel and Logitits support for 24/7 availability, but never worked the Colombians on Sunday.” (Participant 4)

“Always asked about family and social conversations in the native language before ever talking business.” (Participant 5)

3.2.3. Strategic and Crisis Leadership

Interviewees consistently identified crisis management and strategic planning as key strengths. These capabilities enabled them to navigate complex business challenges and make decisions under pressure.

“Due to time differences, I often made decisions then just back briefed stateside leadership” (Participant 1)

“Made decisions on risk resolution on security patches for software updates on a weekend which enabled a successful implementation of the software.” (Participant 5)

“As senior advisor to the Deputy Minister of Narcotics, ensured strategic needs of the U.S. were met with metrics and strategic objectives.” (Participant 6)

“Crisis leadership was constant while working with the National Police.” (Participant 7)

3.2.4. Values-Based Leadership

Themes of integrity, accountability, and mission focus emerged as defining characteristics. Participants indicated that these values influenced both decision-making and team dynamics in corporate environments.

“Special Forces training taught me to be willing to work anywhere at anytime” (Participant 2)

“For Selfless service, I worked nights and weekends to ensure company objectives were met” (Participant 4)

“Trained the Minister of Defense while training the military and security forces on values to be a more professional force” (Participant 6)

3.2.5. Transition Challenges

Despite strong capabilities, participants reported challenges including:

- Difficulty translating military experience into business language
- Employer bias and lack of understanding
- Misalignment between skills and job placement

“Stakeholders don’t take order very well” (Participant 3)

“To bridge a gap while training Kenyans, I had to take them to a German restaurant and watch shows in Swahili with seven of their officers to have them organize the setup of the classes for training, where normally I just gave orders.” (Participant 7)

“The hardest challenge was not being able to find work that I could do.” (Participant 8)

The effectiveness of the military-to-civilian career transition is frequently associated with workforce readiness, the compatibility of veterans' capabilities with occupational requirements, and employers' ability to recognize competencies developed through military service (Maury

& Bradbard, 2021). Employer perceptions continue to play a significant role in veteran hiring decisions, with organizations frequently citing leadership, adaptability, and mission focus as valuable attributes while simultaneously acknowledging challenges in interpreting military experience within civilian workforce frameworks (Harrell & Berglass, 2023).

3.2.6. Integrated Findings (Triangulation)

The integrated analysis examined three complementary dimensions of the evidence. First, convergence was assessed by identifying findings that were consistently supported across both datasets. Convergent evidence occurred when descriptive survey responses aligned with recurring qualitative themes, thereby strengthening confidence in the interpretation of those findings. Second, complementarity was evaluated by determining how qualitative narratives extended or enriched the quantitative results.

In many instances, survey responses indicated that participants viewed specific leadership competencies as highly transferable, while interview data explained the operational experiences, organizational contexts, and leadership practices that shaped those perceptions. This complementary relationship provided greater explanatory depth than could be obtained through descriptive statistics alone. Third, divergence was examined by identifying instances in which qualitative perspectives differed from, qualified, or introduced additional complexity to the quantitative findings. Any discrepancies were interpreted as meaningful sources of insight rather than methodological inconsistencies, recognizing that differences between numerical summaries and personal narratives may reflect variation in individual experiences, contextual factors, or organizational environments.

The integration process enhanced interpretive rigor by permitting findings from one dataset to inform the interpretation of the other while preserving the independent analytical procedures associated with each method. Comparing descriptive quantitative patterns with qualitative themes improved the overall credibility of the study by demonstrating where multiple sources of evidence converged, where participant narratives provided additional explanation beyond the numerical results, and where differences suggested opportunities for further investigation. This integrated approach was particularly appropriate for an exploratory study involving a specialized population because it produced a more comprehensive understanding of how SOF veterans perceive the applicability of their military-acquired leadership competencies within contemporary civilian organizations.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data confirms:

Table 7: Quantitative Outcome

Quantitative Outcome	Qualitative Insight
Cross-cultural success	Cross-cultural success narratives
Strong performance	Leadership trust and cohesion
Market success	Strategic execution examples

This triangulation strengthens validity and supports the mixed-methods design.

4. Discussion

Results confirm alignment between SOF training and global leadership competencies. Their ability to operate in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments provides a competitive advantage. The strategic value of SOF veterans may be understood through a strategic human capital lens, whereby rare and difficult-to-imitate competencies

contribute to organizational adaptability and performance in volatile international markets (Ployhart, 2022). Organizations can benefit from leveraging these capabilities.

4.1. Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical contribution of this research links experiential military training to leadership theory and business performance. First, it extends the human capital theory by demonstrating that military-acquired competencies, particularly those developed within SOF environments, represent a form of specialized capital with direct applicability to organizational performance. Unlike general leadership experience, SOF training develops context-specific capabilities that are particularly valuable in high-risk environments.

Second, the study advances cross-cultural theory as cross-cultural skills emerged as a recurring theme associated with participants' perceptions of leadership effectiveness (Schnell, 2014). This finding suggests that leadership effectiveness in global contexts is not solely a function of experience but is significantly influenced by the ability to interpret and adapt to cultural complexities (Ang et al., 2020).

Third, this research contributes to leadership theory by providing empirical support for decentralized and adaptive leadership models. The effectiveness of SOF leadership observed in this study aligns with contemporary perspectives that emphasize agility, empowerment, and distributed decision-making in complex organizational systems (LaCroix et al., 2021).

The results observed in this study align with prior research exploring how veterans navigate the transition from military service to civilian employment and how organizations assess the value of military-developed competencies within professional workplace settings (Slyusarenko, 2018). Harrell and Berglass (2023) reported that employers frequently identify leadership, adaptability, resilience, and mission-oriented performance as valuable attributes associated with military service, while simultaneously acknowledging challenges framing military expertise using language and credentials commonly valued in corporate hiring processes (Suutari et al., 2022). Similar perceptions emerged in the present study, where participants described difficulties communicating the relevance of their military-acquired competencies despite possessing substantial experience in leadership, cross-cultural engagement, stakeholder management, and decision-making under uncertainty. These findings suggest that organizations may benefit from developing more effective mechanisms for recognizing and evaluating military-developed competencies when recruiting talent for international leadership and global business positions.

4.2. Practical Implications

The practical implications of this research result in recommending that organizations integrate SOF veterans into global leadership pipelines. Consistent with employer-based workforce research, organizations that establish formal processes for identifying and translating military-acquired competencies may be better positioned to leverage veteran talent in leadership roles that require adaptability, cross-cultural effectiveness, and strategic decision-making (Harrell & Berglass, 2023). Research on post-9/11 veterans suggests that successful transitions are associated with access to employment resources, career development programs, and social support mechanisms that facilitate long-term workforce integration and professional advancement (Aronson et al., 2019).

Table 8 Skills Translation

Military Competency	Business Competency
Mission Planning	Strategic Planning
Civil Affairs	Stakeholder Engagement
Psychological Operations	Change Communication
Negotiations	International Contract Negotiation
Regional Studies	Cultural Intelligence

Organizations should consider:

- Developing targeted recruitment strategies aimed at SOF veterans
- Implementing structured programs to translate military competencies into business applications
- Training hiring managers to recognize and evaluate non-traditional leadership backgrounds

By leveraging this underutilized talent pool, organizations may gain a competitive advantage in navigating complex global markets.

4.3. Limitations

Convenience sampling and the modest sample size ($N = 11$) were appropriate for the study's exploratory qualitative objectives and enabled the collection of rich experiential data from a highly specialized population. However, these methodological choices limit statistical power, increase the potential for sampling bias, and preclude generalization of the quantitative findings beyond the participants studied. Accordingly, the quantitative results should be interpreted as descriptive and hypothesis-generating rather than confirmatory, and future research should employ larger, probability-based samples to validate these preliminary findings.

Several factors should be considered when evaluating the results of this study. The participant pool consisted of a limited number of Special Operations Forces veterans recruited from three Veterans of Foreign Wars posts within a single geographic region, which may limit the applicability of the findings to veterans from different geographic regions, military backgrounds, and professional experiences. In addition, the study relied on participants' personal perceptions and recollections of their experiences, creating the possibility that responses were influenced by memory limitations or a tendency to present experiences in a favorable manner. The absence of a comparison population, such as civilian executives or veterans from conventional military backgrounds, also limits the ability to assess whether the reported competencies are unique to the Special Operations community (Simpson & Sariol, 2019, Li & Rainville, 2021). Because this study employed an exploratory, cross-sectional research design, the results are best understood as observations of participant experiences and perceptions rather than evidence demonstrating direct relationships between military service and organizational outcomes.

4.4. Future Research

Future research should expand upon the exploratory findings of this study by employing larger and more geographically diverse samples of Special Operations Forces (SOF) veterans across the United States. A larger and more diverse sample would strengthen the applicability of the findings across broader veteran populations while offering a more comprehensive

understanding of how leadership capabilities developed through military service are utilized within organizational and international business contexts. Additionally, future investigations should incorporate employer and organizational leader perspectives to better understand how multinational corporations perceive, evaluate, and utilize the unique capabilities of SOF veterans within global leadership roles.

Comparative research designs examining SOF veterans alongside civilian leaders with similar levels of managerial responsibility would further clarify whether observed competencies represent distinctive advantages associated with military training or are common among experienced organizational leaders. Comparative investigations of this nature could provide deeper insight into how military-acquired leadership competencies are perceived and applied within international business environments and whether these capabilities offer distinct advantages in globally complex organizational contexts.

5. Conclusion

Special Operations veterans participants reported that SOF-acquired competencies may provide value in international business settings. Across interviews, the most repeated transferable capabilities were cross-cultural competence, crisis management, communication, stakeholder management, leadership, and adaptability. These align with multinational business needs in ambiguous and culturally complex environments. These emerging market business values are seen in examples like 3M, General Electric, and Whirlpool. This is a tremendous opportunity for any company to take on the endeavor of emerging markets using Special Operations veterans to complete the mission, goals, and objectives of the multi-national company.

From a strategic human capital perspective, organizational success is increasingly influenced by the collective deployment of specialized talent whose capabilities enable adaptation, innovation, and effective decision-making in complex and dynamic environments (Ployhart, 2022). The experiences reported by SOF veterans in navigating culturally diverse environments, leading under ambiguity, and managing complex stakeholder relationships reflect many of the competencies associated with successful global leaders operating in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environments (Mendenhall et al., 2023). These same companies would be well served and better positioned to achieve even greater opportunities by utilizing the phenomena of skills and values Special Operations veterans bring to the world of business.

Future research should expand the sample size and incorporate longitudinal study designs to enhance the generalizability, temporal validity, and deeper understanding of how Special Operations Forces veterans' leadership competencies evolve and influence organizational performance within international business environments over time.

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