

# Once a soldier, always a soldier

The common belief is that when a person experiences a dramatic and unexpected life event that forces him/her to sever all ties with their profession, the skills and values they developed in the past will not be helpful as they forge new careers. However, a research paper by a professor at the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, debunks this assumption.

For her paper, Mukta Kulkarni, professor, Organisational Behaviour and Human Resources Management at IIMB, who also runs the Mphasis Chair for digital accessibility and inclusion, interviewed 30 army and paramilitary personnel who lost either their limbs, vision or hearing while at the front line.

An explosion or attack had upended their lives, but instead of ignoring their past, they built their new identities around the fact that they were soldiers.

All those interviewed had constructed their identities using socially available discourses regarding what it means to be a soldier.

“They engaged in selective self-interpretations that allowed them to hold on to their narratives of being a soldier while attempting transitions. Coupled with continuity in terms of being surrounded by military personnel, facilities, and emblems, maintaining a semblance of *status quo* was construed as change,” said Ms. Kulkarni.

At the time of her study, the personnel were engaged in rehabilitation and vocational training at a military-affiliated facility, The Queen Mary’s Technical Institute For Differently Abled Soldiers, Pune, to help them move towards civilian careers.

## Select identity elements

“They saw themselves as fortunate when they compared their present selves with a possible worse self. The interviewees also held on to select identity elements from their past profession and stated how these would make them superior professionals in the future,” the paper stated. Some of the army men admitted that they had delayed exiting the army by attempting to hide or downplay their injuries.

Ms. Kulkarni’s paper titled, ‘Holding on to let go: Identity work in discontinuous and involuntary career transitions’ has been accepted for publication in a peer-reviewed business and management journal.

Fielding questions posed by the researcher, the interviewees spoke of why they attempted to hold on to their narratives of being a soldier which helped them maintain continuity of their goals, values, and jobs. They stated that they held on to their elements of their past selves that they believed would help them “eventually become superior civilian professionals”.

Ms. Kulkarni said their attitudes in the face of hardship reveals how the values they acquired in the armed forces had percolated into all aspects of their lives.

“The interviewees rationalised their career choices, validated their disabilities, and selectively interpreted their present self in a manner that allowed them to distance themselves from their bodily struggles caused by their profession while holding on to their self-narratives based on their profession,” she said.

The personnel felt that self-defining values of discipline, endurance, loyalty, and honesty would be helpful in their new professional lives. While a majority of them wanted jobs in government agencies or banks, some of them had also opted for self employment, Ms. Kulkarni added.