

Why Identity, Not Employability, Is the Real Transition Crisis

86% of service leavers find a job within six months. Almost none of them are asked whether they know who they are without the uniform on.

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For as long as the UK has had a formal system for supporting people leaving the military, that system has measured itself the same way: did the person get a job? The Career Transition Partnership's own official statistics put the employment rate at six months at 86% for 2024/25 — higher than the general UK population rate of 75%, though down from an 89% peak in 2022/23, and notably lower for medically discharged leavers (73%) [1]. On that measure, transition support in this country is, for the most part, working.

So why do so many people who left the military years ago — with a job, a home, a pension — still describe feeling like they never really landed? This is the question that sits underneath everything AURIS does, and it deserves a longer, more careful answer than a single statistic can give. This piece sets out that answer in full: what the evidence actually says, where each claim comes from, and — just as importantly — what remains genuinely unproven.

1. The Employment-First Assumption, and Why It Doesn't Hold

The dominant model of transition support — in the UK and, as far as our review has found, internationally — is built on a simple assumption: if a person leaving a high-pressure institution can be placed into a civilian job, the transition has succeeded. It is a reasonable assumption on its face. It is also, according to a growing and increasingly convergent body of published research, incomplete in a way that matters.

A person who secures a job is not automatically a person who has rebuilt a sense of who they are. Employment and identity are measured on entirely different timescales and by entirely different mechanisms. Employment can be secured in weeks. Identity, the evidence suggests, is reconstructed — where it is reconstructed successfully at all — over years.

1.1 What a ten-year study actually found

The clearest evidence for this comes from one of the few genuinely longitudinal studies in this field. Jan Grimell, at Umeå University, followed Swedish service members from 2013 through to a follow-up cycle in 2023 — a full decade — using annual interviews and inductive analysis to track how military identity behaved over time after leaving service [2]. The finding that matters most for this discussion is not that identity disruption occurs at transition — that much is intuitive. It is what happens afterwards. Grimell found that military identity did not fade as the years passed. If anything, it grew more salient. His participants, a decade after leaving service, were still operating with a military identity standard rather than having

replaced it with a civilian one — not because they had failed to adjust, but because the identity constructed by military service does not simply dissolve when the institutional context is removed.

Grimell's companion analysis describes a pattern he calls "the challenges in operating multiple identities tailored to contrasting moral regimes" — in plainer terms, the effort of holding a military self-concept and a civilian one simultaneously, without either fully replacing the other. That is a fundamentally different problem from unemployment, and it does not show up in a six-month employment statistic.

1.2 What coaching research found when it looked past the job search

A 2024 doctoral study by Dr Miguel Ingle at Liberty University took a different approach: rather than following people over a decade, it used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis — a qualitative method designed to surface how people themselves make sense of a lived experience — across eleven US veterans who had been through career-transition coaching programmes [3]. Four themes recurred across the interviews: identity conflict, the need to redefine purpose, the challenge of understanding and articulating military skills in civilian terms, and social and community integration. Notably, Ingle found that coaching produced meaningfully better outcomes specifically when it addressed identity and personal values directly — not when it focused on skills-translation alone. Career guidance that treated the person as a set of transferable competencies, without engaging the identity question underneath, was the weaker intervention.

This finding matters practically as well as theoretically. It suggests that the standard toolkit of transition support — CV workshops, skills-mapping, job fairs — is not simply insufficient on its own; it may be actively missing the variable that determines whether the coaching relationship helps at all. We treat this as directional evidence, not definitive proof — Ingle's study is an unpublished dissertation with a small sample, and we cite it with that caveat attached, consistently, every time.

2. What Gets Built During Service — and Why It Doesn't Simply Unwind

To understand why identity loss is so disruptive at the point of transition, it helps to understand what these institutions actually build, and there is a long-standing sociological framework for exactly this question.

2.1 Role exit as a structured psychological process

In 1988, sociologist Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh published "Becoming an Ex," a study of people leaving deeply identity-defining roles — originally former nuns, but extended to a wide range of role exits since [4]. Ebaugh's central contribution was to show that leaving a central, identity-organising role is not a single event but a process, typically involving doubts about the role, a search for alternatives, a turning point, and — critically — the deliberate construction of a new "ex-role" identity that has to actively account for what was left behind. This last stage is the one existing transition support rarely touches. Finding a job answers "what do you do now." It does not answer "who are you now, given what you used to be" — and Ebaugh's framework suggests that second question does not resolve itself automatically.

2.2 The story people tell about themselves

Psychologist Dan McAdams's work on narrative identity offers a complementary lens: people form and sustain a sense of self partly through an ongoing, internalised life story, one that has to keep making sense

as new chapters are added [5]. A role that has organised someone's language, community, purpose and daily rhythm for years is not a chapter that can be closed cleanly — it is woven through the story's structure. When that role ends abruptly, the narrative doesn't just lose a chapter; its continuity is disrupted, and reconstructing that continuity is itself a piece of psychological work, not something that happens as a side effect of finding new employment.

2.3 Belief in capability, and where it comes from

Albert Bandura's foundational work on self-efficacy — the belief in one's own capability to act, persist and succeed — is relevant here too [6]. Self-efficacy is not identity, and should not be treated as identical to it, but the two interact closely: for someone whose competence and confidence were built entirely within one institutional context, having those beliefs "port" successfully into an entirely different context is not guaranteed. It has to be actively rebuilt, and often against a backdrop of feeling, for the first time in years, genuinely unsure of one's own competence.

2.4 Coherence, meaning and coping

Aaron Antonovsky's concept of "sense of coherence" — the combination of comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness that supports someone's capacity to cope with stress — offers a third angle on the same underlying problem [7]. A structured institutional role typically supplies all three automatically: the world makes sense within its rules, the demands feel manageable because the institution has trained you for them, and the purpose is usually explicit and shared. Transition can strip all three away simultaneously, which is one reason the disruption often feels more disorienting than a straightforward change of job.

3. What Our Own Interview Research Is Showing

Alongside this published literature, we run our own longitudinal qualitative research programme, Identity After the Uniform, targeting 108 in-depth interviews. As of this piece, 22 have been recorded, transcribed and fully coded — and we disclose that denominator every time we reference this work, because findings from just over a fifth of a planned sample can and will shift as the sample grows.

3.1 The role becomes the self

Across the interviews coded so far, a recurring theme is that highly structured, all-consuming roles don't just provide employment — they construct identity: a shared language, a built-in community, and a clear, external marker of who a person is. When the role ends, interviewees frequently describe the loss as far larger than the loss of a job.

3.2 Awareness often arrives late, not at the point of leaving

A striking pattern in this dataset is that the realisation of identity loss frequently does not arrive at the point of transition itself. Several interviewees describe a gap — sometimes years — between the transition and the point at which they recognised what had actually happened to their sense of self. This has a direct, practical implication: a person can appear outwardly settled — employed, housed, apparently coping — while the underlying disruption remains unresolved and simply hasn't surfaced yet. Any support model that only engages people in the first months after transition risks missing this population entirely.

3.3 Regulation strategies vary, and portability seems to matter

Interviewees describe a wide range of ways they steadied themselves through the hardest periods — physical activity, faith, routine, preparation, humour, relationships. One pattern worth flagging: anchors that were external — tied to a specific role, relationship or activity — were more common in this dataset than anchors that were internally generated and independent of circumstance. Where an external anchor was removed or interrupted, several interviewees described renewed instability. This is an emerging, weakly supported signal, not a finding — but it is exactly the kind of thing a structured framework should be designed to test, and it is one of our own four tracked research questions, covered in the next piece in this series.

3.4 Identity disruption is not always singular

At least one interview in this dataset illustrates something we call compound identity disruption — where a visible, role-based transition (leaving a uniformed career) overlapped with a separate, unprocessed identity transition running underneath it. In this case, the interviewee described continuing to seek out high-intensity operational environments after leaving service, describing them less as a career choice and more as a kind of identity homecoming. This matters because it suggests that, for some people, the visible transition may not be the only — or even the primary — identity disruption at play. A purely role-focused support model could miss this entirely.

4. Why Existing Support Doesn't Close This Gap

None of this is a criticism of the people and organisations currently delivering transition support — much of it does genuinely valuable work within the scope it was designed for. It is a structural observation: almost every existing UK intervention is built around the employment-first assumption, and none of the research above suggests that assumption is wrong so much as incomplete. CV workshops, job fairs, vocational training grants — all useful, none of them designed to touch identity directly, because identity was never the variable they were built to measure.

That is the specific gap AURIS was built to sit inside — not competing with employment support, but addressing the layer underneath it that employment support was never designed to reach.

5. What AURIS Actually Is

AURIS Institute exists to understand how identity is lost and rebuilt during major life and occupational transition, and to translate that understanding into a structured, evidence-informed system for rebuilding it. That system rests on the AURIS Framework — five pillars describing the sequence people appear to move through when they successfully rebuild a stable sense of self after a role that used to define them.

Awareness

Recognising that something has shifted, and being honest about where you actually are — directly responsive to the delayed-awareness pattern our own interviews keep surfacing.

Understanding

Making sense of the patterns, reactions and behaviours that have emerged since the transition — connecting present-day struggles back to their origin, rather than treating them as unrelated new problems.

Regulation

Getting steady before asking anything of the mind — body first. Given what our interviews suggest about the fragility of externally-anchored regulation strategies, this pillar is deliberately built around portable, internally-generated tools.

Identity

Rebuilding a clear, grounded sense of who you are now — not by discarding the old identity, consistent with Grimell's finding that it doesn't simply fade, but by integrating it into something that can also function in a civilian context.

Stability

Sustaining the new identity through consistent daily practice — the outcome our own interview data suggests follows from identity, community and purpose together, rather than something that can be pursued directly on its own.

It is important to be precise about what this framework currently is and isn't. It is a structured, evidence-informed coaching model, built from a genuine and growing research programme. It is not a clinical or therapeutic intervention, and it does not claim to be a validated, peer-reviewed treatment. We say that plainly because the population this work is aimed at — veterans, blue-light personnel, people in recovery, and others navigating identity-defining transitions — deserves a system that is honest about its own evidence status, not one that oversells itself to look more finished than it is.

6. Why We're Publishing the Research Openly

Three foundational papers underpinning this work — covering the proof-of-concept research base, the Identity Performance Psychology framework, and a full evidence-informed white paper — are published on Zenodo under an open licence (CC BY 4.0), so anyone can read the underlying research rather than take our word for it. A full Parliamentary Evidence Review, submitted for cross-party consideration in June 2026, sets out the same evidence base in more depth, alongside its limitations, mapped against a 60-claim traceability register so that no sentence in it outruns its supporting evidence.

That's the deliberate approach behind everything else we publish: evidence first, interpretation second, recommendations third. It's also why three more pieces sit alongside this one — one showing exactly what our evidence base currently supports and where the real gaps still are, one showing how that research is being tested in live pilot programmes right now, and one setting out why we think this matters at a policy level, not just an individual one.

7. The Underlying Thesis: Why Identity Sits Beneath Performance

Identity Performance Psychology, the conceptual framework underpinning AURIS, rests on a premise that is simple to state and easy to underestimate: people do not consistently act according to what they know.

They act according to who they believe themselves to be. Traditional approaches to personal change — motivation, productivity systems, goal-setting, discipline — tend to focus on knowledge, skills and habits. These matter, but they do not fully explain why capable, motivated people so often fail to sustain behavioural consistency during periods of major transition, uncertainty or challenge.

The central premise can be summarised in one line: identity drives behaviour, and behaviour drives performance. When identity is stable, behaviour tends to become more consistent, deliberate and aligned with a person's own stated values. When identity becomes disrupted — as it does, according to the evidence reviewed above, after leaving a role that has organised someone's sense of self for years — behaviour often becomes fragmented, reactive, and increasingly difficult to sustain. This is not a claim that identity is the only factor in behaviour change. It is a claim that most existing approaches to transition support skip over it, and that skipping over it has a cost.

7.1 Why this is a genuinely different starting point

Most transition and performance interventions implicitly ask: what does this person need to do differently? Identity Performance Psychology asks a prior question: who does this person need to become, in order for the doing to hold under pressure? A person who identifies as a leader behaves differently from someone merely attempting to lead. A person who identifies as resilient responds differently to setbacks than someone who does not hold that belief about themselves. The same logic applies, with considerably higher stakes, to someone whose entire adult identity was built inside a uniformed institution and who now has to answer the question "who am I, if not that" for the first time.

8. Why AURIS Is Structured as Six Interconnected Parts, Not One Product

AURIS is not, and is not intended to be, a single app or a single service. It is structured as six interconnected components, each strengthening the others: the AURIS Framework itself, providing the structural spine of Awareness, Understanding, Regulation, Identity and Stability that underpins everything else; the AURIS membership app, the primary delivery mechanism for guided reflection, structured pathway content and community, functioning as one access point into the system rather than the system in its entirety; the Identity After the Uniform research programme, the evidence engine that continuously improves the framework itself, not a one-off validation exercise; AURIS Institute, the governance and quality body responsible for evidence discipline, safeguarding and accreditation standards; a facilitator and licensing programme, extending human delivery beyond what any single founder could deliver alone; and an identity-focused community, where members strengthen one another's progress rather than relying solely on any one facilitator or founder.

None of these six exist independently. Removing any one weakens the whole system — the app without the research becomes an unaudited wellbeing tool; the research without the app becomes an academic exercise with no delivery mechanism; the facilitator programme without the Institute's governance loses the evidence discipline that distinguishes this from generic life coaching. Understanding AURIS as an integrated system, rather than a single product with some supporting activities around it, matters for exactly the reason this article exists: it explains why identity, not employability, sits at the centre of every part of it, not just the parts that are explicitly framed as therapeutic or supportive.

9. Who Else This May Affect — A Hypothesis, Not Yet a Finding

Our own working hypothesis, developed from the theoretical mechanisms reviewed above rather than from sector-specific verified evidence in every case, is that identity disruption at transition is likely to be most severe wherever several conditions apply together: a total or near-total institutional environment, where housing, social life, healthcare and daily structure are substantially provided by the institution itself; a deliberate process of collective identity construction, where individual identity is actively organised around a shared language, ritual, uniform or purpose; a moral framework embedded in the role itself, so the institution supplies not just employment but a sense of worth and meaning; a cultural stigma against acknowledging struggle or vulnerability; and an abrupt, rather than gradual, exit from full institutional membership.

This hypothesis is exactly why our interview programme deliberately includes non-military comparators — people whose identity disruption arose from disability, redundancy, addiction recovery or public office rather than uniformed service — and why our pilot partners span veteran, LGBTQIA+ and addiction-recovery populations rather than staying narrowly military-focused. We flag this explicitly as a hypothesis under active testing, not a proven mechanism, because some of the sector-specific research that would confirm or challenge it — particularly in policing — remains a genuinely open gap in our evidence base, covered in full in the next piece in this series.

References

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