

READY TO SERVE

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FULL TEXT

A career military veteran leaves the service both highly skilled and trained to both follow and lead characteristics that businesses clamor for in an employee.

Many of those potential workers, though, have little experience writing a resume or doing a traditional job interview.

"About 200,000 veterans annually separate from active duty, and around 9,000 move to Ohio. That provides this pool of potentially unemployed folks with huge capabilities and awesome leadership experience," said Joel Martin, manager of commercial training and services with Solon-based Swagelok, a global fluid system products, assemblies and services company

Martin, a veteran of the U.S. Air Force and active reservist, chairs the company's veterans and military resource group. He has made it a personal and professional mission to help former soldiers get their footing after leaving the service.

Swagelok recently adopted the U.S. Department of Defense's SkillBridge program, which is aimed at helping transition military veterans to the civilian workforce via personal and professional development classes, networking and mentoring, along with practical work experience fellowship opportunities.

"We call them fellows because I wouldn't call somebody who has 20 years of experience an intern," Martin said.

"We have definitely transitioned to actively recruiting veterans and offering them assistance with interviewing skills, the job-seeking process and career-building."

The veteran workforce

With more than 250,000 veterans living in Northeast Ohio and an expanding pool sending prime, working-age employees into a tight labor market, the opportunity for the region to tap into the former military community could go a long way toward closing the employment gap.

A recent Team NEO Aligning Opportunities report analyzed the region's potential to leverage this workforce and spelled out opportunities for businesses in the region.

Of veterans in Northeast Ohio, more than half are 65 or older, but 44% are considered working age: 17% are in the 55-64 age range, and 27% are 54 years old or younger, according to the report.

About 38% of former military in Northeast Ohio are Gulf War veterans, and those currently making the transition from service to civilian life have both a higher labor force participation rate and higher education attainment than average workers in the region. For instance, the Team NEO report found 77% of the region's Gulf War population has at least some college and an associate's degree well above the 58% regional average.

Jacob Duritsky, vice president of strategy and research at Team NEO points out that the high rate of post secondary degrees held by veterans is significantly higher than that of non veterans in the region.

"If you look at labor force participation (for Gulf War veterans), it's almost 80%," Duritsky said. "Compare that to the overall population in Northeast Ohio, where labor force participation rates hover around 60%, and that's about 20 percentage points higher in terms of the number of veterans who want a job."

He added, "Vets are highly relevant to our region's workforce needs. They are coming home and taking on jobs in accounting, legal and IT and technical support, business management, service occupations, transportation, material movement. You can see a large cross-section which represents Northeast Ohio's employment base,

including manufacturing, professional services, education and health construction."

Military to civilian transition

The biggest challenge for veterans making the transition is translating everything they've learned in the military to civilian-speak, Martin said.

Many vets also do not realize how their very specific skill set applies to industries in need of workers, and employers do not always know how to evaluate the skills of someone coming out of the military.

"It's really a two-way street. A lot of vets, myself included when I came out in 2014, have a bit of impostor syndrome and don't know if they can do the job," Martin said. "I know how to fix an F-16 (fighter jet), but I did not necessarily know anything else."

The fast-paced rate of hiring in times of need makes veterans' job searches even more difficult, in part because of a nine-character code used in the Army and Marine Corps to identify a specific military job. The military occupational specialty (MOS) code is complicated and nearly untranslatable for anyone outside of military service. "When our HR team gets a vet candidate, they will almost always send us that resume and ask 'What the heck does this mean? What type of role should I be looking for or this person?'" Martin said.

MOS codes, even when translated into a job title, do not tell the whole story, Martin said, because there are not always parallel or similar positions to military jobs. That can make things difficult for businesses looking for a standard way of evaluating talent.

Paige Sanchez, who now works at Huntington Bank as a program manager, was one of those transitioning military members who could not find a good fit even though she came out of the service with a master's degree in biomedical engineering.

"I found it very hard to transition. We moved (to Columbus) because of my husband's duty assignment. I didn't have a network, and it was very hard for me to translate my experience to employers and get connected," Sanchez said at a Team NEO event in late May to discuss the report's findings. "I spent a few months actually unemployed as a veteran while I tried to navigate the Columbus-area corporate world."

After about a year of unemployment and underemployment, Sanchez, a 2012 West Point graduate, joined Huntington, which had rolled out a military veteran development program. The goal was to take veterans who were struggling and prove that banking is a safe spot, with lots of job flexibility for military vets with transferable skills. The Huntington program is just one of a number of programs to help veterans leaving service. Programs that connect employers and employees include MilitaryHire.com; a Veteran Educational Access program offered by Cuyahoga Community College; registered apprenticeships eligible under the GI Bill; and a pending U.S. military program that would support veterans' wages during training.

With the right guidance and soft-skill development, veterans can successfully move to civilian life, Martin said. "Veterans know how to influence, how to share a message, how to communicate appropriately, how to problem-solve," he said. "All those things are core functions of leadership."

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