

More employers recruit the military work ethic

By Barbara Hagenbaugh, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Employers looking to hire workers with strong work ethic, leadership skills and diverse backgrounds are increasingly turning to a select group of recruits: members of the military.

Companies across a broad number of industries, such as Union Pacific, Starbucks, Raytheon and Merrill Lynch, are seeking workers for a wide variety of positions as they recruit veterans, sometimes before their time in the service has ended.

Raymon Williams, 28, received five job offers when he left the Navy last year after spending eight years as a nuclear technician working in part on submarines. Williams, who holds a master's degree, is now an engineer for Air Products in Allentown, Pa.

"I got a lot of interest from a lot of different companies," he says.

The firms are motivated by more than a rock-bottom jobless rate, which was 4.6% in January, near a five-year low.

"When you look at our employee base and you see the guys who are very conscientious, who are always early for work, who are clean-cut, have a smile on their face, get the job done and just have a great attitude, many of those guys come from the military," says Jeff Owens, president of Advanced Technology Services in Peoria, Ill.

One-quarter of ATS' 1,700 employees are veterans. The firm, which maintains manufacturing equipment for factories across the USA and in Mexico, has increased its military recruiting efforts in the past few years.

Other companies are boosting their military recruiting efforts or even launching military hiring programs for the first time. LendingTree this month will attend a career fair at Shaw Air Force Base in South Carolina, the first time the online lender will go to a military job fair. Recruiters from the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles recently went to a military job fair to try to find security guards.

Dunkin' Brands, the parent company of Dunkin' Donuts, Baskin-Robbins and Togo's, is launching a program in April called Military Boot Camp, in which it will train people leaving the military to be managers at its restaurants and offer them a career path to eventually become franchise owners.

"A few years ago, it was kind of like one of those niche recruiting areas that not a lot of people were paying attention to," says Sandra Stratton, assistant manager for talent management at Toyota's manufacturing and engineering headquarters in Erlanger, Ky. But now, "Companies are recognizing that they have excellent skill and capability and first-rate training."

John Dowling, managing editor of G.I. Jobs magazine, attributes the increased interest to the greater focus on the military because of the war in Iraq, a low unemployment rate and the looming exodus of baby boomers from the workforce. Four years ago, his magazine, directed at people who are leaving the military, was 32 pages. The December issue was 212 pages.

"There's a horse race, sweepstakes, to see who can capture more of that talent," Dowling says.

Nearly 210,000 members of the military left service in fiscal 2005, which ended September 2005, the period of most recent data.

Although young veterans still have an unemployment rate that is higher than the general population, the stepped-up interest in hiring from the military has given many of them a wider number and variety of opportunities.

Kevin Sharpe, 27, of Boston quickly found a job as a plumber through a program called Helmet to Hardhats, which helps place veterans in construction jobs, when he left active duty two years ago.

"Within two weeks, it seems, I was working," says Sharpe, a former Navy Seabee who spent 5½ years in the military, including time laying gas pipelines in northern Iraq from midnight to noon seven days a week.

Strong work ethic

Keith Newton, 32, of Long Beach works for General Electric, selling and implementing a software package in a job he

started two weeks after leaving the military last year. The Air Force Academy graduate with an MBA and a master's in international business interviewed with three, and sometimes 10, firms a day, when conducting his job search soon after returning from Iraq.

Newton is now interviewing candidates from the military to come to work at GE.

"When you are hiring just anybody, you just don't know what you get," he says. With a veteran, "It helps you define who the person is before he walks in the door."

Employers are impressed by the veterans' strong work ethic and training. Home Depot has found that veterans stay with the company longer than those without military experience, says Marlon Sullivan, senior director of staffing.

Stacie Bearden, who served in the Marines for 22 years while on both active duty and in the reserves, has been with Home Depot since 1999. She says former military members make good employees because they have been tested in ways other people haven't.

"You get people who have been tried and true," says Bearden, 41, of Avondale Estates, Ga., who is director of delivery for more than 2,000 Home Depot stores.

There are other reasons why firms are seeking vets:

- Leadership. Those in the military are often thrust into leadership roles faster than people in the private sector. Newton managed as many as 10 people at a time and oversaw large budgets while in the Air Force and received training in management, he says. Bearden says she at one point managed more than 100 people.

"They've got all the leadership skills that you just can't train without a lot of commitment and investment," says Brian Noviskis, senior director of talent acquisition at Siemens in Iselin, N.J.

- Security clearance. Companies, particularly those that do government contract work, need many employees to have special security clearances. But obtaining such a clearance can be difficult and sometimes expensive if companies are trying to expedite the process. Many members of the military have undergone background checks and have such clearances, making them attractive candidates.

Demand for people with high-level clearances "has grown significantly over the past six years," says Julie Martin, recruiting manager for defense markets at consultant Booz Allen Hamilton in McLean, Va.

- No relocation costs. The government pays relocation costs for those leaving the military, saving employers the burden of paying moving expenses.

- Diversity. Companies seeking to create a more diverse workforce are also turning to the military for recruiting. About 36% of members of the military are minorities vs. 33% of the total population. "The U.S. military is one of the most diverse organizations in the U.S.," Home Depot's Sullivan says. One of the reasons why Home Depot recruits from the military, he says, is to build a diverse workforce.

- Stress management. Many members of the military have had to work under extreme stress. Such experience can be a key asset in the civilian world.

"In the military, you're trained and conditioned to deal with that stress and to respond well and think on your feet," says Troy Ponto, 39, who left the Marines last year after 20 years. The former flight engineer from Raleigh, N.C., is now working as a site coordinator at Advanced Technology Services.

- Patriotism. FedEx last year joined a program for Marines to help them adapt to the private sector after the shipping company's CEO, Fred Smith, who served in the Marines, heard about the military-run program. Not only is the program a good way to identify potential workers, but it is a way of helping people who served, says John Leech, director of recruitment for FedEx Services.

There's no doubt the tight labor market has made companies focus more on hiring military than they would have otherwise.

"With the employment environment the way it is these days, you don't want to leave any stones unturned," says David Carpenter, head of human resources for DavCo Restaurants, which operates 159 Wendy's franchises in the Washington, D.C., and Baltimore region.

Demand for skilled, good workers overrides any concerns that employers may have about the difficulty former military members may have transitioning into civilian life or worries they will be called to serve again if they remain in the reserves, says Tom Aiello, vice president of veteran careers and government programs at Military.com, a website that offers job-search help to veterans. It is illegal for employers to refuse to hire people because they are, or one day could be, in the military, including the reserves.

Lots of job fairs

Efforts to recruit members of the military have led to a proliferation of job fairs, publications and websites seeking to link companies and veterans. The Labor Department, which last year sponsored 17 job fairs as part of its HireVetsFirst campaign, plans to host more than 100 fairs this year.

The publications and websites also offer advice on how to put together a résumé, dress for an interview and follow up with potential employers.

"A lot of these individuals have never interviewed a day in their life," says Sandy Morris, co-CEO of military placement firm Bradley-Morris.

The government also runs programs for members of the military before they leave service to teach them the basics of job searching.

"In the military, you aren't focused on things like selling yourself," says Charles Ciccolella, assistant secretary of Labor for veterans employment and training. "When they come out of the military, they make a jump, it's a transition. It's just like any other transition. It's not always the easiest thing."

Difficulty moving into the civilian world may in part explain why, despite the demand from employers, young veterans are still unemployed at a higher rate than the general population.

The unemployment rate for veterans ages 20-24 was 10.4% in 2006. Although that was lower than the record high of almost 16% in 2005, it was still more than twice the 4.6% rate seen in the general population. The jobless rate for non-veterans 20-24 was 8.1% last year.

A University of Chicago study issued last month suggested the high unemployment rates may be partly because young veterans are taking their time — up to nine months in some cases — job hunting.

That may be a positive if young veterans are looking for the right job, rather than taking the first one that comes along, Ciccolella says.

With demand from employers high, veterans can afford to be choosy, says Ponto, the former Marine now in Raleigh, N.C.

"It wasn't so much that I was being interviewed and critiqued, but I was interviewing them," he says.