



## **Let vets know: We want you**

### **Tax credits, manager training play roles in lowering veteran unemployment.**

By Lisa V. Gillespie - Employee Benefit News

In 2010, the unemployment rate of post-2001 veterans was 11.5% - including 20.9% among vets age 18-24 - well higher than the national 9.1%. Because of this, President Obama has called for two new tax credits: One would provide an incentive for companies to hire unemployed veterans, and the second would double an existing tax credit for hiring long-term unemployed veterans who have service-related disabilities.

"That's the least we can do; we need to do much more. Many didn't quite understand that they would be serving for three or four tours, and it's had a devastating impact," Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis said at a recent press event in Washington, D.C.

Employers hiring a vet returning within six months would get a tax credit of \$2,400, and if a vet was unemployed longer, the credit would be higher. "We need to open up opportunities in the private sector, especially for those that are disabled," said Solis.

However, identifying qualified veteran candidates is a tough obstacle to overcome, since few veterans know or understand how to translate their military service into marketable private-sector skills.

Kyle Johnson, a former Marine officer who is now a human resources professional at a hospital in Oregon, says younger service members have a difficult time navigating the workplace post-military.

"Your typical enlisted guy that's never been to college, they're not going to know [how to create a resume based on military service]; they don't understand how tough the job market is," Johnson says, who, before his departure, collected all of his Marine performance reports from six years and highlighted tasks he found important.

He then enlisted his wife to tell him what she didn't understand. From that, he built a "civilian" resume. "I had to find a way to translate everything."

#### **Translating military experience into civilian language**

Emily King, who four years ago launched Military Transitions, a consulting firm to help companies recruit and retain veterans and provide career coaching to veteran job seekers, agrees with Johnson.

"The biggest challenge is that they don't have experience or [know] the best way to present themselves as a competitive job candidate," King says, adding that the team-oriented focus of the military is a reason veterans are not accustomed to calling out their accomplishments.

"They have no context in how their experience can translate," she says. But on the flip side, HR/benefits managers rarely know how to decipher a military resume, "It literally is a language barrier," says King.

Sodexo, a provider of food and facilities management, actively recruits veterans and has programs such as leave policies, deployed member support and supervisor training.

However, Anthony Scarpino, the company's senior director of talent acquisition, acknowledges the difficulties in translating between military terms and civilian job descriptions.

"We are lucky to have hiring managers who have served in the armed forces prior to joining Sodexo. They understand how certain military experiences can contribute to a candidate's success in our business lines," Scarpino says.

Sodexo employs over 3,000 veterans and guards and reservists. "[Job-seeking veterans] should use tools like MOS Translators on Onet that allows them to enter their MOS [military occupation specialty] code and provide similar civilian job functions. Doing this type of research will help veterans create a resume that is compelling, easily found through key words that the recruiter will search for, and clearly represents the skills and competencies that they will bring to the organization," says Scarpino.

Aside from resume issues, another obstacle is that companies sometimes worry about the consequence of hiring on a veteran, the biggest factor being post-traumatic stress disorder.

However, Bob Cartwright, who leads Patriotic Promise, an organization that helps educate HR pros about hiring veterans, says that hurdle can be cleared by putting more boots on the ground in workplaces, so to speak - creating somewhat of a chicken-egg scenario.

"The most successful programs that integrate veterans into the workplace have veterans managing these programs," Cartwright says, emphasizing the importance of integrating veteran employees into mentoring programs or even the hiring process.

It's a tricky proposition, since successfully hiring veterans can hinge on exactly that - hiring veterans. But for employers up the challenge, Cartwright says, "you'd find yourself in a wealth of talent."

### **Culture counts**

Recruiting a veteran is only the beginning of building a solid veteran employment program; retaining them obviously is key as well. Corporate culture and military culture are often on opposite ends of the spectrum and be-

cause of this, HR/benefits professionals should train managers on the differences between the two and how to effectively bridge the gap.

For example, "if you have veterans in your department, be more explicit about what your expectations are," says Brian Bascom, CEO of the U.S. Veterans Chamber of Commerce.

He says veterans will want to know if direct feedback is appreciated in the office culture. "They tend to give you direct feedback, and institutionally nobody gets their feelings hurt [in the military]. There's a much better chance than with the normal population to get honest feedback. If you cut them off at the knees, feedback stops."

Another cultural challenge can be helping vets adjust to the idea of the working their way up the corporate ladder, despite the responsibility held as a service member.

"In the military, no matter how good you were, if [you were an exemplary] first lieutenant, [and] there was just another average first lieutenant, you'd get promoted at the same time," Johnson notes, adding that in the civilian world he looked forward to being promoted according to merit, not rank. However, he's found that "the military was a large bureaucracy and a large company is a large bureaucracy. They don't always do a good job of leveraging talent."

#### **'Look for the abilities'**

Still, for all the tax credits and training, a change in mindset may be what ultimately lowers veteran unemployment the fastest.

Michael Lang, a retired Army Lieutenant Colonel Quartermaster who's since earned a masters in education, says employers need to "recognize the fact that our military personnel have a lot, if not more, experience than our civilian counterparts," adding even more bluntly that employers need to "stop b.s.-ing about being thankful to our vets. If companies are thankful, then start showing some action and hiring vets."

Sherrill Curtis, the state workforce readiness director for the Garden State Council chapter of the Society for Human Resource Management, asks employers to consider how this population is really that different than, say, an employee who suddenly loses full use of speech or one side of their body because of a stroke, or perhaps loses a limb in a car or industrial accident.

"We need to stop thinking of this talent pool as separate," she says. "If we look for the abilities, we can always manage around anything that requires an individual to perform a job function differently than how we have traditionally done so."