APPROACHING THE VETERANS COMMUNITY TO FILL THE WORKFORCE GAP

Who needs a reliable, accountable, drug-free workforce, anyway? You do, of course. This dialogue between Chris Ford, CEO of the National Association of Veteran-Serving Organizations (NAVSO), and FRA President Deb Hawkinson examines why forest industry, logging, and log trucking employers should seek out veterans to grow their workforces.

Concerns about attracting a qualified workforce to forestry-related work—not only in logging and truck driving but in forestry field work and forest products manufacturing—underlie one of FRA’s most pressing action areas: growing the workforce. FRA is working with NAVSO to learn how to engage the community of veterans and reservists to fill this gap, to understand what strengths and skills these men and women bring to the workforce, and to probe how logging and forestry employers—large and small—can welcome this valuable cohort to their teams.

**DEB:** Chris, as the forest industry supply chain grows out of the recession, the challenge of building the workforce that supports it has grown. We are looking at a skills gap, as well as what seems to be a generational shift away from the land-based industries.

Naturally, the community of veterans comes quickly to mind as a means of filling this gap. As an overview, how would you characterize the veterans community?

**CHRIS:** Veterans comprise the most valuable human resource talent pool entering America’s workforce. Their training, education, skills, characteristics, and experiences are exceptional. If properly integrated into America’s businesses, veterans can help businesses achieve higher financial targets, improve innovation, and expand businesses’ reach. Today’s military veteran is used to living in austere environments often facing daily danger with finite resources and a diverse team. Veterans are not afraid of the difficult jobs, nor do they shy away from emerging challenges. In my experience, veterans are the exact employees businesses need if they’re going to continue to succeed and grow. Corporate Executive Board, a company and measures what companies do best, recently confirmed this point. A study of more than one million

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**The National Association of Veteran-Serving Organizations (NAVSO) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of our veterans and military families. We do this by using technology to join together veteran-serving organizations, companies and government agencies in a national network to improve collaboration, inform research, offer educational programming and facilitate evaluation of meaningful services. Given our broad and deep understanding of the evolving needs of veterans and military families, coupled with our national network of providers and resources, NAVSO is uniquely positioned to assist companies seeking to leverage this talent pool as future employees.**

Learn more at [www.navso.org/about](http://www.navso.org/about)

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employees found veterans to be 4% more productive and to have a 3% lower turnover rate than their non-veteran counterparts.

**DEB:** We can characterize the logging, forest products trucking, and the rest of the forest products community as requiring strong technical skills, problem-solving skills, and a "project" orientation. "Teamwork" is frequently mentioned, but also a strong sense of individual responsibility.

Can you characterize the community of veterans in these terms?

**CHRIS:** Veterans are all about "team." They served our nation selflessly and with a sense of purpose based on a calling higher than oneself. In business, they subjugate themselves for the betterment of the team and the organization. Yet, despite this "team" focus, they remain highly accountable for their own personal actions. No matter if you’re hiring hourly employees with specific skills like electricians or mechanics, or if you’re hiring salaried employees to lead larger teams, veterans bring characteristics you want from all of your employees, like discipline, resilience, agility, and loyalty. Even veterans who served among the most junior ranks have experience in leading small teams, managing multiple, complex projects, and, in the end, delivering the results expected of them.

**DEB:** What pitfalls should an employer avoid when approaching veterans? How would you characterize typical misconceptions?

**CHRIS:** We’ve learned a lot in the last 15 years when it comes to employing veterans. Sure, it’s easy to make some public proclamation to hire 10,000 veterans (we’ll call this "veteran friendly"). It’s much harder to be "veteran-ready," meaning doing the homework necessary to recruit, hire, onboard, and retain veteran talent in your workforce. Assuming you can overcome brand challenges that prevent veterans from even considering your business or your industry, and assuming you can get the veteran on board, it’s important to ensure the representations that drew veterans into your business match their experiences with your business once they’re hired. If veterans soon discover a lack of integrity or authenticity, or a lack of clear focus on mission, they’ll quickly grow dissatisfied and leave your ranks. The good news is, because of all this learning and discovery in recent years, the "hard" work doesn’t have to be recreated, nor do businesses need to build a solid program alone. There are robust support structures to help employers do this well at reasonable rates.

**DEB:** Could you outline some of the tools and resources NAVSO can make available to improve the opportunities interested employers—large and small—can make use of to reach out to veterans?
**CHRIS:** NAVSO’s team collectively has decades of experience with veterans, nonprofit organizations and private sector employers. These experiences allow us to leverage the best practices from each sector, along with our expansive network, to ensure the businesses we serve develop programs that are authentic, organic, and best in class. What’s best about our approach is that companies get high-quality programs without having to build out a robust HR division. When we work with businesses, we focus on these key areas:

- Help businesses create consistent brand presentations, both in-person and online
- Assure consistent messages among key stakeholders
- Demystify veteran experiences, breaking stereotypes
- Create competitively positioned and emotionally resonant messages that differentiate
- Help veterans visualize “fit” at client businesses
- Deliver external partnerships to help with the talent pipeline
- Understand how to translate veteran skills and experiences
- Provide interviewing techniques
- Build trust between human resources and hiring managers
- Leverage existing veterans within your company
- Develop Employee Resource Groups and mentor programs

**DEB:** Tell us about a case of a successful veteran hire that really sticks in your mind.

**CHRIS:** Wow, where do I begin? There are so many examples across multiple sectors and industries. A few anecdotes come to mind.

First, I met a veteran recruiter at a small tech company in the Midwest who shared his experience with his first vet hire. It was to be this veteran’s first day on the job, and he walks into the building about 5 minutes late, in his suit, a bit winded, and slightly sweaty. When asked what happened, the veteran said his car broke down about 5 miles away, and since he didn’t want to be late for his first day at his new job, he ran to work. The recruiter said no other employee, new or not, would have done the same. Instead, they would have called in and maybe showed up the following day. This represents the characteristics found in veterans that you won’t list in a vacancy announcement or find on a resume.

I could give you a long list of such stories, but suffice it to say, these experiences with veterans are common.
Second, and more broadly, let's talk about how a major communications company moved to become the #1 veteran employer in the country. Through the effort of one person in human resources (that is, not through a top-down CEO proclamation or company strategy), this company employed the techniques I just mentioned to move into the #1 slot, ahead of long-standing leader USAA. Through a deliberate approach, this company put in place strong internal programs to ensure that veterans recognized that its corporate values aligned—in more than superficial ways—with those found in the military, and it involved existing veterans to make itself “veteran-ready.” It's now seeing increased market share in its industry and, quite honestly, is growing more rapidly than its leading competitors are.

I won't say all of that success comes from veteran employees, but the timing of both the effort and the results are hard to ignore.

**DEB:** Could you say more about using veterans already employed in one’s business, or in similar businesses, as advocates to interest more veterans in seeking work with you? How have businesses, or associations, put this “resource” to work?

**CHRIS:** Leading companies that attract and retain veteran talent leverage five key stakeholders associated with their company: senior leaders, hiring managers, recruiters, veteran employees, and external influencers. When all five consistently convey the same information about the company (culture, fit, mission, opportunities, etc.), it's easier for veterans to see themselves working there.

One of the greatest groups to leverage is existing veteran employees. Veterans inherently trust other veterans. When existing employees who've previously served tell transitioning service members how great it is to work at your company, it speaks volumes. Identifying veteran employees and asking them to help recruit, hire, and even onboard/mentor new veterans is a great way to advance your veteran employment program and ensure retention of the talent you've worked so hard to acquire. Not only do they help the candidate navigate the hiring and onboarding systems, they help human resource professionals and hiring managers overcome concerns they might have and help them understand the candidate's background better.

**DEB:** In our discussions, you’ve mentioned the misconceptions, or special challenges, surrounding the employment of veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other Service-related disabilities. We've heard that outdoor work, connected to a small community, and being able to return home at the end of each work day, should count as a significant compatibility factor for logging and forest products trucking employers reaching out to PTSD sufferers.

What's truth and what's myth in this assessment?

**CHRIS:** First, we need to recognize that not all veterans are created equal. Some are struggling with mental and emotional challenges in the aftermath of their service, and others have emerged with honors and medals. But in the middle of this bell curve are the majority—the hundreds of thousands of veterans who are at neither extreme. They are fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters; they are black, white, Latino; they are married, divorced; they represent nearly every diversity group in our nation. And, more
importantly, they’re job-ready. They’re looking for a new career that can bring their military service background forward into something meaningful.

For many, that means getting outdoors. The healing properties found by experiencing nature, whether through work or through leisure, are well founded. It’s no different for veterans. Give them a meaningful job, ensure they understand how their job fits into the broader mission of the business, and help them adjust to the new environment, and they’ll exceed your expectations.

I should point out that Post Traumatic Stress is not confined to veterans—some 7-8% of civilians also suffer from it. Among the 12-15% of veterans who do suffer from PTSD, the majority are seeking mental health treatment, and its presence should not be a major concern of any business looking to hire a veteran.

**DEB:** Chris, can you point toward another sector, with some similarities to the forest products industry, that has reached out effectively to veterans?

**CHRIS:** Many industries are actively recruiting veterans. From consulting to software engineers, from plumbing to composite manufacturing; you name it, industries are meeting their emerging workforce demands by actively seeking access to the 200,000 transitioning service members who leave military service every year.

A few of those resemble FRA or specific components within your industry: solar energy, oil and gas, trucking and transportation, and manufacturing. And let’s be clear, the companies aren’t in the veteran hiring game out of mere patriotic obligation. They know from their own experiences that veteran talent adds real value to their company’s bottom line and future growth.

**DEB:** We know that respect and appreciation for veterans runs high among FRA members, and that we can expect good participation in a well-prepared initiative to reach out to veterans. Any final thoughts?

**CHRIS:** First, thank you for your interest in helping veterans find meaningful employment within the FRA ranks. Studies show when veterans can provide for their families, they’ll overcome many of the other challenges they may experience during their transition out of the military. We also know that when they land properly on both feet, they do much more than work 9 to 5. They are civic assets who vote more, volunteer in their communities more, and continue to give back. I’m excited to see FRA leverage its position as an industry leader to help member businesses, large and small, seize this opportunity: to recognize veteran talent and direct it to meet emerging workforce needs. Together, I know our two associations can drive meaningful impacts for both veterans and forest resource businesses.