

Service members are in demand in the private sector

By Philip Walzer

When Robert Walker left the Army in 1996, he didn't know "where to go or what to do."

Walker got three job offers: two in trucking, one in hazardous waste. He ruled out trucking because of his bum knee, so he moved to Missouri to handle hazardous waste.



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Paul Bennett of Lockheed Martin Corp. talks earlier this month to Army Staff Sgt. Donell Grant at a career fair in Norfolk. Adam Sings In The Timber | The Virginian-Pilot

Virginia Beach

Private companies aren't the only ones capitalizing on the military-to-civilian transition. In March, the Virginia Beach City Council appointed the Military Economic Development Advisory Committee. Its goals include strengthening the city's relations with the military and identifying exiting members of the services who can fill local private-sector jobs. That, in turn, will help lure businesses to Virginia Beach, said Warren Harris, the city's economic development director.

Today, Walker would find lots more help. A burgeoning number of recruitment companies have sprouted to place transitioning military personnel into civilian openings ranging from sales to engineering. Many have offices or hold events in Hampton Roads, capitalizing on the area's large military population.

Walker even joined their ranks, to help military men and women land better jobs than he did.

As director of career fair sales for RecruitMilitary, he oversaw a fair earlier this month at Half Moone Cruise and Celebration Center in downtown Norfolk. It drew about 30 employers, including Lockheed Martin Corp. and CarMax Inc., and more than 260 job-seekers who have left or are leaving military service.

At least two other national companies that deal solely with military-to-civilian recruitment - **Bradley-Morris Inc.** and Orion International - have local offices.

Also, two years ago, Landmark Military Media Inc., part of The Virginian-Pilot Media Cos., bought the Destiny Group, featuring an online "job board" with more than 100,000 listings.

The companies say they target both enlisted personnel and officers. They generally collect fees from recruiters, not the applicants. Bradley-Morris' fee often equals 30 percent of the annual salary of the position, **said Tim Best, a principal and vice president based in Norfolk.**

Even with the increased competition and dampening economy, the companies report healthy business.

Bradley-Morris has enjoyed double-digit percentage growth in revenues in each of the past four years, Best said. RecruitMilitary recorded 35 percent revenue increases for the past three years, Walker said.

Last year, RecruitMilitary held 45 fairs; this year, it plans 104, including three locally, he said.

The appeal of military job applicants rests on both quantity and quality.

"It's a constant, renewable source of job candidates," said Bill Stevens, president and chief executive officer of Landmark Destiny Group. "People are coming out all the time" - more than 200,000 a year.

And most, recruiters say, come out dependable, punctual, industrious - all hallmarks of a valuable employee.

"They have a mission-accomplishment approach," Best said. "It's not uncommon for them to spend a day of nonstop work, and very little rest, because they have to get a job done. They have the mentality, 'I don't have to have dinner right now; I need to finish this.' "

Walker said, "We've had companies that hired salespeople who had no experience. The reason is, they're totally dedicated to completing the mission. They don't give up. They have a set goal in mind, and they will do whatever they can to meet that goal."

The military, Best said, also provides experience with diverse work settings.

Many of the leaders of the recruitment companies are veterans themselves. Stevens was a Navy submarine officer, **Best a former Army pilot.**

That, they say, helps them find job connections. "A lot of it is word-of-mouth," Best said. "I'm still in touch with my friends in the military, and I've been out almost 10 years."

Their backgrounds, they said, enhance their job of educating applicants on how to look for a civilian job - go light, for instance, on the military terminology. They also advise employers on the skills the veterans can bring.

"Just because somebody is a mechanic in the military working on ships doesn't mean they can't be a great field service engineer" in the business world, said former Navy Lt. Bob Larned, president and founder of Robert Larned Associates in Virginia Beach, which places former members of the military in civilian jobs.

A supply officer could be an ace in corporate finance, Stevens said.

At the RecruitMilitary fair in Norfolk this month, job candidates said they sensed an appreciation for their skills.

"At a regular fair, I have to break down what I did in terms of what kind of work, what equipment I worked on," said Deron Mills, 23, of Virginia Beach, an electrician's mate who will soon leave the Navy. "Here, they understand it a little bit better."

David Williams, 53, of Virginia Beach, a former operations specialist with the Navy, left "walking with more pop in my step. I recognize that I do have something these companies are looking for."

Not all companies, though, are gung-ho about hiring former military people.

Some clients don't see vets as "out-of-the-box thinkers," said Gail Jackson, executive recruiter with The Lee Group, a search firm in Newport News. "A lot of times you find that someone who's been in the military a while is accustomed to following direct orders: There's not a lot of initiative and creativity that was taking place."

That's not what Chantelle Bradley hears at Spherion Staffing and Recruiting. "I deal with the military every day," said Bradley, Spherion's branch manager for Hampton Roads. "Just being here in this area, it's such a resource for my clients, as well as for me."

She estimated 85 percent of the people she places in technology jobs are from the military.

Norfolk Southern Corp. regularly hires junior officers and senior enlisted people for its training program for supervisors, said Jim Waters, the company's recruiting manager. For hourly positions, such as train operators, it sometimes taps junior enlisted people.

"The caliber of the candidates that we see and their performance after they're hired is very favorable," he said.

Norfolk Southern, Waters said, has felt no need to use military-recruitment firms. "Our results have been more predictable and entirely satisfactory with the direct approach," he said.

Melissa Griffin, human resources manager at Electric Motor & Contracting Co. Inc. in Chesapeake, used to stay away from those firms, too.

The fees were daunting. Plus, she wasn't sure the ex-military members "could step right in and be first-class technicians."

But after the company grew and jobs became harder to fill, she signed on with Bradley-Morris this year.

The first time, "I gave them the job description, not expecting a whole lot back," she said. "Within two days, they sent me a resume. The very first resume, we hired that person."

Since then, Electric Motor has hired two more people through Bradley-Morris.

The veterans, Griffin said, "have a very strong mechanical or electrical background. It established a good foundation that we can build on to suit the needs of our industry."

Working with Bradley-Morris made Griffin's life easier: "I tell them what I need; they do all of the legwork. That's been a huge plus."