

America's Veterans: Strong Capability, Right Attitude

By Scott J. Cameron, IPMA-CP

State and local government budgets are gradually becoming healthier. Federal agencies are bracing for the long-predicted retirement tsunami whose first waves seem finally to be arriving. These developments suggest that government managers everywhere will be looking to hire new talent. Managers and staffing specialists are always looking for that magical and elusive combination of knowledge, skill, ability, and attitude in their new hires. One all-too-often overlooked new hire labor pool is composed of the men and women who have faithfully served in America's armed forces: America's veterans. There is now a new tool that hiring officials and human resource management staff can use to find the right veteran for possible government employment. Before presenting that information, allow me to describe the predicament that America's veterans are facing, and explore why the veteran has a lot to offer civilian public service.



Time to Rally Around the Veteran

Everyone knows that America's men and women in uniform volunteer to serve our country. They often risk their own lives overseas to advance the nation's foreign policy objectives and protect our way of life here in the homeland. For nearly eleven years now, they have been exposed to combat situations in southwest Asia. As those conflicts continue to wind down, veterans returning to the United States face a different set of challenges.

About 11 percent of veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are unemployed. The rate for 18- to 24-year-old veterans of those wars is closer to 25 percent. In contrast, the national unemployment rate has been hovering around eight percent

for quite some time. Clearly, veterans as a group are facing tougher economic conditions than the average American. Yet, they have a lot to offer prospective government employers:

Veterans Are Made for Government Service

America's veterans are a great source of new talent. They represent a large, skilled, eager, proven and now increasingly accessible workforce. Between 2012 and 2015, thousands of veterans will leave the military service. While some of these people will be returning to the U.S. after ending tours of duty in Iraq or Afghanistan, many others will simply be demobilized after serving out enlistments in Europe, Asia, or a military base in your own state. They range in age from their early twenties to their mid-50s. Their educational qualifications range from a high school diploma to a Ph.D.

Veterans come into the workforce offering several advantages to prospective government employers:

- They are already trained. The U.S. government has already invested a lot of money in training them. The Department of Defense spends \$13.7 billion each year on training. That amounts to more than \$4,250 per employee per year; significantly more than most state and local governments spend on their own employees. It exceeds the per capita training budgets of most federal government civilian agencies. DOD invests heavily in training in a wide variety of disciplines, most unrelated to combat. After all, only about 14 percent of those serving in the military do so in combat roles. Non-combat roles covered by DOD training include:

- Law enforcement
- Medicine
- Law
- Logistics

- Facilities management
- Information technology
- Heavy equipment operation
- Motor pool management
- Case management.

Given this diversity of training experiences and the relatively large per capita training investment, the veteran is a well-educated and highly skilled potential employee.

- **Commitment to public service.** Veterans are accustomed to working long hours under unpleasant conditions, in service to the American people. In many cases, they were regularly expected to be willing to risk their own personal safety to perform their jobs. Hiring a veteran means hiring someone who has already demonstrated a very personal commitment to public service.
- **Discipline, organization, respect for government procedure.** Unlike many people who have never worked in government, veterans have a strong understanding and respect for the chain of command. They value and appreciate the importance of following appropriate work protocols.
- **Access to external funding for future training/educational opportunities.** With government training budgets remaining under pressure, it is a real advantage to be able to hire an employee who comes with his or her own training budget. The Department of Veterans Affairs offers veterans a very wide variety of taxpayer-funded training programs. Expenditures on these programs are approximately \$12.6 billion per year. That is nearly \$7,500 for each veteran age 35 or younger. These programs, like the well-known GI Bill, help an individual veteran earn a college or postgraduate degree. They can pay for vocational training and certifications to supplement on-the-job learning. They can prepare a veteran for a skilled trade job.

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By hiring a qualified veteran, you can leverage these federal investments in veteran education. The new veteran employee can be encouraged to take advantage of federal educational programs to become more effective in their current government position. These benefits can also prepare the veteran employee to make an even greater future contribution to the success of the agency.

- **Leadership capability.** Veterans often have had significant levels of supervisory responsibility. Typically, this is at a young age compared to their civilian counterparts. Furthermore, the teams they led were usually highly diverse. They often were expected to perform at a high level under demanding and stressful conditions.
- **Mission focus.** Government employees typically are in public service because they care about the mission of their agency. They do not see the job primarily as a path to financial gain. Veterans have had a very similar experience. Military pay is notoriously low. It is dedication to mission and desire to sustain one's team that drives performance in the military. This work ethic can be readily transferred to the career civil service.

Initiatives to Increase Government Hiring of Veterans

A number of state and local governments, and certainly the federal government, have a long history of adopting laws, regulations and policies to promote the hiring of veterans into public service positions. Until very recently, however, there was no systematic way of identifying veterans as a distinct labor pool. Rather, individual

veterans would learn about and apply for government jobs on their own, on an ad hoc basis. During the staffing process, the veteran's application would receive whatever special consideration the law allowed. There was no easy way for government employers to reach out to qualified veterans as a group.

On Nov.13, 2009, President Barack Obama signed Executive Order 13518, Employment of Veterans in the Federal Government, launching Veterans Employment Initiative. It directs federal agencies to take a number of actions to increase veteran employment in the federal government.

The executive order creates an inter-agency council to promote veterans hiring. It requires agencies to set numerical targets for veterans as a percentage of agency new hires. The order also requires agencies to develop plans to increase the hiring of veterans.

New Tools for Accessing the Veteran Labor Pool

One of the outcomes of the executive order was the creation of the Veteran Employment Services Office (VESO) within the Department of Veterans Affairs. Led by Dennis O. May, VESO oversees VA for Vets, a suite of hightech and high-touch tools and resources to recruit, retain and reintegrate Veterans into the workforce.

VA for Vets includes a web-based database of career ready resumes uploaded by the veterans themselves. Resumes often reflect extensive coaching by VA certified career coaches skilled in translating military jargon into civilian government vernacular. In fact, VA for Vets offers the most advanced integrated military skills translator and career assessment tool available. There are now more than 11,000 veteran resumes in the database, and the number is expected to grow with the upcoming drawdown of troops.

On top of the database are a series of sophisticated tools designed to:

- Match military skill sets to potential civilian government jobs,
- Rank resumes by their relevance to particular positions, and
- Produce a list of individuals who are

possible hires for the client agency to interview.

VA for Vets was initially designed to easily find significant numbers of veterans who are potentially qualified for positions within VA itself. However, given the success of the program, and with the support of the interagency council, VA is moving forward with plans to implement the system across the federal government. As of October 2012, other federal agencies are preparing to take advantage of the tool. VA understands that the majority of government positions are in fact filled at the state and local levels. Discussions are therefore currently underway to determine how this tool may be made available to state and local government employers.

Take the Next Step

Based in Washington, D.C., VESO employs a full time staff of which more than 70 percent are Veterans. VESO occasionally hosts VA for Vets veteran hiring events in various parts of the country, which may be of interest to state and local governments as well. However, the Web-based technology will be made available to client agencies. It is literally just a phone call or email away. Agencies can either get direct access to the VA for Vets system after being trained by VESO, or they can sign up for an arrangement where VESO does the research for them and provides them with candidates for positions. You can learn more about the services VESO can offer your agency by visiting the website at vaforvets.va.gov or by contacting the VESO office at (202) 461-7759.

The time is right for all levels of government to take advantage of the significant investment that society has already made in the men and women who have served in uniform; men and women who have already demonstrated their commitment to public service, and who have enormous talent to contribute to society here on the homefront.

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