

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Matching military veterans with open jobs requires specialized training for employers 01GEJ1WR6J60BMQ6C0DT6VH53C

CATHY Now here on the program we've talked about the problem of Minnesota facing a very tight job market.

WURZER: Businesses are looking at a number of creative solutions to find and hire more employees. Amy Johnson believes an underappreciated source for workers is Minnesota's military community.

Veterans face a number of challenges transitioning into the civilian workforce even when companies are eager to hire them. Amy is a 15-year military spouse, and the founder and president of a workforce solutions business for greater Minnesota called Cardinal Consulting Solutions. Amy, welcome to the program.

AMY JOHNSON: Thank you, Cathy, for having me.

CATHY There's always a personal story behind everything. I'd like to start with yours. I know your husband transitioned

WURZER: into the civilian workforce about 10 years ago? Tell me how that went for your family.

AMY JOHNSON: That is true. And that was not an easy road for us. So when one member in our family is broken, it really does affect the entire family. And so my husband and I have three boys. And at the time, we had two, and they were little. And so thankfully, it didn't have long term effects on them necessarily, but it was definitely a learning experience.

We had to start over in a new life. But this is different than just starting over. A military family is used to starting over each time they change duty stations. But each time, they have the support of the military throughout that process. The military will help with finding housing, the needs are met easily, and of course, you already have work lined up when you get to your next duty station. You're given a built in community that lives the same life as you, and there's a lot more predictability.

And when you transition out of the military, you have officially exited. And you lose access to those things that would have otherwise made a move much easier. And another thing is the network that's created while in the military is suddenly gone upon an exit. So it's now incredibly difficult to find people that understand the life that we've lived.

CATHY It sounds as if you were almost unmoored in your life. Does that make sense?

WURZER:

AMY JOHNSON: Yeah. Even reconnecting to family and friends. You would think-- You know, that is the reason that we did return. We wanted to get back to our family, and make sure that our children knew their grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, because we come from a large family. But we came back different people because of the experiences that we went through. Granted, I'm not a veteran, I'm a military spouse, but I had a five-year crash course, and it changed who I was and who we were.

So it seemed that people expected us to return as the same person we were when we left, and that just isn't how it was. And that's a hard adjustment.

CATHY And so you changed, as you say, because of your experiences in and around the military. You come back home,

WURZER: and I would presume that you you've lost that military identity, right? Did that make it tough to get a job?

AMY JOHNSON: You know, my husband, the soldier, most definitely. And it was very hard to watch him through that experience. So as a soldier in the army, in his case, from his personal experience. He's earned his rank that he's respected for in the army. It's a level of respect that he has for service every day that he went to work and reported to his job.

He had a structured routine, organizational awareness. So he knew his place in the army, and was respected for it, and knew what he was going to go do every day, and what his objectives were. And then pride, where he stood in the army. And then once he got out, thinking about what he left, and really missing the camaraderie that he had just days prior.

CATHY WURZER: I know your husband has some very unique skills. Can you run them down a little bit for us here in terms of those skills and what other skills veterans bring to the workforce?

AMY JOHNSON: What's interesting, and what I'd like to start with, is typically the bias. I come from the world of human resources, 20 years. And so a lot of military related resumes has come over my desk. And so listening to hiring managers and leaders, they see a resume that speaks veteran and they say, yes, hire them. They'll show up. They'll be on time. They're reliable. And they're a hard worker. And so I feel like that's putting our veterans in a box.

And the truth is, though veterans may have those traits, they're all still human, and they each have their own story, they're their own person. And not all veterans walked the same path, or saw the same things. And in our case, the experience that my husband went through gave him a renewed appreciation for life, and reinforced his work ethic.

CATHY WURZER: I'm wondering because there are so many different jobs in the military, how do some of those skills translate into a civilian workforce?

AMY JOHNSON: So there are a lot of resources that do exist that help employers and service members with that transition, like translating resumes from military language to civilian language, and trying to skill match in the civilian world.

So my husband, as a soldier, he had never interviewed. So seven years in the military, and he joined the military later, after-- not directly out of high school. You would think that when you're interviewing somebody in their late 20s or early 30s, they've done this before. And in many cases, when you're interviewing a veteran, they've never been in an interview. And so this is a first for them.

And not only have they never been in an interview, but they have no idea that they're about to be misunderstood by the person that's interviewing them. They've spoken this military language for however many years. This is something that we talk about in the workshop that I do now. It literally is a different language. And if you talk to somebody in any branch, every branch, all six branches even have their own language.

So sitting across the table from somebody that has never lived that life, they won't understand. And so that's the life that this individual knows. And so that creates a language barrier immediately in the interview. Which then allows the interviewer to lose their confidence. And so it's a really difficult situation.

So when my husband was interviewing, I helped him the best he could to translate that resume as well. But it just doesn't seem like it's ever enough. Because they do so much in the military. My husband, actually, he was in logistics. And he actually won an award for the best warehouse in the United States army while he was in because of his performance [AUDIO OUT].

And so telling that to somebody across the table as an example of maybe your greatest achievement, I mean, it's hard to understand or fathom what that really means. But yeah, he went through the resources that he was provided, and was told that he needed to be out on the forklift. And he wouldn't get a greater job than that, and he needed to start over in the civilian world. So that really hurt his pride as well because of the identity that we spoke of earlier.

CATHY Because of all you've experienced, you went and you started your own business, which is so interesting. How are you trying to match the skills and the passions of veterans with businesses looking to hire someone? How's it working for you?

AMY JOHNSON: It was during the pandemic that I started my business, taking a leap of faith, deciding I think I can help solve these workforce issues, at least by helping employers identify new talent pools that are underappreciated. We kind of take a reverse effect, and we teach the employer.

So we teach the employers where to find the veterans, but not only where to find them, but when they find them, how to understand them, and appreciate them for the culture, the skills, and the value that they bring to the table. And then we also help create inclusive workplaces for those veterans.

CATHY How's it going?

WURZER:

AMY JOHNSON: Really good. So I would love to help every veteran that transitions to Minnesota, I'm in Greater Minnesota, and so just helping them find the quality of life that they're looking for. But that group is so protected. They're very hard to reach. I live in Ashby, Minnesota, which is a town of 400 people. It's pretty small. I serve West Central Minnesota and most of Greater Minnesota as well. And one thing that I wish was easier is that we can find each other.

When my family transitioned, I visited numerous veteran community organizations to try and find other military families so that we could share our stories, and we could create that missing network. I never did. And I was told that we wouldn't get the help that we were looking for unless my husband was disabled. And technically, my husband does have a service connected disability, but it isn't bad enough to get the help that we were looking for.

And so 10 years later, I'm sitting at a baseball game next to another mom, and come to find out her husband is in the Guards, he was deployed for a year recently. And she lives one mile from me. And I couldn't help her. We couldn't help each other. And so I just wish-- I wish it was easier to find each other.

CATHY All right. Amy, thank you so much for the conversation. We wish you all the best.

WURZER:

AMY JOHNSON: Thank you so much, Cathy, for the opportunity.

CATHY That was Amy Johnson, founder and president of Cardinal Consulting Solutions. You can learn more about Amy's business at ccsworkforce.com.

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