



Employing Veterans: Werner Electric

A SkilledUp Case Study



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With the [federal government](#) and [individual states](#) offering hiring incentives, companies are turning their attention to hiring veterans.



Talent Lab is investigating this trend by talking to companies that employ veterans about their experiences: the benefits, the challenges, and the lessons learned.

Here, one company shares its story.

The company: Werner Electric, Minnesota

Werner Electric is an electricity distributor in Minnesota. Van Meter Inc. and Werner Electric of Wisconsin acquired the company, founded in 1920 as Northland Electric, in 2001.

According to Chief Operating Officer Nathan Lewis, a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps, veterans have always been a part of the company's workforce.

"Werner always sought out or appreciated what veterans or what people in the military have to offer," he said. "A few years ago, three out of the four senior leaders in the company were veterans."

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At present, Werner employs 270 people. Eighteen of those employees have identified themselves as veterans.

Companies must rely on veterans to self-identify. Although interviewers are allowed by law to ask a job candidate if they served, veterans sometimes choose not to respond. If a veteran does answer, he or she is required only to provide answers about length of service, rank or grade at time of discharge, and the type of training he or she received while in the military.

Lewis says many businesses in the private sector tend to pass over qualified veterans for jobs because hirers don't recognize military experience as being equivalent to experience in the business world.

"It seems like the private sector wants to discount that experience," Lewis said.

He's experienced this himself: As a Marine, Lewis was in charge of bringing communication equipment to Iraqi leadership. A multimillion-dollar project conducted in a high-stress environment, Lewis was leading a team of managers and they were working across language barriers. He was 22 years old at the time.

After he left the Marines, he found companies he interviewed with didn't seem to count this experience as management experience. Werner, he said, does: "We're not going to discount that experience."

How to Find Veterans

Because Werner has employed so many veterans over the years, the company has a large military network. Many of the veterans who've come to the company were recommended by veterans already employed by Werner.

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"As soon as we hear that there's a veteran in our network who is looking for an opportunity, we seek them out. There is something about their skill set that we get extremely excited about," Lewis said.

Werner often meets with veterans who are transitioning from military to civilian life, because they are often the ones looking for work and reaching out to their own networks. It's difficult to do a lot of job searches during an officer's last year on a base, he says.

Werner doesn't rely only on the personal networks of its employees. The company also uses [Mytasca](#), a service run by Campus Media Services, which provides information about where to find veterans who are studying in college. In addition, Werner posts jobs to [Minnesota Diversity](#), a site that shares jobs directly with veterans groups.

"We definitely post roles on sites that seek out diversity, whether they be minorities, women and veterans," said Lewis.

Benefits

Werner hires veterans for many reasons, but above all, their leadership experience.

“The one thing I see most veterans have outstanding experience in management,” he said, pointing out that even a lance corporal, an enlisted Marine two ranks above a private, is expected to give orders.

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“To me, the leadership experience they get is very solid,” Lewis said.

Another important skill, he says, is decision-making under pressure.

Veterans, he says, have “the ability to make decisions and have a structured system for making decisions.”

The military teaches decision-making as a skill, but many veterans who have served in war also have experience with high-pressure decision-making on the battlefield.

“They have the ability to multitask and deal with a fast-paced environment,” he said.

Government Incentives

According to Lewis, Werner does not apply for federal incentives that reward companies for employing and training veterans. Despite this, these programs are worth noting.

Employers who hire veterans may qualify for Work Opportunity Tax Credits (WOTC). A business is eligible for this credit if it has hired a veteran who has received SNAP benefits, been unemployed, or is disabled.

There are also more structured programs.

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), employers that hire service-disabled veterans may qualify for incentives and tax credits through the Special Employer Incentive (SEI) program, a six-month job-training program

for veterans who face challenges in gaining employment. The VA selects eligible veterans, pairs the veterans with employers, and reimburses up to 50 percent of the veteran's salary during the program, among other benefits.

There is currently a federal bill in the pipeline to provide employers of veterans with a different kind of benefit. In January, the House of Representatives passed the [Hire More Heroes Act](#), an act that would allow businesses to hire veterans without them counting as full-time employees under the Affordable Care Act, so long as those veterans are covered by any health care program administered by the Department of Defense. The bill is still awaiting approval from the Senate.



Challenges

One challenge in employing veterans, Lewis said, is that when individuals have spent a career in the military, an organization with a clear purpose and mission, they can feel aimless when they start working in the private sector.

“There is a very strong sense of purpose and a strong sense of identity within that,” Lewis said.

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The challenge for a company that wants to keep its veterans is in giving them a purpose that keeps them motivated.

Werner deals with this challenge in a few ways.

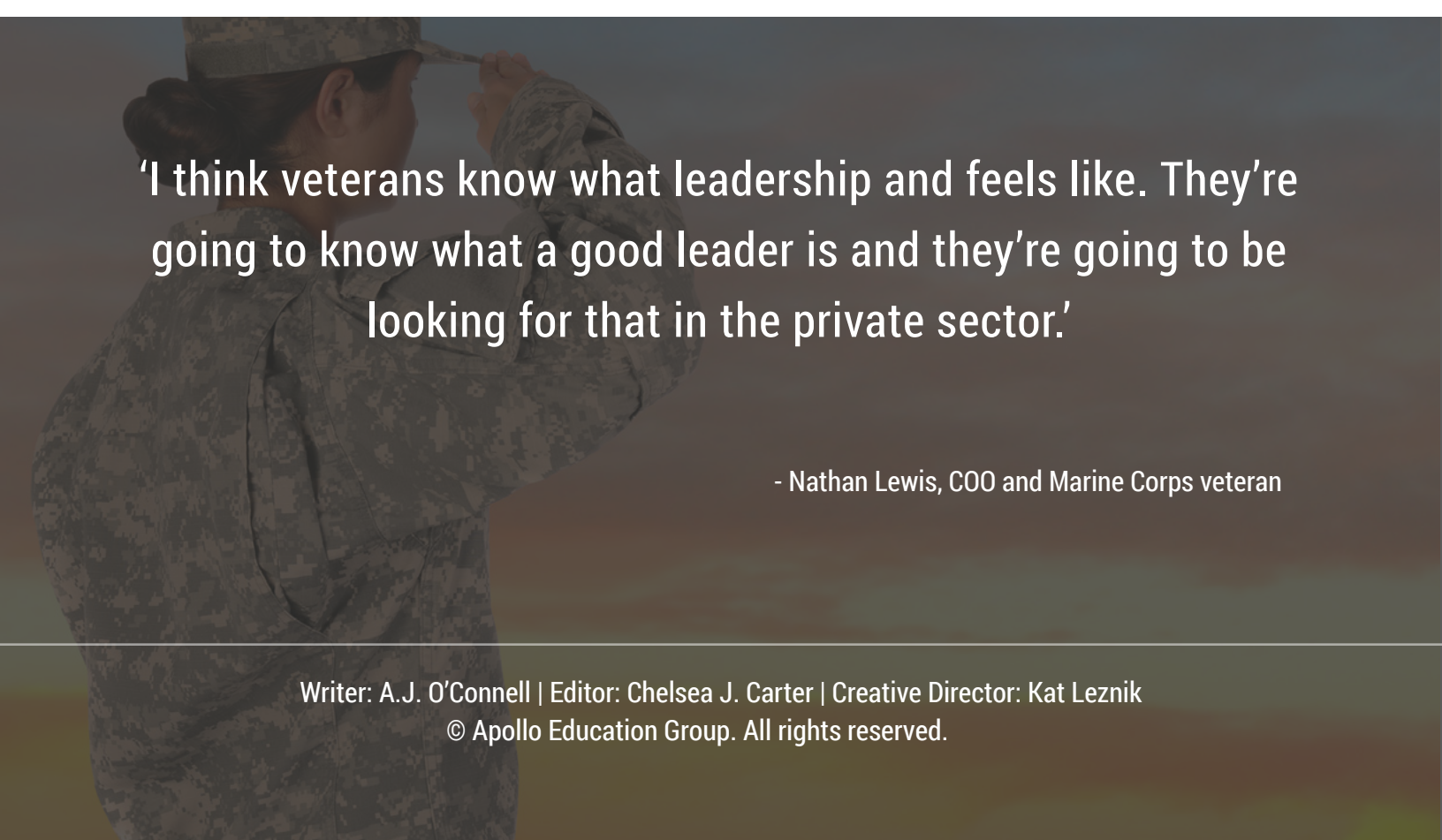
First, the company recognizes that everyone’s definition of “purpose” differs, and allows employees time and money to pursue outside passions.

“We do pay for employees to participate in outside events,” he said. Employees are allowed paid time off to pursue interests or work with charities. Werner also matches the funds employees raise for their causes.

Werner encourages employees to volunteer within the company itself on employee-led teams: the company's safety team, for example, is employee-led.

Leadership is important to military veterans, he said.

"I think veterans know what leadership and feels like," he said. "They're going to know what a good leader is and they're going to be looking for that in the private sector."

A woman in a military uniform is shown from the side, saluting with her right hand to her forehead. She is wearing a camouflage uniform and a matching cap. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape with a blue sky and a green field.

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