



From the Editor-in-Chief

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Make a veteran's day

Talented individuals, tax cuts are part of the motivation to hire these former members of the military

What's not to like about hiring military veterans? They have operated in some of the most stressful situations possible. They understand what needs to be accomplished from a tactical viewpoint so that key strategic goals can be achieved. They know how to work effectively in teams. They are not afraid of hard work.

And those metal fabricating companies that swear they can't even find people to show up on time should realize that veterans typically don't have that problem. If anything, they are going to be early for any appointment.

Jason North, an American Welding Society certified welding educator at the Merrill Institute of Welding (MIW), which resides at Merrill Fabricators, Alma, Mich., is an early bird too. He's opened the doors to the welding lab at 6:30 a.m. for veterans enrolled in the 10-week welding "boot camp." Those veterans are there for extra lab practice or to spend more time with the training materials.

"My last group, they were showing up really, really early. It was really cool to see," North said. "That shows me that they are really into it.

"That's nice for me. I don't have to instill that in them," he added.

Merrill's second class for teaching military veterans welding skills is under way. The institute graduated its first veteran class in late October 2012. Before that the company held and graduated three civilian classes, each with about 10 students.

Grants from the Michigan Economic Development Corp. (MEDC) fund these programs. Students do not need any prior welding experience to enroll in the classes. By the end of the program, which entails almost 400 hours of welding lab experience, the graduates receive the nationally recognized American Welding Society Level 1 certification. (MIW is accredited by AWS and follows its Schools Excelling through National Skills Standard Education curriculum.) They will have learned to fabricate and weld metal in all positions and demonstrate proficiency in shielded metal arc welding, gas metal arc welding, flux-cored arc welding, and gas tungsten arc welding.

The focus on veteran's training came about when the MEDC approached Merrill to see if the company was interested in targeting these former members of the U.S. military. At one time Michigan had one of the highest unemployment rates (29.4 percent in 2010) for veterans returning from wars that started after 9/11. That unemployment rate has been cut in half since then, but Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder still called it "simply unacceptable."

"Our executive team and our group here really wanted to do something for our veterans," said Chad Sibley, MIW's director. "This became a partnership with the MEDC because they are helping to fund two classes, and we are actually funding the full third class ourselves. We also have added leadership courses to it."

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—Jason North, Merrill Institute of Welding

Out of the first veteran's class, eight graduated, and Merrill Fabricators hired five of the graduates. Today Merrill has 190 employees and is always looking to add more in anticipation of business growth in the near term, said Nick Kraft, Merrill's recruiting specialist.

North added that this training effort isn't solely for the benefit of Merrill Fabricators. These graduates have a nationally recognized credential that isn't specific to the place where they learned the welding craft. They have skills that are transferable to any metal fabricating setting. In fact, during the first veterans' training class, a representative from another local metal manufacturing company visited to make a pitch to the welding students, with no Merrill employees in the classroom.

"All of the companies within this area are all talking about the same thing. They lack skilled people," North said. "To hire a veteran, there are so many tax credits that employers can access. It just makes sense

"But the biggest thing is having the right set of skills. I feel that if they go through our program, they'll have a great foundation in welding, and they are going to be very marketable," he added. "Right now we have about three different companies in our area that are very interested in hiring some of these vets out of this program."

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the U.S. unemployment rate for veterans was 7.6 percent in January, more than a full percentage point higher than the January 2011 rate. Even in the face of those statistics, some metal fabricators claim they can't find people with the right skills. With thousands of military personnel likely returning to the civilian ranks in the coming months as the U.S. looks to wind down operations in Afghanistan, metal fabricators will have an even greater chance to add quality employees to their ranks.

Veterans have sacrificed as part of their service to this country. Let's see what the metal fabricating industry can do to serve them.

Dan Davis

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