

NextOp bridges job gap for veterans, companies

STORY BY CHRISTINE KNAUER

The American workforce is shifting. Workers are moving into new industries and from lower-paying jobs into higher-paying management positions vacated by retirees. They're spending more time caregiving and prioritizing a better quality of life over working long hours. It's left companies scrambling to find talented, experienced workers who can keep the lights on, services running and customers happy. It's especially true in aviation.

Meanwhile, veterans and transitioning military personnel need help finding sustainable employment in a competitive civilian market. Between online job hunting, resume writing, electronic applications and adapting to life as a private citizen, finding and landing a good job can be downright daunting.

NextOp, a nonprofit organization that provides employment services to veterans, helps solve both challenges. In six years, NextOp has helped more than 2,700 veterans find employment while simultaneously solving recruitment issues for companies.

Founded in 2014 by a group of former military leaders

and industry executives, NextOp operates offices in Houston, Texas, and New Orleans, Louisiana, but its services are available to veterans and transitioning military members across the United States.

Serving ranks E3 to E7, NextOp provides comprehensive, one-on-one employment services such as identifying skills, resume writing, application assistance, interview preparation and more. Each candidate works with a dedicated employment coordinator.

The employment coordinators don't share all resumes with companies or all jobs with candidates. They take time to match qualified candidates for specific roles as well as follow up with placed candidates periodically to

see how they're doing in their new careers.

"These veterans have fantastic skills that can translate into a career," said Patrick McManus, employment coordinator for NextOp. "They just need help seeing how their skillset translates, which is in more ways than they think, navigating the environment and communicating their skills in a way that makes sense to the civilian population."



WEBSITE: nextopvets.org

WHAT THEY DO: NextOp provides free employment services to veterans and transitioning military personnel.

EMPLOYEES: 12

FACILITIES: Offices in Houston, Texas, and New Orleans, Louisiana

Founded: 2014 by a group of former military leaders and industry executives

AEA MEMBER SINCE: 2021



NextOp has helped more than 2,700 veterans translate skills learned in the military into civilian employment opportunities.

Like McManus, most of the members who make up the NextOp management team, board of directors and advisory board are former military veterans. McManus, a U.S. Air Force veteran, served 20 years in support of Operation Sea Signal in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, Task Force Katrina in New Orleans, Operation Deep Freeze in Antarctica, and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, among other assignments. After the military and prior to NextOp, McManus served as a project manager for a Louisiana company, building commercial diving equipment.

In addition to veterans coming to NextOp, the

nonprofit recruits candidates directly from military bases and veteran organizations as well as through partner programs.

“We strive to recruit and begin working with candidates as early as one year prior to their end of service to help them avoid periods of unemployment or underemployment after leaving the military,” McManus said. “We also have veteran candidates who find us after they’ve left the service and are already in local communities and unemployed or underemployed.”

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The NextOp team includes (left to right, front row) executive director Stephanie Drake; employment coordinator Tiffany Bradbury; development director Shannon Cranson; Louisiana employment coordinator Stephen Sider; (left to right, back row) employment coordinator John Zavala; programs marketing coordinator Maddie Zimmermann; employment coordinator Patrick McManus; Louisiana expansion manager Chris Brown; employment coordinator Joe King; programs director Allen R. Whiteside; and Louisiana regional manager Ben Armstrong.



NEXTOP INC.

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Partnering with the AEA

Originally, the organization focused on filling positions in oil, gas and other energy-related industries. Over time, it has expanded and diversified to include employment opportunities in aviation, construction, banking, health care, technology, logistics, manufacturing as well as others.

NextOp recently partnered with the Aircraft Electronics Association to help bridge the gap between the employment needs of military aircraft mechanics leaving the service and civilian companies' need to hire experienced aviation technicians.

"There is a good percentage of aircraft mechanics and service members who are mechanically inclined and are quick learners transitioning out of the service," McManus explained. "So, in this case, NextOp partners with companies who have a need for aircraft mechanics in the workforce and provide vetted quality candidates for open roles.

"Our only limitation is finding the right candidates in the right location at the right time. We're not limited to veterans or companies we currently work with. With the AEA's broad membership base across the United States, this opens up a large number of opportunities for the veterans we serve."

Win-win for businesses

In addition to former and transitioning military personnel, NextOp works closely with companies, helping to provide outreach to veterans, consulting on job descriptions, NextOp programming, recruiting, hiring assistance and more.

"The biggest advantage is having a direct pipeline to skilled and diverse candidates who have been pre-screened and possess skills employers value," McManus said. "Today's transitioning veterans are highly skilled, dedicated and adaptable individuals with an unparalleled work ethic. Every year, some \$17 billion is spent on military training and education, making the U.S. military one of the top employment training programs in the world. We partner with employers across multiple industries, many of whom have a strong desire to recruit and retain veterans but lack the resources and knowledge of how to do so."

NextOp also recently partnered with the U.S. Department of Defense to assist with the SkillBridge program. The program allows service members to gain valuable private industry experience by going through civilian training, apprenticeships or internships while they're finishing their military service.

All of NextOp's services are free to both service members and companies. The organization is funded through supporters, including corporate donors. Typically, NextOp has 100 to 150 veteran and military service personnel in the queue at any given time with capacity to assist more. □