



★★ HIRING ★★ HEROES

Employing veterans is about more than honoring their sacrifices. Why you should consider recruiting former and current service members.

BY SARAH PFLEDDERER ASSOCIATE EDITOR

From aiding in the destruction of bombs as a radio field operator in the U.S. Marine Corps to destroying weeds, among other tasks, at The Grounds Guys of Greater Little Rock, Ark., Andrew Wagner's transition to the civilian sector—primarily the Green Industry—was somewhat seamless.

Then again, his stake in landscaping started awhile ago. When he was 10 years old, his dad rolled a push mower in front of him and instructed to go earn some dollar bills.

Wagner credits his four-year military service, including two tours to Afghanistan and one to Iraq, for his success in the industry, though.

"It's a great place for military [people] for the simple fact it's fast-paced and you're always doing something new," says Wagner, a foreman. "In the military that's what we do every day, something new and fast-paced."

To that end, it's Wagner's military mindset and work ethic that make him, as well as other military veterans, a fine fit for the Green Industry, says Russell Hall, president of The Grounds Guys of Greater Little Rock.

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Wagner, the only veteran of a nine-man staff, has quickly risen through the ranks at the company. He was promoted to foreman shortly after his hire in February and is slated for promotion to supervisor before the end of the year.

“He knows what it takes to make a business successful,” Hall says. “We are rewarding him as quick as we can to show him we really appreciate his attitude and efforts.”

The most admirable qualities of a veteran like Wagner, Hall adds, are punctuality, discipline and leadership. Wagner also will keep colleagues in check for quality workmanship, which Hall says is a plus for a boss.



RUSSELL HALL



THERESA AUSTIN

Parallels in sectors, skill sets

Theresa Austin says the discipline veterans attain from their service is most transferable to the Green Industry and what makes them stand out from their peers.

The COO of Lambert Landscape Co. in Dallas speaks from experience, too. Austin served in the U.S. Air Force from 1987 to 1992.

“The military requires great discipline and a get-it-done attitude,” she says. “We used to have to get up at 4 a.m. every morning, run 3 miles and then get to work when most people are just waking up.”

As a hiring manager, she adds: “Service personnel put a lot of investment in what they do and are great employees. Every vet I’ve hired has proven that.”

For Austin, it was her exposure to total quality management in the Air Force that’s proven useful to her career in the Green Industry. The process of putting a design from paper into reality and then sustaining it, for example, must be through a “regimental process,” Austin says.

“In the Air Force, standard operating procedure guides all decision-making,” she says. “This mindset works well at Lambert’s because standard operating best practice is how we approach our work. There’s a very specific way we execute our jobs, maintain the properties and measure performance. Military training is really compatible with that.”

Benefits in workmanship, finances

Hiring veterans also can come with financial benefits to business owners.

The Veteran Opportunity to Work (VOW) to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 provides tax credits to

“[THE LANDSCAPE INDUSTRY IS] A GREAT PLACE FOR MILITARY [PEOPLE] FOR THE SIMPLE FACT IT’S FAST-PACED AND YOU’RE ALWAYS DOING SOMETHING NEW. IN THE MILITARY THAT’S WHAT WE DO EVERY DAY.”



—ANDREW WAGNER, THE GROUNDS GUYS OF GREATER LITTLE ROCK, ARK.

employers who hire veterans struggling to gain employment. Those tax credits include the Returning Heroes and Wounded Warrior Tax Credits.

The Returning Heroes Tax Credit provides a credit of 40 percent of the first \$6,000 of wages (up to \$2,400) to employers who hire veterans unemployed for at least four weeks and a credit of 40 percent of the first \$14,000 of wages (up to \$5,600) for employers who hire veterans unemployed for more than six months.

The Wounded Warrior Tax Credit provides a credit of 40 percent of the first \$24,000 of wages (up to \$9,600) for employers who hire service-disabled veterans who have been unemployed for more than six months.

These programs expire Dec. 31. A move in Congress is required to extend them to 2014 or to make them permanent. Though it’s uncertain if it will do so as of press time, Congress has expanded and extended them in the past.

Chris Vedrani, owner of Planted Earth Landscaping in Westminster, Md., took advantage of a \$1,500 tax credit four years ago when he hired Justin Spittal, a project manager with the company. Spittal served eight years in the Army National Guard.

Vedrani says the financial advantages to hiring Spittal were a minor perk. He concurs with other landscape business owners that veterans’ greatest value to the Green Industry lies in their discipline and, in Spittal’s case, organizational skills.

“For him, organization may stem from coordinating plant deliveries to scheduling equipment,” Vedrani says. “The discipline and the organization are a key part of that role.”



He adds military members also bring loyalty, and says: "They made a commitment to the country and completed it. That spells loyalty and they're going to be loyal to your company and loyal to your client. That's a big plus."

Challenges to consider

Hiring military members may not always go smoothly, though, cautions Dirk Bakhuyzen Jr., president of PROCARE Landscape Management in Byron Center, Mich.

With two veterans and one National Guard member, who is his daughter, in the makeup of his 35-member team, Bakhuyzen says hardships can surface from employing military members.

His daughter, for example, was sent to Advanced Individual Training for the National Guard during PROCARE's midseason. (This branch of the Army allows soldiers to maintain their military training part-time amid working or acting as a civilian.)

Although PROCARE is operating sufficiently in his daughter's absence, Bakhuyzen says it's not always easy.

"You want to leave their job open for them but you can't necessarily do that," he says. "You may have to fill that job temporarily until they get back."

Still, employers should know the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) is a federal law in place to protect military members against discrimination and safeguard their civilian jobs, ensuring their position is available upon return from trainings or deployments.

Another challenge Bakhuyzen once had was with a veteran employee who suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder after a deployment to Iraq.

"We stood by him for a long time but he ended up ultimately having to leave," he says.



CHRIS VEDRANI



JUSTIN SPITTAL

ENLISTING RESOURCES

American Jobs for America's Heroes, a nonprofit alliance with the National Guard, helps unemployed Guard members, veterans and spouses obtain skills and jobs in the private sector. Companies can post job openings for free online and are also assigned a case manager who will actively match National Guard candidates with job requirements.

The Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) has signed on to this program's honor roll of trade and professional organizations promoting the effort. For more information or to post free job listings online, visit CenterforAmerica.org/register.html.



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MY MILITARY EXPERIENCE

How two Green Industry business owners have turned their military service into private-sector success.



Daryle Johnson and his wife, Linda, attend PLANET's Renewal & Remembrance ceremony nearly every year with grandchildren.

Daryle Johnson

CEO of All American Turf Beauty in Van Meter, Iowa
Service: U.S. Army, 1954-1956

"I was 18. I'd worked one summer, gone two quarters to college, ran out of money and volunteered for the service. I spent 16 months in Korea. I got out when I was 20. They wouldn't let me buy a beer when I got back.

The G.I. Bill gave me a chance to complete college. That's a reason I went to the service.

I majored in agronomy [at Iowa State University] and went to work for Swift Agricultural Chemicals, a division of Swift & Co. that was large in the fertilizer business. I worked there in sales and management for 17 years. We marketed and sold fertilizers and pesticides to golf courses, lawn care people and farmers, so we were deeply involved with the Green Industry. At that time chemical lawn care was just starting. There

weren't any program chemical lawn care companies doing business in Iowa, so I started the first chemical lawn service business, All American Turf Beauty.

The first two years were difficult. We obviously didn't make any money. It takes a while to get started and you've got to stick with it. We started in 1976 and in 1983 we were an Inc. 500 company, one of the fastest-growing privately owned companies in the U.S.

We financed our expansion with our own profits. About every two years we would move into another market, when we developed enough money to buy the equipment and hire the people. We financed our own growth rather than getting huge loans. We had 67 percent compound annual growth over five years each year.

Anybody that's been in the service knows you have to have a certain amount of discipline. That's also necessary to start a business. It's not easy. You've got to stick with it and be disciplined or else it falls apart."

—As told to Sarah Pfledderer

Brandy Prettyman

Co-owner, The Grounds Guys of Omaha, Neb.

Service: U.S. Army, 2001-2004; husband Dan Prettyman served in the U.S. Army from 2001-2007

"Both my husband, Dan, and I were in the Army. We're both Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans. We were both in Iraq for the initial go around in 2003. I got out during 2004. He came home in 2004 and went back out again in 2004. He pretty much did back-to-back trips.

When we got out of the Army we both went into government contracting. Last year we decided we wanted to do something different. We both knew we wanted to start a business but starting a business from scratch wasn't the way we wanted to go. We knew the VetFran program was available to us and we started looking at The Dwyer Group. The episode of "Undercover Boss" that Dina Dwyer-Owens was on featured The Grounds Guys. I said to Dan, "You like being outside, and I could run the business side of it." It was just a good fit. We created our corporation in March 2012.

Last year we started with just myself and Dan. This year we currently have 10 employees. During the summer we actually surged to 14. We have the Offutt Air Force Base grounds maintenance contract. We provide maintenance services for over a thousand acres. It's a \$1.4 million contract over five years. Dealing with a federal contract is never easy, but our experience helped us hone in on what was important and what needed to be done. We knew this is where our specialty was.

It has been an exhausting year, but it's also been very rewarding being able to run your own business and know you control how well you do.

The one thing about the military that prepared me the best to run a business was being able to roll with the punches. In the Army I wasn't in a leadership position; I was a specialist when I got out. You learn as member of lower enlisted to just roll with it. Learning how to diplomatically react to your [military] team leader or a drill sergeant is similar to reacting to a customer. You have to find a way to explain why you did what you did.

Another thing the military taught me is having a structure and knowing that structure. You really learn how to empower your subordinates. As an owner, you cannot control everything; it's the same as being a squad leader or platoon leader. There are so many tasks that have to be completed to keep the mission going. You can't do them alone. You have to depend on your team. One of the best lessons the military teaches you is it's not just about you. We either succeed or fail as a company."

—As told to Marisa Palmieri



Brandy and Dan Prettyman met in the Army; today they co-own a The Grounds Guys franchise.

» WEB EXTRA

To read about L.G. Scott Landscaping & Tree Service, a Pennsylvania landscape business operated by a military family, visit the Web Extras section of [Landscape Management.net](http://LandscapeManagement.net).

Landscape business owners, he says, should not be deterred from hiring veterans dealing with the aftereffects of deployment, though. They just need to be attentive to their needs.



DIRK BAKHUYZEN JR.

Attraction between parties

The advantages to hiring veterans in the Green Industry, Bakhuyzen says, far outweigh the downsides. It's for that reason he hopes to recruit more veterans going forward.

"The experiences I've had with veterans and active (members) is that they're very job-focused. They take instruction easily, listen and try to follow through on everything," he says. "They're not whiners."

Hence its name, Military Veterans Landscaping (MVL) was formed from the notion veterans and the Green Industry mesh well, says Chris McDonald, managing member of MVL. The company was largely established for the purpose of employing veterans in the Green Industry.



"WHEN YOU BRING SERVICE MEMBERS BACK THAT ARE LOOKING FOR EMPLOYMENT, THEY ARE STRONG, ABLE-BODIED INDIVIDUALS. A LOT OF THESE GUYS ARE LOOKING FOR A JOB AND THEY'RE WILLING TO WORK HARD NO MATTER WHAT THE SECTOR IS. WHEN THEY PUT ON OUR UNIFORM THEY GIVE 100 PERCENT."

—CHRIS MCDONALD, MILITARY VETERANS LANDSCAPING

Based in Washington, D.C., MVL is mainly staffed by veterans, with the exception of some seasoned landscapers for training purposes.

"When you bring service members back that are looking for employment, they are strong, able-bodied individuals," McDonald says. "A lot of these guys are looking for a job and they're willing to work hard no matter what the sector is. When they put on our uniform they give 100 percent."

After a 10-year service in the Navy, McDonald cofounded MVL with John Yori in January 2012.

While he had no experience in landscaping, McDonald joined the industry for an obvious comparison between it and the military, which is they both require outdoor work.

"I liked getting outside. I enjoyed working really hard," he says of his service, and adds of his landscaping career, "I love that you go to a property and it's a mess. You tear it up and put something back more beautiful than before."

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★★HIRING HEROES★★

The outdoor aspect, Hall agrees, attracts veterans to the Green Industry.

“Being in the military, they are used to hard work and working outdoors a lot,” Hall says. “People who sign up for the military, they’re the type of person who enjoys the work we’re doing.”

Veterans, Austin adds, like the structured environment of a landscape business and may be beneficial to a company looking to put structure in place.

“Having military management experience is a skill set that can be a strategic advantage for entrepreneurial companies seeking to build efficient systems and practices,” she says.

These comparisons are the reason many landscape business owners seek out veterans for employment, too.

“It’s hard work, long hours, hot, cold.



I think [the military] provides some of that before they get here,” says Vedrani, who actively recruits veterans from Hire Heroes USA. The nonprofit organization trains job-seeking veterans for employment in the civilian sector. It creates engagement between employers and veterans via job postings and offers a database of veteran candidates to employers.

For other business owners, the drive to hire veterans goes beyond gaining a dedicated staffer.

In Bakhuyzen’s case, it’s about returning a favor.

“I’d like them to work for me just for the satisfaction of knowing I can give back to someone who gave something to me and my country,” he says. “If I can help them achieve their goals after service, that would be a great thing.” **LM**

Just the facts

★ **270,000**

Estimated number of active military, Reserve and National Guard members discharged annually. Statistically, about 32,000 of those veterans will join the ranks of nearly 1 million veterans already unemployed.

SOURCE: HIREHEROESUSA.ORG

★ **10%**

The unemployment rate for Post-9/11 veterans in August.

SOURCE: BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS

★ **49%**

The rate of unemployed members of Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America who don’t feel employers are open to hiring veterans.

SOURCE: IAVA’S 2012 MEMBER SURVEY

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