

Putting veterans to work

BY EMILY O'DONNELL SUN CHRONICLE STAFF | Posted: Sunday, August 18, 2013 11:15 pm

MANSFIELD - Forty-five percent of veterans need help finding a job, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reports.

And, many vets say one of their biggest challenges is communicating to potential employers how their military skills might apply to civilian jobs.

Now, Covidien, the health care product provider headquartered in Mansfield, is trying to address the problem.

The company, which employs 1,500 workers and about 450 to 500 veterans, linked up with six other life science businesses in Massachusetts to host free career training workshops for veterans, the last of which ended on July 29.

Michael Dunford, Covidien's senior vice president of human resources, organized a pilot program of Edge4Vets, a career development initiative run by the Human Resiliency Institute at Fordham University in New York City.

Dunford, who served as a reserve officer in the Marine Corps, said he learned how the workshop benefited veterans in New York and wanted to bring the program to Massachusetts, where life sciences is the state's fastest growing job sector.

"Veterans have a number of skills that make them good candidates for jobs in life sciences," Dunford said. "They've been trained to work hard to meet deadlines in extremely tough environments, and veterans have a deep sense about how to lead their peers."

Human resources representatives from Biogen Idec, Vertex Pharmaceuticals, Fresenius Medical Care, Pfizer and Haemonetics, along with Covidien, served as mentors for 31 veterans during three workshops once a week for three weeks from July 15 to July 29 at Biogen Idec in Cambridge.

Tom Murphy, director of the Human Resiliency Institute at Fordham and founder of Edge4Vets in 2011, explained the details of the workshops.

"The first workshop is about clarity. We teach the veterans to identify the skills they learned in the military such as duty, dependability and leadership, and how those strengths make them more marketable in the job market," Murphy said in a phone interview.

"They're qualified for these kinds of jobs, already. We just try to help them bring it out," he said.

The next week, participants decided which life science jobs they wanted to target and mentors from sponsoring businesses helped rework their resumes. The final workshop brought veterans face-to-face with top ranking HR reps at each of the seven companies, Murphy said.

Dunford added to Murphy's program by guaranteeing each veteran job interviews with three of the seven Edge4Vets partner companies.

"We're not guaranteeing employment, but networking directly with employers is more effective than sending their resume to a generic HR email that a real person will most likely never see," he said.

Though this summer was the first introduction of the workshops in Massachusetts, Dunford said the program was a success, and added that Biogen Idec hired one veteran participating in the program after just the first session.

The Covidien rep said often little changes in how veterans interview for jobs can make big differences.

"One mistake a lot of veterans make is using military acronyms and abbreviations that non-veterans don't understand," Dunford said. "We work with them to describe what they did in the military using civilian terms in the life science industry."

Murphy said many veterans still have a military mind-set, especially if they recently returned from duty.

"Each branch has a culture where everybody is responsible for each other, but civilian life isn't like that," Murphy said. "They have to make the switch from 'we' to 'I.'"

Attleboro resident Daniel Ross, 40, who participated in Edge4Vets, said the experience was "invaluable."

"It really helped me get my foot in the door," said Ross, who served in the Coast Guard for 12 years and is now unemployed.

After he returned from duty in 2012, he was looking for a federal job, but none were available in the Attleboro area. Ross found out about the program through his job search and the local veterans affairs office.

"In the Coast Guard, I worked with local law enforcement to inspect the safety of certain facilities," said the father of two young children. "Through Edge4Vets, I found out that my training can transfer into a job in quality assurance."

Ross interviewed for a job at Covidien and Vertex.

Former Army officer Paul Darragh, 57, of North Attleboro, said he, too, was impressed.

"I can't say enough good things about this program," Darragh said. "It helped steer me in the right direction of my job search, and the networking was phenomenal."

After leaving the Army in 1992, Darragh earned master's degrees in business administration and information technology from the University of Massachusetts Boston.

He said mentors at the workshops pointed out that he had a broad resume, and that writing what he described as a "vision statement" allowed him to focus on what he wanted to do.

"It took me a solid day to write, but it helped because I had to define what exactly I was passionate about, and what I wanted to do with my life," Darragh said.

Another vet living in the Attleboro area, who asked not to be identified, said he has a job, but used the program to gain a higher position.

The former Marine said he had trouble adjusting to civilian life after he left the service in 2001.

"The workshops helped because mentors taught me how to utilize skills I never thought would come into play again," the 2005 Bridgewater University graduate said. "They coached me, instead of telling me what to do, which was great."

The 32-year-old said he interviewed for a job at Fresenius, and, though he won't hear back for another month, is optimistic about his chances.