



EPISODE 16

Recruiting Veterans: A Hidden Arsenal of Top Talent

- Introduction:** Welcome to Strategic Insights, brought to you by PrideStaff. On each episode, we bring you interviews with leading management and employment experts from across the country. Your host for Strategic Insights is Brad Smith. And now, here's Brad.
- Brad Smith:** Hello, and thank you so much for listening in to Strategic Insights from PrideStaff. I'm your host, Brad Smith, and we have an amazing episode today.
- Brad Smith:** I really want to set the stage for this episode by sharing a few words. One of those is respectful, efficient, selfless, trustworthy, dedicated, hard working. And think to yourself; are these the qualities of the perfect person you'd like to hire? I'll say for myself, that for me, I would love to hire this person. I'd love to work closely with this person. I'd love to lead this person because I know they're going to be hard charging. I know they're going to put their all into what they do every single day.
- Brad Smith:** The great news is that most armed forces veterans really fall into this category. They share these qualities. And with a bit of cross training, they can become highly valuable additions to our teams. They can become the type of people that are great to lead and the type of people who become leaders themselves.
- Brad Smith:** In this episode, we're really going to focus and talk about why military veterans make amazing employees. We're going to talk about what you can do to attract the best of the best of this talent. Joining me in this conversation is Robert Calamia, owner and strategic partner of the PrideStaff, Fort Lauderdale office. Robert, thank you so much for joining us today.
- Robert Calamia:** Great. Thank you very much, Brad. I look forward to this opportunity to talk to everyone.
- Brad Smith:** Robert, in addition to being a highly successful staffing agency owner, you have some military experience yourself. Can you share with me and the listeners a little bit more about your background and how that really helped shape your life?

Robert Calamia: Absolutely and I appreciate the opportunity and the privilege to talk about this.

Robert Calamia: I joined the Texas Army National Guard when I was about 19 years old. I served six years as a cannon crew member. I had a 155-millimeter Howitzer. I was in field artillery. I left in about 1995 as a Sergeant E-5.

Brad Smith: Robert, you were in field artillery. So, when thinking about this, there really isn't a civilian job that aligns with that directly, and that's a case for a lot of military veterans. You finish up your military career, you come out, you don't exactly know where to go. So, if you don't mind just at a very high level, talk to a little bit about how your military experience and how that experience in field artillery really helped you personally and professionally.

Robert Calamia: Great. Well, I'm going to start with a little story first. Before I joined the National Guard, I was enrolled at The University of Texas at El Paso. I was doing very poorly. I didn't know what direction I really wanted to go in my life. I had always been attracted to the military. I was actually in the Army RTC program there at UTEP as well. I thought I'm going to drop out. I'm going to go in the infantry, ranger. I wanted that whole nine yards and to be gung-ho and to go for that experience.

Robert Calamia: My parents were not excited about that prospect. I made a deal with them that I'd join the National Guard first to see if I liked it, and then if I did, I could always go active if I needed to. I couldn't pay tuition. I was working in a minimum wage job and hating life. I was basically very immature.

Robert Calamia: When I went to bootcamp, it was like this epiphany that hit me. I was in full combat gear, running behind a tank. My water was so hot in my canteen you could have washed dishes with it, and carrying about 60 pounds on my back, covered in dirt. I remember saying to myself, "You know what? College isn't so bad. I love my parents. College has air conditioning." It really matured me very quickly. When I came back out of bootcamp, in my AIT class, I was a star student. I was a star citizen. It really shaped me even to be who I am today, just that short experience in the six years I served.

Robert Calamia: You mentioned coming out as a cannon crew member on a Howitzer. Yeah, there are no transferable direct skills out there for this, but what it did do is it shaped me as a person. That's just as important as coming out with any kind of certificate or any kind of skillset you could imagine, because I was able to always operate in a high stress environment. There was nothing that I felt that I couldn't do or accomplish, and it taught me how to present myself under pressure and not be emotional and fragile. It gave me self-discipline as well.

Robert Calamia: Now, those things that I mentioned are transferrable and ideal skillsets in any position out there. So even though I may not have had that direct skillset, I

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think those types of softer skills, if you will, are directly transferrable to the job market. A lot of our military members out there today have that; we just have to find it. Again, I'm not talking about every person in the military. It's like in any organization, you have the good and the bad, but people tend to come out of the military very solid, very mission-oriented and focused.

Brad Smith: Robert those skills that you mentioned, arguably, are more important than those "required skills" that we see in many job descriptions. Those are things that they're very hard to teach on the job. But you've learned that through your military career, that gave you the perspective to understand that coming out of this, maybe the real world, maybe the job and the requirements of that position, weren't as bad as not having that perspective. Build on that a little bit.

Brad Smith: I'd like to think from the employer perspective. How can we as an employers or internal HR managers or recruiters do a better job of aligning the job skills from the military with our current job openings?

Robert Calamia: Excellent question. It takes a little work to do that. Sometimes it does take some knowledge as well. Sitting down with a veteran and actually asking some in depth questions about their experience is going to be helpful to kind of pull that out of them too. But if you think about it, a lot of these guys are coming up with skillsets, but we have to translate from their military experience to the civilian. Let me give a working example.

Robert Calamia: When I started really working towards recruiting veterans, I dealt with a gentleman who was out of Iraq, out of the army, and his military specialty was air conditioner repairman. All he did in Iraq was set up air conditioners in field units. Tremendous experience, but he lacked the resume writing skills that somebody would have, so he had a problem translating that military experience to a civilian resume.

Robert Calamia: It takes part of the strategic partner to also communicate with employers and translate some of that experience verbally that maybe they have problems expressing on a civilian type resume. I contacted air conditioner repair groups that were always looking for this type of talent. Even though he lacked the civilian certificates, they were able to bring him on because they knew that there was a very short learning curve, and to help him get those civilian papers in order to be successful in his job. But it does take work to be able to translate that. In the military, they work with a lot of people. They have out-processing counselors that help them prepare resumes, but there's still a lot of work that has to be done.

Robert Calamia: I think employers are going to really enjoy having military-oriented folks on their teams because one, they're extremely loyal. They're used to following process. They're always looking to improve a process, and simply detail-

oriented. In the military, they tell you to "pay attention to detail", that's the phrase. They have a deep respect for authority as well. They're always going to say, "Yes sir," "No, sir." They're going to respect the chain of command. When you compare that to a lot of the youth of today, it's very refreshing to have someone with that kind of military etiquette, so to speak.

Brad Smith: It certainly is. Yeah. You certainly laid a good case and groundwork for why hiring vets can be so beneficial from the employer side. I love that concept of looking through and seeing what skills can be transferable, and how we can shorten that learning curve and be a little bit more flexible in our requirements and bring that vet in. And oftentimes they're an amazing employee that has a lot of longevity and drives productivity, not only of themselves, but of others around them, which is great. So, for those companies that are listening to this and they see that value of hiring vets, where do you really start? How do you go about attracting these types of skilled professionals?

Robert Calamia: First of all, I think it's important to advertise that you're veteran friendly, but before you do that, it has to be understood what that actually means. It's commitment. If you say you're vet friendly, that means you're going to be open to understanding that they might not possess the perfect civilian type of certifications that you may require. You have to be flexible to maybe train these people to get those civilian certifications, like I was mentioning about the AC installer earlier. It can't just be a moniker that you throw up on a business card or a PowerPoint slide. It is a real commitment to understanding the community and what these folks do, what they've been through and what their expectations are, and ideally what they're capable of. And it's appreciating that.

Robert Calamia: Also, you have to involve yourself with the veteran community. Like I said, it's not just throwing a label up. Does your organization support veteran types of organizations out there? Does your organization hire military spouses? Are you going to be flexible for those people that may be in the reserves or National Guard in order to take in that type of personality into your organization? You might have to be able to let them go on a weekend or a week for their deployments or what have you. But what you get in return is so rich, it's absolutely worth it.

Brad Smith: Robert, I want to build on something that you talked about a little bit. Obviously, there's different branches of the military. You were a reservist, which is a little bit different. Tell us more about the value that reservists can bring to the civilian workforce.

Robert Calamia: Good question. You have your active-duty personnel and then you have your reservist and guardsman. Your guardsman also have a state mission as well. During hurricanes floods, riots, or anything of that nature they may be deployed very quickly for those types of missions as well. Reservists are

working day in, day out. They're called a citizen soldier. They could be your neighbor. They're just out there working every single day, but one week in a month, two weeks a year, they're working a full-time mission for their respective service. That has to be respected and complied with by federal law. But again, you're getting that type of personality, and they may have other types of civilian skillsets because they are a full-time civilian as well.

Robert Calamia: Also, I would recommend recruiting at these types of locations as well; the Reserve Center, the Armory. For example, here in Fort Lauderdale, we had a reserve unit that was heavy equipment operators. Sometimes, if you talk to the right people, they'll let you set up a table on a weekend and recruit because they know that they're citizen soldiers, but some of them are looking for work too. We were able to place some people at the airport operating heavy equipment simply because that's what they did in the military one weekend a month, two weeks a year. It worked out perfectly. And they came with the softer skillsets we were talking about in the beginning.

Robert Calamia: Again, it has to be understood; sometimes these folks are deployed for national security purposes. They could be deployed up to a year. It could be three months. It just depends. But you have as an employer, that's what I was talking about, you have to be able to accept that flexibility in order to be truly veteran friendly.

Brad Smith: So, we need to be a little bit more flexible, and having that flexibility is going to get us people that are more dedicated, that are detail-oriented, that come with a great work ethic. Are there any other challenges that come along with hiring vets? Is it just about flexibility or are there some other concerns that we should be aware of?

Robert Calamia: Sometimes people come out of the military and they could be what we call high-speed, low-drag, where they're very gung-ho, very mission-oriented, let's knock this out today, and that doesn't always fly in the particular work environment or the corporate culture of certain organizations. So that has to be toned down sometimes. That's a talk between the HR professional and the military member to where it's not coming across as an insult, but more of a how to blend in with the current culture. "Keep those attributes that attracts us to you, but you have to dial down. You're not going to be yelling at people or giving orders, especially to everyone that you work with."

Robert Calamia: Sometimes too, people come out of the military they've been receiving overseas pay, they have commissary privileges, they have free healthcare, and they come into the civilian world thinking that they're going to be matching all that in a job. That's the biggest rude awakening that I've dealt with veterans coming off active duty. It's a real shock to them entering a civilian role because in their mindset, they have all these skills that they could directly apply, and that's not always the case. That takes some real hard counseling. Sometimes

that leads to a depression of the veteran as well that you have to deal with because they're just having a problem adapting to the real-world environment that they're coming out to.

Brad Smith: Terrific. Now Robert, I know PrideStaff has many military veterans on staff from top leadership all the way down to entry level positions. Talk to us a little bit about how PrideStaff can help with recruiting and uncovering great vets for other employers, other companies out there.

Robert Calamia: Sure. What we did locally, we had a local group that expanded to a national level before unfortunately they closed down, it's called Patriot Placements, and they were helping vets find work in the civilian world, and I partnered with them. They were feeding me resumes of people that were trying to move to Fort Lauderdale or were present and were veterans. So, it acted as a whole other stream of resumes for me that I didn't otherwise have. Also, they worked with military spouses. That's a whole other category that should be tapped into as well, because these folks they served our country, essentially just like the vet does. Because they have to move around a lot, sometimes they lack the certification or the education, but they're just as qualified to work somewhere. Tapping into that group is also very valuable.

Robert Calamia: Reaching out to your local military bases, if you have any in your area is also advisable because they have outplacement offices that are constantly working with soldiers who are leaving the military and are looking for work. You could even hold resume writing classes, introductions, et cetera, with that group. There's also another group here we worked with. It was an organization that helped homeless veterans get furniture, get an apartment, et cetera, lined up. We not only donated to that group, but we also worked with them in trying to find applicants as well.

Robert Calamia: Sometimes some vets just simply run out on hard times. We ran across an individual who worked on a nuclear submarine actually, extremely intelligent, but was dealing with his mother's sickness and cancer and ran into severe financial issues because he couldn't work and he was taking care of the mother. The mother passed. And quickly, he found himself homeless. We bought him work boots. We helped him find a job. I even drove him. I know it's a no-no, but I drove him from the shelter to the job location for an interview. He got the job. He was one of their star employees, and he was able to catapult into a \$70,000 a year job because of his intelligence.

Robert Calamia: It's just those kinds of things. We took a chance on someone, but because of those intrinsic values and attributes that we talked about earlier, he was able to drive forward and just need some help. So do not start thinking that, "Oh, I'm not going to look over here because they might not have money." You never know what could be there.

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Robert Calamia: Also, I joined a West Point alumni group. I am not an alumni of West Point, unfortunately, but because I was prior military, and because of my mission of trying to help veterans find work, I was able to gain access to officer level individuals who were looking for work, or they were managers or leaders in their organizations and they hired me to recruit for them because of my association with the military and what I was trying to do.

Robert Calamia: Also, one more thing. I also looked for HR managers on LinkedIn and whatnot from companies who were prior military and had discussions with them and told them, "I'm trying to hire them vets," and they brought me contracts just because of that very reason, and we placed a lot of folks there.

Brad Smith: Robert, you brought up so many good points there. I don't even know where to begin to unpack that. I love that you've made so many relationships with veteran-based organizations in your market. You've reached out to alumni groups. You're thinking through military spouses and their needs and how we can open up the talent pool to those individuals who might have challenges finding a job. There's just so much value in what you're doing there, and I know that PrideStaff offices across the country are doing similar things.

Brad Smith: So for those listening, if you're thinking to yourself, "Wow, hiring a veteran and having all of these great soft and hard skills that come along with that would be great," reach out to your local PrideStaff office. Visit pridestaff.com. Make a connection to your local office. They can work with you on opening up your jobs, your opportunities to this amazing talent pool.

Brad Smith: Robert, thank you so much for your time today. Any closing words of wisdom?

Robert Calamia: One last thing I'd like to add. Less than 10% of the US population ever puts on a uniform and writes that blank check with their life basically to serve this country. These are unique people. They have strong work ethic and strong value sets and they've served our country, and we got to think too, it's time to serve them as well as they enter the civilian workforce.

Brad Smith: Robert, you certainly sold me. I'm definitely looking to bring more people with this level of experience, these types of skills into our own organization. I love that you've taken up that effort in PrideStaff and are helping and employers with that effort as well.

Brad Smith: Thank you again so much for your time, and thank you everyone for listening.

Robert Calamia: Thank you all. Appreciate it.

Brad Smith: Take care.

Closing:

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