

Tech industry turns to veterans to fill jobs

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Peter Mallett, Staff Writer ~

Information technology executive Patrick Shaw says he has a solution for his industry's workforce shortfall: teach and then hire more Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) veterans.

The Toronto-based tech industry consultant is turning his attention to the education sector to create this army of highly skilled IT and cyber security experts from veterans and transitioning members of the military.

"We envision developing their software skills through training in IT [Information Technology] and cyber security; it will have tremendous value for our industry and for Canada as a country," says Shaw.

With that in mind, he and his business partner Jeff Musson founder of tech networking group Northof41, launched a fast-track distance education learning program called Coding for Veterans. The program runs in partnership with Ontario's Durham College and the University of Ottawa. Students can attend similar classes in person elsewhere, but the course is entirely geared towards attending classes from locations across Canada through the computer application Moodle.

It's all about supply and demand. The information communication and technology sector needs approximately 182,000 staff by the end of the year to fill new cyber security analyst, software programmer, and data analyst jobs.

"We decided we could do something about this," says Shaw, noting the untapped market of the retiring military members.

In the last 15 years, approximately 140,000 military personnel have been discharged and transitioned to civilian life with another 25,000 more expected over the next five years.

The seed for the Coding For Veterans educational program was planted two years ago following a conversation Shaw and Musson had with a representative from the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS). The CSIS employee commented that transitioning forces members and veterans were "very well positioned" to support the IT field in the private sector.

Fast-forward to late 2019 and the program was ready to launch.

Coding For Veteran's syllabus says it "vows to provide men and women from the CAF with a unique opportunity to develop highly sought after technical skills, preparing them for success in the rapidly expanding innovation economy."

Ten students began their studies in December 2019. Each post-secondary institution's course is geared towards developing a different skill set.

The Durham College courses focuses on introductory software development and basic computer coding required for most computer programmer jobs, such as how to set up a network and ensure its security. Shaw says this instruction would be suitable for those people with limited experience in the field of information technology.

The course at University of Ottawa is more advanced and focuses on cyber security and its management.

Students in the Coding For Veterans program must undergo an introductory phase. At the end of their course work they enter a mentoring phase where they are assisted in finding employment.

The time commitment is roughly five hours a day for eight months, with course instruction on demand and viewable any time of day through the Moodle app.

"We designed our program this way because we wanted to take into account the specific needs of all veterans, including those with commitments at home and to their families, and also those with injuries or other medical issues whose ability to spend five continuous hours of studying may be limited."

They have already tipped off senior executives at some of Canada's largest corporations such as IBM and Toronto Dominion Bank that a new breed of IT employees is in the making.

"Most of the people we talked to at these companies immediately said 'yes, we will take everybody we can get from that program'," said Shaw.

For more information on Coding For Veterans visit their website: codingforveterans.com

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