

Veterans have right stuff to fill tech talent shortage Non-profit program recruits ex-military personnel to train as coders

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By Kevin Crowley

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A new non-profit is trying to create a pipeline of tech talent by tapping into the stream of military personnel who leave the Canadian Armed Forces each year.

Coding for Veterans provides former Canadian military people with basic and advanced training in software programming, with an emphasis on the cybersecurity sector.

“The beauty of this program is that it helps to fill a need in the tech industry while also providing stability and good paying jobs to those who served our country,” said Jeff Musson, Executive Director of Coding for Veterans.

He was in Waterloo Region this week with the Coding for Veterans caravan, part of a promotional campaign that is stopping at Royal Canadian Legion Halls across Ontario in the lead up to Remembrance Day on Nov. 11.

Musson, who is also the President and CEO of Toronto-based web and software company Dynamite Network, came up with the Coding for Veterans idea while wrestling with a problem that’s all-too common in the Canadian tech industry — how to find enough skilled employees.

“In a moment of frustration, I looked at it and said, If I want to create my ideal software programmer, what skills do I want them to have? Things like attention to detail, leadership, teamwork, can-do attitude. And then I took a step back and said, holy cow, these people are in the military.”

Musson canvassed colleagues in the industry, the federal government and the military. Together, they came up with the idea of recruiting military veterans, assessing their experience and aptitude for programming, and then leveraging existing veterans’ transition funding to offer job training.

The courses are provided fully online through the University of Ottawa.

The intro-level course teaches basic programming skills. The advanced level course addresses cybersecurity and data analytics, and includes writing the test for the internationally recognized Certified Information Systems Security Professional (CISSP) designation.

“We learned that there are 45 to 50 occupations in the military which are already heavy into IT,” Musson said. “So we needed to create an advanced stream. The second thing is that (many) military veterans have security clearances, so that it is very attractive to employers.”

Brad Bierman knows first-hand about the skills and aptitude that ex-military personnel bring to technology companies, especially the cybersecurity industry, which has a growing presence in Waterloo Region.

A former master bombardier in the Canadian Armed Forces, Bierman currently works as a threat operations engineer with cybersecurity company Arctic Wolf Networks, which has an office in Waterloo and deep ties to the region.

“It’s the defensive mindset that I think, from the security perspective, is really attractive,” he said in an interview. “(Veterans) already have that idea about protecting something... and I think that is something that gives them an edge in doing the kind of defensive work that we do.

“And from the coding aspect, (the work) is quite logical, it’s step by step, you’re thinking things through, and again that’s something that you get drilled into you in the military,” he said. “You’re also attacking different problems, and they are not necessarily problems that have been solved before, and it’s the same thing with coding — you have new problems to address.”

Although Arctic Wolf wasn’t previously familiar with the Coding for Veterans organization, company spokesman Dan Deeth said “Arctic Wolf has recognized the value of military experience in terms of building our business.”

In addition to hiring a number of ex-military personnel at both its Canadian and U.S. locations, Arctic Wolf is in the process of establishing a new security operations centre in San Antonio, Tex. One of the reasons for locating there, Deeth said, is the presence of the nearby Lackland U.S. Air Force Base and the potential to tap into skilled ex-military personnel.

Last month, Arctic Wolf announced a US\$200-million Series E funding raise, which will help accelerate growth at the company’s Waterloo operation, which focuses on R&D and security operations. Arctic Wolf employs more than 200 people in Waterloo now, and plans to create an additional 100 jobs here by the end of 2021.

The company, which is based in Eden Prairie, Minn., was co-founded in 2012 by CEO Brian NeSmith and Kim Tremblay, a University of Waterloo computer science graduate and veteran of the Waterloo Region tech sector who retired from the company earlier this year.