

El Paso Workforce Transitions Veterans into Cybersecurity Careers

While El Paso may be the sixth largest city in Texas based on population, it is home to Fort Bliss, the largest Army training area in the U.S., encompassing nearly 1 million acres. It is hard to overstate the economic importance of Fort Bliss on El Paso, with more than \$1 billion, it is the largest single industry in El Paso. **Each month in El Paso, Texas, approximately 500 Army veterans transition from military careers to civilian life.**



CHALLENGES

Many veterans and their families move out of the Army's Fort Bliss and are absorbed into the greater El Paso region. Vets face unique challenges readjusting to civilian life. Often one of the most significant challenges facing these well-deserving women and men is finding high-growth, civilian career pathways.

Workforce Solutions Borderplex (WFB) is committed to using its precious resources to achieve the highest return on its investment. Workforce management are challenged to identify training programs with measurable, predictable and positive outcomes. In addition, given the large population of transitioning vets, WFB must consider how vets' skills convert into high-demand job roles.



SOLUTION

- **Offer transitioning vets and their spouses opportunities to train for, and obtain, 5 job-driven IT certifications, leading to placement in cybersecurity careers.**
- After receiving several hundred inquiries from vets and vet spouses, WFB implemented a rigorous candidate screening process.
- CompTIA assessed the IT literacy of the students accepted into the program; selected best-in-class learning materials; and, deployed an instructor to El Paso to start a 12-week, intense and accelerated IT training program.



RESULTS

- So far, there have been two completed sets of training. Only 10 weeks after graduating the first class, two-thirds of graduates have earned 5 in-demand IT certifications and are employed with salaries ranging from \$57,000 to \$110,000.



Workforce Solutions Borderplex, El Paso, Texas

Workforce Solutions Borderplex (WFB) assists employers to find quality employees and trains individuals with necessary skills to thrive in the workplace. WFB designs and administers programs to effectively address local workforce issues. WFB and its initiatives have been recognized and awarded by the Texas Workforce Commission for their innovative approach to assisting employers and job seekers.

WFB partnered with CompTIA to address the unique career challenges veterans and their spouses encounter during the transition from military to civilian life.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Workforce boards have opportunities to fund accelerated IT programs which require minimal IT knowledge.
- Careful screening to verify students are committed and disciplined, will ensure higher outcomes with more students completing training, earning certifications and launching high-growth careers.
- IT careers are in-demand everywhere and starting salaries are highly competitive.

THE FULL STORY

Graduating Veterans Naturally Ease into Cybersecurity Careers

Many of the unique challenges veterans face as they readjust to civilian life are directly related to their new careers including: preparing to enter the workforce; returning to a job; creating structure; and, adjusting to a different pace of life and work.” (U.S. Dept of Veterans Affairs*). WFB decided to leverage funding to train well-deserving vets and their spouses for the high-growth, IT career pathway. Partnering with CompTIA, the program consisted of accelerated training and validating the skills for 5 job-driven IT certifications. Classes would run from 8:00am – 4:00pm, 5 days per week for 12 weeks. The ultimate outcome for each graduate would be placement in higher-paying cybersecurity jobs.

After WFB posted the IT training opportunity, they implemented a rigorous candidate screening process to select 30 students from 189 applicants who took a CompTIA assessment test, with the plan of have 2 consecutive cohorts. WFB’s screening included multiple tests and interviews. Final candidates committed to missing no more than 3 classes and had to present written approval from their Army Garrison.

CompTIA assessed the IT literacy of the finalists; selected best-in-class learning materials; and, deployed an instructor to El Paso to start the first cohort’s three-month IT instruction.

A uniquely-engaged classroom:

Veterans brought an impressive, disciplined approach to classroom learning and demonstrated respect not only for the instructor, but also for each other. When a student was struggling to answer the instructor’s question, fellow students would provide encouraging support. The instructor and students were teaching each other using comfortable terms applying equally to the military roles the veterans were leaving behind and to the cybersecurity roles these students were training to fill e.g.: protect, advantage, hack, retreat, advance, eliminate, pivot, extract, covert channel, just to name a few! As Army Senior Sargent Michael Bradley explained, “In this class none of us are in uniform, rank or in charge, but we are all responsible for helping each other out, which reaches back to a foundation of military service – teamwork. This teamwork will translate to civilian jobs.”

Fort Bliss by the Numbers:

- 1 million acres--largest U.S. Army training area
- \$1 billion in economic importance to El Paso, Texas
- 500 Army veterans each month transitioning to civilian life

A life changing career pathway:

Interviews during the last week of training revealed a few striking themes, without exception each veteran expressed:

- tremendous optimism about entering a cybersecurity career;
- sincere gratitude for the opportunity to take accelerated, yet “doable” training;
- and, appreciation for the CompTIA instructor’s teaching skills.

Student insights:

Tyler Cowart Retired Army Veteran:

“This training will help me transition to civilian life by ensuring that I have the appropriate certifications to get a good paying job in a security position. This program is one of the best learning experiences that I have ever had.”

Shawn Biederman, Current Army Employee, BA in Computer Science:

“This opportunity has been unbelievable... If you come through this program and you market yourself properly, you are guaranteed a good job.”

“Workforce Solutions Borderplex is so proud of the partnership and program we designed with CompTIA specifically in response to the high-demand of our region and with our own veteran population. We are honored to thank these veterans and their families in this way - with a life changing opportunity to advance their careers.”

– Leila Melendez, COO, Workforce Solutions Borderplex

CompTIA is the voice of the world’s information technology (IT) industry. Its members are the companies at the forefront of innovation and the professionals responsible for maximizing the benefits organizations receive from their investments in technology. CompTIA is dedicated to advancing industry growth through its educational programs, market research, networking events, professional certifications, and public policy advocacy. For more information, please visit CompTIA.org.

*https://www.va.gov/VETSINWORKPLACE/docs/em_challengesReadjust.asp

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