



CASE STUDY

Helping Veterans Leverage Military Skills To Build a Civilian Cybersecurity Career

It should come as no surprise to anyone in the tech sector that skilled cybersecurity professionals are hard to find. Colleges and universities are trying to educate the next generation of IT leaders, but many struggle to balance holistic general education and effectively training students with real-world challenges they will face in a live security operations center (SOC) or production environment. For experienced cybersecurity professionals, the unemployment rate remains 0%, and filling security positions is typically one of the CISO's most difficult tasks.

Within this challenging landscape, cybersecurity vendor Fortinet identified an opportunity many companies overlook when hiring for technology positions: the hundreds of thousands of U.S. military veterans who exit from the armed services every year. "There are strong synergies between what a service member goes through in the military and what a cybersecurity operator does out here in the civilian world," explains Jay Garcia, who served 20 years in the military and is now the Global Veterans Program Manager for Fortinet.

Military veterans are, by nature, problem-solvers who understand the importance of maintaining a strong defense posture and following the chain of command when dealing with an active threat. They are also practiced in understanding the mindset of their enemies. Every branch of the military is becoming increasingly digital and these digital skills translate well to cybersecurity. Discipline, confidence, courage, and adaptability are traits that come naturally to many veterans and are crucial to success in the cybersecurity sector. The fact that a full 13% of Fortinet's U.S. staff are veterans demonstrates the degree of overlap in skill sets between the military and cybersecurity communities.

Fortinet created the Fortinet Veterans Program (FortiVet) when it saw an opportunity to help veterans launch civilian careers that capitalize on their unique capabilities. The program's purpose is to fill the cybersecurity skills gap by creating talent and connecting former military members with appropriate jobs. For up to six months, each FortiVet participant has access to Fortinet resources that can provide the training, mentoring, and networking they need to launch a cybersecurity career.

FortiVet Provides Support To Launch a Cybersecurity Career

The program is entirely free of charge, for both participants and hiring companies. Any honorably discharged veteran may apply, as well as reservists, National Guard members, and military spouses. Applicants who are accepted into the program specify which area of cybersecurity they would like to pursue. Fortinet then provides support to help them prepare for their desired careers.



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– Michael Beckham, Sales Engineer, Walker and Associates, Inc.

Details

Fortinet Partner: Walker and Associates, Inc.

Industry: Telecommunications

Location: Welcome, North Carolina

Business Impact

- Streamlines organizations' processes for recruiting military veterans
- Provides access to highly trained cybersecurity professionals with a military mindset, free of charge

“We put military veterans and their spouses on a pathway that aligns to their goals,” Garcia says. “For example, if a FortiVet participant wants to pursue a SOC analyst role, we provide career path information to help them become a SOC analyst. We let them know what certifications they need and what experience they should seek. We provide Fortinet resources, as well as outside resources, that they can connect with for additional training and certifications.”

The program offers resources in three areas; the first is training. Each FortiVet participant has access to self-paced modules within the Fortinet Network Security Expert (NSE) Training Institute. At the end of the six-month program, participants may have NSE certifications that give them a head start down their career path of choice.

The second prong of the FortiVet program is peer-to-peer, relatable coaching. “We offer participants a one-on-one mentorship experience with another veteran who works for Fortinet,” Garcia explains. “If the FortiVet participant is looking for a technical role, we will connect them with an engineer. If they are looking for a sales role, we will connect them with a mentor in our sales organization.” The mentors help participants understand what education and skills their desired career paths require. Mentors also help FortiVet participants polish their resumes, hone their LinkedIn profiles, and prepare for job interviews.

Finally, the program provides unique networking opportunities that help veterans find cybersecurity jobs. When a participant enters the program, Fortinet creates a “battle card,” a condensed resume that includes the individual’s clearances, commendations, and certifications. The FortiVet team provides battle cards to Fortinet’s HR team, which distributes them internally, in case there are appropriate positions available within the company.

The FortiVet program also delivers battle cards to over 300 external organizations. Every three weeks, organizations receive an updated candidate feed customized to their needs. Fortinet makes information about FortiVet jobseekers available on its community forum, as well. Each of these organizations is dedicated to helping defend the United States’ critical infrastructure, including managed security service providers (MSSPs), cybersecurity consultants, and systems integrators. Unlike other programs designed to support veterans’ transition from the military into a new career, the FortiVet program focuses specifically on helping veterans establish themselves as cybersecurity professionals.

A FortiVet Success Story

More than 200 military veterans have completed the FortiVet program so far. One Fortinet partner and reseller that has benefited from the FortiVet program is Walker and Associates, Inc., a North Carolina value-added distributor that specializes in the telecommunications and government sectors.

“Within Walker, our goal is to always hire the best person for each role, based on specific criteria,” says Jane Brightwell, Vice President of Federal International and RBOC Sales. “Veterans come with excellent qualifications and education, so naturally they are a great fit for many of the roles we have, particularly in our federal program.”

A couple of years ago, Walker was having difficulty finding the perfect candidate for a position in the Southeast United States. When Brightwell received information from Fortinet on prospective applicants, she immediately noticed Michael Beckham. He had served for 21 years as a Cryptologic Technician Communications Operator for the U.S. Navy and had recently graduated from the FortiVet program with a Fortinet NSE-3 certification.

“At the time, we were working on starting our security practice, but it was not yet running,” Brightwell says. “We could see that Michael was an excellent engineer, and that we should not let him get away. When you find an individual of this quality, you have to figure out how to make a place for them in the organization. So, I worked with our VP of Operations to find a role for Michael. We brought him on board in an engineering role, with the expectation that he could transfer to the security practice.”

Business Impact (contd.)

- Vets job candidates’ skills, as well as certifications that indicate mastery of specific capabilities
- Provides organizations with a framework to mentor their veteran employees, helping them feel supported and boosting retention

Solution

- FortiVet

“Working with the FortiVet program was one of the best hiring experiences I have had. We have found that military veterans can learn our systems and the nuances of federal government policies and federal acquisition regulations much more easily than non-veterans.”

– Jane Brightwell, Vice President of Federal International and RBOC Sales, Walker and Associates, Inc.

Beckham proved an excellent hire. He is now a sales engineer who coordinates activities of Walker's federal account managers, and he has been with the company for more than two years. Brightwell credits the FortiVet program with helping her find him, as well as streamlining the process of vetting him as a candidate.

"I really like how Fortinet has done so much of the background work with applicants," she says. "They have not only trained and certified candidates, but also worked with the candidates on their strengths and weaknesses. I was very confident that Michael could carry our message to customers as a field sales engineer because the FortiVet program recommended him to us."

In addition to the technical skills demonstrated by his certifications, Beckham has proved capable in communications, strategy, and other soft skills. "Michael serves as a thought leader and trusted adviser to our customers," Brightwell says. "We are also able to do a lot more webinars now because of his leadership and presentation skills. He is extremely well-versed in security products, and he is a charismatic speaker. Fortunately for us, the military gave him a lot of experience presenting to senior leadership. When he speaks, people listen."

From Beckham's perspective, military veterans are a good fit for cybersecurity teams because "in the military, successfully achieving mission goals is paramount." He adds, "Companies can rely on the fact that these men and women will apply themselves to achieve the organization's mission. In the Navy, the core values are honor, courage, and commitment. Each military service has instilled core values into veterans that can help them to become major contributors and make an immediate impact in the corporate world."

The positive experience with Beckham has motivated Walker and Associates to bring additional veterans on board. "Working with the FortiVet program was one of the best hiring experiences I have had," Brightwell says. "We have found that typically military veterans can learn our systems and the nuances of federal government policies and federal acquisition regulations much more easily than non-veterans. In fact, we just hired another veteran last week."



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