

JOBS & EDUCATION



View from cellular
communication tower

WARRIORS4WIRELESS

Higher Calling

Telecom industry hiring vets to build
next-generation wireless networks

By Matt Alderton

U.S. ARMY VETERAN DAVID Medina is afraid of heights. Like many soldiers, however, he learned to subjugate his fears in service to his country. Upon enlisting at the age of 17, he completed basic combat training at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., advanced individual training at Fort Lee, Va., and,

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finally, airborne school — three weeks of paratrooper training that culminates in a series of five jumps from an airplane — at Fort Benning, Ga.

“If you have self-discipline, you can do almost anything you put your mind to,” Medina said.

When he transitioned out of the military in December 2014, Medina felt like a ship without an anchor. Unsure of what he wanted to do or where he wanted to go, he almost re-enlisted half a dozen times before ultimately moving home to the Pacific Northwest, where he worked at a home improvement retailer designing kitchens and bathrooms. He liked it so much that he subsequently spent four years working for a countertop retailer as an interior designer.

Then he discovered a new opportunity in the last place you’d expect to find a self-confessed acrophobe: at the top of cellphone towers.

“Even though I’m deathly afraid of heights, it’s a great job,” said Medina, who recently joined network infrastructure company SAC Wireless as a tower technician. He learned about the opportunity from a career counselor at the VA regional office in Portland, Ore., who submitted his résumé to Warriors4Wireless (W4W), a nonprofit organization that provides training and job placement to veterans who are willing to inspect, install, replace and maintain equipment atop communication towers that can be up to 600 feet tall. It’s one of the most difficult jobs in the industry — and because wireless companies are in the midst of a revolutionary infrastructure upgrade to ultrafast 5G networks, it’s also one of the most important.

“Fifth-generation wireless networks are here, and we need tower climbers to help us build them,” explained Jonathan McKinley, co-founder and chief field services officer at SAC Wireless, who said there’s a national shortage of tower crews. “Somewhere around 10,000 people are needed to fill jobs working on the network. ... I personally have about 200 open positions, and veterans are a great avenue for me to fill them.”

WHY WIRELESS?

Although the jobless rate for all veterans fell to an 18-year low of 3.5 percent in 2018 and was 3.4 percent as recently as August, the positive numbers paint an incomplete picture, according to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation’s Hiring Our Heroes program, which in 2016 published a study of 1,000 recently transitioned veterans. Eighty-six percent of those surveyed found it challenging



SAC WIRELESS

to choose a career path, 53 percent faced at least four months of unemployment since leaving the military and 44 percent had left their first post-military job within a year.

“The drop in unemployment ... only tells part of the story,” the study said. “Equally important is whether veterans are finding the right jobs — are they finding jobs where they are fully engaged and maximizing their skill sets? Are businesses benefiting from those skills and retaining their veteran workforce? In many cases, the answer is no.”

The answer is more likely to be yes in the wireless industry, according to U.S. Navy veteran Christopher Challender, SAC’s head of training. “Veterans have a variety of skills that are immediately translatable to the wireless industry,” he said. “Veterans come to us with a very strong work ethic, for example, and a willingness to work long hours doing difficult tasks. They come to us with a very strict discipline around safety. They’re physically agile, and they’re good at following instructions — particularly in situations that are life-threatening.”

And working atop cell towers can be, in fact, life-threatening. “In the military, you handle a lot of dangerous missions, but you’re taught that if you trust your equipment and follow proper procedures you will mitigate a lot of the risks. The same thing applies to climbing towers,” said U.S. Air Force veteran Kevin Kennedy, president and CEO of W4W. “In the military you’re also taught teamwork, attention to detail and to do the job right the first time. All those things are critical to being a tower technician.”

TRAINING FOR TOWERS

Although veterans already have many of the attributes they need to work in wireless, tower technicians must be trained and certified before they’re allowed to climb towers. The industry has therefore invested heavily in training through programs like the one offered by W4W. The two-week residential program takes place 15 times per year at Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service (TEEX), a VA-approved trade school that’s affiliated with Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. Course tuition is \$5,600 — which veterans can pay using their GI Bill benefits — while room and board is free thanks to a \$500,000 grant from T-Mobile.

“It’s a cram-course in everything you need to know about being a tower technician,” said Kennedy, who added that about one-third of the veterans W4W works with enroll in W4W’s training program; for the other two-thirds, like Medina, W4W provides job placement services at 180 wireless employers.

Another go-to training provider is Airstreams Renewables, which offers its curriculum to transitioning service members at seven different active-duty military bases, and to veterans at its headquarters in Tehachapi, Calif. The 240-hour program takes seven weeks on bases, and six weeks in Tehachapi. Tuition is \$10,000 at the former and \$14,000 plus \$9 per day for housing at the latter; participants can use their GI Bill benefits to pay tuition at both locations.

“We started this training program because we wanted to make an impact,” said Airstreams President and CFO Jeff Duff. “It’s all about the individual student and trying to help them find a path in their life as they transition out of the military.”

Although they recruit directly from W4W and Airstreams, wireless companies also have their own training

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Trainees at Airstreams Renewables

AIRSTREAMS RENEWABLES; WARRIORS4WIRELESS

programs. SAC, for example, has a 15,000-square-foot national training center in Elgin, Ill., that includes classrooms, two 35-foot indoor training towers and a 50-foot outdoor training tower. New hires like Medina — who said he felt a “little scared” on his first climb, but also “really, really safe” because of his safety gear — receive two weeks of preparatory education in their home markets, followed by a week of hands-on tower training in Elgin, after which they return

to their home markets for one more week of local training. Because they’ve already been certified, graduates of W4W and Airstreams may be eligible for accelerated onboarding that gets them in the field faster.

A TRANSFORMATIONAL TRADE

Wherever they receive training, veterans who enter the tower trade usually end up climbing in more ways than one. The first, of course, is literal.



“Guys who are coming out of the military are looking for an adrenaline rush,” Challender said. “They want to do something physical and exciting.”

Tower technicians also climb figuratively — up their respective career ladders. Entry-level tower workers can advance within six months to a year, according to Challender, and eventually can move up to lead their own tower

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— CHRISTOPHER CHALLENGER,
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crews. And when they someday want to stop climbing, there are opportunities to lead construction projects on the ground.

The pay is good, too, according to Duff, who said entry-level tower technicians typically make a starting wage of \$18 to \$22 per hour.

Finally, there’s a service aspect to the work, suggested McKinley, who said the connectivity on which modern Americans rely would not be possible without talented tower technicians. “Tower crews are the backbone of wireless infrastructure because they’re the ones installing the equipment and making the network run for carriers,” he said. “Companies like SAC help our customers keep the world connected, and veterans play an integral part in that.”

Their contribution is even more salient in the context of new 5G networks, whose high speed and low latency will enable myriad positive uses, such as providing ultrareliable communications for first responders during emergencies, monitoring patients who want to receive remote health care and connecting autonomous cars with each other and infrastructure to reduce fatal collisions.

“The 5G network is being treated as a strategic asset for all of the most important countries in the world, and the United States is no different,” said Sandro Tavares, global head of mobile networks marketing for Nokia, which owns SAC Wireless. “Veterans (who become tower technicians) can be 100 percent sure that they’re engaging in something that is absolutely transformational and will add a lot of new capabilities to this country.”



GETTY IMAGES

USTECHVETS.ORG CONNECTS EMPLOYERS, VETERANS

The most important building material in modern cities isn’t concrete, stone, steel or asphalt. Arguably, it’s silicon — as in computer chips. From smartphones, laptops and home assistants to robot vacuums, fitness trackers and so much more, the world belongs to technology.

Unfortunately, the companies developing the technological infrastructure don’t have enough talent to build it.

“Our industry has an urgent skills gap,” said Jackie Black, director of strategic alliances at the Consumer Technology Association (CTA), a U.S. trade association representing more than 2,200 consumer technology companies. “We have more than 7 million unfilled jobs, but only 6 million Americans are unemployed — and a lot of those Americans don’t have the right skills.”

But many of them do — one

group, in particular: veterans.

“We’re looking for untapped talent resources, and veterans are an obvious untapped talent pool,” said Black, who added that veterans possess leadership, teamwork and problem-solving skills, as well as technical skills acquired in IT- and cyber-related posts during their service. “Both the hard and soft skills they possess are really valuable for our industry, even if some additional training is needed.”

How can organizations like CTA help tech employers and skilled veterans find each other?

The answer: USTechVets.org, an online community launched in 2014 by CTA in partnership with the Northern Virginia Technology Council (NVTC) and job search website Monster.com, which has a relationship with millions of service members and veterans via

its subsidiary, Military.com. Jointly powered by both sites, the platform is free to CTA and NVTC member companies, which can post unlimited ads targeting veteran candidates and obtain complimentary access to Monster.com’s database of nearly 1 million veteran résumés. Veterans, meanwhile, can use the site to search for employers and to access resources like a Military Skills Translator that helps them market their military experience to civilian employers.

“The results are outstanding,” according to Steve Cooker, executive vice president of government solutions for Monster Worldwide; employers over the past five years have used USTechVets.org to hire more than 15,000 vets. “It’s made a significant difference.”

— Matt Alderton