

To build an army of STEM workers, look to veterans

(AL.com – Dr. Thomas A Kennedy: 3-31-15) While the U.S. job market has been gaining strength in recent months, there's one group of Americans who are still struggling to find work: veterans. According to the latest report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, unemployment among post-9/11 veterans was 6.7 percent in February -- a full point higher than the population at large.

As a veteran myself, it's disheartening to see so many former service members struggle in their transition to civilian life. The problem is especially troubling given that these men and women are uniquely qualified to provide the kinds of skilled labor our economy sorely needs.

In particular, the shortage of Americans with training in science, technology, engineering, and math has left many U.S. employers unable to find qualified workers.

In recent years, the need for skilled STEM workers has been growing rapidly in industries ranging from medicine to forensic science and even architecture. According to the labor analytics firm Burning Glass, there are currently 2.5 entry-level job postings for every STEM-educated American with a 4-year degree. And, as a recent report by the Brookings Institution shows, STEM job vacancies take twice as long to fill as non-STEM openings.

These jobs aren't just more plentiful than positions in other fields; they are also more lucrative. The median wage for STEM employees in 2013 was \$76,000 a year, compared to roughly \$35,000 for American workers as a whole.

The demand for employees with technical training, meanwhile, isn't likely to subside anytime soon. Indeed, the number of STEM jobs is expected to increase 55 percent faster than the number of non-STEM positions over the next ten years, according to BLS data.

Closing the so-called "skills gap" is essential to America's economic success in the 21st Century. As President Obama has put it, "leadership tomorrow depends on how we educate our students today -- especially in science, technology, engineering and math."

Military service leaves many men and women well-prepared for careers in science, technology and engineering fields.

In order to meet this challenge, a number of prominent businesses, educational institutions, and non-profits have launched efforts to train the next generation of skilled workers. To this end, one of the most promising ways forward involves educating our veterans.

Why veterans? For one, military service leaves many men and women particularly well-prepared for careers in science, technology and engineering fields. In my own case, the five-plus years I spent in the Air Force instilled in me a level of discipline, technical know-how, and confidence that were indispensable to my career as an engineer.

What's more, some of the fastest growing STEM fields -- particularly those related to cyber and information security -- are areas where former service members have much to contribute. According to a recent BLS report, jobs for information security professionals will grow 37 percent by 2022 -- faster than any other STEM positions.

Despite being well-suited for such jobs, America's young veterans consistently suffer higher-than-average rates of unemployment. According to a recent analysis by the RAND Corporation, young veterans were 3.4 percent more likely to be jobless than their non-veteran counterparts.

This disparity represents an enormous waste of much-needed talent. But worse, it is an injustice against the brave men and women who have sacrificed for the security of our nation. They deserve better.

Fortunately, there is much we can do, as recent efforts by my own company, Raytheon, make clear. Through partnerships with organizations like Student Veterans of America and the Wounded Warrior Project, our company has provided countless veterans with the scholarships, training, and mentorship they need to translate military experience into a successful careers.

As these type of programs illustrate, our young veterans can thrive in professions where skilled labor is in short supply. What's needed now is an aggressive, national effort to help America's former service members put their abilities to work in the STEM fields.

By preparing today's ex-service members for careers in STEM, we can offer veterans the opportunities they deserve while building the skilled workforce the 21st-Century economy demands. Such an initiative would not only address a serious economic need, but a moral one as well.

(Thomas A. Kennedy, Ph.D., is chairman and CEO at Raytheon. He served in the Air Force from 1977-83, attaining the rank of captain.)