

Veterans Can Help Utilities Steer Through Turbulent Times

by John Egan

With a state unemployment rate of under 3 percent, it's harder than ever to recruit new employees in Florida. Veterans bring critical job skills to the workplace but also personal values that align well with a Florida public power utility. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that 200,000 men and women leave military service each year to return to the civilian sector. Hiring a veteran is a smart investment for your utility and its customer-owners.



RILEY KRUGGEL

Personal Values Make Veterans a Good Cultural Fit

Hiring managers don't just hire a set of skills — they hire a person. That person has specific values and personal characteristics in addition to a specific set of skills they bring to the table. Veterans have many values that make for a good cultural fit with Florida public power utilities.

"Veterans make great public power utility employees because the skills they learned while in the military are easily transferrable



WAYNE YOUNG

to the civilian workforce," said Julio Torrado, director of human resources and communications for Keys Energy Services (KEYS) in Key West. "Veterans are well-versed in the chain of command and teamwork. Both skill sets are highly valued in utilities."

Being Part of a Community

"I love being part of a brotherhood, a community," said Jamison Parker, a relay substation manager with Beaches Energy Services, serving Jacksonville Beach, Neptune Beach, Ponte Vedra and Palm Valley in northeast



JUAN LLERA

Florida. "It was a pleasant surprise to find that in a public power utility after I left the Navy. It's a gratifying feeling to know that what you do has a direct impact on the community."

Other veterans we interviewed also correlated their military service with being a part of a brotherhood or community. While their desire to serve is what brought them to the military, sharing that strong sense of service and community — found through their work in public power — is a way to continue living their military values as a civilian.

"As a first responder, working for a public power utility was a good fit," commented Juan LLera, a safety and risk management coordinator with KEYS. "After serving our great nation for over two decades, it was only appropriate to have the ability to continue to serve our local community while providing reliable service to our customers."

LLera spent 21 years in the Navy as a combat diver disposing of explosive underwater ordnances to support special forces teams from various branches of the military. He then worked in law enforcement for 13 years. Working in a utility was a nice opportunity to "take it down a notch in terms of stress," said LLera.

Being part of a community means you have each other's back, especially in dangerous situations, added Riley Kruggel, Apprentice Lineman II at Kissimmee Utility Authority (KUA). Kruggel, who is 24 years old, served six years in the Air Force National Guard right out of high school and was recalled to active duty while at KUA.

"Having each other's back is a core value you learn in the military. You need to be confident your partner fully supports you."

Wayne Young agreed. During his 27-year career in the Navy, he commanded two naval surface warships, including one that carried Tomahawk cruise missiles. These days, he's vice president of environmental services at JEA in Jacksonville. He sees his career as being "one of service, giving back and being engaged." JEA's high level of community engagement attracted Young when he was looking for a post-military career.

"We search high and low for veterans like Wayne," commented Charna Flennoy, a talent acquisition manager at JEA. Approximately 18 percent of JEA's workforce are veterans, she said, adding, "JEA partners with various military organizations that support veterans and their families. Our recruitments are advertised on various platforms to reach individuals seeking career opportunities within our organization. JEA remains compliant with all regulations addressing veteran's preference."

Added Cindy Herrera, vice president of human resources at KUA, "The veterans that we hire consistently bring value to KUA, not only because of their professional skill set, but their personal morals and values. We hire the most qualified candidates, and being a veteran is the cherry on top of the sundae."

Approximately 16 percent of KUA's 288 employees are veterans, she estimated. At the utility's Cane Island Power Park alone there are 18 veterans currently employed at the power plant. The majority of the plant's employees are Navy veterans who have worked in submarines or ships that have equipment and controls similar to the plant's turbines, which allows them to easily transfer their skills.

Service is important to LLera, who immigrated to the U.S. from Cuba as a child. "I wanted to give back to the country that gave me an opportunity to live here."

Humility and Teamwork

Serving in the military humbles people and teaches them that they are part of a team. A very large team, perhaps, but a team nonetheless. Success doesn't happen unless everyone does their job.

"I was fortunate to stand on the shoulders of giants, including my father, who served in the Navy," Young said. "My father told me that the people you will be in charge of will be your biggest accomplishment."

The first thing Young did after joining JEA was to knock on his colleagues' doors and ask questions about their work and the utility.

"Entering a new profession, I humbled myself, recognized others' expertise and referred to them when making decisions," he said. "That helped build trust. It's important to recognize the value of people who do the job day in and day out."

In other words, no one, not even a Navy's ship's commander, can launch cruise missiles by themselves. But working together, a team can execute a flawless launch.

When he was in the Navy, Beaches Energy's Parker was an interior communications electrician, a first-class petty officer (IC1) rank, and currently a lieutenant, engineering duty officer serving in the Navy Reserve.

"Power engineering is neither common nor sexy in the Navy," he said with a laugh. "Weapons are sexier. Admirals were sexier. Strategy was sexier. But I managed communications between sensors that were located in every compartment of the ship to make sure they all were communicating with each other."

Those sensors tracked temperature, air flow, weapons, flooding, telecommunications and the ship's navigation, among other things. Proper alignment allowed the ship and its crew to function optimally. He might not have been at the top of the totem pole, but everyone in that totem pole depended on him to do his job so they could do theirs.

In 2020, after only 18 months as a KUA employee, Kruggel was deployed to a combat zone, where he used the electrician skills acquired at the utility to help build an 864,000-square-foot military base, which included an underground electrical distribution system. In that six-month deployment, Kruggel performed a combat engineering role, which involved operating heavy construction equipment, laying pavement and terminating electrical cables at transformers.

"I did a lot of trenching, and my unit deployed 17 transformers," he said. "It's nice when your civilian skill set transfers back to the military."

Honor, Courage and Commitment

The four veterans we interviewed all expressed some version of "Honor, Courage, and Commitment" as principles that guided their military service.

"As military members, we live by a set of fundamental values each day: Honor, Courage and Commitment," explained LLera of KEYS:

"The honor to be your brother's keeper and work alongside hard-working professionals; the courage to get the job done regardless of

weather, obstacles or harsh conditions; and the commitment to our customers, fellow employees and our utility to do the right thing, always."

"Integrity first, service before self and excellence in all we do are core values veterans bring to public power," added KUA's Kruggel. "It's the same for working at a public power utility. We work for, and give back to, the community. Customers are owners. We would never do anything that disrespects them."

Interviewed as Hurricane Ian was bearing down on Florida, he continued, "When a storm comes, or a car hits a pole and there are live wires on the ground, you must be resilient. You go to work, work safely and bring power back online."

Safety Mindset

LLera learned first-hand the importance of working safely while clearing underwater mines and unexploded ordnances so special forces teams could do their jobs. One wrong move could be deadly.

Now the safety and risk management coordinator at KEYS, LLera has not forgotten his commitment to safety. Under his leadership, the utility had no lost-time accidents in 2021.

For the last three years, KEYS won state and national safety awards.

KEYS excellent safety record lowered its workplace insurance premiums by \$100,000 last year.

"Our employees oftentimes have to work in dangerous conditions, like restoring power," LLera said. "Safety is everyone's responsibility. Jobs have to be done right. That way, everyone goes home to their families and with all their fingers and toes intact."

Essential Skills Transfer from the Military

As they seek to fill open positions, hiring managers want to see evidence that a candidate has demonstrated a particular skill in a prior position. If a candidate performed that skill in one job setting, there's a high probability that he or she could do it in a utility setting. That's true whether it comes to welding or leading organizations during periods of acute change.

Leadership, Management and the Chain of Command

"The military's approach to recruitment has evolved over time," LLera commented. "Instead of focusing recruitment on the traditional 'grunts,' the military is seeking people with

organizational skills. You've got to know the mission and be ready to execute it. You've got to follow the chain of command. If you don't have those skills when you enlist, you will get them while you're in the service!"

Chain of command is vital to the effective operation of any organization, whether you're managing a dozen utility staffers or 1,000 soldiers or sailors operating in a war zone.

All the service branches emphasize a respect of the chain of command as well as leadership. Whether learned in a classroom or on the battlefield, leadership and chain of command are the heart and soul of the military.

Following the chain of command doesn't mean reflexively consulting a rule book before undertaking an action — particularly if the setting is highly dynamic.

As the electricity industry continues to evolve, it's important that employees at every level have the ability to critically assess whether changes need to be made. It may be necessary to revisit some policies and procedures that were enacted before electric vehicles and rooftop solar panels became common. Utilities must adapt to ever-changing customer expectations

Fast Facts About Veterans in the Energy Industry

Utilities are not the only sector of the energy industry that is actively recruiting military veterans. Oil and gas producers, oil refiners, pipelines and other segments in the energy ecosystem are recruiting veterans because of the values and skills they learned while serving.

Here are some fast facts about veterans in the energy industry, according to the Center for Energy Workforce Development (CEWD):

- Veterans represent almost 10 percent of the energy industry's workforce.
- Employees with military training are in high demand, and most companies in the energy industry proudly sponsor veterans resource groups.
- The energy industry supports 7 million jobs and hundreds of apprenticeship programs, many offering "earn and learn" programs.
- Energy utilities expect to hire more than 115,000 people in the next three years.
- Average compensation for key energy industry jobs is \$75,000. Many pay much more.
- Today's energy sector is highly reliant on technology proficiency.
- Many industry careers focus on environmental stewardship.

and communications avenues. But those changes can't be implemented unilaterally: they need to be run up the chain of command, lest chaos ensue.

"The military has a well-defined set of rules, regulations and procedures, and it is important that those are followed. But even the most detailed instruction manual doesn't cover all situations," JEA's Young explained. "That's when you need to exercise initiative, make changes and adapt. Leaders need to have the latitude to make changes to the tactical plan as they see fit. That's an essential part of leadership."

While Young currently manages an organization of about 80 employees in JEA's environmental services department, he managed more than 350 men and women as a Navy officer. He also studied leadership while attending the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland.

Looking back at his leadership over the deployment of JEA's advanced metering initiative (AMI), Young said, "We may have broken some china along the way, but we were blazing a new path and recognized that we needed to make some changes to the plan as we moved ahead."

"Our nation's military does a great job of forging its members into independent thinkers that become assets while contributing to the overall team effort. They know the value of being motivated and taking the initiative to get the job done," added KEYS' LLera. "Service members are cross-trained in many areas, can adapt quickly and are encouraged to continue their education. Military members receive training with leadership and organizational skills, resulting in significant benefits to the utility."

Independent thinking. Ability to adapt. Following rules and regulations but recognizing when changes are needed. Using initiative to achieve goals. Capability to lead others. All of these are skills prized now as the utility industry is going through more change than ever before. In the military and in a utility, the ability to keep your eye on the mission, despite all of the noise and distractions, may

be the most valuable skill veterans can bring to Florida's public power utilities.

Improvising in Dynamic Conditions

JEA's Young recalls a comment from former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, the Army officer who also served as a presidential national security adviser and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "You don't have to have 100 percent of the answers to move forward. If you wait until you have 100 percent of the answers, you'll never move forward."

"The Navy doesn't have a detailed list of instructions that covers all situations," Young said. "What you learn in the military is the ability to improvise when needed, to recognize changes and adapt."

"In the military, you get curveballs thrown at you every day," commented Parker of Beaches Energy. "If you excel in the military, it is partly because you rise to the challenge and figure out a way to hit those curveballs."

Parker recalled a ship commander's end-of-day comment to his sailors: "Semper Gumby," which means "always flexible."

Words to live by, in the military and a utility.

Where to Recruit Veterans

KEYS is one Florida public power utility that has developed a specific plan to recruit more military veterans. It has nine veterans on its workforce, and most of them have been hired in the last five to eight years, according to Julio Torrado, the utility's director of human resources and communications. KEYS is looking to grow the number of veterans on its workforce.

The policy, approved in January 2022, says the utility is "committed to successfully recruiting talented and skilled military veterans into the workforce. KEYS recognized the extensive training, experience and transferrable skills gained through military service. This plan is intended to reward those who served their country and recognize the qualities and traits developed by military services."

Torrado said, "We have multiple military bases in our area. We recruit veterans via our

normal channels (website, Indeed, classified ads) given that they live in our readership area. But we also include a specific emphasis in places with significant military veteran readership, such as the www.veteransflorida.org website."

KUA's employment of veterans has been long-standing and consistent since the utility first came into existence in 1985. Over the years KUA has implemented several initiatives to recognize and retain its veteran workforce such as veteran's appreciation luncheons, walking in the Veteran's Day parade and other tokens of appreciation.

Several of those we interviewed said they joined their utilities after friends who were employed by a utility recommended they apply for a job there. This underscores the point that utilities should not overlook the power of word-of-mouth advertising. Since retired veterans often stay in contact with bases on which they served, utilities might want to proactively communicate with those employees who are veterans that the utility is actively recruiting veterans.

LLera of KEYS recommends utilities become active in local Military Affairs Committees (MACs). At monthly meetings, these members work to help soon-to-retire veterans find jobs as civilians.

"There's no better environment than the MACs for retired or soon-to-be-retired soldiers, sailors and airmen to find post-military employment," said LLera.

Another recruiting resource is Troops to Energy Jobs, a placement service for veterans operated by the Center for Energy Workplace Development.

In many ways, military veterans would make excellent hires at Florida's public power utilities. The personal values they bring — being part of a community, having a safety mindset, humility and teamwork, and honor, courage and commitment — are the values of public power. And the skills they learn in the military often can easily be redeployed at a utility once veterans end their active service. ■