

Veterans Make A Difference At EJ Ajax



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Marine Master Gunnery Sergeant Jose Chavarria had a very serious assignment: keep his Boeing CH-46 helicopters functioning properly so the pilots could keep the choppers, and their payloads of up to 24 Marines, in the air.

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It was risky business. Mortar and missile attacks were frequent and deadly. Losses had mounted throughout the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. But there was no other practical way to transport troops, weapons and supplies to and from the base.

Stationed at the Al Asad Airbase in the Afghan province of Al Anbar, Chavarria had become an expert on the CH-46 Boeing Sea Knight. He received extensive Marine Corps training in the operation and maintenance of the chopper's computerized control and navigation systems, power plants, weapons, communication systems, diagnostic systems, fuel systems, and other critical components of the tandem rotor, 3,600 horsepower, 6-ton behemoth.

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EJ Ajax has produced a video montage of people, processes, and machines in action on the production floor at EJ Ajax

Awesome!

Check it out!
Click the video tab on metalfformingblog.com

After surviving numerous combat engagements without loss of life or limb, Chavarria retired from the U.S. Marine Corps in 2010. He landed in Fridley. His next objective: find work. Better yet, find a career. Through a highly specialized fast-track sector-training program in sheet-metal fabrication at Anoka Technical College, Chavarria was able to transfer his 24 years of Marine Corps training and experience into a manufacturing skill set that positioned him for good job offers upon graduation.

There was no need for Chavarria to pound the pavement looking for work — company recruiters came to him. Anoka Tech hosts reverse job fairs where company recruiters present opportunities to top-performing graduates.

Chavarria now programs complex, large-scale metal forming machinery the size of a school bus for EJ Ajax of Fridley. His primary reason for choosing EJ Ajax? A safe working environment.

Chavarria's story is not unique. Job-seekers with military technical training and experience are finding that employment doors are open, and for good reason.

U.S. Armed Forces training is arguably the best in the world. The dollar value of high-level military technical training is difficult to measure — certainly in the hundreds of thousands. Moreover, military training specialists are very good at evaluating technical aptitude. Troops unsuited to technical duty are assigned elsewhere.

Many Minnesota companies, manufacturers in particular, need the skills, the discipline, the attention to detail, and the teamwork abilities that high-caliber military veterans possess. My company is fully aware of the rules of engagement when recruiting veterans and we compete vigorously. In the past four years, our company has hired 16 vets. These employees have excelled. Several have already advanced within the company.

At the same time, U.S. manufacturing has been building steam. The Purchasing Managers Index, a measure of manufacturing activity, reached a four-year high in June. Conditions are ideal for companies like EJ Ajax to expand. We will need good people. Orders are: Hire more vets.

However, like many Minnesota companies, EJ Ajax struggles to find top candidates for open positions.

Statewide unemployment for June is near 4 percent, well below the 6.3 percent national rate. The pool of skilled workers is smaller than it has been in months. Nationally, an estimated 3 million jobs are going unfilled for lack of qualified workers.

Returning military veterans offer hope. Troop drawdowns in the Middle East are nearing completion, and many returning veterans will enter or re-enter the job market.

That's good news for companies like EJ Ajax who value veterans as employees. Competition for the best of the best will be fierce. Job offers will include excellent pay, benefits, paid vacations, and advancement opportunities. That may not be enough.

EJ Ajax Human Resources/Operations Manager Curt Jasper, a retired U.S. Army Command Sergeant Major, has been in the recruiting trenches to fill open positions.

Using insider's knowledge of veteran-specific career issues, he has guided his company through a string of successful hires and will spearhead his company's recruiting efforts in 2014. Among the recruiting tactics EJ Ajax will apply:

SUPPORT ACTIVE NATIONAL GUARD AND RESERVE MEMBERS

We have six active guard and reserve members on our team. They drill one weekend each month plus two weeks per year. This training commitment provides guardsmen with a fantastic opportunity to hone their leadership, decision making, problem solving and team building skills.

Guardsmen use this training to better themselves as soldiers and as company colleagues. They bring that valuable knowledge back to EJ Ajax.

PARTNER WITH AREA TECHNICAL COLLEGES

Returning veterans often choose 18- to 24-month technical programs over traditional university degrees, which can require four or more years to complete.

In addition to Anoka Tech, EJ Ajax maintains close relationships with Hennepin Technical College and Dunwoody College of Technology. The company participates in the development of specialized programs at these colleges, which then produce graduates with ideal skill sets.

BE VISIBLE TO JOB-SEEKING VETERANS

EJ Ajax was a third-year exhibitor on July 9 at Minnesota's largest Veterans Career Fair at the Earle Brown Heritage Center in Brooklyn Center. The company invested heavily in preparation for this job fair.

The expense and effort was necessary; there was even a waiting list this year for companies to exhibit at this fair. Many exhibitors were large companies — 3M, Cargill, FedEx, Land O'Lakes, Xcel Energy. EJ Ajax colleagues who are veterans including Chavarria were at the job fair to discuss employment opportunities with job-seeking vets.

Our efforts paid off.

We scheduled appointments and tours of our plant with 20 top level veterans, each with 4- to 20-plus years of service. With all these high-caliber candidates available, selecting

the highest-qualified among them for our four open positions will not be easy.

Our company is very fortunate to be in a position to recruit such fine job candidates here in Minnesota. We will look forward to additional opportunities to recruit veterans of the United States Armed Forces.

FAQ:

Q: How does EJ Ajax structure scholarships to make them more effective for veterans?

A: Tuition reimbursement is a common recruiting tool. It's helpful for sure, but often inconvenient for veterans who lack the up-front cash needed to get enrolled.

EJ Ajax solves this cash-flow problem by pre-paying up to \$5,000 of tuition per year for qualifying colleagues. This solution helps our vets maximize their GI benefits.

THE VALUE OF THE NEAR MISS: 5 WAYS TO MAKE PEOPLE LESS GUARDED AND MORE ENGAGED

By Matt Norman
normanblogger.com

Editor's Note: One of the top ten safest companies in America, EJ Ajax, has gone 24 years with only one minor lost-time incident. The U.S. Air Force even asked the company's president, Erick Ajax, to be the keynote speaker at their annual safety conference this year.

In his recent post about workplace safety, Dale Carnegie Training North Central President Matt Norman interviews Mr. Ajax and learns that understanding the "near miss" is key to making a workplace safer.

An employee has a brainstorm, a great idea to address an unmet need in your market. But it's admittedly a little "out there," not the usual thing your organization goes for. Does he decide to bring up the idea anyway?

Another employee has spotted a possible flaw in your latest product, the one that's set to launch this week. All the marketing's been done. Pre-order fulfillment is already in progress. It's make-or-break time. Does she say something about the potential issue to management?

"85% of employees have safety ideas or concerns they don't voice. Their companies simply don't have a climate of safety."

If they're in the typical organization, chances are neither of those employees would feel comfortable expressing their thoughts. According to Margaret Heffernan, author of the book *Willful Blindness*, roughly 85% of employees have issues, ideas or concerns they don't voice. Their companies simply don't have a "climate of safety."

Hearing this statistic, I thought, who better to learn from than one of the top ten safest companies in America, E.J. Ajax, a metalforming plant in Fridley, Minnesota. They've gone 24 years with only one minor lost-time incident. The U.S. Air Force even asked the company's president, Erick Ajax, to be the keynote speaker at their annual safety conference this year.

I asked Erick, What do they know that so many others don't?

Their secret, he told me, is that they understand the value of near-miss reporting.

"When you screw up and almost hurt yourself or someone else, it's human nature to hide it and not bring it up to your supervisor," he explained. "But near misses are the early-warning system. It's OK to report a near miss. There won't be any disciplinary action. I frequently have to stand up later and say I'm so glad you reported the near miss because now we have a better environment."

Near misses aren't confined to the factory floor. I'm reminded of when a colleague called to say he was sorry he undermined me in a team meeting earlier that day. He was reporting a near miss, something that could make our culture less safe.

The hallmark of a climate of safety is people who are willing to report near misses to each other. Here's what Erick and his team shared about building that environment:

1. Reinforce the importance at every meeting.

Creating a climate of safety isn't accomplished through a one-and-done pronouncement. We need the constant reminder, not because we're forgetful or distrustful, but because we're human. Consider creating ground rules for your meeting that reiterate the what's, why's and how's. At Ajax, they start every meeting with a safety discussion.

2. Promote the benefits of safety. From a company perspective, Ajax points out, "profit

and safety are joined at the hip." Safety also drives engagement. When people work in physically or emotionally unsafe conditions, they build walls of defense that disconnect them from others.

3. Proactively make people safer. Ajax pays 100% of addiction rehabilitation costs, including time off. They also average 100 hours and \$1724 per employee, per year in training. Erick didn't have to research that—he knew the exact figure. Making people safe is a top-of-mind priority.

4. Democratize safety. Ajax's Safety Leadership Team has no management representation. Brandon Holmes, a member of the team, told me people "come to me on a personal level. I hear their idea or issue and let them take part in the solution...We are constantly creating an environment where their ideas are building the business."

5. Find out what people are talking about around the water cooler. People who think their colleagues and boss care about them are less likely to hold things back. Brandon points out that when leaders invest in what's important to team members—families, hobbies, goals—people feel more comfortable bringing up challenges. "You just have to make people and culture a priority."

Sticking your neck out, whether you have a "crazy" idea or a quality or safety concern, can be a risky proposition. But it shouldn't be that way.

What does your organization do to encourage near-miss reporting?

In The News

There's a lot going on at EJ Ajax these days. Here's a quick roundup of recent developments.

ISO Update

The quality and infrastructure development team at EJ Ajax is making progress on the company's 2014 ISO certification process by making significant documentation updates & related system upgrades. Much of the work involves updates to various chapters in the company's procedures manual. More importantly, the company is developing a new internal auditing system that conforms to ISO specifications.

The 2014 Expansion is Underway

EJ Ajax has taken another step forward on the company's 2014 expansion plan by adding a new bay to be used for human resources offices, our new online training area, plus a few well-earned amenities for our colleagues.

This new space also provides an area for team meetings on safety, quality, and productivity issues. It's secluded from the hustle & bustle of the main production floor so company colleagues can better concentrate on matters at hand.