Ready to Serve: How and Why You Should Recruit Veterans

By: Chris Hitch, Ph.D.
Program Director
UNC Executive Development

About the Author:

Chris Hitch, Ph.D., a Program Director at UNC Executive Development, has over 25 years of proven leadership and management experience focusing on aligning strategy, leadership, and operations to drive solid business results in multiple industries including defense, federal government, financial services, health care, life sciences, manufacturing, nonprofit, professional service firms, public service, and technology.

If you'd like to talk to the author of this paper or to any members of the UNC Executive Development team about your talent development needs, call 1-800-UNC-EXEC or email unc_exec@unc.edu.
Introduction

For the first time in a generation, hundreds of thousands of men and women are leaving the U.S. armed forces as war veterans. They have served our country with honor and dignity, and are poised to enter or re-enter the civilian labor force.

Their military experience offers employers valuable knowledge and skills—yet a disproportionate numbers of these heroes are unemployed when compared to the civilian population. Some 263,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans were jobless in May, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The unemployment rate of nearly 13 percent for these veterans is well above the national average of 8 percent. Veterans between the ages of 18 and 24 are having a particularly difficult time finding employment; the jobless rate for this group is approximately 30 percent, well above the 16 percent jobless rate for the same-age civilian population (Curtis, 2012).

Many employers who hire veterans do so at first because of a well-placed sense of patriotic duty. They simply want to assist and thank those who have served our country. HR and talent management professionals, however, quickly discover that hiring veterans is not only good for the country but good for their companies as well.

This white paper:

- Offers reasons why HR and talent management professionals should recruit and hire veterans.
- Provides an overview of some government incentives offered to employers who hire veterans.
- Discusses challenges HR and talent management professionals may encounter when hiring veterans and offers suggestions to overcome those challenges.
- Offers resources, suggestions and tips to HR and talent management professionals wishing to recruit, hire and employ veterans.
- Highlights three organizations that have successfully developed and implemented programs for hiring veterans.
Why Hire Veterans

Employers need employees with great technical skills, and while veterans certainly possess more than an ample amount of these much-needed skills, they also have some much-desired competencies HR and talent management professionals look for in job candidates. Through military experience, veterans have honed leadership, teamwork, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and have learned how to work under intense pressure—all top-rated competencies sought by employers. In addition, veterans have a strong work ethic and exhibit loyalty, according to Bill Offutt, executive director of the U.S. Department of Labor’s HireVetsFirst campaign. These qualities, he notes, are helping to increase the hiring of veterans by private-sector employers (Leonard, n.d.).

Their military experience taught veterans to acquire and apply new skills quickly, to keep up-to-date with the latest technology, to be extremely aware of the importance of health and safety standards, and to understand how policies and procedures help an organization function. Veterans tend to be inclusive because they have worked with diverse populations, and are determined to overcome any and all challenges that come their way.

When HR and talent management professionals hire veterans, they hire more than men or women with exceptional skills and competencies. They also hire their immediate and extended families who have weathered and celebrated their soldiers’ active-duty service. By hiring veterans, businesses can improve their brand, attract new customers and increase the loyalty of their existing ones, and become an employer of choice (Curtis, 2012).

G.I. Jobs’ Top 10 Military Friendly Employers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Veteran New Hires</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Amazon (Seattle, WA)</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Southern Company (Atlanta, GA)</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. CSX Corporation (Jacksonville, FL)</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. BNSF Railway (Ft. Worth, TX)</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. URS (Germantown, MD)</td>
<td>48%</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. ManTech International (Fairfax, VA)</td>
<td>53%</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Johnson Controls (Milwaukee, WI)</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Booz Allen Hamilton (McLean, VA)</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. USAA (San Antonio, TX)</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. T-Mobile USA (Bellevue, WA)</td>
<td>25%</td>
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Top Ten Reasons to Hire Veterans

1. **Accelerated learning curve:** Veterans have a proven ability to learn new skills quickly and efficiently.

2. **Leadership:** The military trains soldiers to lead by example and through direction, delegation, motivation and inspiration.

3. **Teamwork:** Military duties involve the ability to execute both individual tasks and group endeavors.

4. **Diversity:** Veterans have learned how to work with all individuals regardless of race, gender, geographic origin, ethnic background, etc.

5. **Performance under pressure:** Veterans understand what it means to perform under difficult conditions and tight schedules and with limited resources.

6. **Respect for procedures:** Veterans understand what accountability means. They also understand how policies and procedures help an organization function.

7. **Technology and globalization:** Veterans are aware of international and technological trends, and how they apply to business and industry.

8. **Integrity:** Veterans know the value of “an honest day’s work.”

9. **Health and safety procedures:** Veterans are extremely conscious of health and safety standards, and have been trained to strictly adhere to them.

10. **Triumph over adversity:** Veterans have shown time and time again that they can survive the harshest of conditions and succeed in mission-critical situations.

(Source: Jones, 2010)
Government Incentives Can Help

HR and talent management professionals may well be aware that hiring a veteran with the latest technological skills and desired competencies will pay off in the long term for their organizations, but their companies’ C-suite teams may need more convincing about the immediate benefits, particularly in today’s economy. The federal government has attempted to boost these benefits by enacting several programs that offer financial incentives to employers that hire veterans.

The Veteran’s Opportunity to Work (VOW) to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 provides a tax credit to employers who hire short-term unemployed veterans (those who have been jobless for at least four weeks). The tax credit is worth 40 percent of the first $6,000 paid in wages (up to a maximum of $2,400). Employers who hire long-term unemployed veterans (those who have been jobless for longer than six months) can receive a tax credit.

Interviewing Tips for Employers by a Veteran

Chad Storlie, a retired U.S. Army Reserve Special Forces officer and author of *Combat Leader to Corporate Leader*, knows first-hand how difficult it can be for veterans and HR and talent management professionals to translate military experience into professional work experience. He notes that interviewers can easily miss the value veterans bring to an organization because of the seeming disparity between their military skill sets and how an organization functions.

“For example,” notes Storlie, “Is there a relationship between a military sniper and a software quality engineer? Both are focused on initiative, identifying small changes, working alone and on a team, technical expertise, and a complete understanding of the environment in which they operate.”

Storlie recommends that for HR and talent management professionals to fully understand veterans’ skill sets ask them to talk about their most challenging day in the military. “Have them paint you a picture of the conditions, what they were assigned to do, the problems they faced, and how they successfully completed the mission,” says Storlie.

“As they tell their story, look for instances of creativity, leadership, independence, initiative, and technical expertise.” These “hidden” skills may well lead to a variety of potential positions and capabilities that are needed in the organization.

“When you look for those hidden skills,” says Storlie, “you will find the leader you need in your
of 40 percent of wages paid (up to $5,600).

Employers can also take advantage of the Wounded Warrior tax credit which extends a credit of up to $4,800 to companies that hire veterans with service-related disabilities. There is also a new tax credit available to businesses that hire long-term unemployed (more than six months) disabled veterans of 40 percent of the first $24,000 of wages paid (up to $9,600).

These incentives may give HR and talent management professionals the tipping point they need to convince senior leaders that hiring veterans will boost their organizations’ bottom lines now and in the future.

**Employers Struggle with Military-Speak**

Every profession has its own jargon and for good reason. Jargon helps groups of similarly educated and trained people communicate with one another at a higher level more quickly and efficiently. The military is no exception, where the ability to skip the basics of communication and to move to more pressing matters can literally save lives.

The jargon that serves as an asset to written and oral communication in the military, however, can be a detriment in the private sector for men and women transitioning from the military.

Many HR and talent management professionals readily admit that military-speak is akin to ancient Greek to them—they can’t speak it, let alone read it. So when they receive a resume from a veteran seeking a management position that reads "serves as executive officer for a forward-deployed systems military intelligence company. Major tasks include management of intelligence portion of the Joint Planning and Execution Systems and the deployment and redeployment of intelligence assets into theater," eyes glaze over and foreheads furrow. They simply don’t have the benchmarks to help them understand what it means.

At the rate HR and talent management professionals receive resumes, their first reaction may be to place these resumes to the side. This could be a mistake. The military has more than 7,000 jobs in more than 100 functional areas, 80 percent of which have a direct civilian equivalent. The military employs medical professionals, scientists, engineers, photographers and technicians, to name just a few (Burnell, n.d.; Curtis, 2012). HR and talent management professionals who take the time to translate military jargon on a resume or during an interview will reap the rewards.

There are resources available to HR and talent management professionals seeking help translating military jargon. Military Occupation Classification (MOC) codes have been added by the Department of Defense for more than 10,000 jobs on O*Net Online. HR and talent management professionals who know a candidate’s MOC code can also
Tips for Transitioning from the Military

1. **Attend a Transition Assistance Program (TAP) workshop.** These three-day workshops on career exploration, job search strategies, resume and cover-letter writing and interview preparation are sponsored by the federal government and held in locations throughout the United States. New veterans must take advantage of these workshops within 180 days of their separation from the military.

2. **Think about transferrable skills.** Veterans should work on translating what they did in the military into civilian terms.

3. **Find military-friendly employers.** Employers are striving to become more military-friendly, particularly as they realize the long-term benefits of hiring and retaining veterans. Proctor & Gamble, The Home Depot and GE are just a few of the companies with military-friendly reputations, as are employers who are members of the “100,000 Jobs Mission”.

4. **Adjust from military to corporate speak.** A key to getting that first job outside of the military is fitting in. Veterans should avoid military jargon, use civilian time and drop “sir” and “ma’am.”

5. **Find recruiters who focus on military-to-civilian transitions.** Firms that specialize in these transitions include Lucas Group and Bradley Morris.

6. **Play up your strengths as ex-military.** Play up the assets former military are known for—like leadership and teamwork abilities.

7. **Network, network, network.** Reach out to veterans who have successfully transitioned into the private sector and network with them.

(Source: Lin, n.d.)
use O*Net's Military Crosswalk Search to learn the civilian equivalent to the military position listed on a veteran’s resume. HR and talent management professionals who are actively recruiting veterans should consider listing the MOCs of a civilian job on their job announcements (White House Business Council, 2012).

Military-speak may also hinder the interviewing process and inadvertently turn off some HR and talent management professionals. When speaking with veterans—particularly those who recently left the military—keep in mind that this foreign language they are speaking was developed to foster rapid, precise communication under stressful conditions. Instead of dismissing them, practice patience and ask them clarifying questions that will prompt them to explain it in more civilian terms. Over time and with use, veterans will become fluent again in civilian-speak.

Military-to-Civilian Transition Challenges

In an interview with Stars and Stripes (McCloskey, 2012), Tom Tarantino, legislative director for Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America observed that “people in the military do things [in their 20s and 30s] their civilian peers won’t do until their 30s or 40s.” This can make the transition from the military to civilian life and work more challenging for some veterans.

Amy Wittmayer, director of the MBA Career Management Center at the University of North Carolina’s Kenan Flagler Business School, witnessed such transition pangs with a recent female MBA graduate, a top student and a member of the university’s veterans club. “She was better qualified than many other MBA graduate students,” Wittmayer notes. “But she returned from an internship quite disillusioned. When she was in the military, she had led thousands of people and was in charge of a million-dollar supply budget, yet in her internship, she found herself stuck in a cubicle running reports. It took time for her to adjust to the idea that she would have to go through the same ropes as everyone else in the program to prove her worth.”

Veterans from all levels of the military can find the transition difficult. In terms of career placement, the most senior officers to young vets can “feel like they’re being demoted,” says Patty Sauka, a career coach with VA for Vets. She estimates that about half of the veterans she coaches take whatever job is available just to get their foot in the door. The other half won’t take anything less than the position level they held in the military (McCloskey, 2012).

HR and talent development professionals can help veterans navigate these career transitions by applying the same methods they use with other workers to align expectations and assumptions about the organization—by clearly communicating job responsibilities and performance expectations from the recruiting phase on, and explaining
the organization’s promotion policies and timelines. Employers like AT&T have launched employee resource groups that can help veterans network with other veterans to help ease military-to-civilian transitions.

**Company Spotlight: AT&T**

Employee resource groups (ERGs) are often formed to allow employers to gather information on the demographic cohort represented by the group. ERGs help attract and retain talent; identify new customer markets; build relationships in the community; and improve supplier diversity. ERGs for veterans are no exception. Employers, which have no ERGs in place, will discover that a veteran ERG is a great way to start because it can easily include all segments of the employee population.

AT&T launched its veterans’ ERG in 2006, after a series of mergers and acquisitions had caused a previous veteran ERG to flounder. The group is open to all AT&T employees and retirees (no need to be a veteran to be a member, and helps support AT&T’s commitment to diversity; promotes understanding of the sacrifices and contributions made by vets; and serves as an information source and support for AT&T employees called into service or who have family members serving in the military. The group also manages community outreach events and fosters relationships with other veteran-focused organizations. In addition, the 3,500-member group helps out at job fairs and serves as volunteer job search advisors.

(Source: Hastings, 2012)

**Good for the Bottom Line**

It may take a little more time to acclimate newly separated military personnel to the civilian workplace, but it appears to be worth it. A recent poll by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that more than 90 percent of HR professionals agree that veterans bring a strong sense of responsibility to their work, show strong teamwork under pressure, have a strong sense of professionalism, are able to see a task through to completion and are adaptable—all highly desired attributes HR and talent management professionals seek (Curtis, 2012).

Another recently released study by the Center for a New American Security found that while 30 percent of employers said they hired veterans “because it was the right thing to do,” the
majority hired them because it was good for their bottom line. Seventy percent of the study participants said veterans had good leadership skills, purpose and motivation. Further, about half of the executives in the survey said they had been impressed with the trustworthiness, dependability, integrity and maturity exhibited in veterans they had hired (Zoroya, 2012).

Company Spotlight: Amazon.com

Executives at Amazon.com have embraced veterans because of their logistical know-how and “bias for action,” and as a result, 25 percent of their new salaried employees in 2011 were ex-military. Young former junior officers are particularly attractive to Amazon because they are well educated and are (literally) battle-tested.

Amazon’s penchant for hiring veterans actually began without a plan and without a sense of patriotic duty. Amazon realized in the 1990s that it had unintentionally hired a number of former officers to run its warehouses, where logistics skills are highly sought. By 2010, it had formalized its veteran hiring program. Today, Amazon conducts its own military recruiting (rather than working through an outside hiring agency) and has its own dedicated military recruiting website. Amazon has even minted a service coin similar to military medallions commanders give out as tokens of appreciation. Amazon’s coin has the logos of the branches of the U.S. military on one side and Amazon’s logo on the other.

(Source: Lashinsky, 2012; Smith, 2012)

Recruiting and Retaining Veterans

Employers who hire veterans find that it is a win-win situation for all involved. HR and talent managers interested in launching a program dedicated to hiring and retaining veterans in their organizations can begin the process with the following steps:

1. Get support from senior leaders.
2. Use existing resources to find veterans.
3. Welcome veterans into your organization.
4. Offer flexibility, enhance employee assistance programs (EAPs), and establish veterans’ employee resource groups.
1. Get support from senior leaders

All successful programs require support from senior leaders, and a program dedicated to hiring and retaining veterans is no exception. HR and talent management professionals should be prepared to make the business case as to why their organizations' would benefit from a veteran’s hiring program. The business case should include an overview about what other HR and talent management professionals have realized through their own veteran hiring programs (using the information contained in this white paper), an identification of challenges with possible solutions, a return-on-investment (ROI) analysis and an explanation of how the program links to organizational goals.

2. Use existing resources to find veterans

Despite the fact that there are a number of job boards and online resources available to veterans looking for jobs, few HR and talent management professionals seem to take advantage of these resources. A recent SHRM survey found that only 13 percent of respondents said they were very familiar with where to find veterans. They are out there, however, and can (and should) be found.

In addition to online resources (see “Online Resources for Recruiting Veterans” on page 12), SHRM offers the following suggestions for finding veterans:

- Seek out local representatives from the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserves (ESGR). Local connections can be found through the ESGR website (www.esgr.com).

- Host a booth at job fairs specifically for veterans and their families (don’t forget virtual job fairs like Milicruit.com).

- Network at local military community centers (these centers often have services that help connect veterans with local employers).

- Advertise at local college and university career centers, many of which offer programs for their veterans.

- Advertise in military-focused publications like the Military Times and USAA Magazine.
Use social media outlets like LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and Armedzilla.com. LinkedIn hosts more than 250 military-related groups, some of which allow job postings (Curtis, 2012; White House Business Council, 2012).

In addition, the U.S. Department of Labor offers an online publication, *The Veteran’s Hiring Toolkit*, as part of its “America’s Heroes at Work” program. The toolkit is designed to help employers through the process of hiring veterans. It is available for download at: [http://www.americasheroesatwork.gov/foremployers/hiringtoolkit](http://www.americasheroesatwork.gov/foremployers/hiringtoolkit) (Burnell, n.d.).

### Online Resources for Recruiting Veterans

There are so many online resources available to help HR and talent management professionals connect veterans with job opportunities that it can become overwhelming. To help HR and talent development professionals focus their search, the White House Business Council recommends the following websites:

- **Army Career Alumni Program (ACAP):**  

- **Employer Partnership of the Armed Forces:**  
  [http://www.employerpartnership.org](http://www.employerpartnership.org)

- **National Resource Directory:**  
  [http://www.nationalresourcedirectory.gov/employment](http://www.nationalresourcedirectory.gov/employment)

- **VetSuccess:**  
  [http://www.vetsuccess.org](http://www.vetsuccess.org)
3. Welcome veterans into your organization

The welcoming process begins at the recruiting phase; let veterans know your organization is “military friendly.” For example, veterans appreciate flexible work options, so if your organization offers them, include that information in your job advertisements. Many businesses have established employee resource groups for veterans—let veterans know that as well.

If your organization is unfamiliar with the military, now is a good time to become more educated. This could be accomplished through brown bag lunches where employees who are veterans talk about their military experiences, offer some “translations” for military nomenclature and answer questions. Taking the time to help other employees become more familiar with the military will create a more welcoming atmosphere for newly hired veterans.

A welcoming atmosphere is crucial to the interview process. HR and talent management professionals should understand the military occupational skills that correlate with the job before interviewing a veteran; these can be obtained through O*Net. They should also be sure to thank veterans for their service at the beginning of the interview.

Veterans are taught in the military to be modest about their accomplishments (it’s all about teamwork), and it may be difficult for them to talk about themselves during an interview. They are also taught to present themselves to others with eyes forward, backs straight, and to address others as “sir” or “ma’am.” HR and talent management professionals should be prepared for these kinds of possibilities when interviewing vets and be coached on ways to make veterans more at ease (e.g., encouraging them to speak freely and to address the interviewer by his or her first name, if appropriate). And if “military-speak” begins to dominate the interview, hiring managers should be coached on how to ask clarifying questions to understand better how the veteran’s military experience applies to the job at hand.

4. Offer flexibility, enhance employee assistance programs (EAPs) and establish veterans’ employee resource groups

HR and talent management professionals can support veterans by expanding or modifying some existing programs that may already be in place in their organizations. A 2011 SHRM/Family Work Institute report makes the following recommendations:

- Enhance EAPs to include specific support for veterans and their families, such as managing stress, and caring for veterans after an injury or trauma.
• Provide benefits to veterans that enhance their financial well-being. For example, Capital One has a Disaster Recovery Grant program that helps employees who experience sudden misfortune.

• Offer workplace flexibility programs. Veterans undergoing medical treatment for injuries or who are adjusting to civilian life may need added flexibility.

• Offer additional sick and vacation leave so veterans can leave for separation and reunion events.

• Start an employee resource group for veterans (Maurer, 2011).

Organizations can support veterans by offering mentoring programs and phase-in programs that allow vets to start part time and gradually increase their work hours (Maurer, 2011).
Company Spotlight: CSX Corporation

CSX plans to hire 3,000 people in 2012, including approximately 1,000 veterans. The organization has a long-standing commitment to hiring veterans and reservists – nearly one in five CSX employees has served in the military. CSX also supports employees engaged in the National Guard or active Reserve by extending salary and benefits to employees called up to active duty.

Not surprisingly, CSX is recognized as a military friendly company. It is the recipient of the 2012 Distinguished Service Award from the Military Officers Association of America, and is one of CivilianJobs.com’s Most Valuable Employers. CSX also is the only two-time winner of the Freedom Award from the Employer Support the Guard and Reserve, and is regularly among the top three companies in G.I. Jobs’ Top 100 Military Friendly Employers. Below is a brief Q&A with Jennifer Burnett, AVP - Talent Acquisition at CSX Transportation:

What are the benefits that CSX receives from hiring soldiers/veterans?

Veterans make our business better by bringing accountability, teamwork and commitment to their civilian jobs, just as they do in the military. Our military employees take pride in achieving excellence in all that they do. We also have found there are many parallels between the military and CSX environment as it relates to the need to work safely, to adhere to rules and procedures, to perform work with a high level of precision, skill and attention to detail, and the willingness to work in a physically demanding environment.

How does CSX assist veterans in identifying the right job fit and making the transition to civilian work?

We understand the challenges of moving from a military to a civilian career and we want to make that as smooth a process as possible. We begin by being very active and involved in the military communities, and connect with individuals even before they leave the service. We have dedicated recruiters, who are military veterans themselves, who visit bases and military facilities and talk to service men and women about searching for jobs, writing their resume, and interviewing.
Company Spotlight: CSX Corporation (...continued)

We consult with them on some of the challenges they may face. Our representatives provide this guidance not just for the sake of attracting people to CSX, but simply to share our knowledge and experience in order to help military veterans successfully obtain a position at any company.

With regard to our own recruiting efforts, we provide resources on our career site just for military candidates, including a job match tool that shows them how to relate their military experience to railroad jobs.

CSX is also strengthening our on-boarding process for military veterans by providing support from many areas of our company, including our Military Affinity Group, made up of CSX employees who can serve as mentors and coaches. We also understand that many people will still serve in the Guard and Reserves and we support them in many ways, especially should they be called into active duty and/or be deployed.

Overall, for CSX, hiring and retaining military veterans brings great value to our business, for those individuals, and for our country.

(Source: J. Burnett, Email exchange, June 19, 2012)

Conclusion

We have been honored to have fine men and women voluntarily put their lives on the line to serve our country. HR and talent management professionals have a rare opportunity to tap into the skills military veterans have refined in the most difficult of circumstances. Veterans have learned and put to use outstanding leadership and technical skills—skills that they are willing and able to give back to the private sector. HR and talent management professionals will find that hiring these fine men and women not only helps our country but helps their organizations as well.
About UNC Executive Development

Our approach to program design and delivery draws upon the power of real-world, applicable experiences from our faculty and staff, integrated with the knowledge our client partners share about the challenges they face.

We combine traditional with experiential and unique learning to ensure that all individuals gain relevant new skills that they can easily implement within their own organizations. Through action learning and business simulation activities, we challenge participants to think, reflect and make decisions differently.

Our Approach: The Partnership

Our team customizes each leadership program through a highly collaborative process that involves our clients, program directors, faculty and program managers. We are dedicated to following-up with our clients and individual participants to ensure that their learning experiences have been meaningful and impactful. This integrated approach consistently drives strong outcomes.

Our Approach: The Results

Our executive education programs are designed with results in mind, and we are focused on successfully meeting our clients' business and academic expectations. Below are a few examples of the results our client partners have achieved:

- Big data analytics
- Leadership refocused with new strategy and cohesive vision
- Strategic plans created for the global marketplace
- Supply chains streamlined
- Products redefined
- New markets targeted
- Cost-saving measures developed
- Silos leveled
- Teams aligned

Participants leave empowered to bring in new ideas, present different ways to grow business and tackle challenges. The result is stronger individuals leading stronger teams and organizations.

Contact Us

Website: www.execdev.unc.edu | Phone: 1.800.862.3932 | Email: unc_exec@unc.edu
Sources


