

Boston Business Journal
May 14, 2013

Covidien, others join together to find jobs for vets

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Boston Business Journal

Massachusetts has a thriving life sciences cluster, and there continues to be rapid growth in the sector. That's why six of the state's life sciences businesses are working together to fill some of those employment opportunities by recruiting and mentoring veterans.

Human resources executives from Biogen Idec (Nasdaq: BIIB), Covidien, Fresenius Medical Care, Pfizer and Vertex Pharmaceuticals held a focus group on Tuesday with local veterans and state and federal officials to prepare military veterans for jobs in the life sciences.

The group kicked off its partnership with Edge4Vets, a career development program launched in 2011 by the Human Resiliency Institute at [Fordham University](#), and the Massachusetts Department of Veterans' Services.

[Michael Dunford](#), who served as a reserve officer in the [U.S. Marine Corps](#) and is now senior vice president of human resources at Covidien, said while there are many job placement programs for military vets, there always seemed to be something missing.

“The piece that was missing was the connection to real jobs,” said Dunford, who handles human resources for the Dublin-based company, which has more than 1,500 employees at its Mansfield,

Mass. campus. “There seems to be a level of frustration where they attend large job fairs and are one of thousands to submit resumes, but don’t get the connection to the real job.”

To address it, Dunford corralled a group of human resource representatives from the other six companies and connected with the Human Resiliency Institute to develop the program. Nearly 50 people - from local veterans service departments, the Boston Private Industry Council, UMass Boston and UMass Lowell and officials from the Massachusetts Dept. of Veteran's Services - were brought together to validate the concept in preparing military vets for jobs in life sciences.

Some veterans who attended the focus group expressed concern over the perceived gap in skill set, but Dunford said life science companies have to fill not only research and development jobs, but jobs in multiple areas of the business such as human resources, manufacturing and finance. This program will help prepare vets for those types of jobs.

The pilot program, slated to kick off as early as June, will consist of three, 3-hour workshops over a three-week period. A total of 20 to 25 veterans will be identified to participate in the pilot.

“The intent is to run the pilot, learn from it and cross-correct,” Dunford said. “Fundamentally it is about getting a veteran a job. We want to get more vets employed.”

The need to fill jobs in state’s fastest growing industry is dire. As of 2012, 1,198 life sciences companies were operating in New England and employing 103,006 workers and more than half of those companies are located in Massachusetts, according to the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council. According to a report by the Boston Foundation, there was 27.3 percent employment growth in life sciences in Massachusetts from 2001 to 2011, compared to 11.9 percent in the same period.

If the pilot is successful, the plan is to grow it and bring on other sponsoring companies. “It absolutely has scalability,” Dunford said. “I put (the others) on notice to say that after the pilot, we will have to tell two friends and bring more people into the fold,” Dunford said about the original group of life science companies involved in the program.

In order to connect veterans with jobs, all veterans who participate in the program will be guaranteed job interviews with sponsoring companies. “We are not guaranteeing employment, but we are guaranteeing access to decision-makers.”



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