

AN ARMY OF FARM WORKERS

Former military personnel could be the solution to many farm staffing problems – and they come with a unique set of skills. **Gary Young** reports.

While many farming businesses report problems in hiring staff there could be – quite literally – an army of workers out there ready to take on the opportunity.

Organisations such as the charity HighGround believe that veterans and service-leavers are ideally placed to fill the widening gap in the rural jobs market as military life teaches members of the armed forces a range of skills that can make them ideally suited to working in the countryside.

HighGround, which has been operating for 12 years, helps service leavers, reservists and veterans to work out what military skills and experience they have, how they will map into the land-based sector and how to access the many opportunities it offers for employment and self-employment.

CEO Jamie Crisp, who is a veteran himself, said ex-service personnel have a unique set of skills that makes them attractive to employers. “Integrity is a critical part of their make-up, and they have loyalty, ‘stickability’ and integrity,” he said. “They have the drive to turn up whatever day it is and whatever the

weather and can be relied upon to put in a good day’s work.

“They are highly trainable – military people are always being retrained every 18 months and have the willingness to learn and adaptability to succeed. They are also specifically trained in teamwork – they can work in small or large organisations or work individually on their own initiative.

“And because of the operational tours they undertake, there is a strong awareness of the importance of health and safety measures as the equipment they are called upon to use is often highly dangerous.”

Depending on their experience, veterans often have skills around HR, finance, logistics and project management and can offer a multitude of vehicle licences or engineering backgrounds, with many having worked on tanks and large vehicles. For businesses in the agri-tech industry, Navy and RAF veterans in particular can have specialised skills around data analysis, drones and engineering work.

“The biggest feedback we get from employers – it’s always similar – is that veterans have fitted into the dynamics of the team very quickly,” said Jamie. “They are very quick to learn and usually go through the ranks of the business quicker than their counterparts and into

leadership roles. It is usually agreed that they have added value to the business.”

In recent years, the UK’s departure from the EU led to changes in immigration policy that reduced the availability of seasonal workers, which was then further disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Add to this an ageing workforce, competition from other industries for skilled workers, and aspirations for a better work-life balance and staff shortages have continued to grow.

“Youngsters going from education into the workplace are often looking at portfolio careers,” explained Jamie.

“An 18-year-old may have done many jobs in a short period of time – they are a transactional workforce and if you are looking to invest the time and training in their future, you have to ask: are they going to stay?”

“We want to build greater awareness in the agricultural sector of how the 16,500 people leaving the services this year alone can fill the skills gaps in the UK. These veterans are an important untapped workforce for this country and its industries.”

For more information about HighGround, visit highground-uk.org

CASE STUDY / OLLY PEMBERTON

Olly Pemberton is a farm manager for Velcourt on the Waddesdon Estate near Aylesbury, a traditional 6,500-acre country estate featuring combinable crops, sheep and beef, parkland and other activities beyond agriculture.

He grew up on a family farm in Hampshire, studied engineering at university and joined the Coldstream Guards. Commissioned in 2011, he left the Army in 2016.

“It was the end of a phase in my career in the military, and I would have been moving onto a role a bit less on the front line and more administrative and I wanted something that was still out and about,” he said.

“Because of my background I enjoyed being involved in agriculture growing up and my job now is a combination of running your own business effectively on behalf of the client – activity such as budgeting and planning – and I’m a qualified agronomist as well through Velcourt, who run a training scheme which gave me industry-specific skills.

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“I run the farm as if it’s my own and there is a decent amount of hands-on practical work and I’m still in the workshop or out on the kit at busy times of the year.”

Olly, who works with HighGround, said the organisation offers a fantastic service as many people leave the military with precisely the skills the agriculture sector is looking for.

“I’d definitely recommend employing veterans,” he said. “They have independent thought and can act on their own initiative, are receptive to training but are also used to following orders and being part of a chain of command. They have excellent communication and personnel skills. You’ve got to accept people probably haven’t got a lot of direct agricultural experience, but with a bit of guidance and training, it’s relatively cheap and easy to upskill them for that.

“I tell veterans to look beyond the salary, because there’s a lot of benefits that come with it, such as housing being provided – it’s a lifestyle as much as it is a job, in the same way that the military is. You’ve got to enjoy it; you’ve got to be passionate about it and if you tick those boxes then it’s really rewarding.”

CASE STUDY / CHRIS GILES

Global machinery brand John Deere runs a pioneering programme in the UK and Ireland specifically aimed at offering military service leavers a pathway into their next career.

The Military Hiring Programme is a worldwide initiative and applicants are connected to an individual within John Deere who has already made the transition before being put through a raft of free training to prepare them for a career as a technician at one of the company’s depots.

John Deere views military personnel with a background in servicing combat vehicles as having an extremely transferable skillset that will help them adapt to a new role maintaining mechanically and technologically advanced agricultural machinery.

Chris Giles has carved out a career in the civilian world by transferring his military engineering skills to John Deere’s dealership network. After serving on the front line around the world in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME), Chris attended an open day about the hiring programme.

He became a technician at the Tallis Amos Group

Leominster depot and today he is a technical communicator and certified dealer instructor at the firm.

Chris said: “In terms of the kit, going from tanks to tractors is a completely different world. The hydraulics, for example are completely different.

“But there wasn’t much of a transition when coming to the John Deere brand, as the level of high readiness is the same. The kit needs to be fixed and out the door as soon as possible, much like in the army. You’re looking to apply that pre-existing training and knowledge to a different kind of machine.”

For details visit www.deere.com/JDMHP

