

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

You are listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Work in progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges. Transitioning from active military duty to a civilian career can be one of the most stressful times of your life according to today's guests. Fortunately, there are people in every branch of the military to help prepare service members for that big step. Steve Keck is Chief of the Career Investment Division of the U.S. Coast Guard. Chris Cruz is the deputy chief. Both are veterans and both understand that service members learn remarkable skills while serving their country, skills that are vital to our nation's security. They also know that sometimes it's helpful to have a degree or industry-recognized credentials as they make that transition. Steve, Chris and I discuss their roles in prepping soon-to-be veterans to fill critical maritime security jobs. But first, Steve starts us out by explaining the work they do at the career investment division.

Stephen Keck, U.S. Coast Guard:

Everyone within the Coast Guard active duty officers enlisted in civilians are beneficiaries of our services and our programs. So we offer tuition assistance to help the members get a higher education, whether or not they're enlisted in starting off with an associate's degree up to a master's or even a second master's degree. We have the credentialing assistance program, which was really born out of the fact that all the military services were paying way too much in unemployment compensation, tens to hundreds of millions of dollars. And Congress had said, why are we paying that much in unemployment compensation when we pay so much money to train these kids? And what happens is they would get out, they did a great job while they were in the military, but if they got out after 4, 6, 8, 10 years and didn't have a skill that was recognized in the civilian sector, then they weren't given a job.

Even though they did that exact job in the military, they did not have to have at that time a credential or a license because you don't need one while you're serving in the military. And so we help members both get the training to get them up to speed, to be able to take and sit for that exam or credential. And then we also pay for that exam and credential that they can do. And it's mostly directly related to their world of work, but it doesn't have to be. And that's something that the Coast Guard is doing different than the other services. We are allowing members to get a credential or a license or a certificate in anything. It doesn't have to be related to the world of work because we just feel that it's professional development and talent management and just good for, we're investing in their careers, hence why we're called the Career investment division.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Chris, you want to give me an example of how that might be applied to an active member and how they may go through that type of credentialing?

Christopher Cruz, U.S. Coast Guard:

Yeah, absolutely. We just gave a brief to a group of training officers, active duty officers, and one of the challenges that we do have is really awareness of the programs. I think a podcast like this can really help with that. Here were some young junior officers that it was their first time hearing about the CA program or credentialing assistance program. Maybe a recent example we had was 40 plus Coast Guard members active duty up at the Coast Guard headquarters in DC. They took the SHRM training, it's human resources specific credential. That is a really important one in the HR world out in the private sector. Well, using the CA program, these 40 plus trained together, I think training was about a week

long and they used their CA benefit. And now solely but surely those members are taking the exam, which CA is also paying for.

Now what does that mean? It means that the Coast Guard gets 40 plus individuals that are more ready, more professionalized to do that HR job, everything that SHRM, just using that as an example. So it's good for the Coast Guard while they're still in uniform. It's absolutely good if some of these members eventually transition out of the service. There's just something magical about those letters, the licenses behind your name when it's time to transition. And that's the one fact everybody will go through. It's not when, but it's not if, it's when. And so whatever we can do to prepare members, whether it's a degree, a credential, or an apprenticeship, that's what we're all about.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

For those of us who are not familiar with the day-to-day activity of the Coast Guard, what kind of work do they do, Steve?

Stephen Keck, U.S. Coast Guard:

So honestly, it runs the gamut from a person who drives the ship to the person who fixes the engines, to the person who is a storekeeper and has to order all the... They're the supply person and they have to make all the orders and prepare all the orders. We have culinary specialists who have to prepare the food on board. And then on the officer's side, we have marine safety personnel and marine scientists and engineers and aviators, because we do search and rescue. It runs the gamut of, it's a large swath of different things that they do that would really take up... You could honestly go to nearly any college and just say, we need somebody that's doing every single one of these things and any trade school. So go to any trade school and any college and university, and we probably have someone in the Coast Guard doing those things that need that education and that development.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Programs like the one that you both lead makes people more civilian life ready with credentials or associate's degree or college degrees. Where is the big need now?

Stephen Keck, U.S. Coast Guard:

One of the biggest ones, and it's actually considered a national security crisis, truly is the lack of credentialed merchant mariners. There's an organization Military Sealift Command who provides the ammunition and all the supplies, and they're the supply ships that if something were to go wrong, they help provide all the logistics for the military. And so right now, there is a danger because there's not enough credentialed mariners that we might not have enough ships to bring in all the supplies. That's one of the programs of credentialing assistance. It's called the Military to Mariner program because that was, as I spoke about earlier, where they get all this training and yet when they get out, they don't have a civilian credential. So one of the first ones established was the military to Mariner because it just makes sense. You're driving boats, you're in charge of that. When you get out, you should be able to work on a ship.

None of our folks could step on a ship. Even though they drove some of the biggest cutters, and even in the Navy driving an aircraft carrier, being a member of an aircraft carrier, when they get out, if they do not have a Merchant Mariner credential, they cannot step aboard a civilian ship. Whether it's a cruise ship or whether it's one of the transport, anything that's going back and forth to international waters, they couldn't do it. So what we are doing is starting up a program where at basic training, we want every

single new basic trainee that goes to Cape May will come out of basic training as at least the most basic, it's called an ordinary seaman, but they will receive a Merchant Mariner credential that starts the process. And this requires no sea time. It's just basically a physical exam, a drug test, a few things, very, very simple.

And then you have this, and it looks just like a passport. And it's issued by the National Maritime Center who they are the credentialing body for the entire world. They are the ones who if you are going to sail in international waters anywhere within the United States and any of our partner nations, you must have an international credential that is provided by the National Maritime Center. But getting that initial credential is so important because it is very difficult to get, it's fairly difficult, meaning, I don't want to say the bureaucracy, but there's a lot of steps to go into it because they are accrediting body for the entire world. So the entire Mariner community let's say. But getting that initial credential is super important because then as they get sea time, they can get endorsements and become a captain or a master mate or all these things that allow them to go on a commercial ship and have a job when they get out.

Christopher Cruz, U.S. Coast Guard:

Steve brings up a great point. Whenever the words national security crisis comes up, of course it gets our attention. And so this is a really huge initiative that we really think is going to make a big difference. One of the stories that we share when we do our road shows when we meet with Coast Guard members is our very own voluntary credentialing program manager. He talks about his time when he was active duty army. He was a communications specialist working at the very highest levels. One of his tours was at the White House as a communications officer for the Clinton administration. He's got some great pictures with Hillary Clinton, President Clinton. He had this special clearance called the Yankee White, which basically allowed him to be out on the street and with this clearance, he could be in the Oval Office within five minutes. He was doing it all.

It was at the very highest levels. So when he was going to get out of the army and become a civilian, he was very confident with the job prospects because he had been there, done that. And unfortunately, what his personal experience was, was that he didn't have the official license or credentials that he needed for these specific communications jobs. It was a hard lessons learned. A year and a half, two years later, he's still unemployed. And it wasn't until he earned those official credentials that employment opportunities came for him. He shares that story openly. It wakes people up. I mentioned [inaudible 00:10:43] earlier, you want that credential attached to your name. There's just a big difference when you have it and don't have it. And so that's one thing we're really pounding the table on for Coast Guard members.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

So when you go into the Coast Guard, you really are getting this specialized training. So you are, as you mentioned already both of you, you're learning how to steer the ship, you're learning navigation, et cetera. But there's also other parts of it, law enforcement, engineering, healthcare. You mentioned human resources. So how are you helping that vast pool of people get more training to be prepared much as you're doing with the Merchant Mariners?

Stephen Keck, U.S. Coast Guard:

Great question, Ramona. So we are perfect case in point, working with the culinary specialists out in Petaluma, California. So they finish basic training. They're just a regular recruit. They go to their A... What's called their A school. That's just their initial, they pick whatever rate, whatever job they want to

do within the Coast Guard, and let's say they want to be a cook or a chef. And so we have been partnering with the American Culinary Federation, ACF, and they have come out to check out what we're doing in that a school. And we have made changes to the curriculum, added, subtracted, done all these things so that when they leave, there are several civilian certifications through the ACF that they automatically receive when they finish this training. And this is something that's never happened before. And we're doing the same with the engineering and the MEs and the electricians.

Christopher Cruz, U.S. Coast Guard:

The electricians, electricians mates, really across any of the military ratings. If there is a way to get a credential during whatever specialized training, that's what we're going for. And we're really pushing this with the training team.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Are you able to offer tuition assistance for those people who want the associate's degree or a four-year degree?

Stephen Keck, U.S. Coast Guard:

So yes, we offer \$4,500 a year towards tuition assistance, and we also offer \$4,500 a year towards credentialing assistance. And those are both exclusive from one another. So for all intents and purposes, they get a \$9,000 bonus if they use both of those opportunities every year, which is different than many of the services. Not that this is necessarily a plug for the Coast Guard, but yay, Semper Paratus. It resets every October and they can start again with another 4,500 and again, working towards whatever degree that they would like to get into. And I will say kudos to Admiral Fagan, who is our commandant, who has really shown that continuing education and education is important.

So the Coast Guard is just now starting up a program. It's called Continuous Learning Incentive points. So basically it's points towards advancement. It's for the enlisted members, they will get points towards their next promotion for degrees. So let's just say one point for an associate's, two points for a bachelor's, three points for a master's, and also for certain credentials. So if you're a mariner within the Coast Guard and you get a 100 ton license or an unlimited license or a licensed engineering with the engineering department, those things will provide points towards advancement. And it's just another way of showing that they really do care about that and it's become more and more important.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

How many people within the Coast Guard... Chris, maybe you can answer this, how many people within the Coast Guard are taking advantage of these programs to prepare themselves for either advancement in their career within the Coast Guard or afterwards?

Christopher Cruz, U.S. Coast Guard:

So my short answer is not enough. The numbers are increasing, but on tuition assistance, it's about 4,500 participants. Happy to say that on the credentialing assistant side, that has really, really taken off from fiscal year '23 to '24. I mean, the numbers are really, really massive, over 600% increase in the funds spent in credentialing assistance. And we're continuing to see those type of increases. So we're really excited about that. But I do say in all seriousness, it's not enough because in my opinion, practically every member of the Coast Guard should be taking advantage of these great benefits. And I'm talking about Coast Guard civilians like Steve and myself.

Steve is using credentialing assistance. I have plans to use it. And the mindset is this, and I think this is really important to working Nation. It's lifelong learning. It's continual learning, it never stops. So the Coast Guard is really small, especially compared to the other services. Every single member of the team, every single member of that cutter or that aviation squadron, they have to be a force multiplier. And so the education, the learning mindset, the continual improvement, that's just a key piece of being a Coast Guard member. And it's actually an honor to be a member of this high caliber team. And so I think it's very much in sync with the fact that Coast Guard prioritizes education, professional development like no other, something that we're very proud of.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Both of you are veterans. When you made the service to civilian transition, did you get enough assistance there? I think there is still a bit of that, and I know that a lot of work has been done over the years to improve that. But tell me a little bit about your experiences. I'd love to hear about it.

Stephen Keck, U.S. Coast Guard:

Personally speaking, right? Because this was my journey. When I transitioned out, I did go through what they call the Transition Assistance Program, the TAP program, which is constantly being refined and updated and upgraded, and they encouraged you to go at least six months before you're thinking of retiring. And now we in the Coast Guard are telling folks, you need to start at least a year and a half before you're going because no matter what anybody thinks, like Chris said, it's not a matter of if, it's when. Everybody gets out and they keep going on. So I did receive a lot of information. I did only go once within my six months, and I don't think that was enough. And that was partly on me, partly on... I was in command at the time. And so it was very hard to let go of that and take the time for myself with everybody, you look at them in the eye and say, you need to make time for yourself, and then people just don't make time for themselves.

And I think I was a very typical story. As I said, I think earlier, Ramona, I worked at the VA before I came to the Coast Guard and helped my job there was to help veterans get jobs. But before I even went to that, I found out the average veteran, it takes them about four jobs before they land where they're going to be and for any length of time. This Coast Guard job is my fifth. So it really does... It's about right and I'm done. I love it here. I'm not going anywhere.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And how about you, Chris?

Christopher Cruz, U.S. Coast Guard:

Number three for me, not as high of a number, but a similar story. My transition, and I was very, very fortunate. It's atypical. I had a great opportunity in front of me that stemmed from really my active duty job. There I was a U.S. Southern Command headquartered in Miami, Florida, and I had this great opportunity to work some really incredible humanitarian assistance disaster response projects. One of the biggest ones was the U.S. Navy's hospital ship missions. So here's the USNS Comfort on the East Coast and then the USNS Mercy on the west coast. But these were fantastic missions, and they would go down to... The big hospital ship would go down to South America, Central America and the Caribbean for about five months. And lo and behold, here are the Navy doctors, surgeons, dentists, and so on, working right alongside the civilian nonprofits, medical NGOs, non-governmental organizations, Operation Blessing, Operation Smile, Latter-day, Saint Charities, Registered Nurse Response Network,

Project Hope. It was upwards of 100 civilian volunteers that raised their hand and say, Hey, I'll deploy on that ship for free so I can do some really good things for these countries.

And it was just a very incredible opportunity. One thing leads to another, I ended up with one of those NGOs that I was working closely with. I mean, honestly, it was what I considered a dream job. And this is one of those things that I tell peers and friends when they're transitioning out. I just didn't think I was going to be one of those that had the average of four to five jobs because this one fell into my lap and it was great, and it really, really was. But what good is that if the family and the stress and everything that goes along with those things are just not what you expected them to be. Transitioned back into the government side of the house, worked for Navy as a civilian, and then saw the light and worked... And now this is my last job. I've told Steve I'm not going anywhere unless he fires me.

I absolutely love what we get to do on a daily basis and to help these Coast Guard members with their next steps, whether it's in uniform or when they transition out, and preferably both. The reality is that phase of life, especially for 20 plus year military member, arguably the most stressful thing they will do at that point in their life. And this is compared to... And I've talked to my peer group. Yes, yes, more stressful than landing on the aircraft carrier at night after combat operations. It is more stressful than that. It's actually a full-time job if you're doing it right, that transition out. And one of the challenges is who has the time to dedicate to do two full-time jobs during that phase of life? So whatever we can do to back it up, get people planned and prepared as early as possible, we're going to do that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I love that you shared your stories because I think that is a very important thing. And if as we close this, if you had to talk to civilian employers, what would you both say? What would you each say to say, this is a stressful time for someone moving out of the military making the transition. They may not have all of the credentials you need right now, but how can you be a part of it to make that an easier time to help those people who have served?

Stephen Keck, U.S. Coast Guard:

Ramona, I would love to talk to hiring managers. I'd get the opportunity to be one every once in a while as I hire folks, and I do it way different than the average person that's hiring for the government. I take it a totally different route, and my mindset is that pretty much anyone can do what we need them to do. I can train them, we can train them up and teach them to do what they do. It's mostly about fit. So I would offer that these folks who are transitioning out have been... And we all feel this, right? I know this. Pretty much every single veteran can say, I feel like a jack-of-all-trades, a master of none, in most cases. Now, if you're an aviator, yes, if you are a lawyer, okay, there are some specialties, but for the most part, I was a medical officer medical Service Corps, but I did medical training, I did medical IT, I did medical logistics.

So the resume of the average military veteran is all over the map. What you have to see past is that to look really deeply at that and say, we can get this person to do anything. The motivation level, and I hear from friends of mine now who own businesses and they just want people who want to show up. Who will show up on time and be prepared to start work. I don't want to say that it's that simple, but truly you're going to get with a veteran. You are going to get someone who absolutely will take orders, be willing to change, be willing to do whatever's needed to do next because they are those... Every two years or every three years, we transition. I transferred from San Antonio to Philadelphia to California down back to Texas. You only stay in one position at one job for three or four years.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Understand, to be able to use that to your advantage I think is super important.

Christopher Cruz, U.S. Coast Guard:

Ramona, all of us on this call, we've been there on the hiring panels and what seems like great candidates and eye watering and so on. The reality is it's still a gamble. It really is. I don't care how good the resume looks, I don't care how good the interview was, it's still a gamble. Personally, I put a lot of stock into known proven quantities, known proven people, and I think that's one of the differentiating factors for military members, especially one that's done a full career. You have a proven known quantity for the last couple of decades. It will show up in their paperwork, it'll show up from their recommendations and so on.

It's something that you cannot hide from. Steve and I were down in Pensacola not too long ago, business owner conversations, entertainment industry, restaurants, real estate, and he was sharing with us how difficult it is to have really good qualified employees. And of course, we're a little biased and we shared that the benefits of veterans, and that's something that I think the more private sector can really employ veterans and know of their many attributes. It's just a great thing. I love programs like SkillBridge that allow private companies to utilize veterans, military members that are about to leave the service. I think that's a really great program. And the more of those type of initiatives where they can already prove their worth in that civilian organization, I think is a great thing.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Chris and Steve, thank you very much. I appreciate you sitting down with me.

Christopher Cruz, U.S. Coast Guard:

Thank you, Ramona.

Stephen Keck, U.S. Coast Guard:

Thank you so much, Ramona. It was our pleasure.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

That was Steve Keck and Chris Cruz of the U.S. Coast Guard's Career Investment Division. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thanks for listening.