

Toyota Veterans Association Spotlight: Supporting Veterans Every Day

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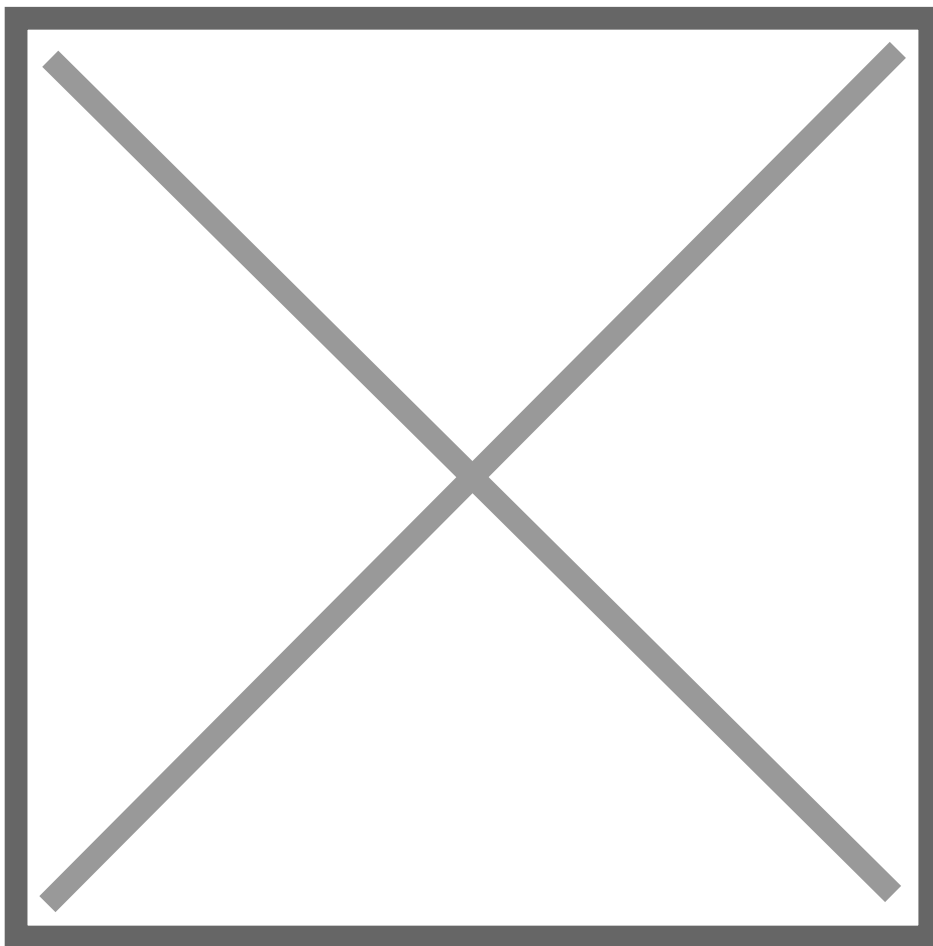
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Veterans Day celebrates and honors those who have served in the United States Armed Forces every November, but the Toyota Veterans Association (TVA) serves military veterans every day.

With more than 1,500 members and 16 chapters across the country, the growing business partnering group (BPG) serves as an advocacy and support group for veterans at Toyota. But it isn't just those who have served in the military who are active members. In fact, many participants are drawn to the organization because they feel a deep connection to or have loved ones who've served in the U.S. Air Force, U.S. Army, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Marines, U.S. Navy or Space Force.

"I'm an ally," explains Ruth Jessen, senior analyst in Legal at Toyota. "I didn't actually serve. My grandpa was in the Navy during World War II, and I've just always loved to support the military community because they do what I cannot. I recognize the sacrifices that the people make, and their families make, and I just try to find a way to help fill the gaps on the backside."



All for One and One for All

Individuals like Jessen play a critical role in the support of those at Toyota who have dedicated their lives to serving and protecting their country. Sam De La Garza, senior manager in Product Planning & Strategy at Toyota says he loves the diversity of experiences that its members bring to the table. Members may be directly or indirectly related to the military, but all feel a connection and are welcome.

“I think that’s what’s beautiful about this organization. We accept and we respect everyone as they come through it,” he says.

Getting veterans through the door, keeping them and promoting them is what the organization strives to achieve. TVA has worked across boundaries in new ways to help attract and hire, as well as retain, veterans in roles where there is a critical need across Toyota, specifically at its manufacturing plants.

“TVA is all about advocating for talent with military experience and helping them succeed once they get inside Toyota, through networking and mentorship,” says Michael Smith, senior manager of Revenue and Cost Analytics at Toyota and chair of the North American Advisory Council for TVA and a proud Marine. “And then giving back to the communities in which we are a part of, whether that’s in West Virginia or across the other 16 chapters, we’re all trying to pull together to do the same thing.”



TVA has seen some recent success attracting talent. For example, last summer the organization conducted virtual job events at Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Alabama where prospective employees learned about the benefits of working for Toyota. The events also allowed current Toyota veterans to share their experiences and speak about how to succeed at the company. It was the first time TVA worked with the plant leadership, their human resources department and Toyota's corporate human resources department.

"We had over 50 veterans join us just from those two events alone," says Smith. "So, that's one initiative in Alabama that we'd love to keep doing as we help veterans find manufacturing jobs."

Crossing Virtual Bridges

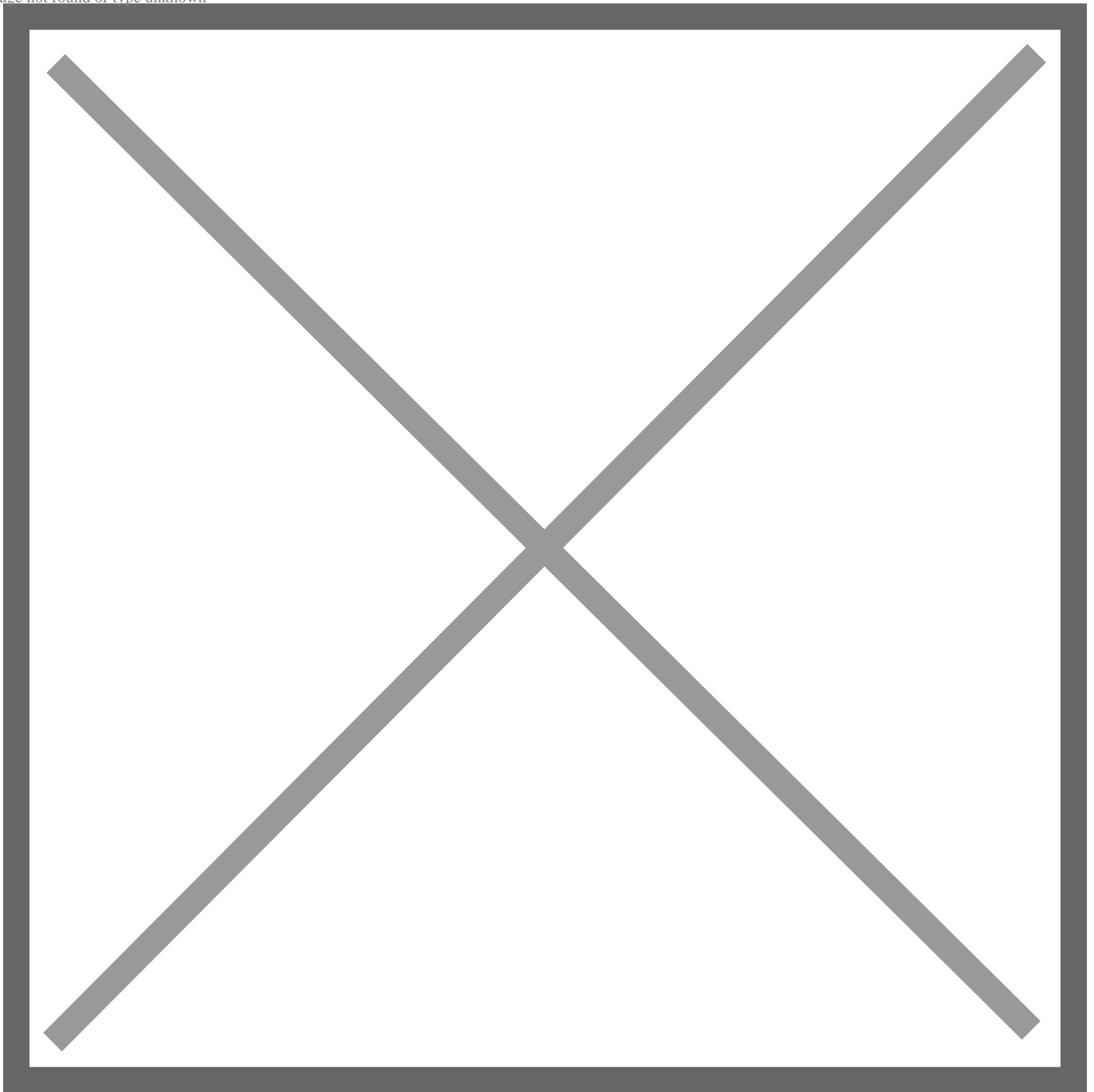
While the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted how many companies conduct business, it's been beneficial for TVA's recruitment efforts. In addition to the virtual events in Alabama, remote platforms have worked in the group's favor.

"The virtual world almost works better for us because military members are leaving different duty posts from around the world," De La Garza explains. "So, if a veteran is coming back to the states from Germany, we can actually reach them before they even leave the service and they can have a job in Huntsville, Alabama practically by the time they arrive."

He adds, "That's the amazing thing about the military services and where people are located around the globe, we can actually get to them, tell our story, and excite them about the opportunities at Toyota."

While job requirements differ across Toyota, being virtual ignites conversations and jumpstarts potential opportunities.

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Stronger Together

Once veterans are a part of the Toyota family, TVA's goal is to ensure they're supported professionally, as well as emotionally. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, many veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of exposure to life-threatening experiences during combat missions.

"Veterans put on a good surface, we're often tough, resilient, all these values that we espouse, but sometimes the job is really tough. And some folks have seen some really tough things," explains Chad Wegner, a manager in

Corporate Strategy at Toyota Financial Services who also served four years in the Army. “They’ve seen the worst side of humanity in their roles defending freedoms. So, the veteran community can also be very fragile.”

That’s why cultivating an environment where veterans can open up and express their feelings with colleagues who’ve shared similar experiences is a top priority for the group. TVA provides members with a safe space so they can build relationships and create an opportunity for meaningful conversations. Jessen recalls one of those moments at a recent event hosted by the Plano, Texas chapter.

During the after-hours event that took place over Memorial Day, people recalled memories with their friends who had given their lives in service to their country. Whether it was sharing photos or telling funny stories, it gave those in attendance an outlet to voice their thoughts and feelings — and honor fellow veterans.

“Being able to provide those safe spaces for people to participate, whether engaging and telling their stories, or just by showing up gives the sense of ‘I’m not alone in this hard situation in life,’” Jessen says of the group’s benefits. “People need people to survive and to thrive in life.”

Building Unbreakable Bonds

The sense of camaraderie is exemplary throughout TVA. As with other BPGs, its members have similar backgrounds and interests that create a strong common ground, but the level of understanding and kinship that military veterans feel towards each other is exceptional.



“The military provides an environment that really intensifies all of our life experiences, which is the reason why camaraderie and that feeling of strong bonds are already there,” says Lipas Hicks, a Navy veteran and associate in Production Control at Toyota West Virginia. “We joke about things with each other, but if somebody on the outside picks on one of us, then we’re going to have each other’s backs.”

Wegner adds, “When you’re in the military, you have a degree of camaraderie that you develop. When veterans get out of their service, they often look for family support groups within the veteran community to provide a sense of belonging. And in corporate America, they often find it. I think Toyota is pretty exceptional in that it

has a pretty good culture, a pretty strong culture. So, when we are able to find that sense of belonging with each other, it makes an even stronger connection in the corporate setting. I think a lot of veterans look for that, want that, and that's what's so great about TVA."

Driven by Respect

People are what drives Toyota in every aspect of the business. Smith, De La Garza, Hicks and Wegner all sit on TVA's North American Advisory Council, a group of council members tasked with creating diverse and inclusive environments where individuals can come together and work towards a common goal of mobility for all across all of the BPG's chapters. To put these principles into action, all council members must have strong lines of communication and listen to the needs of others to help execute them.

"When a chapter brings an issue to us or a question or something that's happening at the chapter level, we as an advisory council discuss and try to formulate an adequate response," says De La Garza. "One of our main goals is listening to our chapters, listening to others and respecting each other."

TVA is the sweet spot between the Toyota Way and the U.S. military because many of their values such as respect, teamwork and commitment mirror each other.

For many veterans, that's what makes Toyota so attractive.

"These people are exiting service and they're looking for companies that have common values," says Smith. "When you can translate Army, Marine, Navy, Coast Guard values to Toyota values, it really matches, and it resonates with people."