TRAINING WITH INDUSTRY: THE REGIMENT BRINGS BACK A TIME-TESTED PROGRAM

by CPT KATHRYN A. WERBACK

IN 2014, the Engineer Regiment resurrected the Training with Industry (TWI) program by assigning several senior captains and majors to civilian companies to gain experience and training not typically available within the military school system. The TWI program is a work-experience program that provides extensive exposure to managerial techniques and industry procedures within corporate America by working side-by-side with our civilian counterparts.

The program consists of one year of working with industry followed by a two-year utilization tour with the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). I was assigned to work with Dewberry, a privately owned professional services firm specializing in architectural, engineering, and consulting services with more than 40 offices across the U.S. and headquartered in Fairfax, VA. My sponsors, MG (Ret) Mike Walsh, COL (Ret) Grant Smith, and Jean Huang, created a comprehensive training plan that allowed me to work within each of the company’s practice areas and corporate management groups from July 2014 to July 2015.

BENEFITS FOR DEWBERRY

This experience with Dewberry ties directly into the company’s strategic goals to diversify its work and client base. Although Dewberry has established a strong presence in the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and flood communities, this program enhances the firm’s recognition in the military engineering community. Having a TWI officer is just one method of increasing the company’s presence in the federal sector, and such a relationship gives personnel throughout the company a chance to better understand military officers while at the same time giving officers an opportunity to better understand private industry. It allows us to learn a bit of the others’ language and culture while realizing the depth of each other’s perspective.

When I first learned of the program, I had never heard of Dewberry. Now that I have spent time with the company, many of my associates, both military and civilian, have been introduced to Dewberry and the services it provides. The presence of a senior captain or major provides a platform to engrain Army methods into the Dewberry culture and learn how to bring some of Dewberry’s culture back to the Army.

As I rotated through the practice areas, my primary interactions were with business unit managers and project managers, and my military methodology and experiences helped broaden their scope. There also are many parallels in daily activities. For example, the firm’s charrettes, or collaborative sessions, are similar to our mission analysis or MDMP processes.

With the opportunity to rotate through each practice area, the corporate office and a variety of satellite locations, I know perhaps as much about Dewberry as some of the firm’s senior leaders. The opportunity to see so many of the firm’s services and to work with such a wide range of leadership styles will undoubtedly provide me with a unique perspective on future partnerships between USACE and civilian organizations.

BENEFITS FOR THE OFFICER

While the TWI program expands business opportunities and strengthens relationships between the Army and Dewberry, the officer receives many professional development opportunities—the greatest of which is simply the opportunity to work on the other side. Although there are many similarities, there are a variety of differences. The tight bonds native to life in the military, developed over many stressful 24/7 missions together, is not present in the civilian workplace. Most com-
pany employees that work together tend to leave their relationships at the office to spend time with their families and friends.

On the other hand, the longevity and knowledge base within a company in which many employees have upward of 15 years of experience is an expected (but still surprising) dynamic. Compare this to the Army’s two- to three-year turnover (due to PCS/ETS), in which we constantly create a new team around the mission. Similar to the Army Values, the work ethic of Dewberry professionals provides a strong framework to understand what it takes to succeed long-term in the civilian workforce.

The opportunity to work with industry also provides a great opportunity to develop a network outside the military. I have now worked with water resource specialists, transportation engineers, land planners, wetlands restoration professionals, architects, the Chairman, CEO, and varying levels of management. Although I will get the opportunity to work with experts of similar skill and experience in USACE, the opportunity to shadow private industry experts through team, client, and firm meetings has been an intimate and unique training opportunity. Whether an officer plans to commit an entire career to the Army or leave the service immediately after completing the three-year time commitment incurred from the assignment, the connections made with the civilian side of the industry are far-reaching. The people I’ve had the opportunity to meet have been very supportive of the program, and we’ve always parted with an offer of assistance should I ever need it.

LESSONS LEARNED
As with all new or revitalized programs, my Dewberry sponsors and I had to adjust to the training and learning opportunities. As I rotated through all the practice areas, we would meet with the receiving unit to review current best practices and their training plan. Providing a list of specific ways that the program could be most successful allowed them to refine their plan. Some best practices that enhanced the experience included shadowing primary managers throughout section huddles, strategic meetings, client engagements, potential employee interviews, business conferences, proposal development and review, project support, and other daily activities.

From this guidance, the follow-on manager was able to create a more substantial plan for my time in his or her section.

To maximize my time between high-profile activities, I supported each section throughout their current projects. I was a section lead and contributor during proposal reviews and conducted project research to see if expanding to a new federal entity was feasible. I updated existing project schedules and created and refined new schedules for projects in their initiation phase. I even made time to pass the Project Management Professional (PMP) exam, earn my Toastmasters International Competent Communicator (CC) through Dewberry’s club, and prepare for the Professional Engineer (PE) exam.

THE WAY FORWARD
The TWI program is currently in a trial period and will remain so for several cycles before the Army decides whether to expand, contract, or even cancel the program. I personally think that the opportunities provided are beneficial for all entities involved and provide a creative platform for interaction between the military and civilian workforce.

If the Army decides to expand the program, it is my hope that they will open it to our senior NCOs because they would benefit as much as our officers and warrant officers.

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