

Training with Industry Gives NCOs Insight into Civilian Workforce

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester - NCO Journal

May 16, 2016



Despite constantly improving NCO education and leadership training, there is still one thing the Army can't completely prepare Soldiers for: life after the Army. Into that gap steps the Training With Industry program.

The TWI program offers selected NCOs and officers the chance to take off their uniforms for a year and work in private industry, observing industry practices, communication tactics and work flow. NCOs who participate in the program say the year not only helps them gain knowledge they'll need when they eventually retire from the Army, but they learn tactics that can help the Army as well. After their year in private industry, each NCO who participates in the TWI program serves in a mandatory utilization assignment back in the Army, using and sharing the knowledge they gained.

Though officers have been participating in the TWI program for many years, it is only recently that NCOs were allowed to join. Lt. Col. Joel LeFlore, the 51A (program management) proponent officer and the TWI program manager for the U.S. Army Acquisition Corps.

proponent chief and the TWI program manager for the Army Acquisition Corps, headquartered at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, said officers in the acquisition corps have been participating in the program for more than 20 years. “This was our first year having NCOs in the program, so we’re excited about their addition,” he said.

The efforts of Master Sgt. Eric Sears, the 51C (contracting) proponent sergeant major, were an important part of getting acquisition NCOs into the TWI program. Sears said he had seen the benefits of the program to Soldiers and the Army, so he was eager to get NCOs to participate.

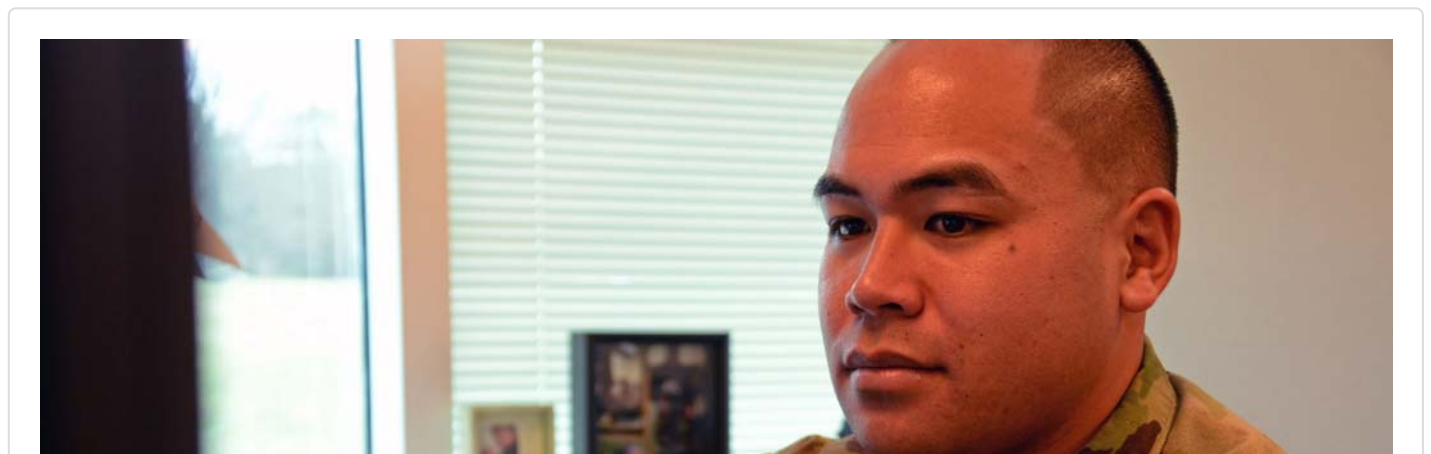
“We’re starting to get further along in what we do as Soldiers, but what can we do to broaden our NCOs, to develop them as leaders?” Sears said. “One of the first areas I looked at was, what opportunities are out there in the Army that NCOs can tie into? What we do in acquisition directly relates to what our industry counterparts do. There are things as acquisition NCOs that we can offer industry and then we can take lessons from industry to bring back to the Army.

“So I really wanted to explore, in cooperation with our command and Human Resources Command, the possibility of establishing the TWI program,” Sears said. “The entire process took 12 to 18 months to get established from when we first asked to do it.”

What NCOs learn

When Sgt. 1st Class Arthur Ireland, who is serving his utilization assignment as a training developer for 94M (radar repairer) at U.S. Army Combined Arms Support Command at Fort Lee, Virginia, first learned of the TWI program, it wasn’t available for NCOs. But as soon as he saw an e-mail stating that NCOs could apply, he jumped at the opportunity.

“I thought the way Army 2020 is going, we as sustainers need to make ourselves more marketable to the Army. Do more with less,” Ireland said. “I thought the TWI program was a good way to make me a more multifaceted logistician, getting to see all the parts that we as NCOs don’t normally get to see.”





Sgt. 1st Class Arthur Ireland is serving his Army utilization assignment after spending a year working at Lockheed Martin as part of the Training With Industry program.

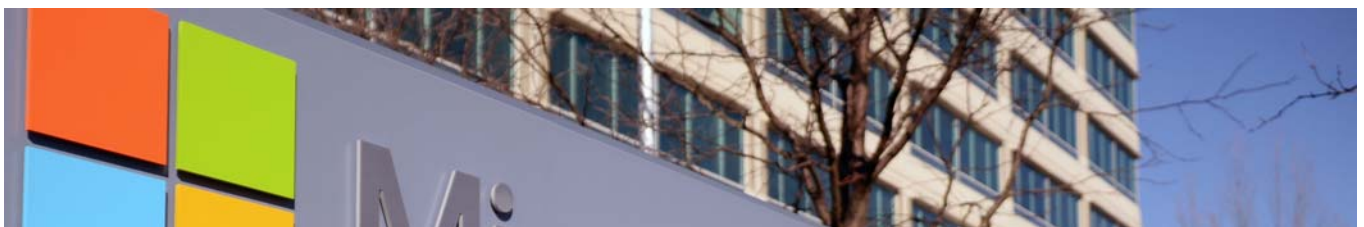
Ireland's year in private industry was spent at Lockheed Martin. Among other civilian-world culture shocks was learning he needed to slow down his hard-charging NCO persona.

"Everything in the defense industry, because of the limitations they are held to by contract, everything is so slow it seems like," Ireland said. "I'm used to waking up, hitting the ground in the morning, hard-charging it all through the day. But at Lockheed Martin, it's a take-your-time process, which I can understand because they are building missiles. I can see why they take their time, but it was a hard process to just slow down.

"With that slow movement of how things worked in the defense industry, I think it helped calm me down a little bit as an NCO," Ireland said. "It helped me to be able to take a step back and look at a situation before reacting. That builds a better leader, so I think that helped me out."

Sgt. 1st Class Patrick Dennis, a 51C (contracting) NCO who is spending a year working at Microsoft in Reston, Virginia, also noticed the slower pace of private industry.

"It does seem a little bit more relaxed as far as, for instance, I expect after a first sergeant telling me, 'Do this,' I'm going to get it done in the next 30 minutes," Dennis said. "I see there is definitely a difference in attitude in this industry. Of course they expect work to be done. Microsoft wouldn't exist if work wasn't completed. But it's definitely not as strict or as structured as military culture."





Sgt. 1st Class Patrick Dennis is spending a year working at Microsoft in Reston, Virginia, as part of the Army's Training With Industry program.

If there is one thing each Soldier involved in the Training With Industry program learns early on it's that civilian workers can't be ordered to do something. They have to be persuaded. What that means is that NCOs have to brush up on their interpersonal skills. After years of receiving and giving orders in the Army, and watching those orders get immediately carried out, it takes some adjustment dealing with civilian workers who don't have any qualms about saying, "No."

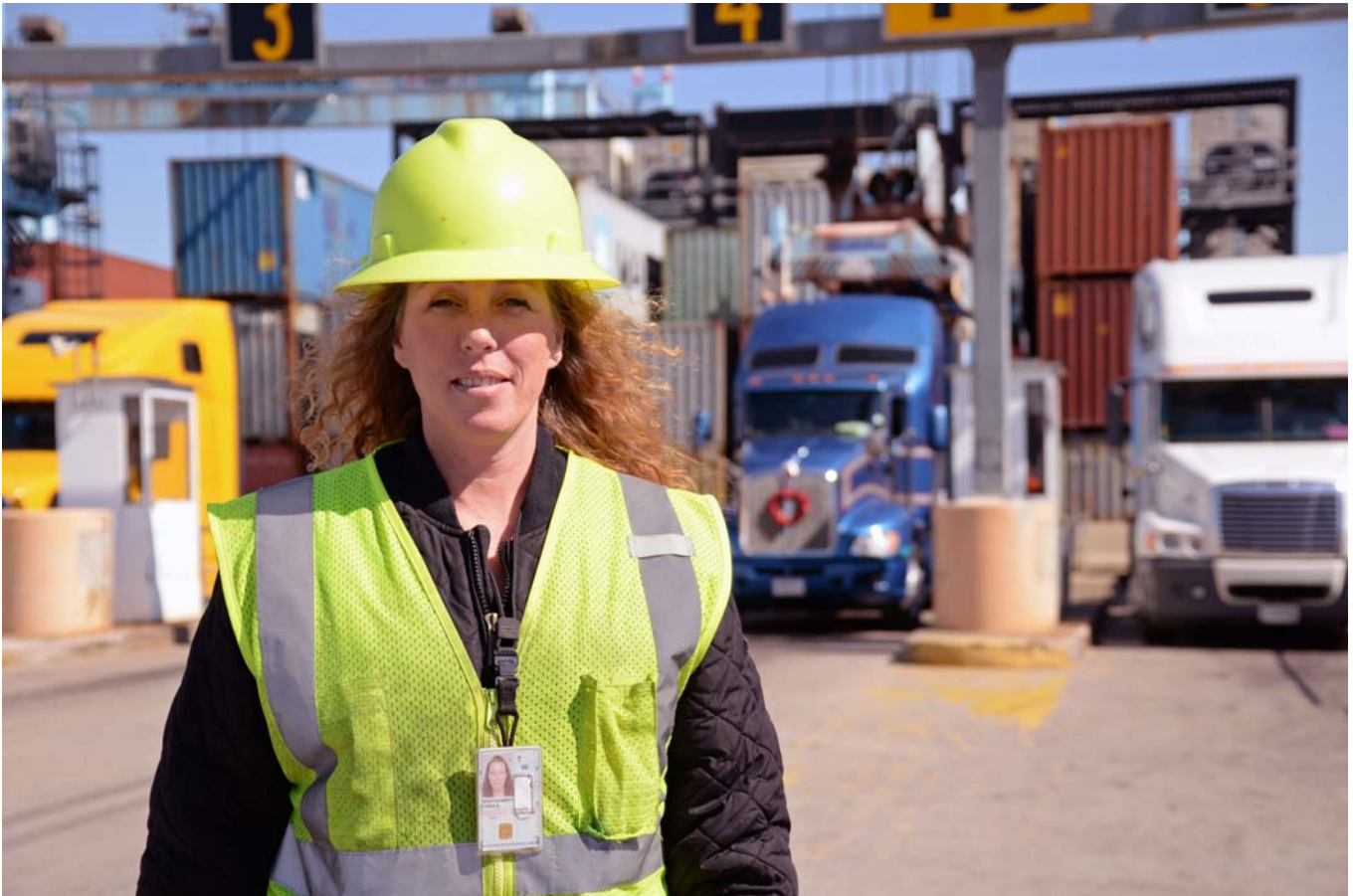
"Sometimes we get excited as NCOs, and we handle things in a different way than the civilian sector handles things," Ireland said. "I would watch the supervisors (at Lockheed Martin) speak to their employees, and the way they spoke to them, I would say, 'Man, that would not happen in the Army.' They would ask me, 'Well, how would you handle it in the Army.' I'd tell them, 'There is no other answer. The way I told you is the way we are going to do it. Go do it!' They would say, 'Well, we can't do that here. If we told them that way, they would go to human resources, and we'd have a complaint filed against us.' That surprised me. I've been in the Army for 15 years, and that's the way I know how to do things.

"So, interpersonal and communication skills are key," Ireland said. "They are key in the Army as well, but it's definitely a big factor in the civilian world."

Chief Warrant Officer 3 Brian Masters, a training developer for 948D (electronic missile systems maintenance warrant officer) worked along with Ireland at Lockheed Martin as part

systems maintenance warrant officer), worked along with Ireland at Lockheed Martin as part of the TWI program. Masters said that while he and Ireland were there, he was surprised to witness employees and supervisors going through training on how to understand and communicate with younger, millennial-generation workers. That level of care toward someone's feelings is not something your typical Army drill sergeant is worried about.

"We would talk to some floor supervisors who were prior service, and they would say it's a different world when you get out of the Army," Masters said. "In the Army, you tell somebody to do something and you expect them to do it without questions asked. Civilian world is a little bit different. Understanding interpersonal skills is a key role in the civilian environment. Being able to understand different generations. In the Army, we base leadership a lot off rank. I'm going to tell you to do something because that's the rank I have. But that's the very bottom level of leadership. In the civilian world, they really want to focus on — people perform because they want to perform."



Sgt. 1st Class Tonia Montgomery is spending a year working as an operations assistant manager at Virginia International Terminals at Virginia International Gateway in Portsmouth, Virginia, as part of the Army's Training With Industry program. (Photos by Jonathan (Jay) Koester / NCO Journal)

If dealing with civilian workers sounds difficult in an office environment, imagine what it's like

at a busy seaport, with sometimes-angry truck drivers thrown in the mix. That's the environment Sgt. 1st Class Tonia Montgomery is in while she spends a year working as an operations assistant manager at Virginia International Terminals at Virginia International Gateway in Portsmouth, Virginia. Montgomery didn't hesitate when asked about what was hardest to adjust to in the civilian world.

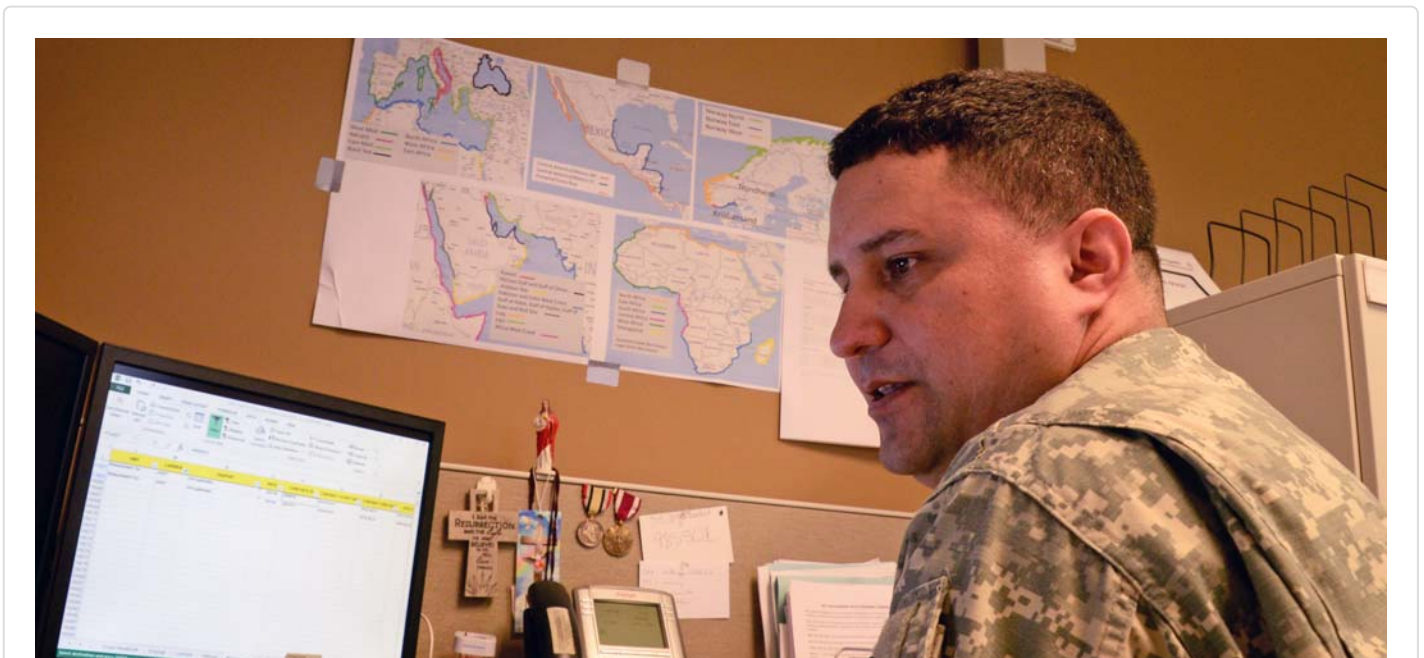
"Being told no by a subordinate," she said. "That's hard without knowing what to say back. You have to smile it off and be as friendly as possible. Interpersonal skills are the No. 1 thing you need here because you're dealing with well-paid professionals at the top level all the way to a new person who was just hired for labor, or a not-so-polite truck driver. It's very multifaceted here.

"They can speak way more freely than in the military," Montgomery said. "They can get away with talking to you outside of what the norm would be. We have Army values and discipline. In the military, values mean a lot. I respect you, and you respect me back. It doesn't always happen that way in civilian industry."

How the Army benefits

Allowing Soldiers to spend a year seeing how things work in private industry brings benefits back to the Army, allowing the Army to improve on some of its processes, Sears said.

"Industry tends to be a little more forward thinking in how they adapt to changes," Sears said. "The Army is a very structured environment. So, by being able to go out into industry, it really allows us to see some of the cutting-edge changes of how they are doing procurement actions. It allows us to look at these and say, 'We know this works for industry, how can we implement some of these changes back into the Army in how we do procurement?'"





Sgt. 1st Class Wilbert J. Torressierra is serving his Army utilization assignment after spending a year working for Virginia International Terminals as part of the Training With Industry program.

Sgt. 1st Class Wilbert J. Torressierra worked in the Virginia International Terminals position before Montgomery. Torressierra is serving his utilization assignment as operations NCO in-charge/ordering officer, 597th Transportation Brigade, Fort Eustis, Virginia. Torressierra said he learned a lot during his year that made him more useful to the Army.

“The Army recently assigned us as being the bookers of cargo moving around the world,” Torressierra said. “That’s even more related to what I did at the port. I learned how to move cargo throughout ports, and now I’m learning how it is booked through all these carriers taking our cargo everywhere in the world. I learned a lot of stuff that could help me when I retire, as well as knowledge that I am bringing back into the Army. It helped me both ways.”

The knowledge NCOs gain during their time in private industry is multiplied when they return to the Army, Sears said.

“The knowledge that Soldiers gain as part of TWI doesn’t just rest with those NCOs,” Sears said. “Word of what is going on in best practices gets shared. The learning spreads. The biggest goal of this program is to utilize them and bring knowledge back. It’s not just to set NCOs up for success years after they graduate from the program.”

Dennis said working with Microsoft has shown him that there is a knowledge and communication gap between Army contracting officers and private industry. It’s something he hopes he can help with later.

“Back in the Army, I think I’ll be able to help people understand why vendors are thinking the way they are, or why a vendor might be having an issue with a process, or why it’s taking a vendor 90 days to produce on a contract,” Dennis said. “I think the knowledge I bring from here, any unit that I go to next, I will be able to train up that unit to focus a little bit more on vendor education.”

How industry benefits

Though the TWI program has clear benefits to Soldiers and to the Army, it wouldn’t work if there weren’t also benefits for private industry, Sears said.

“It’s not a one-way street, where we are just pawning off an NCO,” Sears said. “When we sat

down with both companies (the acquisition corps works with Microsoft and Amazon Web Services), that's one of the things they asked, 'What will these NCOs bring to our organization?' Fundamentally, there needs to be a benefit on both sides."

What NCOs bring to industry is a hard-working professional who can offer new perspectives on how to get things done, Dennis said.

"A corporation that is willing to open up positions to NCOs, they are expecting some type of leader, some type of self-motivated individual coming into the position," he said.

In addition to that added perspective, the program allows the businesses to get a good look at potential future employees, said Christopher Sipe, the rail manager at Virginia International Gateway.

"For us, it's much like an internship program," Sipe said. "We have internships for college students; but this is also an internship, just for folks who have a lot of experience. You don't get that experience with college students, but you do with military folks. So it gives us an entire year to evaluate someone, and if that person does show interest in being here, we can hire them down the line. We just hired a person who was a Training With Industry NCO about three years ago."

Lessons learned

Those who have gone through the TWI program, or mentored Soldiers who have, offer some advice that is useful both to future NCOs going through the program and NCOs near retirement who need to get ready for the civilian workforce.

Sipe said one often overlooked aspect of getting and keeping jobs in the civilian world is networking.

"The big thing to remember in private industry is you really need to make contacts," Sipe said. "You need to be able to network effectively because in private industry there is no guarantee of promotion, there is no guarantee that you'll get hired. Not to say there is in the Army, but it's a lot different in the civilian world. Hopefully that's the purpose of this program, especially as we're getting mostly NCOs near the end of their careers. This is a fantastic opportunity for them to network. Some use it effectively, and some do not. There are people we remember and people we don't. Introduce yourself and make sure you get a lot of exposure to every department so they know who you are."

Dennis said he would advise future participants to take advantage of the opportunity to learn something new.

"I would tell them to try to learn as much as possible," Dennis said. "They should immerse

I would tell them to try to learn as much as possible," Dennis said. "They should immerse themselves into the organization and try to learn as much as they can from it. Understand how they can help the organization, but get as much as possible back. I'm trying to bring things back to the Army. How can I impact the next unit that I'm going to? There's a lot of knowledge to learn here at Microsoft."

Pat Brady, business manager in the federal department at Microsoft, has worked with many TWI participants, and she tells them it's important not to be a wallflower. It can be easy for some to fade into the background and not get all they can out of the opportunity.

"The thing that I always stress when they come in is don't be timid, don't be shy, just jump right in," she said. "Because it's like drinking from the firehose at Microsoft. You just don't get a chance to have somebody hand-hold you through this process. You have to get out there, meet as many people as you can, try to get in front of key decision-makers and managers to learn all you can about the business. When I took over the program in the beginning, that's the only thing that I saw, so I stress that."

Industry, the Army and Soldiers all get something important out of the Training With Industry program, Sears said. But, in the end, it's NCOs who really benefit.

"The program gives Soldiers exposure, and they start to get a heads up on what industry looks for, how to interact with industry," Sears said. "They can start seeing that other side. Our two Soldiers who are in the TWI right now, they are 14-plus years in the Army; it's what they have spent the majority of their life doing. It can be a tough transition going from an enlisted Soldier to immediately out into the corporate workforce. By participating in the TWI program, they are going to come back, they are going to give back to the Army for the remainder of their career. But then they are already going to have that exposure and that knowledge on how to interact with corporate leadership to help give them a step up."

How to get into the TWI program

The Training With Industry program is available to NCOs in a growing number of MOSs, including ordnance, public affairs and quartermaster. The Milper message giving application details will go out in September, with a deadline to apply in January.

For more information on the program, including eligibility requirements and contact information, visit, www.hrc.army.mil/EPMD/NCOs%20Broadening%20Program (<https://www.hrc.army.mil/EPMD/NCOs%20Broadening%20Program>)