



# Blackfox Program Trains Vets for Manufacturing Jobs

by **Andy Shaughnessy**

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It's harder than ever for managers in the PCB manufacturing industry to find qualified staff, with some reporting that positions are remaining open for months at a time. On the other hand, there are thousands of soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines transitioning out of the service each year and seeking good jobs. Al Dill, president of Blackfox, joined me at IPC APEX EXPO to discuss a program that offers manufacturing training to veterans, starting while they're still in the service.

**Andy Shaughnessy:** *Al, why won't you start off by giving us some background on the company.*

**Allen Dill:** First of all, we're celebrating 21 years in business, so we're excited about that. Blackfox is headquartered in Colorado, and we have a fa-

cility in Colorado, a facility in Tempe, Arizona, one in Guadalajara, Mexico and one in Penang, Malaysia. Blackfox offers all of the six primary IPC certifications, both for specialists and for instructors. That's been our core business since day one. Blackfox is different in the sense that we are very close to our customer base. We take care of our customers as all companies should, and that has led us to developing another complimentary program to service our employers even better by helping them with the need for skilled labor today.

In Colorado, unemployment rates are below 3% right now, so it's almost impossible to find skilled labor. We work with a lot of STEM programs, going back into high school, K-12 and informing the students of the opportunities in manufacturing. It's not your grandfather's manufacturing today; it's a very clean environment with lots of opportunity, so we're getting the word out there in schools. We have immediate

needs for skilled individuals, particularly in our industry, which are mostly aerospace and defense companies.

We have worked in conjunction with a lot of our employers and customers to understand the skill requirements for their type of business, and we've developed, in collaboration with our employers and clients, the general curriculum required for a successful transition into aerospace manufacturing. But the issue there is again finding those that are either underemployed or unemployed to fill the need. We have tapped into a very strong resource in our transitioning military veterans. In Colorado alone, we have four military bases that have roughly 600 veterans transitioning into civilian life each month.

Blackfox is working with our state employment agencies, through our workforce centers and veterans services, and introducing transitioning veterans to this program while they're still in the military. All of our veterans have a timeframe that is given to them for the smooth transition into civilian life while they're still paid by the military. They are able to look for the standard education opportunities and employment opportunities while they're still in the service. We're going upstream, talking to veterans at these bases about the program that we're offering. This program is typically sponsored through training grants, so typically there's no expense for our veterans coming into this program and there's no expense for our employers that consider hiring our graduates.

We develop a very comprehensive, compressed five-week program that introduces vet-



Allen Dill

erans and civilians to this industry. We expose them to the industry and make sure it's something they're interested in. We don't want to place anyone in the industry who doesn't feel comfortable in it. We make sure they have the interest, the dexterity, and the aptitude for electronic manufacturing before we ask them to invest their time and for us to invest any of our time into this program. Once they go through that and they feel like it's something they'd like to pursue, then they start to program with Blackfox.

Clearly we're doing this in Longmont, Colorado, and we're expanding a second office in Colorado Springs, which is close to the military bases, so we don't have the logistic issue with transporting them for five weeks from Colorado Springs to Longmont, which is a couple hours of commuting. We're setting up a new office there, but the program in general is a five-week program, 200 hours, and it's an advanced manufacturing certification. It's an accredited program and it'll dovetail into future education that most of our employers offer, and they can pursue a four-year degree in advanced manufacturing if they wish. But they're prepared to at least be successful when they move into our employer company. Most of our employers offer an on-the-job training or an internship that this program dovetails into nicely as well.

There's no cost to the employer. There's no cost to the veteran. Blackfox does this not as a huge profit venture for us. We do because it's the right thing to do for the veterans. In a nutshell, that's our program. During the five-week program timeline, we set aside a couple of days

towards the end for employers to come in and actually interview with our graduates and essentially offer jobs to our graduates. By the time they graduate, they can transition almost immediately into an employer's internship or on-the-job training program and get paid during this whole timeframe. So far we have trained over 200 veterans in the last three or four years of the program. A lot of our graduates have gone to Lockheed Martin and they're working in the space division. I just heard today that one of our veterans who graduated three years ago and worked in assembly at Lockheed Martin was just promoted to a production planner.

**Shaughnessy:** *Wow, that's great.*

**Dill:** It's a really great success story, but I've been told that Lockheed Martin is experiencing about a 92% retention rate with our graduates, so that means our screening processes in the front end and the communication with our students are at least positioning them for a longer-term career path. In a nutshell, that's our program.

**Shaughnessy:** *You may have seen our hiring survey last month. Over half of the respondents said that they're hiring. A lot of managers here at APEX say they can't find enough qualified people. Are you seeing this?*

**Dill:** Absolutely. We have employers contacting us every day who have heard about the program, looking in some desperation for a solution. Our STEM programs are helping, but that's more of a futuristic solution. We need something more immediate to help fill some of these gaps. It's a real challenge, definitely. We hear it all over the nation, wherever we travel.

**Shaughnessy:** *I heard one company promises new engineers a Tesla. It's almost full employment, I guess.*

**Dill:** We've heard of folks who are maybe in their graduate year of tech school or university being offered such wages that some will just leave school and start working right away as opposed to finishing their degree programs. There's so much demand out there.

It's tough, but the main thing we're trying to get across to students, to their parents, and to those who aren't familiar with this industry, is that it is a very clean industry. There are all kinds of opportunities in advanced manufacturing, and not just electronics, but machining and other types of advanced manufacturing. It's a huge opportunity and unfortunately a lot of our younger folks haven't been exposed to that yet.

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In my generation, we grew up being exposed, even during middle school and high school, to some of the trade skills that are needed out there, and exposed to manufacturing, which a lot of our younger folks haven't experienced yet. So we're trying to get to their parents and to them to let them know that there are opportunities. You don't need to go into retail and fast food and these other jobs.

That's a longer-term solution. We need to work with our military veterans to make sure they're aware of the opportunities. They deserve it. They served our great nation, and we do all we can at Blackfox to help promote that. With the new administration promoting more manufacturing in the US, the demand will be even higher!

**Shaughnessy:** *That sounds like a really beneficial program, Allen. Best of luck going forward.*

**Dill:** Thanks, Andy. **SMT**