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The Deloitte On Cloud Podcast

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Title:	**Filling the digital transformation skills gap with exceptional talent**
Description:	As digital transformation initiatives accelerate, many companies continue to see talent shortages in key areas. In this episode, David Linthicum talks with SkillStorm's Chairman and Co-Founder Vince Virga about his successful solution to the problem. SkillStorm connects companies with veterans transitioning out of the military and provides them with the training they need to succeed in the rapidly changing tech environments of today and the future. It's a win-win situation.
Duration:	**00:20:31**

David Linthicum:
So, welcome back to the On Cloud podcast. Today I'm joined by Vince Virga, and he is the chairman of SkillStorm, and he's here today to talk to us about veterans moving into a technical career path. This is definitely something important for us at Deloitte, and as I know, we're committed to supporting and

emphasizing programs that allow our veterans to make impactful contributions beyond their military service. I'd love to hear more about SkillStorm and your work here. Let's welcome our special guest, Vince Virga. How are you doing, Vince?

Vince Virga:
I'm doing great, David. How are you?

David Linthicum:
I'm doing great. So, give us the Vince Virga story. So, in other words, back us up when you first started getting into this. What's your background that led you in this direction? Why were you passionate about working with veterans? And this is something I'm always very excited about because we're getting people—we're solving two problems with one effort. In other words, we're filling in the tech skills gaps, which are huge right now, and also giving people substantial careers where they can kind of build a life. But fill me in on how you got here.

Vince Virga:
Yeah, absolutely. So, I've been in IT services for 27, 28 years now, and you know, I was a first-generation college student, first generation professional. I didn't have a lot of guidance coming out of college from my family other than, "Hey, it'd be a good idea if you went to college." And just very fortunately, through some friends that I knew at university, had referred me to work at an IT services company. I got in on the same side, and little did I know at the time that this was really the advent of IT services. And, so, I was very fortunate to be with a small, fast-growing company that really invested in our training and really helped us learn the industry. So, I did that for six or seven years and then my business partner and I started our own company.

So, we started SkillStorm in 2002. Obviously, that was on the heels of 9/11, and we sort of stumbled into government contracting just because the demands were so enormous there with getting all the agencies that typically had built these systems that were intentionally meant to be all siloed, to help them all be able to communicate better, and there was a real push to really implement more advanced commercial technologies versus the government sort of centric technologies that they had. So, that was a subsidiary of our company called SGIS. We grew that from zero to 1,000 employees organically over the next six or seven years, and then we sold that to a private equity firm, and that was really the first time that we did a ton of work with the military, worked with a lot of veterans on a lot of the projects that we were doing.

And after that, we started doing—I guess we found ourselves on the heels of another crisis, so this is 2010 coming out of the great financial crisis, and we started doing work for banks, but sort of the—our approach there was that we're hearing from some CIOs that they wanted more sort of localized talent, and so we had to build the teams to do the work there. But the common thread here is in the last 25 years, regardless of whether it was government work or commercial work or who the customer was, being on the sales side I'm not going to say it was easy to get business, but the reality is everybody needed IT services work done.

The biggest choke point was there just weren't enough people available to do the work, and so we about five or six years ago started really trying to work on a solution to create net new talent here domestically, and we met a couple guys that were in the industry and were doing some pretty innovative things in that regard. We brought them into the organization three or four years ago, and we completely transformed the company to really focusing on creating net-new talent.

So, what does that mean? So, we engaged with first-generation college graduates and transitioning service members and veterans. We assess them for potential, we bring them into our organization, pay them a full-time developer's wage to really learn, and then over the course of several months, it's about 600 hours of intense training, we get them certified in the latest technologies in cloud and cyber and full-stack development, and then we deploy them at scale to our clients who are some very large global consulting firms and government contractors.

So, for me, why I'm passionate about it, we are—I was very fortunate to end up in IT services. I could have done everything, and little did I know, again, there was going to be such a huge opportunity in this industry. And, so, for me—for us to be able to do that for other people, give them the opportunity to have access to these great jobs, to launch these great careers and give them the—what we're doing is providing not just the instruction but connections to these amazing companies that they end up working for.

David Linthicum:
Yeah, as somebody who's constantly looking for talent, these sorts of things really excite me. I think it's a step in the right direction. But walk me through the process, and say I'm a sergeant, I just retired from the Army after 20 years, I'm only 41 years old, and don't know what I want to do but I developed some basic computer skills while I was in the Army. Do they contact you to basically put an application in to be put into the training program? Do you reach out to them? How do they get in touch with you?

Vince Virga:
Yeah, great question. So, it's a little bit of both of those things. So, obviously we have networks that we're reaching out to, and people do contact us, but really one of the biggest advantages that we have is we have contracts with various government organizations where we actually are paid to train these individuals that are coming out of the military. And, so, that gives us kind of first look at who might have the most potential that are able to go into some of these more advanced roles. So, we will train probably 1,000 veterans this year. The way our agreement works with the government is we don't get paid unless they get a job.

So, in many cases, we're hiring them, but we also have networks with very large companies that are hiring some of them as well, but our purpose as an organization is to accelerate opportunity, and our goal is to be sort of the global leader in launching, accelerating tech careers. So, for us, everything we do is about making sure that the people that we're interfacing with, we're doing the best job of preparing them for success, and then we're getting them launched into great careers. So, it's not just about training them. It's training them to make sure they can be successful when they're starting their tech careers.

David Linthicum:
Even cultural trainings? In other words, they're stepping in from a culture that's very structured and kind of that's what the military is, into typically environments that are probably less structured, even if you're working with the government. So, do you teach them different cultural changes as well, things they need to anticipate as they move into a different work environment?

Vince Virga:
Hundred percent. So, the real core of our business, training is one aspect of it, but that—all that is to really support the core of our business, which we call our next-gen program. So, essentially, that's where we, on the demand side, if you think about it that way, where we're interfacing with these large global consulting firms, government contracting organizations, Fortune 100 companies, we go in and do full tech workforce assessment with them, what are their needs going to be over the next 12 and 24 months?

And then we customize our training specifically to what their tech stack is and the types of projects that they're going to be working on and, very importantly, which you just mentioned is making sure that they're going to be culturally aligned with those organizations once they're done with our training. When they're done with our training, then we deploy them as—this is really interesting. We had a customer bring this up as one of the benefits is that they've been working together and training together for months, and so once they're deployed, there's a certain level of cohesiveness within the team and collaboration that kind of wouldn't exist otherwise. But culture is a very big part of it.

David Linthicum:
Yeah, it's a huge part of it moving forward. So, how do you assess the skills that typically the companies mention? You just mentioned you go in there and you communicate with them and say what you've got going on, but do you also look into the marketplace saying, "Hey listen, we've got a big boost in people who are doing software engineering around AI capabilities, moving into multi-cloud environments," kind of all the newbie stuff we talk about here on this podcast? Or do you basically just go off of the skills list that they're looking for? Or both? Do you kind of consider everything?

Vince Virga:
What we do, I would say it's all pretty bespoke. It's based on client demands, and because we consider ourselves an enterprise solution, it's really done at scale so we can develop these repeatable processes in our training programs, and we have very consistent sort of product that comes out the other side of that. So, it's not like we're creating necessarily an inventory or trying to sort of forecast where the demand's going to be. That's sort of locked in upfront based on client requirements.

Vince Virga:
I mean, specific to their tech stack. So, it could be any number of things related to cloud or AI and all the various tools associated with that.

David Linthicum:
Yeah. You're giving them the skills that they can go out and sell immediately and you know how it goes, and once you get into the flow and you become kind of a self-learner and autodidact, and I guess that's what you're trying to build, they're kind of off and running. So, in other words, once they have the basics in terms of—just use cloud computing, but it could be anything, how it works, how infrastructure works, how to do development architecture, basic operations, things like that, it seems like once you get this base of skills, you can just build off that learning moving forward. You become kind of an engine unto yourself, and those are the people who are accelerating in their career. Are you teaching that? Is that what you're finding as you're placing people into these organizations?

Vince Virga:
Yeah, hundred percent. And then we also provide ongoing training, so we call the people that graduate from our program that we're deploying, we call them Stormers, and we have a Stormer-for-Life program, so they have access to all of our online curriculum where they can continue to upskill throughout their time with us and beyond because obviously technology changes so fast, and regardless of how long they work for us, we want to create kind of those long-term sort of bonds with these individuals and just make sure that they have the best career in tech they could possibly have. We graduate about 4 million people a year in this country with various degrees, and only about 70,000 of them are computer science or related. That number hasn't changed in well over a decade, and so—but obviously, if you look at the number of tech jobs in the market, that has gone up every year and it's forecasted to continue to increase for the foreseeable future. So, I think these are very—that more and more companies that can really think about how to access talent through alternative means, I think it's a really good thing, and I think there's a lot of good private sector solutions out there. I think we're part of that, and I think it's necessary. Obviously, you talk to any tech leader out there, one of their number one concerns is access to talent.

David Linthicum:
Yeah, it's absolutely on the critical path to the point where I'm seeing people who are limited by the amount of talent they have. It's not budgetary limits. They have plenty of money and plenty of plans to leverage technologies with businesses and government is something that's going to enable them to do better and greater things, but people tell me all the time, "Dave, I can't find the people I need, I can't keep the resources I need in house," and that becomes kind of the single limiting thing. And even as we're talking about going into a bit of a downturn with the economy, things like that—and I've been in the business a long time. As economy goes up and down, it seems like there's always a consistent need for skilled, talented technical people because we just don't have enough of that to go around to solve the problems we're looking to solve.

So, obviously companies, government organizations, the government themselves focusing these days on DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion). How does this kind of work with those programs within companies and the government?

Vince Virga:
Yeah, so that is—a lot of our clients that we work with, that is something that they're thinking about and want to work toward having more diverse workforce. The great thing with us is, because we focus primarily on first-generation graduates and transitioning service members and veterans, that tends already to be a more diverse population. So, it ends up being sort of a natural sort of byproduct on what we're doing, but consistently if you look at—if you

break down the various demographics, I guess you would consider underrepresented populations in tech, our outcomes far exceed the averages, and that's something that we're really proud of. The more we can have programs that are sort of promoting more of a skills-based mindset, I think you're going to naturally have a more and more diverse population involved in those things.

David Linthicum:
So, what advice would you give to somebody who's in the military now, and they know that there has to be a career outside of their military service because military service is only going to go so far, and they're going to retire and do what they—do things that they want to do and kind of move on to the next stage of life. So, how would you advise them to kind of getting the skills and aligning themselves with the jobs within the service as to something that's going to position them to work with a company like yours or even learn these skills themselves?

Vince Virga:
Sure. As you know, there's plenty of free online content available out there where individuals on their own can become pretty competent technologists in a bunch of different areas, and we have our own out there on our own platform. What we've heard from a lot of the veterans that we work with, a lot of them really have a desire to be in cyber. They see that as sort of another way to sort of serve the country, and obviously the demand in cyber is probably higher than just about any other skill set at this point in time. When I think about AI and how much more sophisticated cyberattacks can become, I think the number of cyber jobs are just going to continue to skyrocket. So, I think transitioning service members focusing on cyber, there's just such a huge demand and it's so critically important for our government infrastructure and obviously all the critical commercial companies, all the work that they're doing as well.

It's not necessarily an arms race. It's a brains race in this regard, and we just need more and more smart people working on these challenges. It's a really critical need.

David Linthicum:
Yeah. So, one question, as people are moving into this environment and employers are accepting these new employees, what feedback are you getting from them in terms of what's different about the Stormers, the way you put it, and I think that's a great name, versus people who are typically I'd say getting through more traditional channels. What seems to be the common feedback there?

Vince Virga:
Yeah, the biggest feedback that we get is really twofold. One, these individuals are very used to working in a team, and so that is obviously critical, the fact that they can collaborate, and then the way our process works, we train them in teams, they're deployed in teams, and so there's a level of—very high level of collaboration there. But also, these individuals are used to being very mission-focused, somewhat selfless in that regard, and our clients love it.

David Linthicum:
Yeah, and one of the things that the military is a vertical. In other words, there's a lot of contractors out there that serve the military. And, certainly, in my engagement, when I worked on government contracts, it was always an advantage to have a veteran on the team because they knew a lot of things in terms of how the military operated. They knew the culture, they knew the structure, chain of command, all these things that I was not very up on, but I depended on them to kind of guide me through that, and if they bring also additional skills, they can guide me through that as well as bring in some technical skills, that's kind of a win-win I think for organizations out there that are dealing with the government. Are you finding the same thing?

Vince Virga:
Yeah, a hundred percent. And being mission-focused is—I guess it's kind of cliché, but as leaders, that's really important. It's understanding what the overall goals for the organization is and the fact that that's been their life for years, and it's just kind of second nature for them. And I've spent a lot of time in government contracting myself, and the people that I interface with from the clients to the people that we're working with on contracts, that sense of mission is very palpable, and I think all organizations can benefit from it.

David Linthicum:
So, last question, what's the future of this? Where do you think you guys are going to be doing in five years, ten years? Is it relatively the same stuff or do you think you're going to see a transition into other processes, other skill sets, things like that?

Vince Virga:
Well, I think we are definitely going to remain focused on technology. And I see a time where we'll continue to sort of move up the supply chain and be able to engage with individuals, whether they're in the military or maybe it's community college or even at the high school level, and put them on a path early on to where they can be in a position to get a great job in tech.

David Linthicum:
So, what about people finding on the web and also email, and how do you want people to reach out to you if they're interested?

Vince Virga:
Sure they can visit our website, It is www.skillstorm.com and can feel free to reach out to me directly my email is vince@skillstorm.com

David Linthicum:
Well, thank you very much, Vince. This is a great show, and I appreciate you coming on the show and educating us on what SkillStorm does, but more importantly, I think, how the evolution of technology is working and how we're going to have to fulfill these roles moving forward, and also the ability to kind of look for underserved portions of the community as ways in which we can do this in a better way. So, you can check out the SkillStorm website and see the great work they're doing.

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