

2nd Act: From Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy to Director of Insurance Operations

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What does a rear admiral do after 31 years in the Navy?

Instead of retiring, Rear Admiral John Spencer decided to pursue a second career in insurance.

His last assignment for the Navy was as commanding officer, Submarine Group 10, where he was responsible for leading more than 5,000 personnel charged with maintaining and deploying eight nuclear submarines at the height of military readiness for the U.S.

Today, he is senior director of U.S. Operation for ReSource Pro, a provider of innovative, data-driven business solutions for the property/casualty insurance industry.

“I kept an open mind about what I wanted to do next but

was attracted to the insurance business because of its impact on people, businesses and the world. Like the Navy, the insurance business has a mission. The mission is the promise to pay claims and help people and businesses during difficult times.”

After retiring, Spencer worked with a friend of his from ReSource Pro on his transition to a second career. “In the Navy, our mission was to operate a well-run submarine. At ReSource Pro, the mission is to produce a good product and distribute that product efficiently and effectively. I spent about four months learning about the company,

so I knew something about it and was very impressed. So,

Executive Summary

This article is part of a three-part series on P/C insurance executives whose careers in the industry are “second act” careers. Here, ReSource Pro’s John Spencer draws parallels between his first career in the Navy and current career as an operations director for ReSource Pro, an industry process services firm. Among them, he highlights the need for people management skills in both, as well as the ability to deal with massive technological disruption.

Part 2 of a Series

when I was asked if I would be interested in heading up their operations, there was no doubt in my mind. I said yes.”

Managing people was one of the areas where Spencer knew his military experience could prove valuable. It was something he did his entire Naval career. “No matter what business you’re in, you’re in the people management business,” he said. “The insurance industry, like the Navy, has been undergoing a massive technological disruption over the past few years. While automation is critical to making processes simpler, easier to access and improves operations, people are often put in a difficult situation. They need to learn new ways of working and, at the same time, they need to learn how to interact with automated processes and also to interact effectively with customers and insureds.” Spencer says his goal—and that of most leaders—is to take the administrative burden off employees and help them move directly to more meaningful interactions with insureds and colleagues.

When asked what is one

of the most important skills a leader should cultivate, he said, “It all boils down to providing clear directions and expectations, obtaining buy-in on the mission and goals, establishing clearly understood and measurable goals, and then checking in periodically to measure goals and evaluate progress. This will work anywhere.”

When it comes to management styles, Spencer said he doesn’t see much of a difference in managerial structure between the insurance business and the Navy. “I would say that the Navy is hierarchical, rather than authoritarian. Collaboration is very important on a day-to-day basis in the Navy. And I think it’s critically important to be a good listener and to solicit feedback from employees no matter what level.”

“As a leader, you can’t be an expert in everything, and you can learn a lot by talking to the person on the front line who does a particular task on a day-to-day basis. Telling people what to do just doesn’t work. Employees need to know what is expected from



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them. They need to be given the training necessary to do their job, and they want to know how they fit into the company’s mission. However, in the end, when a torpedo hits a ship and it’s sinking, that is not the time for discussion. It’s the time for coordinated action.”

Spencer cites the importance the Navy placed on education and training. “Technology changes how we work. The Navy spends a lot of time on training, decision-making and leadership challenges. I would say that at least every year or



so, we would be taken back to some schoolhouse, literally and figuratively, to do some type of leadership management training. Coincidentally, education and training are among my first priorities at ReSource Pro—and it taps right into my military experience.”

With operational centers in Nebraska, Texas and Orlando, Spencer says ReSource Pro hires a diverse workforce with varying educational backgrounds and from a wide spectrum of industries including law enforcement and nursing. Managing a diverse employee base is not new.

“The military has a long record of dealing with and

managing diverse workforces. We began dealing with these issues years ago. Training and education pay off big time when your mission is to build a team of well-trained, highly effective people focused on military readiness. I don’t think you treat people differently based on sex or race. We’re all humans, after all. It’s the mission and the understanding of that mission and your role in it that matters.”

On a more personal note, Spencer said he wanted to see if he could be successful in a different world. His insurance industry role will encompass standardizing organizational structures, onboarding prac-

tices and business integration systems across ReSource Pro’s global enterprise. “There is a clear mandate for continued, accelerated growth at ReSource Pro. One that leverages the company’s knowledge and insights to drive transformational solutions and move the insurance business forward. That kind of organizational innovation and ambition is highly motivating to new talent and reinforces confidence with our client base.”

Beyond being a rear admiral in the U.S. Navy, Spencer’s military career included posts as executive officer to the commander of U.S. Strategic Command, policy advisor at the Pentagon, and assignments as submarine squadron commander and commanding officer of the nuclear submarine USS Philadelphia. He graduated from the United States Naval Academy, earned a Master of Arts degree in Strategic Studies from the Naval War College and was a Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government National Security Fellowship recipient. [CM](#)