

JOBS & EDUCATION



GETTY IMAGES

Taking Care of Business

Employers continue to turn to veterans, even amid pandemic

By Matt Alderton

FOR 14 YEARS, U.S. Army veteran Brady Busby thrived as a military intelligence officer. In 2010, however, his career was taken from him when a mortar landed at his feet during a combat mission in Afghanistan. The explosion ultimately left him with a brain injury, chronic back pain, three herniated discs in his neck and severe post-traumatic stress disorder. Two years later, he was medically retired.

CONTINUED »

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Brady Busby

PROVIDED BY BRADY BUSBY



Eric Eversole

U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOUNDATION



Margarita Devlin

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

“Having employees who understand that change is inevitable and who know how to deal with it is increasingly critical.”

— ERIC EVERSOLE,
president, Hiring Our Heroes



William Hubbard

STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA

Upon leaving the military in 2012, Busby earned his college degree and taught himself fly-fishing. Mostly, though, he sat idle, like a sports car parked on blocks in the garage.

“It’s not that I was bored, exactly. But ... I felt underutilized,” says Busby, 46, of Gilbert, Ariz. He craved purpose. Although doing so might require forfeiting his disability benefits, he decided to seek employment. That was in December 2019. Three months later came the coronavirus pandemic.

“People were losing jobs left and right, and you couldn’t go to job fairs anymore. I was really discouraged,” says Busby. His worry was short-lived thanks to the Wounded Warrior Project (WWP), which helped him secure a sales agent position at SelectQuote Senior Insurance Services, where he started working in August.

“I feel a sense of accomplishment just getting the job — especially during COVID, when everyone’s hurting so much,” says Busby. “Being a subject-matter expert in something

again gives me back the self-esteem I used to have.”

Like Busby, many veterans seek employment that will imbue them with a new sense of purpose after leaving the military. And despite the negative impact it’s had on the economy, the pandemic has created a hospitable environment for some veterans to find it.

PANDEMIC CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES

The COVID-19 economy has put Americans of all stripes in dire straits, including veterans. WWP recently surveyed its members — wounded post-9/11 veterans — and found that 41 percent have experienced employment-related challenges as a result of the pandemic.

A study by the Jim Moran Institute for Global Entrepreneurship and Syracuse University’s Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) found similar circumstances among veteran entrepreneurs. As of early May, the study found, 39

percent of veteran-owned businesses had closed due to COVID-19 compared with just 5 percent of non-veteran-owned businesses; of those, 17 percent were uncertain whether they’d reopen.

But the picture isn’t as bleak as it seems. In April, veteran unemployment reached 11.7 percent — exceedingly high, but notably lower than unemployment for all Americans, which was a record 14.3 percent. By August, the unemployment rate for veterans had fallen to 6.4 percent compared with 8.5 percent for all Americans.

William Hubbard, chief of staff at Student Veterans of America (SVA), says student veterans are a microcosm of all veterans. On the one hand, their employment is trending upward: As of August, Hubbard says, 64.6 percent of student veterans were employed. Of those, 89.1 percent had a full-time job. On the other hand, uncertainty remains: Although 55 percent of student veterans say they’re confident about their job

prospects, 29.7 percent say they’re slightly worried about them.

“These are fairly promising numbers considering the state of the economy, but there’s definitely still a lot of concern,” Hubbard says.

The concern is real. But so are new opportunities. “As businesses navigate what the ‘new normal’ is, the people they’re going to hire are folks who can flex and be resilient,” says IVMF Director of Entrepreneurship and Small Business Misty Stutsman Fox, who finds military service makes veterans naturally agile and adaptable — and therefore more valuable than ever to employers as they pivot in response to a contracting economy.

Eric Eversole, president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation’s Hiring Our Heroes veteran employment initiative, agrees. “Whether it’s because of COVID or technological advances, the employment landscape is rapidly shifting. Having

CONTINUED »

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**Wounded Warrior
Richard Dorr**

WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT

employees who understand that change is inevitable and who know how to deal with it is increasingly critical.”

And then there’s the rapidly expanding world of remote working. “There’s a chance for companies to find some wildly talented veterans in places they never would have looked before,” Fox says. “Gone are the days where tech companies in Tulsa (Okla.) can’t find coders, because coders can live in the mountains of Colorado and still give those companies what they need.”

MISSION: EMPLOYMENT

Organizations across the country are also working overtime to help veterans exploit new opportunities.

Hiring Our Heroes, for example, offers a corporate fellowship program for transitioning service members and military spouses, who during 12-week internships

receive hands-on training that helps them translate military skills into civilian careers. That program, which often leads to full-time employment, has continued uninterrupted during the pandemic with both on-site and virtual internships, according to Eversole, who says it will graduate 1,300 fellows this year compared with 900 in 2019.

“We graduated our first (post-pandemic) cohort in May ... (and) 85 percent of our fellows were offered jobs,” Eversole says.

Other programs include IVMF’s Onward to Opportunity, which enrolls transitioning service members in online career training courses where they can learn or validate skills sought by employers in sectors like information technology, business management and customer service, and WWP’s Warriors to Work, which provides employment services like

job fairs, career counseling, mock interviews and résumé-writing workshops, all of which are now offered virtually.

“Going virtual hasn’t changed what we do; it’s just changed how we do it,” says Warriors to Work National Director Bryan Rollins. “We’ve had more than 1,000 warriors employed since March 16 with a combined first-year salary of over \$46 million. That’s on track with where we’ve been every year pre-COVID, so we feel good about that.”

The Department of Veterans Affairs is doing its part, too. Margarita Devlin, the principal deputy under secretary for benefits, says the VA acted quickly at the outset of the pandemic to ensure Congress continued granting veterans the education benefits afforded them by the GI Bill despite new remote learning environments. Meanwhile, it has continued to enroll veterans in its Vet-

eran Employment Through Technology Education Courses pilot program, which teaches veterans the skills they need to work in the growing tech sector and provides free educational and career counseling services.

“Veterans right now have the same employment challenges as other Americans given the pandemic that we’re in. But they also have advantages in terms of their eligibility for programs and services,” says Devlin, who notes that the VA itself has continued hiring veterans throughout the pandemic. “Over 50 percent of our workforce at the VA is veterans. What I would say to other employers is: ‘If a veteran applies for a job with you, invite them to come in for an interview. I think you’ll be very impressed by their maturity, their performance under pressure and their ability to learn new skills.’”

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AMAZON

For its customers, Amazon delivers just about anything. For veterans and military spouses, however, it delivers something infinitely more valuable: jobs.

In 2016, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos pledged to hire 25,000 veterans and military spouses within five years. It now employs more than 40,000 of them, according to Director of Military Affairs John Quintas, whose team has helped Amazon surpass its goal with the help of myriad recruitment, development and retention programs. Among them are the Amazon Military SkillBridge Program, which offers internships to transitioning service members as part of the Department of Defense (DoD) SkillBridge initiative; the Military Mentorship Program, which connects veterans with peer mentors during their first year of employment; and Warriors@Amazon, an affinity group for veteran employees that has more than 120 chapters worldwide.

There's also the Amazon Delivery Service Partner program, which helps entrepreneurial veterans establish their own Last Mile package delivery services. Since launching the program in 2018, Amazon has given \$5 million in grants to help 500 veteran entrepreneurs start their own businesses.

"We employ military veterans because they bring unique value to every team at Amazon," says Quintas. "Veterans and their families have sacrificed to make the world a better place for generations to come, so we have a responsibility to care for them after their service."

AMAZON

CVS HEALTH

For more than 20 years, CVS Health has had a Workforce Initiatives team with the objective of attracting nontraditional talent, including veterans. CVS has hired more than 18,000 veterans since 2015, according to vice president of workforce strategies and chief diversity officer David Casey, a Marine Corps veteran.

CVS named its first director of military community initiatives, David Lee, in 2016; the following year it opened the CVS Health Talent Connect Center (TCC) at Fort Bragg, N.C. The first civilian facility of its kind on a military installation, the TCC merges hands-on job-search training with state-of-the-art virtual reality technology to help veterans and military spouses secure jobs with CVS.

CVS offers internships to transitioning service members as part of the DoD SkillBridge program; has a Heroes2Careers program, through which it recruits and trains transitioning service members at 10 military bases; and operates VALOR, an employee resource group whose 2,000 veteran members offer peer support while helping CVS create a welcoming workplace. "We want to recruit veteran talent, yes. But more than that, we want the military community to know we care about the whole of who you are," Casey says.



CVS HEALTH

JOBS & EDUCATION

IBM

If you ask Army veteran Jason Kelley, IBM should stand for "I've Been Military."

"We've been focused on veterans and what they bring to the table since the earliest years of our company," says Kelley, IBM's general manager of blockchain services and head of its Veteran Employee Resource Group (ERG). The ERG provides peer resources and support for veterans across IBM, which has hired more than 2,000 veterans since 2017. "We see all of our veterans as leaders, and who doesn't want leaders in their organization?"

According to Kelley, veterans' training in tasks like cybersecurity, logistics and communication makes them ideally suited to employment in the tech sector. To help them succeed, IBM in February launched a version of its SkillsBuild adult learning program exclusively for military veterans who are transitioning to the private sector. The free online career-readiness training was launched in May, and by September had already enrolled 1,000 transitioning service members.

IBM has a corporate goal of being "the premier place for veterans to work when they get out of the military," Kelley says. "And once they're here, we want to continue addressing their opportunities for progression, skill development and community."



IBM

**LOWE'S**

Veterans don't just work at Lowe's home improvement stores. Veterans created them, according to executive vice president of stores Joe McFarland, a Marine Corps veteran who cites the company's founding in 1946 by World War II veterans Carl Buchan and Jim Lowe. In their honor, he says, Lowe's now employs more than 20,000 veterans, many of whom wear special camouflage vests as a symbol of their service.

McFarland says Lowe's has hired more than 100,000 associates this year in spite of COVID-19 — many of them veterans, whose talent Lowe's has sought at more than 40 virtual, military-themed hiring events. "We haven't slowed down our hiring of veterans because of the pandemic. As a matter of fact, we've continued to step on the gas," he says.

In 2021, Lowe's will further its commitment to veterans as a new participant in DoD's SkillBridge internship program.

"There's a huge benefit to hiring veterans, and it begins with what the military teaches you," McFarland says. "We can train you on the technical aspects of the job — how to do basic home plumbing and electrical work — but the leadership skills (that) the military instills in veterans can't be taught."

LOWE'S