

Hiring

Hiring Veterans Is Good Business. So Why Don't We Do It More Often?

by Derek Bennett

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Ten years after the start of the Iraq War, we're all familiar with the case for hiring veterans: they're mature, responsible, have significant managerial experience, and are used to chaotic, ambiguous environments. Many possess skills that are highly transferable. So why is the gap between veteran and nonveteran unemployment rates 9.4% and 7.9% respectively?

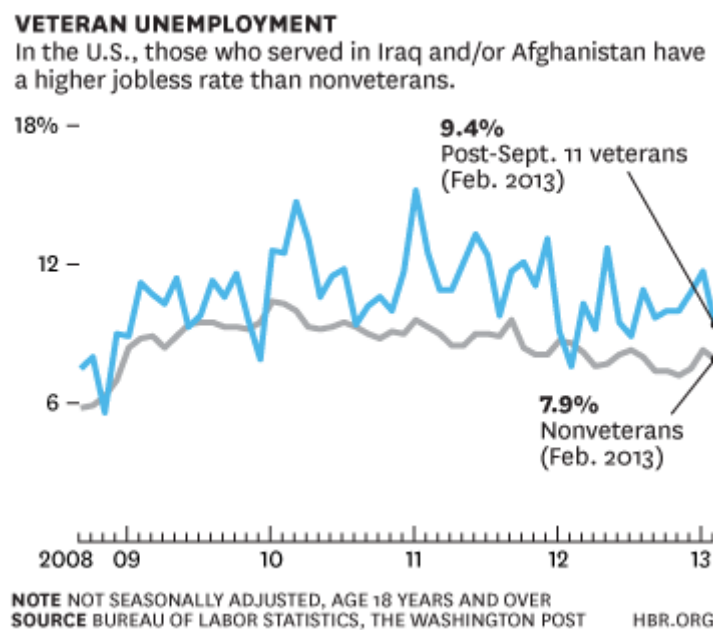
Maybe it has something to do with this:

Black 6 this is Red 1. Class 1, 3 and 5 are now available at FARP Foxtrot, over.

To most of you, that's a fairly inscrutable "sentence." Yet to our veterans it's clear — they know where they can get food, fuel, and ammunition. The military, of course, is known for its reliance on jargon and acronyms. But consider this equally inscrutable language:

The value is multiples of EBITDA, assuming the back-office cost synergy targets are achievable.

For veterans who are transitioning into the civilian workforce, there is just as much, if not more, confusion in trying to decipher the language of business than there is for you to decipher the language of the military.



This cultural gap is a significant driver of veteran unemployment. In the military, we all wear our resumes on our chests; it's readily apparent what your position and function, not to

mention additional areas of expertise, are at a single glance.

There's some good news in all of this, however: veterans are really good at learning good business practices when given the opportunity. In a twist on more familiar models that consultancies like The Boston Consulting Group and McKinsey & Company use, my organization, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), partnered with The Fullbridge Program to provide a business immersion experience, not unlike a business bootcamp, for veterans looking to transition to the civilian marketplace.

Co-founded by Peter and Candace Olson, this program provides a deep tutorial in the language of business, as well as extensive training in business and financial analysis, communication, and valuation. These skills are augmented by the help of Dr. Tim Butler's CareerLeader, which helps students understand and plan for a fulfilling career, not just a one-off job. The result is a veteran who has the tools and confidence to immediately contribute, whether as an entrepreneur or in a company.

Nick Colgin, a former Army Airborne Medic, is one of 10 veterans who have just completed The Fullbridge Program. “Having spent 15 months in Afghanistan, I returned home with a significant traumatic brain injury (TBI).” he explains. “So it brings a whole different set of issues to an already complicated business world. Where I was unable to spell my own name or barely speak in 2008, I am now projecting revenue growth and cash flows in 2013.” Today, Nick is working to finish his bachelor’s degree in English and is helping to manage a multimillion-dollar capital campaign for IAVA. Both Nick and his manager credit Fullbridge for providing him improved analytical and presentation skills.

While there is great value from an intensive, offsite program such as Fullbridge, they can also be relatively expensive, running from \$3 to \$15K per student, depending on travel, infrastructure, and other costs. While that sounds daunting at first blush, consider that Society for Human Resource Management estimates that the replacement costs for an individual employee run from 50 to 200% of the employee’s annual salary. Business immersion programs and Employee Resource Groups can mitigate turnover and reduce those costs.

For small and mid-cap companies, in-house programs might be a good bet. To start, managers should take a hard look at their own onboarding programs and assess whether or not they’re meeting the needs of veterans. If you have veterans working for you now, help them organize a veteran ERG; then have a candid conversation with them about what they wished that they had known when they started at your company, what made their transition difficult, and how long it took them to adjust and feel like they were creating value. The answers to these questions should form the outline for what your own in-house training program should incorporate.

In addition, your ERG can prove invaluable in helping HR sift through — and translate — the applications of promising veterans.

For the veterans themselves, the payoff is pretty clear: Not only do they gain valuable hard and soft skills in addition to a working knowledge of business language, they also emerge with newfound confidence. And our early assessments show that employers benefit as well.

In longitudinal assessments conducted by The Fullbridge Program, graduates emerged “more developed, polished and professional.” In addition, nearly all graduates “were far more effective in their work than previous groups pre-Fullbridge.” Longer term performance statistics are still in development, but these initial results should be encouraging for employers: faster promotion vs. cohorts, greater retention, and, ultimately, higher productivity.

There has been a lot of attention recently paid to companies such as Disney, JP Morgan, and Wal-Mart who have pledged to hire veterans and help solve the employment crisis. I strongly encourage every organization, large or small, that hires a veteran take the extra step of investing in them and their careers as they transition — it’s something that will benefit the next greatest generation.

Derek Bennett is the Chief of Staff of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, overseeing strategy and daily operations. A combat veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Derek attended Harvard Business School and previously worked at the Boston Consulting Group. Follow him on twitter @dhboo.