



# Heroes for Hire

**K**aren Brasch feels an energetic heaviness when she thinks back to the rough time she had trying to get a civilian job after a career in the military. She retired from the US Navy, having served as a commander and a pilot, and when looking for a job, realized she was speaking a language that few hiring managers could understand.

**BY KATIE MORELL**

Translating her military experience, with its accompanying acronyms and jargon, was nearly impossible. Even though she had an MBA to bolster her experience, she wasn't sure how to explain how the skills she had developed in her long service career could be matched to her dream job.

*How companies can attract and retain former service members (and their spouses), and why it is so important*

"It felt like I was in the middle of 'The Amazing Race' TV show," she remembers. "It was like someone had dropped me in the middle of a foreign country without a compass and without a network. I didn't know who to call, even though I knew my skills would be the perfect fit for many corporate environments."

It took time, but she did get a job, and today works as a principal technical program manager at software company Intuit in San Diego. In addition to her day job, she volunteers as the global lead for the Intuit Military Network, the company's veterans-focused employee resource group.

"We are all about education, recruiting, mentorship, and outreach to veterans and military spouses," she says. "We believe that they have unique perspectives, past experiences, and training that can really help us at Intuit. One of the biggest challenges is that their experience gets lost in translation. We work to bridge that gap."

The topic of hiring military veterans for civilian jobs is discussed much more in corporate circles today than it was a decade ago. This is in part

thanks to major initiatives like Joining Forces, a program launched in 2011 by First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden to help pair military veterans and their spouses with public and private sector jobs. Additionally, Amazon, Intuit, Wells Fargo, and many other companies have made public pledges to educate, train, and hire military veterans and their spouses by the thousands through a variety of programs.

On the military side, the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers the VA Transition Assistance Program (TAP) to help prepare soon-to-rotate service members for life in the civilian world, including how to find a job. Depending on the veteran you speak to, though, reviews of TAP are mixed—although some say the program has improved in recent years.

Unemployment numbers provide a glimpse into the challenges facing veterans but don't tell the entire story. In May 2019, the US Department of Labor reported that the unemployment rate for veterans was 2.7 percent—it's lowest since 2000. That number, though, does not account for the unemployment of military spouses, a demographic that is often negatively impacted by long periods of not being able to work while partners are away and by frequent relocations.

A report published by the Council of Economic Advisers in May 2018 revealed that there are approximately 690,000 military spouses and spouses of recent veterans, many of whom can find only part-time jobs once their partners exit the military, even though they'd prefer full-time work. The report says 2017 unemployment rates for military spouses hovered around 16



## Seeking Heroes

In recent years, many organizations have formed to help veterans and their spouses enter the workforce.

- ▶ **RallyPoint** — [solutions.rallypoint.com](https://solutions.rallypoint.com)
- ▶ **Wounded Warrior Project: Warriors to Work** — [woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/warriors-to-work](https://woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/warriors-to-work)
- ▶ **Hire Heroes USA** — [hireheroesusa.org](https://hireheroesusa.org)
- ▶ **Military Connection** — [militaryconnection.com](https://militaryconnection.com)
- ▶ **LinkedIn** — [linkedin.com](https://linkedin.com)
- ▶ **The Honor Foundation** — [honor.org](https://honor.org)
- ▶ **VetsinTech** — [vetsintech.co](https://vetsintech.co)
- ▶ **Vet Employer Roadmap**, part of US Department of Defense — [vetemployerroadmap.org](https://vetemployerroadmap.org)
- ▶ **Hiring Our Heroes**, part of US Chamber of Commerce Foundation — [uschamberfoundation.org/hiring-our-heroes](https://uschamberfoundation.org/hiring-our-heroes)

percent, while other sources say that number could be as high as 24 percent.

The question, in addition to résumé translation, is how to attract and ultimately retain military veterans and their spouses. Thankfully, many people and companies are on the case, including Sean Kelley, Amazon's director of talent acquisition for worldwide operations. A US Navy veteran himself, he is proud that his company currently employs more than 18,500 veterans and spouses, with plans to increase that number in the coming years.

"Veterans and military spouses have a lot to offer a company," he says. "Their bias for action, their ability to think on their feet, and their roll-up-their-sleeves mentality always help push my teams forward and deliver better results for customers."

Kelley's sentiments are widely echoed by others in this space. Even

when a veteran's technical skill set doesn't reflect a job description to the letter, it is always worth it to give them a chance, says Kristen Kavanaugh, Tesla's senior staff partner, diversity and inclusion, and a retired US Marines officer. She says hiring managers should consider veterans when writing job descriptions to make them friendly for that demographic.

"If you are saying someone needs five years of project management experience, what you are actually saying is that the person needs to be able to lead a team, problem solve, and meet deadlines," she says. "If you just write about project management, you won't attract the talent you want, which might come from a veteran's experience. I recommend getting clear on the actual requirements of the job and translating those in a way that doesn't seem overly complex."

Companies looking to attract veterans and spouses are also smart to



create veteran-specific career landing pages, says Tim Falletti, manager of executive recruitment for Adecco USA in Chicago and a US Army veteran, adding that veterans want to know a company is actively looking for them.

On such landing pages, or in job descriptions, Intuit's Brasch suggests speaking their language.

"Explain that your company is 'mission oriented' and is looking for people who 'know how to get things done' and who have experience 'making hard decisions under pressure,'" she says. "Those words matter."

Launching an initiative to attract veterans and their spouses can start inside a company with current employees, says Falletti, who adds that business leaders can ask who already on their payroll is a veteran—a question that may illicit surprising answers, as many do not self-report. Business owners can then work with those staffers to create a program to attract and retain more veterans.

Amazon's Kelley agrees with this concept, and adds that it is best when a company can hire full-time military recruiters and then invest in programs for veterans.

"We have programs designed to help veterans grow in their careers," he says. "Adapt is a recruiting initiative for wounded, injured, or ill military service members. Our Military Leaders Program helps them excel as

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senior leaders and executives in high-priority business areas globally."

The existence of veteran-related employee resource groups, or affinity groups, also helps in the retention of this demographic, as do formal mentorship programs.

"There is so much transitioning from military to corporate or civilian life, and if a veteran isn't placed in an organization that is sensitive to that—to his or her need for camaraderie and career pathing—it can be hard," says Le Nette Rutledge, military talent programs manager at Wells Fargo in South Carolina. "It isn't that they are looking for a BFF, but having someone on hand to answer questions can be a huge help."

The topic of hiring veterans comes with a host of misconceptions, some of which can be deeply inappropriate and offensive to former service members when looking for jobs.

"I've been stigmatized. Some people thought I was 'John Rambo' when I got out of the military and entered the corporate world," says Adecco's

Falletti. People would ask him directly if he suffered from PTSD or had killed someone while in the service. "You should never bring something like that up in the workplace. Instead, ask them what they did in the military, job-wise. Otherwise, it is incredibly inappropriate. Never ask or force it out of them."

Rutledge agrees, adding that it is important to develop authentic relationships with a veteran or spouse before ever talking about mental health or potential combat. She also wants to dispel the myth that veterans with PTSD are somehow bad for companies.

"If someone has served and is wounded—physically or emotionally—it doesn't mean they are unstable," she says. "Most vets in that category have a drive to prove the opposite. They show up at a higher level because they want to dispel any of those myths."

Lack of transferrable skills—even on a technical level—is another toxic myth. People who've served in the military, and their spouses, come with strong levels of discipline, leadership, teamwork, resilience, loyalty, strategic decision-making, and flexibility, which arguably could help every environment.

"When you hire a service member, you are hiring the positive intangibles with them," says Falletti. "Coming into your company, they will want to build a family, build camaraderie. You will have someone willing to fight for you and your company. Why wouldn't you want to hire someone like that?" **IN**

*Katie Morell is a journalist based in San Salito, California, who is passionate about veterans' rights and whose brother is a longtime member of the US Army. Read more of her work at [katiemorell.com](http://katiemorell.com).*