

Entrepreneurship for Veterans with Disabilities: Lessons Learned from the Field

by Gary Shaheen and William N. Myhill

This brief examines entrepreneurship as a viable option for veterans with disabilities, particularly those returning from the present-day conflicts in the Middle East. As entrepreneurs, veterans have an array of opportunities to customize their employment, accommodate their challenges, maximize their strengths and skills, and achieve their financial and career goals. This brief takes a close look at one program — the Entrepreneurship Boot Camp — and discusses some lessons learned from the operation of this program.

Introduction

The number of American military personnel wounded in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as of December 2007 exceeded 40,000. During 2008, U.S. casualties declined, but the number of soldiers experiencing post-traumatic stress and other psychological challenges resulting from these conflicts is conservatively estimated to exceed 100,000.¹ Additionally, many veterans with mental health impairments experience substance abuse problems.²

This circumstance is unprecedented in American history. As a result of advances in both medical and war-fighting technologies, U.S. military personnel are surviving major injuries that would have resulted in fatalities in prior conflicts.³ While these advances have helped more military personnel return home alive, they are faced with a daunting social and economic challenge as they try to reintegrate into their families, jobs, and communities.

At present, homeless advocacy groups are beginning to register the first wave of young Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom veterans at homeless shelters across the nation.⁴ The Associated Press characterized this wave as an impending ‘tsunami.’⁵ These veterans report that their homelessness is a result of an inability to earn a living wage because they are not qualified for living-wage jobs due to a lack of education or training. Additionally, they are unable to seek traditional employment as a result of their disability, required medical care, or family situation. Increased emphasis at the federal and state levels on developing housing, employment, and supportive services as tools to end homelessness offers more hope that veterans of the current conflicts will fare better than their predecessors.⁶

Factors Affecting Employment Among Veterans with Disabilities

Physical and psychological trauma may limit the types of work that veterans can resume or assume. Employers may be uncertain whether veterans returning with a disability will have the ability to perform the same tasks they were originally hired to do. Many veterans are finding that their service-connected training and skills do not easily transfer to jobs and careers in civilian life. In essence, they may find it necessary to reevaluate their job and career expectations, taking into account both their experiences as veterans and their personal strengths

and limitations as people with disabilities. This includes reexamining the skills, strengths, aptitudes, and interests they may have that are shaped by their life experiences prior to, during, and after military service, as well as what types of personal and work-related supports they may need to achieve their job and career goals. Creative solutions to earning a living wage, such as through entrepreneurship, are essential.

Entrepreneurship as a Viable Career Option for Veterans with Disabilities

Owning a small business is an important option for veterans with disabilities to reenter the workforce. Recent reports indicate that there are over 9,600 small businesses owned by service-disabled veterans. In total, there are over 37,000 veteran-owned small businesses nationwide.⁷ Entrepreneurship offers veterans with disabilities increased opportunities to customize their employment to accommodate their challenges, maximize their strengths and skills, and achieve their financial and career goals.

Recently, federal and state governments have enacted legislation and made changes to regulations meant to promote entrepreneurship among veterans with disabilities (see Table 1). And while entrepreneurship as a career goal is increasingly being recognized as an employment option for veterans with disabilities, there are few programs that provide training in business planning and development, and address the personal development and supportive services that entrepreneurs with disabilities often need.

Meeting the Needs of Future Veteran Business Owners: Profile of the Entrepreneurship Boot Camp for Veterans with Disabilities

In an effort to address both the business development and planning needs as well as the supportive needs of returning disabled veterans, Syracuse University's Whitman School of Management introduced a program in 2007 called the Entrepreneurship Boot Camp for Veterans with Disabilities (EBV). The program, open to any veteran with a service-connected disability who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom, has a competitive application process and is offered free of charge to veterans who are admitted.

The EBV program begins with a 30-day online course that teaches the veterans basic skills of entrepreneurship and the "language of business." The next phase of the program is a nine-day on-campus residency. This residency includes more than 80 hours of instruction with faculty from Baylor University, the University of Colorado, and Florida State University in addition to faculty from the Whitman School and the Burton Blatt Institute (BBI) at Syracuse University. Faculty from, or secured by, the Whitman School provide training on starting, marketing, and financing business ventures. BBI faculty provide a "self-employment and disability training track." Veterans are provided with information on resources to support them in starting and operating a business from various systems, the various application processes, and strategies to braid the resources to meet the needs identified in their business plans. The residency also includes presentations from 30 guest speakers, including successful entrepreneurs, Chief Executive Officers of Fortune 500 companies, professional athletes, and national experts in disability employment services.

The EBV program also includes sessions on the customized employment element of discovery. Discovery explores the veteran's gifts, skills, talents, and strengths in order to transform a self-employment dream into reality. Business development faculty deliver training on 'visioning your business' and help veterans to develop an entrepreneurship mindset as a means to help the aspiring businessperson understand what is meant by entrepreneurship and the talents and skills needed to embark on a successful business planning process.

Table 1. Selected Examples of Federal and State Legislation that Promote Entrepreneurship Among Veterans with Disabilities

Law or Regulation	Key Provisions	Intended Outcomes
Veterans Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development Act of 1999	Coordinate Small Business Administration, Veterans Affairs, Department of Labor, and Department of Defense in providing entrepreneurial assistance to disabled veterans. ⁸	Established the National Veterans Business Development Corporation to assist disabled veterans in forming and expanding small business. ⁹
Military Reservist and Veteran Small Business Reauthorization and Opportunity Act of 2008	Improve agency coordination when providing entrepreneurial assistance; gather information about the types of resources needed and those that are available. ¹⁰	Increased number of Veteran's Business Outreach Centers (VBOCs), sponsored study of access to VBOCs, drafted materials to provide to disabled veterans in Transition Assistance Program. ¹¹
Massachusetts General Law, Minority- and Women-Owned Businesses	Expand market opportunities for minority-owned businesses by certifying eligibility to participate in affirmative business opportunity programs and to compete for U.S. Department of Transportation contracts. ¹²	In 2002, the general law began including veteran-owned business in the definition of "minority business," which provided greater resources to disabled veterans seeking to start or expand a small business. ¹³
Michigan Compiled Laws, Purchase of Supplies, Materials, Services	A 10% pricing preference on state contracts for businesses owned by qualified service-disabled veterans. ¹⁴	"A goal of awarding 3% of total state expenditures for goods, services, and construction to qualified service-disabled veteran-owned companies." ¹⁵
Virginia Public Procurement Act	"All public bodies shall establish programs...to facilitate the participation of small businesses and businesses owned by women, minorities, and service-disabled veterans in procurement transactions." ¹⁶	When there is a rational basis for small business enhancement or a significant disparity between the availability and use of these businesses, the governor may "require state agencies to implement appropriate enhancement or remedial measures." ¹⁷

This training track helps each veteran to develop a support needs map that provides a point of reference for informed decisions about what types of business opportunities to pursue. In addition to this discovery phase, participants also receive an orientation on how to develop their own customized business design team. These teams, which can be composed of friends, family members, and business professionals, help the participants explore their business concepts, assess the feasibility of the business, and even help to operate the business. Experience in the program has shown that a business design team involved early in the self-employment process helps entrepreneurs with business development tasks that they are unable to do by themselves.

What makes EBV unique is its ability to provide not only business development curricula, but also vital wrap-around supports for veterans during their residency. For example, a significant number of EBV enrollees have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder. Accordingly, EBV has been able to engage local Veterans Administration hospital personnel, including mental health counseling staff and its pharmacy, to provide "on-call 24/7" services. Making use of counseling and medical services has helped a number of participants cope with stress and succeed in the program.

By the end of the on-campus residency, veterans have developed their own business ideas, gained knowledge and information about resources supporting entrepreneurship for people with disabilities, and learned to write business and marketing plans. The residency ends with each veteran making a "final venture pitch" to panelists who serve as venture capital investors.

After graduation, EBV provides follow-along support and mentorship from program faculty and graduate students from Syracuse University. Program personnel also seek mentors for the graduates to contact in their own home towns.

All in all, the EBV has shown early success. During its first year, 17 veterans were selected from among hundreds of applicants to participate in the program. Fourteen months later, 65% of these veterans began and continue to operate a revenue-generating venture, 11% are pursuing additional education, 11% are engaged in wage employment, and the remainder has lost contact with the program.¹⁸

In 2008, EBV was expanded to include the University of California-Los Angeles, Texas A&M University, and Florida State University. Approximately 100 veterans with disabilities have enrolled in and completed the entrepreneurship residencies across all of the universities since the program began.

For further information on the EBV program, contact:

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Lessons Learned

The EBV program is just one of a wide array of programs, services, and resources available to veterans with disabilities who are interested in entrepreneurship. Many veterans, however, are unaware of these resources or don't understand how they can access them to support their business start-up and operations. Organizations such as state vocational rehabilitation and federal Veterans Affairs vocational rehabilitation agencies can be tapped as viable resources for veterans where possible, but much more needs to be done at the state and local level to help inform both aspiring veteran entrepreneurs and service operators about the myriad resources available to support veterans with disabilities as they learn the art of being a business owner. Lessons from the EBV experience have shown the importance of incorporating into future program operations strong partnerships and sustainable collaborations with other community programs and services available to veterans with disabilities who seek business ownership.

From Serviceman to CEO: The Success of John R.

At age 29, John R. was a veteran after serving in the United State Marine Corps. After graduating from EBV in August 2007, John formed his own construction and facilities management company headquartered in Dallas, Texas. The firm, which focuses on partnering with general, defense, and commercial contractors to pursue government contracts, was awarded its first contract in December 2007.

Today, John's company continues to serve customers across the United States.

For John, EBV represented an opportunity to take a big step toward realizing his dream of business ownership. Attending the Boot Camp allowed John to experience the nuts and bolts of business ownership, most importantly in the areas of leveraging resources, guerrilla marketing, and developing a solid business plan.

“The most important realization I took from the EBV was how much my military training was relevant and directly applicable to entrepreneurship,” says John, “and the importance of surrounding myself with people that have the knowledge and skills to help me make my business dream a reality.”

Federal Government Resources for Veterans with Disabilities to Own Businesses

Veterans with disabilities have a broad array of state and federal resources available to support business start-up and operation from the veterans, disabilities, and generic workforce systems. These resource supports include:

- State offices of Vocational Rehabilitation often provide seed grants to entrepreneurs with disabilities.¹⁹
- The federal Department of Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation – Veteran Entrepreneurship, Self-Employment, and Small Business Development partners with the Small Business Administration and the Association of Small Business Development Centers to provide entrepreneurial assistance and guidance on business start-up issues, including the economic viability of a proposed business, the development of a business plan, and financial feasibility.
- The U.S. Small Business Administration has implemented government purchasing incentives for veterans with disabilities who own small businesses.²⁰
- Disability Program Navigators based at local One-Stop Career Centers provide information about disability-specific and generic resources available to assist entrepreneurs with disabilities.²¹
- Local Area Veterans Employment Representative program staff (LVERs) located at One-Stop Career Centers and Disabled Veterans Outreach Program staff (DVOPs), provide services in the community, job support and development, job placement services, and advice about small business ownership as a career option.²²
- U.S. Department of Labor One-Stop Career Centers provide job development counseling and assistance, and access to veterans counselors, including LVERs and state vocational rehabilitation counselors. They can be a source for training to improve skills necessary to operate a business as well as assist the veteran by working in partnership with local Small Business Development Centers to provide counseling and support for entrepreneurship.²³

In addition, individuals with disabilities — including veterans — can take advantage of other direct business financial supports that can assist them to succeed as entrepreneurs. These include, but are not limited to grants, loans, or purchasing set asides that support the “nuts and bolts” of their small business. Again, much more needs to be done to help veterans with disabilities understand these potential sources of direct business support and their eligibility and application requirements. Lessons from the EBV experience have shown that learning where to get direct business support resources, and understanding how to blend diverse resources from different funding streams that support necessities such as van or car modifications, assistive technology, personal care, and job coaching, contribute both to success as entrepreneurs, and helps these veterans with disabilities learn essential advocacy and life and business management skills.

Useful Resources

There are private-sector organizations and government-funded resources that promote entrepreneurship for veterans with disabilities:

- The *National Veteran’s Business Development Corporation* (www.veteranscorp.org), doing business as the Veterans Corporation, is charged with creating and enhancing entrepreneurial business opportunities for veterans, including service-disabled veterans. It provides veterans with tools and resources to aid with business development and growth, including access to capital, bonding, and entrepreneurial education.
- *Oak Grove Technologies* (www.oakgrovetech.com) is a successful service-disabled veteran-owned company; the founder, CEO, and President testified before the U.S. House of Representatives on entrepreneurship for veterans with disabilities. See *Veterans Entrepreneurship and Self Employment: Hearing Before H.S. Comm. on*

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- The *Association for Disabled Veterans* (www.asdv.org/index2.com) offers an informational database pertaining to advocacy, health care, and employment opportunities. One of its main goals is to “bring service disabled veteran-owned enterprises into the mainstream of the economy.”
- The *Task Force for Veterans’ Entrepreneurship* (www.vet-force.org) advocates for the support of America’s service-disabled and other veteran-owned entrepreneurial enterprises; composed of over 200 organizations and affiliates representing thousands of veterans throughout the United States.
- The *Small Business Development Centers* (www.sba.gov/aboutsba/sbaprograms/sbdc/index.html) provide free counseling and funding assistance to potential entrepreneurs.
- The *Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) Counselors to America’s Small Business* (www.score.org/veteran.html) is composed of retired business people who voluntarily advise and mentor aspiring entrepreneurs. Local SCORE chapters provide in-person counseling and information about topics such as business development and financing. Assistance is also available through the Internet. For a directory of state programs and potentially useful websites for veteran entrepreneurs, see www.score.org/resources_veteran.html.
- The *National Veterans Conference* (www.nationalveteransconference.com) brings together small- and large-scale business owners and federal government representatives to share best practices of how to do business together. The conference includes sessions on federal contracting for small businesses that are just breaking into the public sector.
- The *Job Accommodation Network Entrepreneurship Branch* (<http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu/entre/index.htm>) offers self-employment and small business development expertise and referrals regarding business planning, financing strategies, marketing research, disability-specific programs, income supports and benefits planning, e-commerce, independent contracting, home-based business options, and small business initiatives for disabled veterans.
- *DisabilityInfo.gov - Employment for the Veterans and Military Community* (www.disabilityinfo.gov/digov-public/public/DisplayPage.do?parentFolderId=53) outlines information as well as links to programs and services regarding opportunities for service-disabled veteran-owned businesses.
- *START-UP* (www.start-up-usa.biz/) is a national training and technical assistance center, located at Virginia Commonwealth University, with demonstration projects in New York, Florida, and Alaska, that supports self-employment as an employment outcome for individuals with disabilities.

End Notes

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The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) provides national leadership on disability employment policy by developing and influencing the use of evidence-based disability employment policies and practices, building collaborative partnerships, and delivering authoritative and credible data on employment of people with disabilities.

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Founded in 2007 under a grant/contract with the Office of Disability Employment Policy at the U.S. Department of Labor, the NTAR Leadership Center's mission is to build capacity and leadership at the federal, state, and local levels to enable change across workforce development and disability-specific systems that will increase employment and economic self-sufficiency for adults with disabilities.

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