

# CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

November 11, 2018

## Companies build America by hiring veterans

Randy Hosler



Randy Hosler is CEO of Progressive Mechanical. He was a corporal who served as a combat arms Cavalry Scout soldier in the first Persian Gulf War in the 1st Cav Division 7th Cavalry Regiment.

When I left the Army, I had a hard time figuring out what to do next. Would I attend college? Find a job — doing what?

I thrived under the military's structure. The real world doesn't give you a ready-made schedule or purpose. Many of us crave the guidance of a system that helps us find our north star.

I'm one of the lucky ones. I eventually found my way and got into mechanical contracting. In 2006, I purchased a company with my nephew, and it's been an upward trajectory ever since.

Leading a veteran-owned business, I remember that wandering feeling whenever we're hiring. It's hard to find good employees, and I believe veterans are an undertapped market for any business.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for veterans who served since September 2001 hovers around 4 percent. Almost half (41 percent) of all post-2001 active duty veterans have a service-related disability, but unemployment rates among them are not significantly higher than non-injured veterans.

Approximately 20.4 million Americans are veterans, amounting to 8 percent of the adult population. A 2016 study by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Hiring Our Heroes initiative revealed that veterans are a top recruiting target for American companies. However, the report showed that "a civilian-military divide still exists in today's workforce, and an even greater effort is required moving forward as veterans are brought on board to civilian companies to set them up for success."

One major barrier to success, the study shows, is the sense of shame or embarrassment wounded warriors feel when enduring post-traumatic stress or a service-related brain injury. Business owners must understand the unspoken emotions driving this hesitation on the part of veterans who could be workplace assets, and create strategies for welcoming them into the workforce.

Veterans are loyal. They're dedicated. They know how to work as part of a team. Many assume great risk, bravely. As a member of a Cavalry Scout troop, I learned to find the enemy before they found us. We were hardcore, down-to-earth people you could count on.

I prefer to hire veterans whenever I can — not only to build my team, but to build America.

Veterans need help transitioning to civilian life. It's difficult to leave the structured environment of a 5 a.m. bugle wakeup with every step outlined for you. There's no time to wonder, no option to blow off tasks. You perform through obstacles. You learn to surmount challenge. And you feel great once you do.

In our field, where danger lurks on every job site, we build structure to ensure the safety of our teams, to get jobs done efficiently, on time and on budget. Our industry, and many others, are a natural home for veterans.

I enlisted in November 1989, training at Fort Knox and Fort Hood before being deployed to Iraq after the invasion of Kuwait.

It was exciting and scary at the same time. I knew I faced danger, but the risks didn't sink in until I landed on the Saudi Arabian sand and felt an extreme heat I'd never experienced in America. We deployed through the desert, training for combat, fielding artillery hits, dodging small firefights. Some people killed enemy soldiers. Four years in the military was the wakeup call I needed to become a strong man. But once I completed my tour, I missed the leadership that helped me learn right from wrong, build a strong work ethic and gain the dedication to finish what I start. The very core of who I am today comes from my military mentors who taught me what hard work means, how to make a commitment and see it through to completion, and how to show up for duty and live with honor.

I came to business ownership knowing that what we start, we finish, no matter what. The military taught me there is always a way to get the job done.

Today, a few companies prioritize the hiring of veteran businesses. Ford Motor Co. includes veteran-owned businesses in its supplier diversity strategy. I've worked with construction and engineering buyer Mark Strait, a Navy veteran and member of the Fallen and Wounded Soldiers Fund, who has been instrumental in including veterans in Ford's diversity spend.

Certain companies are ahead of the curve in hiring veteran-owned businesses and have self-mandated veteran spend goals. Other companies don't necessarily have a defined veteran focus, but they acknowledge the importance of employing veterans. It's a growing interest that needs to gain steam.

We hire veterans whenever we can. Even our nonveteran pipe fitters, sprinkler fitters and plumbers say they appreciate working for a company that is veteran-owned. Many have family members or friends who served, and they understand the sacrifice required to protect our nation.

Today's workplace demands understanding, compassion and attention to detail. As we evolve into true 21st century companies, we must consider the impact veterans can have on our workplace as we build America for a better future.