Amazon deploys multiple programs to recruit military veterans and spouses

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By Kristen Parisi

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When military veterans and their spouses transition to the public sector, many often face hurdles finding jobs and assimilating to new work environments.

Amazon, in an attempt to address these challenges, takes a holistic approach to hiring and inclusion for military families, with initiatives ranging from public-private partnerships to an employee leadership group and manager training, Ian McDuffie, manager of global military affairs, recently told HR Brew.

The result, he said, is a welcoming workplace for military veterans and their families, with clear pathways for growth that ultimately make Amazon stronger. The company's eight-person global military affairs enablement team sits within the people experience and technology (aka, HR) team, and is led by army veteran and military spouse Charlotte La Belle.

"We have a lot of creative veterans, military spouses on our team to think about policies that we can write that can support our community pilots, that can launch new partnerships to create military hiring opportunities," McDuffie said, adding that Amazon also focuses on ongoing engagement. "As soon as we bring those folks aboard at Amazon, we want to make sure they're growing, thriving, connecting."

Tailored recruitment and training programs

Amazon partners with the Department of Defense to hire veterans through programs like SkillBridge, which provides servicemembers with civilian work experience during their last six months in the military.

> "I'm a SkillBridge veteran," said McDuffie, who came to the program from Hiring Our Heroes, an initiative through which military members can participate in 12-week programs with companies like Amazon, at zero cost to the employer. "We find that they convert at very, very high rates, but we also find that through SkillBridge we have better retention than veterans who didn't do SkillBridge, or even non-veterans."

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Amazon then turns its attention to training. To that end, McDuffie said the company has a partnership with Northern Virginia Community College to train military veterans to work at the more than 100

data centers in the state in which it has controversially invested tens of billions of dollars since 2011 (with billions more slated until 2040).

“They are able to upskill while receiving full salary into data center operations and engineering roles, and then they do on-the-job training in data centers,” McDuffie said, adding that participants are not required to stay with Amazon after they finish the program.

Family inclusion

Military spouses tend to have a much higher unemployment rate than their peers and even military veterans: 1 in 5 military spouses are unemployed and earn roughly 38% less than civilians, according to the Department of Labor. This is a result of relocating frequently and living on military bases, away from non-military jobs, HR Brew reported previously.

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“We believe hiring veteran military spouses is not only the right thing to do as a company…but we truly believe veterans’ military spouses give us a competitive advantage,” McDuffie said, adding that military spouses are “adaptable and flexible” employees who give the company a competitive advantage. “They’re really aligned to our 16 leadership principles. We find them to be professional learners.”

But none of that matters if they don’t feel included. Employee resource groups often provide a sense of belonging to underrepresented groups, including military families. Amazon’s Warriors employee leadership group has 20,000 members across 25 countries, according to McDuffie, and is a core part of the company’s veteran inclusion strategy.

“We find that when those veterans and military spouses join Amazon and can be linked to their Warriors chapter, and they’re brought into the fold, that family, be it at their site or their corporate office, they tend to do better,” McDuffie said. “They tend to learn about programs. They tend to have better retention rates. They have better promotion rates.”

What other HR teams can do

Roughly 6,000 companies participate in the SkillBridge program, including Oracle, Microsoft, JPMorgan, and Ford. Other employers, like Wells Fargo, and Boeing, train or recruit military spouses.

But McDuffie pointed out that it’s not enough to just hire veterans and spouses. Companies should provide ongoing inclusion support and pathways to advancement.

“There’s been this paradigm that veterans and military spouses need to adjust who they are as people to fit into a company, but the rallying argument of late is that the company should adapt to the community they want to welcome so they can thrive,” McDuffie said, adding that at Amazon, managers are taught how to lead veterans and military spouses.

Employers should also meet military veterans and spouses where they are, and understand the unique perspectives they bring to a workplace, according to McDuffie. “It’s incredibly important for companies to build empathetic frameworks that don’t ask the veteran or veteran or military spouse to, overnight fit a corporate mold.”



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