The Edge: Opportunities for veterans for starting businesses

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I never anticipated business ownership as a job option after leaving the military, but I found that my service with the Navy resulted in a unique perspective that allowed me to more clearly see the point of view of others as well as my own. In particular, it gave me an advantage when I began considering moving my business away from commercial health care and into government contracting. I was able to evaluate projects as an engineer, an end-user and a taxpayer.

My business owner track began when I filed as an S Corporation in 1999 after a friend encouraged me to do so "just in case." Because I was medically discharged due to a training accident, I qualified for the federal Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business set-aside program. I was also able to leverage my network of military contacts to help grow the business over time. But it wasn't easy. Knowing people doesn't equate to winning contracts. Nothing beats constant networking.

According to the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 10.3 million out of 21 million veterans were counted as employed in September 2014. While all exiting service members participate in the newly revamped and mandatory Transition Assistance Program Employment Workshop that provides them with an evaluation of their employability relative to the job market and information about job searches, career decision-making, and basic resume
writing and interviewing techniques, there is no attention given to entrepreneurialism and business ownership.

Did I know what it would take to start and grow a business when I left the Navy? Absolutely not. But I figured it out and learned a lot along the way. Today, there are many programs and resources available to veterans who are interested in going the way of business ownership.

We have some excellent entrepreneurial programs in the community like those at CareerSource Brevard, the Small Business Development Center at Eastern Florida State College and the Women's Business Center at Florida Tech that allow vets to engage with experienced advisers and other small business owners.

Additionally, the Small Business Administration has online resources available to veterans and service-disabled veterans to help them create a business plan and find their first customers (sba.gov/content/veteran-service-disabled-veteran-owned).

Incorporating a business in Florida is very simple and can be done online for less than $100. Once the necessary steps are taken to make the business official, vets can determine their eligibility for the VA's Veterans First Contracting Program at vetbiz.gov/.

It wasn't always easy for me, but entrepreneurship seemed to be a natural fit after the military. The same attributes required to be an entrepreneur — acting independently, being disciplined and taking risks comfortably — are the same as those that veterans have practiced during their service. The military family is here to support vets, too, and that can be a tremendous asset when starting a new venture and growing it successfully.

An estimated 250,000 people depart military service annually, and the SBA's Small Business Quarterly Bulletin for Second Quarter 2014 reports that overall small business indicators are improving to include rising proprietors' income. With the job market as competitive as ever, and since the government is still falling short of meeting its small business goals, now is a great time for veterans to pursue businesses ownership. Utilize your wealth of local resources to make that happen.

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