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## Initiatives Aim to Bring Vets to Tech Startups

BreakLine and investors help former service members transition into new jobs

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*KyMBERLY Penson, an Army veteran who participated in the inaugural BreakLine group, now works at Box Inc.*

After serving as a rear-detachment commander in the U.S. Army, KyMBERLY Penson wanted a job at a Silicon Valley technology company.

But the University of North Carolina business school graduate didn't have a network on the West Coast, and explaining her military background to a tech recruiter was all new to her.

"I didn't know everything from storytelling to personal branding," she said. "I didn't quite register how important that was."

Ms. Penson was one of the first veterans to participate in BreakLine, an initiative founded by a former Stanford University administrator that aims to help veterans find work in tech companies. In July, Ms. Penson started her job as a customer success manager at Box.

BreakLine is one of several recent initiatives in Silicon Valley to retrain veterans leaving the military for roles in the technology industry. Conventional recruiting software and procedures often leave veterans out, or fail to account for the years of work experience they have in the military. BreakLine, venture-backed company Shift and some investors are working to help startups and more established tech companies understand the value that veterans can bring to their workforces. This month, Betts Recruiting and Sandbox will partner to help connect veterans with sales jobs at technology companies through an app and emails.

As tech companies strive to attract more diverse talent, some of their initiatives include recruiting veterans. Several companies include veteran statistics in the diversity reports that they release that also show the percentage of women and minorities the companies employ. However Bethany Coates, BreakLine's founder, says it is inconsistent across companies.

"When you work in the military, you don't get to choose your boss or the team you work with, but you've got to get the job done," she said. "They tend to be really effective and outcome-oriented."

Stereotyping is often a barrier. Ms. Coates said some employers think veterans won't be able to adapt to Silicon Valley's culture, or work well independently after working in the military's regimented environment.

But Ms. Coates wants to highlight the skills veterans bring to the table. She said many recognize veterans have strong leadership skills and can work well as part of a team.

**Don Dixon, managing director of Trident Capital Cybersecurity**, learned of the myriad challenges that veterans face when watching his two sons, Andrew and Peter, trying to find jobs at technology companies after leaving the Marine Corps. He saw how difficult it was for them to navigate the job search—even with family connections and degrees from Princeton University and the University of North Carolina.

Both sons enrolled in programs that help veterans transition into higher-level jobs without going back to school for several years. Peter Dixon participated in Stanford Ignite, a predecessor to BreakLine. Andrew Dixon enrolled in Tech Qualified, a program that teaches veterans sales skills.

“It changed the lens of how I look at my past experiences,” he said. “It gave me the confidence that I can succeed in this field.”

Don Dixon, Andrew’s father, said certain sectors in technology have been more receptive to veterans. He noted cybersecurity is an area where veterans can thrive because the companies’ missions are often aligned with national security interests, and there are more direct applications for military experience. Peter Dixon had a security clearance that proved helpful when he started his first technology job at cybersecurity startup ThreatMetrix.

The Dixon family has recently launched Veterans Hire Veterans, an initiative that seeks to identify best practices for hiring veterans. They’re working with a range of companies, from the technology sector to more established companies like [McKesson](#).

Another organization that is gaining traction in the industry is Shift, which is backed by the startup accelerator Expa. The company has talent advocates that try to translate military skills into experience that makes sense to private sector recruiters.

Shift Chief Executive Mike Slagh said veterans are especially challenged when moving into growth-stage startups that may be preparing for an initial public offering. He said because those companies have little margin of error for who they hire, they tend to recruit candidates who resemble other employee profiles and that may omit veterans.

“Paradoxically those are the companies where veterans can have the most impact,” Mr. Slagh said.

Mr. Slagh said growth-stage companies can allow veterans to use their leadership skills. He also said leadership changes rapidly at these companies, but veterans are used to getting assignments that frequently change.

Some veterans say they are seeing more buy-in by some executives. After serving in the Navy, Don Faul came to Silicon Valley to attend Stanford and wanted to break into the tech sector. When he joined Google in 2005, he knew only one other veteran there.

At Google he was involved in starting the company’s first group for veterans, and went on to develop similar initiatives in the early years of [Facebook](#). After being hired as one of the first 50 employees at Pinterest, he helped the company consider recruiting veterans. Today he is chief executive of the wearables startup Athos.

“There are so many more veterans today in the technology industry,” Mr. Faul said. “The more people we have, the easier it is for a new crop of veterans to find a job.”

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