



Military Veteran Entrepreneurs Share Tips on Launching and Managing a Business

As military members return home from active duty, they face many obstacles reintegrating into civilian life, including finding stable and fulfilling employment. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), only 1 in 4 veterans had a civilian job lined up before leaving active service. While this may seem like a bleak statistic, many veterans return home and choose to start their own business ventures instead of opting for a traditional 9-5.

According to the [U.S. Small Business Administration](#) (SBA), 1 in 10 small businesses in the U.S. are veteran-owned, and these businesses generally hire other veterans. The SBA also found that veterans are 45 percent more likely to be self-employed than non-veterans.

To support the entrepreneurial spirit of U.S. veterans and active service members, Bob Evans Farms established [Our Farm Salutes](#), a national philanthropic mission dedicated to supporting U.S. military heroes and their families. Our Farm Salutes consists of three major initiatives, including one program designed to support veteran entrepreneurs in their business endeavors: Heroes to CEOs.

[Heroes to CEOs](#) is an annual grant program that provides hardworking veteran business owners the opportunity for a monetary award, as well as heightened brand awareness and professional business mentoring.

In 2022, Bob Evans Farms awarded three veteran entrepreneurs \$25,000 each for their business, totaling \$75,000 in funding.

"Supporting the military has always been part of our heritage," said Thyme Hill, CMO of Bob Evans Farms. "We established the Heroes to CEOs program to support our servicemen and women who have come back from active service to launch businesses and need assistance to reach the next level. We are honored to benefit the brave men and women of this country with our ongoing commitment to veteran entrepreneurs."

Since the inception of the Heroes to CEOs program in 2017, Bob Evans Farms has funded over \$450,000 in business grants to veteran-owned businesses and organizations. Below, the three winners of 2022's Heroes to CEOs share tips for veterans aspiring to launch and manage their own businesses.

[Backpacks for Life](#)

U.S. Marine Corps veteran Brett D'Alessandro and his spouse Alexa Modero founded Backpacks for Life, which provides personalized support to homeless and at-risk veterans struggling to reintegrate into civilian life. The organization assembles and distributes backpacks filled with daily essentials, shelter, and mental health counseling care and mentorship for those seeking support on their journey back home.

As you look to start your business, remember the power of networking. "As veterans, we know that 'team effort' and networking can build that alliance of mentors, partners, friends and potential customers," said D'Alessandro. "So many of our successes came from warm introductions following a networking event." D'Alessandro and Modero urge veteran entrepreneurs to attend industry events, veteran entrepreneurship events, local events for small businesses or startups in your area, as well as webinars and virtual roundtables.

While it might be tempting to dive in headfirst toward entrepreneurship, make sure you work on your business idea while maintaining another source of income until your business idea can become your main hustle.

"Entrepreneurship is a lot about failing but failing forward," said D'Alessandro. "It's also a marathon, not a sprint. If you start small, you make small mistakes. Learn from those mistakes and use that to fuel the fire."

[Hampden Farms](#)

Zephryne Hanson, a veteran of the U.S. Air Force, founded Hampden Farms to accelerate food security and community wealth building for underserved neighborhoods in the Denver metro area.

Starting your own business, especially as a veteran returning from active duty, can be exhilarating. Still, it can be easy to ignore your well-being for the sake of your passion project. "Invest in your physical and mental health," said Hanson. "You can't build a business if you aren't building yourself up, too."

Hanson suggests veteran entrepreneurs support their overall well-being through therapy, coaching, and uplifting experiences. Many programs that support veterans, like *Veterans Path* and *Wounded Warrior Project*, are free or low-cost.

In a similar vein, Hanson reminds veteran entrepreneurs to seek out training, incubators, and networking organizations that support the diverse needs of veterans in transitioning to civilian life and business ownership. Organizations and programs that address these issues include *The Institute for Veterans and Military Families*, *Bunker Labs*, and *Veterans to Farmers*.

Finally, Hanson believes that beyond seeking out support, a successful business owner should give back to the community. "Be a servant leader in your virtual, local, and military communities. It's a priceless experience and well worth the time and effort."

[Sterilogy](#)

Founded by Hal Zaima, a veteran of the U.S. Army, Sterilogy has created the only patented, compact, body-worn personal hand hygiene system designed to reduce infections in healthcare, restaurant, and food production industries.

Zaima stresses that veteran entrepreneurs shouldn't be afraid to ask for help.

"You've heard that it takes a village to raise a child. Well, it takes an army to start a business," said Zaima. "Along your arduous road to success, you'll need many people to assist you and to keep the naysayers at bay."

For veterans looking to start their own business, Zaima recommends thinking about what they're passionate about and what is profitable. "Once you've identified what that intersection of passion and profit looks like, you'll be tempted to dive in, but just like in the military, you need a plan." Zaima suggests veteran entrepreneurs write down all the steps in chronological order of what they'll need to reach their goals. This exercise provides a roadmap that can help determine whether you're ready to start or need more time to build additional resources and capital.

"If I had to do it over again, I would have sold the sizzle and excitement of the new product early in my entrepreneurial journey to obtain investor funding sooner," said Zaima. "Funding validates your business, and it will help you accomplish items from your aforementioned list without having to constantly reaching into your own pocket."

Bob Evans Farms believes that leadership, commitment, and courage are just a few reasons veterans succeed as entrepreneurs. This is why the company supports these military heroes as they pursue their dreams after service.

To learn about the Heroes to CEOs program and current and past grant winners, visit BobEvansGrocery.com/ourfarmsalutes.