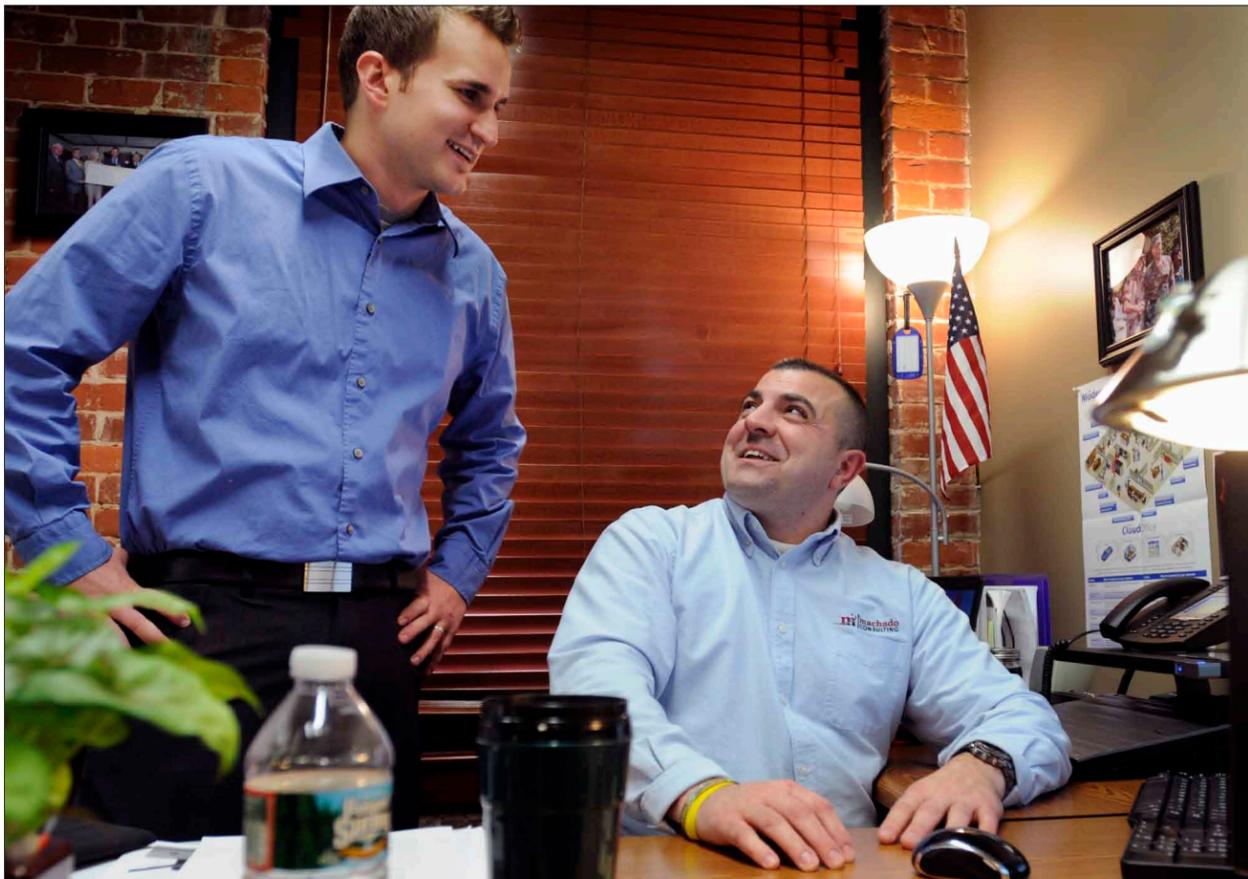


Unemployed veterans finding help

Nailing down civilian jobs can be stressful



T&G Staff Photos/CHRISTINE PETERSON

Helder A. Machado, right, hired Benjamin J. Mehr through a program that puts vets back to work.

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BENJAMIN J. MEHR
VETERAN

Lisa Eckelbecker
TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER — Benjamin J. Mehr carried one burden when he went to war in Iraq, and he came home to another — unemployment.

The 25-year-old husband and father of two boys hauled heavy loads on his back while deployed as a specialist with the 772nd Military Police Company of the Massachusetts National Guard in Taunton, only to return in October 2009 with a herniated disk injury to his back and the discovery that the ailment would prohibit him from returning to work as a carpenter.

He searched for jobs and took a temporary position as a Census worker.

“I ran across not being able to translate my skills to a civilian position,” said Mr. Mehr, who lives in Northboro. “The jobs out there were things I didn’t have any experience in. It was very overwhelming. It felt hopeless. At more than one point, I felt I wasn’t going to get anywhere.”

Thanks to a small nonprofit group, Guard Support of Massachusetts, Mr. Mehr found a job working for another Guard veteran, Helder A. Machado. And Mr. Machado won the first loan that Guard Support is offering under a new initiative, \$40,000 that is helping him ramp up his technology business, Machado Consulting, now housed in offices on Shrewsbury Street.

Mr. Mehr’s lack of experience in a technology field did not bother his new boss, according to Mr. Machado, a major with the 151st Regional Support Group in Framingham.

“I knew that soldiers were very disciplined,” Mr. Machado said. “The technology, we can teach them. But the other skills, for a lack of better words, if you don’t have it, you don’t have it.”

About 1.9 million of the nation’s 22 million veterans have served in the armed forces since the terrorist attacks of 2001 and returned to civilian life.

The unemployment rate of those veterans was 10 percent in November, similar to the nation’s overall jobless

rate of 9.8 percent, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

Returning to the civilian work force during a time of high unemployment has been difficult for some. Sherry S. Handel, executive director of Guard Support of Massachusetts, said 22 of 42 guard members seeking financial assistance from Guard Support as of Dec. 10 were unemployed.

Some veterans find when they return that they cannot go back to their previous jobs, and some are already unemployed when they leave for service, Ms. Handel said. Eight of the 22 unemployed veterans seeking assistance from the group were unemployed before they deployed.

“You have people that are laid off, and deployment comes, and they come back, and they’re still unemployed,” she said.

It’s sometimes a challenge for veterans to figure out how their military skills translate to the civilian economy, and some veterans may return to the United States with post-traumatic stress disorder or a need to relocate for work, said Donald H. Anderson, director of the Workforce Central Career Center in Worcester, an employment center operated by Worcester and the state that has an agent who is focused on working with veterans.

Yet veterans also make attractive prospects to employers, Mr. Anderson said.

“A lot of employers like to hire veterans because they’ve obviously been in positions of responsibility,” Mr. Anderson said. Also, he added, “Some veterans have security clearances that are attractive to federal contractors.”

Mr. Machado started Machado Consulting in 2001 after he was laid off from a chief information officer job. His company provides information technology services for small business. Mr. Machado

soon found another job, but he kept Machado Consulting going and decided to leap into it full time in 2006. An 18-month tour of active duty in the United States came next, but by early 2010 Mr. Machado was ready to open an office and hire workers.

In July, he secured the low-interest loan from Guard Support of Massachusetts, which is using funding from donors to finance one or two loans to entrepreneurs a year. Mr. Machado said he also tapped Guard Support’s “Hire Guard” program to look for a potential help desk employee.

At first, he was unsuccessful. Then he met Mr. Mehr, who heard about the opening through Guard Support and applied, even though he was close to moving his family back to his native Tennessee to search for work there.

“Although he didn’t have a lot of the skills we were looking for, he had a good personality and great work ethic,” Mr. Machado said. “We decided to give him a chance.”

Mr. Mehr started his job in early October and is working to obtain entry-level certification as a computer support technician. Machado Consulting now has five employees, three of them full-time.

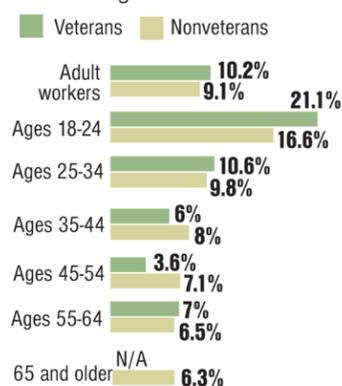
Mr. Mehr said he thinks his military experience has trained him to handle stress on the job and manage the “metaphoric bullets whizzing past my head to get the job done.”

He’s also glad to be working for a fellow veteran.

“Some of the jobs I’ve had, it’s like the leadership is an entirely different style than I’m used to in the military,” Mr. Mehr said. Good leadership “comes from really caring about the people you’re leading and being able to admit if you’re wrong. Military leadership is definitely a good thing.”

Out-of-work vets

Average 2009 unemployment rates among Gulf War II veterans*



*Gulf War II era veterans served on active duty in the armed forces at some point from September 2001 to the present.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.