

Hiring our Heroes

An Interview with Thomas J. Donohue,
President and Chief Executive Officer, U.S. Chamber of Commerce

EDITORS' NOTE Since assuming his position in 1997, Thomas Donohue has aggressively advanced the American Jobs and Growth Agenda, as well as spearheaded the creation of the Campaign for Free Enterprise. Donohue established the U.S. Chamber Institute for Legal Reform, and has dramatically expanded the activities of the National Chamber Litigation Center, the Chamber's law firm, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation.



Thomas J. Donohue

Previously, Donohue served for 13 years as President and CEO of the American Trucking Associations. Earlier in his career, he was Deputy Assistant Postmaster General of the United States and Vice President of Development at Fairfield University in Connecticut. He serves on the board of Union Pacific Corporation. Donohue earned a bachelor's degree from St. John's University and a master's degree in business administration from Adelphi University. He holds honorary degrees from Adelphi, St. John's, Marymount, and Bradley universities, as well as the National University of Ireland at Maynooth. He is a 2013 recipient of the Horatio Alger Award.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The world's largest business federation, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (uschamber.com) represents the interests of more than three million businesses of all sizes, sectors, and regions, as well as state and local chambers and industry associations.

What is the objective of the Hiring Our Heroes initiative?

The simple objective is to find jobs for military veterans and to keep their spouses employed as they move from place to place. The more complicated objective is to find jobs for wounded or sick military veterans who have unique challenges and to help their families. We're about to kick off another effort that would support that objective. We plan to take on the bureaucracy that these wounded and sick veterans face in trying to get their assistance and care in an orderly way. We'll find ways to help them tap into all of the government and private sector resources available to them.

We have run some 680 hiring fairs, which we do in cooperation with the Pentagon and others. They bring in an unbelievable number of national companies, large and small, that operate around the country.

Soon, we will have a phone number in every state where the veterans can talk to people at local chambers and get their attention.

We have more than 1,500 businesses who have already committed to hire 400,000 veterans and spouses as part of our Hiring 500,000 Heroes campaign with Capital One; to date, we have confirmed 255,000 hires.

The second most common assignment in the military is driver. There are also cooks, and those that run technology and communications,

so we're trying to hook up these skilled people with employers seeking someone with those skills. We spend a lot of time helping them put their resumes together, for example.

We have developed a lot of online programs where people can get information and valuable employment services, but we recognize that there is no substitute for person-to-person interaction.

Our corporate partners also offer tremendous support to the military community. Capital One, for example, provides outreach and professional development opportunities for veterans and military spouses, helping them to transition their unique skills from the military to a civilian workplace environment.

Helping these talented men and women prepare to enter the job market at home and translate their military skills into civilian skills is a big part of what our partners and our program offer.

What made this fit so well with the Chamber's role?

On the front of our building, there is a large sign that says "Jobs." We are a country that has people without jobs and jobs without people. We have taken 45 percent on average of all the jobs out of the manufacturing business. But information technology, robotics, process engineering, and supply chain management firms need people now.

These positions require people with skills who are able to read, comprehend, and do math; they have to be able to run a computer and write a little. Of the service members in the military, 99 percent are high school graduates, whereas 33 percent of the general population in the country don't graduate from high school. Those from the military also all have acquired some specific skills. They know how to work in teams; they have had leadership responsibility in some form

or another; they are people of courage and maturity. So if we have a job issue, we ought to start where we know there are quality people – and we also have a moral responsibility to do so.

Never before in our history have we used the Guard and the Reserve the way we have now. We have taken people out of their jobs and regular lives, and not just once. Ten percent of the people in the Guard and Reserve are pulled out repeatedly because of their special skills.

It was clear to us that to keep the Guard and Reserve working, they needed protection for keeping their regular jobs and help finding work when they needed it. We need them to understand that the country cares about them and that we will chase as much assistance as they need on the work front in the private sector.

When the Chamber was founded, it was on two premises: that we would help the business community but also our government. We have done that, especially through wars and natural disasters.

So it's critical to maintain the volunteer military – active duty, Guard, and Reserve – and deal with our fundamental responsibility to take care of those that have been wounded.

Those coming out of the military have a multitude of important skills, but their ability to function in a workplace is often questioned. Has there been an effort to fight that impression?

This question is asked all the time by those companies beginning to look at hiring veterans. What has the experience been like for companies that have hired from the Guard, Reserve, and active duty?

We explain that it's what you would expect in hiring under traditional circumstances, but with a bit of a plus on the leadership, team operation, and responsibility side. Some people have skills that they otherwise would not be trained for.

They will tell you also that some don't make it. But if you hire 1,000 people, you're going to have a few that don't do well in the system. It's no worse than other people they hire and often it's better.

At some of the hiring fairs I've attended, there are young military officers coming out with a variety of skills. You can't work in our military institutions anymore without encountering unlimited opportunities to acquire new skills.

Our servicemen and women possess those skills and extensive experience. Most companies have found their experience of hiring veterans to be very rewarding. ●