

Transition Training Academy Helps Wounded U.S. Veterans Begin New Careers in Information Technology

The Transition Training Academy program provides an opportunity for wounded U.S. military men and women to gain technical skills that will help them begin new careers. As many as 20,000 veterans who have suffered combat-related injuries in Iraq and Afghanistan could benefit from this training. After completing the program, many veterans gain civilian employment, some return to active duty, and others continue their rehabilitation in medical hold or pursue additional training.



TTA graduate Dwayne Brown (middle) receives a congressional certificate of completion

Background

The Transition Training Academy (TTA) pilot resulted from a search initiated by Michael Quinn, vice president of Cisco® Technical Support. As a Marine Corps veteran who was injured while stationed in Beirut in 1983, Quinn understood the difficulties faced by returning veterans and consulted with Cisco senior management about establishing a recruitment and job placement program for these veterans. After receiving approval, Quinn asked Alex Belous, a Cisco Education and Health Strategy manager, to take the lead on this project.

After meeting with various government officials in Washington, D.C., Belous discovered that there was no comprehensive profile of qualified candidates that could be used for recruitment purposes. Based on this finding, Belous felt that a successful recruitment strategy would require a technical training element, and began incorporating best practices from the Cisco Networking Academy® to create a program specifically tailored to meet the needs of wounded veterans.

NMCS D Career Transition Center

After sharing the TTA concept with various medical facilities, Belous found a home for the project at the Naval Medical Center San Diego (NMCS D) Career Transition Center. The center was formed in 2005 as a collaborative effort between the U.S. Departments of Labor, Veterans Affairs, and Defense; as well as the California Employment Development Department.

Cisco provided funding for this project and in 2006, Richard Reynolds was hired to teach the pilot TTA course at NMCS D. Reynolds and Belous worked with NMCS D to identify the special needs of students in medical hold. They discovered that many soldiers could only commit to short periods of classroom time due to scheduling constraints and prohibitive injuries such as brain traumas, post-traumatic stress disorder, and amputations. As a result, they decided to offer three identical classes every other week that were each broken into three, one-hour chunks of time. This allowed students to complete each class at their own pace and repeat sessions as needed.

In all, the pilot program lasted 12 weeks and consisted of 18 hours of classroom instruction and 18 to 24 hours of online instruction. At the end of the program, students participated in a career-skills

workshop that focused on resume writing and job interviews.

Laptops for Graduates

Upon graduation, each TTA participant receives a laptop to assist with their job search and civilian careers. The laptop donation program was developed by Belous, who sought financial assistance from Cisco colleagues and negotiated a laptop discount through Best Buy. Belous was able to raise a total of \$17,000 through employee donations, which was matched by the Cisco Foundation for a total contribution of \$34,000. These funds were used to purchase the first 48 laptops.

Contributions to the TTA laptop fund can be submitted through <http://vetstta.org/>. Each donation made by a Cisco employee will be matched by the Cisco Foundation.

Accomplishments and Future Plans

The first class of 20 students completed the program at NMCS D in August 2007. Three additional classes graduated in 2008. One of the graduates from the February 2008 class is now teaching courses at NMCS D.

Two thirds of the 77 graduates from NMCS D have gained employment following separation from the service or have returned to service in an IT-related position, while the remaining graduates continue their medical recovery. The majority of graduates who completed rehabilitation and actively sought employment in the civilian sector are now employed.

Based on the success of the pilot, the TTA program has been expanded to other medical centers. Forty-one students have completed their TTA training at Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC) at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio as of August 2008, and a class of 46 transitioning veterans is currently underway. The TTA training is also being offered at Dwight D. Eisenhower Army Medical Center at Fort Gordon in Georgia. A mentorship program is also being developed to assist with job placement and career advancement for all TTA graduates.

The TTA is a joint effort of the U.S. Department of Labor, the Veterans' Employment and Training Service, Cisco, the Office of Disability Employment Policy, and the Wounded Warrior Project. The program organizers hope for a total enrollment of 1800 students in 2009.

To learn more, please visit <http://vetstta.org/>.

Turning a Negative into a Positive

During Gorman Penn's stay at NMCS D, where he was rehabilitating from serious head and spinal injuries that he sustained when a piece of plywood hit him during a sandstorm in Iraq, he was devastated to learn of his impending medical discharge from the U.S. Navy. "It was like they were taking my life away," he recalls. Aside from having to leave his military career, Penn discovered he could not resume his former job as a heavy equipment operator due to his injuries.

When Penn learned about the TTA, he was excited about the prospect of starting a new career in IT. After developing networking skills through the program, Penn benefited from a Cisco effort that matches qualified job candidates with Cisco channel partners. Penn works from home in his new position, which allows him to spend more time with his wife and their four-year old daughter. "It gives me the opportunity to watch my child grow," he says. "I've taken a negative and turned it into a positive." Penn is also excited about his career prospects in IT. "My company wants to make me an engineer," he says. "The sky is the limit."

