

Partnership Prepares Veterans for Jobs in Digital Infrastructure

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“Do not get in a car with strangers” was standard advice when Erich Sanchack’s daughter was born.

Today his daughter, a recent college graduate, is among the hundreds of millions of people around the world who routinely tap addresses into their phones to hail rides with strangers.

Ride sharing services are among the thousands of ways the internet and digital economy have transformed how people navigate the modern world – everything from text message and email exchanges to document sharing, AI training, telehealth, digital payments, social media, content streaming and online gaming.

“There are services that we haven’t even imagined,” said Sanchack, the Chief Executive Officer of Salute, a company that provides comprehensive and integrated lifecycle services for data centers, and, along the way, transforms lives for military veterans.

Data centers are the infrastructure that enables the digital economy.

“To be a part of the digital infrastructure space that enables these citizen services is spectacular,” Sanchack said. “And when you overlay the nobility of placing veterans in meaningful roles as part of that legacy, it’s really fulfilling.”

Focus on Transitioning Veterans



Lee Kirby co-founded Salute in 2013 after retiring from the military and seeing an opportunity to help veterans who were struggling to find work after fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and entering a workforce still reeling from the 2009 financial crisis.

Unemployment for veterans was around 25% at the time, more than three times higher than the general population, he noted. Veteran resumes and work ethic were a black box to civilian recruiters, yet he knew the military teaches skills that are well suited for success in the digital infrastructure industry.

“They are taught how to learn, how to adapt, how to think critically, and how to problem solve,” said Kirby. “I look at veterans for that learning ability because in our industry you have to continuously learn. The technology is changing so fast.”

About six years after he launched Salute, Kirby met up with Dean Nelson, Founder and Chairman of Infrastructure Masons, and told him the story of Salute. Nelson started iMasons in 2016 with a vision to unite the builders of the digital age around the pillars of education, inclusion, innovation and sustainability.

“The story was powerful,” Nelson recalled.

“You have people who are trained by the military, who have the right profile to be calm under pressure, to follow rules, to be consistent, to be leaders. And then we started overlaying that with the inclusion component of iMasons where we want to include as many people as possible of all different backgrounds and ethnicities and experiences in our industry.”

The two leaders decided to join forces and entered a strategic partnership that included the formation of the iMasons Armed Forces Member Resource Group. This year, the organizations are celebrating the fifth anniversary of their strategic partnership.

“We’ve had a phenomenal impact on veterans, military spouses and their families. We’ve gotten thousands of them jobs in the industry – and they’re not stocking shelves. They learn an industry trade that starts them on a career that has upward mobility.”

-Lee Kirby

A Life Transformed



When Adam Case told his girlfriend of two years that he might join the U.S. Army and that, if he did, and she didn't want to get married, that they should break up, she said, "Alright, let's get married." "Great proposal," he said with a smirk.

Case told the story of his wedding proposal as a lead-in to a longer story about how he went from waiting tables at a diner to a leadership position at Salute. His story is emblematic of the life-changing trajectories enabled by the combination of military service and industry support for the military community.

He was raised in the Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area by his father and stepmother, who both rose through the management ranks of the food services industry. They bought their first house when Case was 15. Out of high school, Case was on a similar career track when his older brother, then a staff sergeant in the Army, told him he should join the Army too and do something different with his life.

The nudge had the desired effect.

Case proposed, as it was, to his girlfriend, got married and joined the Army in 2008.

He trained for a job in satellite communications and was stationed at Fort Huachuca in Arizona. He and his wife started a family. In 2010, Case deployed for a tour in Afghanistan. Upon return, he and his wife had a second child.

Case got out of the military at the end of his enlistment term and returned to Afghanistan as a Department of Defense contractor where he continued to work in satellite communications for another year and a half.

Home in Oregon for good in 2015 with his young family, Case started to consider his next steps. He'd posted a resume online and was taking a college course when a Salute recruiter sent an email.

"I'm like, who is this person? Why are they emailing me?" Case recalled thinking.

True to the philosophy of Salute, the recruiter saw a veteran with skills and experience that would translate to success in the digital infrastructure industry.

A Life Transformed continued

“You learn how to think on the fly and think outside the box and do deductive reasoning to troubleshoot a situation,” Case said of his satellite communications work. “Working in [the digital infrastructure] industry is the same thing. From a critical thinking and problem-solving standpoint, it translates very well.”

Case was hired as a team lead for one of Salute’s data center clients in the Portland, Oregon, area, and has now been with Salute for more than nine years, moving steadily up through the leadership ranks. Today, he’s the Senior Director of Operations.

More than 5,000 veterans and military spouses can tell a story like Case’s thanks to the efforts of Salute, according to Kirby. The strategic partnership with iMasons has compounded the impact and helped open doors for veterans at companies across the digital infrastructure industry.

For example, members of the iMasons Armed Forces Member Resource Group educate companies on the value of veterans and military spouses, and how to recruit them and train them for jobs in the digital infrastructure industry.

“We want all boats to rise,” said Kirby, naming several of the industry’s biggest players that have established veterans’ programs on the back of these efforts. iMasons, he said, provides veterans with the resources and a network for a lifelong career in the digital infrastructure industry.



Adam Case on deployment with the United States Army

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Salute Employees at a Fundraiser for Veteran Mental Health awareness

New Leadership and Resources



Alison Marlow eschewed the traditional high school to college career track that led many of her colleagues at Schneider Electric to careers in the digital infrastructure industry.

Instead, she joined an expedition to an unexplored canyon in China when she was 18, then hitchhiked through Tibet, studied in Nepal, was a massage therapist in California, a commodities broker and private investigator in Florida, and worked for tech startups in Massachusetts before getting undergrad and graduate degrees in business.

“My very non-traditional background is very similar to a lot of the military spouses’ journeys. They work in a variety of different industries with short-term job stints that aren’t necessarily very easy to weave together into a story when you’re looking for that next position,” Marlow said.

In fact, she had to hire a resume consultant to find success applying for a job at Schneider Electric.

A few years into her tenure at Schneider Electric, where she is now an International Account Manager, Marlow met her future husband as he was transitioning from military to civilian life. After they got married, he encouraged her to volunteer with transitioning veterans. Marlow found

that opportunity with the iMasons Armed Forces Member Resource Group.

Working with the group, she said, she saw herself in the experiences of military spouses, who are constantly developing leadership, organizational, management and technical skills as they move with their partners from assignment to assignment and establish homes and routines wherever they go.

In 2024, Kirby asked Marlow to serve as Chair of the iMasons Armed Forces Member Resource Group. In this role, she’s championing initiatives that bridge the gap between the skills veterans and military spouses gain and the skills recruiters look for to fill open positions in the digital infrastructure industry.

For example, she forged a partnership with Oplign, a skills-based employment software platform founded by U.S. Special Operations veterans. The AI-powered system understands the skills associated with each military job and matches them to desired qualifications in civilian job descriptions.

“It understands all of that programmatic training that goes into the military and puts it into a very skills-based approach,” said Marlow.

The platform works equally well for the spouse community, correlating and distilling a skills list from the disparate jobs and roles spouses assume over the course of their time in the military community, she added.

Marlow is also driving an initiative to educate iMasons members and member companies on what it means to be a military spouse and how those skills translate to the corporate world.

Through this work, I have developed a greater understanding of the impact of the military spouse and the armed forces as a whole and I now boldly represent them in the industry.”

-Alison Marlow

Hidden Skills for Thousands of Jobs



Around 200,000 service members leave the military each year along with 180,000 military spouses, according to Kirby. The digital infrastructure industry is anticipated to have a shortfall of 300,000 people by 2025, according to iMasons.

A major component of the partnership between Salute and iMasons is recognition that the military community is a pool of potential talent for the digital infrastructure industry that is too big for any single company to absorb. Salute, Kirby noted, can only hire about 500 veterans and military spouses a year.

A challenge for the iMasons Armed Forces Member Resource Group is to raise awareness within this talent pool of the ample career opportunities in the digital infrastructure industry.

“Nobody knows we’re out there and we’ve got all these jobs,” said Kirby. “And they are great jobs that have a career to them. So, we’re trying to get people to know we even exist.”

For example, he and his colleagues attend job fairs for transitioning veterans and describe how any job in the military translates to a job in the digital infrastructure industry. Some are direct, such as generator mechanics and members of Reverse Osmosis Water Purification Units, who have needed skills for backup power generation and water-based cooling systems at data centers.

Hidden Skills for Thousands of Jobs continued

Cooks, he added, make great project managers. They are making meals for 300 people, 3 times a day, which requires a project plan with safety procedures and protocols.

“There are hidden skills, too,” noted Kirby. “I use infantry as an example. Everybody thinks about shooting things, but behind that they’ve got to maintain their equipment, their vehicle, their weapons system, their communications gear, and they follow procedures to do that. That’s exactly what a data center technician does.”

Kirby opened his aperture to military spouses after joining forces with iMasons and working directly with the iMWomen Member Resource Group and realizing he had access to an even larger ready and qualified talent pool.

Kirby tapped Marlow on the shoulder to chair the Armed Forces group in part because of her insight and connection to the military spouse community. The work she’s doing with the Oplign tool and her passion to help employers see value in the military experience and community will continue to compound the impact of the group.

“We’ve had a phenomenal impact on people’s lives,” Kirby said of the past five years of the strategic partnership with iMasons.



A Scalable Model for a Booming Industry



Both Salute and iMasons are in transition to the next generation of leaders – Sanchack was appointed Chief Executive Officer of Salute in March 2023 and Santiago Suinaga was appointed Chief Executive Officer of iMasons in July 2024.

“We’ve got the new blood to take it to the next level,” Kirby said.

Like many of his colleagues at Salute, Sanchack is a military veteran. He served in the US Marine Corps after graduating from Pennsylvania State University with a degree in electrical engineering.

The leadership skills he gained in the Marine Corps helped launch his successful career in the private sector, which spanned 30 years from Lockheed Martin and CenturyLink to Digital Realty Trust, where he was Chief Operating Officer, prior to joining Salute.



Salute CEO Erich Sanchak in the United States Marine Corps

Sanchack said he aims to replicate Salute’s recruitment model built around the military community with other cohorts around the country and around the world, which can help the digital infrastructure industry meet the growing demand for digital services.

“We have done a good job at Salute of taking talent that has no familiarity or prior experience with the digital infrastructure space but have the right skills and attributes and training them for the marketplace in a meaningful way,” he said. “There’s no reason we can’t repeat that in other talent pools globally.”

The global reach of iMasons, he added, will help Salute expand into new markets outside the Americas and Europe as they work together to identify potential talent pools and educate and train them for careers in the digital infrastructure industry.

“Salute has created a value proposition that has been recognized in the market. That’s why they have been growing,” noted iMasons’ Suinaga. “The business model is appealing to investors and aligned with iMasons’ core principles in terms of increasing awareness of the industry and bringing more talent into it.”

Featuring



Erich Sanchack
CEO, Salute



Lee Kirby
Co-Founder, Salute



Adam Case
Vice President of Hyperscale
Operations, Salute



Alison Marlow
International Account Executive,
Schneider Electric



Dean Nelson
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Amed Forces Member Resource Group

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The Armed Forces initiative aims to increase the number of military veterans, military spouses, veterans, guards, and reservists in the digital infrastructure industry worldwide.

Please visit imasons.org to learn more about the association and get involved with the iMasons Armed Forces Member Resource Group.



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