

Championing Our Veterans

Steelcase Veterans honored to earn silver Veteran-Friendly Employer designation from Michigan Veteran Affairs Agency

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Veterans and members of the Steelcase Salutes business inclusion team include Bernard Polynice, Matthew Jackson, and Tim Merkle.

The Michigan Veterans Affairs Agency (MVAA) has designated Steelcase as a veteran-friendly organization by awarding it recognition as a 2022 silver Veteran-Friendly Employer. The designation makes Steelcase just one of 61 silver level employers in Michigan and puts the organization in the top 15% of all Michigan businesses. The designation is earned by meeting and exceeding a range of criteria aimed at helping organizations be more welcoming and inclusive to vets.

That recognition is in large part due to the work of the Steelcase Salutes business inclusion group – a cadre of veterans and allies who work to support and advocate for a veteran-friendly environment at Steelcase. They accomplish this in many ways, from organization-wide events to individual outreach like the one that played out recently at the Grand Rapids, Mich. campus.

Nate Kolakowski, a Steelcase sales leader who served four years in the U.S. Army, including combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, knows Vietnam veterans didn't always have it easy once they returned home from the unpopular overseas war. That's why he was so moved recently to hear the Vietnam combat experiences shared by a Steelcase retiree driver during a recent sales gathering. As a veteran, Kolakowski understands the need for community and connection to people with shared experiences; as a member of Steelcase Salutes, he hoped a small act could make a big difference.

"I presented our retired driver with a Steelcase Salutes challenge coin – a token of appreciation presented to individuals in the military to acknowledge accomplishments. I thanked him for his service," Kolakowski says, noting challenge coins are traditionally used in the military to mark milestones. "He was holding it together, but you could just tell this personally hit him in the soft spot. It was a really touching moment."

It's simple interactions like those that help curate community, foster supportive relationships and remove barriers to inclusion for veterans at Steelcase while exemplifying the culture required of a Veteran-Friendly Employer.

While that designation is an accomplishment toward achieving inclusivity goals, it also projects to prospective veteran employees that Steelcase values the unique skills and competencies former service members bring to the organization.

"It signals we understand their value and want to bring these individuals to Steelcase," Kolakowski says. "And it demonstrates that once they get here, there's infrastructure already in place to support them."

Tim Merkle, a Marine Captain who spent nine years on active duty, including combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, helped establish Steelcase Salutes in September 2021. As a veteran and director of the Steelcase retail team's business operations, Merkle says the silver MVAA certification verifies for military families that Steelcase is invested in supporting their community.

“Steelcase Salutes’ mission is to create an inclusive veteran ecosystem across our company and the communities we serve.”

TIM MERKLE | Steelcase director of business operations, Capt. USMC

To obtain silver, the group worked over the past year to validate and meet specific criteria. Examples include specific HR business processes for onboarding veterans, like providing special emails and information kits, as well as tracking and maintaining hiring goals and reporting those to the state of Michigan.

In addition to the certification, Steelcase Salutes signed on to be a ‘veteran connector,’ working closely with the MVAA and Steelcase Wellbeing Hub to ensure veterans’ mental health needs are met. The group seeks to engage other employees through team building activities and commemorative events centered around recognition and support of veterans and their families. Merkle hopes to continue to remove barriers for veterans and plans to work toward achieving the group’s next goal: a gold designation. Kolakowski says the group is ready for the challenge.

“This shows we’ve walked in these shoes as veterans ourselves and we understand the value of veterans and what they can bring to our organization. This is about letting the Veteran community know Steelcase cares about them. Achieving these goals is a great acknowledgment of that,” says Kolakowski.

Find resources and learn more about Steelcase’s commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion online.
