

Amazon welcomes first graduates of program to turn veterans into technologists

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Mike Cooper and his four colleagues in Amazon's inaugural class of veterans-turned-technologists won't make a dent in the company's roughly 17,000 job openings.

But the five former armed service members represent the lengths the Seattle giant will go to satisfy its insatiable appetite for workers.

Cooper, a 31-year-old Coast Guard veteran, and his colleagues are—after a brief ceremony on Wednesday morning—Amazon's newest hires, the first graduates of a program designed to shepherd veterans into careers in in-demand technology jobs. The cohort join Amazon Web Services as cloud support associates, helping customers who use the cloud-computing platform to troubleshoot problems.

"This is just five," said Ardine Williams, a vice president who oversees human resources for Amazon's worldwide operations network, herself a former Army captain. "It's just the beginning."

Another beginning was in 2016, when two members of Williams' team suggested the company look into veterans' apprenticeships to fill [jobs](#) at fast-growing Amazon Web Services.

They secured certification from the Department of Labor, a necessary hurdle to receive government support for such job training programs, and unveiled the new initiative in January 2017. The program, announced amid a White House push for companies to hire more

veterans, also coincided with the technology sector's own initiative to increase the pool of employees with the skills to fill fast-growing job roles in areas like cloud computing and data science. In Washington state, meanwhile, Gov. Jay Inslee, who spoke at Amazon's event on Wednesday, has pushed apprenticeships as an important tool to better train the state's workforce.

Amazon enlisted Apprenti, the partly federally funded apprenticeship program overseen by the Washington Technology Industry Association, to help manage its own training. Recruits spent three months in the classroom before going into a paid, 12-month apprenticeship to develop expertise on-the-job.

Cooper, who also worked as a paramedic after leaving the Coast Guard, figures the apprenticeship saved him tens of thousands of dollars in tuition he otherwise would have paid to get the same experience and certifications.

"It hasn't always been fun," Cooper said of the program. "At no point has it been easy."

Clarifying his quip—to many, also a pretty accurate description of life at famously demanding, fast-paced Amazon—Cooper said he wasn't taking a swipe at his new employer.

"There are far worse places" to land, Cooper said. "And few better."

Amazon says about 175 veterans are currently pursuing apprenticeships at Amazon offices around the country.

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