



**INSTITUTE FOR  
VETERANS AND  
MILITARY FAMILIES**  
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY JPMorgan Chase & Co., Founding Partner



**EMPLOYMENT  
RESEARCH**

# THE FORCE BEHIND THE FORCE

Case Profiles of Successful Military Spouses Balancing Employment, Service, and Family

Deborah A. Bradbard, Ph.D. ■ Rosalinda Maury, M.S. ■ Nicholas J. Armstrong, Ph.D.



EDUCATED

MULTI-TASKERS

Socially Aware

Resilient

DIVERSE

Entrepreneurial

Resourceful

CIVICALLY ENGAGED

Team-Oriented

Adaptable



## About the Authors

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## Acknowledgments

A total of twelve military spouses were interviewed for this report, and although all of their stories were not featured here, their experiences and insight contributed to the recommendations and suggestions in this report. We would like to recognize them and thank them for their time and willingness to participate and for their continued service and sacrifice, which often goes unrecognized.

**Stephanie Himel-Nelson's** photography is featured on page two. Stephanie, the spouse of a Navy veteran, is an attorney and was the co-founder of an influential, national nonprofit organization for military families, serving as the group's Director of Communications and Counsel. Stephanie's essays have appeared in the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Huffington Post. Stephanie previously served as the moderator of The Mil Life on the Washington Post's website, a live chat about issues facing military families. Her interviews regarding parenting, military families, and politics have appeared on or in countless national news outlets. She is an entrepreneur and previously ran a successful photography business.

**Jennifer C.M. Wright's** photography is shown throughout this report. Jennifer has a Ph.D. in geophysics, a Master of Arts in education, and a Bachelor of Science in geology. She is married to an active duty service member in the U.S. Navy. Her family has moved six times in fourteen years. Jennifer has worked as a scientist, technology educator, and data analyst full time, part time, on-site, and remotely. Jennifer has a strong commitment to volunteering. She works to support military families, children with autism spectrum disorders and learning disabilities, and communities in need of emergency services. Jennifer's photography evolved as a way of documenting the lives of her children and connecting them with friends and family far away.

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## BACKGROUND

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Military spouses are a diverse talent pool often overlooked by human resources (HR) professionals. Countless organizations use diversity and inclusion strategies to recruit members of certain groups to level the playing field by reducing disadvantages and, ideally, increase workplace diversity. However, developing sound strategies that attract military spouse talent can be elusive for many in the HR field.

The challenges of maximizing military spouse talent are real. Hiring managers may discount military spouse job applications, resumes, and work histories because they may not conform to industry norms or expectations. Resumes may include gaps in work history, disparate or unrelated positions of short duration, or volunteer versus paid work. Hiring managers—instead of attributing discrepancies to the military lifestyle (e.g., frequent relocations) or focusing on the work-related attributes that develop as a result of those challenges—may instead conclude that military spouse applicants, who rarely self-identify, are unqualified, poor fits, or otherwise deficient for the job at hand. Even when a good fit is apparent, hiring managers may have concerns about retention, given the possibility of a military relocation or other doubts due to the military's lifestyle demands on the family (e.g., deployments, childcare, caregiving, etc.).

Still, the majority of military spouses want to work—and some *need* to work—despite the employment challenges or financial hardship they face. Their educational attainment, pursuit of employment, volunteerism, and engagement in related professional development activities further supports will and desire military spouses bring to the workforce. Additionally, there is no evidence to suggest that military affiliation negatively impacts success or ability to perform in the workplace. Yet, the unemployment rate among military spouses has remained high compared to the rate among their civilian peers.

This paper, through several personal case studies of successful military spouses, highlights the real employment challenges military spouses face, how those challenges impact their work histories and resumes, and how their motivation to remain engaged and focused on finding employment may not be accurately conveyed through a traditional resume format or standard screening process, eliminating them from consideration even before they have had the opportunity to compete.

Therefore, **this paper addresses simple strategies employers can use to assess military spouse candidates.** The paper also demonstrates the mutually beneficial role that employers can play by not only employing military spouses, but also through other efforts such as training, mentoring, or collaborative efforts (e.g., sharing best practices with like-minded employers; supporting nonprofit partners focused on spouse-employment efforts). The opportunity for employers is that, through awareness of military specific challenges, they can simultaneously (1) gain talented, motivated, loyal, diverse, and well-educated employees, and (2) help mitigate some of the negative impacts of the military lifestyle and thus reduce challenges military spouses face while seeking employment.

## THE FORCE BEHIND THE FORCE RESEARCH SERIES

This paper, the second in a series of three, is a collaborative effort between the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) and Prudential Financial, Inc. to illustrate—through interviews of eight successful military spouses—the unique strengths and challenges that military spouses bring to the workforce while supporting their service member’s military career. **Although few employers see hiring military spouses as part of their strategic hiring goals, a significant and growing number of employers are actively including spouses as part of their diversity and inclusion strategies either separate from, or alongside, commitments to hire service members and veterans.** This series is designed to help those and other interested companies achieve their hiring goals. Specifically, the goals of this project are to:

- **Identify some of the common challenges faced by military spouses** using personal case studies in an effort to personalize their experiences and increase understanding among HR professionals and hiring managers who wish to include military spouses as part of their overall hiring strategies
- **Show how military spouse strengths can be leveraged in the workplace**
- **Identify how military spouse resumes are impacted by the military lifestyle** and provide guidance to businesses as to how to assess military spouse job candidates
- **Communicate pragmatic suggestions** directly from military spouses on how corporations can include military spouses as part of their overall diversity strategies for recruiting, hiring, and retaining military spouse employees.



The first product in this series entitled [The Business Case for Hiring Military Spouses: The Force Behind the Force](#), documents military spouses’ known strengths in an effort to define a business case for hiring them.<sup>1</sup> **This paper, as the second product in the series, presents eight military spouse case studies and shows both the challenges they have faced and**

**how employers can mitigate some of those challenges through existing human resource strategies.** We highlight some of the unique components often included in military spouse resumes and how employers can reconcile those resumes with the job specific experiences military spouses bring to the workplace. Additionally, we make suggestions for new strategies to recruit, retain, and ultimately hire military spouse employees while avoiding stigma and stereotypes.

## INTRODUCTION

As a group, military spouses are well educated, motivated, skilled workers, yet their unemployment rates (23-26% over the past five years) are much higher than those of their civilian peers.<sup>2</sup> Military spouses are also paid less, work fewer hours, and often underemployed, meaning they may work in jobs that are either inconsistent with their education or experience, or part-time instead of full-time positions.<sup>3</sup> Research shows military spouses’ employment rates are often impacted because military spouses serve in tandem with their service member who may be required to move repeatedly, work long, unpredictable hours, or deploy for extended periods of time. While performing an important and sometimes unacknowledged role by maintaining family functioning at home and enabling service members to perform their military specific duties, spouses often simultaneously suffer negative, and in many cases, long-term employment related consequences. A 2008 study, for example, found that nearly two-thirds of military spouses reported that the military had a negative impact on their employment.<sup>4</sup>

Military spouses also face unique employment challenges separate from service members and veterans, yet directly related to their spouse’s military service commitment. Challenges include U.S. and international relocations, inconsistent spouse work hours (requiring additional parenting responsibilities), difficulties with childcare, and poor job market conditions. Additionally, unlike veterans, military spouse unemployment rates have been resistant to change despite programmatic and collaborative efforts to address them.

Moreover, the employment challenges faced by veterans have been relatively well-documented, but by comparison, the challenges faced by military spouses are less known, less intuitive, and second in priority (i.e., fewer financial and programmatic resources are devoted to military spouse employment compared to veteran employment). This may

<sup>1</sup> <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/research/topics/employment/employing-military-spouses-research-series/>

<sup>2</sup> 2015 Survey of Active Duty Spouses retrieved from: [http://www.militaryonesource.mil/footer?content\\_id=293017](http://www.militaryonesource.mil/footer?content_id=293017); Meadows, S.O., Griffin, B.A., Karney, B.R., & Pollak, J. (2016). Employment Gaps Between Military Spouses and Matched Civilians. *Armed Forces and Society*, 42(3). DOI: 10: 1177/0095327X156077810.; Maury, R. & Stone, B. (2014). Military Spouse Employment Report. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University

<sup>3</sup> Meadows, S.O., Griffin, B.A., Karney, B.R., & Pollak, J. (2016). Employment Gaps Between Military Spouses and Matched Civilians. *Armed Forces and Society*, 42(3). DOI: 10: 1177/0095327X156077810.

<sup>4</sup> Castaneda and Harrell (2008). Military Spouse Employment: A Grounded Theory Approach to Experiences and Perceptions. *Armed Forces and Society*, 34(3), 389-412.

be because more is known about veterans and the military conferred skills they bring to the workplace. A business case to hire veterans is easier to define than a case for military spouses who do not share the collective experience of military service itself. **However, while the research pertaining to military spouses in the workplace is limited, what is known is that they bring valuable skills, knowledge, and characteristics to the workforce that employers can leverage.**

The first product in this series outlined a business case for hiring military spouses, highlighting some of the unique skills and characteristics that military spouses bring to the workplace including diversity, flexibility, teamwork, education, and civic engagement. While military spouses demonstrate a myriad of positive attributes that can help them excel in the workplace, the research shows that the military lifestyle also introduces barriers that impact their ability to compete for employment opportunities. These barriers impact their ability to remain in the workforce with real consequences. Consider that:

- Approximately 66 percent of military spouses report they are either working or looking for work.<sup>5</sup>
- More than 55 percent of military spouses had difficulty finding their job.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, in many ways military spouses face some of the same challenges faced by their civilian peers, but an employer's misconceptions may impact their willingness to hire a military spouse. For example:

- On average active duty families stay three to four years at each location.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the average time female workers stay in the same job is about four years. There is an inaccurate perception that spouses will not remain in their jobs as long as civilians, but these time frames indicate that their job durations could equal or exceed those of civilians. Anecdotally, spouses may be more likely to remain in one position for the duration of the time in their location precisely because they anticipate a move and are motivated to minimize gaps in their resumes or to prevent unnecessary job changes. **Paradoxically, the employment challenges military spouses face, may, in fact, engender loyalty to the employer, which may encourage them to remain with a company if a job transfer or remote employment are allowed.**



- Approximately fifty-six percent of military spouses report they are working in their area of education or training.<sup>8</sup> However, many spouses, by necessity, work in areas inconsistent with their education or training because of the job market where they reside. **While their job experiences might appear disconnected on their resumes as compared to more traditional applicants, these diverse experiences should make their resumes stand out and expose them to a wider variety of available job functions, activities, and responsibilities compared to other applicants.**
- Military spouses may experience periods of unemployment or underemployment because they only live in one location for a limited time or because of supply and demand in the labor market where they reside.<sup>9</sup> **Employers should not automatically misperceive resume gaps to be skill or experience deficiencies, when, in actuality, spouses may be actively seeking additional training, credentialing, certifications, or volunteer work experience that enhances their skills.**

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center. 2008 Survey of Active Duty Spouses. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1201-Briefing-Support-Deployment-Reintegration-PCS-WellBeing-Education-Employment.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Maury, R. & Stone, B. (2014). Military Spouse Employment Report. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.gao.gov/assets/680/672346.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center. 2008 Survey of Active Duty Spouses. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1201-Briefing-Support-Deployment-Reintegration-PCS-WellBeing-Education-Employment.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2007/RAND\\_MG566.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2007/RAND_MG566.pdf)

## GET TO KNOW THE FORCE BEHIND THE FORCE: AMERICA'S MILITARY SPOUSES

This paper includes the personal experiences of eight dynamic military spouses selected to discuss their personal experiences surrounding employment during their time affiliated with the military. These case studies are presented to highlight the following:

- 1 Strategies military spouses use to maintain their employment while affiliated with the military
- 2 Military lifestyle barriers that impact military spouse resumes, and thus, employers' perceptions about their potential fit for a position
- 3 Tools to help HR professionals assess military spouse candidates in ways that mutually benefit both the firm and the candidate.

The researchers intentionally selected participants to represent a broad variety of military spouse employment experiences. Spouses were recruited based on their profession (i.e., spouses working in government or nonprofit roles were not included), education, length of marriage, spouse's rank and service branch. They were asked to discuss strategies they used to successfully manage their civilian career alongside their spouse's military career. Participant recruiting proceeded as follows:

- Military spouses were recruited through a private Facebook group focused on military spouse employment.
- An online invitation to participate in the study yielded 30 responses from potential spouse participants.
- Each spouse who volunteered was contacted and interviewed briefly to review their background so as to maximize diversity across the individual participants.
- Spouses who were working in nonprofit or government positions were eliminated to maintain a focus on corporate employment.
- From a total of 12 participants, eight military spouses were then selected to participate in the study and interviewed by phone. Each spouse was asked to provide either a resume or LinkedIn profile prior to the interview.
- While being interviewed, each spouse discussed their work experience while describing the employment challenges they faced as it intersected with their military life.
- Surnames were removed to protect the identify of each participant. All participation was voluntary.
- Many of the case highlights include quotations from the participants. Quotations were used wherever possible to highlight the spouses' personal experiences in their own words.



**“I would like to be able to share my military spouse status without being punished.”**

-U.S. Marine Corps Spouse

# WHY HIRE MILITARY SPOUSES?



## The Business Case



### DIVERSE

The active duty military spouse community has a larger proportion of ethnic and racial minorities as compared to the broader civilian population.

**Resilient** Military spouses face challenges including family separations, frequent relocation, separation from friends and family, and difficulty finding employment or finishing their education. Yet, despite juggling multiple responsibilities, they report better coping than the average civilian.

### Resourceful

Military spouses are often learning to use the resources they have available to them, and they create unique and innovative solutions to problems despite obstacles or challenges.

### Adaptable

Military families live with consistent uncertainty. Deployments often occur without warning; families may be asked to move without notice; and benefits and allowances frequently change unexpectedly. Despite these challenges, 68% of active duty spouses say they are satisfied with the military way of life.

**Entrepreneurial** 28% of military spouse respondents have either been self-employed or operated their own business, and 34% indicated they had an interest in online or work-from-home opportunities.

### EDUCATED

**84%** have some college education or higher

**25%** have a bachelor's degree

**10%** have an advanced degree

**Team-Oriented** Military support infrastructure largely depends on at-home spouses relying on one another through social activities, help with childcare, and overall social support.

### MULTI-TASKERS

In a study of over 6,200 military spouses, despite juggling multiple responsibilities, 75% reported feeling confident in their ability to handle problems.

### CIVICALLY ENGAGED

Blue Star Families, in their 2014 survey of military families, found that 68% of their respondents reported that they had either formally or informally volunteered in the past year—significantly higher than the 21.8% of the general public who formally volunteered with an organization in 2015 as reported by the Department of Labor.

**Socially Aware** Military spouses often interact with a variety of people of different cultures, backgrounds, ages, and ethnicities. The military exposes spouses to a variety of cross-cultural and social experiences, and interactions with VIPs and the press. Military spouses understand norms around operational security and safety.

## MILITARY SPOUSE RESUMES

A strong resume clearly conveys a work history that aligns with a particular job description and level of experience. A resume is often the difference between a candidate being in the “yes” or “no” pile of applicants. But military spouses may have trouble demonstrating they are a good fit through their resume alone. Military spouses resumes often have many short-term positions instead of a solid string of long-term positions. Some military spouses may also have gaps in their employment histories, volunteer experiences in lieu of paid positions, or positions that appear disconnected.



### BELOW ARE A FEW COMMON FEATURES OF MILITARY SPOUSE RESUMES:

- Functional vs. chronological resumes
- Gaps in education or employment; Incomplete education or prolonged time in school, attendance at multiple schools, or multiple degrees
- A history of employment in disparate or unrelated jobs
- Employment that is unrelated to educational background or level of education
- More volunteer rather than paid work-related experience(s)
- Short duration jobs
- Underemployment
- Part time jobs vs. full time jobs or temporary work
- Certifications in lieu of education
- Long term unemployment
- Unclear demonstration of advancement or increasing responsibilities over time



## ASSESSING MILITARY SPOUSE JOB CANDIDATES

Companies looking to hire military spouses need to be aware of key circumstances impacting military spouses and their employment histories to assess whether a military spouse candidate is a “good fit,” thus, matching the resume with the job-specific qualifications. For example:

- Resumes may not accurately reflect the breadth of experiences that military spouses brings to the workplace.
- Interviews may better reflect the “soft skills” that are not reflected on a resume, but could be observed in person, by speaking with references, or simply by asking candidates to talk about the experiences that qualify them for a job.
- Enabling spouses to self-identify may also provide an opportunity for an open dialogue about any concerns that the employer or prospective employee may have. However, be mindful that candidates may be reluctant to self-identify due to concerns about stereotypes (e.g., relocation).

# EVALUATING MILITARY SPOUSE CANDIDATES



## DO

- ✓ Encourage military spouse candidates to apply using specific language, direct internet links, and through social media. Also, develop collateral material specific to military spouse candidates.
- ✓ Educate human resource employees and hiring managers on military spouse candidates, how their resumes are likely to appear, the business case for hiring them, and some of the challenges they face with regard to employment.
- ✓ Adapt the business case for hiring military spouses to your own business so that the specific attributes that contribute to your hiring efforts are clearly defined.
- ✓ Evaluate candidates for their credentials and job suitability versus assuming they will not commit to long-term employment.
- ✓ Use expedited hiring practices to move qualified spouses into positions to maximize their talent, their time at a given location, and to maximize opportunities for training, mentoring, and advancement.
- ✓ Leverage capabilities for remote, telework, or flexible employment arrangements.
- ✓ Ensure job descriptions on career website reflect when remote work, alternate work arrangements, or accommodations are available for a given role.
- ✓ Train hiring managers on the value that military spouses bring to the workforce.
- ✓ Encourage open communication about candidate interests, skills, and abilities to provide opportunities to highlight experiences and characteristics not conveyed via the resume.
- ✓ Understand how the military lifestyle impacts what is included on military spouse resumes. Use multiple assessment tools to evaluate military spouse candidates including personal references, in-person interviews, and questions that allow candidates to highlight job-relevant attributes or skills that may not appear on their resume.

## DON'T

- ✗ Assume military spouses will self-identify. Military spouse job candidates may have concerns they will not be hired if they disclose their military spouse status. A separate landing page or application process for military spouse applicants can help recruiters and hiring managers identify military spouse applicants.
- ✗ Assume that hiring managers understand or have knowledge about the military or how the military lifestyle impacts military spouse job applications.
- ✗ Rely on resumes alone to identify business specific characteristics for military spouse candidates.
- ✗ Assume all military spouse employees will be short-term employees. The average time for active duty families at each location is three to four years, compared to the average female worker who stays in the same job for an average of four years.
- ✗ Rule out 1099 employment or temporary employment options as a way to “test” new remote employment situations or as a means to hire military spouses for short-term or contract positions.
- ✗ Make assumptions about length of time, pay expectations, resume gaps or periods of unemployment without discussing with a potential job candidate. Where possible, focus on transferable skills and the ability to adapt and learn as opposed to specific job skills.
- ✗ Assume that gaps in employment, multiple jobs, non-linear career paths, or underemployment reflect a deficit.
- ✗ Speak to job candidates and their references; ask for clarification about resume gaps or their career paths (e.g., what did you do during your time when you were not employed?). Military spouse candidates may apply for positions that appear unrelated to their background or prior experience. Their transferable skills may become apparent—even an asset—upon further examination.



## CASE PROFILE #1

# “Stephanie”

ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE, U.S. ARMY

**CREDENTIALS:** Registered Nurse, Bachelor of Science in Nursing

**PROFESSION:** Nursing

**KEY SKILLS:** Adaptable, persistent, and team oriented RN. Multi-state certification. Recognized leadership skills and exceptional attention to detail. Effective and proactive problem solver.

**BACKGROUND:** Stephanie began her time as a military spouse working as an RN. Shortly after marrying, her husband’s career required they move, and she has moved seven times since.

**EMPLOYMENT:** Though she has experienced several periods of unemployment, Stephanie was able to maintain her career through the majority of military moves, though she encountered numerous challenges including:

- leaving favored jobs prematurely;
- living in remote and rural locations that limited her job opportunities;
- lags in receiving her licensure,
- underemployment;
- issues of self-confidence after periods of unemployment;
- difficulties renewing her nurses license across state lines; and
- questioning various work-related decisions including the impact of staying home temporarily to focus on her children.

**EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES:** Stephanie proactively took advantage of educational opportunities and credentials to advance in her career, for professional development, and to increase her confidence after periods of not working. Stephanie planned ahead when possible, applying and completing accelerated programs of study that allowed her enough time to finish prior to her family’s next relocation.

**LICENSURE CHALLENGES:** Stephanie has had at least seven state licenses and her challenges with licensure include:

- maintaining multiple state licenses
- expenses associated with renewing multiple licenses;
- lag time in receiving license following interstate moves; and
- barriers to employment related to licensure including delays in receiving her license, and other associated delays in being able to apply for or compete for employment while living in a given location for a limited time period.



About finding employment as a military spouse:

“I try to look ahead and make loose plans when I can, but with plenty of contingencies. I am always reevaluating and adjusting [my plans] based on family dynamics and the Army. I never plan on not working again as long as I can help it.”

Roughly 35% of military spouses work in a field that requires licensure. On average, military spouses pay \$223.03 to renew their state license.<sup>10</sup>

**TIMING:** Stephanie described her frustration when she encountered job descriptions that required a state license and recent experience. Stephanie said she sometimes asked herself “Do I want to go through the hassle [of applying for jobs] when I know I’ll just have to get a new license?” At times, when trying to earn credentials or academic training, Stephanie encountered programs for which she could not apply because she was unable to complete them prior to her family receiving military orders to a new location before she finished.

<sup>10</sup> Maury, R. & Stone, B. (2014). Military Spouse Employment Report. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University



“Stephanie”



“Before my husband deployed, I felt dependent on him, but when he came back, I felt more independent and capable. It was a good learning experience, and it impacted me positively in my career. It was a challenge, but I grew from it.”

**MILITARY RELATED CHALLENGES:**

Stephanie described periodic disappointment at being unable to take time off prior to her spouse’s deployment and having to manage his departure while continuing to work. She also noted that, at times, she was working on opposite schedules from her husband, which often limited their time together.

**VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE:** Stephanie strategically used her time during periods of unemployment for volunteer experiences. She found various benefits to volunteering, including feeling like she was contributing to her family, social interaction, and networking. She also indicated that she wished she had kept track of hours, the skills she was using, and that she had leveraged those skills more on her resume.

**WORK LIFE BALANCE:** At various points in her career, Stephanie stayed out of the workforce. She described having “no thoughts of going back to work” and “feeling overwhelmed by balancing work and family responsibilities.” She also noted periodic challenges with childcare including difficulty finding childcare that coincided with her working hours and having to rely on childcare excessively due to expectations at work. Stephanie described weighing the challenges

and stressors of each job with the benefit it brought to the family. While she was not working, Stephanie described feeling hopeless and wondering if she had made a mistake, asking herself, “Can I even get back into this? Did I sabotage my career?” She described, in her words, a “sense of losing my identity. I didn’t have a lot of options and felt stuck.”

**SUCCESS FACTORS:** Stephanie used various educational opportunities to fill resume gaps, build confidence, and “be more competitive.” While in school, she received a leadership award which she described as “very affirming” and thus felt an “increased desire to be back in the profession.” She also described using volunteer work as an opportunity for networking among military spouses. Stephanie added that volunteering was a chance to “help others so that they will help you” and that “you get over the discomfort of asking for help.”

**STIGMA:** Stephanie explained that she usually did not reveal her status as a military spouse until after she was offered a position. Stephanie added that her military spouse status has caused problems at times. She stated, however, that when that happened, she realized it was a clear indicator that the job was simply not the right fit or environment for her.



## CASE PROFILE #2

# “Britni”

## ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE, U.S. NAVY

**CREDENTIALS:** Bachelor of Science in Entrepreneurship and Family Business

**PROFESSION:** Relocation Specialist

**KEY SKILLS:** Civically-minded and proactive relocation specialist with retail experience, perseverance, and ability to work with remote teams in unstructured work environments with limited direction.

**EMPLOYMENT:** Britni married in 2007 while she was working as a relocation specialist in Georgia. A year later, her boyfriend received military orders and she reluctantly submitted her resignation. Britni, eventually married and has moved a total of four times, working at various stationery stores (where she had prior job experience) and as a marketing associate.

After several years, Britni returned to her initial employer as a relocation specialist. She was offered remote employment (which she had requested previously, but was denied). She accepted this job offer, though at a lower salary. She reasoned that the remote position offered her long-term job stability, knowing that she and her husband would continue to relocate. Britni has worked with this same company since 2008

and was recently promoted. She noted, “I get more done in my home office than I do in my physical office because there is too much going on there.”

**FINDING REMOTE EMPLOYMENT:**

When asked why her previous employer had contacted her after so much time she explained: “I am a loyal person. I showed them that I wanted to stay. They are my family, and [I] grew so close with the team; I continued to keep in touch with them. I was persistent. I used my personal connections and I made a case that I did not need to be in the office.”

**VOLUNTEERING:** In 2016, Britni began a blog on spouse unemployment. Through the blog, she has been helping spouses start their own businesses by leveraging their volunteer experiences, networking, and offering advice their needs. Through the blog and other volunteer work, she noted, “I learned a lot about myself. My passion is helping military spouses.” She also described the importance of networking with other spouses and of volunteer work: “You never know who you are going to meet and who they know.”

**ADVICE FOR HR:** Britni conveyed that getting through to human resource professionals is often the hardest part of a job search. She noted the importance of LinkedIn and indicated that she uses it to connect with colleagues, endorse their skills, and seek endorsement from influencers in her network. She also described the importance of building trust between the employer and employee and attributed factors such as her willingness to be available, accountable, and diligent in keeping her work hours as reasons why her remote employment continues to be successful.



“Military spouses are team players and [at work] they are not on the sidelines but are active participants in the workplace, expressing their views and responding and solving problems. They are willing to get their hands dirty.”

Approximately 68% of military spouses use volunteering to maintain continuity on their resumes, network or socialize, contribute to their community, and develop or use workforce skills.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey. Blue Star Families. (2014). Falls Church, VA: Blue Star Families. Retrieved from, <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/BSFReportComprehensiveReport.pdf>



PHOTO CREDIT: JENNIFER C.M. WRIGHT



## CASE PROFILE #3

# “Chris”

## ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE, U.S. NAVY

**CREDENTIALS:** Law Degree, Master of Business Administration, Teaching Certification, Project Management Professional (PMP) certified

**PROFESSION:** Prior Military Supply Officer in British Navy; Current Program Analyst, Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA)

**KEY SKILLS:** Adaptable business professional with cross-disciplinary experience in military, teaching, business, and entrepreneurship. Dedicated civil servant with cross-cultural experience building businesses and managing projects.

**BACKGROUND:** Chris left the British Navy just after getting married at 31 years old. Though he worked in various temporary positions until recently, he took primary responsibility for parenting duties at home as the father of two girls. He and his wife married 14 years ago and she is an active duty officer in the U.S. Navy. Chris decided a year before getting married that he would leave his job, retiring from British military service after 13 years.

**EDUCATION:** Chris earned both his law degree and MBA. He also utilized the MYCAA program (a career development and employment assistance program sponsored by the Department of Defense (DoD)) to complete a provisional teaching license and trained at several schools to complete the requirements. He ultimately finished his certification requirements online.

**EMPLOYMENT:** Chris has worked in a variety of jobs since his military retirement. Upon leaving the military, Chris worked briefly as an operations shift manager, which required him to commute and live

several hours away from his wife for a part of the week. He also held jobs working for a startup energy company and running a transportation department at a major golf course. Later, while pursuing his teacher’s license, he worked briefly as a teacher, a coach, and as a bursar for a school.

After leaving the military, he described feeling like he “had to get back to work.” He acknowledged it was a stressful time and noted: “It’s taken me ten years to realize “what was I thinking?” Throughout his job searches, however, he was consistently being asked to move which was problematic due to his wife’s career. He explained: “The reality of not being able to progress because of limited time on station—[it] doesn’t give you a chance to grow in the company. Plus [employers] always bring you in on some kooky thing you have a talent for, not for a growth position. [Employers] don’t want to invest the time in you.” Chris taught on a short-term basis, but childcare difficulties and an unexpected change in his wife’s orders derailed his plans to teach. While



To HR:

“Give spouses an extra sift—and see what they have done over the time and where they have been. Consider that some civilians only stay at jobs two to three years. [Military] spouses have different circumstances surrounding our resumes and job histories that don’t fit into any category. So those [experiences] also make it worth giving them [military spouses] some extra consideration.”

The average time an unemployed military spouse is looking for work is approximately 20.7 weeks (about 5 months). Long-term unemployment as defined by the BLS is 27 (or longer) weeks.<sup>12</sup>

working as a coach at a school in London, he was hired as an Assistant Bursar due to his MBA. He noted that employment was only possible because his three children had begun school during the day and that he was able to negotiate a flexible schedule that coincided with their school hours.

**NETWORKING:** Although Chris held a variety of short-term contract positions over the past ten years, the majority of the time he was not employed. The short-term positions he pursued allowed him to balance his work and family life while maintaining an employment history on his resume. The majority of these positions were found through actively networking with peers versus online or other application processes.

**SUCCESSFUL POLICIES:** Chris obtained his most recent position as a government contractor through the Department of Defense's (DoD's) Priority Placement Program (PPP) for military spouses. Chris secured the position after learning about the priority and applying online through USA Jobs. He described being hired quickly without an interview and despite the gaps in his work history.

**WORK-LIFE BALANCE:** Chris described a variety of work challenges related to parenting and noted that he returned to work after his children were old enough to attend school during the day. Chris stated that he did not necessarily think there are specific differences between male and female military spouses. He said, "girls are more determined and more successful. They come to the marriage probably better qualified than their spouse. One reason I stayed home is because I only had two master's degrees and she [his wife] had three."

**VOLUNTEERING:** Chris noted he worked in a variety of volunteer or pro bono jobs in order to maintain continuity on his resume as well as for networking purposes.

**SUCCESS FACTORS:** Chris described several strategies he used to help gain employment including: (1) minimizing gaps in his resume by combining several jobs under one "umbrella," (2) utilizing programs such as the PMP certification, (3) networking with peers and other spouses in addition to traditional job applications, and (4) leveraging contacts such as his wife's alumni association.



“Chris”



“The reality of not being able to progress because of limited time on station—[it] doesn't give you a chance to grow in the company. Plus, [employers] always bring you in on some kooky thing you have a talent for, not for a growth position and [employers] don't want to invest the time in you.”

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center. 2008 Survey of Active Duty Spouses. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1201-Briefing-Support-Deployment-Reintegration-PCS-WellBeing-Education-Employment.pdf>; Long term unemployment is defined by BLS [http://www.bls.gov/bls/cps\\_fact\\_sheets/ltu\\_mock.htm](http://www.bls.gov/bls/cps_fact_sheets/ltu_mock.htm)



## CASE PROFILE #4

# “Natasha”

## ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE, U.S. MARINE CORPS

**CREDENTIALS:** Bachelor of Science in Legal Studies and Homeland Security

**PROFESSION:** Government Contractor

**KEY SKILLS:** Adaptable professional with a public-interest security clearance. Diverse experience across professions including supply chain management, administration, inventory control, and bookkeeping.

**BACKGROUND:** Natasha’s career started in Virginia prior to marrying her service member. Natasha has been married for ten years and describes herself as a “jack of all trades.” Her jobs have included bookkeeping, inventory control, supply chain management, electrical estimating, and administrative work. When she met her service member he had separated from service but reentered the U.S. Marine Corps. Eventually they moved to Camp Pendleton where she worked temporarily as a waitress “while getting to know the area.” She connected with a temp agency and was hired with a large company doing purchasing.

Natasha continued to use a temp agency when moving in order to identify work opportunities. However, the only jobs available to her in North Carolina were part-time, such as retail or restaurant positions, and their pay ranges were too low to cover her childcare expenses. She freelanced temporarily as a bookkeeper, but again, the wages were too low to pay for childcare.

**EDUCATION:** Pregnant with her second child, Natasha enrolled in school in 2008 at a local community college. She completed her associate degree in 2009 and, later, a Bachelor of Science in 2014 through an online program. She moved cross-country four times, experienced two deployments, and had a baby, *but still graduated with Honors and was on Dean’s list the majority of the time*. She noted, “I would have strongly preferred to work but felt it was necessary to complete my education.”

**EMPLOYMENT:** For the past several years, Natasha has lived near Washington, D.C. where she described the cost of living as high. She began looking for jobs as soon as she arrived but realized the commute was both difficult and expensive. After being turned down for a job with a long commute, she realized it was “a blessing in disguise since I would have never seen my family.” Discouraged about her job prospects, Natasha stated, “I just stopped looking [for employment]. I was trying to fit into one job, but when I started looking at childcare options, I didn’t think I could afford someone, and didn’t think I could trust someone with my children.” After several months of not looking for work, a friend recommended her as the manager of thrift

Estimates vary based on the economy and type of comparison used, but working military spouses are earning between 19% -38% less than their working civilian peers.<sup>13</sup>

“I made the decision to go back to school for better pay and advancement. There were no employment opportunities. Work wasn’t feasible except for on base. I tried to get jobs and applied but I was passed over.”

store. Once she met some friends who could assist her with childcare she accepted the position and noted “[it] gave me my spirit back; it gave me a job outlet that I craved. I did great things for the shop. I increased revenue and increased the programs. It was a great experience, and the people there were family.” She worked there for over a year and noted that the job gave her “a professional outlet as well as a social outlet.”

Planning on starting her own nonprofit, she resigned from her position after being there one and one-half years, but was unexpectedly referred for another job by a friend. Though she was hired as a contractor doing business intelligence for a support component of the U.S. Army, she was quickly laid off when the contract she was on was not renewed. She is currently looking for a new position. In this recent role, Natasha was given a security clearance, which she noted was particularly helpful in her current job search, stating that it was “worth entering at any level to get my security clearance.”

Natasha noted that she is flexible with her job search strategies and her goal is “to get my foot in the door as an administrative or executive assistant. I find [that if I am flexible], I am offered a lot more and can be promoted from within.”

**VOLUNTEERING:** Natasha admitted being discouraged at times, but noted that volunteering had expanded her skills and enabled her to network. She also described the benefits of volunteering—it “can boost morale, grow your social network” and provide an opportunity to gain experience in positions you “would never be able to do otherwise.” She had also been offered free childcare while volunteering, which was helpful when she needed a break. Natasha also argued that other volunteers have networks too, and that volunteering had helped keep her workplace knowledge fresh

and develop new job specific skills such as bookkeeping, planning and executing large events, and fundraising.

Natasha’s motto is to “Be A Blessing.” She started her own nonprofit organizing community members to help the homeless. She also started a military ball gown giveaway through which military spouses can donate ball gowns for those who cannot afford them. Natasha prefers to add her nonprofit work to her resume and that it has helped her professionally because it “sparks conversation” and “shows commitment to helping the community.” For example, she claimed that her nonprofit experience actually helped her get an interview because it provided a unique networking opportunity.

**ADVICE TO HR:** Natasha noted: “Military spouses are dedicated, overcome challenges, are committed, passionate, and creative problem-solvers. You know they can plan strategically. We are multi-skilled, we can be team players and those skills transcend the roles we are hired for. On the employer side, try to attract and retain spouses. I think the most success occurs when there are targeted hiring efforts specific to military spouses job candidates.” She suggests that employers focus on “providing mentors, onboarding, monthly meet-ups, and opportunities to discuss challenges and gaps in communication between the military spouse and the employer.”

**ADDRESSING RESUME GAPS:** Natasha indicated that she has addressed gaps in her resume “head on” and has been proactive in filling gaps with volunteering and education. She noted she has been asked how long she would be living in a given location. When she has discussed questions like these with her military spouse peers, she explained that they believe that revealing they are a military spouse has hurt them during job interviews.

“Natasha”



“Spouses have to reinvent ourselves so often. Instead of ‘get in where you fit in’, you have to ‘fit in where you get in’”

<sup>13</sup> Hosek, J. & Wadsworth, S.M. (2013). Economic Conditions of Military Families. 23 (2). 41-60. The Future of Children. Princeton-Brookings; Meadow, S.O., Griffin, B.A., Karney, B.R., & Pollok, J. (2016). 42(3). 542-561. DOI: 10177/0095327X15607810; Maury, R. & Stone, B. (2014). Military Spouse Employment Report. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University



## CASE PROFILE #5

“

“I lost out on opportunities because I could not work overtime. When my husband was deployed, my work hours didn’t coincide with childcare and I was acting as a single parent. It’s only us to handle everything. Jobs with overtime and opportunities pay more and would be good experience, but I missed out.”

# “Veronica”

## ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE, U.S. AIR FORCE

**CREDENTIALS:** Bachelor of Arts in English

**PROFESSION:** Freelance writer

**KEY SKILLS:** Adaptable professional with a security clearance and the ability to speak a foreign language. Fluent in Russian. Experience across professions working in sales, staffing, and technical-writing.

**BACKGROUND:** Veronica was previously in the U.S. Army where she met her husband while they both attended language school. At the time, she was battling an injury, but she also became pregnant. Reluctantly, she left the Army. While in the Army, Veronica had been training to be Russian linguist and had learned some computer skills (i.e., Microsoft Office).

After leaving the Army, Veronica noted that finding employment was a challenge and she described feeling a lack of self-confidence. She joined her husband in Texas and secured a job earning minimum wage working in a craft store frame shop. Though she was on her feet all day while pregnant, she said it “helped pay bills.” She continued working six additional months after her first child was born. Because she needed childcare, she indicated she only had “a little [money] left over.” Veronica’s husband started to encourage her to seek a more engaging job. She continued to do temporary

work on and off for several years—working for a nonprofit, as a city employee entering account information, and in the city planning department—until her second child was born.

**EDUCATION:** Veronica learned that military spouses may attend language school for free if there is an opening when their service member spouse was attending. At the same time, she also learned there were state policies in California that allowed free childcare if the mother was either working full-time, or in school full-time and had income below a certain level (husband was junior enlisted airman at the time) through participating in-state childcare centers. These two policies freed her from worry about childcare expenses and enabled her to attend school full-time to study Russian. Simultaneously, she enrolled in community college full-time to work on her associate degree. A partnership with the community college enabled her to use her credits from the Defense Language Institute (DLI) for a degree in foreign language studies. She noted that it was through her prior experience in the Army and knowing “the right people” in senior leadership who “told us about the DLI and free childcare.”

**EMPLOYMENT:** Veronica was very malleable, working a variety of unrelated positions that she often found through a temp agency. She recalled working as a mortgage broker, for a vinyl siding company, for a staffing agency, for a sales team for a finance company, for a web-based company, and as a battalion secretary. After starting her own company for a short period of time, which ultimately led her to accrue some debt, she was hired by a web-based company

More than 55 percent of military spouses indicated difficulty finding their job.<sup>14</sup>



“Veronica”



doing email marketing, building websites, and planning digital strategies. This job allowed her to work from home, paid well, and “was fun.” She noted that it was helpful that she had good childcare, as she was able to pay someone to help her at home.

Roughly four years ago, Veronica began working with her current company. She began by doing technical writing. After several months, she obtained a security clearance while she completed her bachelor’s degree. She noted how helpful the security clearance was to her, stating: “How do you get experience if you can’t get hired.”

Originally she was a temporary hire, but was ultimately hired permanently. When her family received military orders, she began networking internally, inside her company. As a result, Natasha was able to transition to another team doing similar work despite living in another state. She transferred within the company a second time when the family moved again.

Veronica’s job responsibilities have actually decreased at times, something she was not happy with, but she was “hesitant to leave or make a change because the pay didn’t change.” She also noted that it was the first time having a full-time job with benefits.

Veronica explained that many of her jobs have either been a good or bad fit based on her family’s needs and schedule. Certain jobs became “a burden on the family” because “Army comes first.” She noted, it “became hard to manage three kids in school. I was the person to manage

everything and I was coming home late. I asked for a change in schedule but they weren’t able to accommodate.”

**USING TEMP AGENCIES:** Veronica explained how she often used a temp agency to find jobs. She indicated that the temp agency she used would often use assessments to help identify appropriate jobs and also provided some computer training. She stated that the agency she used would “Help you navigate the work environment. You have somebody to be your advocate. They sell me to the client. It’s up to me to prove myself. It takes the hassle and stress out because they put your resume in with multiple agencies.”

**STIGMA AND SELF-IDENTIFYING:** “I made a decision to tell [employers] I am a military spouse. My kids come first, and I am a hard worker, but you have to remember my husband is away and I have kids and it is only me. People are understanding and appreciate. I have a little more flexibility as I’ve moved up and the kids have gotten older. It was harder when they were younger and I was a minimum wage employee. It’s a weird position to be in to answer questions about your spouse, and it limits what your options are. But I’ve used all the resources out there to my advantage. I’ve been willing to take the weird jobs, I’ve learned a lot of things—nothing is going to throw me, you deal with lots of different kinds of people. I learned a lot about how business work.”

“I carried the sense that I had failed because I wasn’t able to stay in the military and be a mom and a wife. I had grown up in the military lifestyle and have parents coming and going, but there was a feeling that I was stuck – I hadn’t stayed in the Army long enough for that to work in my favor. It took me a while to realize I had marketable skills”

<sup>14</sup> Maury, R. & Stone, B. (2014). Military Spouse Employment Report. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University



# “Fran”

**ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE, U.S. ARMY NATIONAL GUARD**

## CASE PROFILE #6



“Most people see a military family and assume there is moving involved and there are kids involved and they eliminate the person [for employment] altogether. That may not be true.”

**CREDENTIALS:** Bachelor of Science in Organizational Supervision

**PROFESSION:** Claims Imaging Supervisor

**KEY SKILLS:** Persistent, hardworking, and team-oriented professional with extensive experience in finance, insurance claims, imaging, and organizational supervision.

**BACKGROUND:** Fran is currently working at a bank where she has been employed for 14 years. She has been married for seven years and met her husband, a member of the Army National Guard, when they were both working at another bank. When his position was phased out and the bank was bought by a competitor both Fran and her husband lost their jobs. Fran and her husband have both been working to complete their education while being employed full-time. Periodically, they have experienced job layoffs, multiple deployments, as well as some health issues.

**EDUCATION:** With the help of Pell grants, both Fran and her husband were able to continue in school and work on their associate degrees. Fran’s husband returned to school during a period of unemployment using his Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits which resulted in less income as he was no longer working.

Fran recently earned her bachelor’s degree. As a result of attending school, and having periods where one or both of them were not working, the family has accrued some educational debt. Fran has completed her bachelor’s degree while her husband is currently working to complete his own.

**FINANCIAL ISSUES:** Student loans have been essential to cover expenses such as housing and transportation. Recently, Fran received a job promotion which she indicated would help them financially as this enables them to pay off some



# INCOME<sup>15</sup>

The majority of American families are now dual income and the number of dual income families is increasing. In 2015, 48 percent of all married couples had dual incomes. When looking at married couples with children, the dual income household percentage increases to 61 percent. Both of these numbers are higher than military families with dual incomes, which is estimated at 41 percent. This is putting military families at a financial disadvantage compared to civilian families

- A non-working spouse forfeits the opportunity to earn retirement savings and social security benefits as well as opportunities for seniority.
- Long-term unemployment reduces the ability to establish financial independence and total household earnings.

When a military spouse is unemployed, a military family's lifetime earnings are reduced over the course of a military career

- Over a 5 year period, a military spouse who would be working full time on minimum wage (\$7.50 per hour) would forgo a total of \$78,000 in wages.
- For those with a college degree, the amount of lost earnings is likely to be higher. For example, a starting salary of \$50,000 can equate to \$250,000 in lost income over five years if the military spouse is not employed.

student loan debt. After his most recent deployment, Fran's husband has been attending school two days a week working on his bachelor's degree, which will take about three more years to complete.

For several months, the family had no income with the exception of a small severance package and unemployment benefits. Deployments have impacted their family's ability to accept job offers and promotions and the family has had to manage their finances carefully, balancing work and deployments with furthering their education. Fran and her husband experienced multiple periods of financial distress as they tried to manage multiple deployments, both partners trying to complete their education, and the complications of various layoffs and the instability of income provided as a result of National Guard service.

Additionally, due to unemployment the family had to cash in their 401K to avoid bankruptcy and described having to make changes to their lifestyle in order to live within their means. Fran reported that currently "having employment has helped us

financially get back on track." She said that it took longer for she and her husband to complete their degrees due to deployments and because they both needed to work.

## THE COMPLICATIONS OF NATIONAL GUARD SERVICE:

Fran described having limited support during her time as a spouse in the National Guard because the nearest base from her home is nearly three hours away. She described wishing she was more connected to the other families in her husband's unit and noted that families living apart from the military installation seemed to be forgotten. At one point during her time as a spouse, she attempted to get career assistance on the installation, but indicated that nothing was available for her. She also said that she had experienced misconceptions about being part of a National Guard family most primarily that others believed that her husband did not deploy despite the fact that he has been deployed multiple times, sometimes as long as a year, over the past seven years.



"Fran"

"Having employment has helped us financially get back on track."

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Characteristics of Families-2015, available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/famee.nr0.htm>; U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center, 2008 Survey of Active Duty Spouses. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1201-Briefing-Support-Deployment-Reintegration-PCS-WellBeing-Education-Employment.pdf>; Income calculator can be found at <http://www.miniwebtool.com/salary-conversion-calculator/>



## CASE PROFILE #7

# “Rachel”

**ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE, U.S. AIR FORCE**

**CREDENTIALS:** Bachelor of Arts in Communications

**PROFESSION:** Contract writer/editor

**KEY SKILLS:** Experienced writer, editor, and blogger with experience using multiple social media platforms. Adaptable, self-starter capable of high quality performance in a remote work environment, with limited supervision, and under tight deadlines.

**BACKGROUND:** Rachel met her husband while starting school in Kansas. They have been married for ten years and have two children ages two and four. After marrying, she and her husband moved to Oklahoma where Rachel began work towards an associate degree. She secured a job at financial aid office and worked as a volunteer on the school newsletter to maintain her communications skills. As part of her school work, she conducted interviews for her school newspaper. After several years, she transferred to a four-year school, commuting 45 minutes each way. While there, Rachel was the associate editor for the paper, and after a year, she advanced to the news editor. During that time, she completed her bachelor's degree, had her first child, after which she discontinued work for the paper.

**EDUCATION:** Rachel resumed her post-associate degree schooling almost immediately after giving birth to her second child (while her husband was deployed). Before her graduation, the family moved to take a special duty assignment. At that point, Rachel began taking online and night classes to complete her bachelor's degree, given that her husband could assume some childcare duties at night.

**EMPLOYMENT:** Since graduating in 2012, Rachel began working as a paid weekly blogger, writing for parenting blogs. This has

allowed her to work remotely, given her a position to add to her resume, and helped “to get her foot in the door and have credentials.” A year later in 2013, she began doing feature and freelance writing but eventually was hired in 2015 as a contractor, for which she committed 20 hours per week doing editorial writing for a local paper.

### **CAREER ALIGNMENT WITH MILITARY LIFESTYLE:**

Although Rachel described wanting to be a newspaper writer and being at an office with other people, she noted, “with kids and deployments, trainings, I have to be able to be home. I’m lucky that what I love to do allows me to stay at home. I’m happy I have the ability to do that. I was going to be a writer anyways and this works well with the military lifestyle.” Rachel said that she’s still learning about how to generate new contracting work and gather more clients. She described focusing her efforts on companies that are willing to support employees who telecommute and who are interested in hiring military spouses. Rachel also actively uses social media to find contracting jobs. She found her current job through Facebook as her employer was looking for a military blogger. She said she was grateful for social media; describing it as a source of information, resources, and social support.

### **ADVICE FOR OTHER MILITARY SPOUSES:**

“Be persistent and professional. When you move, maintain your relationships because they need to travel with you.” She also noted that she has encountered some challenges getting to know her local area and building professional relationships there. “When I want to write locally in the community, it is harder because I don’t know the area or the people. I don’t have any authority with the community. I have to pitch myself as a newcomer but sometimes they aren’t receptive.”



“If I needed to work full time outside the home, I can’t imagine how hard it would be because it’s hard for me working at home. I’m very lucky that my dream career meshes well with who I married.”

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center. 2008 Survey of Active Duty Spouses. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Surveys/ADSS1201-Briefing-Support-Deployment-Reintegration-PCSWellBeing-Education-Employment.pdf>; Similar percentages have been found with federal data such as the American Community Survey: 78% obtained some college education or higher, 25% obtained a bachelor's degree, and 7% obtained a master's degree, see Maury, R. & Stone, B. (2014).



**THE AVERAGE MILITARY SPOUSE IS COLLEGE EDUCATED<sup>16</sup>**

- 84% have some college education
- 25% have a bachelor's degree
- 10% have graduate or advanced degrees

PHOTO CREDIT: JENNIFER C.M. WRIGHT



## CASE PROFILE #8



“The military forgets how hard it is to be a dual income family with budget cuts and lack of pay raises—it’s hard to do everything and expect the one parent who is not in the military to stay at home. Meetings and childcare, it all falls on me.”

# “Traci”

## ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE, U.S. MARINE CORPS

**CREDENTIALS:** Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice; Master of Public Administration

**PROFESSION:** Human Resources Instructor

**KEY SKILLS:** Skilled professional with more than 12 years of experience providing interview preparation, resume writing, and workforce development training to diverse populations. Hands-on experience teaching, managing volunteers, and developing programs under tight deadlines, limited guidance, and with small budgets.

**BACKGROUND:** When Traci first married 18 years ago, she worked as a restaurant manager. She and her husband moved shortly after getting married. Though she had started a program to receive her bachelor’s degree in social work, she could not finish before moving. Upon moving to California from Kansas (her home state), she noted that “everything was different.” With no prior experience around the military, she described it was “completely overwhelming ... [and] very difficult to navigate.”

**EDUCATION:** Traci enrolled in school after moving to California. She completed her associate degree in 2000, enrolling in a general education program. She anticipated that she would be moving frequently and, thus, wanted a degree that allowed flexibility. When the family moved to North Carolina, Traci was pregnant with her first child. She stayed home for several months and then began an accelerated program for Criminal Justice. Using the College-Level Examination Program® (CLEP)<sup>17</sup>, she was able to test out of 26 credit hours. Traci remarked: “it was very helpful—time was always breathing down my neck.”

Despite a lengthy commute, Traci was able to complete her bachelor’s degree, saying that at the time not many schools were “catering towards service members or families.” After finishing her bachelor’s degree, she was pregnant with her second child. Eventually, she completed her master’s degree in public administration. She was hired for a job at the community college where she now works part-time as human resources (HR) instructor. Because it was a continuing education position teaching human resources, Traci was able to compete for the job even though her educational background was in public administration. With multiple moves back to the same location, she was rehired for this job each time, working there for more than 12 years combined.

**EMPLOYMENT:** After moving, Traci worked part-time at a library and quickly received a promotion. She eventually moved again, and after the couple had their third child, Traci took time off from work. She commented: “I could not manage my schedule; my husband’s job schedule was erratic. I have to juggle everything and you don’t know how much more you can take on.”

Traci received a job offer prior to the family’s move to Kansas and decided to move ahead of her husband, living separately for eight months while she worked as a paid family readiness office. She stated: “The position that was extremely compatible with my career goals, and I made the decision to move eight months in advance of my husband. At the time, I felt urge to take the job. It was aligned with my skillsets, the pay was good, and it had been hard to get a job ... [and I] knew if I didn’t do it I would regret it.” She said it was an excellent job, but the hours eventually grew difficult to manage

while her husband was deployed. She admitted that while the “family were all cared for and I was a great employee, I learned that everyone was taken care of, but I was worn out.” Traci was even offered a promotion but chose to remain in her current role. “I couldn’t do it because of the hours involved. I didn’t have childcare or help to back me up.” When her husband was selected for “back-to-back” deployments Traci made the decision to resign from her position because the work and family demands became unmanageable. Around the same time, a previous employer contacted her, coincidentally, hired her to teach classes on a schedule more compatible with her children’s school schedule.

A series of moves over the course of three to four years meant that the family

would only be in a single location for a short time and Traci’s opportunities to work would be limited. Ultimately, she waited until her family was settled and knew her husband’s work demands before resuming work herself.

#### EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF WORK

**CHALLENGES:** Traci described the challenges of employment and military life: “How do you support your spouse without being bitter, and keep it under wraps? Maybe we would not have chosen this route ourselves. We love our service member. We’ll get together and scratch our heads collectively. How did we get here? Sometimes it gets old.” She also admitted: “It’s difficult not to feel bitter. Most of the time the service member goes right to work and I’m getting the kids set up in school and I have to recreate myself when all those things fall into place. They have no comprehension of what that process is. Employers have no idea what happens to military spouses.”

**ADVICE FOR HR:** “If you give a spouse an opportunity to work they will be an excellent employee.” She also expressed that it would be helpful to have spouse preference along with a preference to hire veterans and that hiring managers do not necessarily see the military spouse as “serving” as veterans do. Though she also noted that many employers are “willing to hold onto [military spouses] because they do great work—but they don’t always understand what all those pieces look like. In a civilian family, both people would be available to help with the move. But for military families, depending on the service member’s career, the spouse is unpacking, and situating the family, and allowing the service member to be focused on their job.”

Military spouses have higher rates of underemployment than unemployment, meaning they possess more education or experience—or both—than is needed for the job. Military spouses sacrifice experience and education to avoid unemployment; 61 percent of employed military spouses have more formal education than is required for the job.<sup>18</sup>

“Traci”



“Spouses don’t think they are supposed to use their volunteer experience on their resume. We help them register for the presidential service award. This gives validation to their volunteer experience. Most of them are undervaluing their work. Once they get permission and encouragement, they see how it enhances their resume and illustrates the skillset they have.”

<sup>17</sup> The College-Level Examination Program® (CLEP) offers the opportunity to earn college credit by earning qualifying scores on introductory-level college subject examinations, and are funded by the U.S. government through the Defense Activity for Non-traditional Education Support (DANTES).

<sup>18</sup> Data analysis from Maury, R. & Stone, B. (2014). Military Spouse Employment Report. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University.



## CASE PROFILE THEMES

The spouses who participated in this case research offered insight into their own personal employment experiences. Many of their comments and ideas reflect findings from previous research that captures the collective experience of military spouses and their employment. A few of the findings from the case study participants are captured below:

- **Key skills were robust and diverse across all participants.** Employers value soft-skills. Each spouse demonstrated strong communication skills, persistence, adaptability, perseverance, and initiative. Several spouses had been recognized with leadership awards and others showed a remarkable ability to adapt and learn diverse and divergent tasks, which suggests an ability to perform multiple roles within an organization.
- **Financial independence is difficult** for spouses who cannot work. This impacts total household income, therefore affecting a family's ability to save, pay off debt, or accrue important benefits such as retirement.
- **Childcare is an issue for all employees.** While employers don't necessarily provide child care they can help military spouse employees by building relationships with local child-care providers, along with civilian employees who use childcare.
- **Flexibility** is important and helpful to military spouses, but, contrary to what many believe, it does not prevent military spouses from working. Instead, it enables them to be more productive, less stressed, and to become loyal employees. Flex time policies, such as periodically working from home, the ability to leave to take care of sick children, and the possibility of remote employment, are helpful for many employees and are most helpful for the military spouse who is working to contribute financially while also maintaining a household.
- **Confidence is an issue for spouses who have spent time out of the workforce.** This may be seen during interviews and in the overall hiring process. Those who

assist military spouses seeking employment can assist them with the tools they need to succeed entering the workforce. Employees can help by conducting mock interviews, providing classes to build specific skills, or through certification, education, or on-the-job experience.

- **Balancing work and family is a challenge for civilian families, but may be magnified for military families** who have the overlay of deployments, lack of social support, loss of their network, and the stress and learning curve that comes from repeatedly relocating. Communication about job expectations between employers and employees can help build trust and allow them to plan together to ensure shared success.
- **Military spouses resemble other employees experiencing long-term unemployment**, which creates a vicious cycle that worsens in time. The longer one is unemployed, the less likely a person is to get hired, which decrease confidence, and increases the chances of the military spouse leaving the labor market altogether.
- **Timing and expedited processes** for licensing, hiring, security clearances, and job transfers can maximize the time military spouses can spend working at a given location.
- **The benefits of having a security clearance** were noted by several spouses who described not being able to compete for jobs they were otherwise qualified for because they had not previously obtained a security clearance.
- Several spouses discussed **the benefits of using temporary hiring agencies** to assist them in their job search. Employers interested in hiring military spouses can connect with local temporary hiring agencies to assist in identifying spouses looking for work. Additionally, collaboration between employers and agencies that assist military spouses seeking employment can help mitigate relocation challenges.



## KEY SKILLS

- ✓ Communication skills
- ✓ Persistence
- ✓ Adaptability
- ✓ Perseverance
- ✓ Initiative
- ✓ Leadership
- ✓ Ability to perform in multiple roles



PHOTO CREDIT: JENNIFER C.M. WRIGHT



## MILITARY SPOUSE UNDEREMPLOYMENT

The spouses interviewed each described periods of being underemployed. They each described times where they accepted positions for which they were more qualified or capable of doing more, sometimes taking salary cuts to:

- 1 maintain work-life balance;
- 2 remain in the workplace;
- 3 contribute to family expenses; or
- 4 maintain a sense of self-esteem (social life, networking, making a contribution).

Most of the military spouse participants described periods of underemployment as a compromise to balance their own career desires, their service member's career, and their family responsibilities. They also described challenges such as access, availability, and cost of childcare that contributed to their underemployment.



**“I never hesitate to hire military spouses. You never know when they’ll be back again and they are always hard workers.”**

-U.S. Army spouse quoting her former employer

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HR PROFESSIONALS, HIRING MANAGERS, AND CORPORATE EXECUTIVES

In sum, when military service itself prevents spouses from working over the course of a service member's career, voluntary military service becomes a less viable and perhaps less desirable option for families who require two incomes or whose members simply prefer to be employed. Employers can hire military spouses, and by doing so, access a resourceful, educated, and motivated talent pool without developing new programming or investing in expensive recruitment tactics. **Simply by understanding military spouse job candidates' precise needs, challenges, and why their resumes, backgrounds, and job chronology may not conform to typical career paths, employers can maximize their potential and value to the company while supporting military families.**

The following are recommendations related to hiring military spouses and supporting their employment goals:



### Communicate

- ✓ **Consider the business case** for hiring military spouses and determine why it makes sense to hire them, for which positions, and in which locations.
- ✓ **Encourage self-identification** by developing materials that promote your interest in hiring military spouses. Spouses vary in their preference to self-identify. Employers can communicate through their collateral materials (print, website, job announcements, etc.) that military spouses will not be penalized. This increases the chances that employers and prospective employees can openly communicate with one another about their mutual expectations.
- ✓ **Treat military spouse hiring efforts separately** from veteran hiring efforts despite the apparent overlap.



### Train to Avoid Stigma and Identify Opportunities

- ✓ **Coordinate with networking groups**, on social media, on LinkedIn, with nonprofit groups, and with military spouse employees to determine how to source military spouse candidates.
- ✓ **Provide training** to your HR professionals and hiring managers to help them understand how to review military spouse resumes, how they may appear different from other resumes, and how to evaluate military spouses.
- ✓ **Avoid Assumptions:**
  - about qualifications for a particular job based on age or prior experience (e.g., a candidate may apply and be interested in a job for which they are overqualified)

- that military spouse job candidate will relocate. Veteran, Reserve, and National Guard spouses often stay in the same place as long as civilian employees. Active duty spouses may stay in the same location for extended periods or comparable to many civilian workers; and
- about a non-linear career path. Military spouse careers may diverge from the expected career path or a civilian worker or the ideal career path that includes a career progression with progressive advancement over time.



### Leverage Existing Options and Benefits Rather than Creating New Ones

- ✓ **Consider telework or remote opportunities** where appropriate and for appropriate employees.
- ✓ **Consider 1099 (contract) employment** options as well as traditional employment options.
- ✓ **Examine position openings** to determine if they can be offered as remote, telework or flex-time positions.
- ✓ **Consider using existing benefits** to enable flexibility for military spouse employees (e.g., pooling unused sick leave hours to be used for spouse with service member's deployment). Consider offering flexible benefit packages that reflect the needs of military spouse employees (e.g., childcare credits in lieu of paying healthcare expenses).
- ✓ **Establish a resource list** to connect military spouse employees with local childcare providers to enable a seamless start to the military spouse starting his or her new job.
- ✓ **Consider military spouses** for positions requiring **security clearances**.
- ✓ **Institute a military affinity group** to provide networking opportunities for spouses within your organization and to collect information about how to improve hiring, recruitment and retention practices.
- ✓ **Provide mentorship and training opportunities** for spouses returning to the workplace. Identify and assess for gaps where training could be provided to ensure a smooth transition to the workplace.
- ✓ **Identify specific steps new employees can take** to develop skills, proficiencies, or advance over time efforts to assist military spouses with employment.
- ✓ **Think creatively on ways to support military spouse employment.** Companies can support in a variety of ways **through nonprofits and coalitions** focused on military spouse hiring, **research and development** of training or marketing materials, **active communication** of information to spouses about the needs of employers, **networking events**, and more.
- ✓ **Include military spouse-owned companies in supply chains** or using spouses as vendors or contractors.

## CONCLUSION

Although some important progress has been made in connecting military spouses to employers interested in hiring them, given their persistently high unemployment rate, additional and perhaps more targeted efforts are needed. The goal of presenting these case profiles was to:

- highlight the personal experiences of military spouses;
- inspire interested employers to continue with existing practices;
- employ military spouses by developing new and innovative hiring practices; and
- generate interest among new employers whose businesses can benefit from hiring educated, motivated, and talented military spouses.

Limited research has been conducted to illuminate the shared employment experiences of military spouses. There is a growing realization, however, that military spouses who are employed benefit not only financially, but also personally

and professionally. Their steady employment can also positively impact the transition of their service member spouses when they decide to retire or leave the military.

Understanding military spouses' shared experiences with regard to employment is beneficial—especially if this information can be used to spur employers to develop more effective programs and services that support and match them with appropriate employment opportunities, or to inform local employers who can benefit from the diverse talent, education, and unique skills they bring to the workforce.

The case profiles presented here illustrate the competencies, skills, education, and character that military spouses can bring to bear when they are provided opportunities to work. Moreover, they personalize the stories that likely represent the collective experiences of many military spouses whose opportunities to apply their skills, earn a salary and benefits, and contribute to their family and individual finances are sometimes unrealized. With the help of dedicated and interested employers, military spouse talent can be harnessed, helping both spouses and employers reach their fullest potential.



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**“Be persistent and professional. When you move, maintain your work relationships because they need to travel with you.”**

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-U.S. Air Force spouse



## About the Employing Military Spouses Series

The Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF), as part of its broader employment research efforts, and with the generous financial support and collaboration of Prudential Financial, Inc., is exploring the topic of military spouse employment. This paper marks the second in a series of hands-on products geared to human resource professionals, hiring managers, C-Suite executives, philanthropists, and nonprofit leaders interested in hiring military spouses. This three-part suite of research products will include:

- **Business Case:** an overview of military spouse demographics and the business case to hire them
- **Profiles:** case studies of military spouses that demonstrate some of the common employment difficulties they encounter
- **Training Materials:** for human resource professionals who wish to learn more about recruiting and hiring military spouses (anticipated release date, December, 2016)



## About The Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF)

The IVMF is the first interdisciplinary national institute in higher education focused on the social, economic, education, and policy issues impacting veterans and their families post-service. Through the focus on veterans programming, research and policy, employment and employer support, and community engagement, the Institute provides in-depth analysis of the challenges facing the veteran community, captures best practices, and serves as a forum to facilitate new partnerships and strong relationships between the individuals and organizations committed to making a difference for veterans and military families.



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