

Military OneSource Podcast — How MilSpouses Can Use AI to Optimize Their Job Search

Episode transcript

Intro voice-over:

Welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Today, we're going to talk about how military spouses can use AI to optimize their job search. And to help us get smart on this topic is our guest, who is Quelonda McCrae. Quelonda, welcome to the podcast.

Quelonda McCrae:

Thank you. Thank you. I'm happy to be here, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

So, I want to learn a little bit about you first. First of all, what is your job title?

Quelonda McCrae:

Sure. I am a SECO career coach. SECO stands for the Spouse Education and Career Opportunities Program.

Bruce Moody:

Thank you for untangling that acronym. As a career coach, it pretty much is what it sounds like, which is why we're really excited to have you with us. You have a really great perspective and a background, and I really would like for you to talk about your background. You're a Navy spouse, but it goes even further beyond that.

Quelonda McCrae:

It does; it does, Bruce. First, starting with my current career as a SECO career coach, I do want to share that I have been a career coach with SECO and the SECO contract now for four-and-a-half years, and previously I served as SECO's career advisor for a year, so totaling about five-and-a-

half years with this program. My background does include education, training, program management, community and workforce development, and I have worked with national nonprofit organizations, secondary and post-secondary education, city government, as well as federal government.

Now, my connection to the military has been extensive. I am indeed a military spouse nearly of 20 years. I'm a mother of two and my service member served 22 years in the U.S. Navy. As a child, I grew up as a military child dependent. My father served in the U.S. Navy and retired after 20 years of service. And additionally helping to develop my professional background, I served as a U.S. Navy Command family ombudsman, supporting the triads of two command installations, both stateside and abroad, in forward deployed and training communities.

Bruce Moody:

So, you have looked at the military community from a lot of different angles, literally, since you were a little kid.

Quelonda McCrae:

Yes.

Bruce Moody:

And here you are now. You're a career coach. So, before we get into AI and how AI can help a military spouse when they're optimizing their job search, what are you doing as a career coach?

Quelonda McCrae:

Well, as a career coach helping our spouses reach their career goals, I do provide one-on-one assistance to our military spouses with career exploration planning readiness, whether that's education or career readiness, transition coaching and with various resources to assess their available networks. Specific examples on tools that I use include career assessments. We discuss education options and where education funding may be found, licensure or even credential requirements, resume development and, of course, the job search assistance. We practice interview skills and a lot more. Our coaching here at SECO and a magnificent team that I'm a part of, we offer comprehensive coaching services that are provided as career coaching packages, and these packages are either going to be industry-specific or unique to the career phase that a spouse may find him or herself in.

Bruce Moody:

So, it's interesting you mentioned that the work that you do is industry-specific. You understand what's happening out there in the job markets, which is kind of how I want to get into artificial intelligence, AI, and what it all means. So maybe just get us started on that. It's a hot topic. In your mind, what are your thoughts on AI and maybe how should spouses be paying attention to it?

Quelonda McCrae:

Yeah, absolutely. Overall, AI has the potential to greatly enhance how we approach career development, making the process more personalized, efficient and forward-thinking. Now, as a career coach, it excites me to see how the integration of these technologies can assist our spouses with increased productivity, find new opportunities and explore related career families, translate their skills, prepare for interviews, and of course, grow their networks. AI can be a flexible and an on-demand option for spouses who are also looking or seeking immediate results.

I will also like to add the value that has been placed on AI, not just for the job seeker but the employers according to various sources. Not only there is a growing increased percentage of job seekers utilizing AI, but an increased use of AI from the employers with their hiring practices.

Let me share some stats with you. According to Smart Recruiters, 81% of surveyed companies plan to invest in AI-driven solutions to automate and enhance their recruiting processes. Smart Recruiters then goes on to say that nearly every Fortune 500 company uses AI screening tools in hiring, and 40% of all companies expect to use AI interviews in choosing their candidates. All things considered, the use and value that has been placed on AI is showing quite favorably.

Bruce Moody:

And that's really important to understand. I think a really good point to make is that you and I are having this conversation and you're keeping your eyes on what's happening with AI. It's a hugely dynamic tool. It's changing all of the time. So you and I are going to have this conversation, but I really hope that in a year or whenever the next iteration of AI comes around, you and I have this conversation all over again because I know you will have had your eye on it as it changes, and you'll be able to talk to us about what those new changes really mean. But let's get back to talking about what's happening right now. As you look at AI, what are some of the applications or the uses of this technology that you're most excited about?

Quelonda McCrae:

Wow, great question. As a career coach, I'm particularly intrigued about the transformative potential of AI in career development as well as workforce management. A few of the AI applications that stand out to me are resume builders and job matching tools. These specific tools powered by AI can scan resumes and match candidates with jobs that align with their skills and experiences helping both job seekers and employers. I'm excited about how these tools can remove biases, ensuring a more equitable recruitment process. This also speeds up the job search process, giving candidates more relevant opportunities faster.

Another use of this technology that excites me is skill gap identification tools. AI can help individuals identify skills they need to develop for future roles. This is particularly useful as the job market continues to evolve rapidly and staying ahead of technological advancements and industry shifts are key. AI can suggest tailored learning paths, courses or certifications to bridge those gaps, and third, I would say the interview coaching tools for sure. These tools simulate interviews or access communication skills, helping candidates practice and refine their interview

techniques with natural language processing. These tools can provide instant feedback and how candidates can improve responses, their body language and overall presentation.

Bruce Moody:

So, AI tools are definitely out there, and as you mentioned, on both sides of the process, people hiring are using them, and now people who are looking for a job are using them, and you've just listed a bunch of tools. So, for spouses who are entering or maybe reentering the job market, how would you recommend using AI to make that process maybe less intimidating and more effective?

Quelonda McCrae:

Entering or re-entering the job market can be a daunting experience, Bruce, especially after a career break. I've had a couple myself as a military spouse and traveling with my service member, and I would say AI can be a powerful ally in making this process both less intimidating and more effective.

First, how can it be used in the job search allowing this process to be less intimidating? I would say one, it can develop a personalized career pathway. Many people worry about whether their skills are still relevant and how they'll transition back into the workforce. AI can help by suggesting roles that are a good fit based on experience, even if it's been a while since they were in the field. AI-driven career matching platforms can offer insights into transferable skills and recommend positions that align with their interests and strengths, making the process feel more approachable.

Second, it will allow the job applicant the candidate to build confidence with interview practice access AI tools or access to these AI tools that will develop sample resume questions relevant to the position you're applying for and practice responding to those questions. There are applications available that will give you feedback on your responses, and as I mentioned before, your overall presentation.

Third, assist with job search organization and resume development. Navigating multiple job platforms and developing personalized tailored resumes for each job can feel overwhelming. AI-powered tools can help aggregate job listings from multiple sources, providing a centralized platform for tracking applications and deadlines.

In addition to job tracker applications, AI-powered job matching engines can recommend jobs based on previous search history, your profile or the resume you've posted. Job search automation applications can help you automate those repetitive tasks in your job search using those auto apply bots and personalizing email templates. This helps alleviate the stress of manually managing multiple applications and ensuring that nothing slips through the cracks.

Now for the second half of your question, how could using AI make the process more effective? Skills gap analysis and development. If you're a spouse looking to return to a different role or industry, a spouse can use AI to analyze their skillset and recommend which skillsets to improve or to inquire.

Platforms that we here at SECO have vetted and regularly share with our spouses encouraging our spouses to enroll in is LinkedIn Learning, Coursera or even Udemy. Each of these use AI to

suggest courses based on career goals, emerging trends and skill gaps. This ensures that you're not wasting time on irrelevant courses and are focused on developing the most in-demand skills. Even short, focused courses can help you feel more equipped and marketable and then second for the job matching and receiving those alerts, AI-powered platform like SECO's Military Spouse Employment Partnership Job Search tool that can be set up to send personalized job alerts based on your preferences, experience and desired roles.

These tools refine job recommendations over time. Setting up customized alerts that reflect your ideal job industry and location will help filter out irrelevant jobs or roles that allow you to focus your energy on positions that are a good fit, and then of course, again, looking at how can we use these tools to be more effective with our job search. This will allow for real-time feedback. There are AI platforms that provide continuous feedback on your job search materials, specifically the resume. These insights will allow you to refine your application materials in real time and increase the likelihood of passing through those applicant tracking systems.

Bruce Moody:

I want to go back to the job interview because you had mentioned that. What does it look like for a spouse who's using AI to prepare for a job interview?

Quelonda McCrae:

Yeah, so a spouse may choose one of these AI platforms, copy and paste in full the job description that they're looking to not only build their resume for but practice interviewing for and this platform will pull out the qualifiers, certain knowledge, skills and abilities, and develop questions revolving around those KSAs. And the spouse can do this on camera or off camera, but their responses are recorded, and then assessed by the AI platform, looking to see how well the spouse responded to the question, how the percentage rather of the optimized keywords and phrases that were used and how relevant the response was.

Bruce Moody:

This is so interesting. This is why we have career coaches on our podcast because you guys have so much amazing information and I was really looking forward to this conversation because I have not used AI to its real potential. So, this is very, very interesting. You mentioned LinkedIn and some other networks. How would spouses use AI if they're using LinkedIn and other platforms to expand their networking opportunities?

Quelonda McCrae:

AI networking platforms such as LinkedIn's Career Explorer can help a spouse identify people who are relevant to the spouse's career interest and provide introductions. AI algorithms can suggest connections based on your skills and career goals, helping the spouse to expand his or her network with these relevant contact and without the need of that awkward or cold outreach, like, "I don't know this person. How well or how warm will the reception be reaching

out?" But by engaging in these AI-driven networking tools that target professionals and companies that are likely to help with the career transition.

Bruce Moody:

You work with a lot of spouses, and I wonder if you could share a story with us about a spouse who used AI to stand out as a job candidate.

Quelonda McCrae:

Yes, Bruce. It's been a few months. This one spouse that comes to mind, she stands out quite prominently. I met with a spouse who had taken a career break for several years after relocation to the United States upon marriage, supporting her service member's career, rearing her children and managing those household responsibilities, but during her time off, she had maintained a keen interest in her career field, keeping up with industry news through blogs, podcasts and webinars. When the spouse started her job search, the process felt overwhelming. She was concerned about her command for the English language, particularly her writing skills and the gaps in her resume and whether potential employers would consider her a qualified candidate given the time that she'd been away. She knew she had relevant education, early work experience, transferable skills but needed assistance with developing a strong resume.

So, after our initial session identifying her relevant experiences, pointing out her knowledge, skills and abilities in alignment with the type of jobs that she was looking for, we developed a job search strategy. During her off time, she did discover an AI career development platform that offered a resume builder, and this particular builder helped to create, edit and optimize her resume with the very keywords and keyword phrases that her and I identified during our coaching session. And this same tool helped her filter out other relevant jobs. As a result, with increased confidence, this spouse was able to create an AI-generated personalized resume document that leveraged her professional education and previous employment that she was most proud of, especially as an English second language learner.

Bruce Moody:

So, it's pretty obvious. AI is a very powerful tool. It's easy to see perhaps how somebody could maybe end up relying too heavily on AI for their job search, but at the same time, we know it's important for people to be authentic when presenting themselves to prospective employers. So how can spouses avoid some of the ethical concerns?

Quelonda McCrae:

AI tools can significantly enhance a spouse's job search, but it is crucial to use them ethically. First, I would recommend being truthful about your qualifications and don't misrepresent your experience. Second, tailor your resume to the job description, but only include skills that you truly have. Don't rely on AI to do all of the work for you. Use it to optimize and guide, not to replace your own input, and lastly, always consider data privacy and be transparent with yourself and others about how AI is assisting you and your job search.

Bruce Moody:

This is such an interesting conversation. Maybe as we wrap it up, you can give us your top three tips for using AI.

Quelonda McCrae:

Top three tips for using AI?

One, select tools that are relatively easy to use. In most cases, the purpose of incorporating AI in the job search is to bring ease to the process, not to over complicate the process.

Second, choose a platform whose interface gives you the most control over the text output. The more options you have to influence the tone style, language content, the better. Remember that AI is not written by the user. Therefore, any works created by AI should be personalized and edited by the individual it represents.

Third, don't skip customizing your job application. Use AI to help tailor your application to job descriptions and don't settle for generic content. It is important to remember that AI is not your own work. It doesn't represent your voice, and it's not always accurate.

In addition, remember that by submitting data to AI tool or any AI tool, you are implicitly giving the owner permission to use it. These tools can be a great starting point, but it is strongly recommended that you fact check and edit your documents to make sure they are a true depiction of your background and experience and in alignment with the job description. Utilizing SECO's on-demand resume and cover letter review services or speaking with a SECO career coach to review your documents would be a great final step.

Bruce Moody:

And we've got some links in the program notes so people can find the SECO Career Center and the LinkedIn group and all the other stuff. So that's good stuff there.

Quelonda, thank you so much for joining us today. Really interesting conversation, and I suspect AI will continue to grow and change, and as it does, we hope to have you back to refresh the conversation.

Quelonda McCrae:

I'll be happy to come back. Thank you, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

You're very welcome, and I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you. You can click on the link in the program notes to send us a question, a comment, maybe an idea for a future episode, and we want you to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.