

Military OneSource Podcast — Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

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:

Chelsea Pifer, welcome to the podcast.

Chelsea Pifer:

Thank you, Bruce. It's great to be with you.

Bruce Moody:

It is good to be with you as well. So we're going to have a conversation today with something probably maybe unfamiliar with most people. So we're going to sort of introduce this and unpack it and talk about what it's all about. But specifically, what we're talking about is something called the Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot. So this launched January of 2023. And beyond that, I'm just going to say help us through it. Let us know what this pilot is all about.

Chelsea Pifer:

Thank you, Bruce. One of a kind, first of its kind, I guess I should say program, and we call it MSCAP because you know the military loves our acronyms. So it's a twelve-week program, it's paid and you also have a day where you do professional development with Hiring Our Heroes. But basically, you're put in a resume release where companies can see your skills. They are companies that are military-friendly and more specifically, they're military spouse-friendly. They're eager to hire military spouses, and you go through the normal interviewing process with those companies and hopefully, you get matched with one. It's mutually agreeable to the company and to the spouse. And one of the most important things is the idea is there has to be a permanent position waiting at the end. It's not guaranteed that you will get that job. It has to be, again, the right fit on both sides. But it's not just an internship or just for work experience. It's meant to lead to long-term employment.

Bruce Moody:

Very interesting. So what were you doing prior to becoming a part of this?

Chelsea Pifer:

I had a 16-year employment gap because of marrying my husband who's active-duty Air Force. That's another thing I should add. This program is specifically for spouses of people who are active duty or within one year of transitioning out or retiring. So that's important. But I started working when I was 17. I was always working, other than one semester I took off to load up my course credits so I could graduate early. I was awarded multiple competitive internships. I had two main jobs before I met my husband that were highly desirable jobs that I enjoyed very much. One was working at an NFL stadium in Houston, Texas where I managed luxury suites with one other manager. We were responsible for all of the catering for 200 luxury suites, which involved managing about 300 hourly employees, tons of inventory. I worked high-visibility events like World Series at Minute Maid Park.

I eventually moved over to Houston Methodist Hospital where I did community development and I loved it there. The culture and values resonated with me. The work I was doing felt very meaningful. I was looking at going back to school to get my graduate degree, and then I met my husband and I went to New Mexico, Korea, Germany, D.C., down to Houston during a deployment. Then we met up in Japan, then Arizona, then D.C., and basically so in 16 years I tried to work. I was offered less than minimum wage for a full-time job, no benefits because they said you don't need them, you get them through your spouse. And then I went to graduate school on base, but then I did all the preparation, was ready to start the class, and I was told, you've lost your spot because an active-duty person wants it, which of course I want that person to have a spot too.

But each time something like that happened, it made me feel like the dependent that I was called, we're called dependents, and I felt like I didn't matter. My voice didn't matter. I didn't have the same value as the active-duty people, and yet a lot was expected of me. So I basically eventually gave up, especially once we had two children. Child care [was very limited, and I eventually did go back to school because I started to think, I'm never going to be able to get a job unless I add another degree or I'm going to have to totally change my career because the kind of work I did was very much, you got the job because of who you knew. And I was moving from one community to the next. And even though I would say I'm a good relationship builder, there's only so much you can do in a short period of time.

So, fast-forward to 2020, we moved at the height of COVID from Arizona to Washington, D.C. We knew it was my husband's final assignment. My children began to put down roots here. We're very happy. My husband works in a line of work that's very easy to transition to in the D.C. area. And so even though this was not where I expected home to be, I decided it was best for my family and I would find a way to make it work for me too. I started applying for jobs that I had the perfect degree, I had the work experience, but I couldn't even get an interview. One interview I did manage to get, the HR person said to me, she looked at my resume and kind of said, what have you been doing for 16 years? And I tried to explain, and then she said, well, you know technology has changed

a lot. And of course, my heart sank, and it was kind of hurtful, but I said, okay, well, what would I need to know to be able to do this job?

And it was basically like Microsoft Office. And I said, yeah, I do Excel spreadsheets for fun. I can handle that. And it showed me again that the perception of a military spouse with a long employment gap was that I must be outdated. My skills aren't maybe transferable. And so I really started to give up again. I'd given up before I started to give up again. And then I found out, because my husband participated in a program with Hiring Our Heroes, a corporate fellowship, which allowed him to be paid by the Air Force still while he could learn about the corporate world, and it went really well. And he said they have a spouse version and I was very skeptical because of my past experiences, but I did research into it and I thought, I'm going to give it a try. And so again, the program began in January of 2023. I applied in March. I met with my program manager. She does a pre-screen. So it's basically an interview. You dress for a formal interview, you give your elevator pitch, which, if I never have to give another elevator pitch, not my-

Bruce Moody:

So you're pitching for the program, the pilot itself, and then they're going to match you with a company?

Chelsea Pifer:

The screening process ensures that the candidates that are presented really are career-ready. We are spouses who are educated, we have work experience, but for whatever reason, whether it's the frequent moves or a career gap, as in my case, we're having trouble finding employment or we're underemployed, maybe we want a better opportunity. So I was screened by the program manager for the National Capital Region and then approved to be put in the resume release. And then my recruiter from Navy Federal Credit Union picked me out of the resume release. And so I received an email saying, would you like to talk about this opportunity? Well, the opportunity had absolutely nothing to do with my degree or my work experience, but I was intrigued and I'd heard that Navy Federal Credit Union was a wonderful place to work. I had actually looked on their website in the past to see if there were any jobs for which I could apply, but I wasn't an obvious fit for anything.

So, it turns out the job she was recruiting for was actually earmarked for SkillBridge, another DOD program, but for military active duty. And it was for a marketing communication specialist job primarily to do copywriting. So, I'm not the military member, I don't have a marketing degree, and I'm not officially trained for this role. So even if I had seen that, I would never have applied. But because the recruiter, first of all, she's a military spouse, so I'll say that too. We always say, who hires a military spouse? Another military spouse. So she knew the unique skill set that comes with a military spouse. And she also, when I asked her, why did you put me forward as a candidate? She said, I'll be honest, when I looked at you, you were an 80% fit. She said, I've been doing this long enough and looking at your resume, your experience, I could see that certain things jump out at her, that's why she's good at her job.

And I do not work in talent acquisition. But really they needed someone who was creative, who was a good communicator, who had a level of intelligence, and just empathy is a huge part. And I always say as military spouses, I think we are some of the best in terms of cultural competence, and that really comes into play in this role. But she also had to convince the hiring managers and they don't have a military affiliation, and they would've loved to have an English or a journalism major. And so I interviewed with them. One of the things I always encourage companies to do is to give the spouse a chance to show what they're capable of. So in this case, they gave me a writing assessment. So it was a timed, again, assessment, but they said, take it as an opportunity to see if you would enjoy this work.

Yes, we're going to evaluate you, but we also want to know that it's something you want to do. Because the goal on both sides is that this ends in a permanent position, and I did it and I enjoyed it. I find that the work I'm doing now, it's like it's a puzzle to solve. And because, again, the empathy aspect, I put myself in the reader's shoes and I craft the copy that way, and I am growing as a writer. The most important thing though, when people would say, well, what do you want to do? I said, I want to do meaningful work. That's all that mattered to me.

Bruce Moody:

So it seems like when you're going around twisting knobs, trying to find the place for you, when you find yourself in front of somebody who understands a military spouse, you haven't changed, but their understanding of what your potential is quite different from, say, the next employer.

Chelsea Pifer:

Yeah. It's to be seen and recognized for my value, for them to champion me. Even there was a point in the fellowship because I checked in with the hiring managers because you kind of want to see how's it going because I could see I really wanted to stay. As I said about the hospital where I worked, I thought the culture, these values, they align with my own. I had the most amazing teammates who were also advocating for me, but I wanted to check in with them. And I started to think maybe it wasn't going to result in an offer because it really seemed like they wanted someone whose main goal was to be a writer. And that was not my top goal. I can write, but my main goal, other than the meaningful work part, I love to connect with people and communication is the way I do that.

When I wasn't sure if it was going to work out, what they did is they started setting me up to meet other people in leadership, like VPs and managers working in other parts of Navy Federal, in case this didn't work out, they wanted me to end up where it was the best fit for me too. So that also made me feel valued, and they were a company that I could trust and respect.

Bruce Moody:

So in addition to the position that you're currently filling, and you were kind of touching on this, what are the other aspects of the accelerator that frankly helped to accelerate your career?

Chelsea Pifer:

I think the biggest benefit for me was just the networking. And I don't mean in the going to a conference and networking, but my project manager advocating for me and then through the resume release, my name and my work experience, getting in front of people. So that did something for me that I hadn't been able to do on my own. And then the professional development, every Friday we gather virtually and often there's a speaker and we break out into smaller sections based on our region. So I'm in a chat with other spouses going through the same program, and we're all in the National Capital Region, and some it's their first week. Others they're finishing their 11th week. And so it's just that level of support that makes all the difference that you're not alone in this. And I think that's one of the reasons this program will be so successful.

Bruce Moody: In talking with employers and employees at this Military Spouse Employment Partnership event, the importance of a community, of feedback, of mentorship, feeling like you know what's going on, because you may be able to do good work, but you also want to know that the work that you're doing is sort of in the same compass heading as the front office and so that you're tracking with what their idea is. And so just kind of reiterate for me the value of that, the feedback and the community and the engagement as you're going about your own career goals.

Chelsea Pifer:

So I equate this process a little bit to dating because if you're dating, maybe eventually you want to be married, do you want to be with someone who wishes you were someone else? No, you want to be wanted for who you are today. So by going through this process and being selected by an employer who desires to have a military spouse, they see it as strategic. They see it as an advantage and an asset that I have something to offer and that I don't have to feel bad about my career gap. But we're truly there to walk alongside them in their journey. And so again, as a military spouse, when I'm writing, I can envision that spouse whose roof just caved in from a storm and her or his active-duty loved one is deployed and they need a loan for \$20,000 or whatever, because I've been there.

And so we have a saying at Navy Federal, our members are the mission. And so that's a mission I can get on board with. In terms of Hiring Our Heroes and MSCAP and all of that, it just means, again, I'm not alone. There are quite a few career-motivated spouses out there, but I honestly did not meet them until pretty recently, so it was very lonely. And so I don't feel alone anymore. I want to pay it forward, which is why I'm here today. If I have gone through all this but then can be an advocate for others, then sign me up. And I think that's the thing too, coming out of COVID, is people realize how much they missed each other. We need each other. We need face time. We need to come out to

events like this. Virtual is great to have, but there's still something so necessary about that human connection.

And I have to say one more thing about COVID that I thought was interesting, watching everybody struggling with the isolation, I missed the birth or the wedding or my loved one passed away, or the unpredictability or the scariness of an unseen unknown threat, and I felt less alone in that too, because as military families, I feel like that's what we go through all the time. And so suddenly, what only maybe 1% of the population experiences on a regular basis, our entire nation was experiencing. And I think a lot of good has come out of that. More support for mental health. What do I say? Encouraging mental health care and then also just-

Bruce Moody:

Connectedness.

Chelsea Pifer:

Connectedness. Thank you. Yeah, encouraging connectedness and being more flexible too. The workplace has changed. Because I had that long employment gap and then coming now, and I work with a lot of working mothers, which I am also a working mother, it's a whole different work environment and what I'm seeing so far, I absolutely love.

Bruce Moody:

Chelsea Pifer, thank you so much. All the best of luck to you. We appreciate you joining us on the podcast today.

Chelsea Pifer:

Thank you, Bruce. It was my pleasure.

Bruce Moody:

Absolutely. Take care. Bye-bye.