

Military OneSource Podcast — More Businesses Committed to Employing MilSpouses

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 talking about spouse employment, because strong military families mean strong mission-ready warfighters. When spouses who want to work can find work, when things are okay at home that a service member is better able to focus on the mission. So, the Defense Department has something called the Military Spouse Employment Partnership, that's MSEP for short. And MSEP connects military spouses to industry partners. We have currently more than 950 MSEP partners. So, you might look at MSEP, which is a website and say, "Oh, it's a job site." And yes, yes, but it is exclusively for military spouses. And spouses can schedule sessions with career coaches who totally get military life.

And most importantly, the employers offering jobs are vetted up and down until we are sure that they're able to do the thing that we need them to do, which is to recruit, hire, promote and retain the military spouses. Retain, that's a big one. An MSEP partner must offer meaningful and lasting employment to military spouses even as the military moves them from place to place to place. So, our guest today is Deborah Bradbard. She is founding director of the Boeing Center for Veteran Transition and Military Families, and that center is an MSEP partner. And Deborah, we welcome you to the podcast.

Deborah Bradbard:

Thank you. I'm happy to be here.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. So again, you're the founding director of the Boeing Center for Veteran Transition and Military Families. What is that? What do you do?

Deborah Bradbard:

So that's a great question. We are actually a brand-new center. We're affiliated with Virginia Tech University. Our main campus is in Blacksburg, but our center is actually at our brand-new

innovation campus in Alexandria. And our building just opened just a little over a month ago. And the center, this is its first year, and we're looking to partner with folks in the military community to focus on education and employment, entrepreneurship and research. But a big focus is getting folks into the workforce in the national capital region. We actually have one of the biggest tech corridors in the country, and we are looking to partner with tech to get military spouses, veterans and service members into that tech workforce.

Bruce Moody:

Nice. How do you do that?

Deborah Bradbard:

Well, that's a great question because we are standing up the center, and so we're building ... We have Boeing in our name, so I'm going to use a flight analogy. We're building the plane as we're flying it. So, what we're hoping to do is partner with industry and build pathways into the workforce. We want industry partners to tell us where are their jobs that you need to fill and how can we find folks from the military community? And of course, today we're talking about military spouses. So, we're particularly interested in finding ways to connect military spouses to that workforce.

Bruce Moody:

And you also are a military spouse. So, what is your background and what do you bring to the work you're trying to do?

Deborah Bradbard:

So, I'm a veteran spouse. My husband was in the Navy for about 26 years. All of the issues and challenges that MSEP attempts to address were things that I experienced myself. As an example, I started my career as a licensed clinical psychologist. I was working a position as the director of a small nonprofit and was looking to move up advance in that. And then lo and behold, my husband got orders overseas and we were expecting our first child. So, we made a family decision for me to move overseas where it was very difficult to work. And so, a lot of the issues around status of forces agreements impacted me personally while we were overseas, made it very difficult to work. And if you fast forward about 10 years, I was out of the workforce. Eventually landed in the Washington DC area and knew we were going to stay here permanently.

We've been here almost 20 years, but once we realized we were going to stay, I had to figure out, okay, how am I going to get back into the workforce after this 10-year gap? I didn't have a network. I didn't have people to write references for me that were recent. I had kept my license up to date, but I didn't have recent job experience. And so, I really had to figure out how to get back into the workforce. I largely did a lot of networking. I used LinkedIn, it was a huge resource for me. I reached out to people who could connect me and help build that network. And eventually, I met a recruiter who had posted a position on LinkedIn that looked like it was

written for me, and she provided her email. I reached out to her and was able to say, “Hey, I'm going to send you my resume. You're going to see some things like gaps and nonlinear career experiences that may make you ask some questions. Here's why it looks that way, and I would love you to convey this to the hiring manager.” And she did that.

I was hired by Booz Allen Hamilton, and that put me back on a positive career trajectory. So, I tell that story because I think it's a story that many military spouses share, and it was a very humbling experience. But in the end, I was able to get back to where I wanted to be, but it wasn't without some trials and tribulations. And now that I'm in the role I'm in, I'm able to parlay some of that personal experience into what I think is important for the center to do in terms of programming and services.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, you definitely are describing your career path is nonlinear. That was a great term. Gaps in there some explanation required.

Deborah Bradbard:

Yes, yes, absolutely.

Bruce Moody:

But also at the same time, a path that many, many other military spouses share. So, what is the value of a company hiring a military spouse with a nonlinear career path?

Deborah Bradbard:

Oh, I love this question because I think nonlinear is what people look for, and they don't know quite what to do with something that doesn't look like what they expect. But to your question, because my career path was the way it was, I have done a lot of different things. I've worked in the nonprofit space, I've worked in public sector, I've worked in government, I've worked in criminal justice, I've worked in mental health, I've worked in higher education. And so, I can bring a real broad experience based to any position. I've both been in leadership positions and I've been a follower. I can do both. And I think a lot of military spouses share some of those characteristics when you really dig into their career paths.

Bruce Moody:

So that's one side of it. You're finding people who, despite their career trajectory, you want to hire them. What makes a company want to go the extra mile to retain them, to keep them hired, even as the military is moving them around the world? What's the value statement there?

Deborah Bradbard:

Well, I think a lot of times that's specific to each business. Part of my career path has been doing research on military spouse employment. And one of the things that we find when we talk to employers is the question you're asking is really about a business case. And what often ends up being the business case across the board is cost. It's really expensive to onboard people. You recruit, onboard, bring people into your ecosystem, and when they leave, you lose that investment. And so, when you can retain someone, there's a real economic benefit to the company. But beyond that, that's a tangible benefit. But there's intangibles, and I think one of those is loyalty to a company or an organization. And I think because military spouses do go through all these trials and tribulations to get into the workforce, when they do get a job, they want to stay and they want to do good work, they don't want to leave. And that can be a real benefit to any organization.

Bruce Moody:

So, you were recently inducted into the Military Spouse Employment Partnership. Again, we're calling it MSEP, we don't like acronyms, but people are going to call it that. So, there we go. Really would like you to talk about what that process was like, and what that might look like for the companies who are looking to join the partnership?

Deborah Bradbard:

So, I can't really speak to the details of the process because our actual HR department really worked with MSEP to make sure that our application met all their requirements. So, I can speak to what I did on my side, which I think might be of interest to some of your listeners. When I started my position and I knew we wanted to focus on military spouse employment, it was one of my first goals for the center that we join MSEP, because I knew I was going to go ask other employers to try to recruit military spouses, and I didn't want to ask other employers to do something that we weren't doing ourselves. So that's the first thing. But the other thing I want to mention is I just had to go to HR and ask them to join this. And when I asked them, they said, "Of course, we'll do this."

When I showed them the requirements, we were already doing many of the things that were expected by MSEP. We just need to make it formal. And so, I guess, what I want to say about that is all it took was me bringing it to their attention and making the ask. And it was an immediate yes, they immediately saw the value in this. And it certainly helps that Mara Gardner, who recently spoke at your MSEP convening, she's a military spouse herself so she knows about all the things that we're talking about today. So that certainly helped. But I think a lot of companies, if they just knew about MSEP, they would do the same thing.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah. How can organizations with a history of military support adapt to better include military spouses?

Deborah Bradbard:

I think the biggest thing that I've seen in my time working around this issue is that a lot of times organizations and companies sort of lump all military-connected employees together. So, veterans, service members, military spouses, they're not all the same. They don't encounter all the same issues. They may have different-looking career paths. If you're a service member, everyone served in the military, and there's certain similarities to that. Military spouses don't have that same homogeneity, I guess, is the word I would use. They don't have that same aspect of their backgrounds. And so, lumping all of those groups together in one initiative can sometimes be problematic, because you might do different things with each of those groups in terms of how you recruit, how you onboard, how you work with folks once they are onboarded, what you do to retain them.

Those all might look a little different for those groups. And so, I would encourage companies to think about those different groups differently and also think about which of those groups does it make sense for you to recruit for in terms of your own business case. Sometimes, it makes sense to recruit military spouses because you have a lot of remote and flexible positions, but those don't make sense for service members and vice versa. So, thinking about some of those differences and how they apply to your own organization or business.

Bruce Moody:

So, Virginia Tech has a long-standing reputation for innovation. And so, how do you see this shaping opportunities for military spouses within MSEP?

Deborah Bradbard:

Well, I think the biggest thing for me is that we are really strongly focused on tech. And part of our mission at the center will also be to focus on research. And when I say research, we want to identify opportunities that really align with the labor market. We want to look at the labor market, see where there are actual opportunities, where are people hiring? How much do the jobs pay? What are the certifications and qualifications that are needed to land a position in those companies? And we want to align our programs and services to what that research is telling us. We also want to partner with industry themselves and have them tell us, "Okay, we are looking for employees in such and such field." I'll use user experience is one that has come up a lot in conversation. So, we want companies to say, "We're looking for people who have a user experience background, and we think military spouses would make great candidates. Can we work together to build a program or certification that would build a pathway for them?"

Bruce Moody:

When we talk about the benefits of employers joining the Military Spouse Employment Partnership, a lot of people think that it's because we're wanting them to demonstrate patriotism, support for the military. It's actually not the case. Of course, we appreciate that, but really it's about the bottom line. It's for a company to meet its mission by bringing in military spouses. So, what would you say to companies who are considering joining the partnership, the benefits of bringing military spouses on board?

Deborah Bradbard:

Yeah. I mean, I agree with you. I think patriotic reasons are wonderful, but it is about the bottom line. This is always about aligning what you do with your own business case. And so, I always tell people to start there because your program will not succeed. You won't get leadership support for it if it doesn't align with your business case. But I think hiring military spouses does align with the business case for many, many companies. And the reason why is because military spouses are more highly educated than the general population. They often are adaptable. They often have cross-cultural experience that they worked in a lot of different environments, as we talked about earlier. They bring a lot of skill sets that employers are looking for. And so that, to me, is good for any business. So again, I would encourage companies to think about their own business case and how hiring military spouses align with it, but I think many folks will find that it does.

Bruce Moody:

Earlier you had mentioned that it was your HR team who went through the steps of getting them into the partnership. So, I guess, my last question to you is, if you are not in an HR capacity, you work a different task for an organization. And from where you sit, you see the value of bringing on military spouses. How do you recommend that person make the case to their HR leaders or whoever is going to make the steps to join the partnership? What should they bring to that group or that individual?

Deborah Bradbard:

Well, I think with any initiative that you're trying to initiate within an organization, you always need leadership support. And so, I think building your case on the ground level is great, and that's a great first step. But once you've done that, you always need to get leadership support. And so, the way I think about this is you want horizontal support and vertical support. So, what do I mean by that? You want support up and down the chain of command, but also across the chain of command. So, who in your organization are your colleagues? Who are other decision makers that maybe aren't at the top of the organization, but work across the organization who can either make a military spouse hiring initiative successful or unsuccessful?

Figuring out who's supportive and who is not supportive, and who are your allies and who are the folks who might want to poke holes in whatever it is you're trying to do. Sometimes when you think about, "Okay, who's going to poke holes?" And you think about, "Okay, how am I going to respond to that," in advance and be very proactive about it? Oftentimes, those are legitimate concerns. These things take resources. They take budgets, they take sometimes prioritizing one group, deprioritizes another. And so, these are things that organizations have to think about. There are real concerns that it's not good or bad, it's just the reality of running a business. So, I would encourage people to think about that horizontal and vertical support across the organization.

Bruce Moody:

Well, Deborah, I want to thank you for joining us today and sharing great, great information. Appreciate it.

Deborah Bradbard:

Thank you for having me.

Bruce Moody:

Absolutely. Deborah Bradbard is founding director of the Boeing Center for Veteran Transition and Military Families. Great to have you with us today. I want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you. There's a link in the program notes. You can send us a question or a comment about what you heard today. And be sure 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.