

Workplace Warriors: The Corporate Response to Deployment and Reintegration

Highlighting Best Practices in Human Resources and Disability Management



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Summary

The largest deployment of civilian soldiers since World War II has created a new type of employee: the “workplace warrior.” These employees need the understanding and support of their employers, from military deployment with the Reserves or National Guard to their eventual reintegration into the workplace.

The needs of the workplace warrior create some challenges for employers, including staffing issues for smaller firms to a commitment to best practices for larger companies. Civilian soldiers¹, however, bring back to the workplace enhanced leadership ability, loyalty, unique skills, training and knowledge which makes them even more valuable as employees. Further, employers remain committed to these employees in uniform, wanting to do the right thing for those who served their country and are now returning home to face what can be a difficult transition back to work and civilian life.

According to the Department of Veteran Affairs, for every one soldier who is killed in conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan and nearby areas, at least eight and as many as 16 are wounded or disabled.²

The Disability Management Employer Coalition (DMEC) convened its 2007 Workplace Warrior Think Tank to discuss the scope of challenges and opportunities around returning employees and to identify employer-based resources and strategies. As Think Tank participants discussed, to successfully reintegrate employees, companies must understand the range and magnitude of the challenges and identify resources (both government and their own) that are available.

Supporting employees from pre-deployment, through military service to post-deployment requires a comprehensive approach backed by a clear communication plan to explain the benefits and programs that apply to civilian soldiers and their dependents. Large companies may consider supplemental pay and benefits to ease the burden on employees, especially those who are more established in their careers and have financial obligations including mortgages, education costs for dependent children, retirement planning and the care of aging parents.

Companies who assign civilian employees to work in war zones or at military installations overseas face similar issues. They must provide support for these individuals who encounter many of the same dangers and physical or mental health risks as their colleagues in uniform. This also requires clear communication of all benefits and other resources that apply, including the federal Defense Base Act that covers civilian employees working with the military outside the United States.

¹ **Civilian soldiers** – U.S. workers who as Reservists or National Guard members have been called up to active duty for long-term assignments to the Iraq and Afghanistan military conflicts.

² Bilmes, Linda. “Soldiers Returning from Iraq and Afghanistan: The Long-term Costs of Providing Veterans Medical Care and Disability Benefits.” John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, January 2007.

Recommendations

The Workplace Warrior Think Tank participants recognized that the most effective way to support these employees and their dependents is through the use of best practices in human resources and disability management. The following recommendations are among the most important of the 15 practices identified in the full Workplace Warrior report available at the DMEC Web site.

Changes in an employee's behavior that could signal potential problems include:

- Arrives at work later than normal or leaves early on a regular basis
- Calls in absent at the last minute
- Withdraws from or avoids co-workers
- Exhibits outbursts of anger or increased irritability with colleagues
- Startles easily or seems anxious
- Reports sleeping difficulties or looks more tired
- Appears increasingly sullen or depressed
- Has difficulty performing his/her duties

- Establish a Military Leave and Return Policy covering employees who are members of the Reserves or National Guard. A key component of that policy is to communicate the range of benefits and programs that apply, including provisions of the federal Uniformed Services Employment and Re-Employment Rights Act of 1994 (USERRA), which requires job protection for all employees who are deployed regardless of the size of the employer.
- Inform civilian employees (such as those who work for defense contractors) who are assigned to work with the United States military overseas of the benefits programs available to them. In particular, employees should understand the federal Defense Base Act, which will cover them during their overseas assignment.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and behavioral health services to help returning employees (including members of the military and civilian employees assigned overseas) who have been diagnosed with or who are exhibiting symptoms of major depression, generalized anxiety or post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Use good general disability management practices that apply, including:
 - maintaining communication during absences;
 - celebrating employees' return to work;
 - giving employees adequate information about benefits prior to deployment;
 - allowing time to reintegrate after an extended absence;
 - considering accommodations to assist the employee's return to productivity;
 - recapping changes while employees were gone;
 - establishing red flags to help supervisors identify potential problems (see left column); and
 - obtaining commitment from senior management to ensure that programs are given strong support and a cultural presence.
- Offer sensitivity training to managers, supervisors and co-workers on issues and challenges faced by civilian soldiers during deployment and post-deployment.
- Provide mentoring programs to link returning civilian soldiers with veterans in the workforce. The commonality of military experience may forge bonds among colleagues to support the successful reintegration of returning workplace warriors.

While the think tank focused on workplace warriors, a discussion of the needs of these civilian soldiers revealed lessons that employers can apply to the broader population of employees who return to the workforce after a serious illness or injury, long-term leave or a life-altering event.

The Importance of Employee Assistance Programs

“Estimates indicate that three out of five veterans probably have PTSD to some degree. We need to educate companies about traumatic brain injury and PTSD so people can understand and be aware of the issue.”

Bill Dozier, Assistant Director, National Veterans Outreach Services, Veteran of Foreign Wars (VFW)

One of the critical resources for all employee populations, in particular civilian soldiers, employees who were assigned to work with the military overseas, and their dependents, is an effective EAP.

While many companies offer employee assistance programs, these services can vary and may not be equipped to address the full spectrum of behavioral health issues that affect a significant percentage of workplace warriors and civilian employees in war zones. Particular challenges include PTSD and depression, as well as personal, family and financial strains that can result from deployment or a lengthy overseas assignment in a dangerous location. Professionals administering these services should maintain a positive, encouraging attitude to help returning employees transition back to their daily lives.

An EAP is also important to support those employees whose spouses or other family members or loved ones have been deployed. In many cases, the employee who is affected by the military deployment is the spouse or family member who remains at home, struggling to continue with work, family life and personal responsibilities.

Post-deployment, some civilian soldiers will return with a disability, either a physical or behavioral health condition. According to the Department of Veteran Affairs, for every one soldier who is killed in conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan and nearby areas, at least eight and as many as 16 are wounded or disabled. Physical injuries include amputations, sometimes of multiple limbs. Military personnel who received concussions caused by explosions may suffer from traumatic brain injury (TBI). Behavioral health issues may involve PTSD, which is commonly present to varying degrees among many returning soldiers, as well as major depression and anxiety disorders. According to a November 14, 2007 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, U.S. Department of Defense clinicians identified that 20.3 percent of active and 42.4 percent of reserve component soldiers required mental health treatment. This incidence rate was identified through either an initial post-deployment health assessment or re-assessment that occurred approximately six months later.



Conclusion

Many businesses with disability management, absence management and return-to-work policies and procedures pride themselves on their innovative programs that assist employees who experience disabilities. Employers need to extend this culture of accommodation to military veterans and returning civilians, especially those who are coping with a disability, as well as to all who are readjusting both personally and professionally to civilian life and life on American soil.

To view the full report from the Wounded Warrior Think Tank as well as a list of resources for employers, employees, significant others, and dependents, visit the DMEC Web site (www.dmec.org).

The workplace warrior is not a short-term phenomenon, regardless of the duration of U.S. military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. Repercussions and delayed effects of the war experience will be felt in the workplace for decades to come. Medical and disability issues for civilian soldiers require a long-term, comprehensive response by employers in order to retain these valuable employees and benefit from the knowledge, skills, abilities, training and experience they bring to the workplace. Doing the right thing for veterans, such as using the best practices suggested by the Wounded Warrior Think Tank, represents an appropriate corporate response by employers, helping to assure a positive and ultimately successful reintegration of our workplace warriors.



“When a person has been gone for a year, and then comes from a war-fighting environment to the Booz Allen Hamilton environment, that individual needs support...We’re committed to drawing from different areas of the firm so that these returning employees feel valued and integrated back into the organization.”

Andrew R. Gilbert, PMP, Booz Allen Hamilton, founding member of the firm’s Armed Services Forum and a military veteran with service time in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Iraq



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