

Workplace Warriors:

The Corporate Response to Deployment and Reintegration

Highlighting Best Practices in Human Resources and Disability Management

Authored by:

Marcia Carruthers, MBA, ARM, CPDM,

President and CEO

Disability Management Employer Coalition (DMEC)

Carol A. Harnett, M.S., GBDS,

Vice President, National Practice Leader,

Group Disability & Life Practices

The Hartford Financial Services Group, Inc.



**DISABILITY MANAGEMENT
EMPLOYER COALITION**

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Workplace Warriors Think Tank Participants:

Carol A. Harnett, M.S., GBDS, Think Tank Co-chair

Vice President, National Practice Leader, Group Disability & Life Practices,
The Hartford

Marcia Carruthers, MBA, ARM, CPDM, Think Tank Co-chair

President and CEO, Disability Management Employer Coalition

Stacey W. Papa, LCSW, PMP, Meeting Chair

Senior Business Project Consultant, Group Disability & Life Practices, The Hartford

Daniel M. Arkins, Jr., Regional Director, Disability, MetLife

Colonel. Margaret Cameron, U.S. Army Reserve

Edmund C. Corcoran, Esquire, Director, Integrated Disability Programs, Raytheon Company

William C. Dozier, Assistant Director, National Veterans Service, Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States

Thomas Emerick, President, Emerick Consulting, LLC, Retired Wal-Mart executive managing disability and benefit programs

Andrew R. Gilbert, PMP, Associate, Booz Allen Hamilton, Inc.

Kenneth Mitchell, Ph.D., Vice President Health & Productivity, Unum

Cheryl M. Pasa, CEBS, SPHR, CPDM, Executive Director, Integrated Disability Management, USAA

Kathleen Henrichs, Ph.D., Henrichs & Associates, Facilitator

Patricia Crisafulli, Editor

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The Hartford, MetLife, and Unum

Executive Summary

The corporate response to the military deployment and reintegration of employees is nothing less than a call to action. Through its 2007 Workplace Warriors Think Tank, the Disability Management Employer Coalition (DMEC) has taken up the cause of educating employers. Using best practices in human resources and disability management, companies can better meet the needs of employees who were deployed to serve their country in a time of war and who are returning with new skills, experiences, and even greater potential to contribute to the workplace.

Similarly, companies whose employees are assigned to work in a war zone or at military installations outside the United States should provide resources and support for these individuals. Critical to both employee populations is an effective Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to address behavioral health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression, as well as personal, family, and financial challenges which can result from deployment or a lengthy overseas assignment in a dangerous location.

Successful reintegration of employees, particularly those with physical or mental disabilities, requires education and commitment on the part of employers. Companies must understand the scope and magnitude of the challenges and identify resources (both governmental and their own) that are available to assist these employees. Further, lessons learned from addressing the needs of citizen soldiers can be applied to a broader employee population of individuals who are returning to the workforce after a serious illness or injury, long-term leave, or life-altering event.

The workplace warrior is not a short-term phenomenon, regardless of the duration of U.S. military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. The medical and disability issues for citizen 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.

Introduction

The largest deployment of citizen soldiers since World War II has created a new type of employee: the “workplace warrior.” Supporting these employees at every phase—as they prepare for deployment, during their military service in Afghanistan or Iraq, and as they are reintegrated into the workforce—is a top priority for employers across every industry and for many U.S. government agencies, as well.

The reality, however, is that military deployment of employees is a challenge for many reasons and on a variety of levels. For large corporations with a workforce numbering in the tens of thousands, only a small percentage may be affected. The issue for these employers is to make certain that their workplace warriors do not “get lost” in the overall employee population.

Regardless of how small the contingent of workplace warriors, large employers need to take the extra step of establishing military leave and return policies that include issues such as supplemental salary to be paid during all or part of the deployment (if the employer chooses and can afford to do so). There is often a significant difference between military pay and benefits and the salary and coverage that more experienced employees typically receive. Large employers should ensure that returning citizen soldiers have access to support services, such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) that can address mental health, family, and personal issues, as well as mentoring as they transition back into the workplace.

Companies whose employees are assigned to work in war zones and military installations outside the U.S. should recognize that these individuals may not receive the same recognition and emotional support as their colleagues in uniform. Nonetheless, they face many of the same mental and emotional issues as well as risk of physical injury or even death. Services for these employees need to include an effective EAP and a clearly communicated benefits plan, including details about the federal Defense Base Act coverage that applies to this workforce in the event of injury or death.

For small companies, deployment presents a different challenge. Mandatory compliance with the federal Uniformed Services Employment and Re-Employment Rights Act of 1994 (USERRA), requires job protection for all employees who are deployed *regardless* of the size of the employer. This can create obvious staffing concerns. Even if only one or two employees are deployed, hiring replacement workers could greatly impact productivity and profitability.

The challenge created by deployment, however, also brings opportunities. In addition to the knowledge, skills, abilities, training, and expertise that these employees possessed before deployment, workplace warriors return with additional experience, new skills, enhanced leadership potential, and other qualities that make them even more valuable.

Some of these employees will return home with a disability, whether a physical or behavioral health condition. According to estimates, for every one soldier who is killed in the conflict, at least eight and as many as 16 are wounded or physically disabled. Physical injuries include amputations, sometimes of multiple limbs. Military personnel

who have received concussions caused by explosions may suffer from traumatic brain injury (TBI). Behavioral health issues may involve post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is commonly present to varying degrees among many returning soldiers, as well as major depression and anxiety disorders.

The Disability Management Employer Coalition (DMEC) convened its 2007 Workplace Warriors Think Tank to respond to the needs of citizen soldiers before, during, and after deployment. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the scope of the challenges and depth of opportunities and to identify resources and strategies to support employees. Think tank participants included leaders in disability management, human resources, benefit plan design and administration, and other corporate leaders—including several individuals who are also military veterans and Reservists who were once part of the ranks of workplace warriors. Two military representatives—one a Colonel in the United States Army Reserve and the other a military veteran who is now a representative of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)—were also part of the think tank.

As a result of the discussions, several best practices in human resources and disability management were identified. A few examples (see Utilizing Best Practices in Human Resources and Disability Management, Page 24), include:

- Establishing a Military Leave and Return Policy
- Conducting performance appraisals pre-deployment to establish a baseline for the returning employee and his/her manager
- Maintaining contact with the employee and family during deployment, and offering support to employees whose family members or other loved ones have been deployed
- Offering sensitivity training to managers, supervisors, and co-workers on issues and challenges faced by citizen soldiers during deployment and post-deployment
- Providing mentoring programs to link returning citizen soldiers with veterans in the workforce
- Evaluating Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) for their ability to identify and address PTSD and other behavioral-health related issues.

“Until you start asking, you don’t realize how many former or current military people there are in your workplace. It only took me one email to find four people with prior military experience and two others from military families.”

–Daniel M. Arkins, Jr.,
Regional Director,
Disability, MetLife and a
Lt. Colonel in the Army
National Guard serving a
tour in 2003-2004 in Iraq.

In addition to best practices, select resources are listed in the Appendix of this white paper. Additional resources, articles, and tools are maintained and updated online at the DMEC web site, www.dmec.org.

One untapped resource that many companies have within their ranks is former military veterans. Regardless of when or where they served, these individuals have a common bond with those who are currently serving or who are now returning from deployment. Often these employee veterans are willing to help and are waiting to be asked to lend their support to their fellow Reservists, National Guard members, and other military veterans as they transition back to the workplace.

During the course of their discussion, members of the 2007 Workplace Warriors Think Tank reiterated a strong commitment to veterans, especially those individuals who are

“I’d hire a vet any day of the week. Just making it through basic training means they have valuable skills. Most people I know have benefited greatly from their military service.”

–Thomas Emerick,
President, Emerick
Consulting LLC, Retired
Wal-Mart executive
managing disability and
benefit programs and a
Vietnam Veteran.

the focus of this report: employees who are or have been deployed to serve with the U.S. military and who now face what can be a difficult transition to civilian life. The needs of civilian employees who are assigned to work in a war zone for months at a time were also emphasized. Whether speaking as employers, human resources professionals, or plan design experts, think tank participants were firm in their intention to support these employees before, during, and after deployment, for the good of the individual—and the employer.

Serving the Workplace Warrior

There is a sense of awareness and concern in the employer community regarding workplace warriors. This issue hits home among employers in a very real way when citizen soldiers temporarily leave their desks and work stations to assume military duties.

Whether on the job, in the community, or in the media, we see the faces of the workplace warriors. Reservists and National Guard members are usually older than the average U.S. soldier. Reservists are typically in their mid- to late 30s (and sometimes older), well established in their careers, and hold financial obligations such as mortgages, education costs for dependent children, retirement planning, and aging parents.

Patriotism and the desire to do what is right and fair to help those who are serving their country are strong motivators among many Americans. To be most effective in their efforts, education is critical. Among employers, there must be increased awareness not only of the challenges—for example, how to best accommodate those employees who are returning from military service with physical or behavioral health disabilities—but also the knowledge of what can and should be done. Supervisors and co-workers who engage in one-on-one interactions with workplace warriors need greater sensitivity and understanding in order to contribute to an employee's successful reintegration.

The Veteran as a Valuable Employee

When an employee in the Reserve or National Guard is deployed, that individual leaves the workforce with valuable, knowledge, skills, abilities, and expertise. During his/her military service, that individual will receive additional training and have a variety of other experiences which further enhance the person's value. Some areas will be skill-related; for example, additional training in information technology (IT). Returning veterans possess many other personal and professional assets, as well, including:

- Leadership, including the ability to lead as well as to follow
- Maturity, in judgment, actions, and accountability
- Transferable skills, including new areas of expertise and enhanced knowledge
- Resilience, to cope with and overcome challenges
- Motivation, including loyalty and punctuality
- Solution-oriented approaches to problems
- Team attitude and a willingness to help
- Willingness to take initiative to do what needs to be done
- Expanded network of contacts, including potential business relationships

“The heart of it is companies caring about their employees, just as the military cares about the soldiers.”

–Col. Margaret Cameron, U.S. Army Reserve, 27 years

Educating Employers

Education is crucial for employers, including human resources professionals, managers, and supervisors, to understand the needs of workplace warriors and to assist those returning veterans with disabilities. Resources need to be targeted for employees who are assigned to work in war zones and at overseas military installations, who face many of the same physical and mental health risks as deployed citizen soldiers.

To understand the issues surrounding the deployment and reintegration of citizen soldiers, one must first consider the magnitude of those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to the Department of Defense, as of September 30, 2006, over 1.4 million unique troops were deployed to the Global War on Terror. As of November 2007, Global Security reports the total number of United States soldiers wounded in action was 28,451 with an additional 3,831 soldiers killed in action.

“According to the Pentagon, improvised explosive devices or IEDs now account for nearly 80 percent of all military deaths in Iraq. That figure would be even higher if it were not for dramatic advances in battlefield medicine. Soldiers and marines are surviving attacks that would have killed soldiers in earlier wars. And those who lose limbs have a quality of life impossible for an amputee a generation ago.”¹

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s office reports that as of January 31, 2007, 416,990 National Guard and Reservists were deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Over 20 percent of these citizen soldiers have been deployed more than once since 2001. They represent 24 percent of the troops and are mobilized for an average of 18 months. *The Washington Post* reported on March 2, 2007 that 88 percent of the National Guard and Reserve troops were so poorly equipped they were rated “not ready.” In addition, 100,000 civilian contractors are working in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Citizen soldiers with significant injuries or disabling conditions may require accommodations in order to return to their jobs. Some assistance from the Veterans Administration may be available to help accommodate returning military members in the civilian workforce. The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) of the Veteran Benefits Administration is a national employment resource for employers, providing assistance with hiring veterans with service-connected disabilities. For more information visit the VR&E web site at http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/emp_resources.htm.

In addition to physical disabilities, some returning soldiers may suffer from TBI as a result of one or multiple concussions incurred during explosions in combat. Further, an appreciable percentage of military service people have behavioral health issues, including major depression, generalized anxiety, and PTSD.

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 treatment². This incidence rate was identified through either an initial post-deployment health assessment or a re-assessment that occurred approximately six

months later. Soldiers reported more behavioral health concerns and were referred at significantly higher rates for treatment during the re-assessment than from the initial assessment.

The Employer Response

“It’s important to pull together all of our thoughts and best practices so that employers can respond, even if only one person in their workforce is affected. Employers want and need to support the employee who has been deployed, and to help the co-workers and families as the workplace warrior comes home.

We also can’t forget about the civilians who are working in support positions in the conflict areas.”

–Carol A. Harnett, M.S., GBDS, Vice President, National Practice Leader, Group Disability & Life Practices, The Hartford.

“Understand that estimates indicate that three out of five veterans probably have PTSD to some degree. However, many returning veterans have yet to seek treatment or apply for benefits. 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, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and a former Marine who served in Vietnam.

Many companies with disability management, absence management, and return-to-work policies and procedures pride themselves on their innovative programs to assist employees who experience disabilities as a result of occupational or non-occupational illnesses and injuries. This culture of accommodation needs to be extended to military veterans and returning civilians, especially those who are coping with a physical or behavioral health disability, as well as to all who are readjusting to civilian life and life on American soil, both personally and in the workforce.

The effect of the war is not limited to soldiers. According to James Moody, an associate professor of sociology at Duke University, as many as 6.5 million Americans know someone who has been killed or injured in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Employers should be sensitive to the fact that their employees whose spouses, significant others, family members, and other loved ones have been deployed or are in the process of preparing for deployment. Emotional adjustments can be difficult, triggering questions, fears, and anxiety. Personal and family issues and financial problems may arise when a spouse or other family member is deployed.

One of the critical resources for all employee populations, particularly citizen 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.

Understanding Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

In addition to war veterans, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can affect those who have experienced other traumatic incidents such as kidnapping, serious accidents, natural disasters, and violent attacks such as mugging, rape, or torture. The disorder can be accompanied by depression, substance abuse, or anxiety.

Individuals suffering from PTSD sometimes become easily irritated or have violent outbursts. In severe cases, individuals may have trouble working or socializing. They may also have sleep problems, depression, feel detached or numb, and may be easily startled. Sufferers may lose interest in things they used to enjoy and may have trouble feeling affectionate. Other symptoms include irritability and uncharacteristic aggressiveness.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is diagnosed only if the symptoms last for more than a month. In those who have PTSD, symptoms usually begin within three months of the trauma. Occasionally, the illness doesn't show up until years after the traumatic event. While some people recover within six months, others have symptoms that last much longer. In some cases, the condition may be chronic. Support from family and friends can help speed recovery while antidepressants and anxiety-reducing medications can ease the symptoms of depression and sleep problems. –Source: ComPsych

Supporting Deployed Reservists and Civilian Employees

“Before our employees leave for an overseas assignment, they go through discussions regarding all aspects of HR issues including: benefits, health, EAP, and so forth. They understand in detail the Defense Base Act coverage...highlighting medical, indemnity, and surviving spouse and children benefits through an informational brochure. We explain what would happen if they should become the victim of an attack, even though we have not experienced (employee) death claims and injuries are often minor in nature.”

–Edmund C. Corcoran, Esq.,
Director, Integrated
Disability Programs
Raytheon Company

“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...from a managerial point of view to ease him or her back into the job.

We recognize that this person brings a lot of value to the organization, including relationships they established during military service.

Companies should identify best practices that assist returning veterans transition back to the workplace. Employers can apply these best practices to other segments of the employee population, including workers who are recovering from catastrophic illness, injury or other life-altering events.

Many of the same pre- and post-deployment issues faced by Reservists and National Guard members apply to company employees assigned to work in war zones and at overseas military installations. These individuals do not face the same salary and job-related issues as those who are on military leave because they remain full-time employees; nonetheless communication remains crucial. Employees must understand the scope of their benefits, including EAP services, as well as the federal Defense Base Act, which covers individuals employed at military, air or naval installations outside the U.S. who are injured or killed. (For more information, visit www.dol.gov/esa/owcp/dlhwc/dba.htm.)

Case Study: Booz Allen Hamilton

Armed Services Forum

In 2003, consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton created its Armed Services Forum to bring together employees who were members of the Reserve or National Guard, as well as veterans on staff. The purpose was to extend outreach and professional development, while ensuring that the firm realizes the full diversity benefit of hiring service members and veterans, including enhanced business development relationships through veterans' and service members' networks of contacts.

The forum faced its first major challenge after Reservists and National Guard members were deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq, which reduced the leadership of that group. Returning to their jobs six months to a year later, many of these forum leaders subsequently left the firm voluntarily. Booz Allen Hamilton quickly identified that it had a problem reintegrating staff—an issue that was elevated to the highest levels among the firm's leadership.

Out of these initial challenges has come a strong commitment at Booz Allen Hamilton to more purposefully extend its diversity initiatives to veterans and service members, and to enhance outreach to those who have been deployed and to employees who are returning to their jobs after active duty. Its Armed Service Forum has established an intranet site to connect members and foster better communication among military veterans who often have a natural rapport through their shared experience.

In addition, Booz Allen Hamilton created a Military Transition Forum to help individuals as they bridge the gap from the military to the firm. Through focus groups, surveys, and interviews, the Military Transition Forum identified major cultural differences between Booz Allen Hamilton and the military. For example, the military operates with mostly explicit rules of conduct, a hierarchical structure, and defined rules and status, while Booz Allen Hamilton uses mostly implicit rules of conduct, a matrix structure, and flexible roles and status, particularly as individuals are assigned to lead or support teams. In the military, communication is “a command and control” style, while Booz

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.

Allen uses a "consultative" style. By identifying and analyzing the two culture contexts, Booz Allen Hamilton was able to help employees make a successful transition from active duty service into its civilian workforce.

In addition to the targeted affinity groups, the Armed Services Forum membership is open to all employees so that its intellectual capital can be shared broadly across the firm. The Armed Services Forum provides additional value to employees outside its traditional affinity group, such as former FBI and Secret Service agents, who are culturally aligned with those serving in the military, as well as non-veterans who became part of the forum to further their personal understanding.

Utilizing Best Practices in Human Resources and Disability Management

Many employers already have the in-depth resources in place to meet the needs of workplace warriors. Companies can apply their existing best practices in human resources and disability management to help ease the transitions of employees as they leave for military service and return. The lessons learned from assisting workplace warriors (See “Crossover Opportunities” on page 30) can also improve outreach and support to other employees, including those with severe illnesses, injuries and other life-altering events.

Think tank participants identified several best practices in human resources and disability management that are applicable to the workplace warrior population. Not all of these practices can be adopted by all employers. Small businesses, in particular, may experience both a financial and human resource burden when meeting mandatory compliance with USERRA. The following strategies are designed to stimulate discussion among employers, provide an outline for model program development and more in-depth solutions to address the needs of citizen soldiers from pre-deployment to transition back to the workforce.

Pre-Deployment

- Establish a Military Leave and Return Policy, outlining what needs to be communicated to employees and/or their families and dependents. This includes USERRA requirements and any supplemental salary or support programs that the employer may choose to offer.
- Discuss with employees the provisions of USERRA, which requires job protection for all employees who are deployed—regardless of the size of the employer. (For more information, see the USERRA regulations on the U.S. Department of Labor web site at <http://www.dol.gov/vets/regs/fedreg/final/2006002966.htm>.) Applicable state laws should also be reviewed with employees.
- Give details of compensation and benefits related to the employee’s deployment, as well as how dependents will be affected. This includes information on Tricare benefits for dependents, which is administered by the military (refer to <http://www.tricare.mil/>), as well as any supplemental packages that the employer may choose to offer.
- 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 addition to services such as EAP, employees should understand the federal Defense Base Act, which will cover them during their overseas assignment.
- Conduct a performance appraisal to establish a baseline for when the deployed soldier returns to work. This is essential for those who are deployed

for a year and could be working for a different supervisor or manager upon their return.

- Obtain senior management support for all programs. When the “C-suite” (CEO, CFO and COO) endorses an endeavor, there is a greater chance it will become part of the corporate culture. At the same time, additional management buy-in must be achieved for the initiative to be successful. Leadership support needs to be communicated to department heads, managers, and supervisors who are interacting on the front line with employees.
- Use cost/benefit analysis for all programs in order to set goals, determine effectiveness, and garner management support.

During Deployment

- Maintain communication with the employee and the employees’ family through appropriate personal contact, while respecting individual privacy. Company newsletters and emails from colleagues can help the employee and the family feel connected and cared for during deployment, which will also help prepare for a successful reintegration in the future.
- Invite deployed employees’ families to company social functions, such as annual picnics and holiday parties. This outreach to the employees’ families helps retain ties and reminds co-workers and supervisors that although these individuals have been deployed, they are still employees.
- Conduct sensitivity training for managers and co-workers. Provide education on how and when to ask questions, knowing that some returning employees may be reluctant to share details about their deployment or may only do so with certain individuals at certain times.

Post-Deployment/Reintegration

“Best practices such as providing mentoring post-deployment by another veteran or supporting supervisors with sensitivity training on how to ask certain questions are great ideas that can be adopted by virtually any employer. They can be done at any level and for very little cost.”

–Stacey W. Papa, LCSW, PMP, Sr. Business Project Consultant, Group Disability & Life Practices, The Hartford.

- Welcome returning employees, either with a banner, a reception or luncheon, or other recognition. Let these co-workers know that they were missed and that the company and their colleagues are glad to have them back.
- Ensure that the returning employees receive any pay raises, 401(k) contributions, or advancements and promotions they are due in order to be “made whole.” The time employees were deployed should also be included in their company service as applied to seniority or retirement. Employees should be informed about any changes in management, policies, business practices, direct supervision, and reporting relationships.
- Investigate the need for accommodations for employees who return with a disability, whether physical or behavioral health. Employer assistance for many such accommodations may be obtained through the Veterans Administration.

- Evaluate the effectiveness of the company’s EAP for returning employees who are exhibiting symptoms of major depression, generalized anxiety, or PTSD. An EAP referral may be appropriate for any employee who is away from the workplace for several weeks or more due to illness, injury, extended leave, or other reasons.
- Establish a mentoring program to link returning employees with military veterans in the workforce. Mentoring is vital outreach post-deployment, providing a knowledgeable, empathetic listener through a supportive network in the workplace.

Case Study: USAA

Keeping the Connection

USAA seeks to be the provider of choice for the military community by providing a full range of highly competitive financial products and services to members, associates, and their family members. USAA has an obvious affinity to the military. Beyond its lines of business, there are many active military, veterans, and former military service people within its employee ranks, and top executive at the firm and the Board of Directors include former military officers. (The CEO retired from the Army as a Major General.)

USAA uses several of the best practices in human resources and disability management to assist its employees from pre-deployment until they return to their jobs. The company’s employee intranet site offers self-questionnaire for major life events, including military leave. The assessment includes questions such as whether finances and insurance are up-to-date and correct, and whether one’s spouse knows all necessary details about the household, finances, etc.

Beyond compliance with USERRA and other applicable Federal and state laws, the organization provides additional benefits and programs to employees. California, Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Minnesota, Nebraska, and New York have enacted State Family Military Leave for eligible employees who want to be off work to spend time with a spouse who has been deployed during a period of military conflict. USAA is taking the extra step to extend that policy to all of their eligible employees.

As part of its pre-deployment protocols, USAA People Services recommends that the deploying employee’s supervisor document the employee’s performance rating to establish a baseline of performance. This is helpful should there be a change in supervisor between the employee’s deployment and return to work. This protocol also establishes a rating for pay increases which may be due to the returning employee. Benefits and resources are discussed in detail, both pre- and post-deployment, so that employees will be aware of programs and support they can access if they so choose.

USAA works to keep the connection between its workforce and those employees who are serving or previously served in the military. The company holds events on Veteran’s Day and Memorial Day to honor veterans and their families, as well as service men and women from nearby military bases. USAA employees are

“USAA thinks of and lives for the military. Our employees are coming out of the work environment, to deployment and then back into the work environment. By the very means of who we serve as our Members, we have a vital interest in the treatment of our active military and veterans and their families.”
 –Cheryl Pasa, CEBS, SPHR, CPDM, Executive Director of USAA Time Off Programs

encouraged to invite military men and women from the local military bases into their homes for Thanksgiving and other holidays. Documentary films are aired on the military experience, and the company even hosts fun events, such as a military ration “tasting.” (Non-military employees commented that it “wasn’t that bad,” while older veterans good-naturedly added, “It’s better than we had in my day.”)

Fostering and maintaining connections with the military, particularly employees called to active duty and their families, is vital for USAA. With a welcoming environment and outreach services, citizen soldiers who return to their jobs are more apt to have a successful transition.

Crossover Opportunities to Other Employee Populations

“There is a significant crossover on the return-to-work side of the veteran transition issue to anyone who has been off work for a long period of time, such as due to a serious illness or injury . There are best practices that could be applied to this group of employees, as well as to veterans. It is a matter of just doing the right thing.”

–Marcia Carruthers, MBA,
ARM, CPDM,
President and CEO,
Disability Management
Employer Coalition
(DMEC)

Providing support, resources, and information through clear communication to employees as they prepare for deployment and return home is simply a matter of good human resources practices. Employers can apply lessons learned from effective outreach, education, and support programs designed to assist workplace warriors to all employee populations. Although the percentage of employees who are deployed for military service may be small, there is a connection to much larger groups, including employees returning to work after severe illnesses or injuries, extended leave and other life-altering events.

As employers reflect on the resources and programs they already have in place, or are reviewing for consideration, to meet the needs of returning citizen soldiers, they benefit in a valuable exercise that assesses their human resources capabilities and disability management programs. Companies should examine their corporate cultures to determine whether their policies and procedures effectively support diversity, promote equal opportunity, and emphasize the abilities, not the disabilities of their employees. The following is a list of disability management best practices to stimulate employers' assessments of their own best practices.

Disability Management Best Practices

“It’s a common occurrence, whether someone has lived in a war zone because of deployment, or the person is a cancer survivor..... Survivors are going to re-engage as a person who has gone through an intense experience creating changed priorities or a different point of view on life. It’s important that employers pay attention to these changes.”

–Kenneth Mitchell, Ph.D.,
Vice President,
Health & Productivity,
UNUM

1. Maintain communication during absences, from supervisors to employees, as well as to the family, with cards and emails. Keep up with newsletters and other company communication.
2. Celebrate employees' return to work, whether returning from deployment or disability.
3. Give employees adequate information about benefits, whether they have disabilities or are being deployed or reintegrated.
4. Allow time to reintegrate after an extended absence. Don't expect employees to be 100 percent the day they return.
5. Be sensitive about asking about accidents, illness, disability or deployment.
6. Consider accommodations to assist the person's return to productivity.
7. Recap changes that took place while employees were gone.
8. Enroll returning employees in new employee training to reorient them to the workplace.
9. Understand that coming back too quickly can be as bad at times as not returning soon enough. While companies often emphasize early return to work, for some employees coming back too quickly poses a problem.
10. Obtain commitment from senior management for disability management, absence management, and pre- and post-deployment programs to ensure that the services are given appropriate financial support and a cultural presence.

11. Arrange to have an EAP counselor talk with any returning employees about coping mechanisms, family and financial issues.
12. Establish red flags to help supervisors identify potential problems.
13. Emphasize what individuals **can do**, not what they can't do.
14. Be sensitive to how someone may have changed through a life-altering experience, such as cancer, a major auto accident, or deployment.

Summary

Many challenges face employers today that affect profitability and productivity, from global competition to economic uncertainty. The greatest asset any company has is its human capital. A diverse employee population with a wide array of knowledge, skills, abilities, expertise, and life experiences enriches the work environment. Among these valued employees are military veterans, including those entering the workforce from active duty, as well as Reservists and National Guard members who were deployed and are transitioning back to their jobs.

The largest deployment of citizen soldiers since World War II demands a proactive response on the part of employers. Businesses need well-established policies and procedures to assist these employees as they prepare to leave their jobs temporarily for military service and as they return to civilian life and work. Employers can apply many of the same support programs and resources for civilian employees that they offer to those who work in war zones and at overseas military installations for months at a time.

The employer response will involve individuals across many company departments, from the executive level to human resources, managers, supervisors and co-workers. The payoff for these efforts, however, is enormous. Companies benefit from the skills, knowledge, and other qualities that workplace warriors possess, while affirming a corporate culture that values and practices diversity.

The DMEC and its 2007 Workplace Warriors Think Tank remains committed to educating employers on what can and should be done to support citizen soldiers, those who are assigned to work in war zones, and related populations of employees who return to work after an extended leave, serious illness or injury. Best practices in human resources and disability management can ease transitions out of and back into the workplace. Employers should review and use existing programs first, as they may already have the resources and programs they need, although some may be enhanced to be more effective. As one think tank member observed, "It is the cutting edge of common sense."

The issue of the workplace warrior will not end any time soon, no matter what political decisions are made regarding the military engagement in the Middle East. For years to come, there will be those who need additional support, whether they are returning from military service with significant physical or mental health issues or they need extensive therapy or retraining due to a disability acquired outside of military conflict. This is a continuum of service provided to all employees who possess valuable knowledge, skills, abilities and training, who have served their country in a time of war, and are now returning home—the workplace warriors.

References

1. ABC News, "War Amputees Beat the Odds – And the Competition," June 2, 2007, <http://abcnews.go.com/WN/Health/story?id=3239116&page=1&CMP=OTC-RSSFeeds0312>
2. Milliken, Charles, S., MD; Auchterlonie, Jennifer L., MS; and Hoge, Charles W., MD, "Longitudinal Assessment of Mental Health Problems Among Active and Reserve Component Soldiers Returning from the Iraq War," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, November 14, 2007, Vo. 298, No. 18.

Appendix – Select Resources

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs - <http://www.va.gov/>

Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) - <http://www.esgr.org/userra.asp>

Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) <http://www.esgr.org/>

ESGR's "Employer Resource Guide for Business Leaders"
http://www.esgr.org/files/toolkit/ESGR_HR_Guide_Final.pdf

Defense Base Act (for civilian employees assigned to work in war zones and at military installations outside the United States – <http://www.defensebaseact.com/>

President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors
<http://www.pccww.gov/index.html>

Veterans and Families – Homecoming Guide
<http://www.veteransandfamilies.org/homecomingpreparednessguide.html>

For a more complete list of Resources, please see the DMEC web site at:
<http://www.dmec.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=232>

The information presented in *Workplace Warriors: The Corporate Response to Deployment and Reintegration* has been compiled from Sources and documents believed to be reliable and represent the best professional judgment of the authors and all Workplace Warriors Think Tank Participants and Sponsors, including but not limited to Disability Management Employer Coalition, Inc. [DMEC], The Hartford, MetLife, Unum and their subsidiaries. No representations, warranties or assurances are made regarding the accuracy of the information presented, nor is any responsibility assumed or implied by the author, DMEC, or any of the Think Tank participants for any damage or loss resulting from inaccuracies or omissions.

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