

Insight to Action:

LEVERAGING THE POTENTIAL OF MILITARY SPOUSE TALENT



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Introduction

As the U.S. approaches three years of low unemployment with rates under 5%, one segment of the population has largely been left behind. Military spouses—the husbands, wives, and partners of active-duty members of the U.S. armed forces—have long faced high rates of unemployment and underemployment. **The most conservative estimate of the military spouse unemployment rate is a shocking 21%**, according to the U.S. Department of Defense, and has hovered at or above that level for the past decade.¹

At the same time, widespread low unemployment has made it difficult for employers to source and hire individuals with the skills they need. In fact, **76% of HR professionals said it has been difficult to fill open positions over the past 12 months.**




These insights are both a cause for concern and a major opportunity for employers, military spouses, and the nation's economy. To shed light on this potential and what organizations can do to seize it, SHRM and the SHRM Foundation, with support from USAA, surveyed HR professionals about a range of issues related to recruiting, hiring, and retaining military spouses. These findings provide a road map to understanding the current landscape for hiring and retaining military spouses, as well as actionable steps employers can take to harness the immense talent and expertise of this talent pool.



Profile of a Military Spouse

A military spouse is a spouse or domestic partner of an active-duty member of the armed forces.

Most military spouses are:

-  Female
-  35 or younger
-  Highly educated²

¹ www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/Story/Article/3558394/military-spouses-to-gain-more-job-ops-thanks-to-growing-employment-partnership

² www.hiringourheroes.org/stories/military-spouses-in-the-workplace

Key Insights

- **There is a notable gap between organizations' interest and execution when it comes to hiring military spouses.** Nearly 4 in 5 HR professionals agreed (to any extent) that their organization finds hiring military spouses appealing, yet only 13% agreed/strongly agreed that their organization is effective at hiring from this talent pool.
- **Most organizations (84%) have no concrete program in place for recruiting and hiring military spouses, reflecting a broader lack of awareness about the unique needs of this group and how to target them.** However, organizations with recruitment programs for military spouses are finding success: HR professionals from these organizations were 2 to 3 times more likely to agree they are effective at hiring candidates from this group (86% of those with a formal recruitment program and 65% with an informal program) than those without programs (30%).
- **Organizations lack tailored recruitment and hiring strategies for military spouses.** Nearly 3 in 4 organizations have not implemented any strategies to recruit and hire military spouses. Of those that have, the most effective strategies include instituting remote onboarding processes, communicating flexible scheduling or remote work options, and modifying existing positions to be more flexible.
- **Strategies that recognize the unique needs of military spouses are key to retention, yet many organizations have yet to embrace this approach.** Less than half of HR professionals agreed (to any extent) that their organization understands the unique challenges faced by military spouses. Among organizations that have employed military spouses, about 60% find it more challenging to retain this group than employees with no military affiliation.
- **Organizations that implement retention strategies for military spouses are 2 times more likely to say they are effective at retaining this group.** Nearly 2 in 3 organizations have not implemented any strategy to retain military spouses, but of those that have, these strategies center on child care support services, flexible scheduling or remote work options, and employee resource groups for military spouses.



The Business Case

For the U.S. and its citizens to thrive in today's economic and geopolitical landscape, cooperation and collaboration between individuals and organizations across society is essential. The military's ability to recruit and retain highly skilled members hinges on the support and financial security of their families. Similarly, military spouses need opportunities to do meaningful work and to contribute to their family's financial well-being, which can only be achieved through jobs that align with their needs. Employers nationwide seek skilled and dedicated employees, but encounter challenges in recruiting, hiring, and retaining them when they don't tap into the full spectrum of available talent. Military spouses can bridge this gap because they have the education, experience, personal qualities, and skills that HR professionals and organizations need.



- 1. Military spouses are well educated and have a growth mindset.** Approximately 34% of military spouses have a bachelor's degree and 15% have an advanced degree—higher than the national averages of 24% and 14%, respectively.³ They are also lifelong learners who seek additional training and education.
- 2. Military spouses have a variety of valuable soft skills.** Navigating frequent relocations and spouse deployments, living far from extended family, building communities with fellow military families, and weathering the other distinct experiences common to military life develops adaptability and flexibility, problem-solving skills, cultural awareness, and other valuable soft skills essential in the workplace.
- 3. When military spouses are fulfilled in their careers and can support themselves financially, their active-duty spouses can focus on safeguarding the nation.** National security is vital to the continuing success of all U.S. businesses and is only possible when the armed forces are adequately staffed. When military spouses cannot find meaningful employment opportunities nor contribute to family finances, this can have a significant negative impact on military personnel retention.

Several HR professionals provided insights into the valuable contributions that military spouses bring to their workforce:

"[Military spouses] can be valuable employees and individuals who bring a wealth of knowledge and experience. And, as they rotate out—others rotate in! So, they can become an ongoing source of recruitment."

- HR professional at a large organization in the health care industry

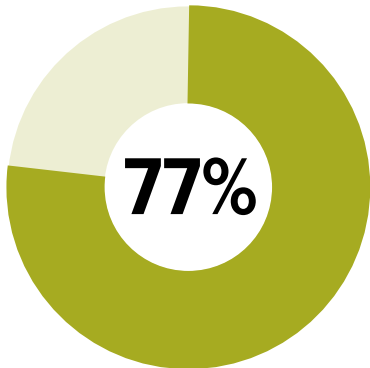
"We have hired a few military spouses and they tend to be very good in the positions we have hired them into, so much so that we haven't wanted to lose them when they move."

- HR professional at a small organization in the finance, banking, and insurance industry

³ www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/educational-attainment.html

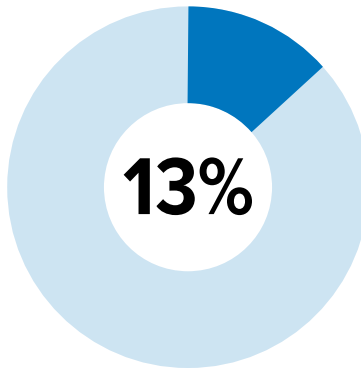
Intentional Strategies Are Key

When it comes to hiring military spouses, most organizations express interest—**nearly 4 in 5 HR professionals agreed hiring military spouses is appealing to their organization** (41% agreed or strongly agreed, 36% slightly agreed). Yet, the results don't match up—**only about 1 in 10 agreed their organization succeeds in hiring from this talent pool** (13%). This disparity can be explained, in part, by the fact that only 5% of organizations have a formal program in place for recruiting and hiring military spouses and only 11% have an informal program. That means **most organizations have no concrete program in place for recruiting and hiring military spouses**.



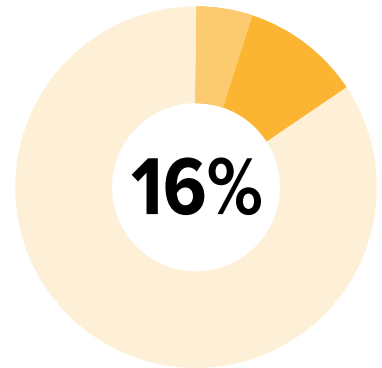
“My organization finds hiring military spouses appealing”

Percentage that agreed to any extent



“My organization is effective at hiring military spouses”

Percentage that agreed/strongly agreed



Organizations that have a formal (5%) or informal (11%) program for hiring military spouses

Establishing a strategic framework to support military spouse recruitment and hiring efforts can lead to success for employers. Intentional strategies play a pivotal role in shifting interest into action and enhancing organizational talent strategies. The survey found:

- Organizations with formal and informal recruitment programs for military spouses were **2 to 2.5 times more likely** to say they've employed military spouses (82% and 60%, respectively) than those without programs (30%).
- Organizations with formal and informal recruitment programs for military spouses were **2 to 3 times more likely** to agree they are effective at hiring candidates from this group (86% and 65%, respectively) than those without programs (30%).



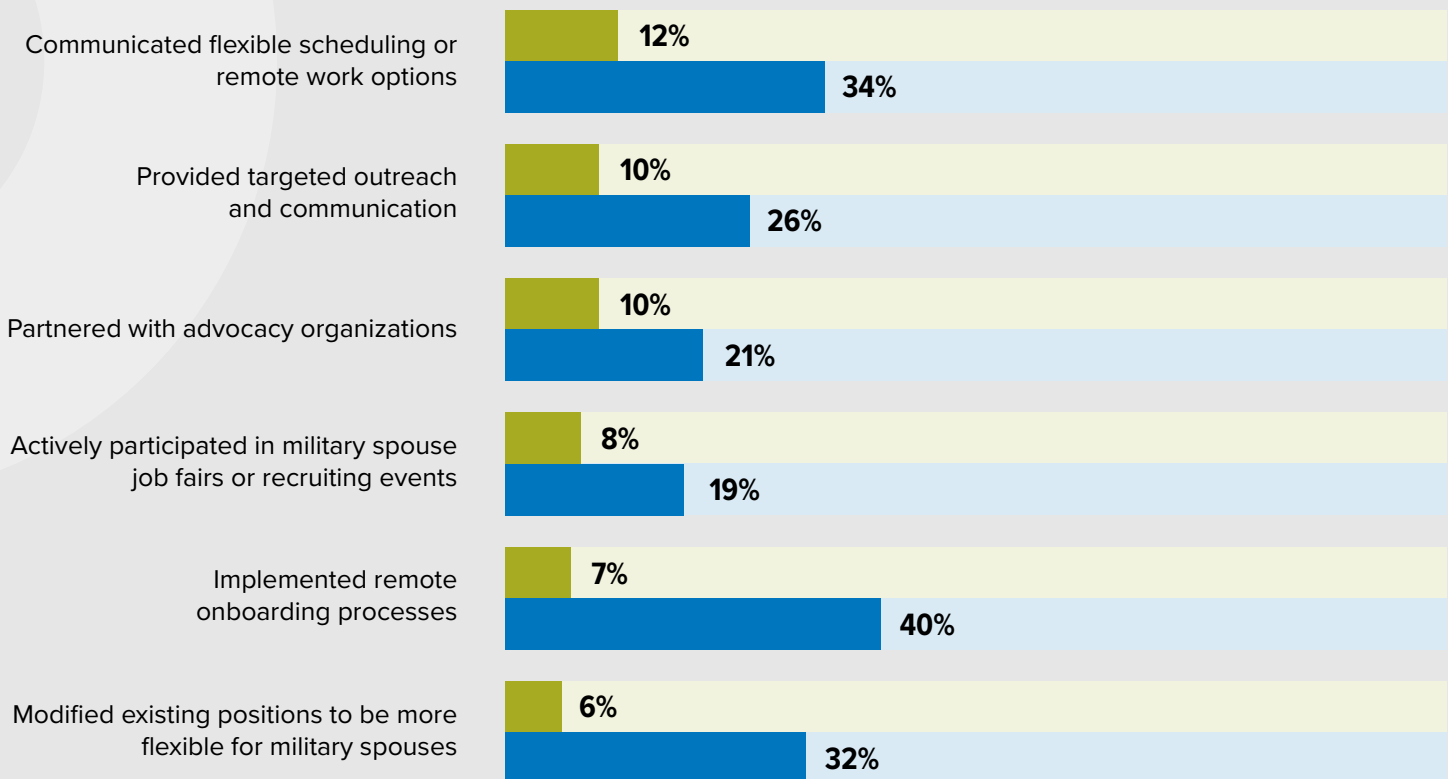
What strategies are organizations currently leveraging to recruit and hire military spouses, and are these strategies effective?

The vast majority of HR professionals (74%) said their organization has not implemented any strategy to recruit and hire military spouses. This inaction represents a missed opportunity for organizations, considering the significant impact that meaningful recruitment and hiring strategies can have on successfully hiring from this group. For instance, HR professionals at organizations that have developed and implemented at least one strategy for recruiting and hiring military spouses were **more than twice as likely** to agree or strongly agree that they are effective at hiring members of this group compared to those that haven't (62% versus 30%).

The research found that some of the top recruitment and hiring strategies that organizations implement to target military spouses are not necessarily the most effective. For example, methods such as communicating existing flexible scheduling or remote work options, providing targeted outreach, and partnering with advocacy organizations are the most prevalent within organizations, but the top three most effective strategies consistently prioritize remote or flexible work options.

Best practice: Although HR professionals have found communicating and modifying flexible work opportunities to be effective strategies for recruiting and hiring military spouses, 93% of the organizations that do this are doing the same for all employees. Customizing and communicating flexible offerings specifically for military spouses and their unique circumstances could potentially yield even greater effectiveness.

Top Organizational Strategies for Recruiting and Hiring Military Spouses by Prevalence and Effectiveness



Key



Percentage of organizations that have implemented this strategy



Percentage of HR professionals that said this strategy is very or extremely effective (among organizations that use it)

Recruitment and Hiring Practices to Support Success

“Most Americans do not understand veterans/military members and their families. [Employers need resources] to help people understand the unique challenges [this population] faces.”

- HR professional at an extra-large organization in the government, public administration, and military industry

Key Challenges and Solutions to Recruiting and Hiring Military Spouses

Indeed, the research found that **less than half** of HR professionals (48%) agreed to any extent that their organization understands the unique challenges facing military spouses. This lack of knowledge makes it difficult for employers to make the concrete plans necessary to recruit and hire members of this valuable group.

The top challenges that HR professionals identified when recruiting and hiring military spouses include:



Challenge 1: Self-Identification

- Military spouses don't self-identify in the hiring process, so organizations don't know whether members of this talent pool have applied or been hired (45%).

“Clear verbiage in position announcements that show support for military spouses has been helpful.”

- HR professional at a large organization in the education industry

Possible solution: Send a signal that your organization is committed to hiring military spouses. Only 4% of HR professionals said that their organization has adopted a hiring pledge committing to actively recruit and hire military spouses. Additionally, only slightly more indicated that they provide targeted outreach to this group (10%) or actively participate in military spouse job fairs or recruiting events (8%). Participating in (and following through on) hiring pledges, engaging with hiring programs, and prominently featuring statements expressing support for military members and their families on job listings are all great ways to reach this community. Also consider adding a voluntary self-identification system on your job applications that allows—and, most importantly, encourages—military spouses to self-identify, being sure to include a clear explanation that you are doing so to ensure fair consideration for their unique circumstances. This display of openness not only signals to military spouses that your organization is military-friendly but also has the potential to boost their confidence in applying and self-identifying. In a system that often seems stacked against them, this is a straightforward method to both earn trust and attract talent.

Military spouses and self-identification in hiring

The decision to self-identify as a military spouse during the hiring process is a personal one. There are several reasons why spouses may be hesitant, but one of the main reasons is the concern about potential discrimination or bias in hiring. The frequent relocations that military spouses experience can lead to assumptions about their availability for long-term employment and may raise questions about gaps in their employment history or career trajectory. In order for employers to create a culture of trust, acceptance, and inclusion, it's therefore essential for organizations to understand military spouses' concerns and why they may choose not to self-identify.

Challenge 2: Lack of Awareness

- A lack of awareness about programs or partnerships that could help them better recruit or hire military spouses (31%).
- A lack of knowledge about where to post jobs to attract military spouses as applicants (28%).
- A lack of knowledge about military spouses' unique needs (25%).

"I honestly don't know what is out there that could help. I'm starting at zero."

- HR professional at a small organization in the wholesale trade industry

Possible solution: Take proactive steps to gain knowledge. The absence of concrete programs for recruiting and hiring military spouses within most organizations reflects a broader lack of awareness about the unique needs of this group and how to target them. The top resources that HR professionals indicated would be most useful in their recruitment efforts are direct connections to local community-based organizations that support military spouses (33%) and specialized job boards (33%). However, building these connections requires proactive outreach. As such, organizations can leverage platforms such as the [Military Spouse Employment Partnership](#), [Hiring Our Heroes](#), and [Blue Star Families](#), which provide resources for hiring military spouses and access to job listings. They can also contact their local military support offices, military family support centers, or military family readiness centers, which provide a range of services to military families at a local level—including employment assistance. By proactively seeking this understanding, organizations can better recognize the myriad of positive attributes that military spouses bring to the table and can craft customized strategies to engage this group. Military spouses' education, diverse experiences, personal qualities, and skills are just a few examples of what makes them invaluable assets to any workforce.



Challenge 3: Flexible or Remote Work

- An inability to offer military spouses flexible or remote schedules (24%).

- HR professionals whose organizations are operating fully in person (40%) are significantly more likely to cite this as a challenge than those operating hybrid (18%) or remotely (5%).
- HR professionals in physical industries (28%) and service industries (30%) are significantly more likely to identify an inability to offer flexible or remote schedules for military spouses as a challenge in recruitment and retention than organizations in knowledge industries (18%).

“Flexible scheduling has been the most effective. In addition, providing employee co-worker job sharing.”

- HR professional at a large organization in the retail trade industry

Possible solution: Assess and evaluate flexible or remote work options, if applicable. Some organizations, particularly those that operate fully in person and those in physical and service-based industries, are more likely to cite this as a challenge than others. Not every organization will be able to offer military spouses flexible or remote schedules, but it is important to examine how much flexibility can be offered in each open position and to separate out management preferences from actual job requirements. When possible, offer remote positions, advertise existing remote or flexible roles during recruitment efforts, and be open to modifying positions to allow for remote work arrangements.



Additional Action Item: Incorporate Inclusive Resume Screening Practices

“Be willing to look past multiple jobs in shorter time frame.”

- HR professional at a midsize organization in the professional, technical, and scientific services industry

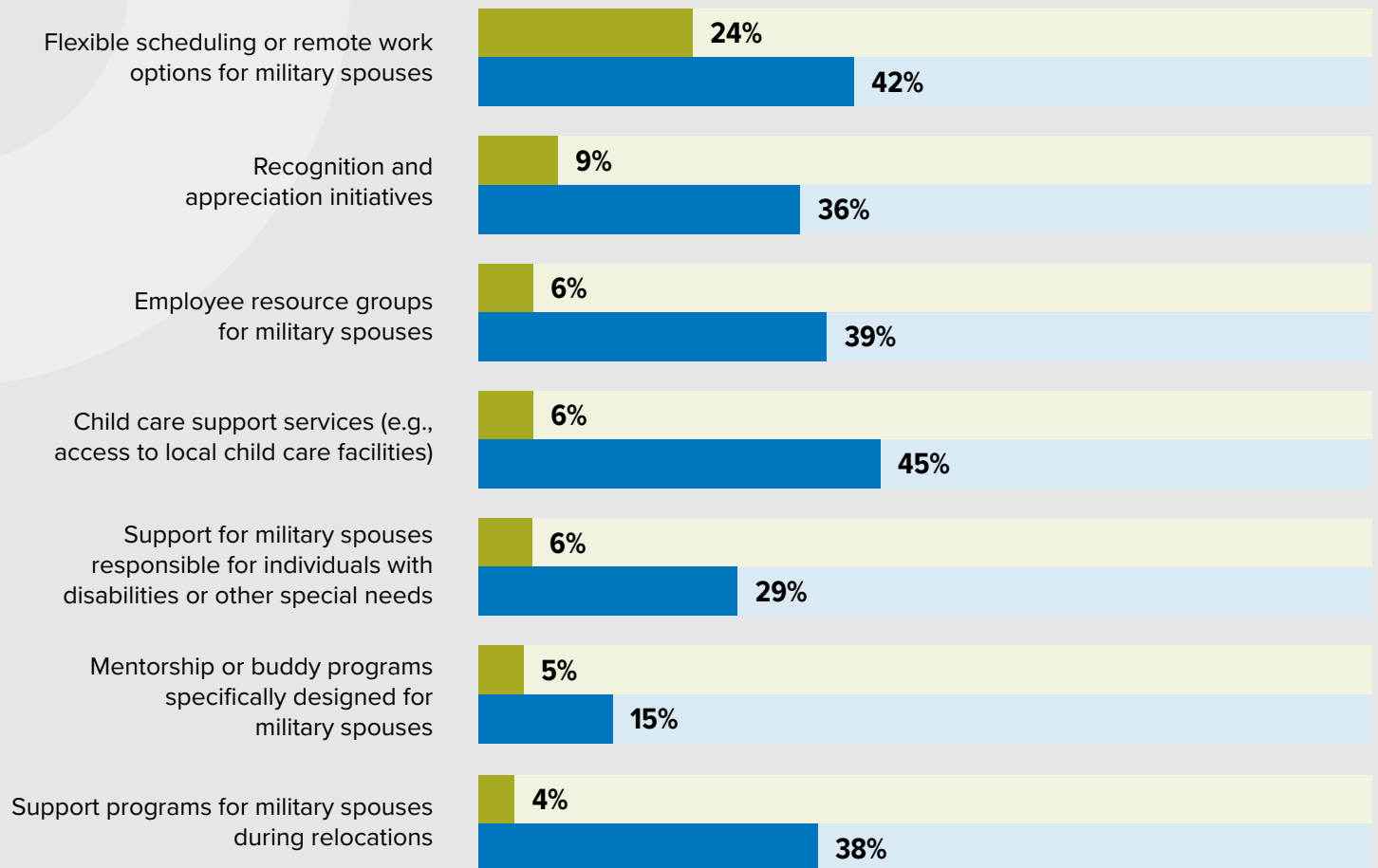
Military spouses’ resumes will likely differ from those of candidates without military affiliation, but that doesn’t mean they are less qualified. Some screening processes filter out resumes with elements more common in military spouses’ careers, such as employment gaps and slower career progression, resulting in organizations potentially overlooking this highly qualified group. **Further, don’t overlook spouses’ volunteer experience—often, these are substantive roles and may have been the only available option in a particular location.**

Retention Practices to Support Success

Among HR professionals whose organizations have employed military spouses, nearly two-thirds (64%) haven't implemented any strategies to retain them. These organizations are likely overlooking opportunities to engage and retain these employees for longer durations. Indeed, HR professionals at organizations that have implemented at least one strategy aimed specifically at retaining military spouses were twice as likely to agree or strongly agree that they are effective at retaining members of this group than those that haven't (38% versus 19%).

There is alignment between some of the top strategies that organizations implement to retain military spouses and the effectiveness of these strategies, such as providing flexible scheduling or remote options and employee resource groups for military spouses, but notable gaps remain. For instance, child care support services are considered the most effective strategy, but they did not rank among the top three strategies organizations currently use.

Top Organizational Strategies for Retaining Military Spouses by Prevalence and Effectiveness



Key



Percentage of organizations that have implemented this strategy



Percentage of HR professionals that said this strategy is very or extremely effective (among organizations that use it)

Key Challenges and Solutions to Retaining Military Spouses

Around 60% of HR professionals at organizations that have employed military spouses find it more challenging to retain them than employees without military affiliation. Many organizations reported difficulties retaining military spouses for long-term employment opportunities because of the frequent relocations inherent in military life.

The top challenges HR professionals identified when retaining military spouses include:

Challenge 1: Frequent Relocations

- The impact of frequent relocations on job continuity (28%).
- Difficulty providing or receiving approval for relocation accommodations for military spouses (22%).

“Treat [military spouses] as if they do not have limited time with you.”

- HR professional at a large organization in the health care industry

Possible solution: Shift your perspective. It’s important to recognize that military spouses are not more likely to leave their jobs compared to other employees in the same demographic. On average, military spouses’ stay at a station is two to four years—far longer than the median employment tenure for all similarly aged women in the U.S., which is 1.1 years for women ages 20-24 and 2.8 years for women ages 25-34.⁴ Knowing this, it’s still important for organizations to encourage military spouses to share information about potential life changes as soon as they arise. This allows ample time to explore alternative solutions to potential employment disruptions and helps employers and military spouses plan to make transitions as smooth as possible. If a military spouse is relocating due to military orders, consider whether their position can be done remotely. If not, explore alternative roles that can allow for remote work now or in the future or even internal transfer options for in-person positions at their new location.

⁴ www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/tenure.pdf



Challenge 2: Accommodating Caregiving Needs

- Difficulty accommodating military spouses' child care needs (18%) and military caregiving needs (12%).

“Being flexible with scheduling and child care needs is essential.”

- HR professional at a large organization in the food service industry

Possible solution: Demonstrate flexibility. Over a quarter of HR professionals (26%) said they would find guidance on the types of military-spouse-friendly benefits they could offer useful. The research indicated that remote work options are effective strategies for retaining military spouses, but organizations can demonstrate flexibility in other ways, too. At any given time, a spouse may face sudden and unpredictable changes to their schedules—their active-duty spouse getting deployed, tending to urgent caregiving needs, etc. Providing adaptable work options can support spouses who need to manage these unique circumstances. Moreover, caregiving challenges are not unique to the military community, so providing these benefits would both benefit organizations' entire workforces and enhance their competitiveness in the current talent market. Organizations should also understand and comply with Family and Medical Leave Act military leave provisions and consider offering additional support such as Permanent Change of Station leave and deployment leave—something only 4% of organizations that have employed military spouses currently offer. These flexible leave and time-off options are critical for military families to successfully navigate transitions during military relocations and deployments.



Challenge 3: Lack of Support Programs

- A lack of access to specialized support programs for military spouses (12%).

“Look for veterans in your organization or current or former military spouses to help ‘sponsor’ them. Having someone who knows what they go through is very helpful.”

- HR professional at an extra-large organization in the government, public administration, and military industry

Possible solution: Create an inclusive environment. Of organizations that have employed military spouses, nearly 80% agreed (to any extent) that they are committed to fostering an inclusive and diverse environment for this group. Organizations can foster inclusion by establishing specialized programs such as employee resource groups for military spouses. Only 6% of organizations that have employed military spouses reported having such a group, yet this was recognized as one of the most effective strategies. Consider this strategy or other community-building initiatives such as mentorship programs, sponsorships, networking events, and more to foster inclusion for military spouses in your workplace. These opportunities are essential for military spouses to connect and build relationships within your organizations.

Additional Action Item: Sincere Military Appreciation

“Military spouses [at our organization] are recognized along with military members for their service and sacrifice.”

- HR professional at a large organization in the food service industry

Possible solution: Less than 1 in 10 HR professionals (9%) said that their organization has recognition and appreciation initiatives for military spouses’ contributions. Foster a culture of military appreciation in the workplace through recognition programs, events, or initiatives that honor the sacrifices and contributions military families make. This can include commemorating military holidays, hosting appreciation events, and offering support and recognition to veterans and employees with military affiliations.

Conclusion

Military spouses have long encountered unique challenges in the workplace, largely due to the frequent relocations inherent in military life. With each move, spouses must often navigate the daunting task of securing new employment opportunities, accessing reliable caregiving support, and building new communities every few years. In today’s competitive job market, where organizations struggle to attract and retain skilled employees, it’s essential for employers to not overlook military spouses. This research underscores various avenues and solutions that employers can implement to drive meaningful change, including recognizing military spouses’ value and unique circumstances and adopting HR best practices to target them. Embracing these best practices in the workplace isn’t just the right thing to do—it’s essential for employers’ and employees’ long-term success. Only by prioritizing inclusive recruitment, hiring, and retention practices can employers fully leverage the talent and dedication that military spouses bring to the workforce.

Methodology

This survey was fielded to a sample of HR professionals via SHRM’s Voice of Work Research Panel from Feb. 26 to March 4, 2024. In total, 1,076 HR professionals participated in the survey. Respondents represented organizations of all sizes in a wide variety of industries across the U.S.



Additional Resources

Additional resources that HR professionals said they would find useful to assist in their military spouse recruiting and retention efforts include:

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Direct connection to local community-based organizations that support military spouses (33%).

Specialized jobs boards for military spouses (33%).

Updates on the laws and regulations that impact military spouse hiring policies and practices (29%).

Guidance on the types of military-spouse-friendly benefits that can be offered (26%).

Advice and tools focused on targeting military spouses’ skill sets (23%).

Partners



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