

CORPORATE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT SUMMIT

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In response to the 2015 survey findings indicating opportunities for military community support via corporate engagement, and in collaboration with the complimentary White Oak process that works by strengthening cross-sector relationships to create scalable and adaptable solutions, Blue Star Families and Booz Allen Hamilton convened a Corporate Employee Engagement Summit, bringing together top government, nonprofit, and corporate actors to identify and strengthen opportunities for corporate community engagement and expanding military spouse and veteran employment. Key leaders from the Department of Defense, the Veterans Administration, and military family nonprofit organizations actively participated in a leadership discussion panel and a number of working groups tasked with answering the following questions:

1. Military families are much like their civilian neighbors; however, the exceptional demands of military service result in some unique strengths and challenges. Which strengths are corporate America best equipped to leverage and which needs are corporate America most equipped to address?
2. Once initiatives, programs, and activities are developed, how can corporate America effectively connect with the military community? How can they reach this population?

I. Overview

Setting the Stage

Blue Star Families released the sixth annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey results in October 2015. The survey provides a comprehensive understanding of the extraordinary challenges of the military lifestyle and is a blueprint for strengthening America by supporting military families. *The 2015 Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey results indicated that many of the challenges experienced by service members, veterans, and their families can be eased through increased collaboration between civilian and military communities.*

Background

In order to accomplish this additional collaboration and support between civilian and military communities, the America Joins Forces with Military Families retreat was created in 2010. The purpose of these retreats, known as White Oak in reference to the venue at which the first retreat was held, is to encourage creative thinking and willingness toward collaboration in support of the veteran and military community among the major military related nonprofit organizations and government leadership. The White Oak process also works to bridge the civil-military divide, reduce barriers to collaborative best practices and develop resources to fill gaps in services. *A central theme of the 2015 gathering was the need for increased public-private partnerships and corporate engagement as a strategy to advance military family integration into civilian communities.* The White Oak process works by to represent best practice models and create strategic-level approaches to identify relevant issues through collaborative working groups addressing consensus issues.

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Constituency Populations

A panel opened the event to provide background and frame the discussion, identifying existing corporate best practice solutions and resources. Summit attendees broke into five discussion groups, answering the above questions and identifying best practice models supporting a variety of military subpopulations: Cultural Competencies; Wellness & Empowerment; Special Populations; Civil-Military Connections; and Policy.

II. Common Themes

Recognize that military families are “normal” American families

- **Sponsor** local-level programs and events that integrate military families as neighbors. This fosters natural relationships, recognizes their significant contributions within the community, and supports further community support and engagement.
- **Create** partnerships with National Guard at local and state level in recognition of the increased flexibility versus active duty installation leadership, National Guard can also facilitate opportunities that overlap to the active component.
- **Educate** corporate and community leaders on the similarities between military families and their civilian counterparts and the unique challenges of the military lifestyle by hosting community-wide Military 101 training on the basics of the military: rank, acronyms, unit structure, community policies, and military lifecycle awareness.

Magnify the Value Proposition of Hiring Veterans and Military Spouses

- Educate hiring managers to translate military lifestyle and experience to civilian needs to best match job descriptions and skills with opportunities, so they identify achievable corporate goals by offering flexible job requirements and tailoring positions to create a veteran and spouse friendly work environment.
- **Create** recruitment channels to determine veterans as potential employees long before they apply for a job through targeted, open professional development and mentor pairing for all levels of leadership and placement.
- **Match** the cycle of the civilian workspace to the lifespan of a military career (for both service member and spouse) to manage access and expectations for workplace entry.
- **Provide** job training, networking and continuing education opportunities to military spouses not currently in the workforce.
- **Develop skill translators** as corporate recruiters and hiring managers do not always understand the valuable skills and experience that veterans and military spouses bring to the workplace. Businesses such as ATT, Microsoft, Disney and Sodexo developed proprietary skills translators to facilitate efforts to offer veterans and spouses meaningful employment opportunities.

Capture the Data

- **Fund** shared data studies that develop quantitative insights into real-time needs assessment, capability resources and special need population contributions to support the efforts of like-minded corporations, community groups, nonprofits and military leaders.
- **Encourage** employees to safely self-identify as a veteran, caregiver or military spouse to show support and create an open discussion about issues and concerns.
- **Build** military spouse profiles through case studies, LinkedIn results and employee surveys to develop data on loyalty, productivity, performance, referral and retention. Study metrics of military spouses who gain employment and how to match those results with others seeking employment.
- **Evaluate** generational differences in how information is exchanged to provide better platforms and gateways that support high engagement.

Make Your Support Obvious

- **Reward** innovative suggestions and ideas by encouraging internal organizational conversation about military family support and engagement.
- **Share** best practices and tips with other companies and small businesses that want to model your veteran/spouse hiring programs. Also, share within the military support community at an open session or within human resources workgroups to foster awareness and understanding of the unique challenges and skills of the military community.
- **Engage** in two-way communications through focus groups, friends of the organization or steering committees that provide direct cultural awareness feedback from and to military families in the local area.
- **Create affinity groups** to recruit and retain transitioning veterans and military spouses and provide mentorship. Corporations with high percentages of military-related hires dedicate significant resources to services that support and develop these employee populations. Informal and formal affinity groups promote a culture of awareness and networking for like-minded employee groups within an organization
 - The Booz Allen Hamilton Military Spouse Employee Forum (MSEF), started in 2013, is designed to link geographically disperse military spouses. The group currently has over 100 active members and utilizes a group page on an internal social media platform, monthly virtual meetings, and blog posts. They created a military spouse employee handbook highlighting ways to succeed in the corporate climate. By leveraging their shared military lifestyle experience, they increase awareness of military spouses as an employee bloc and facilitate recognition of the value and skills they bring to the organization. Key focus areas for the group involve:
 - Increased awareness of the flexibility, problem solving and relationship building skills that military spouses offer.
 - Changing the perception of military spouses from that of a burden to one of long-term value investment.
 - Ways to localize interaction and create a social connection across ten geographic population zones through virtual and in-person meeting options.

III. Top Recommendations for Engagement

- **Leverage** the willingness of military family members to volunteer by bringing them into corporate philanthropy goals, strategy, and planning. Match corporate goals with events and activities that meet the specific needs of military sub-populations such as deployed spouse events, respite events for caregivers, care package programs or wounded warrior games/races.
- **Decentralize** engagement and allow metric driven local gaps in service to drive corporate guidelines and planning for philanthropy and partnership. Encourage participation in a manner that best supports and brings together the community and military families by location.
- **Improve** hiring retention by onboarding new military-affiliated employees to the corporate work culture, particularly by pairing them with another veteran or military spouse employee during the first 90-180 days.
- **Incentivize** hiring from hidden hero populations such as spouses, caregivers or other sub-populations. Consider the unique needs they face and offer job sharing, flex scheduling, telework, temporary or short-term positions, and customized benefits to place them in positions of accommodation.
- **Utilize** geo-mapping technology to help veterans and spouses understand where jobs and demand exist as they navigate PCS or transition relocation.
- **Facilitate** collaboration and innovation through shared data to make the case for what is already being done and what still needs to be accomplished. Show how efforts are working by the numbers and inspire others to join the effort.
- **Increase** visibility for military support via company website pages and PR campaigns that feature spouse or veteran hiring programs and community partnerships.
- **Create** social networking and media campaigns to promote awareness and recruit celebrity supporters to amplify the messaging.
- **Formalize a corporate strategy** for external and internal military engagement. Businesses where a significant population of employees possess a military connection, such as BAE, SpaceX, USAA and Union Pacific, recognize the need to focus resources and attention on the best approaches to amplify branding and recruitment while also serving a community population aligned with their mission and services.
 - Thirty-three percent of Booz Allen Hamilton employees are military-connected; to enhance community outreach and advance their mission a veterans agenda was developed with the following pillars recruit and Retain; Serve and Support; and Business and Brand. Executive advisor committee members use these core objectives to inform and influence departmental work streams through consensus, coalition and resource pooling. Regular opportunities for departmental feedback inform plans for actual events and activities implemented to support each strategy.

IV. Conclusion

According to the 2015 Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle Survey, military families are much like their civilian neighbors. They want good jobs, quality education for their children and access to vital health care. It is the shared responsibility of corporate America and military support organizations to work together to increase awareness of these similarities as the foundational basis for a healthy civil-military relationship. They must also support the unique challenges of military service by identifying which organizational strengths to leverage as they address the continuing needs of a veteran and military population impacted by deployments, frequent moves and other family stressors.

Leaders from the Department of Defense, corporate, government and nonprofit organizations met in November 2015 to discuss ways to fill gaps in service between communities and military families. They agreed there was a need to identify opportunities for partnership, improve access to mentorship and development, and to educate civilians about the military lifestyle and experience. The group pinpointed key recommendations and corporate best practices as a launching point for capturing relevant data, communicating military support, fostering awareness of commonalities and clarifying the value of veteran and spouse experience and skills. These findings should serve as an initial roadmap for those seeking to bridge the civil-military divide through corporate and community engagement.