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10-2019

### Helping Military Spouses Find Careers that Move with Them

Deborah A. Bradbard

Rachel Linsner  
*Syracuse University*

Rosalinda V. Maury  
*Syracuse University (IVMF), rvmaury@syr.edu*

Amber Pitoniak

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Bradbard, Deborah A.; Linsner, Rachel; Maury, Rosalinda V.; and Pitoniak, Amber, "Helping Military Spouses Find Careers that Move with Them" (2019). *Institute for Veterans and Military Families*. 121.  
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THE FORCE BEHIND THE FORCE | JOB PORTABILITY

# Helping Military Spouses Find Careers that Move with Them

Deborah A. Bradbard, Ph.D. | Rachel Linsner, M.S. | Rosalinda Maury, M.S. | Amber Pitoniak, LMSW, B.S.



## About the Authors

### **DEBORAH BRADBARD, PH.D.**

Deborah Bradbard is a Senior Research Associate at IVMF at Syracuse University. She is a psychologist whose research focuses on veteran and military spouse employment, military financial readiness, and military transition. She served as the Director of Research and Policy at Blue Star Families and was the primary author of the 2013 and 2014 Blue Star Families Annual Lifestyle Survey. Her work on military families and military financial literacy have been cited by the White House, members of Congress, CNN, the Center for Deployment Psychology, and the Defense Center of Excellence (DCoE). Dr. Bradbard previously worked as a consultant at Booz Allen Hamilton developing products focused on military mental health issues including PTSD, suicide, substance abuse, and traumatic brain injury. Dr. Bradbard received her Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology from Auburn University.

### **RACHEL LINSNER, M.S.**

Rachel Linsner is a Doctoral Research Fellow at IVMF at Syracuse University. She works on survey development, data analysis, and writing for research related to military and veteran families, military spouse employment, veteran transition, and civil-military relations issues. Previously, she worked as a research intern at the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS), a part of the Department of Psychiatry at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences. Linsner is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Human Development and Family Science at Syracuse University. She holds a master's degree in Child and Family Studies from Syracuse University.

### **ROSALINDA MAURY, M.S.**

Rosalinda Maury is the Director of Applied Research and Analytics at IVMF at Syracuse University. She has worked on numerous projects, including the effects of personal financial mismanagement behaviors, training needs assessment, workload assessment, job and occupational analysis, equal pay for equal work, job compatibility assessment, and factors effecting military spouse and veteran employment. She has extensive experience in survey development and worldwide data collection and has been responsible for developing, implementing, and managing surveys for data collection on the large and small scale, for organizations and government sectors. Her work has been featured in numerous publications and she has presented at various professional conferences. Maury received her Master of Science in Psychology from the University of Texas at San Antonio.

### **AMBER PITONIAK, B.S., LMSW**

Amber Pitoniak is a Research Assistant at IVMF at Syracuse University. She received a Bachelor of Science in both Psychology and Neuroscience and a Master's degree in Social Work from Syracuse University. She works as a Clinical Research Coordinator for CNY Research Corporation at the Syracuse VA Medical Center. Pitoniak has served as a member of Syracuse University's Moral Injury Project for the past four years and volunteers with the Service to the Armed Forces division of the American Red Cross of Central New York.

## Suggested Citation

Bradbard, D.A., Linsner, R., Maury, R., & Pitoniak, A. (2019, October). Job Portability Research Brief: Helping Military Spouses Find Careers that Move with Them (Force Behind the Force Series). Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University



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## About the “Force Behind the Force” Series

The Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF), as part of its broader employment research efforts, and with the generous financial support and collaboration of Prudential Financial, Inc., continues to explore the topic of military spouse employment. The “Employing Military Spouses -The Force Behind the Force” Series sponsored by Prudential Financial Inc., published in 2016, outlines the business case for hiring military spouses and provides guidance to companies and organizations on how to recruit, hire, and retain military spouse employees. The current paper is an extension of these topics and ideas, but focuses military spouse career portability and how employers can assess, develop, and implement portability solutions within their own organizations.

### The newest suite of products in the “Force Behind the Force” Series includes:



- **Defining and Enabling Job Portability Employment Solutions for Military Spouses** – a research brief that defines career portability and provides recommendations for employers.
- **Understanding Status of Forces Agreements (SOFA): Removing Barriers to Military Spouse Employment Overseas** – this research brief is geared at helping military spouses and employers better understand the issues related to SOFA as well as the barriers it presents to both finding employment and working overseas.

### Past “Force Behind the Force” papers in this series included a suite of research products for human resource professionals to use to learn more about recruiting and hiring military spouses.



- **A Business Case for Leveraging Military Spouse Employment** - this research paper outlines attributes and characteristics of military spouses relevant to the business environment. Military spouses bring attributes such as resiliency, adaptability, education, resourcefulness, team-orientation, entrepreneurial spirit, and social awareness, all of which contribute to successful performance in competitive business environments.
- **Case Profiles of Successful Military Spouses Balancing Employment, Service, and Family** - this research paper includes the personal experiences of eight dynamic military spouses selected to discuss their personal experiences surrounding employment during their time affiliated with the military. The case studies highlight the strategies many military spouses use to maintain their employment. This report describes military lifestyle barriers that impact military spouse resumes, and how those barriers impact employers’ perceptions about their potential fit for a position. This report provides recommendations to help Human Resource (HR) professionals better assess military spouse candidates.
- **Training, Leveraging, and Communicating about Military Spouses as Employees** - this training guide is designed for hiring managers and human resource professionals interested in hiring military spouses. This tool illustrates the unique strengths and challenges that military spouses bring to the workforce and provides key insights and ways to train, leverage talent, and communicate when employing military spouses.



## Executive Summary

Relocation is challenging, but it is especially daunting for military spouses because it entails frequent and repeated job searches, sometimes as often as every two years.<sup>1,2</sup> Job portability, the ability to maintain employment regardless of location, can minimize the difficulties related to frequent moves. However, some employers (1) either do not have or do not offer portable positions or, (2) portable positions are available, but employers do not know how to recognize, promote or empower employees to take advantage of these opportunities. Related, is the fact that employers may invest in hiring military spouses, but (sometimes unintentionally) deemphasize associated retention efforts. Without job portability options, employers lose valuable talent, and military spouses have difficulty maintaining employment or leave the labor market altogether, becoming what are sometimes referred to as “discouraged workers.”<sup>3</sup> This may explain why, according to a recent report, military spouses are far less likely to participate in the labor market compared to other working-age-adults.<sup>4</sup>

To ensure they are prepared to provide portable careers, employers must take proactive steps to develop policies and procedures that seamlessly enable and encourage job portability. This implies that employers must focus their efforts on both hiring and retaining military spouse employees while considering the complications related to relocation, including inevitable moves across state lines and overseas. However, some employers may not have existing administrative or human resources (HR) infrastructure in place (e.g., HR policies, criteria, identification of appropriate positions) to instantly offer portable work options for all their employees and certainly not for military spouse employees specifically. This research will focus on job portability as it relates to military spouses. The goal is to assist employers who recognize the talent military spouses bring to the workplace, understand the value of retaining them when they relocate, and are aware of the business case for hiring them.<sup>5</sup>

When employers do have the flexibility and capability to offer portable careers, they can simultaneously minimize some of the employment challenges faced by military spouses, create a viable pathway to retain their high performers, maximize their investment, and achieve a competitive advantage. The current research will identify and explore the topic of job portability from the perspective of employers and military spouses, and will examine:

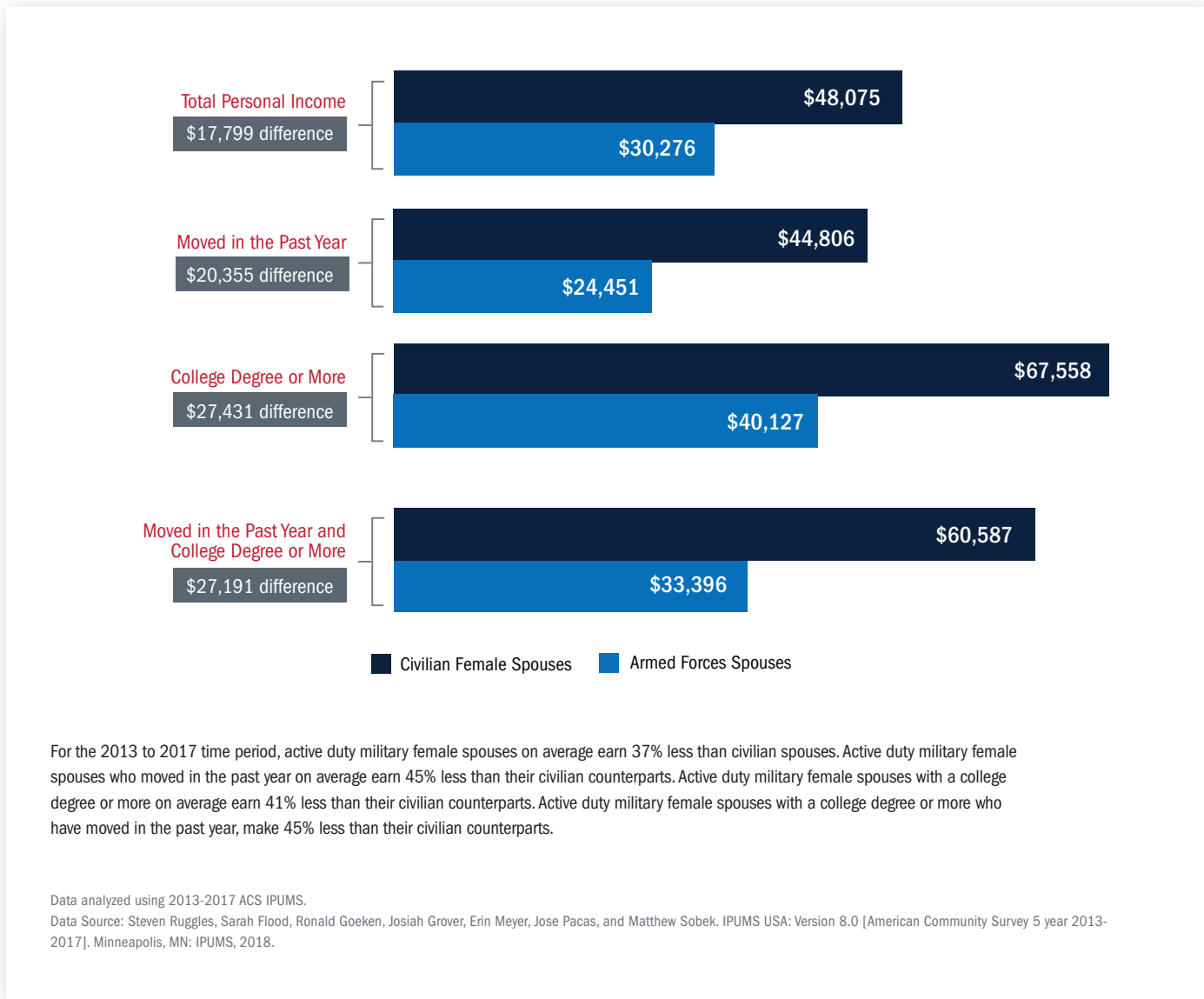
- ① relevant issues that apply to job portability including how it is defined
- ② barriers to sustained employment related to relocation and job portability
- ③ responsive portability solutions to support military spouse employees and their employers

We hope that the proposed solutions generated by this research will benefit both military spouses and any employee facing the challenges of relocation.

# Background

Military spouses miss opportunities for sustained employment when they relocate without the benefit of job portability. The consequences of serial unemployment can have a ripple effect that influences their long-term career and financial path.<sup>6</sup> As shown in Figure 1, the average personal income of military female spouses is less than that of their civilian counterparts, they are underpaid relative to their peers and that relocating reduces the earning potential of military spouses.<sup>7</sup> In addition, due to repeated relocations, military spouses often sacrifice employment benefits such as seniority or long-term retirement savings associated with employment longevity.<sup>8,9</sup>

Figure 1: Average Total Personal Income for Armed Forces and Civilian Female Spouses from the ACS 2013-2017





There appears to be a financial penalty incurred by being a military spouse. Despite having more education than comparable civilians; military spouses earn less than similar full-time workers.<sup>10</sup> For the 2013 to 2017 time period, military spouses with a college degree on average earn about 41 percent less than their civilian counterpart (see Figure 1). Military spouses with a college degree who also moved in the past year on average earn about 45 percent less than their civilian counterpart (see Figure 1). These income gaps widen over the same time period. In 2013, military spouses with a college degree earned about 40 percent less than their civilian counterpart while those with a college degree who also moved in the past year earned about 42 percent less than their counterparts. In 2017, military spouses with a college degree earned about 43 percent less than their civilian counterpart while those with a college degree who also moved in the past year earned about 55 percent less than their counterparts. Moreover, as Figure 2 shows, military spouses are unemployed at a rate four times higher than their civilian counterparts. For this and other reasons, military spouses are described as “underemployed.” For example, their employment often does not “match” what would be expected for their education or experience or they may accept part-time jobs when they would prefer to work full-time.

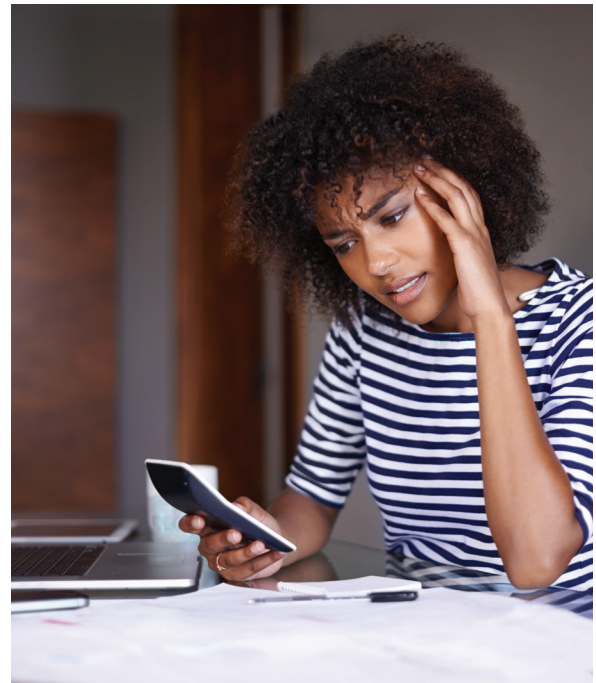
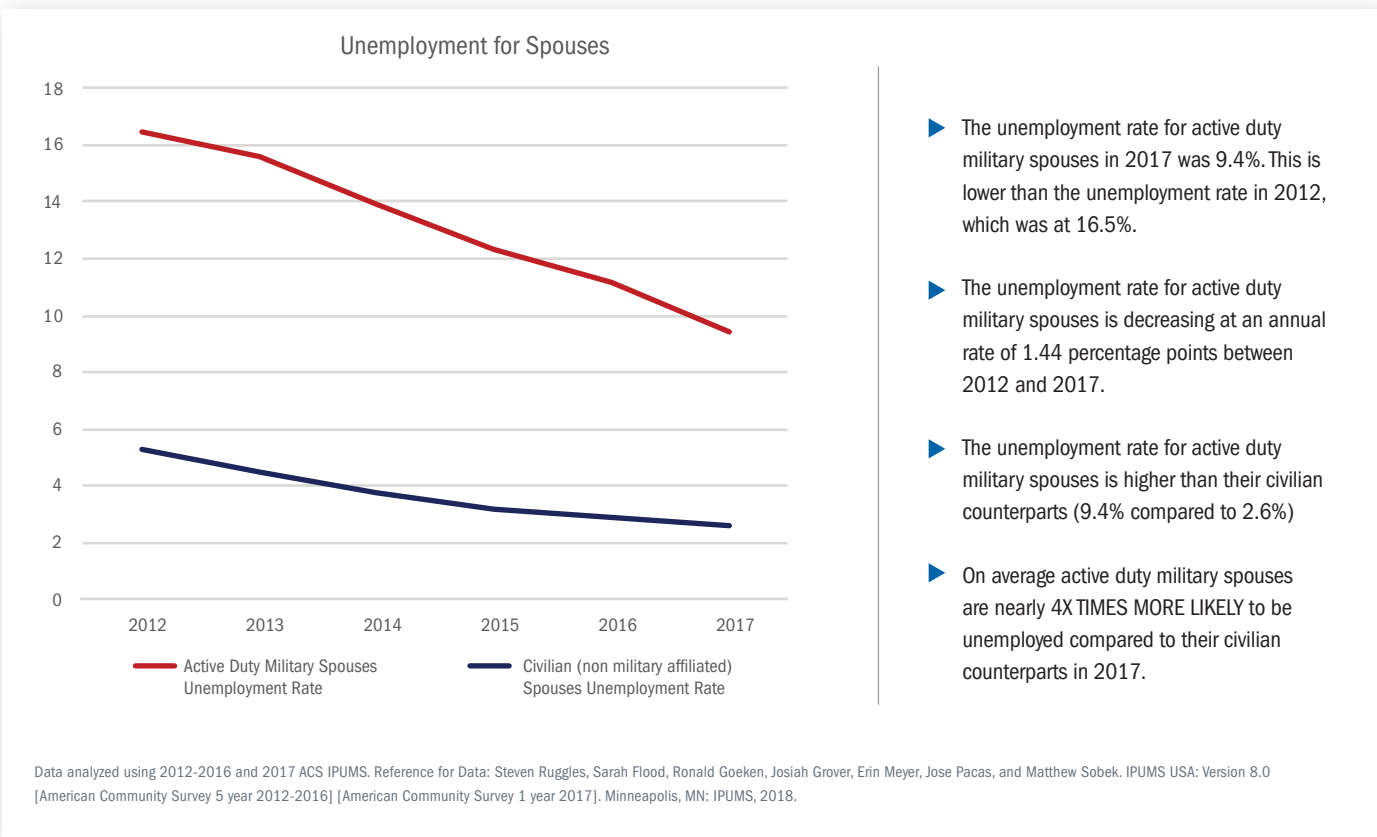


Figure 2: Unemployment Rates for Armed Forces and Civilian Female Spouses, 2012-2017



# THE BENEFITS OF JOB PORTABILITY

## A Solution to Military Spouse Underemployment?



“Underemployed” is a term that is often used to describe military spouses, but it is complicated, poorly defined, and focuses on a problem rather than a solution.<sup>11</sup>

Instead, it is perhaps more beneficial to identify “root causes” of military spouse underemployment. For example, when military spouses must change employment because the military has relocated them, they miss opportunities for recognition, lateral job moves, pay raises, training, and lucrative or career-enhancing promotions within their desired career field—all of which can be ameliorated by increased job portability.

Because (1) military spouses repeatedly relocate, causing them to leave their employment prematurely when they might prefer to remain, and (2) employers make investments in military spouse hiring, it is important that employers simultaneously focus their efforts on hiring and retaining their military spouse employees.

## EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES THAT ALLOW CAREER PORTABILITY CAN BENEFIT MILITARY SPOUSES AND EMPLOYERS ALIKE

- ▶ **Career portability benefits employers** by improving retention and helping employers maximize their initial return on their investment (ROI). Retention is significant for employers for several reasons. For example, a 2016 Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) benchmarking study found that employees incur significant costs when their employees leave a position after being hired.
- ▶ **Employees benefit from portability** when they experience job continuity, financial security, as well opportunities to develop skills, increased business knowledge, and tangible benefits such as retirement, insurance, paid leave, responsibility, and seniority, to name a few.



### UNDERSTANDING THE COST OF TURNOVER IS KEY TO IMPROVING RETENTION<sup>12</sup>



**\$4,129**  
average cost-per-hire



**42 DAYS**  
average time it takes  
to fill a given position



**1/3 OF ANNUAL SALARY**  
average cost of replacing a new hire employee

## Methodology

To clarify and identify the issues related to job portability from the perspective of both military spouses and employers, several methods were utilized.

- A small sample of military spouses were recruited online through military spouse career networking groups to participate in focus groups, held to define job portability and to pinpoint common experiences, challenges, and issues related to job portability for military spouses.
- Online surveys were distributed to military spouses, as well as employers, to gather relevant information about job portability experiences, policies, and best practices.

Based on responses to the employer survey, a subset of employers were selected to participate in qualitative interviews. The data collection efforts are described below:

### Military Spouse Focus Groups

Military spouse participants were recruited in March 2018 through a variety of online Facebook groups focused on military spouse employment. Fourteen participants completed the recruitment survey, which included basic demographic items and questions regarding availability for focus group participation. Of those participants that completed the survey, seven spouses volunteered to participate in a focus group phone call. Focus group participants were affiliated with various branches of service and reported a range of career backgrounds and experiences. Only one spouse was married to a veteran (who had recently transitioned/separated), and the remainder were spouses of active duty service members.

The seven participating spouses were divided among three scheduled focus groups phone calls, each lasting roughly one hour. The groups were facilitated by a moderator and were semi-structured using open-ended questions specific to job portability, career progression, and difficulties or barriers to finding and maintaining employment. All participants were asked to define the term “job portability” and “portable career.” Findings from the focus groups and literature review were used in the development of a quantitative survey of military spouses, detailed below.

### Military Spouse Online Survey

To further understand and identify job portability, an online survey was created to gather military spouses’ perceptions of job portability, their employment and education history, experiences with employer policies, Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and overseas employment, and demographics. The survey was distributed in October 2018 through a variety of military spouse-related social media career networking groups and platforms focused on spouse employment and careers. The survey was available online for five weeks. Initially, 109 participants started the survey. Participants that indicated they were service members, veterans, or spouses of veterans were not eligible to complete the survey and were not included in the final sample. Ultimately, a sample ( $n=90$ ) of military spouses completed the online survey.

#### Demographics of spouse survey participants include:

- ▶ Mean age = 36 years
- ▶ 98% have experienced at least one PCS move due to military orders
- ▶ 96% female
- ▶ 65% have never experienced an overseas move
- ▶ 31% have no children
- ▶ 17% have a doctorate level degree



## Employer Online Survey

A variety of employers were identified through their participation in various military spouse employment initiatives such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundations', Hiring Our Heroes Initiative, Military Spouse Employment Advisory Council (MSEAC). All companies in attendance at the June 2018 MSEAC meeting were verbally invited to participate, and specific companies were recruited via email based on 1) expressed interest, 2) broad industry representation, and 3) evidence of having existing military spouse hiring initiatives with an interest in portability. In October 2018, an online survey was created to gather employer policies and experiences regarding military spouse hiring, military spouse employment, job portability, and best practices. The survey link was distributed to HR professionals and hiring managers at thirteen companies, and recipients were asked to complete the survey or to provide the contact information for whoever was most familiar with their organization's military spouse hiring practices, onboarding, and retention policies. The companies represented a range of industries including technology, hospitality, financial, and media. Representatives from ten companies completed the survey. Of those, four companies were contacted to complete follow-up interviews, and two agreed to participate. Interviews focused on identifying employer best-practices and policies for hiring, employing, and retaining military spouse employees. Interviews were confidential to ensure that companies could openly discuss their internal practices. Because the interview results were consistent with the findings of the survey, they are included only where they augment, support, or explain the survey results.

## Findings

Results should be interpreted cautiously given that this was a small, non-representative sample of active duty military spouses, and some sample demographics are atypical of the general military spouse population. For example, one-third of this sample have no children and 17 percent have a doctorate level degree. Additionally, the mean age at which spouse respondents became affiliated with the military was 26 years and the mean number of year respondents reported their spouse had been on active duty was just under ten years (9.7). Though this sample does differ from the larger active duty spouse population, key themes discussed later in this survey did converge with prior findings relative to military spouse employment.<sup>13,14</sup>

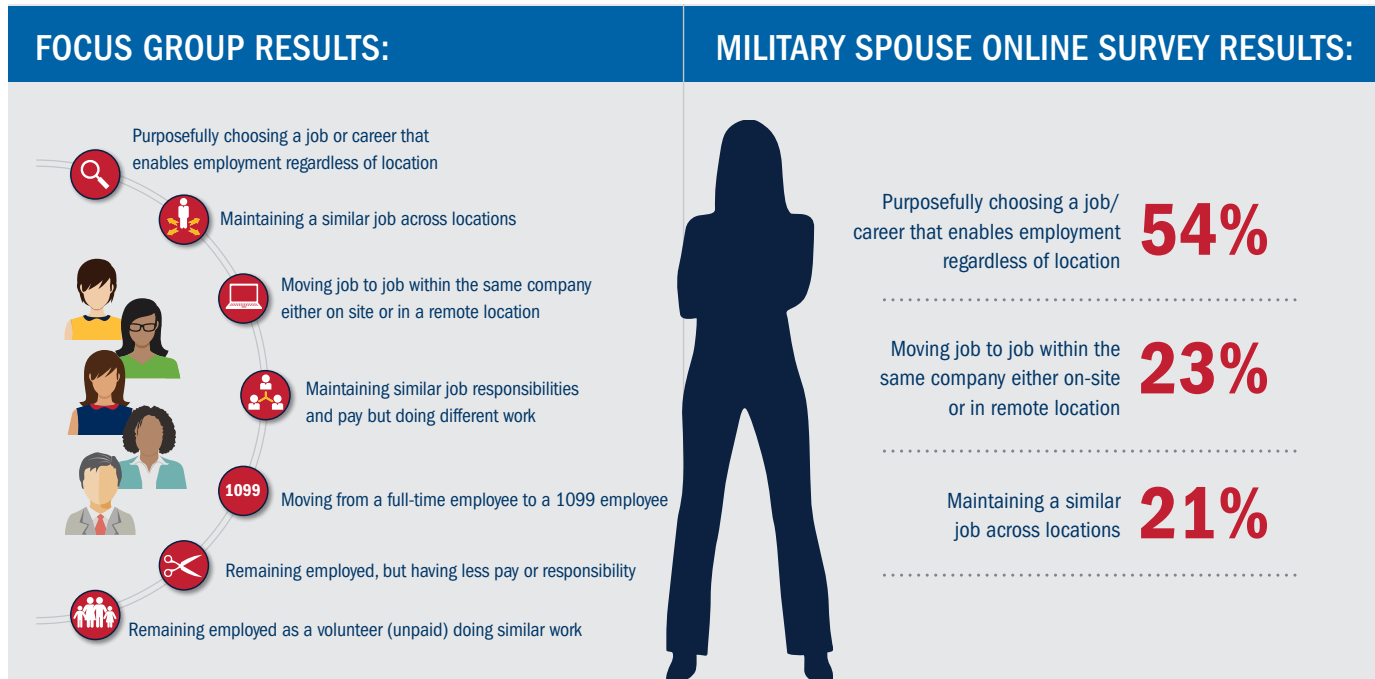
This research includes results from military spouse focus groups, a military spouse survey, and a survey of employers. For the purposes of this report, the primary focus is on the results of the spouse and employer surveys. The findings and quotes will reference the spouse survey unless otherwise stated. Findings are organized by four primary themes:

- ① Defining job portability for military spouses
- ② Why is job portability needed? The Impact of Relocation
- ③ The role of employers
- ④ Overseas employment and Status of Forces Agreements (SOFA)

## Defining Job Portability for Military Spouses

Military spouses and employers often refer to “job portability” or a “portable career,” but there is no common definition for these terms. To understand how these terms are used by military spouses, we asked focus groups and online survey respondents to (1) describe their experiences related to job portability, (2) their thoughts on how employers could better assist them, and (3) any recommendations they would make to improve job portability for military spouse employees.

Figure 3: Defining job portability: A military spouse perspective



In the online survey, respondents were asked to provide a definition of “job portability” and to select one option from a list of choices describing job portability. The options for this latter question were created based on the definitions that arose from focus group discussions. The most frequently selected definitions from the online survey included:

**🔍 Purposefully choosing a job or career that enables employment regardless of location.**

When participants provided their own definitions of job portability in response to an open-ended prompt, many mentioned that job portability provided the opportunity for career growth and progression. In both the focus groups and qualitative survey responses, the majority of participants discussed having proactively selected their career to ensure job portability (e.g., teaching, nursing) and jobs that could be done remotely.

**“The ability to develop a career and progress via benefits and promotions regardless of physical location.”**

-Spouse survey respondent

**77%** said they made adjustments or changes to achieve career portability such as changing careers, going back to school or working in positions outside their desired field.

**63%** said that job portability “often” or “always” factors into their decision when seeking employment and applying for new positions.

**54%** reported that a portable career was “very important” to decisions made regarding their career.



### Moving job to job within the same company either on-site or in remote location.

In both the focus groups and qualitative survey responses, the majority of participants discussed remote work, or the ability and/or opportunity to continue working for the same employer from remote locations (e.g., work from home).

**“A career that you can maintain with the SAME company. May not be the same job, but you can continue with the same company and continue with upward mobility.”** -Spouse survey respondent



### Maintaining a similar job across locations

- ▶ Some participants stressed that job portability should mean that military spouses can remain within the same or a parallel position, pay, or field.
- ▶ Several respondents described portability as a job or career that “moves with you.”
- ▶ A smaller proportion (6%) suggested portability “actually” meant keeping one’s job, but accepting less pay or opportunity for career advancement, thus leading to lower wage jobs and pay cuts.

To summarize, military spouse respondents indicated that components of job portability include remote work that enables career progression, remaining with the same company at on-site or remote locations, and maintaining the same job across pay and field. It is worth noting that employers also need to define job portability. To the extent that employers and employees share a similar understanding of job portability, military spouse employees can achieve career progression and advancement while employers can retain valuable talent.

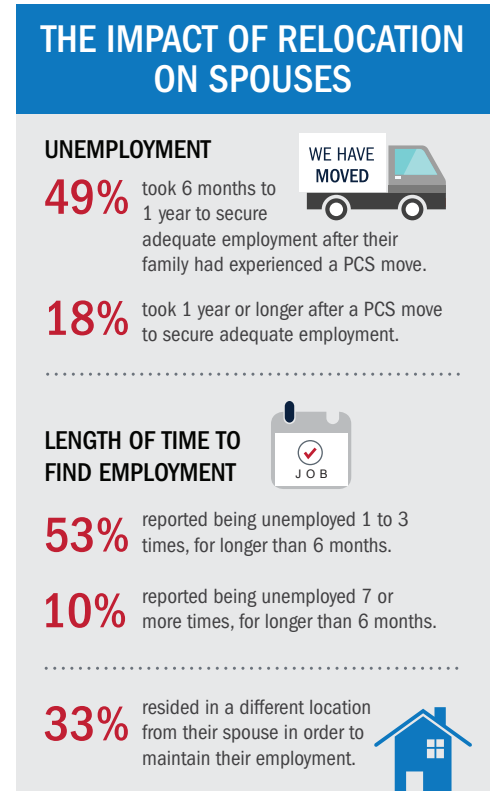
**“I want it [job portability] to mean that military spouses can continue to move forward in their careers regardless of where in the world they are . . . but it usually means a low wage string of jobs that leave you with a checkered resume history.”** -Spouse survey respondent

## Why is Job Portability Needed? The Impact of Relocation Unemployment

Survey respondents were asked about their current employment status. The majority, 76 percent of respondents, reported they were employed full- or part-time, 22 percent were not working and were seeking employment, 2 percent reported not working and not seeking employment or some other employment situation.

Of those individuals who indicated that were NOT currently working, 21 percent stopped looking for work because they could not find work, another 21 percent indicated they were not working because of family obligations, 5 percent reported they are going to school, 5 percent reported they are unable to find childcare, and 47 percent selected “other.” It was notable that none of the respondents reported that “they did not want to work” as a reason for not working. Though more research is necessary, the current data suggests that some spouses might meet the definition of a “discouraged worker.” This is significant to the extent that discouraged workers are not included in traditional unemployment estimates. More information is needed about military spouses who meet the definition for discouraged workers to better understand the long-term employment consequences as they related to job-portability.

Figure 4: The Impact of Relocation





**“I had a good job I didn’t want to cut my career progression short. I couldn’t find local employment that matched my salary and was very over-qualified for most local jobs immediately available to me.”**

-Spouse survey respondent

### Professional Advancement and Underemployment

Of those respondents who were currently employed, 53 percent felt they were over-qualified for their current position. Unemployment and underemployment both contribute to a lack of career advancement and progression for military spouses and missed opportunities for promotions. Despite skills and qualifications, many spouses never achieve their desired level of career advancement. Some spouses leave the labor force entirely, giving up on finding work in their field or location, while others live away from their active duty spouse and family in an effort to preserve their job or career. Periods of unemployment then translate to gaps on resumes. In an effort to avoid such gaps, many military spouses take positions below their education and experience level.

### Job portability, professional advancement, and underemployment

- ▶ **89%** indicated that job portability had impacted their ability to advance professionally either “moderately” or “extremely.”
- ▶ **74%** agreed or strongly agreed their work experience is more than necessary to fulfill their current job requirements.
- ▶ **62%** believe their talents are not being fully utilized on the job.
- ▶ **55%** agreed or strongly agreed that their formal education over-qualified them for their present job.
- ▶ **48%** respondents report they have not remained in the same career field throughout their employment.

### Finances

Both underemployment and unemployment contribute to a loss of income and lack of financial stability for military spouses. Spouse respondents report a number of financial consequences related to relocation. The majority of survey respondents indicated that the lack of job portability had impacted their finances either “moderately” or “extremely.” Repeated relocations can have long-term financial consequences for military families by impacting their ability accrue savings, pay off debt, respond to emergencies, and save for retirement, to name a few. There are also less obvious consequences. For example, half of the military spouse respondents surveyed reported they had never received a promotion during their time affiliated with the military.

**73%** of respondents report they have NOT been able to maintain employment with the same employer after experiencing a relocation due to the military (which has implications for the accrual of benefits such as retirement, leave, and seniority).

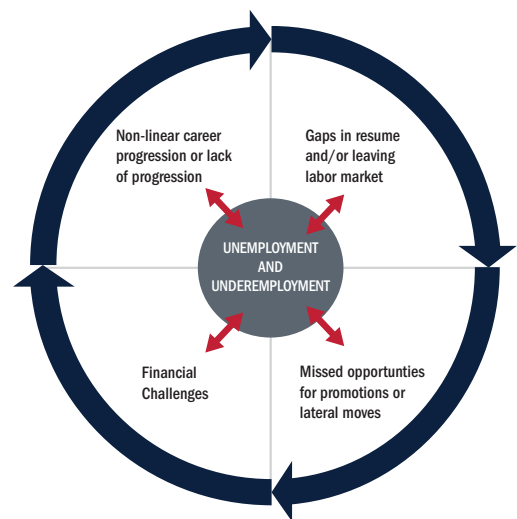
**68%** of respondents reported that lack of job portability had impacted their finances either “moderately” or “extremely.”

**50%** of the respondents reported they had never received a promotion during their time affiliated with the military.



### Decisions to Remain in the Military

Military spouse unemployment has been discussed elsewhere as a factor that impacts service member retention.<sup>15</sup> Unemployment and underemployment have reciprocal long-term career consequences for spouses. In this survey, 41 percent of respondents indicated that job portability had impacted their family's decision to remain in the military. These results are consistent with prior research on military spouse employment and suggest that the PCS moves and frequent relocation experienced by military spouses have major impacts on their ability to obtain and maintain employment.<sup>16</sup>





## The Role of Employers

### Perceptions of “Military-Spouse-Friendly” Policies and Practices

Employers play a large role in creating an environment where military spouses not only feel welcome but also connected to the organization in a way that fosters their commitment and maximizes their growth potential. Survey results suggest that employers must also attend to how they convey the message they are “military-spouse friendly.” Eighty-two percent of participants said it was “important” or “very important” that employers’ policies address the unique needs of military spouse employees. However, 76 percent of spouses believe that employers are “not at all aware” or are “slightly aware” of employment issues facing military spouses. Additionally, 76 percent reported they do not think that companies, organizations, and businesses are interested in helping military spouses remain employed when they move. Employer policies, protocols, and tools for military spouses are often unclear or absent.

When asked what employers could do to help with job portability for military spouses, most respondents suggested creating and providing remote opportunities for military spouses. One spouse said:

**“Be more open to it. Consider all the work that can be done remotely, and realize that military spouses work harder to have those opportunities to be portable and flexible...”** -Spouse survey respondent

### Career Portability: Spouse Perceptions of Employers

- ▶ **86%** stated there were no existing policies in place to help them maintain employment when they had moved previously.
- ▶ **82%** reported their current employer had never worked with them to develop a career plan.
- ▶ **80%** reported their current employer had never offered any mentorship opportunities.
- ▶ **20%** indicated they do not feel comfortable talking to their employer about offsite or remote work opportunities.

Figure 5: Military Spouse Friendly Employers

### A Military Spouse Perspective: How can employers show they are “military-spouse friendly?”



**Military spouses were asked to rate the importance of the following things employers could do to convey they are “military spouse friendly. These include:**

- ▶ Demonstrate an understanding of military spouse resumes (92% rated as “important” or “very important”)
- ▶ Demonstrate a willingness to hire military spouses, shown by the number of existing military spouse employees (89% rated as “important” or “very important”)
- ▶ Have HR systems in place to track military spouse hiring, retention, attrition, internal mobility (85% rated as “important” or “very important”)
- ▶ Identify themselves as a Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP) employer or part of other military spouse coalitions (83% rated as “important” or “very important”)
- ▶ Require recurrent training of their hiring managers, recruiters, and supervisors on military awareness, including military spouse policies (81% rated as “important” or “very important”)

**Job portability options spouses would take advantage of if offered by their current employers.**

- ▶ Remote employment within the U.S. (97%)
- ▶ A flexible work schedule (92%)
- ▶ Remote employment outside the U.S. (71%)
- ▶ A job transfer within the U.S. (71%)
- ▶ A job transfer to another company (61%)



**I feel [self-identification] it is needed to explain the gaps in my resume as well as the short time spent at previous jobs also to explain why I have held so many volunteer positions.”**

-Spouse survey respondent



### Self-Identification

Companies and employers aim to recruit the most highly-skilled employees within a competitive marketplace – precisely the skills and attributes that military spouses possess.<sup>17</sup> As such, companies often proactively invest in strategies focused on recruitment. However, for those interested in hiring military spouse employees, lack of self-identification can be an issue that undermines an organization’s retention efforts. Participants in the employer survey were asked if their organization had a formal way for an employee to self-identify as a military spouse. The majority (70 percent) reported having a formal way for employees to convey their identity as military spouse. These include participation in an employee resource group (ERG) or use of a separate application portal. One company that did not have a formal way to determine spouse status discussed the complexities surrounding the issue, particularly as it relates to legal and human resource departments: “If you’re asking if they’re a military spouse, you’re asking if they’re married...” This places the onus on spouses to find the “right time” to share their military spouse status. Several organizations indicated they encouraged self-identification at various “touch-points” in the employee life-cycle including application, onboarding, or while accessing various employee services.

When asked when they typically reveal to employers that they are a military spouse, 43 percent of respondents indicated they share their military spouse status during job interviews. While some of these respondents reported wanting to share (“It’s an integral part of my life.”), others described reluctantly disclosing their spouse status. The high percentage of respondents who report they disclose their spouse status during interviews is somewhat counterintuitive given that anecdotally spouses often indicate that they encounter stigma related to their military spouse status.<sup>18</sup> It is worth considering whether spouses feel compelled to share their spouse status out of fear that they will lose the opportunity to compete for an open position if they do not.

Military spouses may be less inclined to disclose their military spouse status if they fear not being hired due to potential biases or stigma associated the military lifestyle. Nearly one-quarter of respondents indicated they wait until after they are hired to share their military spouse status.

**“Revealing you are a military spouse significantly diminishes your chances of getting hired. It puts a time cap on your time at the job, and frankly might require more flexibility on behalf of the employer, which is usually too daunting to give to a new hire.”** -Spouse survey respondent



I didn't have a good interview experience. I was told straight out that I wasn't hired because I was military affiliated."

-Spouse survey respondent

### Best Practices

All employer participants indicated their company has specific resources and policies dedicated to military spouse employees and that those resources and policies had been used to help an employee transfer to a job in a new location within their company or organization.

**"Job Portability is a great way to retain awesome talent - while it might seem like a stretch at first, it really is just an adaptation of existing alternative work arrangements and relocation policies - it is solvable and creates loyal employees from a very talented pool of professionals."** -Employer Interviewer

Without cultural awareness and understanding, it is difficult to create and implement policies, plans, and opportunities that specifically address the needs of military spouse employees. In addition to several other recommendations, an overwhelming number of military spouses recommended that employers first develop and demonstrate a greater understanding of military spouses and their employment experiences. The findings also suggest a perceived absence of policies and programs for military spouse employees. For example, the majority of respondents reported that employers are unaware of the employment, relocation, and portability challenges encountered by military spouses, suggesting cultural competence and education may be needed.

## Employer Promising Practices: Enabling Job Portability

### ✔ IDENTIFICATION OF APPROPRIATE PORTABLE POSITIONS WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION

- Employers stressed the importance of identifying those positions and people that were a good fit for portable work.

### ✔ FOCUS ON HIGH PERFORMERS

- Most companies indicate they would offer portability options contingent on satisfactory work performance.
- Almost all participants rated the job performance of their military spouse employees as excellent (the highest option on a five-point scale, ranging from poor to excellent).

### ✔ PROACTIVE AND CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION WITH HR

- Companies with portability options had cultivated relationships with HR professionals within the organization to facilitate and customize portability options specific to certain positions and locations.

### ✔ DEDICATED/DESIGNATED HR PROFESSIONALS TRAINED TO WORK WITH MILITARY SPOUSE EMPLOYEES AND/OR HIRING MANAGERS (e.g., high touch HR practices such as specialized HR familiar with military spouses)

- Organizations with portability options described having provided some orientation or training to their HR professionals and hiring managers emphasizing the need for portability and cultural competence.

### ✔ RECOGNITION THAT SOME POSITIONS WERE NOT APPROPRIATE FOR JOB PORTABILITY

- Companies recognized that some positions were not appropriate for portability work and had either formal or informal ways to identify them.

### ✔ LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

- Companies reported that organization leadership was an important success factor that helped them assist military spouses transferring to new locations in the U.S. and overseas.
- The majority of employer participants (nine companies) indicated that company leadership supported job portability and 80% said their organization allows overseas employment.

### ✔ EMPLOYER PARTICIPATION IN COLLABORATIVE NETWORKING GROUPS; LEVERAGING PARTNERSHIPS WITH NONPROFITS AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS/COMPANIES

- Companies described the importance of sharing information and best practices with like-minded organizations to improve processes, identify solutions, share information, and remove barriers.
- All ten participating companies reported that they participate in collaborative groups, task forces, and/or initiatives focused on military spouse employment, such as Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP), Hiring our Heroes, etc.

### ✔ LEVERAGE EXISTING INTERNAL RESOURCES SUCH AS EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUPS OR EXISTING POLICIES

- Organizations described utilizing their own employees as sources of information to improve job portability practices, policies, and procedures.
- The majority (80%) of employers already offer both remote work and job transfers to their employees. 60% indicated that job transfers were the most frequently utilized option for military spouse employees.



**If you can offer somebody the investment and tools that they need to be successful, that seems to be the critical factor, rather than the specific profession.”** -Employer Interviewer

### Overseas Employment and Status of Forces Agreements (SOFAs)<sup>19</sup>

Among spouse survey respondents, 35 percent reported they had moved overseas as a result of military orders. Among respondents who had moved overseas, 96 percent were familiar with the term Status of Forces Agreement or “SOFA,” which defines the legal status, rights, and responsibilities between the U.S. and its host governments. Respondents also experienced complications when attempting to collect information pertinent to understanding and translating these agreements. For example, of those that indicated they had attempted to find SOFA-related information, half reported that it was “difficult” or “very difficult” to gather information.

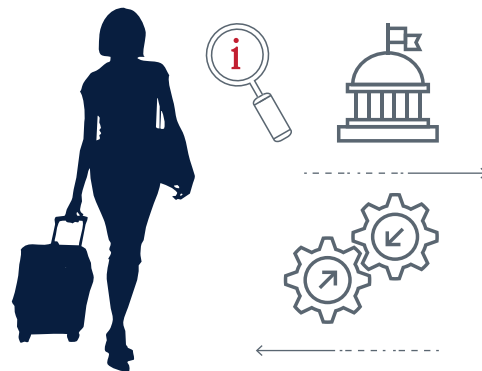
- ▶ Of those who have moved overseas, 62% have moved once and 38% have moved twice.
- ▶ The most common locations for overseas moves were Germany, Japan, Korea, and Italy.
- ▶ Nearly half (42%) reported that SOFA impacted their employment, especially by restricting their employment options.

**“The SOFA [agreement] is a career killer. Not every spouse wants to work on post or can. Not EVERY spouse wants to work in childcare! Especially if the post is small, there are not enough employment opportunities. If you were to work on the economy, you lose military benefits (DEERS etc.)”** -Spouse survey respondent



Locating information about working overseas is difficult. Respondents were asked where they would look for information about overseas employment to determine about how best to disseminate employment information in the future. Among spouses who had been overseas as a result of military orders, 38% indicated their employers were able to provide information about working overseas (e.g., legal and tax-related information). Among all spouse respondents:

- ▶ 41% indicated they would ask their peers and other military spouses
- ▶ 34% percent reported they would search DoD websites
- ▶ 12% would search non-government employment websites
- ▶ 7% reported they would look to their installation JAG officer
- ▶ 2% said they would consult a lawyer.



### Employers and SOFA

SOFAs can complicate employment matters and significantly limit employment options for spouses already faced with career and financial instability because of multiple relocations. Given the convoluted nature of SOFAs, there may be little incentive for employers to retain their military spouse employees when they must relocate overseas. The following SOFA specific recommendations were compiled based on interviews with employers and employer survey responses.

Figure 7: SOFA-specific Job Portability Solutions

PROBLEM	PROPOSED SOLUTION
Limited employer internal knowledge about SOFA	Designate SOFA “experts” with the organization to assist military spouse employees on a case-by-case basis.
Lack of accessible information specific to employers.	Provide SOFA related employment information in a centralized location, ensure it is updated for accuracy, and is location specific. Facilitate access to location specific points of contact to answer specific questions. Collaborate with stakeholders, across DoD, DoS, and Congress to identify problems and coordinate viable solutions.
Differing agreements, rules, and procedures	Clarify how SOFA related procedures differ from one location to another on a case by case basis.
SOFA related issues differ significantly from person to person	Provide “high-touch” assistance to spouses relocating overseas in order to customize solutions. Designate a subject-matter-expert in your organization to minimize disruptions due to employee relocation and maximize retention.
Tax implications for retaining employers are unclear	Enlist experts from HR, tax attorneys, and installation legal officers to answer situation specific questions. Identify costs and benefits of retaining employees tying to the business case.

For more information about SOFA see:

Bradbard, D.A., Maury, R., & Pitoniak, A.L. (2018, June). The Force Behind the Force: UNDERSTANDING STATUS OF FORCES AGREEMENTS (SOFA): Removing Barriers to Military Spouse Employment Overseas. Syracuse, NY: Institute for Veterans and Military Families. Retrieved from [https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Job-Portability\\_Research-Brief\\_Final-7.9.18-004accessible.pdf](https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Job-Portability_Research-Brief_Final-7.9.18-004accessible.pdf)

## Recommendations

Job portability contributes to the intractable unemployment rate that military spouses face. Companies who hire military spouses are better prepared to meet the unique needs of their employees to the extent that they have clearly established policies, protocols, and procedures to address the specific employment barriers, such as how relocation impacts unemployment or the inability to find a suitable career path that aligns with the unique needs of the military spouse. Improving job portability for military spouses will take coordination between spouses themselves, their employers, and the supporting agencies and organizations in- and outside of government. The following recommendations are offered with regard to job portability:



### For Employers and Collaborative Partners

- ✔ Facilitate knowledge and understanding of the military community with personnel who are trained on military spouse specific issues.
  - Foster sensitivity to military cultural issues such as relocation, self-identification and stigma (e.g., recognize spouses may not want to self-identify).
  - Develop ways to work around the differences in time zones and work schedules.
  - Employ methods to transfer employees seamlessly and minimize gaps in pay or benefits to minimize financial impacts of relocation.
  - Acquire a basic understanding of SOFAs by establishing points of contact in relevant locations to better assist employees working overseas.
- ✔ Develop an employee resource group specific to military spouses.
- ✔ Plan across the employee lifecycle (e.g., consider how to hire, retain, and promote military spouses who are high-performers).
- ✔ Develop and disseminate employee policies that address military specific issues (e.g., paid time off that can be used for military PCS moves, specific policies and procedures to address overseas employment or enable remote or telework employment, or transitions from employee to contractor that minimize disruption to pay or benefits).
  - Consider which jobs and positions lend themselves to portability and convey this.
  - Consider which types of employees should be offered portability options and convey this.
  - Consider the legal issues: How will you determine who is eligible for portable options and who is not.
- ✔ Incorporate high-touch HR practices with regard to military spouses as you would for other high-performing employees that you wish to retain.
- ✔ Where possible, work collaboratively with military spouse employees to identify customized job-portability solutions unique to individual circumstances and specific locations; communicate to military spouse employees if collaboration is possible.



### With regard to job portability, organizations can collaborate by:

- ✔ Convene working groups with key stakeholders (e.g., representatives from the DoD and DoS to identify common challenges around portability, and other companies).
- ✔ Share “best practices” to address portability issues.
- ✔ Think broadly about portability (e.g., not just retaining employees in YOUR company or organization).  
If you cannot retain an employee is there a partner organization who can hire them?
- ✔ Identify and share common best practices (and barriers) across industries and job roles.
- ✔ Highlight opportunities that facilitate portability and disseminate portably opportunities (e.g., use social media to share employment opportunities across partner companies).
- ✔ Develop and cultivate relationships across companies and industries to share employment and training opportunities across geographic locations.
- ✔ Identify and share helpful points of contact within particular locations especially across state lines and overseas.



### For Policymakers

Work collaboratively with military spouse hiring related initiatives (e.g., the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, DoD's Military Spouse Employment Partnership) as well as military spouses to develop solutions that enable overseas employment utilizing recent personal experiences gathered from military spouses to include the various options that impact their employment including entrepreneurship and small business ownership, overseas employment, licensure, unemployment compensation, and childcare.

- ✓ Consider incentives for hiring and retaining military spouse employees (e.g., tax credits).
- ✓ Consider whether some spouses meet the criteria for discouraged workers and how this might impact unemployment estimates.
- ✓ Publish and disseminate up-to-date employment guidance on SOFA agreements as they pertain to employment overseas.
- ✓ When SOFAs are under review, include members of DOD and DoS to consider how SOFA changes impact military spouse employment overseas including remote employees.
- ✓ Identify and disseminate accurate contact information for spouses and employers to gather relevant information about SOFA agreements.
- ✓ Establish guidelines to enable employers to retain their employees when they relocate across state lines and overseas while maintaining compliance with licensure requirements and SOFA agreements.
- ✓ Consider options to reduce the tax burdens to encourage employers to retain or employ military spouses residing overseas.



### For Military Spouses

- ✓ Invest time in learning more about the companies and organizations interested in recruiting and retaining military spouses.
- ✓ Whenever possible, connect with mentors, human resource professionals, and organizational leaders to plan your desired career path.
- ✓ Seek out companies that are invested in hiring military spouses.
- ✓ Whenever possible, communicate with your employer about upcoming relocations and/or a long-term career path that includes some relocation.
- ✓ Network with other military spouses by participating in online groups, networking organizations, and employee resource groups.
- ✓ Contact employers in advance of moving (when possible) to minimize gaps in employment.
- ✓ When relocating overseas be aware of SOFAs. Contact the installation career services center to determine who the best point of contact is in the country where you are going.
- ✓ Be willing to tell your story. Personal anecdotes can be helpful in understanding how to improve and make changes.
- ✓ Be prepared to persevere despite barriers and challenges that may arise.





## Conclusion

PCS moves and frequent relocation impact military spouses' ability to obtain and remain employed in the following ways:

- ▶ Some spouses leave the labor force entirely giving up on finding work in their field or location, while others live away from their active duty spouse and family in an effort to preserve their job or career. Relocation overseas presents unique employment challenges for which there is little guidance.
- ▶ Unemployment leads to gaps on resumes, which can be difficult to explain to employers and hiring managers. It appears that military spouses accept positions beneath their education and experience level to avoid these gaps.
- ▶ Both underemployment and unemployment contribute to a loss of income and lack of financial stability for military spouses, and both contribute to a lack of career progression and missed opportunities for promotions.
- ▶ Despite skills and qualifications, many spouses never achieve their desired level of career advancement.

In this paper, job portability was defined as a crucial pathway for retaining military spouses. We have attempted to clarify how portability can help military spouses maintain long-term employment, decrease barriers to employment after relocation, and help military families secure greater financial and economic stability. For employers, portability is one tool to help retain high performing employees if they strategically and proactively plan where and how they can offer portable positions. It is worth noting that many non-military affiliated employees must frequently move as well due to a variety of factors. Thus, such policies can benefit all employees and potential hires who may be suitable for portable career paths.

Clearly, spouses who receive employment support are more apt to find a more desirable career path that aligns with their long-term employment goals. Additionally, helping spouses to achieve their goals simultaneously assists the organizations who hire them, by ultimately contributing to greater retention and a larger return on investment.



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