

Companies Help Veterans Adapt to Civilian Workplace

“In my first six months here,” recalled John Krouse, “I kept thinking, ‘What’s the structure? There’s no uniforms.’ ”

In January 2009, after 24 years in the Navy, Krouse was beginning a new career at Intellicheck Mobilisa, a developer of wireless technology and identity systems in Port Townshend, Wash., and “trying to figure out who does what” in a civilian workplace where the values were as different as the attire.

“As an aviation maintenance chief, all I was concerned about was getting planes fixed. ... I never had to worry about budget.” Whereas on the corporate side, he said, “Everything is profit-driven.” Krouse’s supervisor, Jim Rabb, was sympathetic because he had had his own adjustment problems when he came out of the Navy two years earlier. “I was an E-9 fleet/command master chief [petty officer] working 14- to 18-hour days,” he remembered. “You worked till the job gets done.” Even now, in a 9-to-5 workplace, he added, “My internal clock will not allow me to stop.” All veterans go through adjustments when they enter—or resume—civilian work. Some adjustments are harder than others. And with personnel returning from two wars, HR professionals have the challenge of helping those whom they have hired.

Sometimes the advice is as simple as: Keep your voice down. “When I got mad at someone as master chief, I told them exactly what I think,” Rabb said. When he does that now, he said with an air of surprise, “Sometimes, somebody considers it yelling when I’m not really yelling.” The details of adjustment assistance include apparently trivial matters. “In the military, if you leave every day for an hour, you’re slacking,” said Krouse. “It would drive me nuts” that private industry subordinates would take off 60 minutes daily. “[HR] had to sit me down and say, ‘As a leader, you have to make sure they have a lunch hour.’ ”

“Unfortunately,” said Humberto Alvarez, another Navy veteran who is general manager of Sun State International Trucks in Davenport, Fla., “they’re entitled.”

Carl Pfeiffer, who rose to colonel during 26 years in the Army, declared, “I know how a soldier’s going to react.” But when he was hired as COO of a growing law firm in Albany, N.Y., in 2009, he noticed that employee reactions were less predictable. “You relocate somebody’s workspace and it’s a major emotional event for them. A soldier, going to another cubicle, couldn’t care less.” “In the military, oddball personalities get weeded out quickly or are forced to conform,” said Pfeiffer’s boss, Mathew Tully of Tully, Rinckey PLLC. “In civilian work, it’s common to have tons of personalities at play.” Tully, who hires a lot of veterans, said they can get hung up on co-workers’ sexual orientation, clothing and hairstyles. “They go home and talk to their wives, [saying] ‘You won’t believe what I saw.’ ”

The number one adjustment problem for veterans, Tully said, is the change to a less structured environment. “Our day starts at 8:30. ... Somebody coming in at 8:32 really gets

under their skin.”

Edward Crenshaw, CEO of DESTIN Enterprises, a Maryland-based consulting firm under federal contract to provide placement services for veterans, said that because many private-sector workers are encouraged to be innovative, “Veterans get misjudged in the corporate setting. They’re considered lazy because they’re coming from an environment where they’re told what to do.”

And among veterans used to issuing orders, notably former noncommissioned officers, one of the most common problems is being given less (or uncertain) authority over others. “It’s very frustrating,” said Lisa Rosser, an Army Reserve lieutenant colonel who consults HR professionals in hiring veterans. “The employer tells them, ‘I don’t know what you know how to do, so I won’t let you do a lot.’ ”

Sears Holdings Corp. has roughly 42,000 veterans in its workforce. Philip Dana, manager of specialty talent acquisition, said the first step in helping vets adjust is finding mentors already inside the company. “Say we have a West Point special forces officer coming in. I’ll assign a special forces or West Point buddy.” That might be harder for HR professionals in companies smaller than Sears, but Dana advised, “Reach out to your employees and find out who your veterans are ... and use those people in the interviewing and onboarding process.”

Rosser advises companies to establish veterans’ networking groups so that an unhappy recent hire can find someone to “talk you down from doing something rash like [saying] ‘I’m going to quit the company. Nobody treats me well.’ ” Resources to Explore

Philip Dana of Sears recommends Easter Seals’ Operation Employ Veterans, an interactive train-the-trainer program.

Sodexo’s Angela Guidroz says America’s Heroes at Work from the U.S. Department of Labor “is a great resource on what brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder are and how they will play out.”

Army Reserve Lt. Col. Lisa Rosser has written an HR professionals’ guide for recruiting and retaining military.

Handling Special Cases

Because of Iraq and Afghanistan, finding wounds or emotional difficulties among returning combat veterans is “highly likely,” according to Dana. “It’s a highly stressed environment.”

“I walk around with my back to the wall all the time,” said Jim Flaherty, who joined Sodexo, a food and facilities management company, after more than 30 years as a Marine, including two tours in Iraq that left him with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). “There was a time I could take stress by the buckets,” he said. “Now my stress levels are basically worn out.”

Flaherty’s employer has been working to keep him in positions where he can function despite his condition. Angela Guidroz, a Sodexo recruitment manager in Baton Rouge, La., says the company deals with PTSD using “flexible scheduling, possible job sharing [and] scheduled breaks in response to stimulus overload and fatigue.” The HR approach, she said, is to “provide encouragement and moral support. To lend an ear.”

Jodi Wallach, recruiting manager for The Hartford insurance company in Connecticut, said helping veterans adjust is “all about sensitivity, education and a lot of communication.”

Guidroz said that, often, HR professionals lump people into categories. Instead, she advises companies to find out what can be done for disabled individuals, specifically. “Research indicates those types of accommodations are most likely low cost and very minor.”

Columbia, Md., psychiatrist Cynthia Washington, a major in the Army Medical Corps who counsels veterans at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, said, “Employees are not asking

employers to absolve them of work responsibilities. ... It's a matter of accommodating so they can work more efficiently."

"It goes beyond veterans' issues," added Crenshaw. "It's an ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] issue in terms of creating friendly workplaces."

The Payoff: Loyalty

Philip Dana says Sears Holdings will hire about 7,000 veterans during 2009. "Given the tools for success," he predicted, "they will be phenomenal employees."

This includes those with physical and psychological scars.

Alvarez, who came out of the Navy with a disability, said "We hire [veterans] because of their work ethic, how hard they work."

"They tend to have loyalty," said Bonnie Ludlow, senior VP of Intellicheck Mobilisa, which has hired many veterans. "If you have a company culture that can foster that loyalty and keep it intact, that's good."

With Sodexo's help, Flaherty said his PTSD is getting better. "I'm staying with the company as long as they'll have me. I'm dedicated. I have no intention of retiring out. I've got six-year-old twins. I can't afford to."