

+ RETURN-TO-WORK SUPPORT

Military veterans

Employers play an important role in making it possible for their employees to serve our country in times of need. They can also play an important role in helping those employees return to work after military duty. The following information may be helpful in supporting a smooth re-entry into the workplace.

The challenges

Veterans returning from a war zone may have many sources of stress. They must readjust to family life and civilian routines. In addition, they often face hurdles when they return to their old jobs. Some of these include:

- + Seeing coworkers advance in their careers, while their own career has been on hold.
- + Feeling less important or needed.
- + Civilian jobs may be less stimulating or motivating after the intensity of active duty in a war zone.
- + Those who didn't see much action may find the return to a hurried, less structured civilian life too stimulating.
- + Coworkers may be resentful that the person was gone for so long. They may be upset that the veteran is now getting their old job back. Coworkers may need time to adjust.
- + It may be hard for the veteran to manage anger or irritability. They may resent authority. This can lead to conflicts with coworkers or management.
- + Falling back on "battlefield skills" that are not useful in civilian life and work. For example:
 - Being on constant alert for danger
 - Not trusting people
 - Making quick decisions on one's own
 - Expecting others to obey without question
 - Sticking to a "mission" no matter what
 - Reacting quickly and asking questions later
 - Keeping one's emotions sealed off

How can a manager help?

Successfully reintegrating into a civilian job may depend on how proactive and supportive a manager is throughout the process. The following tips may be helpful for a manager of a returning service member.

Be prepared

- + Talk to coworkers beforehand about the transition and what to expect. Offer concrete examples of how they might support the returning service member. Encourage employees to come to you with concerns.
- + Be aware that the veteran may ask for accommodations. These may be extensive due to disability or more modest, such as structuring tasks or modifying schedules. Check with your HR department regarding your company policy.

Be welcoming

- + Check with the returning employee before making plans. It may be a thoughtful gesture to welcome them back with a small reception. It offers a chance to acknowledge their service and let them know you are glad they're back. Make introductions to any new employees. Be aware that some veterans may want to discuss their experience, some may not.
- + Some workplaces send a card of appreciation to a service member's family.

Be proactive

- + Meet one-on-one meeting with the service member before they begin their duties. Review changes that occurred in their absence and how their job or role might be affected. Ask about the service member's needs and expectations. Discuss training needs.
- + Talk about how any new skills might be put to use.
- + Recognize that the service member may still have mandatory military responsibilities.
- + Control rumors and quickly address any signs of conflict before negative behaviors can take root.
- + Schedule regular meetings for a while. Ask specific questions about how the transition is going.

Be understanding

- + Be aware that it can be hard to return to work after deployment. Accept that returning to normal, or establishing a new normal, takes time. Expect good performance, but be patient.
- + As with any employee, one of your goals should be to help the returning service member build skills and confidence. Offer feedback in a positive way.
- + Don't "walk on eggshells" or think of the service member as fragile in some way. Don't make excuses for unacceptable behavior or ignore potential issues. Try to be direct, but supportive, in your approach.

Be aware

- + Notice how the service member and other employees are interacting. Be sensitive to any issues. Don't respond by segregating the service member. Talk directly to any coworkers who seem to have resentment. Ask for their opinion on how to make the transition work well. Continue to make your expectations clear.
- + Watch for the use of battlefield skills mentioned above. Help them reduce their use.
- + Be alert for signs that they're having trouble. This might be performance issues, alcohol or drug abuse, emotional concerns, or pulling away from others. Be prepared to get the employee help if needed. A management consultation with your EAP can help you decide how to go forward.

Finally, expect a positive outcome and share that with your employees, including the one returning. Setting expectations can have a major influence on the attitude and actions of coworkers. Recognize that for returning military personnel this may be a good opportunity to review their life goals. It can be a chance to fully focus on who they want to be. Expect that, with everyone's good efforts, the return will be a success.

EAP support

Managers may call their EAP 800 number and ask for our Employee Assistance Consultant team 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to discuss any concerns they have about their employees' performance. We will talk through these concerns, make recommendations for interventions, and provide information on how the employee can get support.