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Knowing the appropriate steps to take when an employee is deployed is crucial to making the transition easy for them and your company. Here are four tips that can help.

By Gabrielle Blue | Feb 21, 2011

At the center of every business is perhaps its greatest asset: employees. The contributions provided by each member are essential to keeping your company afloat. And some of the most dedicated members of your team also serve as Guard and Reserve members.

"They bring a professionalism to the workplace," says Art Yerecic, president of [Yerecic Label](#), a New Kensington, Pennsylvania-based packing label company. "There's a lot of pluses that they bring to an organization, [such as] self-discipline. They understand the chain of command and teamwork."

There are thousands of military employees, and veterans, working for civilian establishments nationwide, but what do you do when one of them is called to active duty? These four tips can help make the transition process for your company and your service employee a smooth one.

How to Handle Employees Who Are Called to Active Military Duty: Know the Law

As an employer, you're required under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) to follow certain laws regarding the care of your military employees, the bulk of which mandates employment and reemployment rights and, in some cases, benefits to employees who take leave from work to perform military service.

"In 2003, right after September 11, I was called to active duty on a Homeland Security mission," says retired Staff Sgt. Brian Hurst, who's currently vice president of manufacturing at Yerecic Label and has worked there for 18 years. "It was supposed to be a one-year mission but turned into a two-year mission. "

While your human resources team should know the extensive details of USERRA, understanding the demands of your services employees often leads to a stronger working relationship.

USERRA, enacted in 1994, protects job rights and benefits for veterans and Guard and Reserve members. The U.S. Department of Labor, Veterans Employment and Training Services (VETS) created a [website](#) that provides answers to all of the questions you, or your military employees, may have. From posters to summaries, to fact sheets and FAQs, the DOL site is the first place a business owner should go for assistance. [The USERRA Advisor](#) is an interactive website, also a part of the DOL webpage, which includes two clear categories, labeled Employer Issues and Employee Issues, making it easy to navigate through.

These are three key facts every employer should know about how USERRA effects their business. According to USERRA, an employer is required to:

- Provide employees a notice of their rights and benefits under USERRA. It is up to the discretion of the employer in determining how to do so (e.g. Posting fact sheets, sending e-mails, etc.)
- Ensure the reemployment of a uniformed worker's position upon their return from performing military service. This law lasts for five years.
- Continue providing health-plan coverage for up to 24 months, if applicable, for the service employee and their dependents while he or she is serving.

Still, sometimes you'll find it necessary, depending on the circumstance, to deal with each leave of absence on a case-by-case basis. If you're unsure about anything, call your local VETS office.

"[Our] general practice is to create our policies by interpreting statutes in a way most beneficial to the employee," says Chris Galy, director of talent acquisition and military network leader at [Intuit](#), a software company located in Mountain View, California. "So conflicts rarely arise."

But if they do, the [Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve](#) (ESGR), an organization within the Department of Defense, serves as the middleman between you and your service employees.

"We do provide neutral mediation if issues can't be easily resolved," says Mandi Rumble, ESGR's public service specialist, who admits that the organization's main mission is to support service member and their families.

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How to Handle Employees Who Are Called to Active Military Duty: Develop a Policy

Military duty can often be spontaneous, extended and frequent, so your best bet is to create a policy as a reference point for all of your staff to follow. Granted most of your guidelines will more than likely mirror the UESRRA, but it's crucial to have a clear set of instructions to help troubleshoot any procedural issues.

[Southern Company](#), based in Atlanta, Georgia and is one of the Southwest's largest energy companies. Valerie Hendrickson, the company's spokesman, says, "More than 12 percent of our current population have served or are serving. We have a dedicated human resources call center, who provide detailed process and procedural-based information regarding our military employees."

Like Southern Company, which has two sets of policies on the topic located on the company's internal website, the University of Notre Dame, an independent, national Catholic university located in Notre Dame, Indiana, has also crafted a [policy](#) separate from UESRRA. These types of policies often stipulate:

- Pay eligibility
- The ability to use vacation time or personal days
- Benefits during leave
- The details of reinstatement
- Notification requirements and procedures
- How leave should be reported on time cards
- Hiring replacement staff

Intuit, a company with more than 7,000 employees, focuses on training its staff early on. "Educating employees of their rights and benefits begins during our new hire orientation," Galy says, "and extends throughout their tenure with Intuit through the support of their leadership teams and our human resources team. Where questions do come up, the Department of Labor, Department of Veterans Affairs, and the ESGR are all great resources."

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How to Handle Employees Who Are Called to Active Military Duty: Prepare for the Readjustment

Priming your staff for the absence of an employee for an extended period of time can be difficult without a plan.

"The challenge is primarily felt at the small team level, where the loss of an employee for six months to a year can be disruptive," Galy says. "[We] offer managers coaching and support in reorganizing around their work so that we can optimize their team's effectiveness."

One of the easiest ways to prepare for the readjustment is to plan ahead. In most cases, service members are informed of their pending leave date. It's their job, under UESRRA, to give you a written or verbal notice. When that happens, that's your cue to start planning. Whether you have to bring in someone new or train your current staff, take advantage of the last few workdays, or weeks, you have with your service employee.

"On my first deployment, prior to leaving, I spent three months [training] the guy who was going to replace me," Hurst says.

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How to Handle Employees Who Are Called to Active Military Duty: Show Support

As difficult as it is to readjust your company after an employee leaves, it's nothing compared to the transition from staff member to soldier.

Companies like Intuit, Southern Company and Yerecic Label are a few examples of businesses that go above and beyond to support military employees. These companies, along with more than 58,000 others, have signed statements of support with the ESGR to do everything possible to employ, encourage and aid Guard and Reserve service members and their families.

What sets these three companies apart for the rest is the fact that they're all recipients of the 2010 [Freedom Award](#), the highest Department of Defense award given to only 15 employers a year.

"These are companies that go well above what the law requires," Rumble says. "They're not just doing little things; they are doing highly supportive, highly motivated things for these service members."

In 2008, Hurst and two other employees at Yerecic were deployed to Iraq. They were gone for 13 months. Yerecic continued their full pay and benefits for the duration of their leave. Unrequired gestures such as that is what motivates military employees to nominate their company for the Freedom Award in the first place.

You may not be able to do much but sending a care package, an e-mail or providing family support speaks volumes for your employee.

"Understanding what a citizen soldier goes through is a big help," says Hurst, who retired after serving 16 years in the Army National Guard and four in the Marine Corps. "One day you're wearing a tie and shirt to work and the next you're wearing fatigues—that's a big shock."

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