

National Center for Women & Information Technology

PROMISING PRACTICES

Military Spouse Reentry Programs (Case Study 2)

Helping Mid-Career Women Return to Work in IT



Undergraduate



Career

Military spouses are a large and often overlooked population that could be well-served by IT training and could bring more diversity to IT. The Women in Technology (WIT) Military Spouse Certificate Program is one innovative program that attempts to meet this need by providing scholarships and information technology (IT) training for female spouses of military personnel in Colorado Springs. Supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor and by Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) funds, the WIT program is a joint effort of the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, the Pikes Peak Workforce Center, Pikes Peak Community College, Volt Technical Services, and two local military bases.

Military spouses enroll as a cohort in a unique program at Pikes Peaks Community College where they earn certificates in five modules: IT Fundamentals, Software Fundamentals, Network Essentials, IT Security Essentials, and IT Support Essentials. Each module qualifies them for a higher level IT job. While all five certificates can be completed in nine months, students who need to interrupt their program still receive certificates for modules they have completed. Students also can earn an associate's degree by fulfilling an additional year of IT and general education requirements.

The first cohort of three students began in summer of 2008, while the second cohort of 19 students began three months later. The program leaders credit this jump in enrollment to improved marketing and to the original cohort's recruiting efforts. The majority of women in both cohorts have some post-secondary schooling and business experience but do not have a formal background in IT.

The program also includes several crucial measures to ease the transition to the workplace. During the first class, personnel from Volt Technical Services, a technology recruiting firm, offer information about IT employment opportunities and explain how these opportunities align with the program's certificates. The firm also provides students with mentoring, information about part-time IT employment, and help finding entry level positions. Because Volt is an international organization with 350 U.S. locations, they are well-suited for helping students who may relocate frequently. The community college also runs an online "team room" that serves as a virtual meeting space where employers, course instructors, and students can network, receive mentoring, and share useful resources.

The National Research Center is administering an initial survey and will conduct a comprehensive evaluation once the first two cohorts finish the program. Initial feedback is positive, however. Women from the first cohort highlight several key benefits of the program, including the "streamlined" enrollment process; the course content and teacher support; and the condensed, flexible nature of the schedule. They also identify the support of the cohort — in terms of persistence in the program and life on the base — as a key benefit.



MILITARY SPOUSES COMMENT ON NEW PROGRAM

Lisa was taking a few college courses but had not yet decided on a major when she and her husband were relocated to Colorado Springs. "I wanted to keep busy as soon as I got here, so I went to the workforce center...and they told me about this program. It sounded like a great deal." She also observed that the workforce center made it "so much easier than having to find a new school or program in a new place" on her own. She also noted that it was particularly helpful to have instructors and fellow students who were supportive of her experiences in a military family.

Michelle relocated to Colorado Springs from Germany just over a year ago. Prior to moving, she enjoyed a career as a hairdresser but noted that she was "ready for a change." Before enrolling, she was worried about how speaking English as second language might affect her progress in the program, but observed that this had not been a problem so far. She identified the condensed nature of the program, the flexible schedule, and the support from instructors as important features. "This program is just a great thing to do...It's a great deal...and it's part-time so if you have children, it also works very well."

RESOURCES

For more information about the WIT Military Spouse Certificate Program, contact Mary Ann Roe (maryann.roe@state.co.us) or Jennifer Jirous (jennifer.jirous@cccs.edu).

Case Study Contributors: Mary Ann Roe, Coordinator, e-Colorado Learning Portal and Jennifer Jirous, STEM/IT/FineArts Program Director, Colorado Community College System

NCWIT offers practices for increasing and benefiting from gender diversity in IT at the K-12, undergraduate, graduate, and career levels.

This case study describes a research-inspired practice that may need further evaluation. Try it, and let us know your results.

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PROMISING PRACTICES

How Can Companies Attract and Retain Mid-Career Female Employees? with Case Study 2



Undergraduate



Career

Recent media attention to the so-called “opt-out revolution” – the emerging trend where well-qualified women choose to leave productive careers – paints a simplistic picture of successful women choosing to leave high-profile positions to spend more time with their families. Systematic research reveals several complicating factors that are important for corporations to understand if they are to retain top female talent (Hewlett, Luce, Shiller, and Southwell, 2005).

- While many women (37%) choose to leave their careers for a short time – a phenomenon the Center for Work-Life Policy terms “off-ramping” – 93% of these women want to return to work. Only 74% succeed, and only 40% are able to secure full-time jobs.
- Only 5% of women who return to work want to return to their former company; however, 80% wanted to remain in the same type of position, and more than 60% wanted to remain in the same industry. This finding suggests that many of these women feel unsupported by their previous employers.
- While caring for children is a significant reason for off ramping (44%), other factors, such as eldercare (11%) or pursuing additional education (23%), also lead women to off-ramp.
- These “pull” factors are not the only reasons women temporarily leave their jobs; a number of “push” factors – features about the job itself – also contribute to this decision. Lack of fulfillment in their jobs (17%) or feeling stalled in their careers are two common “push” factors women cite (23%).
- On average, women off-ramp for two years and lose 18% of their earning power if and when they return to work. For those who off-ramp for more than three years, this figure climbs to 37%.

These findings make it clear that women’s so-called “choice” to leave their careers is not a simple one, and that most of these women would prefer to continue working if industry would make this possible. In fact, 94% of women who would like to “on-ramp” indicate that they would take advantage of industry efforts to do so.

WHAT INDUSTRY CAN DO

Research has identified policies that industry can adopt to retain female employees:

- Flexible work arrangements (FWAs)
- Flexible career paths (e.g. allowing time off without terminating employment)
- Re-entry training and support
- Reduced-hour jobs or job-sharing

These policies stand to benefit everyone, including male employees and employees without children, and initial results among companies who have implemented these policies are promising. In a survey of employees participating in FWAs at Ernst & Young, two-thirds said they would have left or would not have joined the company if such programs had not existed. Similarly, in a focus group with female managers at Johnson & Johnson, all of the women expressed high levels of satisfaction with the company largely because of its FWA policies (Hewlett, Luce, Shiller, and Southwell, 2005). At Best Buy, departments that have implemented flexible work hours have reported approximately 35% increases in productivity (Conlin, 2006).

A Word of Caution:

Research indicates that these opportunities are more readily available to women who have already “made it.” Women in their mid-careers, who often need these policies the most, are not always able to access them. Furthermore, taking advantage of these opportunities is often stigmatized and results in unspoken penalties (e.g. not being promoted). Addressing these barriers is important if such policies are to succeed in preventing the “hidden brain drain.”

RESOURCES

- Conlin, M. (2006). Smashing the clock: Inside Best Buy’s radical reshaping of the workplace. *BusinessWeek*, December 5. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/16040492/>
- Friedman, S. D. & Greenhaus, J. H. (2000). *Work and family – Allies or Enemies? What Happens When Business Professionals Confront Life Choices*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hewlett, S.A., Luce, C. B., Shiller, P., & Southwell, S. (2005). The Hidden Brain Drain: Off-Ramps and On-Ramps in Women’s Careers. *Harvard Business Review Research Report*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation.

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Visit www.ncwit.org/practices to find out more.

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