

Ohio SHRM State Council Workforce Readiness Director Takes Off!
By Rebecca Jeffries, SPHR



On September 3, 2009 I was honored to be a participant in the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) Boss Lift with the 121st Ohio Air National Guard Refueling Wing stationed at Rickenbacker Air National Guard Base.

Boss Lift is a program sponsored by the US Department of Defense (through the ESGR) that provides employer orientation activities at training sites where they can personally observe National Guard and Reserve service members on duty.

My time with the 121st Ohio Air National Guard Refueling Wing was spent on a Boeing KC-135 Stratotanker completing a training mission, round trip from Columbus, Ohio to Savannah, Georgia while refueling three Air National Guard aircraft.

While my experiences during refueling were exciting, I was significantly impressed by my observations of and conversations with the aircraft's crew, their discussions about experiences with the Guard, active duty and their willingness to share those experiences with me were a substantial gift that I received that day.

As an HR professional, I have studied USERRA, made sure the USERRA poster is in the employee lunch room but generally had little actual employer experience with the application of USERRA. My Boss Lift experiences provided me with a better understanding of how USERRA truly makes a difference in the lives of military personnel that risk their lives for our freedom.

As an employer I believe it is important to be aware of a recent Department of Defense directive that mandated US Service Chiefs (heads of the Army, Air Force, Marines, Navy, and National Guard) to develop plans, budgets, and future initiatives to "operationalize" the National Guard and Reserve forces (Army Reserve, Air Force Reserve, Navy Reserve, Marine Corps Reserve, Coast Guard) and to "fully integrate" those organizations into the "total force" of the Department of Defense.

This directive was a significant change to the overall structure of the National Guard and Reserve, effectively changing it from a "strategic reserve" force to a more "active" reserve.

This directive also altered the amount of time that the Guard and Reserve members may be required to serve, changing their service obligations from one weekend a month and two weeks per year to an undetermined number of days which has the potential to change frequently – often providing short notice to the service member or their employers.

For employers, this directive has made staffing and work flow scheduling more difficult adding the potential for increased tension between military personnel and their employers.

I asked the crew members what they wanted most from their employers regarding USERRA issues and was surprised by their answers.

The crew members of my flight were very aware of the employers needs in scheduling and staffing. What they want from Ohio employers is to be better educated about USERRA and its application at all levels of the company. They also asked for employers to have more appreciation for what the Guard actually does and to have more consistency and patience in dealing with military personnel. These troops feel understandable pressure when they are performing their Guard duties – they don't want to add more pressure by thinking their jobs might not be there or that they will be fired when they return from duty.

Finally, they wanted employers to better understand the balance between activation, selective activation and volunteering for service.

My personal observations that I would like to share with employers include that the Guard members receive extensive training and have a sense of discipline most civilians can't understand. When they contract into the military they are required to position their military duties/responsibilities before everything else. Service members have a sense of pride and dedication, which translates to their work outside of the military as well, they're not afraid to work hard.

The skills and qualities Guard members possess are assets which would benefit any corporate organization such as: service members are in charge of millions of dollars of government equipment and personnel (management, leadership and responsibility), security training (trust) and willingness to follow orders (respect and diligence).

My day was full, exciting and heartwarming. I am very proud to know that these service men and women are here, serving our country.

Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve

Other programs and services offered by the ESGR include:

- Employer outreach services and information about USERRA
- Ombudsman services and informal mediation concerning USERRA compliance
- Collaborative educational venues
- Employer recognition awards for employers that support employee participation in the National Guard and Reserve members
- Military Member Support providing military personnel with information about their rights and responsibilities under USERRA.

For more information on ESGR please log on to their website at www.ESGR.mil or contact Anthony Augello, Col, USAF (Ret), Executive Director, Ohio Committee at 614.336.7444 OR Bob Labadie, Col, USA (Ret), State Chairman at 614.451.6260.