

A boss and soldier's journey to Iraq and back

Law requires employers to take back deployed workers but offers little help

John Flor's return to work after a 22-month Army National Guard deployment, spent mostly in Iraq, made him feel "like Rip Van Winkle."

"It's like waking up from a two-year hiatus or dream," Flor said. "Everything looks familiar, there's a lot of friendly faces." But a lot had changed: His company had a new CEO and a new reporting structure and he was managing a new team.

"You do need a lot of time to work back into things," he said.

Roughly 1.4 million U.S. forces have been deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Under the law, those who left jobs when they were deployed have the right, in all but the rarest circumstances, to get them back. But there's little help or guidance for companies or employees to handle deployments and returns.

Flor's employer, Allianz Life Insurance Co. of North America, based in Golden Valley, Minn., tried to make deployment as easy on Flor and his family as possible. Now, almost three months after he returned, his manager said there's a few things she'd do differently.

On his first day back at work, July 23, roughly 500 Allianz people crowded the floor and gave him a standing ovation. His manager, Amy Gunderson, gave a speech welcoming him back, as did the company CEO. Joking that he was used to wearing a uniform, they gave him some Allianz golf shirts. They presented the flag they'd flown over the building while he was gone.

"The whole first day was a lot of fanfare," Gunderson said. "Once the fanfare left off, I'm thinking, 'Now what do I do?'"

Boss sends snail mail

Flor was called up in August 2005. "As a manager, I was absolutely stunned when John came into the office with his orders," Gunderson said.

Flor, she said, is a "go-to" manager, one of her seven team managers overseeing an 80-person call center that assists the life insurance company's 170,000 independent agents with things like product questions, sales ideas and supplies.

At Gunderson's suggestion, he prepared to hand off all his responsibilities to another manager within a week of getting orders so he could spend as much time as possible with wife, Nicole, and three young daughters.

"He wanted to tie up a lot of loose ends," Gunderson said. "I was pushing: 'Your family comes first.' We had to figure out some things after the fact."

Flor spent eight months training at Camp Shelby in Mississippi. Then he spent the next 14 months in Camp Anaconda in Northern Iraq, where his team ran a 911 operations center, which coordinated medevac helicopters, ground quick-reaction forces and attack

aviation. The center would take calls if there was a bombing, or a convoy came under fire.

His work team sent him care packages, co-workers sent him cards and e-mails and the company paid his annual bonus. Gunderson bought 20 cards at a time and wrote reminders on her calendar to send a card or picture. If she didn't get an e-mail from him for a few weeks, she'd write saying, jokingly, "I'm your boss, no matter where you are in the world. If I don't hear back from you, I'm going to fire you."

Allianz Life executives had reassured him his job would be waiting for him, Flor said, and that promise was something some peers serving in Iraq missed.

"Knowing a senior leader in the company is personally keeping in touch is pretty reassuring," he said. "It's a model a lot of companies could follow."

The 2006 unemployment rate for all veterans, 3.8 percent, was lower than the national rate, but the rate for veterans 20-24 years old was 10.4 percent, according to the Current Population Survey.

While large companies are doing well bringing back employees who were deployed, smaller businesses sometimes can't afford to keep a position open, said Paul Rieckhoff, executive director of the Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America.

"There's a tremendous amount of inconsistency with employers," he said. When Flor returned from Iraq on May 23, Gunderson called to welcome him back and told him to take as much time as he needed before returning to work. Flor said Nicole was the one who ultimately decided it was time for him to return.

"Imagine turning off the spigot of your life for two years, then coming back to the office, the relationships, the people. It's good to get spooled up on where things are at," he said. He had a new team to manage and he had new peers, as a number of his colleagues had moved on to other jobs. Part of his reorientation was finding out where people sat in the office, since so many had changed roles. Also, the company was offering new products that his team had to support and there was a new chief distribution officer.

Flor credits Gunderson with taking the time to help him adjust. After the big welcome, Gunderson said she spent a couple hours each week with him going over the previous four months of leadership meeting notes. About a month into his time back, he went through a new manager training program, which went over new procedures and new systems.

But that wasn't enough, Gunderson said. She said she also should have immediately put him through new employee training, since so much at the company had changed, she said, including new benchmarks measuring the call center's work.

“I would have talked more with our HR department, with our training department,” she said. “I wish I had had an outlined return process for re-employment.”

Having such a plan is vital, said Andrew Hollitt, team leader for military recruiting at the Lucas Group, a Dallas-based recruiting company that specializes in military transition placement.

“That plan mitigates so many of the problems. not because it’s a magical fix, but ... because it demonstrates to employee that they matter and that they’re so damn important, the company has thought about how they can succeed when they return,” he said.

Flor said, “Having lived through it, I think Allianz did as good a job as they could have.”

Settling back into civilian work life

Flor came back to 3,200 e-mails, including plenty of the “cake in the conference room” variety. But reading the pertinent e-mails and the company’s Intranet entries on new products helped him catch up on what had changed.

Asked if he’s changed personally, Flor said he has, but isn’t interested in talking about details.

“Any life-changing event has an impact on how we view the world,” he said.

From his first day back, he said he focused on moving forward, talking about his emotions with only his family and close friends.

Since Flor’s return, Gunderson said the one change she’s seen in Flor is that he’s “a little bit more mellow.” Compared to the situations he handled in Iraq, workplace predicaments seem tame.

“He’s coming from such a high-energy setting,” Gunderson said. “Our emergency is a communication went out to the sales force that maybe our department wasn’t familiar with. In the grand scheme of things, that isn’t the end of the world.”

Flor said the company goes above and beyond for its soldier-employees and nominated both Gunderson and the company for the National Guard’s Patriot award, for employer support to the guard or reserve. Gunderson won the award. (The company won the award at the state level in May 2006 and is waiting to see if his nomination results in another award.)

“If I were going to offer advice to any company that even cared to listen, I’d say, maintain a dialogue with the employee during deployment,” he said. “That has an indirect affect on morale.”