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Strategy & Creativity Pay Off in Mobile Careers

By Kathie Hightower & Holly Scherer

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As we look for jobs with each move, many of us focus strictly on the salary level or on positions we see advertised in the newspaper. That's what Kathie did early on. When she couldn't match her Human Resources salary moving from Chicago to DC, for example, she switched fields. Not the best strategy. Jumping from one career to the next with each move keeps you from building a track record. You always start over on the learning curve, you don't develop a reputation in one field, and you don't connect with colleagues who you might turn to in the future for leads.

Other military spouses are more strategic in planning their long-term careers as they move with the military. Lynn Edwards, an Army wife, is a great example. As you read this, consider how her strategies might work for you, no matter what career field you pursue.

To start with, Lynn did the interest and values analysis to find a career field that fit her. "I'd always been about fun," she says. "I loved being involved with planning the prom, helping create school fundraisers, coordinating silent auctions. I've always been the one to plan get-togethers for my group of friends." She graduated from the University of Oregon with a degree in Leisure Studies. When she ended up married to the military, it turned out that working in the hospitality industry was one of the best career fields she could have chosen for this lifestyle.

As she points out, no matter where you move with the military, there are hotels, tour companies, convention centers, resorts, event facilities, golf courses that do large events, and of course, military morale, welfare and recreation (MWR) opportunities.

That doesn't mean you can always move in a straight line upward in this career as you move with the military. With each move, Lynn had a different kind of job within the industry. "Be open to that," she advises, "it deepens your experience and value." She's done unpaid internships in hotel sales. She's held jobs in recreation planning for MWR Korea, marketing for the Sheraton Savannah Resort, sales for a 120-room historic inn, large event coordination at an Oregon event facility, management for the Yakima Valley Visitor's & Convention Bureau, convention sales for Ocean Shores Visitor's & Convention Bureau, and now does contract meeting planning, coordinating large events for clients like Microsoft, NEC Invitational World Golf Championships. And she's now creating her own dream, a business called FriendFest that brings girlfriends together at

great resorts (check out www.friendfest.com), a culmination of all her skills and interests.

Strategies Lynn used successfully might work for you.

- **Join and stay active in your professional association.** Lynn has always been very involved with Meeting Planners International (MPI) and the Society of Association Executives. “Your professional associations are hugely key,” she advises, “especially moving internationally. The dues may seem high especially at first, but membership is worth its weight in gold.”

Other spouses agree. Amy J. Fetzer, Marine wife and romance author, belongs to the Author’s Guild and the Romance Writers of America. “Both organizations provided me with information I might not have found, especially since my writing took off when we lived in Okinawa before Internet connections were available.” Army wife and artist Kerry Vosler belongs to the Portrait Society of America and she joins all the art clubs in each area as she moves. “Your peers shorten your learning curve; they can save you a lot of time and money,” says Kerry.

Another great thing about belonging to your professional association is you run into your peers at events even as you move. Where you can’t keep your actual office mates in a job as you move, you can stay in touch with the larger “family” of your profession. With members all over the world, you always have someone to connect with when you move to a new location –and it’s an easy connection to make.

- **Get your professional certification.** “I looked at the jobs I wanted five years down the road and asked what those folks did to get there,” Lynn says. “In my world, it’s the Certified Meeting Planner or CMP. It gives you instant credibility.” As military spouses we feel we have to reestablish our credibility and professionalism with each move and each job. Professional certification cuts through that.
- **Look for mentors, negotiate career-building opportunities, and be proactive on cross training.** “You have to create your own opportunities,” says Lynn. “Speak up and take things on.” When she worked at the Yakima Convention & Visitors Bureau, for example, she said to her boss, “I’m not interested in your job since we’ll be moving, but I want to learn.” He let her sit in on Board Meetings and City Council Meetings. When her boss told her they couldn’t afford to give her the raise she deserved, she negotiated time off and the entry fee to do her CMP training, time instead of money.

- **Be persistent in your job search and start early.** When she found out they were moving to Savannah, Lynn got the event facilities list from the Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) and sent a cover letter and resume to every business listed there before she moved. Then she called those businesses, asking for information interviews and an opportunity to discuss the industry in that community. Once they arrived in Savannah, she went to CVB luncheons and stood up to say “I’m new here and bring a wide skill set,” handing out lots of cards. Even though she was frustrated that she didn’t find something immediately, she says, “I did stuff every day – calls, meetings that forced me to get dressed, and I toured Savannah to get the lay of the land.”
- **Be willing to take a pay cut for new experience (or just to continue in your field in a smaller community).** In Savannah, Lynn accepted a pay cut to work in sales at a high-end facility. Six months later she was promoted to Director of Sales. It may feel like “one step forward and two steps back” at times, but continuing to work in your chosen career path, continuing to make contacts and connections will be worth it in the long run. And your wide variety of experience can pay off later.
- **Be prepared to make changes in the kind of work you do.** Some jobs in the hospitality industry, for example, do not allow family flexibility. But some do. When Lynn had her second child, she chose the CVB work that was 8-5 and negotiated three days a week of work instead of five. Later, wanting even more flexibility, she started her own consulting firm.
- **Sell yourself.** Recognize the strengths you bring to an employer. “I’d basically say ‘Lucky you, I bring a unique set of skills to town,’” says Lynn. After all, you bring a wide experience of seeing how other businesses run things, often bringing in new ideas that can help an operation. You bring the strength of flexibility and being able to deal with change, not a common skill but a necessary one in today’s business world. You’ve most likely learned to work with individuals from all levels of society and from different states and countries. People skills like that are key to any position. Recognize and sell the value you bring.

Peggy H. Frede, an Air Force wife and educator, echoes that idea, “In interviews, be up front about your transient lifestyle. Turn it into a plus. I emphasize the wide range of subjects I’ve taught as well as the range of ages. I point out the varied perspectives and input I can provide from that wide experience at other locations.”

- **Network.** We can’t emphasize this enough! “This industry is very incestuous,” says Lynn. “Management and sales jobs rarely make it into an ad. It’s always through networking. It’s who you know – who knows how well you work!” When Lynn landed back in Oregon with one move,

she called her old boss who led her to a contact with an event coordinator job at a large event facility.

- **Create your own visibility.** Lynn volunteers to speak and teach classes on the leisure industry for community colleges, universities, and at conferences. She volunteered time on the boards of the state chapters of her professional associations.

All of these strategies will work with any industry. Apply them to the career of your dreams.

(And by the way, if the hospitality industry interests you, you don't have to have a degree in Leisure Studies or Business Management. "People have gone from dishwasher to the level of General Manager in some hotels," says Lynn.)

Note: We'll be highlighting successful strategies of military spouses in other career fields in future articles. Write us if you have a story to share or if you have a career field you want more information on.

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