

PUBLICATION

The Mad Hatter Attorney

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I often introduce myself as an attorney who wears multiple hats: my civilian attorney hat and my military hat. Since law school, I have balanced a career in the Louisiana National Guard with my civilian career. I've often worn these hats on the same day; in fact, I'd say I wear both hats almost every day. I bounce back and forth between military legal questions and civilian legal questions. I am currently the Command Brigade Judge Advocate (often referred to as JAG) for the 225 Engineer Brigade of the Louisiana National Guard. My military law office consists of two attorneys and 8 – 12 paralegals whom I mentor, supervise, and support. This is in addition to staying competitive in a major law firm practicing a niche area of law, disaster recovery. I am often asked how I balance these hats and how employers can support their employees who are in the National Guard and also attempting this balance. In this article, I provide my thoughts.

Most citizens don't realize the commitment required by the National Guard. They assume – as suggested in some TV commercials – that the commitment is only one weekend a month and two weeks a year. But the National Guard is part of my daily life. As a Brigade JAG, I advise a Brigade Commander who is responsible for as many as 3,000 soldiers. As a National Guard JAG, I must substantially complete the same tasks as my active-duty counterparts – but in only two paid days a month.

I have deployed to Iraq and mobilized for dozens of natural disasters that have plagued Louisiana – including a fairly lengthy COVID mobilization – all while trying to stay competitive in my civilian career. I even doubled down on the military life by marrying an Infantry Officer, who is an active guard reservist (which means he is a full-time active-duty soldier serving in the Louisiana National Guard). Now I must also balance his military commitments and deployments.

Sometimes I succeed at balancing, sometimes I don't. However, my biggest breakthroughs in reaching some balance have always been rooted in finding the right team to support me. The military teaches you the value of a team, and it's the most critical component of my two successful careers. Balancing multiple careers is a family affair. Our family and friends help by supporting our kids so that we can be responsive to our military and work obligations. I've also relied heavily on my civilian colleagues to support my clients during my unexpected military obligations. In addition, I work closely with my military team members so we can support each other's civilian obligations.

I'm often asked how employers can support employees who are in the National Guard while working for them full-time. It can be a difficult situation. No employer is pleased to have employees leave for a year at a time or unexpectedly gone at a moment's notice for unknown lengths of time. It often boils down to an employer's own patriotic calling regarding how much they will go beyond the basic USERRA laws to support their guardsmen. My recommendations for the employer looking to go beyond the basic legal requirements are:

- Talk to them and consider their military duties when assigning work commitments. Ask your guardsmen how busy they are and discuss their availability. Unlike your other employees, they have another boss and responsibilities. I am often prepping for military trials in my spare time. My drill commitment is when I get to try the case, but as many attorneys know, the actual proceeding is only

one percent of the work.

- Consider their military time and accomplishments during promotion and advancement discussions. For example, the fact that they met your company's expectations AND were promoted in their military rank in the same year is an example of their ability to exceed expectations. Where appropriate, employers should utilize this data in their own advancement considerations.
- Consider holistic candidate experience. A prospective employee's military career (former and current) can provide meaningful insight into the candidate's skills and abilities to perform the job and benefit your business or entity.
- Celebrate your military members – both former and current. There are plenty of opportunities to make your soldier feel truly celebrated. Never miss an opportunity to do so.
- Consider flexible and creative work arrangement policies. Determine whether there are creative policies that will provide more flexibility for employees balancing family, civilian careers, and National Guard commitments.
- Support their deployments! Be prepared for how you will respond when your guardsmen approach you about a military leave of absence. Consider resources on how to support deployed guardsmen [here](#).
- Prepare for reintegration. When your guardsmen return from any military leave of absence, they may feel like a fish out of water. Develop a plan for their return and celebrate it. Make sure their reintegration is methodical and appropriately timed to avoid a firehose of backlogged work.
- Educate your leadership. Guardsmen often seek out jobs that are offered by other fellow or retired guardsmen because they feel they will better understand their circumstances. Those opportunities, however, are limited. Educate your leadership on the military and the National Guard so you can provide a safe support system for your guardsmen. Check out additional employer resources [here](#).

For more information on employer support to the Guard and Reserve, you can also consult the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) at <https://www.esgr.mil/>.