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Employer Strategies for Military Spouse Retention

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MS, Liberty University, 2009

BA, Hardin-Simmons University, 2008

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Employee turnover is extremely costly to organizations, which concerns business leaders in the United States because organizations invest time and money in resources such as recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and training. Grounded in systems theory, the purpose of this multiple case study was to explore strategies employers use to retain military spouse talent. The sample consisted of nine business leaders from large companies in San Antonio, Texas, known for successful talent retention initiatives for military spouses. Data were collected from semistructured interviews with business leaders and publicly available organizational documents. Data analysis was guided by thematic analysis, member checking, and methodological triangulation. Five key themes emerged from data analysis: emphasis on the military spouse persona and challenges faced; normalization of flexible, remote work; military spouse discrimination and diversity; importance of internal support groups; and the importance of education and communication. A key recommendation born from the findings was that advocacy for military spouses to become a protected class should continue, which will prompt tax incentives, benefits, and credits for organizations that employ military spouses, as well as bolster diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. The implications for positive social change include the potential for employers to positively impact military spouses, communities, and the nation as a whole by retaining qualified talent and will not have to spend more on talent acquisition, onboarding, and training.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my wonderful grandmother in heaven, a constant source of inspiration, encouragement, and light. For you, I will continue to seek the tallest ladder. This study is also dedicated to military spouses around the world – never stop competing and striving for the employment opportunities you deserve. As the great Eleanor Roosevelt said, “You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face…you must do the thing you think you cannot do.”

Acknowledgments

I would like to give a very special thanks to my doctoral study chair, Dr. Deborah Nattress. She has been a phenomenal sounding board and advisor throughout this entire process. I would not have gotten through this journey without Dr. Nattress' genuine care, relatability, and demonstration of resiliency. She is an inspiration, and I would not have completed my study without her guidance. I would also like to thank my second committee member, Dr. Jaime Klein, for her timely and thorough feedback, as well as my URR, Dr. Thomas Schaefer, who held the final set of keys that allowed me to unlock this new chapter of endless opportunities. I would be remiss if I did not sincerely thank my incredible family who sacrificed much, so that I could complete this educational goal. Together, they supported me emotionally, financially, and spiritually along this arduous journey. They dried my (numerous) tears, lifted me up, encouraged me, cheered me on, and celebrated each milestone along the way. Additionally, I would like to thank my friends, colleagues, and mentors who encouraged me constantly along this journey. Additionally, I would like to thank military spouses around the globe. Your challenges, trials, joys, and triumphs in the military lifestyle inspired me daily to see this study through to fruition. Your stories need to be told and you will always hold a special place in my heart. Finally, I would like to thank the research participants from various organizations and industries across the city of San Antonio. Your willingness to do whatever it takes to make your organizations, communities, and the lives of military families better never ceases to amaze me. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for making this study possible!

Table of Contents

Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Military spouses are the behind-the-scenes unsung heroes of America's defense system (Blue Star Families, 2016; United States Department of Defense, 2017). A military spouse's service comes with personal sacrifice, as these men and women often relocate and forgo pursuing their careers to support the military member's goals, progression, and career path (Eubanks, 2013; Gonzalez et al., 2015). Innovative employer retention strategies may aid in the fight against military spouse unemployment and underemployment. Therefore, the focus of this qualitative multiple case study was to better understand retention of military spouses in employment. In Section 1, I provide the background of the problem, the problem and purpose statements, the nature of the study, research and interview questions, conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, significance of the study, and a review of the professional and academic literature.

Background of the Problem

Military spouses continuously meet challenges such as deployments, permanent change of station (PCS) moves, as well as career and employment issues – all while demonstrating a commitment to America's service members (Heredia, 2017; United States Department of Defense, 2017). These challenges make it difficult to maintain or advance a military spouse's career path. Therefore, military spouse unemployment and underemployment rates continue to rise (United States Department of Defense, 2017). The subsequent frustration and stress of being unable to find employment, as well as being forced to take severe pay cuts due to the lack of opportunities in a new geographical region, present significant financial challenges for military families (Blue Star Families, 2016). According to the United States Department of Defense (2017), "Ultimately, the issue of military spouse employment profoundly impacts military readiness and our nation's ability to recruit and retain an all-volunteer force" (p. 2). I explored the retention practices of military spouses amongst the private and public sectors and how the sectors address these challenges. By conducting this study, I provided information to business leaders who may conduct future dialogue toward solutions within their respective companies concerning military spouse retention.

Problem Statement

U.S. military spouses face career challenges that affect employee retention, including mandatory PCS moves, lack of employer comprehension, and state licensure and certification issues (Godier-McBard et al., 2020). The cost of losing an employee can cost employers more than 100% of the base salary of the individual who left (Skelton et al., 2019). The general business problem is that employee replacement costs businesses time and money in valuable resources such as recruiting, hiring, and training. The specific business problem is that some business leaders lack innovative strategies to retain military spouses.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the innovative strategies employers use to retain their military spouse talent. The target population consisted of nine business leaders from large companies in Texas who have successful talent retention initiatives for military spouses. The implications for positive social change include the potential to establish collaborative employment efforts among communities and municipalities around the country, reduce employment issues for military spouses, increase consumer spending contributing to local communities' economic growth and health, and to potentially increase the nation's military readiness.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative researchers gather data for identifying, exploring, and understanding the meanings and approaches individuals or groups attribute to and use for addressing problems (Davidson, 2009; Saunders et al., 2015). In contrast, quantitative researchers gather and analyze statistical data for generalizing findings across a population to further explain or describe a phenomenon (Babbie, 2010). The researcher who uses the mixed-methodology design integrates or "mixes" both quantitative and qualitative methods and data within one problem under investigation (Creswell et al., 2004). To explore the retention strategies for military spouses, I did not test hypotheses, which is part of a quantitative study, nor did I used the quantitative portion of the mixed-methodology research, because it was not needed to address my study's purpose. I used the qualitative method for my study.

I considered four research designs that an individual could use for a qualitative study on strategies for the retention of military spouses: (a) ethnography; (b) narrative; (c) phenomenology; and (d) case study (Cincotta, 2014; Ebersohn & Bouwer, 2013; Saunders et al., 2015; Sauro, 2013). The researcher who uses ethnography is immersed in the participants' environment to identify and understand the customs of cultures, such as languages, symbols, rituals, culture changes, and other shared meanings (Cincotta, 2014).

Therefore, ethnography was not the optimal choice because ethnographic designs are rooted in a cultural climate versus a business perspective (Sauro, 2013). The researcher who uses a narrative design relies on the written or spoken words from individual reflections, conversations, and other informal exchanges (Ebersohn & Bouwer, 2013). A researcher using a narrative design combines subsequent events from one or two individuals or sources to form a composite perspective from participants (Sauro, 2013). A narrative design was not the optimal choice because this design only relies on data from one or two sources making it difficult to reach data saturation for the particular topic of this study. In addition, a narrative design was not the ideal choice because a narrative design relies on written, spoken, or visual accounts of an individual’s personal story (Sauro, 2013). As I did not focus on military spouses’ personal stories, the narrative design was not the optimal choice. A researcher using a phenomenological design combines the personal meanings of the participants’ lived experiences and the recollections and interpretations of those experiences (Saunders et al., 2015). A researcher using a phenomenological design focuses on the participants’ perceptions, perspectives, and feelings surrounding the experienced topic or phenomenon (Chan & Walker, 2015; Saunders et al., 2015). As I did not focus on the personal meanings of military spouses’ lived experiences, the phenomenological approach was not the optimal choice. I used the case study design for my study. Case study researchers use multiple types of data, such as reports, interviews, and organizational documents to further understand complex issues (Hamel et al., 1993; Saunders et al., 2015). As the goal of the research study was to understand the problem within a real-life context or setting, a multiple case study design was the most appropriate and optimal for the particular topic of study. Yin (2018) concluded, “Case studies that utilized multiple sources of evidence were rated more highly, in terms of their overall quality, than those that relied on only single sources of information” (p. 126).

Research Question

What innovative strategies do employers use to retain their military spouse talent?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies have been the most successful in retaining qualified military spouses?
2. How do your retention strategies differ for addressing military spouses versus civilian spouses?
3. What types of policies or programs does your organization have in place to retain military spouses after a Permanent Change of Station?
4. What were the key challenges in implementing the strategies for retaining qualified military spouses, and how did you address those key challenges?
5. How do you evaluate the effectiveness of strategies used to retain qualified military spouses?
6. What additional information can you add to this study about the various successful strategies used to retain military spouses?

Conceptual Framework

Systems theory was originally formulated and introduced by biologist, Ludwig von Bertanlanffy in 1937 (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Researchers who use systems theory investigate phenomena from a holistic approach. When an individual adheres to a systemic perspective, the individual believes that it is not possible to understand a phenomenon by breaking it up into different subgroups (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Another key concept of systems theory is that it is imperative to view the phenomenon from a global perspective to obtain a clear understanding of the entire picture or problem (von Bertalanffy, 1968). In addition, researchers understand how individual parts of a process work together to improve various outcomes of a particular process when they use systems theory (McMahon & Patton, 2018; Sayin, 2016). Last, one of the primary goals of systems theory is to reveal a new set of patterns to improve a process or procedure (McMahon & Patton, 2018; Sayin, 2016). Systems theory provided me with a potential conceptual framework to explore how employers retain military spouses.

Systems theory was the conceptual framework for this study. Researchers who use systems theory have the potential to obtain insights into the key contributing issues that can help or hinder this phenomenon. For example, some of these issues can include the organization's type of work, industry, and workplace culture, as well as the geographical location of the military spouse, and the policies of the United States Department of Defense. Therefore, systems theory was the conceptual framework for this research study because it helps researchers reveal how all of these aspects fit together and must work together in harmony to contribute solutions toward retention strategies for retaining military spouses.

Operational Definitions

Military readiness: Military readiness is the ability of military forces to meet the demands of a nation's military strategy (Gilliam & Parker, 2017).

Military spouse: A military spouse is a person whose spouse is a member of a nation's armed forces (United States Department of Defense, 2016).

Permanent Change of Station (PCS): A PCS is a long-term assignment, generally 2-4 years that requires a move within the continental United States or outside the continental United States (Military OneSource, 2018).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

An assumption is a researcher's unexamined belief that can lead to insufficient attention on the integrity of research conclusions (Fan, 2012). Four main assumptions guided the research. First, I assumed that the qualitative multiple case study method through the lens of systems theory was the ideal choice for the study. Second, it was assumed that some employers had successful strategies and best practices surrounding the retention of military spouses. Third, I assumed that these strategies differed from the strategies used to retain civilian and veteran employees. The final assumption was that all participants would be authorized, available, and willing to answer the interview questions completely and truthfully.

Limitations

A limitation is inclusive of the weaknesses within a specific research study, as well as the study's credibility level (Brutus et al., 2012). There were three potential limitations to this qualitative study. The first limitation was that some prospective participants might not consent to participate in the study. The second limitation was that the participants might withhold information surrounding their organization's successful talent retention strategies. The third limitation was that employers' strategies may change over time.

Delimitations

A delimitation aids in marking the boundaries of what is being studied (Wlodarczyk, 2014). The study's scope was limited to nine business leaders at three companies in San Antonio, Texas. The study did not include all companies and organizations within the state of Texas, the entire United States, or internationally. To include stakeholders outside the city of San Antonio would have required resources beyond the scope of this research. The study focused on large businesses and did not include small- or medium-sized businesses. Only employers were interviewed for this study. I did not interview individual military spouses for this study. The study only focused on employers with known, successful talent retention initiatives for military spouses and did not include employers lacking developed talent retention initiatives for military spouses.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

The emphasis on hiring military spouses is not a new concept for government entities and some of America's largest employers (O'Brien, 2018; United States Department of Defense, 2017). However, exploring ways in which an organization can retain military spouse talent after a PCS is a relatively new concept. According to Merhar (2016), every time a business replaces a salaried employee, it costs the business [on average] 6 to 9 months of that individual's salary in recruiting and training costs. In addition, the study further emphasized that costs could grow up to twice an individual's annual salary if that individual is an executive-level employee. In addition, businesses need to consider the additional potentially hidden issues of losing an employee – such as lost productivity and cultural impact (Smith & Cantrell, 2011). For example, it may take a new employee 1-2 years to reach the productivity of the former employee, and whenever an individual leaves a company, other employees take time to ask why (Merhar, 2016). This study's findings have the potential to reduce costs through improving retention strategies and practices for current and future employers of professional military spouses.

Implications for Social Change

Researchers indicate that innovative efforts made by employers can affect employee retention (Cloutier et al., 2015). Therefore, the implications for positive social change could include the potential to identify successful strategies among companies committed to recruiting, hiring, and retaining military spouses, establishing collaborative employment efforts among communities and municipalities, reducing employment issues for military spouses, increasing consumer spending contributing to local communities' economic growth and health, and potentially increasing the nation's military readiness.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

This section is a review of the supporting professional and academic literature that served as the beginning of the research for this specific study. The majority of this research was performed in the Walden University Online Library using the ABI/Inform Complete, the Business Source Complete, EBSCOhost, and military and government databases. This literature review was supplemented by documents and studies obtained from the United States Chamber of Commerce, Blue Star Families, Military Family Advisory Network, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), and several published books, government websites, as well as other military and industry-specific sources. Key search terms included *armed forces, career, distributed organizations, employment, hiring, innovation, military, military spouses, onboarding, organizational culture, recruitment, remote work, retention, systems theory, talent management, telecommuting, training, turnover, underemployment, unemployment, virtual organizations,* and *work-life balance.* The literature review consists of 124 sources with 105 sources being peer-reviewed and 85 sources dated between 2015 and 2021.

Application to the Applied Business Problem

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the innovative strategies employers use to retain their military spouse talent. The organization of the literature included a number of themes developed during the research. The information presented in this literature review identifies the various barriers to the retention of military spouse talent. Currently, there are not any case studies available about employer strategies to retain military spouse talent or talent retention initiatives for military spouses. Therefore, I will discuss the benefits of talent retention to employers, a statistical overview of military spouse employment, the persona of a military spouse, military spouse employment needs, and current initiatives to support military spouse employment.

Systems Theory

The systems theory was used to explore this qualitative multiple case study because it provided insight into the many contributing factors that can help or hinder this phenomenon. When one considers the first systems of written communication, such as cuneiform, hieroglyphs, or numerals – the systemic thought process dates back to ancient times and is embedded throughout history (Hammond, 2003). However, systems theory was first officially introduced by biologist, Ludwig von Bertanlanffy in 1937 when he presented the general theory of systems at a conference at the University of Chicago (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Von Bertanlanffy described a system as elements in a standing relationship and organized the systems theory into three major areas: philosophy, science, and technology (Moller, 2014). Systems theory was further developed later after the World Wars and was specifically catalyzed by the Society for General Systems Research (Hammond, 2003). Systems theory operates in a recursive relationship (Moller, 2014). Systems theory integrates philosophy, theory, and method to create application and action (Sexton & Stanton, 2016). Systems theory explores the relationship between the numerous elements within the system from a broad perspective and approach.

Researchers who use systems theory investigate phenomena from a holistic approach. When an individual adheres to a systemic perspective, the individual believes that it is not possible to understand a phenomenon by breaking it up into different subgroups (McMahon & Patton, 2018). Systems theory is also based around the idea that it is imperative to view the phenomenon from a global perspective in order to get a clear understanding of the entire picture or problem (Kozlowska & Hanney, 2002). Systems theory consists of multiple intertwined relationships (Riggs & Riggs, 2011). Each relationship in systems theory has its own defining attributes interrelated with other elements in the system that are part of a larger perspective and system.

Systems theory also aligns multiple elements that are a part of many different relationships. It is important to note that these elements and relationships (i.e., systems) may be closed, open, simple, or complex (Colangelo, 2016; Moller, 2014). For example, in the workplace environment, a closed system refers to internal interactions only; whereas, an open system refers to external interactions with other stakeholders, organizations, or groups (Ledlow & Coppola, 2011). In addition, a simple system may refer to a traditional machine or tool used within the workplace; whereas, a complex system may refer to other microsystems, sociocultural systems, or a network of systems within the organization (Ledlow & Coppola, 2011). Systems contain multiple elements and relationships, simple or complex that follow similar patterns.

All systems, regardless of the industry, have similar patterns and behaviors. Drack and Pouvreau (2015) proposed that these patterns and behaviors should be used to develop additional insight into the phenomena to be studied. Researchers have found that systems theory shows how individual parts of a process work together to improve various outcomes of a particular process (Sayin, 2016; Zybell, 2013). Researchers have indicated that one of the theory's primary goals is to reveal a new set of patterns in order to improve a process or procedure (McMahon & Patton, 2018; Sayin, 2016). Therefore, systems theory was the conceptual framework to explore how employers retain military spouses. This theory was an ideal fit for this qualitative multiple case study because it showed how all aspects fit together and must work together in harmony in order to contribute solutions toward retention efforts for military spouses.

Supporting Theories and Approaches

There are numerous theories that are similar to systems theory. For example, some of these theories include administrative theory, chaos theory, event systems theory, integral theory, living systems theory, motivational theory, spillover theory, strategic management theory, and sustainability theory (Ludvigsen et al., 2017; Rochat, 2018). However, the three theories and approaches that were the most similar and supported systems theory were the complexity theory, organizational theory, and the Six Sigma approach.

Complexity Theory

The main idea of complexity theory is that organizations are complex structures. The French philosopher, Edgar Morin, developed complexity theory (de Andrade Matos & de Azevedo Barbosa, 2018). Morin developed the theory out of systems theory in the late 1960s (de Andrade Matos & de Azevedo Barbosa, 2018). Complexity theory is the study of complex systems in the field of business, strategic management, and organizational studies (Voss & Krumwiede, 2012). A complex system is one that changes inputs to outputs as its components continuously interact with one another (Varnali, 2019). In addition, researchers using complexity theory propose that while systems are unpredictable, they are also constrained by order-generating rules (Ferreira & Saurin, 2019; Voss & Krumwiede, 2012). Researchers using complexity theory study how organizations or companies adapt within their respective environments and how they manage uncertainty, unpredictability, and chaos (Touati et al., 2019; Varnali, 2019). Researchers using complexity theory propose that organizations adapt and mutate (Perrone, 2019; Touati et al., 2019; Varnali, 2019). Even though organizations are built by complex, dynamic, and often chaotic interactions and relationships, in the complexity theory, order emerges as a result of self-organization.

Organizational Theory

While complexity theory focuses on the organization, organizational theory focuses on the human element. The German sociologist, Max Weber, first developed organizational theory in the late 1800s at the onset of the Industrial Revolution (Cunningham, 2017). Weber's version of organizational theory focused heavily on an organization's policies and procedures to obtain maximum oversight and efficiency (Cunningham, 2017). In the early 1900s, Henri Fayol later contributed to the development of organizational theory by infusing a human element to the theory (Matiaske, 2017). Fayol is credited with adding employee motivation, employee guidance, strategic planning, and recruitment to organizational theory (Matiaske, 2017). In the mid-1900s, Frederick Taylor further evolved organizational theory by adding additional concepts (Lauer-Schachter, 2016). Modern organizational theory now focuses on and encompasses employee training, earnings, employee retention, and performance evaluation.

In addition to the human element, modern organizational theory also focuses on employee productivity. Kocman and Weber (2018) stated that modern organizational helps determine how the workplace environment impacts employee productivity. Daft (2001) found that organizational theory focuses on both the internal and external environment relative to the organization. Daft (2001) also found that organizational theory focuses on how individuals, groups, or subgroups interact with one another to perform the activities to accomplish a shared goal, mission, or objective. Organizational theory suggests that the human element may have a greater influence on organizations than simply workplace conditions alone.

Six Sigma Approach

While organizational theory focuses on the human element, Six Sigma has a statistical, data-driven approach. In the early 1980s, Motorola engineers, Bill Smith and Mikel Harry developed Six Sigma (Dziak, 2017). According to the engineers, the company lacked a common metric for comparing improvement initiatives at the time (Dziak, 2017). Six Sigma is an improvement methodology that helps organizations oversee quality control and eliminate problems in a product, process, or service (He et al., 2017). Six Sigma focuses on the population standard deviation. Standard deviation measures the variation in a collected data set (The Council for Six Sigma Certification, 2019).

Six Sigma is also rooted in a structured approach. Six Sigma's project improvement methodology that helps individuals and organizations solve problems (He et al., 2017). Six Sigma involves a structured, multi-step, problem-solving approach called the DMAIC (Dziak, 2017). The acronym stands for: define, measure, analyze, improve, and control (Dziak, 2017). The DMAIC approach is most effective when used to improve a current process or make slight changes to a product design (Dziak, 2017). Researchers that use Six Sigma use a different approach when exploring a new process, product development, or conducting a complete redesign of a process or product called the DFSS (Awad & Shanshal, 2017). The acronym stands for: Design for Six Sigma. Similar to systems theory, the DFSS must take into consideration multiple aspects and systems that could impact the desired outcome (Awad & Shanshal, 2017; Carvalho et al., 2016). The DFSS also requires involvement by all internal and external stakeholder groups for each function and stage of the process (Carvalho et al., 2016). Both the DMAIC and DFSS processes may help business leaders understand how other organizations improved, developed, and implemented their processes for retaining military spouses.

Contrasting Theories

In order to fully understand systems theory, it is important to explore rival theories and contrasting opponents of systems theory. It is important to evaluate alternative lenses to explore the phenomenon of military spouse retention. The three theories and approaches that were completely opposite and contrasted systems theory were the diffusion of innovation theory, grey system theory, and the structural-functional theory.

Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Diffusion of innovation theory was developed for organizations to communicate information about their innovations. In 1962, E. M. Rogers introduced diffusion of innovation theory (Chang, 2010). Diffusion of innovation theory also helps determine how innovation affects organizations (Chang, 2010; Harvey, 2016). In addition, researchers use diffusion of innovation theory to determine how organizations accept and adopt innovation (Smaldino et al., 2017). Diffusion of innovation theory is relevant to the innovative strategies component of this study.

Diffusion of innovation theory also has its limitations. One of the chief limitations of this theory is that it is exclusive. Jamshidi and Hussin (2016) found that diffusion of innovation only focuses on how organizations adopt, communicate, and use innovation. Diffusion of innovation theory does not focus on the larger picture like systems theory, which is a weakness of the theory. Talent retention programs are complex and involve multiple internal and external stakeholder groups to develop and maintain. Retention programs are more substantial, detailed, and in-depth than simply one component and facet [innovation]. Therefore, due to the theory's narrow scope, diffusion of innovation theory was not the ideal choice to explore military spouse retention strategies.

Grey System Theory

In the late 1980s, von Bertalanffy introduced grey systems theory as a spin-off of general systems theory. If a phenomenon is explored through the lens of the grey system theory, this means that part of the information is known, part of the information is unknown, or some of the information is not substantial enough (Meng et al., 2017).

Researchers can use grey systems theory to solve uncertain problems or to identify additional information or evidence (Liu et al., 2016). One of the limitations of grey systems theory is that it relies on a small sample set due to the missing information (Stanujkic et al., 2017). Therefore, one of the weaknesses of grey systems theory is that a lack of information can lead to results that are incorrect, inconclusive, or unclear. Therefore, due to the theory's gaps, lack of information, and small sample size, grey systems theory was not the ideal choice to explore military spouse retention strategies.

Structural-Functional Theory

Structural-functional theory views society as a system with interrelated parts. In the late 1800s, Hebert Spence developed the structural-functional theory (Parsons, 1964). Structural-functional theory is also known as functionalism (Hall, 1991). Hall (1991) found that the structural-functional theory strives to meet the biological and social needs of the individuals thriving within that society. Spence believed that the parts of society included the economy, education, family, government, healthcare, and religion (Flint, 1997; Parsons, 1964). The structural-functional theory is similar to systems theory with regard to the complex systems comprised of interrelated and interdependent parts.

The structural-functional theory differs because it is also exclusive, similar to the diffusion of innovation theory. Researchers have found that the structural-functional theory only focuses on the societal component and no other facets within business (Choi, 2011; Flint, 1997). This is a criticism of the theory because it cannot accurately explain why societal changes occur (Altinkurt et al., 2015). Durkheim (1986) discovered that the structural-functional theory only identifies repetitive behavioral patterns (Durkheim, 1986). Therefore, the structural-functional theory does not appear to be useful as a macro-level theory, which would be a weakness to my study. Therefore, due to the theory's narrow scope, structural-function theory was not the ideal choice to explore retention strategies for military spouse talent.

Benefits of Talent Retention

In this qualitative multiple case study, I focused on the innovative strategies employers use to retain their military spouse talent. Before delving into the military spouse persona, employment needs, current initiatives to support military spouses, and barriers to military spouse retention – it was imperative to explore the concept of talent retention in its broadest form regardless if the employee is civilian or military-related. There are several benefits for employers to retain their top talent. These benefits include a reduction in turnover, recruitment, and training costs; retaining tenured experience within the organization; an increase in productivity and improved organizational culture.

Reduction in Turnover, Recruitment, and Training Costs

Employee turnover costs organizations time and money in valuable resources such as recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and training. According to Hanny et al. (2020), millennial employees have a tendency to leave a company within 2 years if they feel disengaged. In addition, it takes a significant amount of time to recruit, find, and identify qualified candidates. It takes additional time to review and analyze resumes, coordinate interviews, and negotiate salary and other benefits. It takes additional time to properly train and onboard new employees. This is known as full life cycle recruiting (Martic, 2018). Full life cycle recruiting encompasses six main stages: preparing, sourcing, screening, selecting, hiring, and onboarding (Ghosh, 2019; Martic, 2018). Therefore, strong employee retention efforts can save businesses money, time, and resources.

In addition, replacing an employee is costly to an organization. According to Merhar (2016), every time a business replaces a salaried employee, it costs the business [on average] 6 to 9 months of that individual's salary in recruiting and training costs. Dependent upon the role being replaced, the cost of losing an employee can equal up to 150% of the base salary of the individual who left and that percentage increases for mid-to-senior level executives (Frankel, 2016). For an entry-level position, turnover costs about 16% of the employee's salary (Ross, 2018). For mid-to-senior level positions, turnover costs about 20% of the employee's salary (Ross, 2018). For executives, turnover costs can increase to over 200% of the employee's salary (Merhar, 2016; Ross, 2018). Merhar (2016) added that the cost could grow up to twice of an individual's annual salary if that individual is an executive-level employee. Organizations must also consider the costs of severance packages or other packages when an employee leaves. Last, it may take a new employee 1-2 years to reach the productivity of the former employee (Merhar, 2016). Therefore, when organizations focus on retaining employees, employers are able to reduce the time spent on recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and training and focus on building the business, customer experience, and enhancing profitability.

Tenured Experience Within Organization

Employers with strong employee retention efforts can retain tenured experience within an organization. When organizations focus on employee retention, the employer builds a team of experienced, dedicated, skilled, and confident employees (Heder-Rima

& Dajnoki, 2019; Wikström et al., 2018). Tenured employees often develop time saving efficiencies, problem-solving skills, and best practices within the company due to their experience with an organization (Wikström et al., 2018). Organizations that focus on employee retention can save time, reduce a duplication of work and effort amongst employees, and prevent lost business due to unhappy customers (Ross, 2018). Low employee retention may indicate that the talent, knowledge, and experience are being wasted and given to a competitor.

Employee retention is also imperative to the success of knowledge management. Organizations with diverse employees from all background and walks of life gather and bring a wealth of knowledge, experience, best practices, and practical application to the organization (Heder-Rima & Dajnoki, 2019; Walden University, 2015). Employers must also consider the value of knowledge management when it comes to employee retention and succession planning (Wikström et al., 2018). Tenured, experienced employees often demonstrate a willingness to impart knowledge on younger, newer employees (Appelbaum et al., 2012). Knowledge management and information sharing can also boost organizational morale and culture.

Increased Productivity and Improved Organizational Culture

Employee retention can also improve the organization's productivity, morale, and culture. For example, when positions are left unfilled, it can lead to delays in productivity, overtime costs, and detrimental costly mistakes (Patel & Conklin, 2012). Employee turnover can also cause toxicity in the workplace (Van Fleet, 2008). High employee turnover can cause anxiety and spread gossip amongst the employees

(Vanderpool & Way, 2013). Organizations need to consider the additional, hidden factors of losing an employee with regard to cultural impact (Patel & Conklin, 2012). For example, whenever an individual leaves a company, other employees take time to speculate, ask questions, and ask why (Merhar, 2016). This behavior can reduce overall productivity.

In addition, frequent employee turnover can make it difficult for colleagues to bond and form strong working relationships. This lack of a bond can create trust issues and lead to confusion and toxicity amongst the workplace environment (Lambert et al., 2015). The social connections can increase collaboration between employees (Van Fleet, 2008). Strong working relationships mean fewer disputes, less performance counseling and paperwork, and an overall happier workforce (Shih-Tse Wang, 2014). Employees who are retained by their company become more comfortable, less stressed, and less anxious, and have a stronger sense of belonging and community (Vanderpool & Way, 2013). It is important to note that employee retention can also help employee acquisition. Productive and engaged employees are an effective recruitment and training tool. Happy employees are more likely to recommend their current employer to their own network and are more likely to be enthusiastic and helpful to assimilate new employees into the company culture (Ross, 2018). An increased organizational culture can contribute to leadership initiatives, business development, and increased customer satisfaction.

Increased Customer Satisfaction

Productive and engaged employees often provide better service to their internal and external client and customers. Engaged employees are usually willing to go the extra mile to ensure the company maintains an excellent reputation (Hyken, 2017; Miodonski, 2012). According to Harter and Mann (2017), highly engaged employees improve customer relationships, and achieve a 10% increase on customer satisfaction ratings – resulting in a 20% increase in sales on average. Employers with strong employee retention strategies may experience increased productivity, an enhanced organizational culture, and an increase in revenue due to increased customer satisfaction due to employee continuity.

Successful Strategies and Best Practices

When employees are happy and motivated – they will typically stay with the organization. However, this does not come without thoughtful planning and effort from the employer. An employer's retention efforts show employees they are valued (Ross, 2018). According to Ross (2018), 76% of employees who do not feel valued or important look for other career opportunities. According to Gallup's State of the American Workplace Report, 51% of employed adults in the U.S. are actively searching for new job opportunities (Pendell, 2017). Researchers presented several strategies and best practices for successfully retaining top talent within an organization, including financial security and compensation, flexibility and work-life balance, communication, health and wellness benefits, corporate social responsibility initiatives, and career development and continuing education (Ashton, 2018; Hanny et al., 2020). Employers with thoughtful best practices surrounding talent management will experience enhanced employee retention statistics.

Financial Security

Financial security is still a top priority for employees. Ashton (2018) revealed that competitive salaries and a retirement plan are still highly desired by employees. Performance and merit-based increases, cost-of-living-adjustments, and optimized retirement plans require advanced planning, preparation, and budgeting by the organization (Mehvar, 2020). While important to the employees, this incentive is not an inexpensive strategy, and it may not be the ideal long-term strategy. In a study conducted by the University of Toronto on Evolv, Inc., a workforce software company employing 10,000+ employees, researchers found that a pay raise made employees only somewhat less likely to quit (Feintzeig, 2014). The study concluded that the positive feelings associated with a pay raise only linger on average one week, but less than a month amongst employees (Feintzeig, 2014). Then, employees return to their previous level of happiness and engagement. Feintzeig (2014) encouraged employers to change their salary structure and consider moving away from the annual performance review and offer raises and bonuses quarterly or multiple times a year. Breaking raises into smaller, more frequent increments may keep employees motivated and less likely to seek to be employed by a competitor.

Flexibility and Work-Life Balance

Flexibility and work-life balance are highly desired by employees. This strategy includes a range of benefits and tactics, such as generous or unlimited paid time-off (PTO), parental and wellness leave, options for remote work, flexible working hours, and daycare options (Munsch, 2016). According to Business Solver’s 2018 Workplace

Empathy Study, 90% of employees are more likely to stay with an organization that empathizes with their needs; eight in 10 would be willing to work longer hours for a more empathetic employer, and more than 66% of surveyed employees would be willing to take less pay for a more empathetic employer (Hyken, 2018). Flexibility and work-life balance initiatives help employees live satisfying lives beyond their employment.

Employees that seek and find work-life balance often find satisfaction in their role with their employer. When employees feel that their private and professional lives are in balance, they perceive themselves to be effective and satisfied in the multiple roles that they are faced with (Braun & Paus, 2018; Ross, 2018). Employers and leaders should also aim to exhibit a healthy work-life balance (Braun & Paus, 2018). When the employer exhibits a healthy work-life balance, the employees are more likely to exhibit these positive traits as well; thus, contributing to a healthy organizational culture and talent retention.

The need for work-life balance has changed today's workplace. Technology has helped remove time, space, or location constraints to conduct business and complete work tasks (Narayanan et al., 2017). Virtual teams operate in different locations, share responsibility for outcomes, and rely on technology to conduct business (Braun & Paus, 2018; Narayanan et al., 2017). Remote work helps increase work-life balance, promote a flexible schedule, and creates flexible hours.

There are also many other strategic benefits and possibilities because of remote work. For example, recent studies have indicated that productivity increases on average 13.5% amongst remote workers due to lessened workplace distractions (Surdoval, 2017).

In addition, in a recent survey of remote workers, it was reported that these employees took shorter breaks, fewer sick days, and less time off due to the flexibility and work-life balance that remote work granted them (Gupta & Pathak, 2018; Surdoval, 2017). It is also important to recognize how telecommuting has become an important human resources strategy that is helpful to achieve many financial and human resources goals and objectives. For example, an organization can save on office space, utilities, and rent costs (Narayanan et al., 2017). In addition, there are some positive social change benefits such as less traffic, less air pollution, and a decrease in traffic accidents (Narayanan et al., 2017). Modern employers seeking to retain talent should consider remote work and telecommuting as part of their overall organizational strategy.

However, both employers and employees must keep in mind that with flexibility comes great accountability. For example, if employers allow remote work or flexible hours, they should consider crafting a policy to help guide expectations and accountability within the virtual space (Kossek et al., 2015). This can include everything from addressing the remote office set-up, connectivity, family care plan, and atmosphere to communication styles, project management tracking, and timeliness of response (Gupta & Pathak, 2018). Clear guidelines and policies can help organizations modernize and retain top talent – while responsibly doing so.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Business leaders can benefit in many ways by implementing corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. CSR initiatives can include employee positivity and engagement and positive press and media about the company (Chaudhary, 2019; Tong et al., 2019). CSRs and other charitable initiatives help boost employee engagement, positive attitudes, and aid in employee retention (Santhrosh & Baral, 2015; Tong et al., 2019). It is an important talent management tool to build an engaged workforce (Chaudhary, 2019). In addition, many "Top Places to Work" designations are determined by the quality and quantity of charitable initiatives offered by employers. Santhrosh and Baral (2015) conducted a study to measure attitudes and behaviors amongst employees to determine what motivated them. That particular study helped managers understand their employees and their motivations to invest in CSR activities (Santhrosh & Baral, 2015). Lee and Yoon (2018) also conducted a study to determine how corporate social responsibility activities influence employee decisions. Lee and Yoon (2018) determined that the authenticity and legitimacy of CSR activities were important factors in employee's work orientations, perceptions, and commitment. The implementation and availability of CSR initiatives can impact an employee's decision to stay with the organization.

Career Development and Continuing Education

Career development and continuing education is an imperative benefit to employer retention strategies. The lack of career development and continuing education is one of the top reasons why employees leave their current jobs (Shanker, 2013; Wysocky, 2018). According to a study conducted by the American Psychological Association in 2017, only 58% of employees said their current employers provide career development opportunities that meet their needs and opportunities for advancement

(Ballard, 2017). Organizations that offer opportunities for individuals to boost their skill sets and develop their skills is an excellent strategy for talent retention.

Some employers believe that career development and continuing education are expensive and provide little to no return. However, employers can turn to smaller, more affordable, and tailored development and educational opportunities for their employees (Ballard, 2017). One evolving human resources trend that appeared throughout the literature is microlearning. Microlearning involves breaking down learning material into smaller sections to help individuals better understand and apply the information (Lavoie, 2018). Microlearning also means that all employees are not subject to watch or engage in a presentation or training that is not applicable to and for their role, which saves the employees' time and potentially travel costs (Bradley, 2019). Microlearning could be incorporated into a human resources operating plan to revolutionize career development and continuing education. It provides employers with cost-effective, tailored, and relevant training and continuing education options for their employees (Bradley, 2019; Lavoie, 2018). There are multiple online sources that offer a plethora of unlimited programs, courses, trainings, and tutorials. Strategically selected, tailored career development and continuing education can ultimately save the employer money.

Health and Wellness Benefits

Healthcare benefits are still a top priority for employees. Healthcare is an important employee benefit for recruiting and retaining high-value employees (Ross, 2018). However, it is not uncommon for an employee to leave an organization and role that they love simply to have a role with better health benefits (Gray, 1999). Ross (2018) stated that healthcare costs rose 5.5% for employers in 2018, and costs are projected to continue to rise in the near future. Unfortunately for employers, offering improved health benefits year-over-year can be costly.

Alternative wellness benefits are also a valuable tool for employee retention. The positive news for employers is that employees also seek additional healthcare benefits (Duncan et al., 2011). For example, these alternative healthcare benefits can include gym memberships, in-house gyms, cafeterias with healthy food options, and health initiatives that encourage achieving health, fitness, and wellness goals (Dunning, 2013). The alternative healthcare perks are a useful tactic to employee retention and a healthier workforce can reduce healthcare costs to the employer (Duncan et al., 2011). In addition, when it comes to military spouses, one point for employers to consider is that military spouses typically do not opt-in to the employer-offered healthcare plan (Military One Source, 2019). This is due to the service member's existing Tricare plan, which saves the employer additional money.

Communication

Strong employer communication strategies and tactics are highly sought after by employees. Employers that integrate strong transparency and communication tactics into their organization's culture and core values can help retain valuable employees (Harter & Mann, 2017; Irwansyah et al., 2018). An organization's leaders should consider and encourage open-door policies, company-wide and department meetings, events, and other initiatives and channels to ensure employees are heard, valued, and understood (Harter & Mann, 2017). These additional initiatives and channels can include social media intranets.

Intranets are helpful internal social media tools that can help build community and camaraderie especially amongst remote or distributed teams (Staples & Webster, n.d.). Social media intranets can increase communication, the speed of responsiveness, and information sharing amongst employees at all levels and departments of the company.

Employees seek to feel heard and understood. When employees feel heard, they feel more comfortable voicing ideas, concerns, admitting to gaps in knowledge, and asking for help and guidance – all of which helps prevent mistakes and boost productivity (Ross, 2018). Frustration with communication breakdowns or a lack of being able to communicate will drive employees elsewhere (Ross, 2018). The frequent communication between the team members and the leadership will help keep progress on track and ideally will signal in advance if the organization needs to move in a different direction before they are blindsided by a sudden change in the business environment, and it is too late (Hanley, 2007; Irwansyah et al., 2018). In addition, frequent communication can help employers resolve problems early versus letting them fester. Honest communication can help identify issues and areas of concern for employers, clients, and staff (Tierney, 2013). Clear communication can prompt the discussion of innovative solutions and contribute to employee satisfaction and talent retention.

Downsides to Employee Retention

While there are numerous positive attributes to employee retention, it is important to consider any possible downsides and how this can impact the organization. It is also imperative to explore the concept of talent retention from all angles regardless if the employee is civilian or military related. Therefore, in terms of downsides to talent retention, the most common areas across the literature were lack of motivation and productivity, a lack of preparedness, and a lack of diversity.

Lack of Motivation and Productivity

When there is a lack of turnover in an organization, some employees may become complacent. This can manifest in a number of ways. Some employees may become less invested in improving their work because they do not feel like they are being challenged or encouraged to grow and learn. Organizations with high retention numbers are more likely to keep antiquated procedures and processes in place without looking for efficiencies because employees are used to them (Miller, 2019). It can be difficult to implement change when the leadership and employees stay the same. Also, when employees are not being challenged, they may fall into a rut and be less likely to be proactive and voice new ideas or programs. This can mean that the organization is not at maximum or ideal productivity (Miller, 2019). Employees who are underperforming may stay longer than necessary due to ease.

In addition, negativity and toxicity can create challenges to employer retention efforts. If negative employees are retained by the organization for extended periods of time, they have the opportunity to spread the toxicity amongst the workforce (Miller, 2019). Employee morale and culture can be damaged as a result (Miller, 2019). In the military community, this is precisely why service members change duty stations every 2-4 years (Blue Star Families, 2018; United States Chamber of Commerce, 2017). The rotation helps the institution avoid job stagnation, reduced motivation and productivity, and potential toxicity.

Lack of Preparedness

High employee retention can also result in a lack of human resources preparedness. When employees stay, human resources may be less likely to work on succession plans because it is not urgently necessary (Miller, 2019). A recent human resources study indicated that 92.5% of organizational leaders believe succession planning is important to the organization, yet only 44% have an actual process in place (Jones, 2016). Succession planning helps an organization plan for the long-term and should be part of an organization's strategic plan and employee retention plan.

Succession planning is an important strategy that aids employers in identifying the employees who possess the skills that can advance them within the company or into another position within the company, which can result in positive employee retention. By definition, *succession planning* is a method of identifying and developing quality employees to fill future staffing shortfalls (Helton & Jackson, 2007). Succession planning can help identify qualified future leaders from an internal pool of candidates and creates structure for future training and development (Allman et al., 2006). Transparency about forthcoming opportunities can help curb turnover, as it encourages employees to stay and grow with their current organization (Alter, 2013). The lack of human resources preparedness and failure to succession plan can also lead to problems in providing continuous services to customers, clients, or citizens depending on the organization's mission.

Lack of Diversity

High employee retention may also cause a lack of diversity. It is important to recognize that diversity cannot be defined by one specific attribute. Diversity within an organization is inclusive of thought process, skill, race, creed, gender, age, national, or origin (Legal Information Institute, 2018). Diversity spurs innovation and creativity, as ideas and perspectives are shared from individuals from all cultures and backgrounds (Pieterse et al., 2013). High employee retention may mean fewer opportunities to bring in new employees with new skills, different backgrounds, and different experiences (Miller, 2019). High employee retention may make it difficult to create a diverse culture (Miller, 2019). A lack of diversity and a lack of new, outside ideas may cause stagnation in innovation within the organization long-term.

The Military Spouse Persona

Overview, Characteristics & Demographics

To fully understand the topic of talent retention, it was crucial to explore the military spouse persona, demographics, employment needs, barriers to military spouse retention, and current initiatives to support military spouses. There are 690,000 spouses of active duty service members (Council of Economic Advisors, 2018). At 92%, the military spouse demographic is predominately female, and the average age of a military spouse is 31.5 years old (Council of Economic Advisors, 2018; United States Chamber of Commerce, 2017). Also, 41% of military spouses have children, and 70% of those children are under the age of 11 (United States Department of Defense, 2016). Military spouses come from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, possessing a wealth of knowledge, skills, and abilities based on their experience and education.

Military spouses are known to be resilient and strong. Military spouses have strong core values and are resilient living in a particularly challenging military lifestyle (Council of Economic Advisors, 2018; Doyle, 2018; Eubanks, 2013). Military spouses also have excellent soft skills that are transferrable between employers and transcend industries, such as flexibility, adaptability, critical thinking, leadership, management, teamwork, and positivity (Doyle, 2018; United States Chamber of Commerce, 2017). Contrary to stereotypes and perceptions, military spouses are highly educated – 88% of military spouses have some post-high school education, 34% have an undergraduate degree, and 15% have a graduate degree (United States Chamber of Commerce, 2017). Due to PCS moves, military spouses are likely to hold a variety of jobs and titles across several industries – acquiring different skill sets at each duty station, making them more marketable as time goes on.

Military spouse unemployment is high compared to their civilian counterparts. The military spouse unemployment rate hovers around 16% (Burke & Miller, 2017; Council of Economic Advisors, 2018; Ott et al., 2018). According to the United States Chamber of Commerce (2017), the military spouse unemployment rate is four times the current rate for all adult women and three times higher than the rate for women between the ages of 20 and 25. Also, underemployment continues to be a significant challenge, as many military spouses are in part-time or seasonal positions. In fact, 25% of employed spouses are working more than one job for pay, but the majority would prefer full-time jobs (United States Chamber of Commerce, 2017). According to the Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle Survey (2018), 56% of working spouses reported they were underemployed. Frequent PCS was cited as the predominant cause for underemployment.

Many military spouses believe that their education and past work experience is not being fully utilized. Often, military spouses settle for jobs below their qualifications, below previous salary levels, and take a step back in their career progression due to PCS moves (Council of Economic Advisors, 2018). In addition, military spouses with undergraduate or postgraduate degrees appear to be most impacted by the challenges of military life (United States Chamber of Commerce, 2017). Not only are these spouses more likely to be unemployed, but they also face more prolonged periods of unemployment and are more likely to be underemployed.

Military spouses face multiple challenges when it comes to advancement. The most commonly cited challenges for military spouse advancement include: frequent PCS moves, financial concerns and setbacks due to unemployment or underemployment, uncertainty/inability to plan, transient lifestyles, the demand to start over after each move, and the military spouse losing their job with every PCS, loss of spousal identity through personal and career growth, lack of educational opportunities and flexibility for spouses, deployment to combat zones, Temporary Duty Assignments (TDY), and reintegrating family members after deployment (Borah & Fina, 2017; Burke & Miller, 2017; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Also, according to the Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle Survey (2018), the top military family issues were time away from family, quality of life and well-being due to time away from family, military dependent education, the impact of deployment on children, and financial concerns related to military spouse employment. The stress of the military lifestyle and the lack of employment opportunities for military spouses impact the family's decision to stay in or leave the military – ultimately impacting the nation's military readiness, retention, and recruiting efforts (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; United States Chamber of Commerce, 2017; Wellman, 2018). According to the United States Chamber of Commerce (2017), 81% of military families have discussed the possibility of leaving the military, with career opportunities for military spouses being cited as one of the top determining factors. Overall, the majority of military spouses believe that the military has hurt their employment.

Military Spouse Needs

Personal Finance Quality of Life

Similar to their civilian counterparts, military families depend on a two-income household. More specifically, millennial military families were 70% more likely to report the need for two incomes for their family's financial wellbeing (Blue Star Families, 2018; United States Chamber of Commerce, 2017). Military spouse income levels are significantly lower than their civilian counterparts (Burke & Miller, 2017; Ott et al., 2018). PCS moves cause a substantial decline in spousal earnings – on average, a 14% decline in earnings during the year of the move (Burke & Miller, 2017). PCS moves also increase the likelihood that the spouse will have no earnings for that particular year (Burke & Miller, 2017). According to the Council of Economic Advisors (2018), military spouses earn $12,374 per year less than other workers, resulting in losses of $190,000 over a 20-year military career. Also, more considerable earning reductions occur when the move happens across state lines, for older spouses, male spouses, and those with young children.

On average, military spouses earn less than their civilian counterparts. According to the Council of Economic Advisors (2018), military spouses earn 26.8% less in wage and salary income. Military families report higher rates (13%) of difficulty making ends meet than civilian families (7%). Forty-four percent of military spouses indicated that they are living “paycheck to paycheck” and are struggling financially; 60% of military spouses do not have enough money in their savings to cover three months of living expenses, and 15% of military families have faced food insecurity (Blue Star Families, 2018; Military Family Advisory Network, 2017; United States Chamber of Commerce, 2017). Personal finances impact military families’ quality of life and employment is tied to emotional health, mental health, and the ability to feed the family.

Work/Life Balance

Similar to their civilian counterparts, military spouses seek employment with organizations that respect work/life balance boundaries, practice acceptance and tolerance, and offer flexibility or the opportunity to work remotely. Discovering and designing flexible employment opportunities that work with the challenges of military life is an improvement for military spouse unemployment and underemployment (Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle Survey, 2018). The United States Department of Defense encourages military spouses to pursue portable career paths, such as finance, information technology, and other vocational or technical careers (Ott et al., 2018). Seeking flexible, remote, or a virtual work environment is not a unique trend for military spouses.

According to a study conducted by FlexJobs in 2017, a firm specializing in remote employment opportunities, over 170 companies in the United States operate 100% virtually (Caminiti, 2018). In addition, this survey projected that by 2020 – 46% of the workforce will work virtually (Caminiti, 2018). These nationwide trends appear promising for military spouses because even if there were an impending PCS move, in a virtual environment, the employment opportunity would be portable and not impacted by geographic location.

Psychological Well-Being

Military families deal with issues similar to civilian families. For example, some of these issues include childcare, elder care, education, parenting, marital and relationship problems, and managing careers (Military Family Advisory Network, 2018). However, military families have to also cope with added stressors such as relocation, separation, reunion, and reintegration (Borah & Fina, 2017; Drummet et al., 2003). Military spouses are required to be the backbone of the family when the service member is on a TDY assignment, at a mandatory training, in the middle of a PCS move, or deployed (Malley et al., 2018). Military children also feel the stressors of the military lifestyle. For example, military children must start over at different schools, make new friends, struggle with fear of safety while their parent is away, or even parental loss if the service member is killed in combat while deployed (Military Family Advisory Network, 2018; Riggs & Riggs, 2011). These stressors impact the family unit as a whole.

Military spouses also struggle with spousal identity at higher levels than their civilian counterparts. For example, there is still a stigma and expectation within the military community for the spouse to stay at home, supporting the service member's career and supporting the overall military mission (Malley et al., 2018). These psychological stressors can force the military spouse to turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms (Trone et al., 2018). Trone et al. (2018) indicated that 17.2% of military spouses reported cigarette smoking; 36.3% reported risky drinking, and 7.3% reported problem drinking. Also, military spouses who were bothered by learning of deployment experiences or duty assignments had consistently higher odds of problems with substance abuse and addiction (Trone et al., 2018). Military spouses who communicated with their spouses and other support systems about their experiences were half as likely to indulge in these habits as spouses who did not communicate (Trone et al., 2018). Military spouses have both positive and negative experiences on military life and volunteer personal information and insights in hope that this information can be used by support agencies to enhance the services and resources provided to military spouses and families (Runge et al., 2014). Service members with dissatisfied spouses are more likely to leave the military (Malley et al., 2018; Wellman, 2018). This hinders the United States' ability to recruit and retain an all-volunteer force.

Barriers to Military Spouse Retention

Employee retention is a complex subject for the civilian sector, if not more so for the military sector. Some organizations struggle with the stigma surrounding hiring military spouses, let alone retaining them. Throughout the literature, the most common barriers to military spouse retention were: PCS moves, licensure issues, and employer perception and discrimination.

Permanent Change of Station (PCS)

The most commonly cited challenge for retaining military spouse talent was the PCS. PCS moves impact the spouse's number of days in the workforce, the amount of money that can be made per year, and the likelihood of the military spouse finding a comparable position in the next community (Marshall, 2014). On average, military spouses move three to four times during the length of their service member's career, while 34% move four or more times (United States Department of Defense, 2017; United States Chamber of Commerce, 2017). Sixty-seven percent of military spouses have quit at least one job as a result of a PCS move (United States Chamber of Commerce, 2017). Also, most military moves come with little or no notice – 49% of military families have less than three months' notice to prepare and execute a PCS (Blue Star Families, 2018). Some military families have less than a month's notice to PCS.

The stressors of a PCS impact the family unit as a whole. According to a survey conducted by the Military Family Advisory Network (2017), 80% of military spouses reported that PCS moves cause significant financial stress. Military spouses face additional career challenges specific to rural or remote duty station locations. The majority of military bases are located more than 50 miles from major urban areas, limiting both the quantity and quality of jobs available to military spouses in these locations (Council of Economic Advisors, 2018; United States Chamber of Commerce, 2017). Military spouses that live near military installations or highly populated areas are more likely to be in the labor force, and a United States-based assignment increases the likelihood to be in the labor force. Some of the duty locations can be advantageous to the military spouse due to the city's size or military presence awareness. In contrast, other locales are not as advantageous due to their remote locations and lack of opportunities/amenities (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008). Due to PCS moves, military spouses have to accept any job that they can get (McBride & Cleymans, 2014). Often, these jobs are accepted even if it is not in the spouses' area of interest or expertise and even if it underpays.

In the military, duty stations and locations can greatly differ from one another. According to a survey conducted by the United States Department of Defense (2012), military spouses indicated what may be a good career at one duty station may not be available in another duty station. According to the same survey conducted by the United States Department of Defense (2012), 41% of military spouses say that the most significant employment challenge is employers not wanting to hire them because they may move in the future. According to the Council of Economic Advisors (2018), due to the frequency of PCS moves, employers may be reluctant to hire military spouses, or they may offer military spouses a lower wage in an attempt to recoup turnover costs. The PCS stigma impacts military spouses and employers alike, and 28% of military spouses decline to identify themselves as a military spouse to prospective employers (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; McBride & Cleymans, 2014; United States Chamber of Commerce, 2017). Moves between duty stations can impact continuity in a military spouse's resume (Military Family Advisory Network, 2018). For example, 28% of military spouses have challenges explaining gaps in their resume to prospective employers (United States Chamber of Commerce, 2017). Not only do military spouses have to quit jobs due to a

PCS, but military spouses also face long periods of unemployment after a move (Military Family Advisory Network, 2018). Due to frequent PCS moves, military spouses often struggle to build seniority and obtain promotions in the workplace (McBride & Cleymans, 2014). McBride and Cleymans (2014) describe this as a career lattice, meaning that the military spouse's career path moves in multiple directions, both laterally and vertically, versus solely vertically. According to the United States Chamber of Commerce (2017), 65% of military spouses who had to quit a job due to relocation needed four or more months to find a new employer with 29% taking four to six months, 12% taking seven to twelve months, and 25% taking more than a year. Due to the reliance on a two-income household, the employment search process creates stress between military spouses and their active duty service member.

The Military Spouse Residency Relief Act (MSRRA) is also significant to mention. Officially signed into law in 2009, this act provides protection to military spouses related to residency, voting, and income taxes (Military One Source, 2020a). When the service member leaves their home state due to military orders, the military spouse may retain residency on paper in their home state (Military One Source, 2020a). According to a survey conducted by the Military Family Advisory Network (2017), 43% of military families have chosen to live apart at some point in the service member's career due to the military spouse's career and the children's education. However, only 9% of military spouses who had a PCS were accommodated and retained by their previous employer (United States Chamber of Commerce, 2017). Therefore, military spouse retention is a rather new, unexplored concept.

Licensure Issues

Licensure between state and country lines can cause significant employment issues for military spouses. According to a United States Department of Defense (2016) survey, military spouses indicated that specific state licensing laws are a challenge when attempting to find employment within a new state. This is particularly a challenge among military spouses who have achieved significant educational attainment (United States Chamber of Commerce, 2017). For example, careers and professions that require a license, such as health care, legal, social work, education, childcare, real estate, and cosmetology, are often challenging for military spouses to transport across state and international borders. According to a survey conducting by the United States Chamber of Commerce (2017), 22% of military spouses were unable to transfer professional licenses from one state to another. Professional licenses and certifications can become costly throughout multiple moves.

Strides are being made to ease and improve licensure processes for military spouses. Recently, the United States Department of Defense introduced Directive 1400.33, which helps mitigate some of the licensure challenges that military spouses face through new developments of policy and programming (Ott et al., 2018). As a result of this directive, there is a new initiative called the “Joining Forces Initiative” in which all 50 states have agreed to streamline the licensing and credentialing of military spouses (Ott et al., 2018). This initiative allows spouses to maintain a career with frequent relocations to states where the laws and regulations may be different from their previous duty station (Ott et al., 2018). Many states have implemented or are in the process of implementing state-sponsored license portability measures for military spouses that include expedited applications, temporary licensures, or license reciprocity (Military One Source, 2020b). State-sponsored reciprocal agreements can also help reduce or eliminate the relicensing process in a new state.

The military spouse may be eligible for unemployment compensation if the process ends up being costly or lengthy. For example, the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act allows each service branch to reimburse military spouses up to $1,000 for relicensure and recertification costs resulting from relocations and PCS moves that cross state borders (Military One Source, 2020b). Although many states have agreed to some form of license portability or expedited licensure, the implementation has been rather uneven across the United States – only 40% of states promote some sort of military spouse licensure information on their website and many government customer service representatives are unaware of the current legislation (Council of Economic Advisors, 2018). There is additional work to be done for military spouses stationed overseas, as foreign hosts do not grant spousal work visas.

Discrimination

Many organizations are working to connect spouses to jobs and lower the military spouse unemployment rate. For example, Family Life Educators (FLEs), Employment Assistance Programs (EAP), Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP), among other resources help supplement or provide programs where services are lacking or inadequate for military spouses (Eubanks, 2013; Marshall, 2014; Trougakos et al., 2007). According to Wellman (2018), these organizations and many others are not targeting the root of the problem. Employers are disfavoring and discriminating against military spouses.

Some military-friendly employers offer preference points to military spouse applicants. However, military spouses are not a protected class from employment discrimination, whereas Veterans are (Wellman, 2018). Nor do employers receive tax incentives for hiring military spouses, as they do for Veterans. Currently, an employer can decline to hire, train, or promote someone purely on the basis that they are married to someone in the military (Wellman, 2018). Wellman (2018) believed that addressing the current state of anti-discrimination laws may be a possible solution to address the problem of military spouse unemployment. For example, one option would be to amend the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994 (USERRA) to include military spouses within the law’s discrimination protections, just as Veterans are included (Wellman, 2018). Some states are making strides to implement a Military Spouse Protected Class, tax incentives for employing military spouses, and Military Family Leave Acts in upcoming legislative sessions (Military One Source, 2020b). There is still additional advocacy work to be done within this area as legislative sessions approach.

Transition

In Section, 1, I explained the background of the problem, developed the problem statement, purpose statement, nature of the study, research question, interview questions, conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, and the significance of the study. In addition, I did an extensive review of the academic and seminal literature regarding military spouse retention.

In Section 2, I will address the purpose of the study and describe the roles of the researcher and participants. I will expand on the research method, research design, and targeted population. I will describe in detail the data collection instruments, data collection techniques, and data organization techniques to be used throughout this qualitative multiple case study. I will discuss the research and data quality control measurements for this qualitative multiple case study.

In Section 3, I will analyze and summarize the collected data. I will present the findings from the qualitative interviews. I will discuss the applications to professional practice and proposed implications for social change. Also, in Section 3, I will present the recommended action from the findings and the suggested recommendations for further research on employer strategies for military spouse retention.

Section 2: The Project

Section 2 of this qualitative multiple case study contains the purpose of the study and a discussion of the roles of the researcher and participants. In addition, Section 2 also includes the proposed research method, research design, and population sampling. Section 2 also includes the proposed data collection and analysis methods, as well as techniques that will be used to ensure the reliability and validity of the data.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the innovative strategies employers use to retain their military spouse talent. The target population consisted of nine business leaders from large companies in Texas who have successful talent retention initiatives for military spouses. The implications for positive social change included the potential to establish collaborative employment efforts among communities and municipalities around the country, reduce employment issues for military spouses, increase consumer spending contributing to local communities' economic growth and health, and to potentially increase the nation's military readiness.

Role of the Researcher

Jacob and Furgerson (2012) suggested that researchers conduct in-depth, investigative interviews as the primary collection method for qualitative research. Therefore, following these researchers, I collected data by interviewing and listening to participants. I asked open-ended, stimulating questions to gather important data related to my business problem. In addition, I used a recording device to assist me in accurately capturing the data from the interview sessions (Bahl et al., 2013). I also implemented member checking and had the participants review the summaries (Bahl et al., 2013). In alignment with the Belmont Report, I treated the interviewees professionally with respect. I respected the participants' human rights. I ensured the participants were free from harm and enforced the ethical standards of the law within this research study as required by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979).

Data collection in a case study is obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation (Cronin, 2014). I lessened personal bias by using an objective semistructured interview technique. Rabionet (2011) suggested that researchers ask open-ended questions. Therefore, following this researcher, I asked open-ended questions in a neutral manner and asked any necessary follow-up questions to the interviewee's original responses. In addition, I obtained factual organizational documentation, such as policies and procedures, to mitigate personal bias. Jacob and Furgerson (2012) suggested using an interview protocol instrument. Therefore, following these researchers, I used an interview protocol instrument to assist in gathering the data and to maintain the consistency of questioning throughout the interviews. The interview protocol instrument is included in the study's appendix (Appendix A).

Participants

A purposefully selected sample helps the researcher identify and develop theoretical concepts, better understand the problem and the research question, and identify content to be included in future studies (Brod et al., 2009). Therefore, the target population for the study consisted of business leaders at large companies based in San Antonio, Texas. The target population of participants were business leaders that have program creation and policy-making influence and abilities within their respective organizations. San Antonio, Texas is known for being “Military City, USA,” and multiple employers within this city have successful talent management initiatives for military spouses (Alamo Area Council of Governments, 2018; United States Chamber of Commerce, 2018). Therefore, San Antonio, Texas was selected as the targeted geographical location for this qualitative multiple case study. This was imperative for alignment with the overarching research question.

Through several professional organizations shared by military contacts in leadership roles within San Antonio, Texas, as well as direct outreach to the organizations, I obtained access to the appropriate individual business leaders. Upon receiving approval and permission to conduct research from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I contacted nine business leaders at three large companies within San Antonio, Texas via phone to request permission to interview them and members of their staff for the study. Hennick et al. (2011) stated, “The number of participants in a qualitative case study is often small because the depth of information and the variance of experiences are of interest, so a large number of participants are neither practical nor beneficial” (p. 88).

After receiving general permission from the business leader, I sent an invitation to participate to employees, whose job titles indicated a position of leadership within the organization. The leaders were selected based on their organization’s public reputation of effective military-friendly strategies. The additional individual leaders were identified through the primary business leader contact and via cross-examination of the organizations' websites. Once I obtained permission from the business leaders, I contacted them to formally arrange separate, individual interviews. Each interviewee was asked to acknowledge and sign a consent form prior to participating in the interview. No incentives were provided for completing the study. No names of individual business leaders or organizations were revealed in this qualitative multiple case study. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time by notifying me via e-mail or telephone.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

In the qualitative methodology, the researcher gathers nonnumerical data through viewpoints and experiences to bring understanding to the selected research problem (Davidson, 2009; Saunders et al., 2015). In the qualitative research method, the researcher asks open-ended questions about the research phenomenon using semistructured interviews (Bailey, 2014). Regarding the qualitative research method, St. Pierre and Jackson (2014) focused on the importance of including authentic participant voices, avoiding contamination by theoretical interpretation, and conducting further qualitative data analysis after data coding. Following St. Pierre and Jackson, I used the qualitative research method to understand the strategies employers use to successfully retain their military spouse talent when confronted with mandatory military relocations.

In the quantitative methodology, the researcher gathers and measures statistical, mathematical, or numerical data to further explain the selected research problem (Babbie, 2010). In the quantitative research method, the researcher tests a theory based on data analysis to determine theory verification (Arghode, 2012). The researcher uses data analysis to determine the relationship between the variables under examination (Landrum & Garza, 2015). My research did not include the measurement of variables. In addition, numerical data alone does not provide enough information to understand the topic of retaining military spouses; therefore, quantitative research was not suitable for this particular study.

In the mixed method research approach, the researcher integrates or “mixes” both qualitative and quantitative data within one problem under investigation (Creswell et al., 2004). In the mixed method approach, the researcher incorporates the testing of a hypothesis, as in quantitative research, in order to strengthen the data obtained from the qualitative research method (Wheeldon, 2010). The mixed method research approach was not suitable for my research, as I did not test hypotheses or analyzing quantitative data.

Research Design

The primary designs of the qualitative methodology are ethnography, narrative, phenomenological, and case study (Saunders et al., 2015). Case studies are the preferred design when the research question focuses on current events (Yin, 2012). Therefore, this qualitative multiple case study allowed me to explore the innovative strategies employers use to retain their military spouse talent through the PCS process. In this qualitative multiple case study, each employer was treated as a single individual case study. Yin

(2012) suggested that the goal of a research study is to understand the problem within a real-life context or setting. Therefore, following this researcher, the case study design was the most appropriate and optimal for the particular topic of study.

Other research designs were not appropriate for my study because the components of these designs did not align with the selected research approach. A researcher using ethnography is immersed in the participant's environment in order to understand emerging themes and challenges (Sauro, 2013). This was not the optimal choice because researchers who use this design are usually rooted in a cultural climate versus a business organization. A researcher using a narrative design combines subsequent events from one or two individuals or sources to form a story (Sauro, 2013). A narrative was not the optimal choice because this design did not have enough depth for the particular topic of study. A researcher using a phenomenological study combines the participants' lived experiences and the recollections and interpretations of those experiences (Laureate Education, 2016c; Saunders et al., 2015). The phenomenological approach was not the optimal choice, as researchers have found that this design has the tendency to complicate the interview process.

Throughout the research process, I ensured data saturation was achieved. Data saturation is achieved when redundant or duplicate data begins to emerge throughout the literature and interview process surrounding the research topic (Marshall et al., 2013). In addition, the analysis of the data from the qualitative interviews helped determine data saturation because no new additional themes or codes were identified or collected (Marshall et al., 2013).

Population and Sampling

The purposeful sampling method is appropriate if the goal of the research study is to obtain and gather concluding insights that answer the research question (Onwyegbuzie & Collins, 2007). A purposefully selected sample helps the researcher identify and develop theoretical concepts, better understand the problem and the research question, and identify content to be included in future studies (Brod et al., 2009). A purposeful sampling method was used in this study because this research project solely targets military spouse-friendly employers. Before exploring the employer strategies, it was important to understand the demographics surrounding military spouses. Annually, 14% of the 750,000 United States military spouses relocate out of state due to mandatory military moves (United States Department of Defense, 2017). There are 58,939 military spouses in San Antonio, which equals an annual talent exodus of 8,251 individuals from the workforce based on the 14% (Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, 2017; United States Census Bureau, 2018; United States Department of Defense, 2017).

Therefore, to participate in my study, specific criteria applied. The participants for the study consisted of three consenting business leaders at three different large companies based in San Antonio, Texas. Hennick et al. (2011) stated, “The number of participants in a qualitative case study is often small because the depth of information and the variance of experiences are of interest, so a large number of participants are neither practical nor beneficial” (p. 88). The participants were selected from the geographical area of San Antonio, Texas because it is known as “Military City, USA,” and many employers within this city have successful talent management initiatives for military spouses (Alamo Area

Council of Governments, 2018; United States Chamber of Commerce, 2018). This population and sampling method were appropriate because all selected participants had the shared characteristic of best practices in military spouse retention efforts.

The criteria for participation were that participants must be in a leadership position within the organizations. It was imperative that the participants for this study have program creation and policy-making influence and ability within their respective organizations. The aforementioned criteria were important for the alignment with the overarching research question.

Once I obtained permission and consent from the business leaders, I contacted them to formally arrange separate, individual interviews. For this study, the number to reach data saturation was three business leaders at three different large companies based in San Antonio, Texas. The analysis of the data from the qualitative interviews determined data saturation because no new themes or codes were collected or identified (Marshall et al., 2013).

Interview settings may vary depending on the availability of the participants and the needs of the researcher. The literature recommends that the interview location be convenient for all parties involved. Also, it was recommended that a location be selected away from offices (O'Reilly et al., 2014). I interviewed the participants virtually due to the restrictions of COVID-19 during a mutually agreeable time, where the participant was in a quiet, comfortable place and avoided distractions and background noise in the recorded interviews.

Ethical Research

Researchers use an informed consent form to disclose important information about the purpose of a study, the interview process, confidentiality measures, and the data storage protocol (Grady, 2015). I obtained the required permission from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB, Approval No. 10-30-20-0757586) for this study before contacting the participants. I provided each participant with a consent form to review and complete prior to conducting any interviews. I emailed the consent form to each participant for review prior to the interview. I requested that each participant acknowledge receipt and respond to the email with the words "I consent." When participants sign a consent form, this allows the researcher to proceed in conducting research and interviews (Grady, 2015).

No incentives were provided for completing the study. No names of individual business leaders or organizations were revealed in this qualitative multiple case study. Kaiser (2009) suggested protecting the anonymity of the participants when recording and transcribing the interviews. Therefore, following this researcher, I replaced the participants' names and companies with aliases to protect the anonymity of the participants when recording and transcribing the interviews. In alignment with the Belmont Report, I treated the interviewees professionally with respect. I respected the participants' human rights. I ensured the participants were free from harm and enforced the ethical standards of the law within this research study as required by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979). Participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussion by notifying me via e-mail or telephone.

The Walden University Institutional Review Board (2019) suggested that all interview data, recorded interviews, and supporting documents be stored securely for 5 years. Therefore, I stored all interview data, recorded interviews, and supporting documents securely on a password-protected external hard drive and will do so for 5 years to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Once the 5-year period has expired, all interview data, recorded interviews, and supporting documents will be securely deleted and destroyed.

Data Collection Instruments

This qualitative multiple case study was conducted using semistructured interviews. The interviews were conducted virtually with three business leaders at three separate organizations in San Antonio, Texas. In order for a particular organization to be selected for the study, the organization's leadership and primary point of contact agreed to a series of three interviews.

An interview protocol instrument was developed by the researcher to help guide the interviews (Appendix A) and to ensure that all participants are asked the same initial questions. Qualitative reliability requires that a researcher’s approach is consistent across the project (Creswell et al., 2004). The interview protocol instrument consisted of six open-ended questions designed to solicit insight into the perceptions of leaders concerning the retention of military spouses (Appendix A). The use of open-ended questions in the interview process allowed the interviewees to be forthright and detailed in their responses and allowed the interviewer to ask probing follow-up questions (Turner, 2010).

The questions were specifically designed to allow the participants to guide the interview and provide a deep understanding of the value placed on the retention of military spouse talent in San Antonio, Texas. Upon the conclusion of the interviews, I requested various company/archival documents, such as internal policies and procedures, annual reports, program toolkits, and weblogs.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data collection instrument and process, the data was triangulated between the company's archival documents and the three interviews at each organization. There were nine interviews total. Data triangulation provided an opportunity to evaluate common themes within each organization and each level of management. Also, the final interview summaries were returned to each participant to check its accuracy before inclusion in the final study (Rabionet, 2011). Member checking provided an opportunity for interviewees to provide feedback to the researcher regarding the accuracy of the interviewee's statements (Carlson, 2010; Creswell et al., 2004).

Data Collection Technique

A business leader at three large companies in San Antonio, Texas was contacted via e-mail to request permission to interview them and members of their staff for the study. After receiving general permission from the business leader, I sent an invitation to participate to employees, whose job titles indicated a position of leadership within the organization. Once I obtained permission from the business leaders through a letter of cooperation, I contacted them to formally schedule separate, individual interviews.

Following the recommendations of O'Reilly et al. (2014), I interviewed the participants virtually during a mutually agreeable time, where the participant was in a quiet, comfortable place to avoid distractions and background noise in the recorded interviews. I asked each interviewee to acknowledge and sign a consent form before participating in the interview. The Walden University Doctoral Capstone Resources (2016) recommended that researchers ask a series of open-ended questions. Therefore, I introduced the interview, asked the series of open-ended questions, watched for nonverbal cues, and asked probing follow-up questions to gain depth in the participants' responses. To ensure the accuracy of the data that was collected, I recorded the qualitative interviews and took field notes.

The final interview summaries were returned to the participants to check the accuracy before the inclusion in the final study. Then, I scheduled a follow-up member-checking interview. Member checking provides an opportunity for interviewees to provide feedback to the researcher regarding the accuracy of the interviewee's statements (Carlson, 2010; Creswell et al., 2004). During that time, I asked the participants if any detail or fact was missed and if they had anything to add to the original interview (Walden University Doctoral Capstone Resources, 2016). The entire interview protocol instrument was listed in the study's appendix (Appendix A). In addition to interviews, I collected data such as company archival documents. Grant et al. (2014) suggested that these tactics would support the answers and data obtained in the semistructured interviews.

There are some advantages and disadvantages of the aforementioned data collection technique. The advantages to the semistructured interviews include but are not limited to the interviewer has the flexibility to ask clarifying or probing questions to obtain additional information, the participants have the ability to review their responses for accuracy, and the setting helps build rapport and reduce any potential anxiety for the participant (Aborisade, 2013; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The disadvantages to the semistructured interviews include but are not limited to the participants may feel reluctant to answer some of the open-ended questions and may not divulge the complete truth, while the interviewer's questions may appear leading to the participant (Aborisade, 2013; McIntosh & Morse, 2015).

Data Organization Technique

In a qualitative study, the researcher must keep a record of all data collected and protect the confidentiality and privacy of the participants (Gagnon et al., 2015). I used the iPhone's Voice Memos, as well as Zoom to record the qualitative interviews. Then, I uploaded the interviews to the NVivo software to track, code, and organize the data. I used this technology software package to save time, money, and to prevent the potential loss of data (Tessier, 2012). In this study, all data were sorted, organized, and analyzed through a cataloging and labeling system. Assigning each participant an alias protected the name of each participant; their actual name, company name, and other personal information was not listed or disclosed (Bourne & Calás, 2013). I categorized the assigned aliases in a Google Sheet along with information obtained from the interview, such as field notes and related archival documentation. The Google Sheet also contained the interview date, time, and location. The Walden University Institutional Review Board (2019) suggested that all interview data, recorded interviews, and supporting documents be stored securely for 5 years. Therefore, once the 5-year period has expired, all interview data, recorded interviews, and supporting documents will be securely deleted and destroyed.

Data Analysis

There are four types of triangulation for case studies: data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and methodological triangulation (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). Data triangulation involves time, space, and individuals (Denzin, 1973). Investigator triangulation involves multiple researchers (Denzin, 1973). Theory triangulation involves using more than one theory in the evaluation of the phenomenon (Burau & Andersen, 2014). Methodological triangulation involves using more than one source to gather data (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012).

Researchers using methodological triangulation confirm if the key themes from multiple sources ultimately support the same conclusions (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). My data collection process involved gathering data through various sources, such as semistructured interviews and company archival documents. The use of methodological triangulation strengthens the qualitative research method (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). Therefore, methodological triangulation was the appropriate data analysis process for my research design and study.

In a qualitative study, the researcher must keep a record of all data collected and protect the confidentiality and privacy of the participants (Gagnon et al., 2015). I used the iPhone's Voice Memos and Zoom to record the qualitative semistructured interviews required for my study. I asked probing questions and took field notes during the interview sessions. Mulhall (2003) stated, "Careful attention to the form, meaning, use, and construction of field notes will enable researchers to clarify their particular theoretical stance" (p. 306).

After conducting the interviews, I employed member checking. Miscommunication between researchers and participants can happen due to human dynamics and ultimately jeopardize the validity of the study (Carlson, 2010). Therefore, I asked the participants to verify my interpretation of their comments during the semistructured interviews. I also asked the participants to provide company archival documents – inclusive of any policies or procedures related to the retention of military spouses from their respective organizations.

Then, I uploaded the interviews to the NVivo software to track, code, and organize the data to identify themes. In this study, all data was sorted, organized, and analyzed through a cataloging and labeling system. Assigning each participant an alias protected the name of each participant; their actual name, company name, and other personal information was not listed or disclosed. I categorized the assigned aliases in a Google Sheet along with data obtained from the interviews, such as field notes and related archival documentation. I used the Google Sheet to track the interview dates, times, and locations. These combined technological tools helped me identify common themes gathered in the data analysis, as well as correlate these themes with those found in the academic literature.

Reliability and Validity

Gersten et al. (2000) found that research and data quality help to minimize bias. Heale and Twycross (2015) discovered that reliability and validity help researchers measure research and data quality (Heale & Twycross, 2015). Yin (2018) stated, “Reliability is the consistency and repeatability of producing a case study’s findings” (p. 288). One facet of determining a qualitative study’s reliability is dependability. In qualitative studies, researchers measure research quality and validity through credibility, transferability, confirmability, and data saturation (Morse, 2015).

Dependability

In qualitative research, dependability is the stability of data over time and through specific conditions (Golafshani, 2003). The member checking of data interpretation addressed dependability. I scheduled a follow-up member checking interview. Researchers have found that member checking provides an opportunity for interviewees to give feedback to the researcher regarding the accuracy of the interviewee's statements (Carlson, 2010; Creswell et al., 2004). An inquiry audit and a code-recode procedure also helped me address dependability (Carlton et al., 2015). Saiewitz (2018) stated that an inquiry audit helps the researcher verify that an external reviewer evaluates the collected data and supporting documents. My doctoral committee served as the external reviewers of my research data and supporting documentation. The code-recode procedure helped me further ensure dependability. After coding data from the qualitative interviews, I waited two weeks and then returned and recoded the same data and evaluated the results against one another (Carlton et al., 2015).

Credibility

In addition to member checking, I ensured credibility through data triangulation. Saunders et al. (2015) stated, “Triangulation involves using more than one source of data and method of collection to confirm the validity, credibility, authenticity of research data, analysis, and interpretation” (p. 207). Throughout my doctoral research study, I used multiple sources of evidence – for example, documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts.

Researchers use triangulation to gather information from multiple sources and apply it against the same finding or phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Researchers use triangulation to do an in-depth study of the phenomenon in a real-world setting to deepen the researcher's understanding of the issues (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). Researchers have found that triangulation helps uncover the reality in the data and is used to maximize confidence in the findings of the research study (Patton, 2015; Saunders et al., 2015). To ensure the validity of the data collection instrument and process, I triangulated the data between the company's archival documents and the three interviews at each organization. In this study, I used data triangulation to evaluate common themes within each organization and each level of management.

Transferability

In addition to credibility, I addressed transferability throughout my doctoral research study. In qualitative research, transferability is synonymous with generalizability

(Chenail, 2010). I provided readers with examples and evidence that my study's findings could apply to other situations and populations. Also, I provided readers with examples of opportunities for future research.

Confirmability

In addition to credibility and transferability, I addressed confirmability throughout my doctoral research study. Confirmability refers to the degree to which the results could be verified or documented by others (Cutliffe & McKenna, 2003). Akkerman et al. (2008) suggested using Halpern's audit trail process for confirmability. Therefore, following these researchers, I documented the procedures for checking and rechecking the data throughout the study by following Halpern's audit trail process. The six categories of information to evaluate when conducting an audit trail are: (a) raw data; (b) data reduction and analysis products; (c) data reconstruction and synthesis products; (c) process notes; (d) materials relating to intentions and dispositions; and (e) instrument development information (Cutliffe & McKenna, 2003). I used the data audit to identify areas of potential bias.

Last, I ensured that I achieved data saturation. A researcher reaches data saturation when redundant, or duplicate data begins to emerge throughout the literature and interview process surrounding the research topic (Marshall et al., 2013). Also, I analyzed and used the data from the qualitative interviews to determine data saturation because no new additional themes or codes will be identified or collected (Marshall et al., 2013).

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I readdressed the purpose of the study and described the roles of the researcher and participants. I expanded on the research method, research design, and targeted population. I also described in detail the data collection instruments, data collection techniques, and data organization techniques to be used throughout this qualitative multiple case study. Last, in Section 2, I discussed the research and data quality control measurements for this qualitative multiple case study.

In Section 3, I will analyze and summarize the collected data. I will present the findings from the qualitative interviews and discuss the applications to professional practice and proposed implications for social change. Also, in Section 3, I will present the recommended action from the findings and the suggested recommendations for further research on employer strategies for military spouse retention.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that employers use to retain their military spouse talent. I explored the strategies used by three employers in San Antonio, Texas who routinely employ military spouses. I conducted virtual semistructured interviews with three business leaders at each of the three participating employers – a total of nine participants. To keep the identity of the participants confidential, participants are labeled P1 – P9. Where applicable and available, the participants provided business documents (e.g., policies, procedures, recruitment documents) for additional validity.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for this study was: What innovative strategies do employers use to retain their military spouse talent? Through interviews with employers who had successfully retained their military spouse talent, I established five themes and present them in subsequent paragraphs of this section. The conceptual framework of the study was systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968). I discuss how the results confirm, disconfirm, or extend knowledge, and link the results with the conceptual framework used in the study. I also provide a review of the information obtained from the publicly available organizational documents, as well as new peer-reviewed studies post-proposal.

The five themes that emerged from the study included: (a) emphasis on the military spouse persona and the challenges military spouses face; (b) the normalization of flexible and remote work; (c) military spouse discrimination and diversity; (d) the importance of an internal support group; and (e) effective education and communication. The participants provided consistent answers to the interview questions, which enhanced data saturation. Using the conceptual framework, the findings of the literature review, and the triangulation of the data empowered me to determine the emerging themes during the data analysis.

Theme 1: Emphasis on the Military Spouse Persona and Challenges Military Spouses Face

The participants acknowledged the value that military spouses bring to employers and organizations – especially with regards to their diverse backgrounds, loyalty, and varied skill sets. This theme confirms the findings of Doyle (2018) and the United States Chamber of Commerce (2017) which indicated that military spouses have excellent soft skills that are transferrable between employers and transcend industries. P1 noted, “Military-connected individuals have a hunger to serve others. Military spouses are loyal and there is a lot more selfless behavior in military-connected individuals.”

In addition, the participants agreed that military spouses have significant experience in adapting, resiliency, and overcoming challenges. This theme confirms the findings of the Council of Economic Advisors (2018), Doyle (2018), and Eubanks (2013) who indicated that military spouses are known to be strong and resilient living in a particularly challenging military lifestyle. P1 noted, “Military spouses have experiences that come from the military journey, including sacrifice, adjusting, adapting, and overcoming." P4 added, "Military spouses are resilient, deal with stress better in the workplace, and have an excellent work ethic."

The participants also acknowledged the many career challenges that military spouses face while supporting the military service member through their career. P4 noted, "Military spouses sacrifice for the service member's career through constant moves and taking care of the home front while the service member is away." This theme confirms the findings of Borah and Fina (2017), Burke and Miller (2017), and Gleiman and Swearengen (2012) who found that the most commonly cited challenges for military spouse advancement are: frequent PCS moves, financial concerns and setbacks due to unemployment or underemployment, uncertainty/inability to plan, transient lifestyles, the demand to start over after each move and the military spouse losing their job with every PCS, loss of spousal identity through personal and career growth, lack of educational opportunities and flexibility for spouses, deployment to combat zones, TDY, lack of childcare, and reintegrating family members after deployment.

Five participants acknowledged the military spouse unemployment and underemployment issue. Burke and Miller (2017), Council of Economic Advisors (2018), and Ott, et al. (2018) found that the military spouse unemployment rate hovers around 16%. The United States Chamber of Commerce (2017) stated that the military spouse unemployment rate is four times the current rate for all adult women and three times higher than the rate for women between the ages of 20 and 25. The Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle Survey (2018) found that 56% of working spouses reported they were underemployed – frequent PCS was cited as the predominant cause for underemployment. However, a more recent survey of military spouses from the United States Chamber of Commerce (2021) found that the military spouse unemployment rate now hovers around 32%, which is a 10% increase from the 22% the United States Department of Defense reported in 2020, and over three times the national unemployment rate of 10%. It is worth noting that the Chamber of Commerce study survey was fielded during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the participant contributions and findings extended knowledge available in the current literature. P1 stated, “It is not enough to tout the unemployment number and get military spouses’ jobs, it is about getting them the right jobs for our organizations.” P1 added, “There is a mismatch, a misunderstanding, a disconnect happening between military spouses, employers, and military support organizations.” P5 stated, “There are plenty of great fellowships and internships out there for military spouses and many military-oriented groups that help employers get jobs in front of military spouses.” P5 added, “However, I am not convinced organizations are reaching the full talent pool of military spouses that exists out there. Our organization experiences challenges reaching the military spouse applicant base. Many military spouses are disconnected on the resources available to them. The resources are fragmented. There is also a disconnect in information flow from the military installations to the service member to the spouses.” P2 stated, “The talent acquisition piece is a challenge. Often times, our organization is targeting military spouses for the wrong roles.” P6 added, “It is a prospect retention issue, not a talent retention issue.” Three participants stated that “organizations are trying to fit military spouses into entry-level roles when their experience and education are well beyond an entry-level role, while some organizations fear placing a military spouse into a senior or executive role because of the chance that they could move geographic locations, while other organizations struggle to place military spouses into some information technology roles due to the lack of very specific technical skills within that target population. Other organizations struggle with finding military spouse candidates with specific security clearances." Five participants touted that their military spouse retention rate is "above 90%" or "equal to or better than the organization's retention rate as a whole." P1 stated, "Once we employ military spouses, we have been very successful in retaining them. It goes back to the loyalty piece. Military spouses are extremely loyal." P8 stated, "It is easier and less costly to retain the current employee, versus hiring external." P6 added, "Our organization believes that the overall environment itself creates a selling point that military spouses will want to stay. The organization also offers a bonus structure, performance pay, wellness days, and additional perks that help increase retention."

Last, the United States Chamber of Commerce (2017) stated that 81% of military families discussed the possibility of leaving the military, with career opportunities for military spouses being cited as one of the top determining factors. P3 noted, "Exiting military service can bring resentment from the service member to the spouse, and vice versa for the military spouse who is constantly having to adapt versus advance themselves due to the service member's career." P2 stated, "Military spouses need to be respected, understood, and heard on these challenges, so that employers can adapt and respond empathetically." P2 added, "Socially responsible organizations should take into consideration the unique lifestyles that military spouses face, such as activation, deployment, temporary duty, and war."

Theme 2: Normalization of Flexible and Remote Work

The participants acknowledged that the ability for military spouses to work remotely was a successful strategy for military spouse talent retention. This theme confirms the findings from the Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle Survey (2018) which indicated that discovering and designing flexible employment opportunities that work with the challenges of military life is an improvement for military spouse unemployment and underemployment. P5 stated, "Flexibility and remote work helps the retention of military spouses through a PCS and/or deployment." P7 agreed, "Employers should offer flexible hours to accommodate for deployment and other childcare issues that military spouses face." P2 suggested, "Evaluate the role and if it can be done remotely, evaluate the employee's performance – push the boundaries and be creative to retain military spouse talent."

Six participants acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic was a silver lining that normalized flexible and remote work – not just for military spouses, but for every employee. The value of these benefits was confirmed by Munsch's (2016) findings which stated that options for remote work, flexible hours, childcare options, parental and wellness leave, and/or generous or unlimited paid-time-off were beneficial towards employee retention. This theme is further validated by Hyken's (2018) findings which stated 90% of employees are more likely to stay with an organization that empathizes with their needs and eight in 10 would be willing to work longer hours for a more empathetic employer. P6 stated, “Remote work has changed due to COVID.” P3 added, “COVID changed the face of remote work for military spouses, as well as for many industries.”

Six participants stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has levelled the benefits offered by employers to military spouses and its civilian personnel. P8 stated, “COVID-19 created an environment that equalized the benefits and opportunities afforded to military spouses.” P6 stated, “The strategies to retain military spouses versus civilians do not differ now, in general terms.” P9 stated, “Our organization’s benefits are available to everyone in the organization.”

P7 added, “Military spouses have the same human needs as their civilian counterparts. Our organization offers the same remote work benefits to civilian personnel, as we do military spouses, as long as the job function works in a remote setting and the individual is a performer and an asset.” P8 stated, “Our organization offers flexible work arrangements, in addition to teleworking – these benefits are afforded to everyone, military-connected or not, pandemic or not – as long as the work is getting done.”

P5 added, “Our organization has nonmilitary individuals who are single parents, working from home and homeschooling young children. Due to the impacts of COVID-19, many in our workforce are experiencing some of the same challenges that military spouses have faced on a daily basis for decades.” P6 pointed out an interesting benefit, “During the pandemic, our organization added wellness days to help employees adjust to remote work and juggling work-life balance.” The findings disconfirm the knowledge available in the current literature. For example, Caminiti (2018) predicted that 46% of the workforce will work virtually by 2020. In a recent survey conducted by Gartner (Golden, 2020), more than 80% of company leaders surveyed will permit employees to work remotely upon reopening from the COVID-19 pandemic. This theme also confirmed the findings of Narayanan et al. (2017) which indicated organizations can save on office space, utilities, and rent costs if they allow employees to work remotely. P3 added, "Remote work can bring about a tremendous amount of cost savings to an employer, as well as cut down on travel costs."

All nine participants indicated that the normalization of flexible and remote work debunks the stigma surrounding PCS moves for military spouses. P3 stated. "It will be difficult for employers to revert back and to not allow military spouses to work remotely, especially after it proved to work so well during the pandemic." P9 added, "Moving is not specific just to military spouses; many other individuals in various professions move and relocate too for upward mobility." Three participants noted that "military spouses stay longer in one duty station than the majority of millennials stay with one employer." These findings were confirmed by data provided by the United States Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020) which indicated 75% of 16-to-19-year olds had tenure of less than 12 months, while the average tenure amongst employees ages 25 to 34 years was 2.8 years. The traditional military system typically requires military moves every 3 years. However, Sisk (2019) indicated that there is a push to allow for longer tours at duty stations, such as extensions or stabilizations, to assist with military family stability. P4 added, “Regardless, employers would rather have an excellent employee for 3 years, rather than an average one for 5.”

Even though flexible and remote work appears to bring about a multitude of opportunities for military spouses, some participants expressed “challenges with remote work and employee retention due to specific overseas duty station locales.” Four participants referenced the Status of Forces Agreements (SOFA). According to the Institute for Veteran and Military Families (IVMF; 2018), “SOFAs are multilateral or bilateral peacetime agreements that define the legal status of U.S. United States Department of Defense personnel, activities, and property in the territory of another nation.” (p. 1). The findings extend knowledge in the discipline. SOFA agreements have employment implications for military spouses living overseas. According to IVMF (2018), “It is often unclear how and when SOFA agreements apply since most agreements do not specifically address employment issues directly; they are often written in legalese, and many are simply not accessible.” (p. 1). P1 stated, “There are a multitude of issues and challenges with SOFA.” P2 stated, “Unfortunately, not every military spouse can be treated the same due to SOFA agreements and where their service member gets orders to.” P2 added, “SOFAs typically do not support contract or freelance work with current employers, making military spouse retention a challenge in this area. SOFAs should be modernized or revisited because many were written shortly after WWII, and military spouses had a very different look than they do today.”

Theme 3: Military Spouse Discrimination and Diversity

The participants acknowledged that military spouses experience discrimination. This theme confirms the findings from Wellman (2018) which indicated some employers are disfavoring and discriminating against military spouses. P2 stated, “Many military spouses feel discriminated against based on who they are married to.” P4 added, “Veterans and military spouses often have negative biases to overcome, but it can be turned around into something positive.” P2 noted, “Employers should not treat military spouses differently just because of the possibility that they could move some day.” The findings are extended by the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2021) which stated that questions about marital status are frequently used to discriminate and may violate Title VII if used to deny or limit employment opportunities. The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2021) further stated that employers should not use non-job-related questions involving marital status, number and/or ages of dependents, or names of dependents of the applicant.

Four participants noted that military spouses are not a protected class, like veterans are. This theme confirms the findings of Wellman (2018) who further indicated that an employer could decline to hire, train, or promote someone purely on the basis that they are married to someone in the military. P2 stated, “Military spouses are not a protected class. However, some employers ask, so that employers can tailor a military spouse’s employment experience accordingly.” P4 added, “Veterans are included in an organization’s diversity and inclusion efforts, but military spouses are currently not.” This theme confirms the findings of Wellman (2018) which indicated an option to addressing the current state of anti-discrimination laws would be to amend the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994 (USERRA) to include military spouses within the law's discrimination protections, just as Veterans are included. Four participants felt that military spouses should be included in an organization's diversity and inclusion efforts. P3 stated, "Military spouses should be viewed by employers as diversity candidates." P8 added, "An organization's leadership should consider military spouses a diversity priority."

Three participants recommended that military spouses should self-identify as a military spouse. This theme confirms the findings by Wellman (2018) which indicated some military-friendly employers offer preference points to military spouse applicants. P9 stated, "I recommend self-reported, so military spouses are tracked in the organization's system and receive the benefits afforded to them." However, P8 added,

> Some military spouses are scared to tell their manager that they're a military spouse – even in organizations that have a military-friendly approach and culture shift. It could be because of prior traumatic experiences with previous employers; for example, getting let go due to a PCS. Many military spouses are uneasy talking about military lifestyle needs for fear of a negative perception or impact on their career.

Three participants mentioned that making military spouses a protected class would make good business sense – especially because employers would receive tax benefits for hiring military spouses. This theme was confirmed by Military One Source (2020b) which indicated some states are making strides to implement a Military Spouse Protected Class, tax incentives for employing military spouses, and Military Family Leave Acts in upcoming legislative sessions. P7 stated, “A federal bill has been filed regarding employers receiving tax credits for military spouse hiring, similar to veteran hiring.” P8 added,

> Military spouses should self-identify for current programs and benefits, but also for future tax incentives and credits similar to the veteran population. Also, tracking the military spouse’s career within an organization also adds an important metric to the organization’s overall retention metrics.

Theme 4: Importance of Internal Support Group

The participants conceded that creating internal support groups, employee action groups, or employee resource groups specifically for military spouses was a successful strategy for military spouse talent retention. P6 stated, “A resource group to feel connected, camaraderie, and support is critical to the overall retention success of military spouses.” The overall theme of community and belonging was confirmed by Vanderpool and Way (2013) who indicated employees who are retained by their company become more comfortable, less stressed, less anxious, and have a stronger sense of belonging and community. Trone et al. (2018) also discussed the need and importance for military spouses to communicate with support systems. Last, Staples and Webster (n.d.) indicated that intranets can help build community and camaraderie especially amongst remote or distributed teams.

Overall, the participant contributions extended the knowledge in the discipline from what was found in the current literature. Three participants indicated that military spouses should not be combined with veterans, nor veterans with military spouses because the two audiences and needs are completely different. P2 stated, “Military spouses cannot be treated like veterans. They need their own resources and support tailored to their unique lifestyles.” P5 added, “The veteran/military spouse semantics are not interchangeable. Resources labeled for veterans turn military spouses off.” P6 offered a differing perspective stating, “Our organization has an overall military resource group. It is available to all who are military-connected – veterans, spouses, family members, and general military supporters can belong to the group.”

Multiple participants shared details of how their organization’s internal support groups, employee action groups, or employee resource groups were designed to help military spouses. P2 stated, “Our employee action group helps military spouses inform our organization of their needs and changes to policies and programs that need to be made based on their unique lifestyles and experiences.” P4 added, “Our military spouse group focuses on special programming, celebrations, trainings, and volunteer opportunities for military spouses.” P8 stated, “Our military support resource group offers free trainings to help military spouses reskill, increase durability, and provide upward career mobility.” P7 added, “Because most military spouses receive healthcare benefits through their service member versus their employer, training and advancement opportunities are often more appealing to military spouses than a traditional benefits package. This factor also saves employers money.”

Seven participants agreed that specific tactics contribute to the success of their internal support groups for military spouses. For example, new employees that are military spouses receive a welcome e-mail from a member of the executive team that illustrates the organization’s commitment to hiring and retaining military spouses. P8 stated, “All new employees that are military spouses receive dedicated frequently asked questions (FAQs) and onboarding documents and policies that are specific for military spouses. Military spouses within the organization also have their own dedicated human resources manager. These dedicated human resources managers have a pulse on the positions available throughout the organization and can help share the military spouse’s resume amongst hiring managers at new locations when it comes time for the spouse to PCS.” P9 stated, “Our organization tracks our internal support group’s metrics, such as attendance, growth, decline, and overall engagement. This is where the self-identification piece becomes particularly important. If our organization does not know an employee is a military spouse, they will not be made aware of the additional benefits made available to them – such as the internal support group.” P9 further added, “It is important for military spouses to have their own tools, resources, and engagement pieces. Our organization also offers a mentorship program for military spouses, either one-on-one or in a group setting, as well as special events, such as fireside chats to engage and inform senior leadership on the challenges that military spouses face.” Five participants indicated that the success of their internal support groups was because they are driven from the top leadership of the organization, as well as amongst peers. Many of the organizations are run internally entirely by volunteers who are passionate about the cause of supporting other military spouses. Three participants indicated that the internal support group responsibilities were in addition to and separate from the employee's official role and responsibilities within the organization.

Theme 5: Educate and Communicate

The participants agreed that continual and consistent education and communication was a successful strategy for military spouse talent retention. This theme confirms the overall findings from Ashton (2018) and Hanny et al. (2020) which indicated effective communication was a top strategy and best practice for successfully retaining top talent within an organization. This theme is confirmed by the findings from Harter and Mann (2017) and Irwansyah et al. (2018) who indicated employers that integrate strong transparency and communication tactics into their organization's culture and core values can help retain valuable employees. Harter and Mann (2017) further confirmed this theme by stating that an organization's leaders should consider and encourage open-door policies, company-wide and department meetings, events, and other initiatives and channels to ensure employees are heard, valued, and understood. This theme is further confirmed by Ross (2018) which stated when employees feel heard, they feel more comfortable voicing ideas, concerns, admitting to gaps in knowledge, and asking for help and guidance.

The participants had a number of viewpoints surrounding education, communication, and collaboration – and what this means for military spouses. These contributions extended knowledge available in the current literature regarding military spouses. First, 5 participants expressed their perspectives on the importance of educating an organization's hiring managers on the military spouse persona. P4 stated, "It is important to educate hiring managers on the military spouse persona. Our organization's hiring managers have to go through unconscious bias training in order to avoid discrimination of veteran and military spouse resumes and candidates." P8 stated, "Organizations need a continuous education process for recruiters and hiring managers. Our organization has special tools, such as one-pagers and fact sheets tailored to the employment needs and challenges of military spouses. That way, our organization can better inform our recruiters and hiring managers, so they can help and assist the spouse in their employment search." P9 added, "It is a constant education process, as there are always new military spouses, new recruiters, and new hiring managers coming into the organization's workforce. The education process must be continual and consistent." P3 stated, "Military spouses don't need mentors, they need sponsors – a champion to help advocate for their advancement." P9 added, "Our organization hosts special events dedicated to helping military spouses and hiring managers communicate surrounding an impending PCS move. It is important to communicate all options available to employees."

Second, 3 of the participants expressed their perspectives on the importance of the military spouse communicating their needs to their supervisor. P3 stated, "Military spouses should communicate and be open to their employer about their situation and needs." P7 added, "Military spouses should be open, communicative, and forthright about their needs to their employer." P9 stated, "Our organization presents tips for the military spouse to help them communicate with their hiring manager or supervisor about their upcoming PCS. It eases the fear and stigma around doing so."

Systems Theory

Researchers who use systems theory investigate phenomena from a holistic approach (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Systems theory consists of multiple intertwined relationships (Riggs & Riggs, 2011). Each relationship in systems theory has its own defining attributes interrelated with other elements in the system that are part of a larger perspective and system. Systems theory also aligns multiple elements that are a part of many different relationships. When an individual adheres to a systemic perspective, the individual believes that it is not possible to understand a phenomenon by breaking it up into different subgroups (McMahon & Patton, 2018). Researchers have found that systems theory shows how individual parts of a process work together to improve various outcomes of a particular process (Sayin, 2016; Zybell, 2013). Researchers have indicated that one of the theory's primary goals is to reveal a new set of patterns in order to improve a process or procedure (McMahon & Patton, 2018; Sayin, 2016).

The participants shared examples where external support organizations, employers, and military spouses must communicate and work together in order to improve employment outcomes for military spouses. The participants also shared examples of where different departments or facets of the organization, as well as numerous positions and roles, must work together in order to improve various internal outcomes, programs, benefits, or initiatives for military spouses. P6 stated, "In our organization, it takes a combined group of military-connected individuals, our talent acquisition team, and human resources team to work on programs and initiatives that will be the key to the success of our veterans and military spouses within our workplace." The participants shared examples where the employer or hiring manager needed to communicate and work with the military spouse to improve employment outcomes, while it was equally important for the military spouse to communicate their needs to the employer or supervisor. Five participants referenced how important it is for the organization's leadership to drive the internal initiatives for military spouses and how it is equally important for these initiatives to be created and driven by military spouses amongst their peers for ultimate success. P8 stated, "Successful strategies and programs for military spouses need to be driven from the leadership at the top of the organization, as well as from the bottom up." P9 added, "It is a holistic approach. The strategies must be implemented top down, and peer-to-peer, in order to make all of these initiatives work and be worthwhile." At the beginning of the proposal, I proposed that systems theory was an ideal fit for this qualitative multiple case study because it shows how all aspects fit together and must work together in harmony in order to contribute solutions toward retention efforts for military spouses. At the conclusion of this study, I still agree with and stand by that proposed sentiment.

This completes the findings section of this study. The findings in this research study are a confirmation and extension of the literature discussed in this doctoral study and contribute to the disciplines of business, management, talent recruitment, and talent retention, while also contributing to and bringing awareness of the challenges the military-connected community faces. Research findings should apply to professional practice.

Applications to Professional Practice

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore innovative strategies that some large employers use to retain their military spouse talent. Based on the findings of this study, six applications to professional practice emerged that could help employers of all sizes successfully retain their military spouse talent. The applications to professional practice include the following six recommendations:

1. In a post-COVID-19 workplace environment, business leaders should continue to normalize, accept, and celebrate remote and flexible work. In addition, employers should consider adding wellness and self-care days into their strategies as a result of adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic and remote work. This not only eases the stress surrounding the challenges faced by the organization's military spouse population but creates the potential for a larger impact across the entire workforce. For example, flexible and remote work helps working parents, homeschooling parents, caregivers in all situations, and employees seeking to work fractional time.
2. Business leaders should refrain from combining their military spouse talent with their veteran talent. Rather, business leaders should create an internal resource group or internal support group exclusively for military spouses. This application not only gives military spouses a place to connect, network, and assist each other through the challenging aspects of the military lifestyle, it is also an ideal place for an organization's leadership to seek feedback, suggestions, and advice on

policies, programs, and procedures for military spouse talent acquisition and retention.

3. Business leaders should communicate and educate military spouse employees on the benefits and options available to them. Business leaders should aim to be creative in order to retain their top talent through a PCS move or any other life-altering experience. After all efforts have been exhausted, if the individual is unable to be retained due to SOFA, the business leader should consider an alternative method to fast-track employment if the individual is a top performer, returns to the geographical area, and there are positions available within the organization.
4. Business leaders should also communicate and educate recruiters and hiring managers on the value of hiring and retaining military spouses, the military spouse persona, the challenges of the military lifestyle, and the options and benefits available to this target population. Business leaders should also encourage their recruiters and hiring managers to go through unconscious bias training to avoid discrimination as it relates to military-connected individuals.
5. Business leaders should consider including and incorporating military spouses in their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies and initiatives.
6. Business leaders should consider developing standard metrics surrounding general talent retention. Participants voiced the lack of standard, common metrics or best practices in this area – military-connected or civilian. The findings confirmed that the metrics differed and were not consistent.

Implications for Social Change

The findings of this study could positively impact multiple individuals, organizations, institutions, and societies. For example, business leaders, employers, and organizations, military spouses, communities in which military-connected individuals live, and the nation as a whole. By incorporating the applications to professional practice, business leaders will positively impact their bottom-line by retaining qualified, trained military spouse talent. By creatively retaining military spouses through PCS moves and other military lifestyle circumstances, business leaders will not have to spend more on talent acquisition, onboarding, and training costs. As confirmed by the literature and the findings, business leaders will be retaining a dedicated, loyal, educated, and trained individual, which helps keep the productivity, and morale of the entire team at a stable and consistent level versus creating disruption in the workplace. If business leaders include military spouses in their CSR and DEI initiatives, it exhibits the organization's patriotism, commitment to the military-connected community, and support for the overall national defense. This confirms the findings of Chaudhary (2019), Santhrosh and Baral (2015), and Tong et. al. (2019) who indicated CSR is an important talent management tool to build an engaged workforce and aids in employee retention. It also showcases the organization's recognition and celebration of diverse backgrounds and experiences that can enrich their overall workplace. Last, it positions the organization as an innovative leader in the military-connected space.

Employment is more than just income. For many, including military spouses, employment is emotional. Obtaining and keeping gainful, meaningful employment not only increases the financial stability of the military family, but also helps further provide basic necessities, such as well-rounded, nutritious meals for the military family. This confirms the findings from the Military Family Advisory Network's 2019 Military Family Support Programming Survey that one in eight military family respondents is food insecure and in Texas that number was one in six. Results from the same survey indicated that 27.4% of the currently serving military family respondents had less than $500 in emergency savings or no emergency fund at all. A recent survey of military spouses from the United States Chamber of Commerce (2021) found that employment positivity impacts mental health, and wellbeing, and employed respondents reported higher aspects of self-esteem and flourishing, and employment enhances family relationships and quality of life. For military spouses, employment is more than simply collecting a paycheck.

Military spouse employment has an impact broader than the employer, organization, or spouse themselves. When the military spouse is employed, the household becomes a dual-income household. When military spouses are employed in the duty station that they reside, they are able to contribute to their local community and economy – in volunteerism and service, as well as in increased spending and economic impact, which boosts the local coffers and economy. Last, military spouse employment has an impact even broader than the local communities in which they reside. Service members with dissatisfied spouses are more likely to leave military service, which hinders the United States' ability to recruit and retain an all-volunteer force, which ultimately impacts our nation's military readiness and national defense.

Recommendations for Action

In addition to the recommendations for business leaders in the applications to professional practice section, there are recommendations for action amongst additional populations with regard to military spouse retention. The recommendations for action are as follows:

1. Employers of any size, small, medium, or large organizations, should consider designing and implementing policies, programs, procedures, and best practices surrounding military spouse talent acquisition and retention. In the findings, participants showcased simple tactics, such as welcome e-mails and support groups that could be implemented immediately no matter the organization's size. Participants exhibited how different roles and departments work together to build more robust offerings, programs, and benefits for military spouses that could serve as a roadmap for other employers and organizations.
2. Military spouses should exercise the benefits and opportunities afforded by their employers. Participants referenced self-identification if the employer offers, so that military spouses are alerted to the special benefits, programs, trainings, and support groups made available by the employer. In addition, military spouses should participant in training and upskilling opportunities made available by the employer. Additional technical skills and certifications can bolster durability throughout the PCS and relocation process in order to aid retention efforts.
3. Overall, it would be ideal to revise SOFAs to include or allow special employment professions for military spouses. The Department of State has the

overall responsibility for leading the U.S. government's negotiation of SOFAs and shares responsibility for implementation with the United States Department of Defense. Participants expressed challenges with retaining military spouse overseas due to SOFAs. Employers could seek to establish working groups that include representatives from the Department of State and Department of Defense to help address issues, concerns, and questions. These points of contact could help the employer pertaining to SOFA in the countries where employees are most likely to relocate.

4. Employers, military spouses, and advocates for military-related causes should continue to lobby at the state and federal level for military spouses to become a protected class. This will prompt tax incentives, benefits, and credits for organizations employing military spouses, similar to veterans. This will also impact an organization's DEI initiatives and benchmarks. This will also award military spouse candidates preference points, which will aid in obtaining employment.
5. The military-connected community should consider collaborating on consistent standards, programs, and metrics for what constitutes a "military friendly" organization. Participants pointed out a disconnect in how that is defined across different employers, organizations, and institutions. In addition, the military-connected community should continue to collaborate to educate military spouses, employers, and legislators. Participants acknowledged disconnected, fragmented services and information.

Overall, I intend to publish the findings in various academic business journals and seize opportunities to share the findings with business leaders in forums where employers discuss strategies for innovative military spouse retention.

Recommendations for Further Research

I conducted a qualitative multiple case study on employers with innovative strategies for military spouse retention. The target population consisted of three different business leaders at three different organizations in San Antonio, Texas. The sample size targeted to one city in one state is a limitation of the study. Employers in other cities, states, and countries may provide additional information or strategies to add to the current literature in a future study.

In addition, because this doctoral study is under the school of business, it was imperative to explore the research question from the employer's perspective versus the military spouse's point of view. A future study could explore solely the viewpoints and lived experiences of multiple military spouses. A future study could also explore a mixed-methods approach including the perspectives and voices of both employers and military spouses.

The participants brought up interesting points that identified gaps in the current literature, as well as in current business practices. For example, future studies could explore: (a) issues and strategies surrounding military spouse talent acquisition; (b) employer strategies and tactics for military spouse self-identification and self-reporting; (c) standard metrics for general talent retention; (d) the impacts of COVID-19 on military spouse licensure; or (e) a comparison of military spouse and millennial retention. Last, one of the limitations was that the strategies may change over time. A future study may uncover new strategies employers use for military spouse retention.

Reflections

This doctoral journey was both rewarding and difficult. Throughout the journey, I had many milestones to celebrate and many unthinkable challenges – both personal and professional – to overcome. However, I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to complete a doctoral program, and I would not trade this experience for anything. One of the most challenging components of the study was collecting data during a global pandemic. In addition, the target population was in San Antonio, Texas, I had to move across the ocean this year, and work in a different time zone. Regardless, I persevered and pushed to complete the study. The doctoral journey taught me to think critically, like a scholar, and to approach problem-solving with a new lens. The doctoral journey brought me to a whole new level of mental toughness and resiliency. I look forward to putting my findings into an action plan to contribute to the San Antonio business community, the military-connected community, and beyond.

When I started this doctoral journey, the majority of the academic and professional literature was on the awareness of the problem of military spouse unemployment and underemployment. As I navigated the journey, I began to see additional professional literature, programs, and toolkits geared toward helping employers understand the military spouse persona and hire military spouses. However, to date, I have not found a comprehensive piece of academic or professional literature that focuses solely on the talent retention piece for military spouses. Throughout the journey, I kept focused on – it is a wonderful victory to hire military spouses, but what happens once it is time to PCS? What happens to the military family's second source of income? What happens to the mental health of the military spouse? What happens to the employers' bottom-line? What happens to the employer's workplace culture? These questions, and more, kept driving me to the finish line – to understand what some employers' innovative strategies for military spouse retention were. I am proud to contribute to the literature and dialogue with this study.

I chose to write my study on this topic because I am a military spouse. I have personally seen and experienced the many challenges, joys, selfless service, and pride that comes along with the military lifestyle. I identify with the military spouse persona referenced throughout this study. I have personally felt the fear of talking about being a military spouse in the workplace, I have personally felt the need to hide the fact that I am a military spouse in the workplace due to the possibility of that stigma damaging my career opportunities and potential, I have personally experienced discriminatory comments and sentiments about being a military spouse, and I have personally experienced the stress and anxiety surrounding PCS moves and asking for remote work. I wanted those feelings, comments, and experiences to end for other military spouses. I also knew there were many employers in San Antonio, Texas, "Military City", USA that work daily on improving employment opportunities for military spouses, and I believed that story of those best practices needed to be told and shared as a model for other communities, cities, states, and countries.

While I knew and identified with the military spouse persona, I was surprised to see employers discuss the importance of an internal support group for military spouses. Even though some of the tactics seem rather simple, these concepts were clearly tangible, measurable, and impactful to both the military spouse employees and the employers. At the beginning of this journey, no one could predict the impacts of or changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, I was surprised to see the normalization of flexible and remote work. I expected to find the remote work concept would be an uphill battle that military spouses would continue to face. However, I believe this was a silver lining of the pandemic that helped remove or ease this barrier for military spouses moving forward. I was also surprised to see employers discuss the discrimination and diversity components regarding military spouses. Previously in the space, I found that conversation to be rather siloed. However, I think there are many opportunities for development, change, and impact in those areas. I am excited to continue to learn the additional best practices and new models that unfold and are shared in other communities, cities, states, and countries, as a result of this study. Overall, this experience was humbling and exhilarating to add to talent retention's sparse literature with regards to military spouses.

Conclusion

Employee turnover costs organizations time and money in valuable resources such as recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and training. The cost of losing an employee can cost employers more than 100% of the base salary of the individual who left (Skelton et al., 2019). When organizations focus on employee retention, the employer builds a team of experienced, dedicated, skilled, and confident employees (Heder-Rima & Dajnoki, 2019; Wikström et al., 2018).

Military spouses come from diverse backgrounds, possessing a wealth of knowledge, skills, and abilities based on their experience and education. Military spouses have strong core values and are resilient living in a particularly challenging military lifestyle (Council of Economic Advisors, 2018; Doyle, 2018; Eubanks, 2013). Military spouses also have excellent soft skills that transcend industries, such as flexibility, adaptability, critical thinking, leadership, management, teamwork, and positivity (Doyle, 2018; United States Chamber of Commerce, 2017). As a result of this study, it was determined that employers that hire military spouses acquire a loyal, educated, skilled, and adaptable employee. In addition, hiring military spouses exhibits the organization's patriotism, commitment to the military-connected community, and support for the overall national defense. Employers that choose to creatively retain their military spouse talent multiply their return on investment in the military spouse employee.

At a minimum, business leaders that choose to retain their military spouse talent should (a) continue to normalize, accept, and celebrate remote and flexible work; (b) create an internal resource group or internal support group exclusively for military spouses; (c) continuously communicate and educate recruiters and hiring managers on the value of hiring and retaining military spouses, the military spouse persona, the challenges of the military lifestyle, and the options and benefits available to this target population; and (d) communicate and educate military spouse employees on the benefits and options available to them. The strategies above align with the tenets of systems theory. This study proved that in order for a military spouse retention program to be successful, it must be a holistic approach. The strategies must have buy-in, galvanization, and implemented top-down, bottom-up, and peer-to-peer in order to be successful. The varied and many aspects, such as programs, benefits, roles, departments, organizations, community groups and stakeholders must fit together and work together in harmony in order to ultimately contribute solutions toward retention efforts for military spouses. As a result of this study, it was determined that education and communication must be continuous within the organizations, as well as externally with other military-connected groups, community groups, elected officials, and governmental entities. There is additional work to be done with regards to SOFA, military spouses as a protected class, and other military spouse DEI initiatives. However, these strategies may be useful to other employers, organizations, community groups, and governmental entities or provide an excellent place to start the dialogue regarding military spouse retention initiatives.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol Instrument

[Insert Name], thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to volunteer to talk with me and participate in my doctoral research study regarding employer strategies for military spouse retention. The purpose of this study is to explore the innovative strategies employers use to retain their military spouse talent.

Before we begin, do you have any questions? If not, let us get started. If, at any time, I ask a question that you do not want to answer, please say "pass," and I will continue to the next question. The first question is:

1. What strategies have been the most successful in retaining qualified military spouses?
2. Second, how do your retention strategies differ for addressing military spouses versus civilian spouses?
3. Third, what types of policies or programs does your organization have in place to retain military spouses after a Permanent Change of Station?
4. Fourth, what are some of the key challenges in retaining qualified military spouses, and how did you address the key challenges?
5. Fifth, how do you evaluate the effectiveness of strategies used to retain qualified military spouses?
6. Last, what additional information can you add to this study about the various successful strategies used to retain military spouses?

[Insert Name]; thank you for your time today. Thank you for this excellent information. If you have any documents, policies, or procedures that relate to the topic, you are invited to email them to me. This, of course, is completely voluntary.

In the spirit of transparency, I want to let you know what the next steps in the process will be. I will transcribe your interview and write up a summary of each question. Once I have completed the transcription of your interview and have written the summaries, I will email you the document to review the completed summary for the accuracy of your statements. At that time, you will be able to make any corrections or clarifications. If you feel further clarification is necessary after the review of the summary, we can also set up another virtual appointment or arrange a telephone call. Again, thank you for participating in my doctoral research study!