

Small Business Opportunities December 2005 Release First Lieutenant Learns Tough Business Lessons from Iraq

U.S. Soldier Returns from Iraq to Find How His Business Fared

Summary: Business Tips on Returning from Leave of Absence

PHILADELPHIA, PA-For all of 2004 and part of 2005, Joe Witte had a difficult balancing act: Vice President and Partner for CentricSource.com in absentia and First Lieutenant for the U.S. Army, mission: IRAQ. Was it luck or just a miracle that CentricSource.com didn't close its doors shortly after Joe left? Perhaps a little bit of both.

Naturally, the attention to Joe's business, CentricSource.com, based in Langhorne, Pennsylvania, was upstaged by his intense preparation to fight abroad with the 976th Movement Control Team. And, the distractions that came along with leaving his pregnant wife at home while he traveled overseas for 12 months were enormous.

There's only so much preparation the U.S. Army can do for a mock Iraqi dress rehearsal. When opening night came, the real deal was replete with unexpected surprises. Likewise, an extended leave of absence from your business can be equally surprising. Lieutenant Witte learned the hard way when he discovered everything he had overlooked prior to his departure for Iraq.

Although AT&T and the Internet were available communication outlets, Joe could neither afford the time nor the mindset to simultaneously run a business and participate in war games. When it came to managing his company, CentricSource.com, Joe was forced to leave the responsibility up to his employees and hope for the best.

"I had no clue what was happening on the work front. I took the word of my employees that everything was going ok," Joe admits. When First Lieutenant Witte returned to his office in Pennsylvania, he encountered many changes- including several new employees and the challenge of reigniting sales and morale.

"Leaving your business could happen at any time", Joe warns. "Rule number one – *Be Prepared!*"

To assist others in a smooth transition, Joe has compiled a handy checklist of tips for leaving from and returning to your business.

Leave of Absence Tips

Prior to Leaving:

- Designate someone you trust as 'Second in Command'. Properly prepare them by discussing their additional responsibilities and new position. Compensate them accordingly. Discuss ways of contacting you, if possible. Give them authority to make important decisions.
- Provide the proper employees with partner and vendor contact

information, including passwords, to those who will need it. ☒
Prepare by publishing office procedures, company policy manual, personnel guidelines, and job responsibilities. Ensure clarity among all staff members. ☒ Draft and discuss a financial plan of how your absence will affect the business (i.e., loss of your salary, loss of potential business, etc.). ☒ Discuss a general game plan for potential business growth and loss (i.e., the need to move office location, hiring and/or laying off, etc.).

After Returning: ☒ It's important to recognize that change has occurred in your absence. Don't "storm the beaches" when you return. Instead, ease in, socialize with employees, allow them to warm up to you, and observe what has changed while you were gone. ☒ Accept the changes. You may not be thrilled with what you observe, but give your second in command and employees credit for surviving. ☒ Thank your staff. Remember, they did their best. Reward them in some way – even if the budget doesn't allow. ☒ After getting acclimated, discuss the change in responsibilities with the second in command. Make sure he or she is comfortable and completely understands your position as the re-instated leader. ☒ While it's important to 'ease in', remember that you're the leader and you must stick by your leadership principles. If you see any egregious issues, take swift action. The survival of your business depends on your decisions with input from your key employees.

Leaving your business is a sensitive issue. Making sure you're properly prepared is the key to maintaining a well-managed, stress-free work environment.

Since his return, Joe has worked diligently to fix some of his mistakes, and is since expanding his business. "One important facet in any aspect of life is to admit when you erred, and do what is right to fix it."