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# More Information for Women Looking to Get Back in the Work Force

By JENNIFER PRESTON MARCH 17, 2014

How can women prepare for returning to work after taking a career break to care for children or aging parents? As we reported in the article, “New Programs Help Women Get Back In The Game,” a growing number of re-entry programs are now being offered to professional women on Wall Street and at big law firms.

Explaining a career gap on a résumé is not the only challenge women face. We asked Michelle Friedman, Ann Blinkhorn, Carol Fishman Cohen and Vivian Steir Rabin, who specialize in career development, to share their best job search tips and resources. In addition, Ms. Cohen and Ms. Rabin answered questions from New York Times readers on The Motherlode blog. They are the authors of “Back on the Career Track” and founders of iRelaunch.com, which provides extensive resources for women looking to navigate their way back to work.

We also asked for advice from Susan Madsen, a professor of management who studies women’s leadership at Utah Valley University, and a founder of the Women and Leadership Affinity group of the International Leadership Association. She said she sees too many women leaving the work force without adequately exploring ways to keep working part time or in roles that will give them more flexibility. “Sometimes women have a view that it is all or nothing,” she said.

“Before leaving, women need to consider part-time work, ask about job sharing, telecommuting opportunities.” She also said that women should consider getting a degree or an advanced degree during their career break.

“Take a class,” she said. “Or take an online class. Go back to school part time and move through your degree through the years. You can be at your kids sporting events and prepare yourself to return to work along the way. You will have more choices.”

### **Career Development Experts:**

*Michelle Friedman is the founder of Advancing Women’s Careers, a consulting and coaching firm that focuses on helping women move into leadership roles. Here are some of her tips for people considering going back to work.*

**Careers (and lives) are lived in chapters.** This seems so obvious, but tends to be a big aha moment for my coaching clients who are often so busy with day-to-day demands that they can lose sight of the bigger plan. Once you become more clear about what chapter you are currently in, or transitioning into (“adjusting to being a new parent”, “career can move fast for a few years”, “ready to return to work”), then you can clarify what your own definition of success looks like in that chapter. Indicators of success in the past might be less important in the current chapter, or vice versa. Those returning to work really benefit from asking themselves what are the “must haves” versus “nice to haves” in the relaunch chapter. There will always be the next chapter and you can re-evaluate then.

**Be willing to live with a little uncertainty while you explore what’s next.** It can be a chicken and egg process: I have observed that many relaunchers don’t want to be out networking to find their next opportunity until they can speak with 100% clarity about what they are looking to do next. As my clients tend to be accomplished professionals, it makes sense that they don’t want to waste people’s time or look indecisive. However, I find that lack of 100% clarity often becomes excuse number one for not getting out and talking to people. The irony is that only through an iterative process of narrowing down, speaking with people, and then further refining, do clients really zero in on what makes the most sense in their next chapter. It is fine to say that you are in exploration mode, but narrow it to two

or three things you are most interested in pursuing that you can speak about in conversation. “I have no idea” is not acceptable.

**Your network is everything.**

**Create a relaunching plan for yourself with specific and measurable objectives** that will keep you on track during your exploration and job search. Most people benefit from a structured plan and reach their goals much faster. Consider a self-assessment tool. I recommend several possible assessments including StrengthsFinder 2.0, Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), Strong Interest Inventory and CareerLeader. Many clients find the insight and applicable strategies from their assessment results very valuable.

**Build a strong support system.** To maintain a laser focus on your goals and to hold you accountable as you move forward, I strongly recommend enlisting an “accountability partner”. That can be a trained coach or a dedicated friend, mentor or family member who will commit time to your progress. When life gets busy and overwhelming, remember that you do not need to do this alone. Also, stay in the conversation with like-minded people. Change is hard, and it is not always clear who will be most supportive when starting a relaunch process. Seek out others who relate to your path of exploration and find a way to stay in regular contact. Several of my past coaching circles continue to meet on their own to this day, so please consider finding ways to keep the group in contact with each other.

*Ann Blinkhorn, a graduate of Harvard Business School, founded an executive recruiting firm, Blinkhorn, L.L.C., in 2009 after working for seven years as a leading executive recruiter at Spencer Stuart. She has led searches for chief-executive officer roles and other senior-level positions for a diverse range of clients including Comcast, Discovery Communications, Microsoft, Dow Jones, MTV Networks, PBS and Huffington Post, among others.*

**Find your passion.** If it isn't in an area where you have prior work experience, consider executive education or an advanced degree to gain background and skills. Pursue consulting or advisory board work in your chosen field to further bolster credibility.

**Leverage your network.** Re-connect with colleagues and former classmates who know your capabilities. Meet for informational interviews. Use informational interviews as a way to learn about possible job leads.

**Do your homework.** Get up to speed quickly by understanding current industry trends. Conduct research on companies/organizations that are “best in class” in your chosen field. Read relevant industry and thought leader blogs.

**Manage your “brand” online and offline.** Make sure your social media profiles on LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, etc. are up to date and consistent. Build a resume that provides more detail than your LinkedIn profile.

**Find balance.** Structure child-care and other household support systems to provide you with required flexibility. Be realistic about time commitments, and don’t place the burden of figuring out scheduling on prospective employers.

*Carol Fishman Cohen and Vivian Steir Rabin are the founders of iRelaunch. They answered questions from New York Times readers on The Motherlode blog. Here are some additional tips they shared to help cover the major challenges and questions around returning to work after a break.*

**Managing the “years out” on a resume and in interviews:** You should not leave any time period unaccounted for on your resume. Include volunteer work experiences and describe accomplishments as you would any job. For example, “managed a team of 10 volunteers in running charity auction that netted local public high school 10% more than in prior year.” If the volunteer work is directly related to your career goals, then call the initial section of your resume “Experience” and list it in chronological order, side by side with your paid prior work experience. If the volunteer work is not directly related, you may want to list it in a section below your work experience, perhaps calling it “Community Experience” or “Other Relevant Experience,” so that your prior work experience is at the top of your resume, rather than further down.

If you did not do much in the way of volunteer work or consulting you should just put: 2006 — 2012 Career Break: Took time out of the workforce to care for young children.” Remember that, ideally, your resume will be the second point of contact a hiring manager has with you. The first will be via a networking contact. So it is likely the person will know you took a career break prior to seeing your resume.

Don’t be afraid to “own up” to how you spent your time. This is especially true in interviews. If someone asks you what you did between X and Y years, just

state matter-of-factly, unapologetically, that “I took some time off to take care of my children (or my father), and now I can’t wait to get back to work. I think I am well suited for this particular position because of the experience I had in x job and y volunteer work where I faced similar customer challenges.”

### **How to manage potential employers who consider you**

**“overqualified for this job.”** Here’s your answer: “One of my top priorities is to deliver excellent results to my employer, while also managing the rest of my life outside of work. So while it might look to you like I am overqualified for this position, this level is exactly where I want to be in my current life stage, and I intentionally sought it out. I feel confident I can deliver excellent results to you at this level of seniority.”

**Return to previous job roles or consider new paths. Should people try to go back to what they did before?** Not necessarily. We recommend that anyone who has been out of work for a long time do a self-assessment to figure out whether their skills and interests have changed. We’ve developed a tool to help you do this called “The Job Building Blocks Worksheet”. You can read more about it in our book, “Back on the Career Track”, which is available at many public libraries or on Amazon. What we found when people go through this exercise is that about a third of people are interested in returning to exactly what they did before, about a third are interested in using their old professional skills, but taking them in a different direction (for example an investment banker becoming CFO of an independent school), and about a third are interested in relaunching in an entirely new field or function, often based on some sort of experience during their career break. (For example, a former currency expert with a special needs child becoming an advocate for special needs children at a nonprofit dedicated to this cause.)

Ms. Cohen and Ms. Rabin have put together a detailed list of university, continuing education and company programs. Here is a sampling of programs from their list:

**HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL**, Executive Education, “A New Path, Setting New Professional Directions.”

**ONRAMP FELLOWSHIP:** A one-year paid training contract for women lawyers.

JPMORGAN'S return-to-work program. For more information, email:  
AM.ReEntry@jpmorgan.com

**MORGAN STANLEY'S** return to work program.

**AMERICAN UNIVERSITY** Washington College of Law, lawyer re-entry program

**DREXEL UNIVERSITY MEDICAL SCHOOL** physician refresher course  
(\$20,000)

**CREDIT SUISSE** Eight- to 10-week paid job program beginning March 31:

**GOLDMAN SACHS** "returnship" program

**PACE LAW SCHOOL**, New Directions for Attorneys