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GETTING BACK TO WORK

Expert advice for women in transition

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As their children grow up and leave home, many working women who took time off for family begin to think about restarting a career. At a panel moderated by journalist Cheryl Strauss Einhorn March 31 at the JCC of Mid-Westchester, two executive coaches and a financial expert met with a few dozen women to discuss what it takes to ramp up after a voluntary break. The Inquirer interviewed the experts for their advice on getting back into the workplace.

Women in transition tend to go through two stages. First they need to define what they want to do and question whether they want to return to their prior career or try something new. Those questions can be daunting. Perhaps they never really liked being a lawyer to begin with. Or maybe they had a career but they don't want to go back because it was too intense.

"To me it's an exciting question," said Arjan Eenkema van Dijk, president of InspireShift, an executive and personal coaching consultant. "It's a time to explore who you are and what makes you tick. If you don't know where you are going, you will never get there."

The next phase is working to land the job, which van Dijk views as a marketing question. "What I see happen a lot of times is people think about obstacles. They need to get rid of the mental models of why things might not work." She prescribes a "possibilitarian" attitude. "Think about what is possible instead of what is difficult."

She tells her clients to focus on five C's:



LIAT ALTMAN PHOTO

Arjan Eenkema van Dijk, Michelle Friedman and Cindy Golub, with moderator Cheryl Strauss Einhorn, left, advise women at a JCC panel discussion about how to restart a career after a voluntary break.

Cultivate a mindset of success with a solutions-oriented approach.

Clarity. Define your ideal situation. If you know who you are, your strengths, and what you want, it becomes easier to market yourself. What are your values and interests? What do you want for your job content and company culture? You may love the job but may not like the boss or the culture of the company. Untangle the content from the culture. A career coach can help clients define their strengths by administering assessments as well.

Creativity. Think outside of the box. Peel away the layers to find what it is you like about your profession. Apply what you were good at in the old job into the new job. A former plastic surgeon, for example, might choose not to return to the medical field, deciding instead to

work as a sculptor. Sometimes this type of change requires additional education.

Connections. Engage with people around you to help you think out of the box. Connecting is more than "networking." It's about building relationships so that at any given time you can call someone and they can do the same.

"When people get together things happen," van Dijk said. "Our friends can sometimes see us clearer than we can see ourselves. Connections are everywhere: look to your past and in groups you are involved with now. Although you might feel uncomfortable, if think about it, you have three to five things in common with anyone."

Begin to think about connections from a career perspective: What are the connections you have and what are the companies you want to work for?

Look on LinkedIn for people who are two steps away from where you want to be.

Create an action plan. Action leads to reaction. If you do all kinds of thinking, but you are not acting, no one is going to knock on your door. Put your fear on the table and understand what your fears are. Often your fears are not justified. If you feel uncomfortable about going out there, think about what would make you feel more comfortable. Get yourself to feel safe, and think in a solutions-oriented way. Then begin the process of going on an interview and landing a job.

Marketing yourself

Women tend to undersell themselves. They shouldn't focus on their work gaps, but focus on what they bring to the table, said van Dijk. People develop and use many skills as volunteers, such as fundraising or managing charity events, and as mothers, who are constantly organizing, multitasking and decision-making.

Preparation is essential. Read a job description and ask yourself if you fill the requirements and have the necessary skills. During a job interview, it's important to hear what the needs of the company are and have your story ready to make yourself come to life. The employer needs to know if you can do the job and can do it better than another applicant.

It's also about chemistry. "Do we want to play in the sandbox with you? Will you solve problems or create problems? Applicants should speak in a posi-

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tive, can-do manner and move the conversation forward,” said van Dijk.

After a 15-year career at Goldman Sachs, Cindy Golub, principal at G-Squared Advisory became a certified financial planner. She can relate well to women in transition: she had three kids in two years; after the first two she decided it was easier to be at work than at home; the third child put her over the edge and she chose to stay at home to raise her family.

To stay intellectually challenged, she volunteered to run a capital campaign for an endowment. She had experience to handle complex financial matter but many of her peers did not. She took her volunteer work seriously.

As her kids got older, she wanted to re-enter the workforce but didn't want to return to Wall Street. She said flexibility was important to her. As she began talking to people and thinking about what she likes to do, she discovered certified financial planning. She took classes to get certified, decided to partner with a woman she knew from her days as a volunteer who had a similar background in finance.

“I knew there were money managers and CFAs, but I didn't know I could do what I am doing now,” she said.

Now in business for six years, she combines what she did on Wall Street with helping people. She continues to wear her volunteer hat as chairman of the women's campaign for UJA New York. “I have two 3/4 jobs now; every week is different.”

Her advice is to think of the characteristics of what you like to do and then figure out your options by talking to people. “Network at your kids' soccer

game; talk to the other parents, invite them to get coffee and pick their brains. There are lots of very talented men and women in this community,” she said.

She also said career-transitioning might entail working unpaid at first. As financial planners, she and her partner couldn't charge for services until they completed their licensing. Working for free got them started. “In school we learned the basics; helping 50 people, we got experience.”

Sometimes a job offer will ensue. “Working without pay gives them a chance to check you out and you to check them out.”

When one woman at the JCC event started crying because she had recently left her job and felt her identity was lost, Golub encouraged her to find things that interest her and make her feel useful. She understands women are fearful of this transition. “I tell them it's a great chance to explore who you want to be. It's another chapter. Just because they had a certain career years ago, it's never too late to make a change.”

Activate your network

Scarsdale resident Michelle Friedman of Advancing Women's Careers, an executive and organizational coach, advises women as they start the process of returning to work. She agreed with the others on the importance of making connections to further a relaunch.

“People get hung up on the word ‘networking’ and get scared away. But it's just about relationships.” She encourages women to rely on the “coaches” in their lives: spouses, friends, people they feel safe with and know well. “It's like looking in a mirror; they can give you feedback, and then you can move out from that inner circle

to talk with other people.”

She noted that many times a skill set or opportunity — or something you might be good at — is right under your nose, but you have to hear it from someone else before you realize it.

She doesn't recommend just going online to look up job listings and sending a résumé into the Ethernet. “That goes nowhere,” she said. “Very few people will get a job that way because their résumé or work history is not typical so it gets bounced” by online screening programs. “People who know you well can vouch for your intelligence and your ability in a way your résumé wouldn't.”

Women in transition need to self-assess, but more importantly, to start working, get up to speed and prove what they're worth. “Keep an open mind about compensation, and take less if it will help you get a foot in the door,” she said. Eventually, “you can look at earning potential going forward. Recognize there's a learning curve or ramping back up, and then think in market terms. If you do your homework you can figure out where to peg yourself.”

Friedman also advises women who might not yet have left a full-time job but are thinking of scaling back. “Women who don't want to fully hit the pause button could work on a project basis,” she noted. “There are plenty of people who have navigated a middle ground and have proven techniques” for this alternative.

Families in transition

Disrupting or neglecting their family can be one of the biggest fears for women going back to work. Friedman knows from her own experience there will be bumps, “but it's irrational to think the kids are going

to be scarred for life if you're not there for them,” she said. “Actually the opposite is true.”

Some women choose to restart their career when they begin to feel they are too available and do too much for their kids. “Sometimes it can feel like you are working for your kids. You realize being there all the time is not enabling them to grow.”

A working mother can be a good role model to show kids that they can do many things and not be stuck in one role. “Your kids will say they are proud of you,” Friedman observed. That being said, a stay-at-home mother's résumé as Household CEO means she needs to decide what she will keep from that experience and what she will reallocate as she goes into the workforce.

Friedman uses an acronym ADD: Automate, Delegate, Delete/defer.

Automate: Instead of going all over town to shop for items each day, consolidate your list and order it all online from home on the weekend.

Delegate: Enlist your spouse or hire someone else to accomplish what you no longer have time to do.

Delete: Some things will get deleted from your plate, such as volunteer work. Consider halting or deferring projects on while you transition into work and create a new normal.

With the help of connections and career coaches, women don't have to figure it out on their own, in a vacuum. Friedman told the women in the audience to check out The iRelaunch Return to Work Conference (www.iRelaunch.com) at Columbia University Thursday, Oct. 1, a place to meet return-to-work experts and connect with hundreds of other men and women in career transition.