

Job Search After Being Out of the Workforce

by Jan Cannon

If you've been a stay-at-home mom, cared for a sick family member or just took time off (voluntarily or otherwise) getting back on the job search path may be a challenge. Here are some suggestions to make the transition easier.

Your Professional Network

As important and rewarding as the time at home may be, it comes at a steep price: In addition to the income lost during the nonworking years, female professionals who take three or more years off earn 37 percent less on average than women who haven't taken time off, according to a study by the Center for Work-Life Policy.

Unless you've been unusually diligent about staying in touch with former colleagues, you probably don't have a professional network to provide you with valuable job leads. Your job skills, no doubt, are rusty. You'll have to fight the perception that you're less committed to your career than peers who haven't taken a time-out. And you'll have to overcome your own self-doubts as well.

Make a hard-nosed assessment of what you want out of a job and what you have to offer. Be honest about your priorities; don't, for example, tell yourself you'd be happy with any stimulating job, only to decide, once an offer comes in, that a 75 percent pay cut is too high a price to pay for work you love.

If you want a workday short enough for you to drop off your kids at school in the morning and greet them in the afternoon, you have a lot fewer choices than if you'll settle for the usual 9-to-5 grind. So focus your job search by considering the trade-offs you're willing to make.

You'll also need to update your skills and catch up on changes in your industry since you last worked. Take a class to become familiar with the computer technology currently used in your field. Update certifications and licenses if your profession requires them. Follow industry developments by subscribing to trade journals, reading online blogs by industry insiders and signing up for [Google news alerts](#) keyed to important industry issues.

In short, do what's necessary to make your years out of the work force invisible to interviewers.

When updating your resume, however, you can include relevant volunteer work. If you raised thousands in a charity fund raiser (speaks to your marketing skills) or helped kids publish a yearbook (establishes your project management skills), list those achievements -- just be sure to clarify how the experience is applicable to work.

Dial into a network

In a perfect world, you'd have stayed in contact with all the people you knew in your old work life. But if you haven't, get reacquainted now. Attend meetings of local professional organizations, and don't be shy about introducing yourself to other members.

Don't confine your networking to official business situations either. Mary Tousle, 45,

last year landed work as a recruiter after four years at home with her kids; the introduction that led to that job arose from a conversation she had with a friend from church who also belongs to her garden club.

Get your house in order

Your top priority must be to line up child care. Until you know who will look after your kids and on what schedule, you won't know what jobs you can take.

Nothing dampens an interviewer's enthusiasm faster than when they ask, "How soon can you start?" and you reply, "Um, depends on how quickly I can get a sitter."

Prepare your family to pitch in more around the house as well. Your kids may have to find another chauffeur, and your spouse will have to change routines.

Crunch the numbers

It costs money to make money. Going back to work may entail child-care costs, transportation expenses and, in all likelihood, increased spending on takeout food as well as a back-to-business wardrobe. Don't forget taxes. A second paycheck in the house will probably be taxed at a higher rate than a solo wage earner's.

But even if your net pay amounts to just a few cents on the dollar, the long-term benefits may more than justify returning to work. A good job now, after all, may lead to a better job later, while enabling you to build retirement savings.

Then too, the longer you stay out of the work force, the harder it may be to return.

"People tend to focus on the immediate cash-flow issues, but the long-term financial consequences should be an equally relevant consideration," says Kristin Maschka, president of the nonprofit Mothers & More.

Roll with the punches

If your job search doesn't yield results, change your tactics -- or expectations. Accept that you're unlikely to return to work at your old salary. And consider taking a less than perfect job now that could lead to a better one later.

Catherine Workman, 41, a former fuel-oil marketer from Pound Ridge, N.Y., found that out when she tried unsuccessfully to return to the oil industry after six years at home with her two kids.

After a year with no luck, she settled for a part-time job assembling marketing documents for an auditing firm -- a job she wasn't keenly interested in. But last October, that job led to a new position that suits her perfectly: working as a business analyst at the same firm.

Workman's advice to other returning parents? "Persevere and keep looking."

Which is just what Julie Printz plans to do. "I'm thrilled with the experience I've had at home," says Printz. "But I'm anxious to get going again on the career."

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