

Career *Break* People

Career Breaks – A Guide

Career breaks are often treated with a degree of suspicion. The “CV Gap” mentality of many employers and society in general has traditionally hallmarked those on career breaks as lazy or unworthy. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth and finally there are now signs that in 2018 career breaks are being valued in the workplace.

People take career breaks for different reasons; generally they are taken for family responsibilities or for health reasons, but they also include time to consider a change in direction. Harvard Business Review cites that in the US in 2005 – yes, a while ago now - 43% of highly-qualified women with children were opting to take career breaks, an additional 24% were doing so to care for elderly relatives and 9% had taken breaks for personal health issues. It is interesting to compare these statistics with only 24% of men taking career breaks with reasons such as switching careers or obtaining additional training; significantly fewer men than women were leaving work to start a business or care for family.

The need for businesses to appreciate the balance of skills gained whilst on career breaks is becoming more important. Life today is far less uniform, with employees stepping in and out of the workplace more often. Millennials (aged 18-30) are more likely to take a break than their mothers.

Making the decision to take a break

You may be feeling nervous about taking a break. Rest assured you are not alone – a 2014 survey by the London Business School found that 70% of women fear taking a break and going into the unknown away from the world of paid work. For many, it represents a shift in status, identity and control. A key factor may be the change in your financial situation and it is well worth seeking advice from a financial adviser to help you plan for a career break. There are several who specialise in female clients.

The key to a successful break is being prepared.

If you are taking a break to have children, you may find several practical and emotional hurdles in your path. The first is discussions about maternity leave with your employer. At this point it may be wise not to commit to return-to-work timing – you may have great intentions to return within weeks, but babies can be a huge emotional pull and you may find that your attitude changes. That said, discussing a long break can put employers off and you may lose maternity benefits as a result.

A few tips:

- Make sure your CV is up to date before you leave. Depending on how long you have been in your job, you may not have written one for years. Having a current CV on file will help when you are ready to return to work.
- Put together a summary of your achievements to date: day to day responsibilities, projects, their outcomes and your specific role in each. Whilst fresh in your mind now, these may be harder to recall in the future.



- Have you nearly finished a professional qualification? Or are you about to? Try to complete it before you start your break ... eg chartership/accountancy exams.
- Update your LinkedIn page. It's perfectly respectable to refer to your career break and why you are taking it. It's also a great way to maintain your professional identity.
- Update any professional membership subscription rates to reflect the fact that you are on a career break (often this can only be done for a limited period of time).

The second key to a successful career break is to maintain your inner confidence. This can be achieved in a number of ways:

1. Think about your own identity and stay true to yourself.

The modern world defines us by our position in the workplace. This can be “lost” with a career break and we have to work hard to discover our own identity again – though in the case of parents, this can be absorbed by the child. You do not become any less capable just because you are no longer in paid work. Have confidence in your decision about your break from paid work, even if everyone else seems to be doing the opposite – remember, what is right for you may not be right for the next person. 80% of women aged 25-54 are in employment, but nevertheless there are 1.9m women on career breaks so, although in a minority, you are not alone and the numbers on a career break are up 6% from 1999.

2. Remember that your choice to take a break is valuable.

There are also lots of advantages to taking a break that you may not have considered. Your break from the (paid) workplace will not only benefit your family, it also benefits the country - the pressure for people to return to work because of the loss to GDP is the justification for childcare vouchers. You will contribute hugely in multiple ways through caring, volunteering, school and community support etc ... next time you read a headline about loneliness or loss of community life, just think about what people on career breaks do to help this.

3. Taking a career break is an equivalent decision to staying at work.

Whether you consider staying at work or taking a break, you are making a significant and life-changing decision. Either is as important in the general scheme of things to the other. If you need affirmation for taking a break, “Being There: Why Prioritising Motherhood in the First Three Years matters.” by Erica Komisar an excellent read and promotes the many advantages staying at home to bring up children over going back to work.

4. Make local friends and see them regularly

There are apps to help such as MushMums and MummyLinks. Try not to become isolated or live your life online too much – nothing beats face to face interaction. If your break doesn't include young children, find other activities and societies that will involve meeting new people.

5. Prioritise some “you time”

At CareerBreak People (www.careerbreakpeople.com) we offer a Personal Skills Log which can help you identify and keep track of all the skills you develop whilst away from the workplace; we can provide personal guidance throughout as well. Our advice is to prioritise some “you” time to keep your mind active; read journals related to your business, attend local networking events (often free and becoming more commonplace). You can feel isolated on a break, so try to combine your educational time with meeting other people. The *Pondero*, Pilates for the Mind, talks series held termly in Twyford, has been designed to help with this, and the CPD certificates at the end of each series can be added to your skills log (www.pondero.co.uk). Although it may seem a while away, take time, perhaps once a year, to review and update your CV or complete CPD (perhaps a requirement of your qualifications).



Returning to work after a break

There is no “right” length of career break; and often uncontrollable circumstances dictate when a return to work is needed. It can take a reasonable amount of time to work out what you want to do after a career break and it’s worth taking time to explore all the options.

Treat returning as a project in itself: set a budget, allocate time in the day, do your research, go out and meet people (at an event set a target to meet at least 5 new people).

Ask yourself some of these questions:

- Do you want to return full or part time? Perhaps you are already working part-time, but now want to embark again on a full-time career.
- Do you want to re-train? Do you want to become an entrepreneur?
- Do you want to travel? Can you work long hours?
- How far are you willing to commute?
- What kind of childcare should you consider?

Thanks to shifting attitudes and a greater acceptance among employers to embrace returners, there are now several variables, which you may want to consider. These are outlined below:

Returnships

Many companies are now offering returnships (a paid short-term employment contract, with a view to supporting an individual when they return to work - and sometimes offer full-time work thereafter). Employers are becoming more receptive to people returning after breaks from the workplace and are recognising the value of skills they have gained whilst away. Remember that you will have developed your people and time management skills to a level beyond what many industry training courses can offer! Finding a role in a returnship scheme may help the process and you will find yourself in a group of like-minded people.

Flexi-time & home-working

There is a lot of support for flexible working and there are recruitment agencies that specialise in this such as www.ten2two.org and www.capabilityjane.com.

Working from home has become increasingly popular and many companies will now let you do this, often with a few days in the office as well. There has been a growing trend of starting up a company whilst on maternity leave but do read about the impact of being on a screen around babies and young children, as this can be detrimental to their wellbeing. Have confidence, there will always be time later – and getting it right in the first three years of your child’s life, will pay dividends in their teenage years. Remember that “having it all” means “having it all, but not all of the time”.

Technology

With the speed of advancement of technology, the nature of jobs is continually changing. 85% of jobs that will exist in 2030 haven’t been created yet. So, keep flexible! Do not be put off if you have been away from technology for a while, these skills can be learnt. Accenture has identified that having a strong digital pathway is a huge help and their recommendation for returners includes:

- 1) having digital fluency (using digital technologies to connect, work and learn)
- 2) having a career strategy (making informed choices and proactively managing careers) and



3) immersing yourself in tech (acquiring greater technology and stronger digital skills).

What to wear

After some time away just working out the outfit to help you through your first interview can seem daunting. There is an amazing organisation – Smart Works (www.smartworks.org.uk) - not only do they help you choose your return to work outfit, but they actually give it you to keep (it's often designer) and provide help with interview skills and practice.

When you get the new job – congratulations! Keep your confidence up: remember you were hired for your skills and potential which have been greatly enhanced by a break from (paid) work. Above all, keep sight of your aspirations.

Are you about to take a break, on a career break or thinking of returning to the workplace? CareerBreak People holds regular networking meetings, “Focus-Accelerate-Succeed” workshops for entrepreneurs and “Your Return to Work” workshops see www.careerbreakpeople.co.uk/workshops/ for details.