

Beep-Beep, I am Trying to On-Ramp: Women Returning to the Workforce

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While both women and men can choose to leave work for a while and focus on other areas of their lives, this is more prevalent among women (Mainiero & Sullivan 2005). Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) have discovered that women's career histories seem to be more relational in nature; women seem to make decisions about their career choices after they have considered the impact that their decisions will have on other people in their own lives. Some examples of why women decide to off-ramp or step-out include the desire to meet family needs, such as caring for an elderly parent, extended maternity leave, childcare responsibilities, and even relocation due to a spouse's job transfer.

Women that have chosen to off-ramp or take a break from their career path find on-ramping back into the workforce quite challenging. Cabrera (2007) suggests that two of these perceived barriers were the difficulty of explaining long periods of unemployment and a lack of respect for women who have taken time off from their careers. Other barriers include the lack of job skills, low networking possibilities, and low self-esteem. Cabrera (2007) discovered that women might be able to reduce some of these barriers by starting the planning for re-entry into the workforce the day that they step-out.

Research suggests that during a break from a career it is vitally important for a woman to stay well connected with others (especially with other women) and to continue to enhance her education by taking advantage of learning opportunities, attending seminars and training, or going back to school (Eby, Butts, Lockwood, 2003;

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Cabera, 2006). Mentoring is one such way for women to stay connected with other women.

"Mentoring relationships in which women are mentored by other women provide the mentees with both psychosocial and career development benefits. Mentoring relationships in which women are mentored by men are more often based on career development, lack of relational component important to many women, and fail to provide role models with which women can identify." (Schwiebert et al., pg. 251,1999)

In addition, re-entry programs designed uniquely for women are very much needed (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). These programs serve an important purpose by helping to build a woman's eroded confidence, and provide them with much needed career counseling, skill set matches, and job training.

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Women's return to the workforce is often more than just a return to their previous careers; it is a redirection. In a study conducted by Lovejoy and

Stone (2011), 54 at-home mothers were interviewed to find out why most of them tended to redirect into different career paths after stepping-out of their previous careers for a period of time. The majority of the women in the study reported that they now desire a career that would combine both motherhood and work. Moreover, due to a lack of flexibility in their previous jobs, “only a handful of women planned to return to their previous employers” (Lovejoy & Stone, pg. 639, 2011). Half of the women that were interviewed stated that they intended to start a new occupation and leave their former professions all together. Findings of this study showed that during their career hiatus these women became more involved in female-dominated professions like teaching; this was due to their involvement in their children’s schools and volunteer work (Lovejoy & Stone, 2011). One of the moms in the study elaborated about her shift in careers:

“Former lawyer Maeve Turner’s involvement in her children’s progressive school fostered her interest in getting a master’s degree in early childhood education, which she saw as a way out of the legal profession to which she was no longer committed: ‘My soul isn’t in it anymore. I don’t feel identified with it. It’s just not who I am anymore.’” (Lovejoy & Stone, pg. 644, 2011)

Maeve Turner’s excerpt displays the reality of many highly educated women returners that desire to redirect into a different career before they step back into the workforce after a break.

Help along the way. One valuable way to facilitate women’s return to a career could be a Woman’s Career Re-entry Center on a college campus. The use of female mentors or “Career

Coaches” within a Woman’s Career Re-entry Center would be an invaluable tool that would help to motivate, encourage, and re-direct women returners. It could be a place to find much needed skill development, education, confidence, networking, as well as mentoring. On a macro-level, the community as a whole could indeed benefit from having a larger pool of women returners with improved confidence and updated skills who are ready to enter well-respected organizations (Greer, 2013).

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