



LEAN BACK IN

How do you return to work after a career break? Cyan Turan spoke to experts, hiring managers and women who've done it to find out

Out of date, out of touch and low value – that's often how employers see women who want to return to work after a career break, according to Dominic Moss, founder of search firm The Return Hub.

That assumption, though, couldn't be more wrong, which is why Moss is on a mission to redefine 'returners', and help the 427,000 women who want to return to work to do so. Even though 88% of women say they learnt transferable skills while on a break, leaning 'back' in is no easy task. Why? Perhaps it's because employers don't yet view these skills (or the way they were acquired) as valuable – a myth Moss is keen to dismantle.

There's also the issue that recruitment systems tend to be rigged against women returners. 'The recruitment market doesn't know what to do with returners,' explains Moss. 'In lower salary brackets, three agencies will compete to fill a role, and they want easy-to-find, low-risk candidates. A career breaker with a 'wonky' CV isn't that person. Without a recruiter, an HR algorithm will whittle down hundreds of applications; if you have a gap on your CV, you'll be filtered out.' She adds: 'Unless you understand these hurdles, you

can think you're the problem, but actually it's the system letting you down. Once I speak to employers about my returners, they say: "Can she come in tomorrow?"

'Returnships' – internships for returners – were seen as a silver bullet but Moss offers a word of caution: 'Many returners are desk-ready and should be included as part of a normal hiring process.' A better model, she says, is a fixed-period return-to-work programme, with a definite role to move into. And tempting though it may be, she says, 'Don't go into a role below your previous level; your confidence will return in a couple of weeks but it'll be difficult to jump up.'

So how does a woman with a gap on her CV cut through? 'Get back in touch with your network,' says Moss, but don't ask for a job. 'Instead, say: "What keeps people awake at night in this sector?" It's about getting back in touch in a way that doesn't feel awkward.' Read the trade press, follow key people on Twitter and think about updating professional qualifications. Get your CV in order. Moss admits a job search is a job in itself. 'We all have moments of self-doubt. But what distinguishes the women I see from those I don't is courage. They've tuned out of the negative voice and into the one that says, "What have you got to lose?"'

MEET THE WOMEN WHO'VE DONE IT



Geri McMahon
INVESTMENT CONSULTANT, AON

'After eight years in investment banking, I joined a health start-up in 2014. I ended up running it, and also had a little boy. I enjoyed it, but financial markets have always been my interest. The returning process, however, wasn't smooth; I applied for jobs without success and spent several months trying to engage with recruiters who weren't sure where they could place me due to the "gap" in my CV. Dominic helped sharpen my CV and suggested roles I thought I wasn't qualified for. One was as an investment consultant; advising pension schemes on their asset and liability management at Aon. I got the job in April 2018. It's been hard work but I have support and sponsorship. Don't be put off by roles you don't think you're qualified for. It's a great opportunity to reposition your career.'



Kemi Lawson
MANAGER, EY

'After a career in investment banking and accountancy, I took a five-year break to bring up my two daughters. I changed a lot of nappies but also took on consulting work through friends and contacts, who I'd told I would be available for ad hoc projects. Two and a half years ago, I wanted to kickstart my career again. I was keen to become financially independent and thought it would be good for my daughters to see me working "like daddy". I felt that going down the traditional route of looking for a job wouldn't suit me, since there was a gap in my CV. EY's 12-week Reconnect programme gave me the chance to dip my toe back into client work and when it finished they offered me a full-time role. Now, poring over spreadsheets with a coffee on a Monday is a pleasure after a hectic weekend. Flexible working means I can take the whole of August off to look after my girls and colleagues say seeing me work flexibly gives them the confidence to know they could do the same.'



Narister Oliveira
BUSINESS ANALYST, BBC

'For two decades I worked in IT in Brazil, then I took a career break to raise my children and support my parents. After two years, I started a business in digital marketing, but left to move to Europe. I'd been out of the workforce for eight years but I could see there was demand for IT professionals in the UK, so started sending out CVs. I got an opportunity to join a returner programme with FDM Group – a professional services provider with a focus on IT. I was successful and got some interviews at FDM clients but didn't have the requisite financial business knowledge. I kept looking for jobs and after an interview for the BBC Career Returners Programme was offered a position as a business analyst in the tech arm of the BBC. I started in January and am excited to be back, using my background and improving my skills.'



Oluyemisi 'Yemi' Morgan-Raiwe

STRATEGIC PROGRAMME MANAGER, ENFIELD COUNCIL

'My last role as a skills and employment manager ended in 2012 and I decided to try something different. I focused on foster caring, became a board member of a local NHS Trust and helped set up an organic food manufacturer, but I missed the energy of the workplace. I started to look for work in late 2015, but three years out of the "formal" workforce meant my CV had a gap and I had a sinking feeling I wasn't being taken seriously. After a year, I'd applied for 20-plus roles and been interviewed once; before my career break, I got one interview for every three applications. I was over 50, low in confidence and concerned my best days were behind me. I came across the Career Returners @ Enfield Council programme in my local paper and was surprised when I was asked to interview, then offered a post as a programme manager. The council's returnship programme offers retraining programmes and I was given one-to-one mentoring with a senior executive. After four months, I applied for a permanent job and I'm now a strategic programme manager. The Women Returners Professional Network and the Enfield Council programme were invaluable and I'd highly recommend returner programmes. They help build up your confidence and adjust to the new realities of the workplace.'



Liz Littlechild

PARTNER AT HEADHUNTING CONSULTANCY SESAME

'I took voluntary redundancy from my job at a PR agency and planned to take a six-month break, but six weeks in I found out I was expecting twins. When my twins were eight months old, I fell pregnant again. Six months quickly turned into a three-year sabbatical. After that, I realised I needed something that would

allow me to use my brain in a different way – the old way. I spoke with my old PR and working-mum friends. Everyone was encouraging about returning to PR agency life, but they reminded me about the long hours, client dinners and weekend working. Agencies talked about the possibility of a four-day week, but with no guarantees and not until after my probation. The caveats rang alarm bells. A friend had recently set up Sesame, a PR headhunting consultancy, which offered flexible working. When she asked if I'd like to do three days a week, I jumped at the chance. I assumed the hardest thing about returning might be finding childcare or the fear of leaving my children, but it was self-doubt – could I retain information like I used to? Talk to clients like a normal person? Would people understand I might keep irregular hours when my child was sick? Now, 10 months in, I'm finding my feet again and encourage PR clients to see the benefit of candidates looking for flexible working. Being back at work doesn't always run smoothly – I'd like to gloss over some days – but my family and I are getting into the swing of things. If you can, work with someone who understands what it's like to return to work and will negotiate the package you need to be your best at work and home. An older, female relative told me there's never an ideal time to go back to work (much like having a baby) so if it feels 75/80% right, go for it!

READY TO RETURN?

Natasha Holland, EY's HR Director, has recruited women who've had a career break. If you're considering a return to work but are unsure where to start, here's her advice...

BE CONFIDENT ABOUT YOUR CAREER BREAK

Employers are looking for transferable skills and the diversity of perspective you will bring to the workplace. Talk about activities you've undertaken during your break, such as charity work or volunteering.

RESEARCH IN-DEMAND SKILLS

Whether your career break has been two years or 10, familiarise yourself with new workplace tools, such as LinkedIn, Slack and Skype.

BE HONEST ABOUT YOUR WORKING PREFERENCES

Employers will consider all sorts of flexible working options, from reduced hours to job-shares and working from home. Do some research into companies who are actively advertising their commitment to flexibility and be honest about your needs from the start.

HONE YOUR ELEVATOR PITCH

Be clear on the reasons you want to go back to work and what you want to achieve in the next step of your career. This will help you to confidently articulate your goals in an interview.

YOUR CV DOESN'T HAVE TO BE PERFECT

It should be an authentic representation of what you will bring to a role. Include all the skills you have honed during your time out, such as budgeting, delegation or project management. Include anything you have done that shows you value lifelong learning.

For more advice on returning to work after a career break, visit [The Return Hub \(thereturnhub.com\)](http://TheReturnHub.com) or [Women Returners \(womenreturners.com\)](http://WomenReturners.com)