

Grad Guide 2007

Comeback Time: What Will a Family Do to Your Career?

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Special to washingtonpost.com
Thursday, April 19, 2007; 10:54 AM

Starting a family may be a few years away for many in the college class of 2007. But career and family issues are likely to come up for many women at some point during their professional careers or graduate school, so it's never too early to plan ahead -- especially if you're a woman considering taking time off to raise children.

Is it possible? Yes, especially as more employers look for ways to hold onto valued workers by offering new accommodations and arrangements. But a dose of hard reality is worth taking, too.

While lots of people will likely tell you to watch out for the effects time away can have on your earning power and your standing in the workplace -- too many employers still make damaging assumptions about the interests and capabilities of working mothers -- there's more to the story.

In this article, I'll share the experiences of women who left careers to raise children before returning to work -- and who coped with change, both within their organizations and themselves -- differently while staying connected to their fields even while not showing up to the office each morning.

Their tales might help you find ways to keep your career moving forward even after you step aside.

Coping With Change

Mara Murphy, a litigator at Williams & Connolly L.L.P., did everything she could to remain in the workplace. She had her first child at 28 and her second at 30, then shifted to part-time at the law firm after maternity leaves. She later spent a year working full time as senior counsel for America Online Inc., becoming a stay-at-home mom only when her young son was diagnosed with diabetes.

"I didn't know if I'd be staying home permanently," Murphy recalls, "but I knew it was right to stop, because he needed me." She had a third child and then returned to Williams & Connolly part time two months ago. "Per my request," she says, "I am on the non-partner track -- at least until my youngest enters kindergarten."

Murphy's experience highlights one way in which a mother returning to work might expect her role to change in some -- if not many -- ways. However, the likelihood of returning to the same position in one's old corporation or small company after an extended hiatus is small.

Sometimes that is driven by the evolving nature of business and the effects of mergers, acquisitions, bankruptcies and other events. Other times, the role remains but in a different form -- you may find yourself marketing new products or services to a completely new customer base.

Finally, you may also be subject to change -- as the story of Christina Hendricks, president of DCmom.com, a Web site highlighting shopping deals and activities for mothers and children, illustrates.

Hendricks had opened offices all over the world for insurer American International Group Inc. as vice president of administration. "It was fantastic, exciting, wonderful," she says. She had two children while working, cut her work back, and stayed home after her third child was born. After a few months of being home full time, she says, "It was not working that well. I wanted to be more active mentally and physically."

She began researching new ways to shape her life and work -- what Washington-based authors Diana Holman and Ginger Pape referred to in their book "Repotting: 10 Steps For Redesigning Your Life" (Hay House, 2007). (Repotting is their term for reshaping your landscape when you sense that your feet are planted in the wrong place.)

"I realized I was a mother with three young children who liked doing things with kids," says Hendricks, "and I liked doing things myself, too." She attended a six-week program run by Ladies Who Launch, a networking group for entrepreneurs, where she thrived on the support and feedback of women entrepreneurs and those who would be.

After finding a stand-in to meet her children coming off the bus, she set about launching DCmom.com.

Staying Connected

The attorney and corporate-executive-turned-entrepreneur described above returned to the workplace ready to go. Will you feel the same about your abilities after time off? Maybe not -- but there are ways you can stay in touch with your professional self while raising children that can help ease your transition back to work.

- **Don't go it alone.** When you're ready to move back into the workplace, use everyone and everything at your disposal as a resource. Let former colleagues know you're looking again; do the same with recruiters you may have worked with, and even old academic contacts. An unexpected resource may be staffing companies, says Loretta Penn, senior vice president and chief of service excellence at recruiting firm Spherion Corp. in McLean, Va. They may be able to offer sample resumes of others who've successfully made changes like you hope to make.
- **Use technology to your advantage.** Widespread Internet access and mobile technology allows you to work from anywhere, says Deven McGraw, COO of the National Partnership for Women & Families. That makes it easier to network and means that you might be able to return to work without returning to the office, she notes: "You can work where none of us have been able to work before" with a BlackBerry.
- **Stay active.** Nearly every woman I spoke with recommends keeping your hand in by doing some kind of work, whether consulting or part time, when possible. Most also encourage constant networking even while not employed. "I met people for lunch," Murphy says. "I maintained social friendships." Those led to the opportunity to ask if she could return to Williams & Connolly.
- **Associate freely.** You may decide to join professional organizations to have meaningful networking activities in your chosen field. If you do, staying with them can pay off. "Attend industry events, open houses, cocktail parties," says Cynthia Gervais, project leader at the D.C. office of recruitment firm Futurestep. "Re-engage those networks. Be in touch with alumni groups to ease re-entry." She puts her money where her mouth is: Her firm uses networking groups as a source of potential female job candidates looking to rejoin the workforce.

In short, there's a lot you can do -- much of which you'll likely

already be doing during the early stages of your career -- that can set the stage for a much smoother move back into the work world if that is what you choose.

Get ready. Business will have changed, as you did.

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