



Women Who Step Out of the Corporate World Find It Hard to Step Back In

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Women executives who leave the corporate world when they hit a glass ceiling, want to raise a family fulltime or decide to focus on other interests, encounter frustrating roadblocks in their attempts to re-enter the workforce, according to new Wharton research.

To overcome the obstacles, women should confront the difficulties they face and prepare for their return to the labor force the moment they leave, says Monica McGrath, adjunct professor of management at Wharton, executive coach and co-author of the study entitled, "Back in the Game. Returning to Business after a Hiatus: Experiences and Recommendations for Women, Employers, and Universities." "I was seeing many women who, when they reached 50 and their kids were heading off to college, said, 'Now let me get back to work,' and they couldn't," says McGrath. "These are talented professional women. Why was it so impossible?"



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The study found that while 36% of the women who left their jobs said they were conflicted about their decision, 70% remained positive overall about the decision. When they were asked to describe their hunt for a job after deciding to return to work, 50% said they were frustrated and 18% said the experience was depressing. The women were "angry about having to justify the time they took off and start over as if they had never gotten an MBA," says McGrath, who is also the former director of leadership development for the Wharton MBA program.

McGrath conducted the research with two Wharton alumnae, Marla Driscoll, a former partner at Accenture, who has been an independent consultant for two years, and Mary Gross, head of learning and development with Merrill Lynch Investment Managers. The [Wharton Center for Leadership and Change Management](#) and the Forté Foundation, a non-profit organization that develops women business leaders, supported the study.

In late 2004 and early 2005, the researchers surveyed 130 executives who had stepped out of the workforce for at least two years and had already returned, or were trying to do so. Of those who responded, 83% were over 35 and 81% had an MBA. Sixty percent had left their jobs within the last five years and 18% within the last 10 years. At the time of the survey, 60% of the respondents had re-entered the workforce and 32% were actively seeking employment.

Most of the respondents -- 64% -- had planned to step out for five years or less, while 48% had planned to stay out for two years or less. In the end, 29% stayed out for about the amount of time they had anticipated, while 28% stayed out for a shorter period and 43% stayed out longer. A full 87% of those who initially never planned to return to work were already back on the job or looking for employment.

The women indicated that they wanted to find a job for the intellectual challenge and stimulation of being back in the workforce. They were also returning out of economic necessity. "Economic times change. Children's ages change. What these women thought was going to be a lot of money in their IRA is now not a lot," McGrath says, citing comments that survey respondents made in follow-up interviews. Those who are part of the baby-boom generation seemed reluctant to fully retire between ages 50 and 65,

McGrath noted. "That's a long time to play golf."

The study showed that the participants entered into their new job searches with realistic expectations. Forty-nine percent anticipated that the process would take at least a few months, and 36% thought they might have to take a lower-level position. Frustration developed when they actually started the interview process and had trouble even making it past initial gatekeepers.

Keeping Up with the Competition

Survey respondents reported that one obstacle to women re-entering the workforce is corporate recruiters' concern that experienced MBAs are more expensive than a new graduate. "[Recruiters] are thinking, 'I can get a Wharton MBA who graduated in 2005 who will hit the ground running. Or I can get an MBA who graduated [several years earlier] and I have to get them back on track, and that's going to take more time and money,'" says McGrath.

The best way to combat that problem is to stay up-to-date on skills and to keep a hand in the working world while absent from full-time employment. For example, women need to maintain professional licenses, take continuing education courses, and keep their informal network of business contacts alive if they hope to have an easy transition back to work, survey respondents said. Better yet, women who plan to return fulltime should seek out project work or find short-term consulting jobs to remain in closer touch with the business community. "Being part of a project is a way to prove your mettle," says McGrath. One woman surveyed negotiated a deal with her boss to work on projects, even though that type of agreement was not official corporate policy. She took on short-term projects for different parts of the organization over nine years. "When she came back fulltime she knew the company and she knew all the people."

Many of the executive women McGrath coaches have a spouse who has decided to step out of the workplace to manage the home. Those men almost always continue some kind of connection to their work life. "When the women talk about the role their husbands take, they all talk about the business the husband does on the side," says McGrath. "The men seem to stay more connected. I'm not sure women do that when they are home."

Keeping up with Excel is just one example of how women can improve their chances of easing back into the workforce, suggests McGrath. A large number of women who responded to the survey had worked in the financial industry and learned how to do a spreadsheet in business school. "Two years later, the technology changes. It's totally unacceptable to say, 'I don't know how to do that.'" Another frustration for survey respondents was being told they were overqualified for jobs they were willing to take just to get back into the workforce. One woman said she was thinking about removing her MBA from her resume.

McGrath advises women to be honest and unapologetic about the time they stepped out, but to quickly return the focus to the present. "You can say, 'I felt I could make a bigger impact with my parents who were sick, and here is how I've been keeping myself up-to-date on skills.'" The best way for a woman to make her case is to take a proactive stance, not apologizing for taking time off for family but framing her story in business terms and adopting a tone that exudes strength.

Four Sons and Teamwork

For example, one woman spent her years out of the workforce raising four sons. "This person was very confident and said, 'Let me tell you how managing a family with four sons is like managing people at work,'" says McGrath. "She was able to cite a long list using business language." McGrath gave another example: "Don't say, 'I helped raise \$100,000 for my kid's school.' Say 'I was part of a team that put together a fundraising program.' There are ways to frame it."

The survey results indicate women attempting to go back to work set out with confidence. Then, when confronted with obstacles, they begin to suffer self-doubt, which only makes their situation worse, says

McGrath. "When they meet resistance, they are taken aback. They are not prepared for it, and they lose confidence. There is a difference between interviewing from power and confidence and interviewing in such a way that you feel a need to explain yourself."

For many of those who responded to the survey, the best route back to work was through smaller companies. Of those who had returned to full-time jobs, 59% joined companies that were smaller than the companies they worked for before they stepped out. Only 20% were at larger companies, and 21% had joined companies of roughly the same size. The trend was stronger among younger women: 63% of respondents up to age 45 joined smaller companies, while 50% of respondents over 45 joined smaller firms than the ones they had left.

The strong showing for small companies also reflects respondents who are now self-employed. Of those who had re-entered the workforce, 45% are self-employed. "Our hypothesis is that the migration to smaller companies and to their own businesses is a way to have control over their hours and perhaps a way to convince people that they have the competency to do the job," says McGrath, adding that many of the respondents used their time out of the workforce to reflect on where they wanted to go next in their careers. Of those who had returned to the workforce, 61% had changed industries and 54% had changed the kind of role they played on the job.

Employers who are interested in attracting women returning to the workforce should offer more flexible programs, says McGrath. Companies should also train their recruiting staffs to recognize the value that women returning from a break in their careers can bring, and should develop mentoring initiatives for women -- with structured programs similar to the ones they have for relocating employees or ex-patriots.

Finally, she says she would like to see an annual "best of" list for companies that welcome women who are returning to work. Among those she cites are Deloitte & Touche, IBM, Rohm and Haas, and Goldman Sachs. "I think companies are still trying to make sure that they are women-friendly," says McGrath. "Maybe we will never know the real reasons that women run into barriers, but I tend to be optimistic. I think it's just that no one at the most senior level of the company has ever said that finding women who want to reenter the workplace and helping them become successful is what he or she wants their workplace to be known for."

Universities can also play a part in helping smooth the way for MBAs and other professional women to return to work. Schools could offer targeted career services, alumni networks and executive education programs to update skills for women trying to re-start their careers. They should also ask students to think more about the various paths their careers may take once they have a few years of experience in the working world. "We need to encourage women to think of their career as a lifetime," says McGrath. "They need to be asked, 'What's your game plan?' Companies are diligent and strategic in planning the path for a talented person's career. As women, we need to do a better job of that ourselves."

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