BACK IN THE GAME

Returning to Business After a Hiatus:
Experiences and Recommendations for Women, Employers, and Universities

Executive Summary
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Abstract

In this study, we capture the experiences of women who voluntarily step out of the workforce for a hiatus and provide proactive recommendations that these women, as well as employers and universities, can use to facilitate their re-entry into the working world. This study was done under the advisement of the Wharton Center for Leadership and Change and through the support of the Forté Foundation, as well as several professional women's organizations. The research team constructed a survey to delve into the challenges women face when they are ready to return to work after stepping out for a period of time and to collect their advice about how to alleviate, or at least minimize, these challenges. In addition to the survey, we conducted one-on-one interviews with a select group of our survey respondents to explore their experiences in depth. We were interested in how these women manage the process of returning to work after their hiatuses, something we referred to as "stepping back in." We discovered that women seem to face similar difficulties, whether their hiatuses spanned 2 years or 8. While ours is not an academic study, our survey and interviews do cast a light on the experiences these women encounter. We feel our respondents have something important to tell us about the stepping-out process and how the stepping-in process can be improved, and we hope our work enables their voices to be heard.

Background

Both women and men are reconsidering the price they pay for a corporate career post-9/11. Dual-career couples with children find their combined work hours leave little time for family since a typical couple will work over 91 hours a week, not including off-the-job responsibilities (Wallis, 2004). Women often start their own businesses to counteract the demands of a corporate job, and although men also feel this tension between home and career, women are leaving at twice the rate as men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). And, it is not just for their families that women are willing to give up the corporate playing field. The lack of flexibility, the inability to make an impact, and the limited opportunities for development are other reasons they take that "step out" (Catalyst, 1998; Korn/Ferry International, 2001). In the analysis between a corporate position with limited impact and the potential impact a woman can make with her family or community, many women executives and professionals conclude that the corporate role has too high of a price. Consequently, they contemplate how and when they will take a step out from their jobs. Although some never plan to return, many women do plan to get back into the corporate game and to re-engage as soon as possible, especially once they have some distance from their day-to-day demands.

Our conversations with women from the upper and middle ranks of management who stepped out and then attempted to return highlight the issues and obstacles they encounter once they make the decision to return to the workforce. Organizations and universities make considerable investments to attract and retain women, and they develop programs to train them for leadership roles. However, if women cannot balance these jobs with

their responsibilities outside of work, this investment is misaligned (Catalyst, 2002; Wirt, 2004). One participant we talked with had stepped out and was ready to return once her children were grown. She found it extremely frustrating when a hiring manager spent considerable interview time outlining the corporate family-friendly programs, which were no longer important benefits, to her at this stage in her life. Then, when she was discussing the job responsibilities with this same hiring manager, the manager challenged this step-out woman because she did not appear ready to *"hit the ground running."* Women still appear to encounter a type of double bind. They are expected, indeed encouraged, to maintain a high level of commitment to family, children, spouse, and parents, but when they do step out of their careers and make this commitment full-time, it costs them considerable traction in their careers. Some suggest that women can sequence their careers easily by blending career ambition with education and family in a steady and integrated sequence throughout their lives (Jamieson, 1995). However, researcher Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1995) argues that sequencing is costly for a woman's career. She notes, "Unless women can translate time spent rearing children into an asset in the public sphere, sequencing means that women of a given age will have less professional experience than men of the same age. Moreover, a woman's biological clock will draw her from the workforce at an age when management-level promotions are most likely.…" (p. 64). One woman in our study put it this way, *"The company really wanted me, but I was costly to train, and they didn't want to invest the money or the time. I don't blame them; it's easier to get a newly minted MBA than to train an older one who has been out for awhile."*

After a hiatus from the workforce, women return to work for several reasons, such as desire for intellectual challenge, an eagerness to return to the stimulation of the business environment, and economic necessity. Women transitioning back to work will often begin by working part-time, but lack of opportunity to make a valued contribution or to be considered for truly meaningful assignments, as well as ineligibility for benefits, eventually cause many to seek a full-time role. One way that women become re-engaged in business is to re-enter the workforce as an entrepreneur. Over 10 million firms are at least 50%-owned by a woman or women, and the estimated growth rate in the number of women-owned firms is nearly twice that of all firms (Center for Women's Business Research, 2003). Still other women decide to enter the business of the not-for-profit realm. Regardless of the path they decide to take – full-time, part-time, entrepreneurship, not-for-profit – women who stepped out find the workplace environment has changed dramatically since they left. Technological advancements, regulatory changes, and effects of mergers and acquisitions are among the many challenges they encounter on the competitive landscape. Other, more personal obstacles – a dormant network, diminished self-confidence, and lack of support from family members – can be daunting to even the most assertive and competent businesswoman (Stout & Chaker, 2004).

Women who attempt to re-enter the corporate ranks face skeptical hiring professionals with no knowledge of the re-entry women's particular challenges. The outdated firewall of some organizational recruiting and retention practices can stop women who have stepped out from being presented to executives as viable candidates for open

management positions. Our findings indicate that despite their business degrees, these women were not necessarily viewed as attractive candidates for full-time positions and were rarely presented as possible candidates for executive roles. This finding may be a surprise to women who feel confident that organizations will welcome them back when they are ready to return, and naively believe themselves immune because they have a business degree (O'Connell, 2002). Women with MBAs have been reported to think that they are "safe" in suspending their careers because they believe an MBA will guarantee a smooth transition back to the workforce (Belkin, 2003).

We designed the Back in the Game study because we know talented, creative, exceptional women who have taken a step-out and cannot find meaningful and challenging full-time work. We wanted to know why, and we designed the study to understand the challenges these women face. We also thought women would have a lot to say about what they need when they return to the working arena. We wanted to call attention to these women and help them as they contemplate a step-out, to spur their thinking during the step-out period and help them take action as they "ramp up" to return (Hewlett & Luce, 2005). We offer recommendations for the individual woman, for employers in their attempt to attract these women, and for universities in supporting the careers of MBA alumnae.

Method

We constructed a survey to identify challenges experienced by women who have left the workforce and have recently returned to work or are in the process of rejoining the workforce. Prior to release of the survey, we conducted six initial interviews to refine the questions in the survey, and we validated the survey design with an expert in market research. The survey enabled us to collect information from participants, such as demographics, educational information, career track information, initial attitudes toward the step-out experience as well as after the stepping-out period when they attempted to return to work, barriers and challenges they faced, and lessons they learned through their experience that would be helpful to others. Participants were asked to provide contact information if they were willing to be interviewed by a member of the research team to answer additional questions and to expand on their experiences around stepping out and stepping back in. The appendices contain the survey questions and interview guides.

The survey was available for access starting in August 2004 and was closed to participants at the end of March 2005; we also conducted follow-up interviews during this period and into April 2005. We publicized the survey through workshops and speaking engagements, through contact with women alumnae groups, and through a number of women's organizations as well as our own women's networks. We also enlisted the help of the Forté Foundation (www.fortèfoundation.org), a non-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of women in business; Forté agreed to advertise the survey link to its business school members.

The criteria for the participants of the survey were women (and men) who:

1. Held an advanced degree in a professional area, such as business, law, medicine, or education;
2. Held an executive level or other management position;
3. Stepped out of the workforce for at least 2 years (to raise children, care for a sick relative, travel, complete education, or some other reason); and
4. Have recently returned to the corporate workforce or are trying to do so.

Demographics

Two hundred ten respondents began the survey, and 130 of these respondents fit the profile criteria given above. We selected 24 women and one man for in-depth follow-up interviews. These interviews were conducted on the telephone with each interview taking approximately 1 hour.

The majority of the respondents were over the age of 35 (83%) and resided primarily in the United States (92%). The highest geographic concentration was the northeast U.S. (52%). Most of the participants were women with an MBA (81%), and almost one-half of this group had earned their MBA (45%) within the last 10 years. These degrees were earned at a variety of academic institutions, but three schools had the highest representation within the respondent group: University of Michigan (19%), University of Pennsylvania-Wharton (16%), and Cornell University (10%). A wide variety of industries were represented in the sample, with some concentrations in investment banking, commercial banking, brokerage, and consulting. The respondents were somewhat concentrated in the functions of executive management, financial analysis, and marketing/advertising. Prior to stepping out, 35% worked for companies with annual revenues greater than $1 billion. Most of the sample had some type of profit and loss responsibility (59%) and managed others (74%). Sixty percent had left their jobs within the last 5 years and 78% within the last 10 years.

Analysis Approach

Surveys: The survey allowed the research team to collect quantitative and qualitative information from participants. Our chosen survey tool (www.surveymonkey.com) automatically collected and summarized responses. We divided the survey results into sections for preliminary analysis, and we then rotated assignments to ensure additional input. This process was followed by final discussion across all sections and questions. We created a summary spreadsheet in which the comments shared by survey participants were categorized into distinct themes.

Initial and in depth interviews: We prepared a list of questions to guide each interview. During each interview, we asked additional questions, as needed, for clarification. The interviewer then documented each interview and circulated the interview write-ups to the other members of the research team.

Synthesis: Based on the survey results and the interview findings, we then characterized the most common issues experienced in women's attempts to re-enter the corporate workforce after a hiatus, and we collated recommendations for other step-outs, employers, and universities.

Key Findings

From the survey responses and interviews, we made several conclusions, illustrated in the following diagram. The first finding, regarding why women step out, confirmed what we have observed empirically over the years. The remaining four findings, however, were somewhat surprising.

Key Findings

- Women most often step out in order to care for children and enhance the quality of their lives.

- Women stay out longer than they anticipated.

- When women first step out, they feel energized and positive, yet when they attempt to return, they find the experience negative and depressing.

- Women who re-enter the workforce are joining smaller companies.

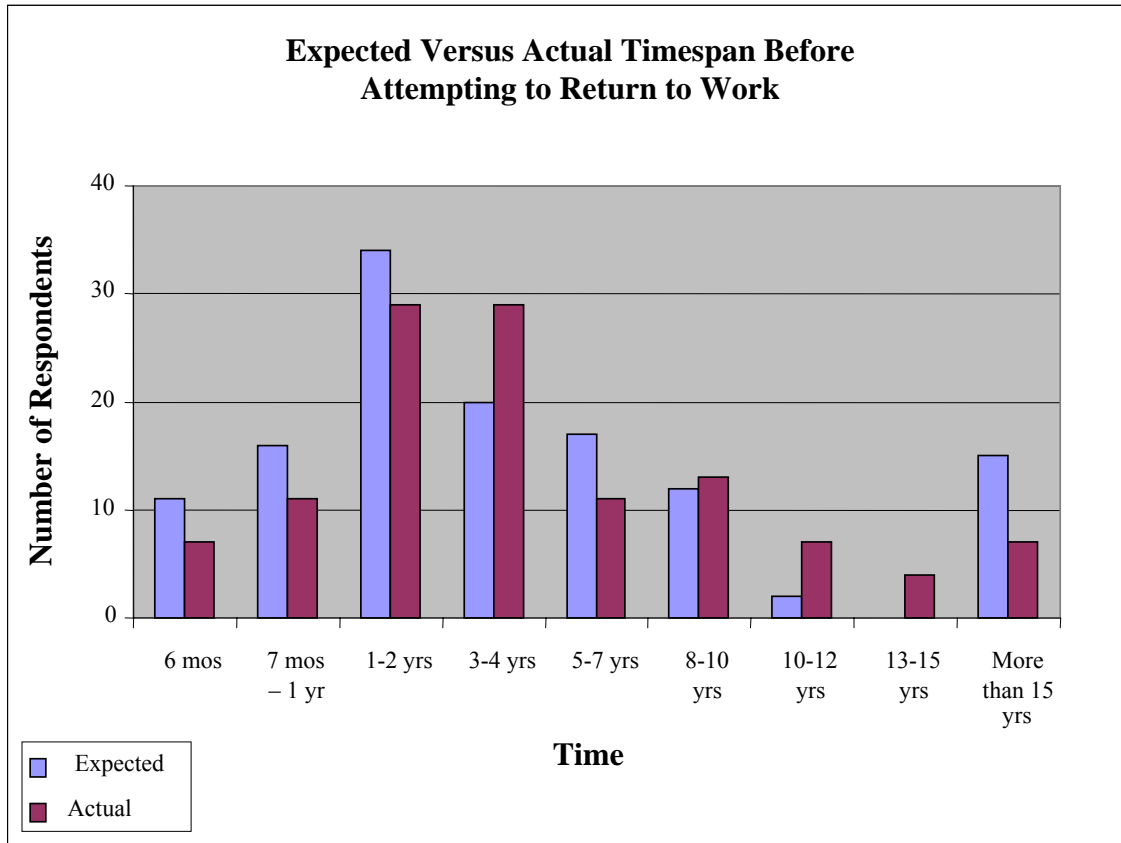- Women who return to the workforce shift industries and functional roles.

Why Women Step Out

Women step out of the workforce to seek a more manageable balance in their lives. They want to be able to meet the multiple demands of work and family, and they want to do it well. Many of our study participants left their jobs to care for their children (74%) and to enhance the quality of their lives (71%) through deepening their relationships, spending time with family, and seeking more control in their lives. Other studies offer supporting information (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999). Although both parents are working for pay in about 78% of American families (Grant, Hatcher, & Patel, 2005), women still bear much of the responsibility for management of the family and household. These responsibilities can seem daunting to the professional woman, particularly if she feels she is not advancing at work, not challenged, and has little or no support (Center for Creative Leadership, 2000; Lyness &Thompson, 2002; Ruderman & Ohlott, 2002; Tharenou, Latimer, & Conroy, 1994). Women want the necessary flexibility to be truly competent in both domains, family and work (Bitman & England, 2003; Catalyst, 1996). While women find that multiple roles enrich their work effectiveness, the work role does not appear to do the reverse (Ruderman, 2002).

Women also want their relationships to be a source of support as they attempt to manage the stress of job and family. Intense career demands, combined with few truly accepted flexible work arrangements and limited options for part-time work, will drive professional women to step away from corporate jobs. One of our interviewees related how she came to this point just as she was facing the adoption of her second child. Once she thought it through, she realized she was tired of the long hours and high stress, and she just *"wanted out"* for awhile. When another one of our respondents had just been given a promotion, she decided that the expectations and demands of the new role were greater than her capacity to meet them with a high level of competence, and with her feelings that her children were missing out on her best, she then decided to take an extended break from her job.

Actual Versus Expected Duration of the Step-Out Period

Most of our respondents planned to step out for 5 years or less (64%), with 48% planning to stay out for 2 years or less. A full 87% of respondents planned to return in 10 years or less. When we compared the length of time our respondents planned to step out with when they began their job search, on an individual basis, we found that 29% stayed out about the amount of time they had anticipated, while 28% stayed out for less time than planned, and 43% stayed out longer. Furthermore, 87% of those who initially never planned to return did, indeed, return to work or are currently seeking employment.

Expected Versus Actual Timespan Before Attempting to Return to Work

Number of Respondents (y-axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40)

Time (x-axis): 6 mos, 7 mos – 1 yr, 1-2 yrs, 3-4 yrs, 5-7 yrs, 8-10 yrs, 10-12 yrs, 13-15 yrs, More than 15 yrs

Legend: Expected, Actual

From Positive at Time of Step-Out to Negative Due to Re-Entry Challenges

Although some women felt conflicted about their decisions to step out (36%), they also felt happy (50%) and optimistic (43%). In general, women felt positive about their choice to step out (70%). These positive emotions (optimistic, hopeful) may well be expected since many women have been working at least a 40-hour week at work plus numerous additional hours at home. The positive emotions they experience could be useful to them as they encountered loss of income and prestige, disconnection from professional networks, and the more mundane aspects of household management (Davidson & Fielden, 1999). Positive emotions can also help women address some of the very issues that drove their decision to leave in the first place: positive emotions energize us to take action, solve problems, and improve our relationships (Fredrickson, 2000). Unfortunately, there are fewer positive emotions as women chart their course for stepping back into the business arena.

Women realize they will not find a job easily when they begin the journey back to work. Forty-nine percent expected it to take at least a few months, and 36% thought they might have to take a lower-level position. As they contemplated their re-entry, they planned to justify their stepping-out decision (45%). We conclude that although they had what appeared to be realistic expectations when they first began the job search, they were

unprepared for the obstacles and surprises they found. Recruiters were not very interested or helpful, and we uncovered evidence of disappointment and discouragement. When women in our survey described their experiences discussing full-time work with potential employers, 50% told us they were frustrated and 18% felt the experience was depressing. While some of them felt challenged, which, debatably, could be considered a positive emotion, most felt negative emotions. Negative emotions can be correlated with many physical and psychological problems, and we think these negative emotions will burden women step-outs as they return to work. When a woman is starting her job search to step back in, she will need to reconnect to a new network, demonstrate confidence and competence to potential employers and to her network, and find creative solutions to overcome the obstacles in her path. Negative emotions will sap her energy and immobilize her enthusiasm (Fredrickson, 2000; Lyubomirsky, 2000). Women felt unprepared for criticism and ambivalence, and they were stymied by indifference and blocked by their own sagging confidence.

Women in our study found that a need for updated skills, the amount of time away from the job, and their age were the main obstacles they encountered during the stepping back in process.
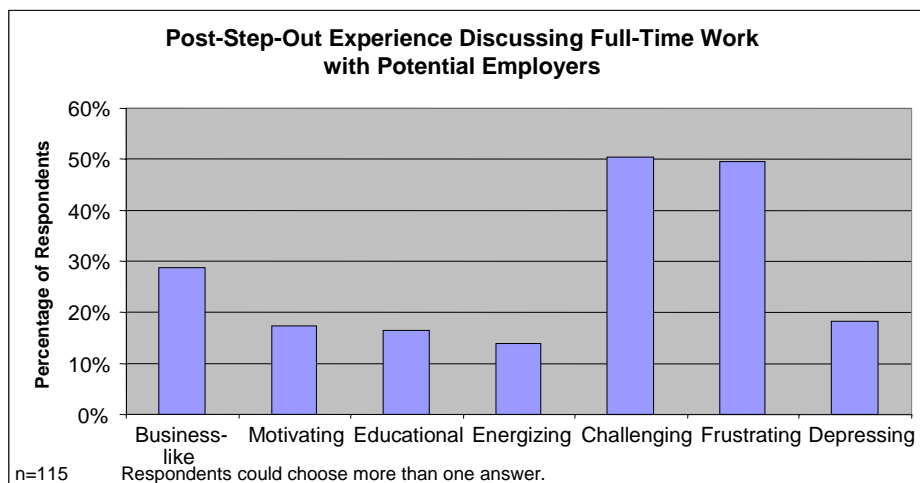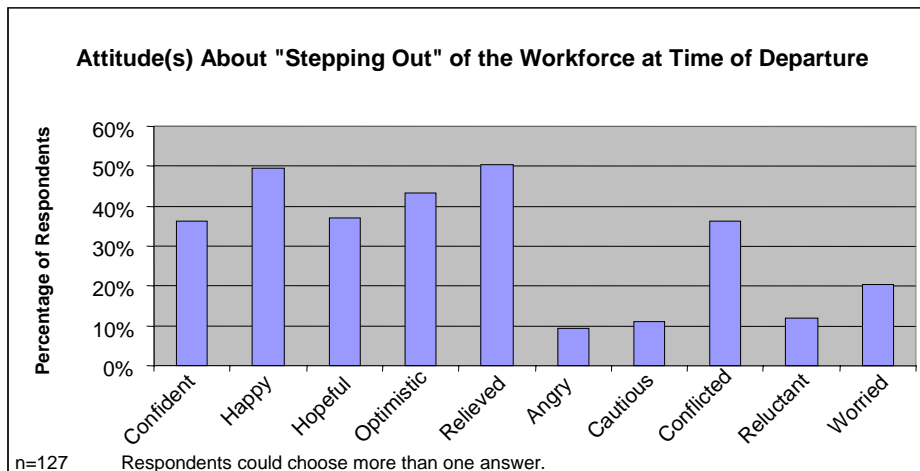
<u>Need for updated skills</u>: Women in our survey are finding it difficult to present themselves as having updated skills. Women managers and MBA alumnae have virtually no resources for ongoing business education. The career services counselors in their MBA programs are focused on coaching and counseling an increasingly high number of MBA graduates each year. Although some universities do have dedicated resources for alumni, these career service professionals have no understanding of the challenges faced by women who have stepped out of the work arena. An interviewee felt she could not get much help from the career services office, and what little time she did get was so depressing and discouraging that she decided to stay away from alumni events until she had landed again. Updated training for a newly returned woman may seem expensive to some employers, but the investment may pay off later in lower turnover, a higher level of commitment, and more motivated employees (Harris Poll, 1999; Society for Human Resource Management, 2003).

<u>Time away from the job</u>: Historically, women tend to move in and out of full-time jobs more than men (Bee & Bjorklund, 2004). Of course, biology dictates that women's stepping out will always be a factor for employers to manage. Women who have been educated for a business career by making a considerable investment in an MBA see these career step-outs as interruptions to their working life cycle and do not feel they should start their careers over each time they step back in. The women we spoke to were often interviewed by employers as if they had no experience at all, or that their experience had been lost in the time they spent at home, especially if childcare was their main activity. Volunteer and community work attract women step-outs, but even here, women, once interviewing again, found a cool reception. In addition, women who would be willing learners sometimes found their MBA education to be a deterrent to landing a job. One particularly frustrated woman in our survey told us she was searching for any job, anywhere; she told us, *"Really, I just want to work!"* She was thinking of removing a reference to her MBA education from her resume. She felt she would do better if she came into a lower-level job and had a chance to prove herself as a good worker and, in this way, she would not be seen as a threat to those who did not have the same kind of education. She said, *"At this point, even the retail stores don't want me because I'm overqualified."*

<u>Age</u>: The older worker has garnered much attention recently. In a recent *Fortune* article (Heylar, 2005), the older workforce was highlighted, and older workers were warned to evaluate their jobs and refresh their skills to avoid losing corporate roles. Indeed, older workers often find themselves in the first wave of corporate layoffs, despite research that management job performance does not diminish with age (Bee & Bjorklund, 2004). Older managers tend to be more thoughtful decision makers, face problems more efficiently, and bring more experience and wisdom to crises. The women in our study experienced a reaction to their age, combined with skepticism about the time they had spent away from work. Many felt these reactions from employers and recruiters were obstacles they could not overcome. One woman we interviewed told us she thought it would be *"…impossible to get a job as an over-50 woman."* And, while this may appear
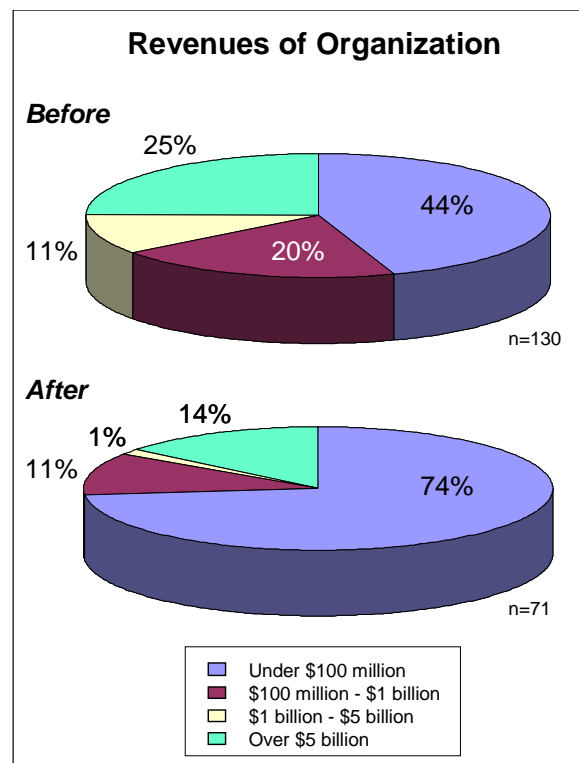
to make economic sense for employers since older workers are more expensive, it does burden the step-out woman with an additional hardship as she attempts to return to work.

Migration to Smaller Companies

Sixty percent of our respondents have re-entered the workforce, and 32% are actively seeking employment; the remainder are either in school or have not yet begun their re-entry.

More than half (59%) of our respondents who have re-entered the workforce have joined companies that are smaller (based on annual revenues) than their pre-step out companies; only 20% have joined larger companies, and 21% have joined companies of the same size. We noticed that this trend in moving to smaller companies is more prevalent with the younger respondents: 63% of respondents up through age 45 joined smaller companies, while 50% of respondents over 45 joined smaller companies.

Some of the trend in joining smaller companies is reflective of the number of re-entrants who are now self-employed (consulting, entrepreneur, etc.). Of the respondents who have re-entered the workforce, 45% are self-employed. Further analysis revealed that many of those who are now self-employed were recent step outs (since 2000); therefore, some of this movement to self-employment is probably a result of the economic conditions during this time period.

Revenues of Organization

Before
25%
11%
20%
44%
n=130

After
14%
1%
11%
74%
n=71

☐ Under $100 million
☐ $100 million - $1 billion
☐ $1 billion - $5 billion
☐ Over $5 billion

Shift in Industries and Functional Roles

Of those respondents who have returned to the workforce, 61% changed industries, and 54% changed functional roles. During their step-out periods, many of our respondents reported that they spent time reflecting on where they want to go next with their careers. Many women decided to indulge a new interest, while some made a change in order to escape their pre-step-out industries, which they perceived to be inflexible and not conducive to advancement. Furthermore, the economic environment since late 2000 has likely had an influence on our results, as several of the industries in which our respondents were concentrated have been particularly hard-hit by the economic slowdown and have been slow to recover (U.S. Department of Labor, 2005). A much larger sample would be needed to conclude which industries lost and which industries gained, on an overall basis.

Eighty-three percent of the participants who have re-entered the working world reported that they accepted a position at a comparable or lower level, relative to their position prior to stepping out. Of the 17% reporting that they re-entered at a higher level, two-thirds of those appear to have accepted comparable responsibility or lower. For instance, a higher level at a smaller organization may not equate to greater responsibility.

Position Taken After "Stepping Out": Industry and Function

- 24%
- 21%
- 14%
- 40%

Legend:
- Similar role in same industry
- Similar role in different industry
- Different role in same industry
- Different role in different industry
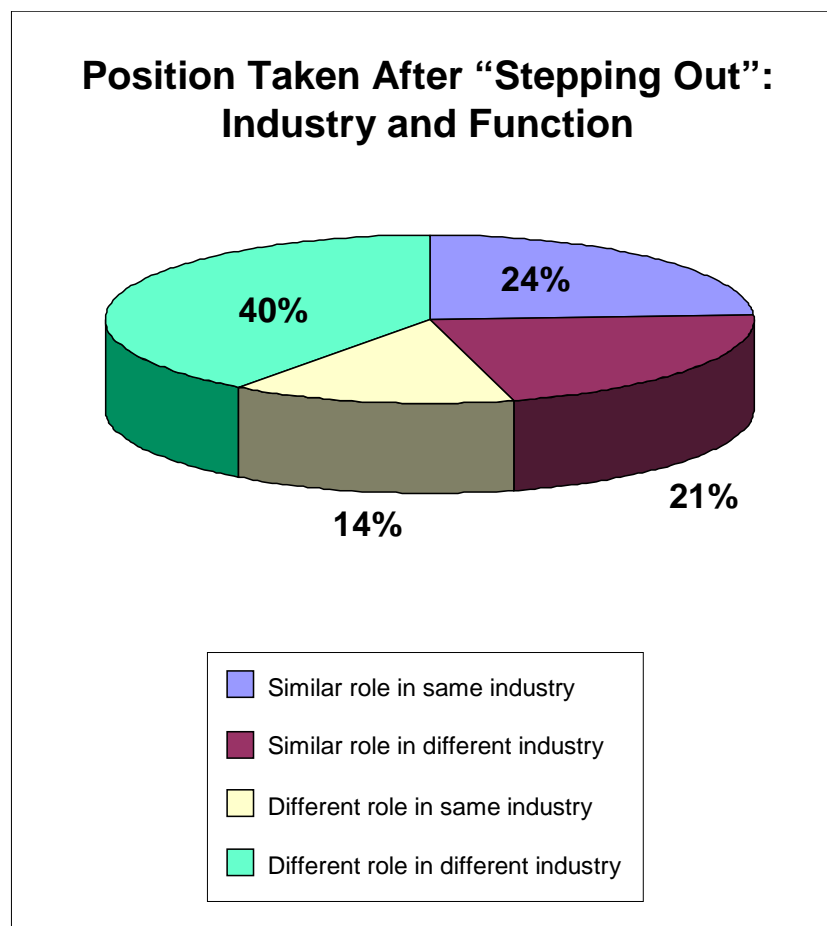
n=70

Recommendations

The step-outs we interviewed were quite open and candid in their advice for their peers as well as their suggestions for how employers and universities can facilitate the transition back to the working world.

Proactive Solutions for Step-Outs

Women can facilitate their return to the workforce by taking specific steps before they decide to step out, during their time away from the corporate arena, and during the subsequent job search period. *"Create a network, ideally before you step out, but if not before then after – colleagues, professional organizations, friends, family, alma mater(s), volunteer work…,"* advised one respondent. Others offered, *"Start preparing your 'come-back' at the time when you step out!"* and, *"Have a plan for stepping back in if at all possible."*

Women who structure their step-out period – through ongoing networking with mentors and colleagues, keeping pace with industry and technology trends, and cultivating new skills that are of value in the workplace – appear to fare better during the job search period than those who completely disconnect. *"You've chosen to [take] this time, and effectively it is costing you, now choose what you want to do with it,"* one respondent opined. Another added, *"Think through what will make you valuable when you're ready to return to work and invest in whatever that is. Relationships? Get to know people in your industry that you never had time to meet or learn about before. Industry knowledge? Attend conferences. Expertise? Even if you have to volunteer or do unpaid work, keep a hand in to the extent that you're able."*

The step-out period can be ideal for reflection about potential career directions. One survey respondent philosophized, *"I think individuals should use the time to decide exactly what they want to do with their lives. Think about who you are, who you want to be, where you want to be, and what you want to be doing – and be prepared for the surprise when the answers change from year to year the longer you don't work in a corporate environment. Nowadays, I just couldn't be bothered with the politics, the show, the often underhandedness of the corporate world. Learn to tell a good story and do things that interest you because often you find that those things will lead you down a path that you'll enjoy and 'grow' in far more than the empty world of black suits and corporate competition."*

During the step-out period, keeping connected to the business world is an absolute must. Many participants recommended, *"Keep your professional network alive,"* and *"Stay connected. Attend economic club and chamber meetings; wear your 'corporate costume' when you do. Send notes/e-mails to people in your profession. Read … the literature, publications, and research in your field."*

A number of respondents touched on the importance of maintaining professional licenses and memberships in professional organizations. *"Do not let your license or certification lapse. Keep up with any continuing education you need to stay current,"* warned one respondent. *"Stay involved in industry associations. Keep abreast of developments in your industry,"* counseled another. For those interested in moving into a new industry, one participant suggested, *"Network in [your] targeted industry,"* – advice echoed by another respondent, who wished she had *"made more contacts in my intended new career area and worked those contacts during my 'step-out' period."*

Many respondents advised against completely stepping out of the workforce. *"Pick up some work in the interim, contract or consulting projects, what have you, but periodic work keeps connections and habits going and provides some context for not stepping back in 'cold',"* offered one participant. A second added, *"Do something so that your resume doesn't have a gap in it (join the board of a non-profit, volunteer, start a home-based business, go back to school)."*

Keeping skills current and developing new skills was a recurring theme. Suggestions include, *"Find out how requirements have changed, and update your skills,"* *"Go back to school and take a few courses so your knowledge is 'fresh',"* and *"Take courses/read everything you can to bring you up to speed on advancements in your area or in the area that you would like to break into."*

Before starting to search for a job after stepping out, women should *"get current on what is going on in your field or industry before starting to interview… Do your homework. Understand the needs of the marketplace, companies, customers, etc., that you plan to target and be able to communicate clearly and concisely what value you bring (talent, expertise, experience, education, relationships, etc.) and how you will help them to accomplish THEIR goals. Connect the dots for people."* In addition, participants recommended that women preparing to re-enter the workforce address polish and presence, as in, *"Make sure you have regained your corporate polish before starting the search process…"* and, *"Groom up! … Sit where professional women pass by and watch!"*

Furthermore, women must be prepared to frame their step-out experiences in a business context. First, step-outs need to be able to articulate in a positive way the reasons why they stepped out. Several respondents suggested, *"Have a good elevator pitch explaining why you stepped out."* Second, women need to describe how the skills they developed during their hiatuses can be leveraged at work. Participants recommended, *"Create a way to package what you learned during your time not working that will pique the curiosity of whomever you're networking with…"* and *"Be able to describe how stepping out had benefited you in terms of being a better employee…"*

The re-entry job search can be very challenging. Re-entrants should be realistic about the job search process. After a break in career progression, it may take a long time to find a suitable position, especially since employment continuity is still considered to be

extremely important by employers and recruiters in evaluating candidates. As one woman advised, *"Be prepared for the realization that in the business world, your stepping out time counts for less than zero. Be prepared that your stepping out time may make potential employers think you are not as reliable as other applicants."*

Women searching for a job after stepping out should be realistic about level, role, and salary. Cautioned one woman, *"Be flexible in the kind of work you may find and under no circumstances, expect to 'pick up right where you left off.' Be prepared to take a few steps back in pay and responsibility, and do not think that you will ever match the career progress of your former peers that have not stepped out."* Being flexible regarding type of work and role may require creativity on the part of the re-entering women, who should be prepared to propose options to potential employers. Finally, coming back to work after a hiatus may be the perfect time to explore any entrepreneurial tendencies.

Proactive Solutions for Employers

Employers interested in accessing the talent pool of step-out women can take several actions to attract re-entrants, including flexible work programs, training their own recruiting staff to recognize the value that step-outs can bring to the workplace, structured ramp-up programs similar to those in place for relocating employees or ex-patriots, and formal and informal mentoring initiatives.

Large employers should identify resources responsible for maintaining ties with their own employees who have stepped out. Such resources should also work with functional heads and division leaders to identify and carve out part-time projects that could be done by women during their step-out period and upon re-entry. As one respondent put it, *"Hire competent professionals on a project basis – almost every executive has a project pile of things that they would like to get done. Many who step out would be prepared to undertake these for reasonable compensation just for the experience. Also is a good way to test fit and personality before making a significant commitment."* This approach would enable an employer to not only keep connected to his or her own current step-outs, but also attract step-outs who have left other companies.

Attracting re-entrants and retaining them long-term requires a commitment to making flexible work arrangements a reality across the company and a viable career option free from negative progression ramifications. *"Allow for flexibility – women re-entering often want to apply themselves to a position on their own terms. They have the potential to be top performers if given the power to work in a not-so-rigid schedule,"* said one respondent, and another added, *"Flexibility in terms of vacation time, flextime, and other family-friendly programs would be much appreciated and frankly more important than full-time or full-benefit compensation."* The importance of flexibility is underscored in one woman's counsel, *"Be open to more job flexibility, so that we won't feel the need to step out again."*

Flexibility includes willingness to explore creative options. With well over half of our survey respondents changing industries upon re-entry, many related how difficult they found that change to be, even when they were willing to take a step back in order to make the switch. One interviewee described, *"The chemical industry is a boys' club, so I am targeting a different industry, such as pharmaceuticals or medical. I've targeted a pharmaceutical sales position but was told I was over-qualified. I was quite clear in my reasons for doing so – flexibility, learn the business – but they cannot grasp why"* she would want to take a job for which she appears to be over-qualified. Even for those step-outs coming back to the same industry, the sentiment was, *"Allow someone to come back at a lower level if they wish to (to get their confidence back, less responsibility, for whatever reason really) even if this doesn't entirely make sense with the experience on their resume."*

To attract step-outs currently in the job search mode, employers should sponsor (and advertise) networking and recruiting events. Education of hiring managers and recruiters as to the potential benefits of hiring re-entrants is vital, as reported by one respondent, *"Train their hiring/recruiting organizations to better understand different backgrounds. Those looking to step back in are disadvantaged when hiring organizations do not understand stepping out – or view it as a negative… Perhaps this is another type of diversity issue."* To that end, employers should expand their diversity programs to address alternative career paths, including stepping out.

Once hired, re-entrants will need to ascend a learning curve, as they settle into a new routine. The adjustment period is somewhat akin to that experienced by relocating executives. Employers should acknowledge and accommodate the step-in period by adjusting expectations similar to what is done for relocating employees or expatriates until they get settled. Just as with any employee, employers should provide for skills development for the re-entering worker. Finally, establishing a mentoring process for re-entrants will increase the chances that the re-entrant will "root," become productive as quickly as possible, and contribute to the success of the organization.

Proactive Solutions for Universities

Universities can play a greater role in preparing step-out women to re-enter the work world. First and foremost, universities should undertake an initiative to provide focused career services and counselors who understand the particular challenges of women who step out through a dedicated resource center. Such a resource center would provide support to step-outs and seasoned alumni in career transition, as some of the transition challenges are similar. Any such center needs to be able to reach step-outs who do not live in close proximity to the home campus, as suggested by one respondent, *"…to reach far-flung alums, have the resource center 'travel' and use [local] alumni organizations for outreach."*

The step-out phenomenon offers universities the opportunity to create new, focused re-entry programs containing refresher courses and seminars on current business topics and industry trends. Such certification programs would help re-entrants better market themselves to potential employers, while also providing employers with greater assurance regarding the abilities and readiness of candidates to contribute to their companies. In addition, universities could offer seminars on job search and networking skills to help step-outs better plan and execute job search strategies. Furthermore, a number of respondents mentioned coaching as a dire need. *"Most people who have stepped out have individual situations that will require individual counseling/advising. I'd suggest one-on-one meetings, which would probably have to be fee-based,"* commented one participant.

Due to the need to reach step-outs who do not reside near the home campus, universities should consider offering these seminars in various cities. For cost feasibility purposes, perhaps working with other institutions makes sense for the design and delivery of refresher courses, certification programs, and seminars on job search and networking skills. Another potential solution is for universities to partner with leading outplacement firms in various cities regarding offerings for women attempting to return to work.

Many respondents want their alma maters to establish networking programs to enable them to connect with other current step-outs in order to share experiences and tactics, and they would also like to network with step-outs who have already successfully returned to the workforce. Networking with alumnae and others willing to serve as mentors for re-entrants and providing web/online chat opportunities also surfaced as requests.

Universities also have a role to play in helping to place step-outs. Universities should draw upon their relationships with corporate leaders to identify projects or other temporary assignments that alumnae could perform during their step-out period or upon re-entry. In addition, those relationships put universities in the unique position of being able to identify which companies are receptive to re-entrants, as one interviewee suggested, *"Creating a '50 Best Companies to Work For' list for re-entrants would be helpful."*

A number of participants suggested that universities sponsor networking events for step-out alumnae and employers. *"Provide networking opportunities/events with companies that are interested in hiring individuals returning to the workforce,"* and *"Specific efforts to mingle those who've stepped out with companies or alumni willing to mentor them or take them on for short projects,"* are just two examples.

It is in each university's best interest to facilitate employment and continued career progression of alumni. *"Use Executive Management programs/seminars to educate employers of the rich pool that is not being tapped,"* and *"Educate companies and recruiters about the benefits of these individuals and assist in promoting this message through the hiring channel,"* counseled respondents. Similarly, universities should educate current students, as well as alumni, about alternative career paths. Spotlighting

re-entry success stories in alumni publications and recruiting collateral sent to employers would reinforce awareness, acceptance, and uptake of the step-out talent pool. Such measures would pave the way for universities to create new service offerings to help companies add the step-out dimension to their diversity initiatives.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

Everybody stands to gain from implementing the recommendations outlined in this paper. Step-out women will approach the re-entry process with more confidence and competence, employers can capitalize on a broader pool of leadership talent, and universities can expand their service to both alumnae and employers. Tapping this under-appreciated but highly experienced segment of the workforce and leveraging its capacities is sure to become increasingly important in the years ahead.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SURVEY QUESTIONS

SURVEY QUESTIONS

*   *Questions preceded by an asterisk require a response.*

Demographic Information

1.   Please indicate your age.

35 and under   36-45   46-55   56 and over

* 2.   What is your gender?

Female   Male

* 3.   Please indicate the region in which you live.
*   *New England:* Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont
*   *Middle Atlantic:* New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania
*   *East North Central:* Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin
*   *West North Central:* Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, N. Dakota, S. Dakota
*   *South Atlantic:* Delaware, DC, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, N. Carolina, S. Carolina, Virginia, W. Virginia
*   *East South Central:* Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee
*   *West South Central:* Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas
*   *Mountain:* Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, Wyoming, Utah
*   *Pacific:* Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington
*   *Outside the US*

Educational Information

* 4.   What graduate degree did you earn?

MBA
Masters in other business discipline
Masters in engineering or scientific discipline
Masters in liberal arts
Doctorate in business discipline
Doctorate in engineering or scientific discipline
Doctorate in liberal arts
JD or other law degree
Other

* 5. For the degree you selected in the previous question, when did you earn that degree?

1975   1976   1977   1978   1979   1980   1981   1982   1983   1984
1985   1986   1987   1988   1989   1990   1991   1992   1993   1994
1995   1996   1997   1998   1999   2000   2001   2002   2003   2004   Other

* 6. For the degree you selected in the previous question, where did you earn that degree?

Arizona State University (W. P. Carey)
Babson (Olin)
Boston College (Carroll)
Boston University
Brigham Young University (Marriott)
Carnegie Mellon University
Case Western Reserve (Weatherhead)
Columbia University
Cornell University (Johnson)
Dartmouth College (Tuck)
Duke University (Fuqua)
Emory University (Goizueta)
Georgetown University (McDonough)
Georgia Tech (DuPree)
Harvard University
Indiana University (Kelley)
Michigan State University
MIT (Sloan)
Northwestern University (Kellogg)
Notre Dame (Mendoza)
NYU (Stern)
Ohio State University
Penn State University (Smeal)
Pittsburgh (Katz)
Purdue University (Krannert)
Rice University (Jones)
Southern Methodist University (Cox)
Stanford University

Texas A&M University (Mays)
Thunderbird
Tulane University (Freeman)
UC Berkeley (Haas)
UC Davis
UC Irvine
UCLA (Anderson)
University of Arizona (Eller)
University of Chicago
University of Georgia (Terry)
University of Illinois at Urbana – Champaign
University of Iowa (Tippie)
University of Maryland (Smith)
University of Michigan
University of Minnesota (Carlson)
University of North Carolina (Kenan-Flagler)
University of Pennsylvania (Wharton)
University of Rochester (Simon)
University of Texas (McCombs)
University of Virginia (Darden)
University of Washington
University of Wisconsin – Madison
USC (Marshall)
Vanderbilt University (Owen)
Wake Forest University (Babcock)
Washington University (Olin)
William and Mary
Yale University
Other

7.	Did you earn a second graduate degree?

	Yes			No

* 8.	What second graduate degree did you earn?

	MBA
	Masters in other business discipline
	Masters in engineering or scientific discipline
	Masters in liberal arts
	Doctorate in business discipline
	Doctorate in engineering or scientific discipline
	Doctorate in liberal arts
	JD or other law degree
	Other

* 9.	For the second degree you selected in the previous question, when did you earn that degree?

	1975 1976 1977 1978 1979 1980 1981 1982 1983 1984
	1985 1986 1987 1988 1989 1990 1991 1992 1993 1994
	1995 1996 1997 1998 1999 2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 Other

* 10.	For the second degree you selected in the previous question, where did you earn that degree?

	Arizona State University (W. P. Carey)
	Babson (Olin)
	Boston College (Carroll)
	Boston University
	Brigham Young University (Marriott)
	Carnegie Mellon University
	Case Western Reserve (Weatherhead)
	Columbia University
	Cornell University (Johnson)
	Dartmouth College (Tuck)
	Duke University (Fuqua)
	Emory University (Goizueta)
	Georgetown University (McDonough)
	Georgia Tech (DuPree)
	Harvard University

	Indiana University (Kelley)
	Michigan State University
	MIT (Sloan)
	Northwestern University (Kellogg)
	Notre Dame (Mendoza)
	NYU (Stern)
	Ohio State University
	Penn State University (Smeal)
	Pittsburgh (Katz)
	Purdue University (Krannert)
	Rice University (Jones)
	Southern Methodist University (Cox)
	Stanford University
	Texas A&M University (Mays)
	Thunderbird
	Tulane University (Freeman)
	UC Berkeley (Haas)
	UC Davis

UC Irvine
UCLA (Anderson)
University of Arizona (Eller)
University of Chicago
University of Georgia (Terry)
University of Illinois at Urbana –
Champaign
University of Iowa (Tippie)
University of Maryland (Smith)
University of Michigan
University of Minnesota (Carlson)
University of North Carolina
(Kenan-Flagler)
University of Pennsylvania
(Wharton)

University of Rochester (Simon)
University of Texas (McCombs)
University of Virginia (Darden)
University of Washington
University of Wisconsin –
Madison
USC (Marshall)
Vanderbilt University (Owen)
Wake Forest University (Babcock)
Washington University (Olin)
William and Mary
Yale University
Other

Career Information

* 11.   In what industries and functions did you work prior to "stepping out"?

Select both the "most" and "next most" industry and functional areas from the list below.

Industry Area

Accounting Services
Advertising
Aerospace/Aviation/Defense
Agriculture/Forestry/Fishing
Architectural Services
Arts/Entertainment/Media
Automotive
Banking – Commercial
Banking – Investment
     Banking/Brokerage
Biotech
Broadcasting
Chemicals/Plastics/Rubber
Computer – Hardware
Computer –Software
Construction
Consulting
Consumer Electronics
Consumer Packaged Goods

Design Services
Education
Engineering Services
Environmental Services
Fashion/Apparel
Food/Beverage/Tobacco
Franchising
Government/Public
     Sector/Military
Healthcare
High-Tech
Hospitality/Tourism
Industrial Machinery
Information Technology Services
Insurance
International Trade
Investment Management - Hedge
     Funds, Mutual Funds
Law Enforcement/Fire Protection

Legal
Manufacturing
Marketing
Medical Supplies
Non-Profit
Oil & Gas/Mining
Pharmaceuticals
Public Relations
Publishing
Real Estate
Recruiting/Staffing

Restaurant/Food Service
Retail/Wholesale
Shipping/Distribution
Sports/Recreation
Telecommunications
Transportation
Utilities
Venture Capital/Private Equity
Other
Not applicable

Functional Area

Accounting/Audit/Tax
Communications - Corporate and
PR
Consulting – IT
Consulting – Management
Corporate
Customer Service
Finance
Design
Engineering
Executive/Management
Facilities
Financial Planning
Financial Analysis
Fund-Raising
Healthcare - Management,
Administrative
Healthcare – Delivery
Human Resources
Inventory Management
Investment Management
IT
Legal

Lobbying
Logistics/Supply Chain
Manufacturing
Marketing/Advertising
Mergers & Acquisitions
Operations
Operations Improvement
Operations Planning
Plant Management
Procurement
Product Development
Project/Program Management
Quality Control
Regulatory
Research and Development
Risk Management
Sales - Business Development
Sales – General
Strategic Planning
Trading
Other
Not applicable

12. Please briefly describe your career path prior to "stepping out" (dates, employers, roles).

* 13. What was your last job prior to "stepping out"?

Company Name
Job Title

* 14.   Before "stepping out" of the workforce, for what size organization did you work?

       < $1 million revenue/year
       $1 million - 5 million revenue/year
       $6 million - 25 million revenue/year
       $26 million - 100 million revenue/year
       $101 million - 500 million revenue/year
       $501 million - 1 billion revenue/year
       $1.1 billion - 5 billion revenue/year
       $5.1 billion – 10 billion revenue/year
       $10.1 billion - 25 billion revenue/year
       $25 billion revenue/year

* 15.   Describe your management responsibilities prior to "stepping out" of the workforce, in terms of P&L/budgetary responsibility.

       None
       < $1 million/year
       $1 million - 5 million/year
       $6 million – 10 million/year
       $11 million - 20 million/year
       $21 million - 30 million/year
       $31 million - 50 million/year
       $51 million - 100 million/year
       $101 million - 500 million/year
       $501 million - 1 billion/year
       $1 billion/year

16.   Describe your management responsibilities prior to "stepping out" of the workforce, in terms of number of employees for whom you were responsible.

None	21-30 people
1-3 people	31-50 people
4-7 people	51-100 people
8-12 people	101-250 people
13-20 people	> 250 people

Stepping Out

17.   When did you "step out" of the workforce?

1989 or earlier	1993	1997	2001
1990	1994	1998	2002
1991	1995	1999	2003
1992	1996	2000	2004

18.   Did you step out of the workforce voluntarily?

        Yes   No

*19.   What best describes your reasons for "stepping out" of the workforce? (Choose all that apply.)

        Care for children   Lack of opportunity for
        Care for sick relative   advancement
        Move prompted by change in   Lack of opportunity for financial
        spouse's job   reward
        Return to school   Result of merger or reorganization
        Burned out   Refused transfer involving
        Pursue personal interests   relocation
                                           Other (please specify)

*20.   At the time of your departure, how would you describe your attitude about "stepping out" of the workforce? (Choose all that apply.)

        Confident   Cautious
        Happy   Conflicted
        Hopeful   Reluctant
        Optimistic   Worried
        Relieved   Other (please specify)
        Angry

*21.   How long did you plan to "step out" of the work arena?

        6 months   7 months - 1 year   1 - 2 years   3 - 4 years   5 - 7 years
        8 - 10 years 10 - 12 years   13 - 15 years   Never planned to return

22.   What best describes your key activities since "stepping out"? (Please describe any key professional activities first, then any key personal activities.)

Returning to Work

* 23.   When did you decide to return to full-time work, in terms of how long after you first "stepped out"?

        6 months   7 months - 1 year   1 - 2 years   3 - 4 years   5 - 7 years
        8 - 10 years 10 - 12 years   13 - 15 years   More than 15 years

* 24. How would you describe your expectations as you began your job search after "stepping out"? (Choose all that apply.)

I expected to find a job easily
I expected it would take a few months to find a job
I expected employers to focus on my skills
I expected recruiters to focus on my skills
I expected to justify my "stepping out" time
I expected to find a position of the same level of responsibility
I expected to find a position at a lower level of responsibility
Other (please specify)

* 25. How would you describe your post-step-out experience discussing full time work with potential employers? (Choose all that apply.)

Motivating	Educational
Challenging	Energizing
Depressing	Business-like
Frustrating	Other (please specify)

* 26. Did you use the services of a headhunter when you decided to look for full-time work after "stepping out"?

Yes   No

* 27. Please rate the following descriptions of your experience with headhunters as you attempted to return to work after "stepping out."

Strongly Agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly Disagree   N/A

Interested in supporting me in my return to work
Able to provide supportive resources/tools (e.g., help with resume, interviewing skills)
Expressed concern about ability to get me interviews
Able to suggest companies particularly interested in working with individuals returning to the workforce
Responsive in finding job leads and getting me interviews

28. Please describe your experience discussing your return to work with headhunters after "stepping out."

<u>Landing</u>

29.   After "stepping out," what was the result of your job search?

       Corporate position
       Consulting/contracting on your own
       Entrepreneur
       Other self-employed
       Still looking
       Other (please specify)

* 30.   After "stepping out," what size organization did you join?

       < $1 million revenue/year
       $1 million - 5 million revenue/year
       $6 million - 25 million revenue/year
       $26 million - 100 million revenue/year
       $101 million - 500 million revenue/year
       $501 million - 1 billion revenue/year
       $1.1 billion - 5 billion revenue/year
       $5.1 billion – 10 billion revenue/year
       $10.1 billion - 25 billion revenue/year
       $25 billion revenue / year

* 31.   After "stepping out," what type of role did you accept? (Choose only one.)

       Similar role in same industry (e.g., you were in accounting in oil & gas before and after "stepping out")

       Similar role in different industry (e.g., you were in accounting in oil & gas before "stepping out" and were in accounting for electronics after "stepping out")

       Different role in same industry (e.g., you were in finance in consumer products before "stepping out" and were in corporate development/mergers & acquisitions in consumer products after "stepping out")

       Different role in different industry (e.g., you were in operations improvement in retail at the corporate level before "stepping out" and were in IT for health care after "stepping out")

* 32.   After "stepping out," what level of position did you accept? (Choose only one.)

       Comparable level to where you were before stepping out
       Higher level than where you were before stepping out
       Lower level than where you were before stepping out

Search Recap

* 33. How would you rate your overall experience in the job search after "stepping out"?

     Extremely positive
     Somewhat positive
     Neutral
     Somewhat negative
     Extremely negative

34. Considering your response to the previous question, please describe your overall experience in searching for a job after "stepping out."

* 35. How important was each of the following in your strategy for getting back to work after "stepping out"?

     Vital   High Importance   Moderate Importance   Low Importance No Importance

     Networking

     Use of job search websites
     Use of headhunters
     Maintaining a positive attitude
     Having a good "elevator speech" in general
     Having a good "elevator speech" for the "step out" period
     Targeting particular companies

Proactive Ideas

36. Given your experience in "stepping out," what three pieces of advice do you have for individuals who have stepped out for a few years and are now trying return to work?

37. Given your experience in "stepping out," what three pieces of advice do you have for individuals who HAVE JUST STEPPED OUT but intend to return to work after a few years? Or, to look at it another way, what do you wish you had done during your step-out period that could have made it easier to re-enter the workforce?

38. Given your experience in stepping out, what do you think employers could do to facilitate re-entry to the workforce after "stepping out"?

* 39.   Please rate how effective each of the following university offerings would be in supporting individuals in returning to the workforce after "stepping out."

Vital Highly Effective Moderately Effective Marginally Effective Not Effective

Provide quick refresher courses in core skill areas (e.g., accounting, marketing)
Provide courses to update skills due to passage of time (e.g., technology, competitive developments, new regulations)
Provide courses that grant continuing education credits
Provide compressed (short) courses for hot topics
Provide targeted career resources for alumni returning to work
Provide general guidance on how to find a job
Host seminars on job search related topics (e.g., networking, resume writing, interviewing)

* 40.   For courses or seminars focused on people attempting to re-enter the workforce after "stepping out," how effective are the following formats?

Highly Effective   Moderately Effective   Marginally Effective   Not Effective

Instructor-led, face-to-face, on-campus
Instructor-led web seminar
Computer-based training module accessible over the web
Paper-based self-study

41.   Please describe any other ideas you have for how universities could better support individuals returning to the workforce after "stepping out".

Wrap-Up

* 42.   Would you be available for further questions and comments?

Yes   No

* 43.   How may we reach you?

Name
Phone
E-mail

Thank you very much for participating in this survey!

If you have any questions about the survey or our study in general, please send us an e-mail at womenstudy@resourcesforleadership.com. Thanks again for your help!

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW ROUNDS 1 AND 2

INTERVIEW ROUND 1
Name
Date

1. Year born: x
2. Educational background: x
3. Career overview: x
4. Pre-hiatus job: x
5. Management responsibilities: x
6. Left position: x
7. Reasons for leaving: x
8. Attitude toward leaving: x
9. Planned length of hiatus: x
10. Key activities since leaving:
                                       a. Family: x
                                       b. Health: x
11. Decided to return to work: x
12. Experiences with employers:
                                       a. x
                                       b. x
13. Experiences with headhunters: x
14. Beginning expectations: x
15. Result of search: x
16. Search experience since hiatus: x
17. Most important strategy aspect: x
18. 3 priorities for returnees:
                                       a. x
                                       b. x
                                       c. x
19. What employers can do:
                                       a. x
                                       b. x
                                       c. x
20. What universities can do:
                                       a. x
                                       b. x
21. Available for follow-up: x
22. Contact information: x
                                       x

Thank you for participating in our survey and for agreeing to talk with me about your experiences. What I'd like to do is give you a 2-minute overview of our research and then ask you some questions to expand on your survey responses.

The goal of our research is to understand and to explore the challenges faced by businesswomen returning to work after an extended "stepping out" period. "Stepping out" is a term we use to describe women who left full-time work for any reason and have returned to work (or plan to do so sometime in the future). The data collected from this interview will be used to write on the subject and to influence the design of strategies (employee-driven, corporate-driven, and educational) to facilitate women's return to the workforce. That's the 2-minute overview; what questions do you have regarding our research goals?

Now, I have some specific questions for you. I have your survey responses in front of me.

1. Confirm answers to Survey Questions 17, 18, and 19.

2. Explore the reasons behind the answers to Survey Question 20.

3. At the time you "stepped out," what were your thoughts regarding how "stepping out" would or would not impact your career?

4. As you tried to step back into the workforce, how did your experiences differ from those initial expectations?

5. Explore the reasons behind the answers to Survey Question 25.

6. How did your experiences before "stepping out" and during your "step out" period influence the type of organization you targeted (or are targeting) during your return to the workforce?

7. For those who indicated a different role and/or different industry in Survey Question 31, what strategies enabled you to make the role and/or industry switch?

8. For those who answered Survey Question 32, how did your "step out" period influence the position level you (a) sought, and (b) accepted, upon returning to the workforce?

9. Explore the response given in Survey Question 34.

10. Now, let's turn to the what-can-we-do-to-ease-re-entry portion of our study. I know that you provided some answers to us in the survey, but I'd like to ask you three questions again to capture any additional top-of-mind thoughts. Knowing what you know now, if you could go back in time to the day you "stepped out" of the workforce, what would you do differently to ease your re-entry to the workforce?

11. Re-ask Survey Question 38: Given your experience in "stepping out," what can employers do to facilitate re-entry to the workforce after an extended "stepping out" period?

12. How should universities better support individuals returning to the workforce after "stepping out?"

13. Clarify any other survey answers as needed.

14. As we document our research, we will be creating case vignettes to illustrate experiences of people who have "stepped out." If we choose to use your story, do you approve of our using your name or would you rather we use a pseudonym for you?

Thank you again for your time and your candor. We appreciate your help!

This section contains our survey questions and interview guides. Please request a copy from backinthegame@resourcesforleadership.com.