

BACK TO WORK

Suzie Skipper explores ways of getting back to work after a career break – be it a few months or more than a decade. Recruiters, coaches and other mums share their tips and advice.

Maybe your child has just started nursery, school or even university. Perhaps you'd like another source of income? Or you want to re-ignite the working you. Whether you've been out of work for a few months or several years it's often very difficult to know how to go about finding your ideal job. The good news is that most companies nowadays have a very strong ethos of flexible working and many will be looking to recruit women returners.

Confidence, confidence & more confidence

Here's the hard part – returning to work after any kind of career break is rarely easy. I have so often heard friends say: "Who would employ me now? I'm so out of date..." Forget the out-of-date skills, everyone is constantly having to re-learn with the pace of change today. The main issue for women returners is confidence and self-belief.

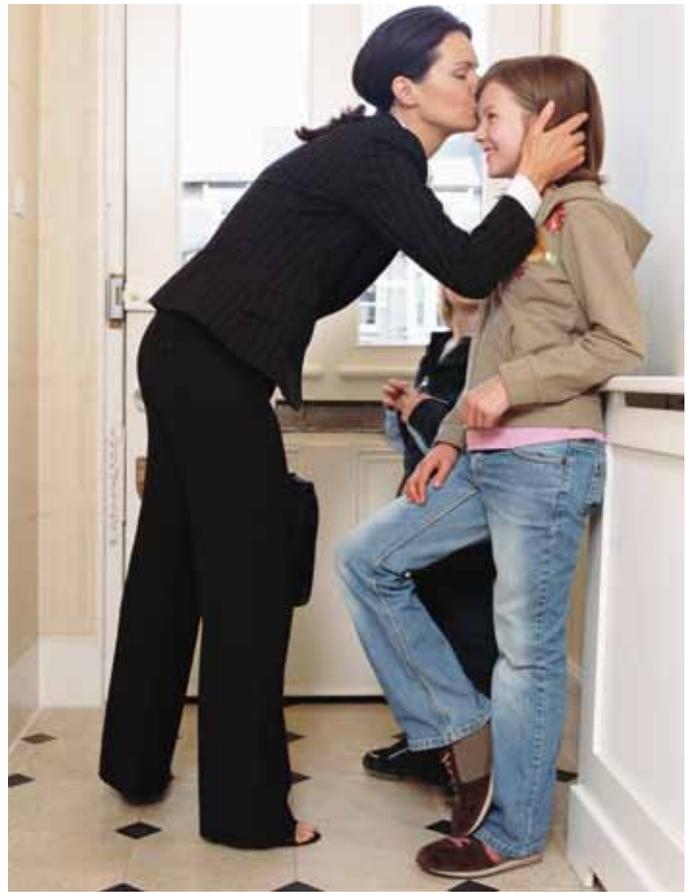
"Many women write themselves off before they've even started," says Mandy Garner, editor of jobsite Workingmums. So how can you boost your work-related confidence when it feels like it's at zero? Start by writing down all the things you've done in your life, professional and during your career break. Do include things such as PTA work, fundraising for school and nursery etc. "Involvement in the PTA or organising school events enhances important skills that are transferable and it's easy to underestimate them," says Mandy.

Remember that many companies will be keen to reconnect with you. Women leave corporate life for various reasons at a similar stage in their career, probably in their early 30s. "Corporations know that they need to reconnect with these women, otherwise they risk having a gap in their diversity talent pipeline," says Helen Toogood, founder of professional network Hot Chilli Connect.

Lyndsey Oliver, founder of M4 Coaching advises: "Take baby steps...and congratulate yourself on the gains made. Babies fall over a lot when they learn to walk but they never give up."

Make time

Looking for a job is a job in itself. So take it seriously and set aside some proper time. If you've been a full-time mum for some years your focus of attention is usually looking after others. Putting the attention on yourself is often at the bottom of the list for most women says Katerina Gould, Co-founder and Director of Women Returners. "Unless you make time to research and look for work, it's not going to



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happen. You need to let go of some of the things you do for everyone else, even if it's just for a few hours a week," says Katerina.

Brainstorm

The first step is to understand how ready you are to return to work. Is it just that you'd like to do something? Or are you ready to re-launch yourself into a professional career? Brainstorm what that return means to you, says Sara Hill, founder of part-time recruiter Capability Jane. "The positive side to having had a career break is that you have the chance to re-evaluate what it is that you'd like to really do," says Sara. It can be helpful to think in terms of different personas. The previous you – could you get back up to speed to go back to what you did before? Or another persona based on the expertise you have now.

Hire a coach

A professional coach will help you focus on and evaluate what you want out of your new job and how to go about getting the role you really want. Investing some time to think and talk about 'you' is very powerful for most people, says ex-investment banker, professional coach and mum of four Audrey Wiggin. "Whether it's rebuilding your network or moving to an entirely different industry, coaching can really help you focus on what you want to do and give you clear strategies on how to go about it," says Audrey. Sometimes by preparing a candidate for an interview it will come out that the hours aren't really going to work with their family commitments and that maybe going freelance or taking a new direction is really what they want to do. It's far better to thrash it out with a coach first, says Audrey.

Network, network, network

The beauty of living in 2015 is that networking couldn't be easier. Obviously, you must broadcast the news that you're looking for a job. "You never know who might know of someone who needs your skills," says Katerina. Don't forget to join LinkedIn. "It's a returners dream! It gives us all a platform to re-engage with former work colleagues or contacts in your field," says Sara. Map out your network and connect. Include friends, family, the school gate, your social life, former colleagues, suppliers, clients etc.

Many women feel nervous about getting back in contact but don't! "Identify friendly faces first. Have a chat over coffee and explain that you are re-launching yourself. You will be surprised. People are often delighted to help," says Sara. Just remember that ex-colleagues who thought you were great will see the 'old you' and still think you are fantastic even though you may have lost a bit of confidence. Women often think that their working world has completely changed. Perhaps the technology has but not a great deal will have changed fundamentally.

Simona Barbieri had spent over six years at home looking after her three kids when she realised there had to be a way of helping women make the next change in their life. "Networking events make me cringe so I set up Hub Dot in 2012 to give women the chance to reconnect without labels," says Simona. Whether it's finding an investor for your business or meeting a fellow mother with whom you can share your challenges, going to a Hub Dot event is a different way of networking, says Simona. See hubdot.com for upcoming events.

Agencies

The job hunting scene will have changed if it's been a few years since you last worked. So you'll want to research and register with a couple of agencies. "But take care with regards to the ones you join – ensure they specialise in what you want to focus on. For example we focus on



Connect with other women at networking events like Hub Dot

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office-based roles in and around London, many with flexible working hours," says Veronica Wint, the 'back to work expert' and head of Timewise Recruitment. Isabelle La Floch who found her perfect job on Workingmums suggests setting up email alerts from jobsites so you can respond quickly.

Support

Gather some support for this new period in your life. "Liken it to when you first became pregnant and were preparing for the transition to becoming a mother. You read books, consulted medics, friends, family, NCT groups etc. This is another similar transition from home to work and you need a similar support network," says Katerina. Make sure you get the right kind of support too. Philippa Cheer, who has just returned to work after a ten-year gap, says that she got a lot of support from her friends, many of whom were also looking for jobs. If you're the only one in your friendship group who's looking to go back you may need to look elsewhere for support.

Do your homework!

It's a good idea to get the low down on what's happening in the industry you want to return to or join. Read the trade press, join a professional association, go to a conference, talk to friends or colleagues who are working in the world you want to join to find out what's happening etc. Hot Chilli Connect runs free events which gives women the chance to learn about current trends and new technology.

There's lots of careers advice out there on the web (see our Black Book for where to look). Working Mums has a free careers advice service where you can write into experts. Look at online courses such as learndirect.co.uk open.ac.uk or reed.co.uk.

Volunteering

Brushing up on your skills can be a great game plan and confidence booster. Some women find strategic volunteering gives them the opportunity to update skills while giving their time for free to a charity. Try do-it.org or timebank.org.uk.

Returnships

Returnships (trademarked by Goldman Sachs) aka 'returning professional internships' are big news in the UK right now. They give professional women wanting to get back to work after a career break the chance to take on paid short-term employment and receive coaching and training. It's great news for companies too who are seeking to redress the imbalance in the numbers of senior women. "In the corporate world having a gap of 5–10 years can make returners seem a bit risky even if you've kept up your skills or done loads of volunteering," says Katerina. It's competitive to get a place on a returnship and they're intensive but you will update your skills and there's sometimes the chance for the role to turn permanent.

Multiple CVs

Long gone is the day where you just had one CV. Multiple CVs are a must. Tailor your CV to each job. "Your CV should be absolutely 100% focussed on the job you are applying for, highlighting your

skills and experience in that area,” says Veronica.

Veronica recommends putting a punchy personal profile no more than five lines at the top of your CV. This should be a brief synopsis of your career focussing your work to date rather than what you are looking for. “It doesn’t matter how long ago that experience was gained. You are the same person, with the same skills and value to offer a prospective employer, so take heart,” says Veronica.

Talk in figures where you can e.g. won industry award for the way I managed my team of 10 people, managed a £20,000 budget and so on. Keep it short: two or three pages at the very most. Keep the font functional like Arial or Verdana. Do get feedback from others, not just family and friends. If you know someone in recruitment or HR ask them to look over it.

You will of course be worried about what to write when it comes to your career break and you’re not alone. “My advice is – never try and skirt around it. Be proud about the time you took out for family, that hobby, the voluntary work you undertook. It’s all of interest to a prospective employer,” says Veronica. If you gained any work-related skills in that period, mention it but make it short. Experience and skills gained from previous employment should make up the vast majority of your CV, says Veronica.

Returns’ Black Book

Jobsites and Recruiters (support and inspiration)

- Jobsite, franchise opportunities [workingmums.co.uk](#)
- Recruitment, coaching, advice [womenlikeus.org.uk](#)
- Agency and jobsite [timewiserecruitment.co.uk](#) [timewisejobs.co.uk](#)
- Flexible recruiter [capabilityjane.co.uk](#)
- Online jobs board [jobs4mothers.com](#)
- Network, advice, coaching, returnships [womenreturners.com](#)
- Professional interim, part-time [workpond.co.uk](#)
- Part-time and flexible roles [ten2two.org](#)
- Flexible working platform [2to3days.com](#)
- Non-exec and exec roles [womenonboards.co.uk](#)
- [30percentclub.org.uk](#)
- Flexible careers [mumplusbusiness.co.uk](#)
- Jobs and inspiration [beyondtheschoolrun.com](#)
- Virtual working [timeetc.co.uk](#) [virtualassistants.co.uk](#)

General/language job boards

- Job search engine [indeed.co.uk](#), Jobs and courses [reed.co.uk](#)
- Local work [gumtree.com](#), Languages [multilingualvacancies.com](#)
- Languages [toplanguagework.co.uk](#), French [french-selection.co.uk](#)

Advice, networking, coaching and volunteering

- Professional network, coaching [boitchillconnect.com](#)
- Connecting women [hubdot.com](#)
- Advice [mumandcareer.co.uk](#)
- Work life balance [workingfamilies.org.uk](#)
- Maternity coaching [m4coaching.com](#)
- Professional coaching [audreywiggin.com/](#)
- Advice, coaching [inspiredmums.co.uk](#)
- Inspiration and advice [talentedladiesclub.com](#)
- Volunteering [do-it.org.uk](#) [timebank.org.uk](#)
- Distance learning [learnndirect.co.uk](#)
- Open University [open.ac.uk](#)

Suzie interviewed four mums who have returned to a variety of different working roles. Log on to our website to read their case studies [angelsandurchins.co.uk](#)



A well-cut new jacket and good hair will help to make you feel confident

Be realistic

Have realistic expectations. If you want to work 10am-2pm and have a marketing director role in mind, think again. Think about how going back to work will change family life and get childcare lined up. And remember it will take time. “You might have a few meetings that don’t go as well as you hoped. But take heart. It takes time to get used to telling ‘your story’ and you’ll get better at it,” says Katerina.

Working wardrobe

You don’t need to create a new you but the chances are what you last wore to the office will make you feel out of date and old. Invest in some new pieces and a good haircut. Enjoy spoiling yourself!

Flexible working

There are so many more jobs around that offer flexible working. This doesn’t just mean part time. It could be working from home some days, longer hours over fewer days or shorter hours over a week. Or even term-time work. The possibilities are endless and having a smart phone and laptop are the tools that will help you.

Working from home is ideal for some people. Often executives running their own business need freelance help from PA and admin to marketing, writing and editing. There are jobsites that deal specifically with virtual work. Try [timeetc.co.uk](#) or [virtualassistants.co.uk](#).

Looking for work locally (try Gumtree or the local paper) cuts down on your commute and adds that element of flexibility to your working life. It’s a great deal for local companies too who can recruit high calibre staff who’ve often had experience in top corporate roles.

Finding your ideal job

Try your network of friends and previous business colleagues, especially if you’re looking for part-time work. If you answer an advert mention the fact that you’d like to be part-time once you’re further down the line. “Flexibility is the key nowadays... being measured on your output rather than hours,” says Katerina. Do think about the fit of the company too. Will you thrive in the environment? Do their values match yours? Will it be a fun place to work? Consider taking an interim position to work on a project or covering a maternity leave. It can often lead to a permanent role and allows you to check out the company before fully committing.