



Firsthand Accounts of Re-Entry

Program held on April 23, 2013

Re-entering the legal profession after a break requires a well-considered and executed plan of action. At this program, hosted by the City Bar's Career Advancement and Management Committee, four lawyers who returned to the workforce after taking time away from their careers told their stories and provided helpful insight into various ways to navigate that process. Carol Fishman Cohen, co-founder of iRelaunch and co-author of Back on the Career Track, moderated the program. Panelists included Cheryl McGee Wallace, management consultant in the Financial Services Regulatory Practice at PwC; Robin Sellier, professional development manager at Schulte Roth & Zabel LLP; Lubna Jafri, research editor at Practical Law Company; and Virginia Ryan, of counsel at Fordham University's Office of Legal Counsel.

All of the panelists agree that support and structure are critical to a successful re-entry into the workforce. This article summarizes the key take-aways from their discussion. In addition, bar association programs, career coaches, and re-entry programs can also provide helpful guidance.¹

Be prepared and focused. It is difficult to approach possible contacts and employers if you do not have a clear idea of what you want to do. At the initial stage of your re-entry process, take the time necessary to think about where you want to be. Although it may be hard to know your end goals at this point, being able to articulate specifically what you are interested in doing is a key part of the career assessment process. Practice your message and stop apologizing for taking a career break – when discussing your time out of the workforce, emphasize the skills you developed and what you learned.

Make sure you have a resume (possibly more than one version based on various types of positions) and a writing sample ready to go. It's a good idea to have others review your resume to make sure you are portraying yourself as clearly and positively as possible. Although your resume and writing sample will continue to be fine-tuned as your journey progresses, you should be able to provide them immediately if asked. And if you are seeking a legal position, confirm that your bar admissions and continuing legal education requirements are current.

Create a page on LinkedIn, but make sure that your page is professional (including your photo), accurate, and typo free. Be strategic about who you connect with and periodically review who your connections know.

¹ See resource list at the end of this article.

Stay current on developments in your areas of interest. Read relevant periodicals and articles, take a course, and be prepared to show that you are serious and proactive.

Make the most of networking. Understand that it's perfectly normal to be reticent about reaching out to people with whom you haven't had contact in a while. But also remember that people generally want to be helpful -- and it gets easier each time you make the effort. Again, preparation and focus are key. Develop a list of questions about various jobs, trends in the field, and the other person's career path. Be honest about your goals and, initially, be clear that you are not asking the person to hire you: "I'm trying to be strategic and thoughtful about my next move and am in information-gathering mode right now. Would you be willing to spend 15 minutes talking with me about trends in your industry?" Or, "This is what I've been doing and what I'm thinking about as a next step [e.g., volunteering, internships]. Do you have any suggestions or know anyone else I might speak with?" Practice these conversations until you're comfortable with them, have an agenda in your mind for the conversation, and whenever possible, meet the person in his or her office rather than speaking over the phone.

Put yourself in a position to meet other people -- staying at home behind your computer is not the best use of your time. Consider attending a professional conference to network with people in your field of interest. This will probably require a financial investment on your part but that, in and of itself, will demonstrate to the people you meet that you are serious about pursuing your career. Temp assignments can also provide opportunities to develop business relationships and let others know your end goals (and will give you current relevant work experience). Explore strategic volunteer opportunities that mesh with your interests and career goals -- through charities, bar associations, political organizations, etc. You may have to force yourself to attend meetings, reunions, parties or networking events, but if you keep an open mind, you never know who you'll meet and what doors will open.

Final words of advice:

- Look backward when looking forward. Make the best use of your professional and personal experiences and connections.
- Reach out to people who were meaningful in your earlier career. They know you and are good sources of advice.
- Tell your story in a way that you can own it. It's very empowering.
- The first step is the hardest.
- Get support. The re-entry process is challenging. Don't do it alone.

Article drafted by Susan Galligan, member of New York City Bar Career Advancement and Management Committee, September 2013

Resource List

The following resources were mentioned by the panelists during the program:

1. New York City Bar, www.nycbar.org, information regarding professional development and career programs and the Career Development page.
2. iRelaunch, www.irelaunch.com
3. New Directions for Attorneys, www.pace.edu
4. Five O'Clock Club, www.fiveoclockclub.com
5. Financial Women's Association of New York, Inc., www.fwa.org
6. NALP, The National Association for Law Placement, www.nalp.org