
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: RETURNING TO WORK

Returning to work after taking a significant amount of time off can be a scary and daunting process.

Whether you took time off to raise a family, care for a loved one or pursue another interest, it can be difficult knowing how best to explain your absence from the work force to potential employers and capitalize on your assets. At the City Bar program, *What to do if Mom (or Dad) is on Your Resume*, Deborah Epstein Henry, founder and president of Flex-Time Lawyers LLC, tried to ease participants' anxiety and address these issues.

Forty-two percent of women lawyers, says Henry, leave the profession, independent of maternity leave, for an average of three years. This is a huge talent pool from which law firms can pull, but employers have no idea how to find them. So it is largely up to you, says Henry, to reach out to employers.

It is hard for re-entering attorneys to learn how to network and communicate with confidence to everyone they know that they are ready to re-enter the work-force. Women especially, Henry notes, often have difficulty expanding a personal relationship into a professional one.

Learning how to do this, however, is key to maximizing opportunities for potential employment. To help ease this awkwardness, Henry suggested re-entering attorneys practice a five sentence pitch that goes like this:

My name is _____.

I used to be _____.

For the past _____ years I have been doing _____.

I am now interested in pursuing _____ or _____.

If you know anyone doing _____ and can make an introduction that would be great.

Although you have made friends and acquaintances during your time away from the work force you have no idea how many people don't really know who the professional you is, says Henry, and how effective a pitch like this can be. Neighbors have friends and cousins, acquaintances have sisters and colleagues. It is staggering the number of people you can reach if you try, says Henry. Make sure not to make apologies for being home, advises Henry; it is part of your background now. Keep your pitch short and general. You don't want to limit your options unless you really have specific needs that you are not willing to be flexible about.

Another effective way to get the word out that you are ready to re-enter is to put this same pitch in an email, says Henry. Send it to your personal network, former colleagues and law school and college alumni networks.

Remember to think about not just what you want but what employers are looking for. Look at your resume, says Henry, and see if there is any unaccounted-for time. If so, explain the gaps on your resume and account for all your time away either in the resume or cover letter. Employers want to know where you have been and what you have been doing. List any volunteer experience and highlight the transferable skills you have gained. Many skills, for example, management skills, are transferable from one practice

area to another and from working inside to outside the home.

Employers, Henry notes, often disregard resumes and job inquiries from re-entering attorneys because they don't know what to do with them. So try to do the work for your potential employer; let the employer know where you think you would fit in. Henry advises stating up front that you were out of the practice of law for so many years and would like to join the firm as for example a fifth year associate or as a midlevel associate. Also convey why it is in their financial best interest to hire you. Offer to eliminate the firm's risk by suggesting it hire you on a temporary basis for, say, three months and if things work out then permanently.

Finally, notes Henry, remember not just to prepare your pitch and resume but to prepare yourself personally. Invest in support if you have young children at home so you have the time and flexibility to go on interviews. Consider interning and volunteering if you have not done so already, to determine how motivated you are to rejoin the work force. If you feel rusty take classes and go to trainings, whether in substantive areas of the law or in technology. Be prepared for reactions from family and friends; it may take time for them to get used to the new professional you.

Restarting your career is possible, says Henry. If you realize that you may have to pay your dues for a while or readjust your expectations and sell yourself creatively and with confidence you will be able to maximize your success and rejoin the legal profession.

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