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GETTING BACK TO WORK

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Whether you are returning to your previous job after a leave of absence or finding your way into a new career, your months or years outside the workforce can create personal and professional challenges. Preparedness while you're away and when you return can make the difference between a successful segue and one that makes you wish you'd stayed at home.

By Linda Melone

When returning to work after a period of time off, remember that honesty is the best policy. Whether you've been out of the workforce because of family reasons, such as having or raising a child, or because of illness, job loss or just to pursue other interests, returning after a leave of absence does not necessarily require an explanation of your whereabouts in the

interim. If you fear that the gap in your resume may raise eyebrows during a job interview, however, give an honest explanation. Don't try to bridge the gap by stretching time lines.

"Many companies do background checks and will find out if the dates (between jobs) don't make sense," says Ed Klimczak, a corporate recruiting consultant. A 2005 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management showed that since 2002, 40% of HR professionals have increased the time they spend checking references, making it more likely that dishonest job seekers will be caught.

False job titles and dates of employment were among the most common transgressions found on resumes, according to a recent New York Times article. Job seekers who lie on their resume lose their chances of getting hired for their desired position. "A job application is a legal document," Klimczak says. "Lying on it reflects negatively on a person's integrity. Not only that, but it's simply not necessary to lie about a work gap. Losing a job to downsizing or layoffs has less of a stigma than in the past." In addition, more employers are sympathetic to time taken off for family reasons.

"An employer's concern is with the ability of the person to carry their skill set forward after a long time away. I would recommend explaining on your resume if there's a gap of six months or longer. Put a note in parenthesis on your resume and briefly explain the reason 'time off for family,' etc." Klimczak notes that this is particularly important if you are mailing the resume or posting it on a job site. "Otherwise, with no explanation you may look like a job hopper."

Here's a look at three main scenarios that take people outside the workforce, along with strategies for returning from each type of absence.

Bouncing back after having a baby

Maternity leave allows employees time off to adjust to their role as parents and gives them time to prepare for infant care. Now a new state law, the Paid Family Leave Act, also accommodates the needs of adoptive moms, good news for those who take leave to adopt a child. Jennifer Hughes took a four-month leave from Edwards Lifesciences when she adopted her first child in 2003 and again in 2005, when she adopted her second daughter.

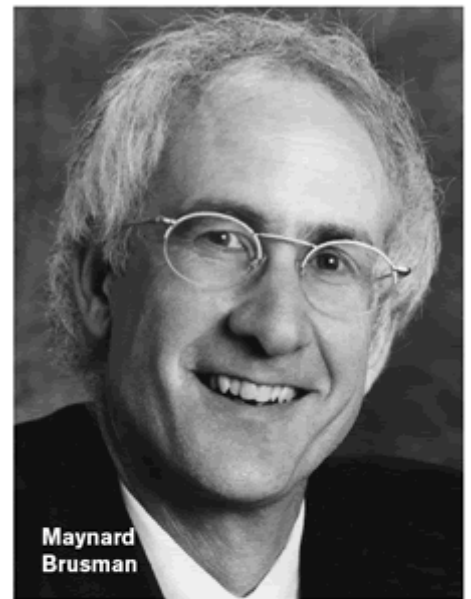
Finding ways to transition back to work after welcoming a child into your life affects both you and your child. Hughes found an easy way to make it work: During her time off, she arranged her family's schedule as if she was still working. As a result, schedule changes were minimally disruptive. "I stuck to the same schedule at home as I would have when I was working, so my first daughter was already in the routine before I returned to work." The second child was more of a scheduling challenge, but Hughes used the same technique to keep everyone on an even keel. "I think it's especially important to keep everything the same with the second child to avoid disrupting the first child's schedule."

"In addition to keeping the girls on a schedule, I kept myself on one," Hughes adds. "I see many new moms who stop taking care of themselves when they have a baby. I found that getting up early and getting dressed as if I was going to work made me feel better about myself than if I hung around the house all day without showering or putting makeup on. The biggest obstacle was finding good childcare. The rest was easy."

Stressed out

Stress is one of the main reasons people quit their jobs or take leaves of absence, but for "stress leave," to be covered under workman's compensation, it has to be a direct consequence of business pressures. In today's competitive culture, that happens often enough. Downsizing and company reorganizations wreak havoc with company routine and job roles. Employees may be forced to take on additional tasks, working extra hours, late nights and weekends. Additional hours, impossible deadlines and pressure from a demanding boss can bring employees to their emotional knees.

"Now more than ever people are just overwhelmed at work. Everything is a



"For many people, the workplace becomes their community. (Leaving can be) like leaving family; it's emotionally difficult to be

priority,” says Dr. Maynard Brusman, a psychologist and executive coach.

“Overwork and interpersonal conflict especially with bosses are the most common origins of workplace stress.” Studies show the most stressful work situations include work interruptions, role conflict, office politics and time management. Prolonged job stress doubles the risk of heart disease and contributes to weight gain and high cholesterol (which may result from emotional eating due to the stress).

Stress is bad for both workers and employers since it runs up companies’ worker’s compensation claims and insurance rates. The American Institute of Stress (AIS) reports an annual price tag of \$300 billion for stress-related accidents, absenteeism, employee turnover, diminished productivity and direct medical, legal and insurance costs. Facing high costs, many companies have some kind of stress-control program, but time away from the work environment sometimes is the only viable solution.

A stress leave is implemented for the mutual benefit of the employer and employee with the restoration of the employee’s well-being and productive capacity as the desired end result. Unfortunately, the outcome objectives are rarely spelled out, creating resentment among co-workers who feel the employee “jumped ship” when the going got tough.

“ The employee may face disgruntled co-workers when they return, because the rest of the office or team had to pick up the slack while they were out,” Dr. Brusman says. “Furthermore, in order for this type of leave to have a successful outcome, the employee and the boss must establish how the situation needs to change provided the boss isn’t the source of the stress. And, if it’s the environment that’s the problem, meditating ten times a day won’t change that fact,” Brusman adds.

Brusman recommends the following for those returning to work after stress leave:

- Ask yourself if the work situation is really the right fit for you.
- Know what’s important to you in your work and whether or not your current job provides what you need.
- If the environment is the problem (i.e. working weekends and late hours are expected as part of the job), is it a situation that will change when you return?
- Consider whether or not your co-workers are supportive.
- If you decide to stay, reacclimate gradually instead of taking on a full workload right away.

“ In addition, if an employee decides to acclimate gradually back to work by taking on less hours, a written agreement between the employee and employer should be drafted to reflect and clarify this change,” says Laura Miller, President of LKM Consulting, a human resources consulting firm. This “return to work” form letter outlines the modified work period and allows for continual evaluation of the employee’s condition and ability to work. Miller adds, “A written policy avoids the assumption that this is an ‘open-ended’ job offer for an indefinite period of time and prevents other employees from thinking they can easily make the same claim.”

Worst-case scenario

Making the wrong choices in life can create much bigger obstacles than frequent job changes. An unexpected loss of a job and the inability to find another may send a person spiraling out of control. Seeking solace in alcohol and drugs resulting in a felony record becomes a permanent stain, forever limiting future positions.

Lynn M. can attest to how quickly a good situation can go horribly wrong. After graduating from college, Lynn accepted a position at Boeing, where she worked as a productive employee for 10 years. Feeling restless, she quit her job and moved back to her home state of Oklahoma, but found herself back in Orange County six months later. “I wasn’t happy,” she said. An attempt to find happiness in an Internet venture left her broke and depressed. “I felt hopeless. I wasn’t feeling good about myself, and I blew my whole savings.”

Lynn turned to drugs at the age of 40, although she had never touched them previously in her life. Now 43, she says, “Most people I know who do drugs have done them for a long time, but I never used drugs when I was younger. I came from a wealthy family, did well in college and was a star basketball player. Within a year of using drugs, I lost everything and ended up on the streets. It actually only took me six months to hit bottom.”



The road back

After more than one stint in prison on drug-related offenses, Lynn entered a drug program and sought the help of Working Wardrobes to get her back into the workforce. Founded by Jerri Rosen in 1995, Working Wardrobes works with local shelters to provide job readiness and life skills workshops for people like Lynn who are ready to turn their life back around. Through the organization, Lynn was able to rebuild her life and found a job as an administrative assistant. "I made a huge mistake and lost 10 months out of my life and, the worst part, it cost me my freedom. I can't get a savings or checking account. Now, I'm slowly getting my life back. But it's a lot tougher now that I have a felony record."

Most employers will not hire a candidate with a felony record, although there are exceptions. Hiring managers commonly perform background checks that may delve back as far as 15 to 20 years for a high-level position but typically look back at least seven years. "It's very situational," Klimczak says of background checks. "Obviously, if you were ever arrested for embezzlement, you shouldn't waste your time applying at a bank. But an offense like a DUI may not bother some employers, depending on the position you're applying for."

The Men's Wearhouse, an avid supporter of Working Wardrobes, recently hired Indika W., another graduate of Rosen's program. Born into a wealthy family, Indika initially believed he could live off his parents his whole life. "My brother is a professor at Yale, and my sister has her master's in public health. Unfortunately, I chose a different path."

Without a thought to his future, Indika partied heavily and became addicted to drugs in high school and continued to use drugs through college. After several stints in jail for drug-related incidents, he turned to the Salvation Army for help. Through them he met Karen Lawson of Working Wardrobes, who helped him get back on track.

Lawson's 10-year background in leadership coaching makes her effective as a volunteer Working Wardrobes success coach. "People in Indika's position feel their options are limited. They feel afraid and judged by others. Many have the work skills but not the life skills to land them the interview," Lawson says.

After working with Lawson, Indika met Chris Byrne of The Men's Wearhouse through a job fair hosted by Working Wardrobes. "He presented himself well and was willing to start at an entry level," Byrne said. "He's made a lot of progress and is already a wardrobe consultant; it's likely he'll be considered for a management position in the future. Indika took the first step and had the initiative to contact me. That's what made the difference."

It can happen to anyone

Finding yourself suddenly without work or a home can happen to anyone. An unexpected catastrophic illness or a disaster like Hurricane Katrina can take everything away within a very short period of time. "Situations like these lead to a loss of the self-confidence and 'edge' that enables people to be successful," says Rosen, founder of Working Wardrobes. "We have had Ph.D.s and many white-collar criminals in our program who became tangled up in drugs and alcohol and ended up on the streets. It can happen to anyone. We live in a society of excess, and, unfortunately, too much alcohol and drugs are a part of it."

Rosen acknowledges that there's as much "inside" work as well as "outside" work for graduates of her program reentering the job market. And, although many don't make it, there are people like Indika and Lynn M. who are determined. "I have learned from my mistakes and am moving ahead," Indika said. "I realize that there are many companies that would never hire me, but there are companies like The Men's Wearhouse that give people like me a chance. I'm back in school and am pursuing my goal of importing and exporting textiles. I believe I can do this now. I'm not looking back." **ocm**

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The Laws of Absence

"If you had to pick the most complicated and frustrating part of employment law, it would be the laws governing leave of absence. Seventy-five percent of inquiries into our office come from employers with some question about leaves," says Mark Budensiek, an attorney with Rutan & Tucker, LLP.

The problem, according to Budensiek, exists because leave is governed by both state and federal laws. "California and

federal laws are similar but different enough to cause confusion.”

Budensiek cites the five basic categories for employee leave as:

1. Pregnancy disability leave
2. Family and medical leave
3. Leave in connection with work-related injuries (under workman’s compensation laws)*
4. Leave granted in certain cases as an accommodation for disability
5. Miscellaneous reasons: military leave, jury duty, leave for victims of domestic violence and others

* “Technically, the term ‘stress leave’ is slang; there really is no such thing,” says Budensiek. “A worker’s comp claim is filed the same as if the person suffered a slipped disc. The problem is in identifying the source of the stress: Does it result from personal issues or is it truly work-related?” Employees must show that work is more than 50% of the cause of the stress-related physical issue in order to collect worker’s compensation. **OCM**

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