

Career Gaps to Confidence Gaps

Each year, thousands of individuals make the pivotal decision to leave the workforce to have children or retire. These decisions are widely discussed and accepted by professionals in all fields. However, some individuals will be making a slightly different decision and actually decide to return to the workforce for a multitude of reasons: their kids just left for college, they miss having a set routine, or they crave the community a workplace creates. Whatever reason a person has for reentering the workforce, they may experience a confidence gap between how the market views their skills and their own perception of those skills. The re-entry of women into the workforce after a period of absence can be a challenging and daunting experience. Women who have taken time off to raise children or care for family members often find it difficult to regain their footing in the professional world. They may face discrimination, lack of support, and a lack of understanding from employers and colleagues. However, there are ways to support women in their re-entry and help them succeed in their careers. Furthermore, a LinkedIn survey found that women are four times less confident than their male counterparts when it comes to finding a new job (IANS Agency). Additionally, women are more likely to take a career gap than men leading to a variety of issues that arise when they try to rejoin the professional workforce. Group 360 offers women three pieces of advice that can be put into practice when returning to the workforce to help close this gap: highlight skills gained during the break from professional work, be accepting of not being perfect, and reach out to past networks.

First, it is important to note that women are more likely to take a career gap than men. Very recently, LinkedIn now allows individuals to select ‘Career Break’ as an option. Just over 50 percent of men under 35 claim to be the “main career” for their children, while 73 percent of women under 35 claim to be (Muller-Heyndyk). This implies that more women are leaving the workforce during pregnancy and after to care for their children than men. Additionally, recent trends have led to women giving birth later on in their lives and careers. This means that women will be leaving their careers at more senior levels, disproportionately affecting the talent pool available to hire and leaving many of these more senior positions to men. For instance, research from the comprehensive McKinsey report on Women in the Workplace found that “for every woman at the director level who gets promoted to the next level, two women directors are choosing to leave their company” (Krivkovich, Alexis, et al). Women giving birth later in life are also typically more financially secure leading them to feel less pressured to return to the workforce quickly. Furthermore, when women return to the workforce, they are not necessarily being considered for jobs that correspond to their skill set and previous experience.

Another issue women face when reentering the workforce is that their former professional network has gone away. Their previous bosses and coworkers may have retired or moved on to other positions, leaving these women unsure of who to turn to for access, support, or networking. Furthermore, some women only half-heartedly or assuredly commit to finding a new job when they decide to reenter the workforce, leading to a quiet job search. A quiet search lacks momentum, meaning that a person is not actively asking their former network, or at least

what is left of it, for feedback. These women are more hoping that a job falls into their lap than actively getting their skills and capability out into the field/market. We recently worked with a former female leader who had been out of the paid professional workplace for 17 years. She was shocked by the amount of skepticism she encountered, especially from male interviewers as to whether she “was really serious” or “whether she was just trying to prove that she could get a job.”

Group 360 wants women to know of and use all possible resources when reentering the workforce. First, women should not omit the skills learned and the impact of volunteer work done for their communities or children. Being a mother is a full-time job and it is important to recognize this. Instead of thinking of motherhood as a career gap, highlight the experiences and skills learned from being an active participant in a school’s parent-teacher association. Second, be ok with not being perfect. Women often set themselves to higher standards than men do. For instance, a Hewlett Packard internal report found that “men apply for a job when they meet only 60% of the qualifications, but women apply only if they meet 100% of them” (Mohr). Women should be putting themselves out there more because the outcome may be better than expected. A person will never be able to efficiently reenter the workforce if they do not put themselves out there. Lastly, women should not be afraid to reach out to their former network. Even if former coworkers have moved on to different opportunities, they may still be able to provide support. They can share crucial information on how the field has changed, offer feedback on a resume or know of possible open positions.

People, especially women, are often selling themselves short. As we start this New Year, reflect on the skills you possess and how you have used these skills in your day-to-day or work life. If you plan to return to the workforce this year, remember that you do have the skills and experience to find a new job and that you should not underestimate your capabilities; however, organizations also have a role to play in closing this gap. Like Group 360, McKinsey urges companies to “track representation and hiring and promotion outcomes more fully” (Krivkovich, Alexis, et al). Companies must reflect on how hiring practices can help close the gender gap in leadership.

Works Cited

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