

Conscious Careering



Rejoining the rat race; the challenge of returning to the workforce after taking extended time off

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Even for professionals who have enjoyed an unbroken string of employment for many years, keeping up with the rat race often seems like a formidable challenge. How difficult, then, must the challenge of rejoining the workforce seem to people who have been out of the job market for an extended period of time?

In reality, once an individual “falls off the rat” there are significant obstacles involved in clambering back on. In the course of my career coaching practice, I’ve worked with dozens of clients (both men and women) who have checked out of the workforce for several years and then felt the need to search for work again, either due to sheer financial necessity or out of an internal yearning to apply themselves once again in a professional setting. Often, the situation involves a parent who put their career on hold at one point to raise children. In other cases, however, it might relate to a mature worker who finds themselves bored with early retirement, or an individual who has been sidelined due to significant medical issues or the need to provide long-term care to an ailing relative.

Regardless of the reason, there’s no question that the challenges of the traditional job search process become magnified considerably when a candidate has been out of the market for an unusual length of time. No matter what creative resume format you utilize, for instance, you won’t be able to disguise the fact that you’ve taken an unusually long break from the working world. And unfortunately, these employment gaps still carry a stigma in today’s competitive job market as employers question, fairly or unfairly, whether it’s might be too risky to hire somebody without a recent track record.

Additionally, as if these external marketplace barriers weren’t enough of a hassle, there are also a number of predictable internal barriers that individuals face when attempting to find a new job after several years of unemployment.

For starters, feelings of self-doubt and insecurity are an almost unavoidable part of the process. If you haven’t had a chance to prove yourself in a professional environment for a while, you’re likely to wonder whether your skills still have value and whether you’ll be able to make a meaningful contribution to a new

organization. What’s more, these nagging doubts will become powerfully reinforced the moment you start canvassing the Internet job boards and discover that there are virtually no published positions for which you’re fully qualified—due to the constant inflation of skills, credentials, and qualifications.

So all in all, professionals who have taken a hiatus from the workforce should prepare themselves for a bumpy ride when it comes to rejoining the ranks of the employed. Most importantly, they will need to acknowledge the unique set of challenges (both internal and external) they will have to overcome in order to be successful. Denying these factors only compounds the difficulty of the search challenge. Additionally, it is often highly beneficial for returning workers to seek out professional support in planning, executing, and managing their job search campaign, whether this help is through a paid consultant or through the many free sources of aid available through local churches, community colleges, and the unemployment system.

Without regular encouragement, and expert advice on how to penetrate today’s hiring channels, the process of finding work for returning workers will be even more of an uphill battle than it needs to be.

Aside from these primary suggestions, which are somewhat generalized, here are a few specific tactical tips I’ve used to help job seekers in this situation maximize their success rate:

● **Use short-term training to compensate for your lack of recent experience.** Since you won’t be able to blow an employer away with a portfolio of recent on-the-job accomplishments, it’s a smart move to seek out and complete highly targeted training classes related to your target industry or field of expertise. This will not only add a number of marketable new skills to your resume, but will also build your confidence and help convince potential hiring managers that you’re back in “professional mode” and ready to make a triumphant comeback.

● **Don’t beat your head against the published job market.** By the time a hiring opportunity is announced on the Internet, or in the local paper, you’re already going to be at a significant disadvantage. It will be nearly impossible to compete against other candidates who can offer the employer a spotless, seamless employment pedigree. Your best bet, therefore, will be to engage in a guerrilla marketing campaign that takes advantage of the personal contact networking and direct target company marketing channels. These avenues are far less rigid than the published ad world and will enable you to reach employers—and win them over—before they open the opportunity up to hundreds of your potential competitors. So make a point to network closely with the people who can best vouch for your former professionalism. They’ll be your greatest asset.

● **Level the playing field with creativity, initiative, hustle, and persistence.** If you haven't worked in a while, you're not going to win the hiring game strictly through the force of your talent and credentials. Common sense suggests, therefore, that you'll need to outhustle and outwork your competition in order to catch the eye of discriminating hiring managers. So what you can't offer in recent experience, make up for in attitude. Take creative risks with your cover letters. Hand-deliver your resumes to the company's doorstep. Follow up assertively on all leads and be "professionally persistent" about reaching employers by phone in order to sell yourself and promote your qualifications.

In the end, taking some time off from the workforce can be a marvelous, life-transforming experience. Many of us working stiffs, in fact, are enormously jealous of those people who have the guts to "check out" for a while and focus on some areas of their life outside of the professional realm. Eventually, yes, you'll face a few extra challenges in getting back into the employment game, but if you bravely face the realities involved and give 110% to the effort, you'll be able to successfully jump back on to the career bandwagon. Just remember the wise words of King Solomon that I always share with my clients: "this, too, shall pass."

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