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LIFE'S WORK

## After Baby, Boss Comes Calling

By [LISA BELKIN](#)

AMY STEPNOWSKI spent 12 years as a banker specializing in Latin America. Which means she spent the better part of 12 years on airplanes. While pregnant with the second of her three children, she decided that that kind of globetrotting didn't allow her a family life, so she left JPMorgan Chase & Company in 2002. In the years that followed she "didn't have time to think about work, or going back to work, or actually much of anything at all that didn't involve children," she says.

It was not until last fall, with her youngest in preschool, that Ms. Stepnowski turned her thoughts back to banking. She spent four long weekends updating her skills at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth in a program called Back in Business, one of several cropping up around the country to bring workers with résumé gaps up to speed in the business world. Then, this spring, she found a job at a far smaller bank than the one she had left, working on a per project basis rather than full time.

Neither the refresher course, nor the ease of finding contract work, existed when she left the field five years ago. That is because she "opted out" just as the issue came to a head — a result, I confess, of a magazine piece I wrote for this newspaper — and caused a nasty and noisy debate about whether privileged and educated women were abandoning the workplace, or the workplace was abandoning them.

But now it is time for another phrase, "opting back in," a term that not only describes Ms. Stepnowski's decision to return, but also reflects the growing acceptance by business of a nonlinear career. It's a movement that's still in its infancy. And it is hard to separate lip-service by companies from true commitment for the moment. But should it take hold — should the stopping and starting, the ramping down and revving back up of a career become the norm — it would transform the workplace.

Numbers are driving the trend. There has been a 6 percent falloff in labor force participation among married mothers, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). But those women are not leaving permanently. They stay out an average of 2.2 years, according to research by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, the founding president of the Center for Work-Life Policy, whose book "Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success" (Harvard Business School Press) is just out. Then they try to opt back in. "Ninety-three percent of off-ramped women are trying to get back on track," Ms. Hewlett says, and while 74 percent do find work, only 40 percent find work they call satisfying.

Her new book is an upbeat chronicle of how dozens of major companies are setting out to improve those numbers. A looming worker shortage, brought on by the imminent retirement of the baby boomers, means off-ramped employees, already trained and battle-tested, will be increasingly valuable.

This means more of what we have already seen: flexible work schedules, telecommuting, job sharing. Women

in particular, but also a substantial percentage of men, have made it clear that is what it will take to keep them loyal. A study by the Families and Work Institute shows that 24 percent of women and 13 percent of men who work full-time would like to work part-time. And among the youngest workers, those now having children and most actively juggling family and career, Fortune magazine found that 61 percent would leave their job if they could find another that allows them to telecommute.

Which is leading companies to look deeper for flexibility. The law firm of Heller Ehrman, for instance, created a group called the Opt-In Project, which has spent the past year studying the way the firm does business. At the end of the month, the group plans to unveil a proposal to abandon the idea of billable hours that is deeply ingrained in the profession. "We can't afford to keep losing all these people," says Patricia Gillette, founder of the project. "The way we currently reward spending more and more hours at work makes no sense in a world where people demand balance."

This growing demand for balance, or what I prefer to call sanity, is also leading businesses to accept that some employees will leave no matter how much flexibility exists, and that it is better to keep the door open for their return, rather than slamming it tight.

That is the thinking behind the adjunct program at Booz Allen Hamilton, where employees are invited to keep their hand in even after they quit. About 100 workers have signed on for the two-year-old program, and several have moved back to full time, which is the eventual point. Lehman Brothers has a similar program, called Encore, which recruits workers who have left the workplace for as long as three years.

Robin Scheman is one of them. After 12 years in investment banking, she quit in 2002, when her children were 10 and 6. "I was burned out," she says. She spent three and a half years at home and was beginning to think about the road to re-entry when she was invited to an Encore luncheon. Intrigued by Lehman's stated determination to recruit seasoned women, Ms. Scheman went through 14 job interviews at the company searching for a good fit. At each meeting she repeated "that they should not even show me jobs that require more than a three- or four-day week," she says. "They made it clear that would not be a problem."

For the last year Ms. Scheman has been the director of training for investment banking at Lehman, working a three-day week. She is struck by how many younger women today are upfront about balance in their lives. "When I was coming in, in the 1980s, you wouldn't mention the idea of cutting back on work," she says. "In the 1990s, maybe you would whisper. Now they just say it directly."

Employers willing to offer opt-in options need access to potential employees, and there is a niche of businesses cropping up to fill that need. The past few years have seen the beginning of such entities as HR OptIn ([HROptin.com](http://HROptin.com)), which specializes in placement for human relations executives who are ready to return after time away; Mom Corps ([momcorps.com](http://momcorps.com)), which has a database of 6,000 mothers who have left the full-time workforce but are looking for challenging contract projects; and Flextime Lawyers, ([flextimelawyers.com](http://flextimelawyers.com)) matching legally trained workers with short term projects.

I have been writing about life and work long enough to know that a change in policy is not the same as real change. I hear regularly from workers who were all but laughed at when they tried to take advantage of a flexible program that was nothing but corporate window dressing. Or who work for a company listed in Working Mother's "100 Best Companies" but who are at the office nearly every weekend. This week I got a

typical e-mail message from a woman, in her 40s and trying to return to the workforce, who finds that “interviewers still think your brain has the consistency of baby food just because you’ve spent some time off with a baby.”

So I am too jaded to believe that this small handful of trendsetters will bring transformation overnight. They will not change the fact that too many employers still look at a résumé gap as a disqualifying mark; or that women who leave and return pay an average 18 percent salary penalty compared with those who never pause; or that men feel constrained from asking for flexibility because it carries a stigma; or that the only way to eliminate the stigma is for men to start to ask.

But whatever distance is left to travel before these exceptions become the norm, we are five years closer than when Ms. Stepnowski opted out. And I am not so jaded that I don’t recognize that this is a promising, and important, start.

*Note to Readers: Life’s Work, a column about workplace trends and office culture, which has run most recently in Sunday Business, today moves to Thursday Styles. It will appear every other week. E-mail: [belkin@nytimes.com](mailto:belkin@nytimes.com).*

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