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Comeback Careerists: Reinventing Work After Time Away

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By Toddi Gutner Special to The Wall Street Journal

Hilary Stark, an investment banker with a Harvard M.B.A had more than a decade of experience when she left the workforce in 1995 to raise her two children. Last year, she decided to come back. Her decision came just as Corporate America began to make it easier for professionals who've taken time away to return and to reinvent their careers in a way that works better for them than their 90-hour-a-week pasts might have.

To help jumpstart her search, Ms. Stark attended Harvard's program for businesswomen looking to re-enter the work force. While there, she met the chief diversity officer of Lehman, Anne Erni. Ms. Erni was on hand to talk about the firm's newly-launched Encore program, which recruits seasoned professionals who want to return to work after taking time off.

That's when Ms. Stark's re-entry plans got fast-tracked. Turns out, Ms. Erni was just beginning to think about hiring someone to head up the program. Ms. Stark, who had spent the previous 12 years not only raising children, but also managing people and projects on a volunteer basis, told Ms. Erni she really wanted to work for a program like Encore. Two months later, Ms. Stark became the program's full-time director. "It goes to prove the power of networks, and that you'll never know where or how you'll meet your next employer or your next hire," says Ms. Erni.

Of course, not all stories of women (or men) engineering a career comeback are as rosy. In fact, 93% of highly qualified professional women who have left the work force and been out for just over two years, are trying to get back in says Sylvia Ann Hewlett, the founding president of the Center for Work-Life Policy and author of "Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success" (Harvard Business School Press, 2007).

Though 74% do find work, only 40% say they are gainfully employed in full-time, mainstream jobs. "There is still a tremendous amount of stigma and suspension when employers see a hole in a resume," says Ms. Hewlett.

Still, dire statistics aside -- it is easier than it has been for white collar workers to jump back into a career -- and to craft your return to make it work for you. The motivation for companies is two-fold. First, there's the expected worker shortage as the first waves of 77 million baby boomers begin to retire; and second, is the myriad of evidence that the next, smaller generation of younger workers want more flexible work arrangements. The result: Companies are waking up to the idea of welcoming back well-educated and seasoned professionals, says Ellen Galinsky, president of the [Families and Work Institute](#).

To be sure, not every industry or company welcomes or has programs to recruit comeback careerists. But, there are a growing number of Web sites, recruiting agencies and job boards that specialize in placing returnees at companies willing to consider them. A number are also staffing professionals in part-time or flexible arrangement. Companies like [Mom Corps](#) and [On-Ramps](#) offer a myriad of resources for returnees and have job postings for positions in a variety of industries although not always in a broad range of locations as do more specialized firms like [Flex-Time Lawyers](#); [Aquent](#), for marketing executives; and [HROptin](#) for human-resources executives.

And, to facilitate that transition, a whole new industry of coaching and staffing firms as well as corporate and educational programs have popped up. "This talent pool is more and more necessary" and there is a growing recruiting effort to target parents returning to work, says Meryle Mahrer Kaplan, vice president of advisory services at Catalyst.

New targeted recruiting programs at top-tier business schools are meant to help ease the way for experienced professionals to return to work. Dartmouth University's Tuck School also has an intensive

course while Yale University and University of Minnesota's Carlson School are launching similar programs. Law schools are just beginning to get into the act, with Pace University and Hastings Law School offering refresher courses for comeback careerists.

Some programs have the added benefit of a corporate partner. Robin Mayer, 42, had more than 15 years experience as a corporate bond analyst before she took two years off to be with her three children.

As she launched a search for a new job last year, Ms. Mayer attended a three-day program at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, held in partnership with investment bank and designed to recruit and retrain women like her. She soon landed a job at the company as executive director of fixed income research. "I was a perfect fit," she says of the position, which allows her the flexibility to work from home some days.

If you're ready to make the move back to the work force, there are a number of things you can do to smooth the way. Allison O'Kelly, CEO of [Mom Corps](#), recommends taking a few classes to hone your skills. If you've been out of the market for a while, you might want to take a contract job a few notches below where you'd like to enter the job market. Industry and alumni associations are also a good resource for refresher coursework in your field.

In your resume and later in interviews, be sure to take the mystery out of the time away from work. If you've taken on projects at schools and charities and used some of the skills from your career, highlight those volunteer experiences and any bottom-line or eye-catching results from the projects. Use your cover letter to be very specific about where you think you fit into a firm and explain why hiring you would be in the company's best interest, says Deborah Epstein Henry, founder and president of [Flex-Time Lawyers LLC](#). "Anticipate the employer's concerns and how you will meet those concerns," says Ms. Henry.

Once you feel you're current or close to it with where your industry is today and you've shaped your resume, make a list of everyone you know, including former colleagues, alumni from your university days, folks you met through industry associations, former employers, and charities and volunteer organizations you've worked with. Reach out and tell them of your plans to return to the work force. Be clear on what kind of position you would like, advises Simi S. Nwogugu, CEO of [2Hats Network](#), a company that offers career coaching to re-entering professional women and creates corporate programs to recruit, develop and retain high-potential women. An estimated 42% of people found a job through a networking contact, according to a Right Management survey.

Make sure you take time to research whether firms in your industry are actively recruiting returning professionals through programs like the ones at financial firms (including and), management consultancies (including Booz Allen Hamilton) and accounting firms (including PricewaterhouseCoopers and Deloitte & Touche). If you find a company with such a program, send your resume.

For Dan Mayville it was a combination of these strategies that worked. Mr. Mayville left his job in operations management at a manufacturing company in Atlanta to care for his two young children so his wife, Debbie, could advance her career as a market research analyst. One-year into his at-home stint, Mr. Mayville enrolled in night classes at Georgia State and earned his M.B.A. over two years -- a move he hoped would smooth the way back to work when he was ready. At graduation, he hooked up with a professors to do a consulting project 20 hours a week for Deloitte & Touche, a firm that has been proactive in hiring and training comeback careerists. Three weeks in, the professor recommended Mr. Mayville who wasn't yet looking for a job for a full-time position as a manager of analytical services, a job he's now held for two years.

For some, the best bet for future employment it is to stay connected to your former employer. Some firms, particularly in the financial sector, are making it easier.

One example: The PricewaterhouseCoopers Full Circle program allows high-potential professionals leave the firm of up to five years with the option to return. During the time off, program enrollees meet with a mentor, and keep current on skills through company-sponsored training sessions and firm get-togethers. "Our problem is retention," says Jennifer W. Allyn, managing director in the office of diversity at PricewaterhouseCoopers. "And leaving with the intention of coming back is different than just leaving."

As the war for talent heats up, many companies say they realize that flexible work options are also a competitive talent management tool. "We think that providing flexible work alternatives will allow us to continue to attract and retain the most talented lawyers, many of whom expressed doubts about the ability to pursue a career doing challenging legal work while at the same time achieving an appropriate balance with their personal lives," says Jeffrey S. Lewis, a partner at New York law firm Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton who spearheaded the development of the firm's flexible work program.