



Point of View

Return to Planet Workforce: How to Come Back After Living in an Alternate Universe

People increasingly cycle in and out of the workforce. They take time to care for children or elderly parents, grapple with illness or struggle with unemployment. Returning to the workforce after a disruption is no longer uncommon although it is still challenging. But there are ways to smooth the transition.

How do you return to the workforce without losing ground? That's a central question for many people coming back after an extended absence. To be sure, there is a big difference between coming back from a planned absence, such as a maternity leave, and a layoff or other involuntary leave. But both situations share common elements, from regaining your confidence to updating your skills. While returning isn't easy, it can lead to new opportunities. Here are four ways to regain your professional footing.

The ties that bind

Don't let your professional and personal connections languish. This may seem daunting if you're knee deep in childcare but it is critically important. Call or e-mail colleagues and pop by the office regularly. Remain active in professional organizations. Tap alumni networks, past employers, industry job boards and online networking resources such as LinkedIn. Don't drop out of sight; when you are ready to resurface, it will be even more difficult.

Keep your skills fresh and current

Always keep your eye on your eventual return and what you'll need to succeed. If you plan to volunteer, use your professional expertise, such as accounting, marketing, fundraising, sales or legal skills. Take on a leadership role.

Consider taking a class, attending conferences or pursuing a degree. Attend conferences. Freelancing, project work or consulting also allows you to stay involved without a full-time commitment.

When the time comes, market your leave by identifying and quantifying your accomplishments and specifying how your time away actually makes you a better, more skilled employee.

Don't be intimidated or sell yourself short

Whether you're returning to the same job or starting fresh, you may face a psychological obstacle - feeling that you no longer have as much to offer. Get the facts by researching job qualifications and industry trends. You could be better qualified than you think. If not, focus on filling any gaps. A quality staffing agency or career coach can help you assess and showcase your skills. Some companies also have programs to help recruit returnees and ease the transition.

Also, don't apologize for your time away. State what you've been doing, segue into your relevant experience and move on to why the job you're applying for is a good fit for you and the company.

Be prepared to be flexible

In some ways, returning is like starting a new job, even if you're returning to your old gig. All eyes are on you and expectations can be high. Let your colleagues and boss know you're back for the long haul. If you've prepared for your return and carefully chosen your next step, you will succeed - and be better for the experience.