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Getting From At-Home to On-the-Job, Even Now

By SUE SHELLENBARGER



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When a mothers' group huddled on Laurie Witt's screened porch last summer over sandwiches and iced tea, they wanted more than leisurely chit-chat. As their children played nearby, the women grilled each other in imaginary job interviews, tore apart each other's resumes and told tales of rugged job-market forays.

All had former careers—in consulting, marketing or finance—and all were intent on returning to work after years at home. The biweekly career-coaching sessions “built confidence and helped us develop a stronger game plan,” says Ms. Witt, of Wellesley, Mass. Three of the four regular participants have since found jobs.



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Rick Friedman for the Wall Street Journal
Laurie Witt returned to work after taking time to raise three children.

Few job seekers face higher hurdles than at-home parents trying to return to the work force. Mothers at home full-time crested in 2004 at a recent high of 31.2%, among married-couple families with children, government data show; at-home dads, who often face even greater bias than returning mothers, make up about 5%. Many of these parents now need or want to get back to work. Beyond the recession and employer bias against dropouts, many also are burdened by outdated skills and self-doubt.

Those who succeed are using savvy job-finding tactics, including some particular to at-home parents. Some are mining neighborhood networks in new ways, drawing on other out-of-work professionals for career coaching. Others choose volunteer work strategically, to hone skills. Still others invest heavily in training and credential-building. In sum, returning parents “are taking a more sophisticated approach,” says Carol Fishman Cohen, an author and co-founder of iRelaunch.com, a Web site on the topic. They also need a measure of luck, of course, to find employers who aren't biased against taking career breaks. Here are three success stories:

Neighborhood Nexus

In her 10 years out of the work force, Ms. Witt, a former design manager for Nike, sought out volunteer work that would keep her skills “rich and vibrant,” she says. She chaired a \$115,000-a-year scholarship program and co-headed a 60-parent school group with a \$65,000 budget. By 2007, when her children were 3, 10 and 12, “I was ready to take a break from all the volunteer work,” she says. Getting started was tough. “I don't know where to begin,” she told her husband, who brought home a book, “Back on the Career Track” co-authored by Ms. Cohen.

When It's Time

- Be prepared to spend money and time retraining and upgrading credentials
- Emphasize the value you can bring to the company now, rather than your time away
- Recount past work successes in specific terms, as if they happened yesterday
- Network in depth, asking for critiques of your résumé and interview skills
- If asked, explain your career break briefly and in positive terms, then move on

Ms. Witt began spreading the word that she was job-hunting. “I got a lot of ‘Me too!’” reactions, and thus the screened-porch sessions began, she says. Among the tips she gleaned was to leave dates off her resume, to avoid distracting employers from her skills. The sessions also lifted her confidence. She started cold-calling employers for meetings, and began landing interviews. Even with the economy in a swoon, she had three job offers by November and signed on as a regional marketing manager at Watson Wyatt, a benefits and human-resources consulting firm.

Patricia O'Connor, a Watson Wyatt managing consultant and Ms. Witt's boss, liked not only her Nike experience, but her volunteer work. As a working mother, she says, “there's a connection there for me.” The scholarship job showed Ms. Witt could “manage a lot of complexity” on her own, she says. Ms. O'Connor says it was clear from Ms. Witt's resume that she could handle a wide range of tasks. “She had her hands in a lot of things all along.”

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an applicant from the crowd, says Tim Schoonover, chairman of OI Partners, a career-coaching firm. It may not even matter whether you got a paycheck in your last "job." In Ms. Witt's case, says recruiter Patricia Lenkov of Agility Executive Search, the volunteer work was enough to prove "continued development and a track record of success."

Pay to Play

Many at-home parents discover new interests and change career paths when they return; only 39% take the same kind of job they left, says a 2005 study of 130 people at the Wharton School. During Katherine Buehler's 16-year break caring for her three children, she discovered an affinity for advising people on investments, and fixed her sights on a career doing that. As a former client-service director for a wealth-management concern, she had a good start.

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But reaching her goal took more credential-building and networking than the Kenilworth, Ill., mother expected. After deciding in 2005 to return to work, she spent the next two years prepping for the Certified Financial Planner exam. Nearing the test, she spent most of a Florida vacation hitting the books, saying goodbye each morning to her husband and three teenagers and setting out on her bike for the library.

Then, just after Ms. Buehler passed the exam and hit the job market with her newly minted credentials, the economy tanked. Intent on her goal, she turned down a first job offer last September, because it emphasized sales and "in my gut, didn't feel like the right fit," she says. As hiring ground to a halt by December, "I was kicking myself, thinking, 'I should have taken that job,'" she says. She did pro-bono work, helping low-income families with finances, and forced herself to keep networking.

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Her dogged efforts landed her an interview in January, with Globe Wealth Advisors, Deerfield, Ill., a unit of Globe Corp., an investment company. Bert A. Getz Jr., co-chief executive, says he was awash in applications from ex-employees of Wall Street firms when he heard about Ms. Buehler from a business contact. He was impressed by her aggressive preparation and, in a twist, saw the break on her resume as a plus. The open job was a new position, and "we wanted to start with a clean canvas. We didn't want someone coming in and saying, 'This is the way Goldman Sachs does it,'" Mr. Getz says. "Katherine comes with a fresh perspective." He hired her as a vice president and head of compliance; both say it's a good fit.

More than half of workers returning from career breaks sign on with companies smaller than those they left, the Wharton study shows. Smaller employers tend to be less hung up on conventional career ladders; checking out such firms "is even more important in this down market," Ms. Cohen says.

Give to Get

Shavonne Blades was apprehensive about Pam Kruteck, one of 40 applicants for a sales job, even before they met for a lunch interview. Ms. Blades, publisher of Yellow Scene, Erie, Colo., a glossy regional magazine, feared Ms. Kruteck's former career in advertising, including a stint as media-services director at Slim-Fast Foods, made her overqualified. "My first reaction was, 'Oh no, another media snob,'" she says.

But by the time the pair finished lunch, Ms. Blades had done a 180. She tried to scare Ms. Kruteck away, telling her, "Sales is a brutal job; there's a lot of rejection," she says. But Ms. Kruteck didn't wince, and proved herself humble and open to learning. Ms. Blades says she also won her over by "getting it"—understanding the magazine's mission; "she has that passion" about its goals. She offered Ms. Kruteck the job.

Ms. Kruteck is taking a step down in pay and status. But she chooses not to see it that way. To her, the job poses an opportunity to learn a new skill—sales. Also, her background afforded Ms. Kruteck enough leverage to persuade Ms. Blades to let her work part-time, to spend time with her sons, 10 and 13, she says.

"As long as I'm making money and you're making money, it shouldn't matter," she told Ms. Blades. Ms. Kruteck considers herself "lucky to find someone who is willing to take a flyer on me" and give her flexibility.

Albeit a step down, the job may actually be "a better position" for Ms. Kruteck because it's "a better fit" personally, says OI Partners' Mr. Schoonover. Also, Ms. Lenkov says, getting a foot in the door often pays off later; "one may have to take a step backward to ultimately advance."

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