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# Getting back to business

**After time off to raise kids, returning to work can solve a host of problems. First step: Rebuild your network.**

By **George Mannes**

January 23, 2006: 1:30 PM EST



NEW YORK (MONEY Magazine) - Julie Printz left the paid workplace in 2000. The systems analyst, then making \$53,000 a year at a St. Paul insurance company, was wracked with guilt each morning after dropping off her crying daughters -- one three years old, the other 10 months -- at day care.

She was exhausted at night from working odd hours to troubleshoot failed computer programs. She took a stress-reduction class through work but it didn't help -- until she reached the lesson suggesting that sometimes the solution is to make a major change in one's life. So she quit.

Six years later, Printz, 41, is encountering a new type of stress. Though her husband, Greg Berger, was making \$93,000 as a software tester when Printz left her job, he was laid off two years later and now earns \$77,000 in a new testing position.

The drop in his income, combined with the loss of hers, has put a big strain on their once-comfortable finances: The couple have maxed out a \$60,000 home-equity line of credit and run up \$10,000 in credit-card debt.

So with their two daughters now in school, Printz decided to rejoin the world of paid work. But after five months of job hunting, with 40 job applications and three interviews to show for her efforts, Printz has had no luck.

"When I last looked for a job 11 years ago, I had three offers in six weeks," says Printz. "I knew it wouldn't be that easy, but I didn't think it would be this hard either."

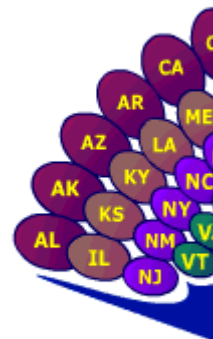
The rocky road back to a career after years at home to care for kids is one traveled by millions of American parents every year. Not surprisingly, most of them are women: Just 58 percent of moms with children age five and under work vs. 74 percent of women with kids ages 6 to 17. (The employment rate for dads stays steady near 90 percent.)

As important and rewarding as the time at home may be, it comes at a steep price: In addition to the income lost during the nonworking years, female professionals who take three or more years off earn 37 percent less on average than women who haven't taken time off,

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If you're resuming your career after a number of years as a stay-at-home parent -- or after any kind of long-term hiatus -- you face some stiff hurdles.

Unless you've been unusually diligent about staying in touch with former colleagues, you probably don't have a professional network to provide you with valuable job leads. Your job skills, no doubt, are rusty. You'll have to fight the perception that you're less committed to your career than peers who haven't taken a time-out. And you'll have to overcome your own self-doubts as well.

"It took me about a year and a half," says Printz, "just to get comfortable interviewing."

How do you move past the obstacles to land a job that fills your needs? Take these steps.

### Get a grip

Make a hard-nosed assessment of what you want out of a job and what you have to offer. Be honest about your priorities; don't, for example, tell yourself you'd be happy with any stimulating job, only to decide, once an offer comes in, that a 75 percent pay cut is too high a price to pay for work you love.

If you want a workday short enough for you to drop off your kids at school in the morning and greet them in the afternoon, you have a lot fewer choices than if you'll settle for the usual 9-to-5 grind. So focus your job search by considering the trade-offs you're willing to make.

You'll also need to update your skills and catch up on changes in your industry since you last worked. Take a class to become familiar with the computer technology currently used in your field. Update certifications and licenses if your profession requires them. Follow industry developments by subscribing to trade journals, reading online blogs by industry insiders and signing up for [Google news alerts](#) keyed to important industry issues.

In short, do what's necessary to make your years out of the work force invisible to interviewers.

When updating your resume, however, you can include relevant volunteer work. If you raised thousands in a charity fund raiser (speaks to your marketing skills) or helped kids publish a yearbook (establishes your project management skills), list those achievements -- just be sure to clarify how the experience is applicable to work.

Notes Kathryn Sollmann, co-founder of Women@Work Network, "Business skills aren't always developed in a business setting."

### Dial into a network

In a perfect world, you'd have stayed in contact with all the people you knew in your old work life. But if you haven't, get reacquainted now. Attend meetings of local professional organizations, and don't be shy about introducing yourself to other members.

Don't confine your networking to official business situations either. Mary Truslow, 45, last year landed work as a recruiter after four years at home with her kids; the introduction that led to that job arose from a conversation she had with a friend from church who also belongs to her garden club.

### Get your house in order

Your top priority must be to line up child care. Until you know who will look after your kids and on what schedule, you won't know what jobs you can take.

Nothing dampens an interviewer's enthusiasm faster than if he asks, "How soon can you start?" and you reply, "Um, depends on how quickly I can get a sitter."

Prepare your family to pitch in more around the house as well. Your kids may have to find another chauffeur, and your spouse will have to change routines.

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### Crunch the numbers

It costs money to make money. Going back to work may entail child-care costs, transportation expenses and, in all likelihood, increased spending on takeout food as well as a back-to-business wardrobe. Don't forget taxes. A second paycheck in the house will probably be taxed at a higher rate than a solo wage earner's.

But even if your net pay amounts to just a few cents on the dollar, the long-term benefits may more than justify returning to work. A good job now, after all, may lead to a better job later, while enabling you to build retirement savings.

Then too, the longer you stay out of the work force, the harder it may be to return.

"People tend to focus on the immediate cash-flow issues, but the long-term financial consequences should be an equally relevant consideration," says Kristin Maschka, president of the nonprofit Mothers & More.

### Roll with the punches

If your job search doesn't yield results, change your tactics -- or expectations. Accept that you're unlikely to return to work at your old salary. And consider taking a less than perfect job now that could lead to a better one later.

Catherine Workman, 41, a former fuel-oil marketer from Pound Ridge, N.Y., found that out when she tried unsuccessfully to return to the oil industry after six years at home with her two kids.

After a year with no luck, she settled for a part-time job assembling marketing documents for an auditing firm - a job she wasn't keenly interested in. But last October, that job led to a new position that suits her perfectly: working as a business analyst at the same firm.

Workman's advice to other returning parents? "Persevere and keep looking."

Which is just what Julie Printz plans to do. "I'm thrilled with the experience I've had at home," says Printz. "But I'm anxious to get going again on the career."

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