

## Opting In Best Practices

**A group of successful executives that have successfully On Ramped back into their careers offer their advice on how best to take time out of your career and stay on track. We hope their experience will inspire and help you.**

## Stepping Out

**Consider Your Options for Cutting Back Before You Opt Out Completely** – The marketplace is changing but on average, women who Opt Out for some time still pay a price in career advancement and earning potential for leaving the workforce completely. We hope this won't be the case for you, but many talented women who leave are surprised by the challenges and bias they face when they are ready to return to work. Before you choose to Opt Out completely, evaluate your options thoroughly and seriously consider opportunities for staying at work on a reduced basis, taking an extended leave of absence, or taking your skills independent as a consultant on a part time basis. If you do decide that Opting Out for some time is the best option for you and your family, start laying the groundwork for your return as soon as you leave.

**Preserve Your Network and Your Reputation** - Your reputation and your network are your best career assets, preserving them will pave the way for your return to work. Consider leaving on a high point, not a low point. And after you leave, explore opportunities to consult part time to maintain your reputation and network. Other options for keeping the door to a past career open include staying involved in industry associations, pro-bono work in your field, or journalism in your market space. If these are not options for you, regular social networking with past colleagues will help to keep those connections strong. And a leadership or board position with a non profit, or volunteer work in an area that you are passionate about will demonstrate your continued leadership skills and build new networks.

**Explore Your Passions** – Many professionals find that their time out of the corporate environment frees them to explore new areas of interest, and may lead them down a new career path. Whether it's a new business, a career change, or involvement in community service or a political campaign, spend some of your newly acquired time exploring your passions. The investment will help to keep your skills fresh and your head in the game, and just may lead you down another career path.

**Consider How Long You Stay Out** – If your plan is to return to your career after some time off, the clock may be ticking. Every person's story is different, and only you best understand your situation and the marketability of your skills. But studies show that negative effects on career progression and earning potential are linked to how long women stay out of the workforce. One On Ramp recruiting program at an investment firm targets individuals who have been out of the workforce for 3 years or less. Another program targets those who have been out of the workforce for 3-5 years. None that we know of target women who have been out for more than 5 years.

## Opting Back In

**Assess Your Personal and Professional Goals** – One thing that time out of workforce, and off of the career track can offer is perspective. Before you step right back onto your prior career track, assess your personal and professional goals. Your priorities, skills and interests may have changed. Carol Fishman Cohen, and Vivian Steir-Rabin co-authors of the book "Back on the Career Track," to be released in June 2007 offer excellent tools in their book for assessing your career goals as you prepare to make a career comeback.

**Demonstrate Your Commitment** - No matter how dynamic you were in your prior career, once you've stepped out of the workforce for some time you'll need to demonstrate to potential employers that you are serious about getting back in the game. If you've been consulting, this may offer the credibility that you need. If you haven't been working for pay, consider other ways to demonstrate your initiative and drive. This is where community leadership and pro bono work can work to your advantage.

You might also consider completing an On Ramp program at a noteworthy University. Several leading MBA and Law schools are now offering these programs for professionals that have taken time out of their careers and are planning a return to work. Many offer skills, job search, networking and even image refreshers. More importantly, they send the signal to your future employer that you are serious about your career comeback.

**Refresh Your Professional Persona** – Whether you have help through a university On Ramp program, work with a coach, or rely on your own initiative, you'll need to refresh your professional persona as you prepare to re-launch your career. Refresh your industry knowledge, your resume and perhaps your image as you prepare your return.

**Warm Up Your Network** - Once you've revitalized your professional self, it's time to actively reach out to your network. As any good career coach will tell you, your network is your most valuable job hunting asset. Set up lunches with past colleagues and contacts, engage with the leading recruiters in your space, go on informational interviews, join industry associations, attend conferences, take on short term consulting projects. These activities are much more likely to land you back on track than sending blind resumes.

**Don't Apologize for the Gap** – Don't leave white space on your resume. Instead, showcase relevant skills and experience during the years you were out of the workforce using concrete examples that demonstrate your capabilities and level of commitment. Similarly, avoid apologizing for the gap in interviews. Even a lengthy explanation of your time out, will sound like an apology. Instead, develop a concise, positive elevator pitch that describes what you've been doing for the intervening years and showcases relevant capabilities and concrete results.

**Interviewing Well** – Demonstrate industry knowledge. Ask good questions. Show confidence and enthusiasm. Showcase relevant capabilities and concrete results. Be matter of fact about your choice to stay home and your commitment to returning to work. And don't ask them take your word for it, also offer compelling references.

## **Transitioning Back to Work**

**Easing the Transition back to Work** – If you took time out of the workforce to care for children or other family members, you'll need to put some infrastructure in place to ease the transition back to work. A little advanced planning will go a long way to making the transition smooth for everyone.

### **Find Good Quality, Flexible Childcare or Eldercare**

This may mean paying a good nanny or nurse slightly more than the going rate so there is no risk of losing them and they are more motivated to support your schedule. It may mean selecting a day care with flexible policies to smooth scheduling issues, or both.

### **Work with your Partner and Support Network to Craft an Emergency Care Plan**

Work with your spouse or partner, nanny or family to understand their professional limitations and craft a team plan for responding to the inevitable emergency care situations - a sick child, an emergency meeting, travel. If you and your spouse both travel for your jobs, sit down on a weekly basis to negotiate your travel schedules. Each of you will need to make compromises in the process so you both win.

### **Take Advantage of Technology**

In this day and age there is no excuse for being tied to your desk. A full suite of technologies has been designed to help make us productive from anywhere. Invest in the right tools and expertise in using them, to make your work hours as productive as possible and allow you to schedule your work around family commitments.

### **Create Systems to Help Life Run Smoothly at Home**

A little planning can go a long way in helping to ease transitions between home and work. Suggestions include: laying out clothes and packing lunches each night to get you to work and school on time; maintaining a family calendar with the travel schedule of each parent, caregiver and school schedules and children's activity schedules so you're always on the same page; and planning meals and stocking the fridge each week, so you always have plenty of food on hand to feed the masses.

**Be Prepared for Mixed Emotions** - If you are like a number of Opt In moms we've heard from, you may be surprised at the range of emotions you'll experience once you return to work – even within the course of one day! You'll likely experience elation at the freedom to focus without interruption, and at the satisfaction and accolades that accompany your accomplishments at work. And yet, you are equally likely to experience guilt over missed opportunities at home, and stress over the level of complexity of your new family schedule. When the emotions come, remember that you're not alone.

**Assess, Then Limit Your Internal Debate** – Plan to give yourself time to adjust to the transition back to work. Wait to assess at 3 and 6 months. Once you've passed your assessment marks if you've decided that your return is on track, limit your internal debate. Committing yourself mentally can limit your guilt and put you in a frame of mind to focus on making it work. Your resolve will help put your family at ease as well.

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