



A Curated Research Report

Prepared by The Center for Women and Business at Bentley University

The Workplace Journey: Caregiving, Career Breaks, and Reentry



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Gloria Cordes Larson
Center for Women and Business

About the Gloria Cordes Larson Center for Women and Business (CWB)

Advancing women and fostering workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion

The CWB provides thought leadership and training on critical diversity, equity, and inclusion issues. CWB facilitators lead hundreds of sessions with businesses worldwide, providing knowledge and tools to foster inclusive organizations.

Our dynamic programs focusing on workplace inclusion range from strategic sessions for senior leaders to hands-on workshops for emerging professionals. Topics include:

- Corporate Culture, Unconscious Bias, and Inclusive Leadership
- Allyship, including Men in Partnership to Advance Women
- Building Confidence and Overcoming Unseen Barriers
- The Role of Courageous Conversations
- Mentorship, Sponsorship, and Networks
- Talent Pipeline Issues from Entry Level to the Boardroom
- The Impact of Intersectionality
- Authentic Leadership and Team Development
- Effective Negotiations
- Workplace Flex and Parental Leave
- Taking Employee Resource Groups to the Next Level
- Developing Diversity and Inclusion Metrics
- The Multigenerational Workforce—Issues and Impacts



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About This Report

On the following pages, the Gloria Cordes Larson Center for Women and Business (CWB) explores the many dimensions of workplace reentry, a process that impacts at least one in four Americans each year. In addition to identifying the most current and relevant data, we address the critical role that caregiving plays, given that it is often the impetus for work breaks. We examine workers' experiences during their time away and the often arduous reentry process. The report also spotlights the unique experiences of women, veterans, and those confronting medical issues, including mental health. We place emphasis on women's experiences because they are disproportionately impacted by caregiving demands and the need for career breaks.

In addition to providing a *state of the state* on workplace reentry, this report serves as a practical resource. It includes specific recommendations for employers and employees alike, a glossary of terms, a list of companies with on-ramp programs, and a list of workplace reentry resources.

In preparing this report, we reviewed over 165 sources and interviewed numerous individuals, including returners, businesses, and those who run reentry programs.

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Lead Author: Trish Foster, CWB Senior Director

Layout/Editing: Anna Babbi Klein, CWB Program Director

Research Support: Janelle Gee, CWB Program Manager

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Caregiving in the U.S. provides a critical backdrop to the topic of workplace reentry. Workers overwhelmingly report that caregiving obligations negatively impact their ability to work productively, and a significant percentage of employees — primarily women — take leave for caregiving at some point throughout their career. Although most leave-takers want to return, a significant percentage won't find a job comparable to their former position.

All genders are impacted by caregiving but the largest affected group is women, who represent approximately 75 percent of caregivers and carry the largest burden of unpaid caregiving in the U.S. While breakout data on how caregiving impacts women of color is limited, we know that they are disproportionately impacted and include such information where possible.

Reasons for workplace leaves vary from caregiving in all its unique forms to personal medical needs, elder care, and military service, but the primary driver is child care. While women disproportionately take on child care responsibilities, the number of men taking a break to stay at home with their children has increased significantly over the past decade.

We explore the impact of caregiving and employer views on pages 4-7 and spotlight women returners on pages 8-11.

The return process is often harder than expected, with surprising challenges impacting those reentering the workplace. Just a few examples of the hurdles that relaunchers need to overcome include: a decrease in confidence; a real or perceived deterioration of skills; and employer stigma about their commitment to work. Employees and employers alike should look at both the break and reentry process as part of a continuum, planning for reentry even before leave is taken.

Formal reentry programs, such as returnships, are proliferating. Well-executed returner programs can provide valuable on-ramps for employees and help organizations tap into highly skilled, motivated, and mature workers. We discuss the return process, the challenges, and returner programs on pages 12-17.

Military veterans, critical and talented members the U.S. workforce, bring exceptional expertise to the civilian landscape. Yet they often face reentry challenges based on their own mindsets as well as those resulting from biases, hiring approaches, and onboarding processes in civilian-run organizations. We spotlight the experiences of veterans and the issues unique to female veterans on pages 18-21.

Workplace leave for medical reasons is common. Of the approximately 20 million people who take unpaid leave each year through the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), a significant majority use it to care for their own injuries or illnesses or for those of loved ones. In the workplace discussion around health and well-being, mental health is a rapidly growing concern and the increasing focus of research and media coverage. We identify unique considerations around leave and reentry related to medical needs, including mental health, on pages 22-24.

Recommendations for employee and employer alike are addressed at the end of the report. This section includes considerations ranging from how and why a work break might be needed to how to ensure a successful reentry. Recommendations begin on page 25.

The appendices of the report include: a glossary of terms; a list of companies with on-ramp programs; and a list of workplace reentry resources.

THE CAREGIVING PREDICAMENT

The growing issue of caregiving in the U.S. has been characterized as a *crisis*,¹ and thus provides a critical backdrop to the topic of workplace reentry and this report. Its impact stretches beyond women and children to men, millennials, executive leaders, and seniors.² The average family caregiver spends about 24 hours per week providing care and one in four devotes more than 40 hours a week.³ Their responsibilities include caring for children or other family members, particularly elders, as well as those with physical or mental health issues including physical disabilities. Among all Americans, 40 percent are both raising a child or caring for an adult child, as well as caring for a parent aged 65 or older.⁴ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identifies this group as *the sandwich generation*. We explore the caregiving challenge in this section.⁵

Caregiving Drives Career Interruption

Almost three quarters of U.S. workers have caregiving obligations of some kind, and looking ahead, caregiving needs and the burdens they place on American workers are only expected to

increase. The *Wall Street Journal* reports that 80 percent of workers believe their productivity has been impacted by their home responsibilities, preventing them from doing their best work,⁶ and Unum finds that 78 percent of those with current caregiving responsibilities see such demands increasing over the next 5-10 years and beyond.⁷

When asked if caregiving has impacted their careers, 28 percent of people say yes, identifying negative impacts on assignments and opportunities for raises and promotions.⁸ And Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) research backs this up. Its survey of employers indicates that common workplace challenges for caregivers, such as late arrival, early departure, or unplanned absences, undermine career advancement.⁹

In 2017, as part of the *Survey of U.S. Employees on Caregiving*, Harvard researchers found that one third of employees left a position due to the conflict between work and family caregiving duties. They reported that those who decide to leave work in order to handle their care responsibilities do so because of: the high costs of paid help; the challenge of finding trustworthy, qualified help; and the inability to meet work demands in the face of personal caregiving responsibilities.¹⁰

What type of caregiving prompts employees to leave an organization?¹¹



Caring for a newborn or adopted child



Caring for an elder with daily living needs



Caring for an ill or disabled family member

Workplace interruptions affect different demographic groups, and the impact on each group varies. For example:

- Two very different groups are most likely to leave a job for caregiving: younger workers and those in higher-paying, managerial, or executive positions.¹² The latter group is likely able to leave because they have the financial resources to do so.
- About 25 percent of U.S. working women return to work within two weeks of giving birth, and the lowest income earners are overwhelmingly represented in this group.¹³ This is likely driven by the reality that lower-income employees are more apt to feel they may lose their jobs if they take time off.¹⁴

- The research demonstrating the outsized challenges and micro-inequities that women of color face at work indicates that they are disproportionately impacted when it comes to caregiving breaks — they either find it more difficult to take the needed leave or are judged more harshly for doing so.¹⁵ For related information, see the CWB report *Intersectionality in the Workplace: Broadening the Lens of Inclusion*.

The Growing Burden of Caregiving on Millennials¹⁶

With an aging population, Millennials are taking on caregiving responsibilities “...at pivotal times (in their lives) that threaten to derail expected milestones, like starting a family or buying a house.”¹⁷

—Maria Aranda, Associate Professor of Social Work & Gerontology, University of Southern California



More than six million Millennials are providing care for a parent, parent-in-law, or grandparent



24%

Millennials make up 24% of unpaid caregivers in the U.S.

1 in 3
MILLENNIALS



are caring for someone with dementia

84%

of all Millennials, regardless of gender, say they expect to take a significant break at some point in their careers for childcare or other reasons

Gender and the Impact of Child Care

In a 2018 survey conducted by the Center for American Progress (CAP), mothers were 40 percent more likely than fathers to say that they had personally felt the negative impact on their careers of child-care issues.¹⁸ And 78 percent of stay-at-home mothers say they are doing so to care for family versus only 24 percent of stay-at-home fathers.¹⁹ While exact data on the number of women currently taking a career break to raise children is difficult to obtain, the U.S. Department of Labor estimates that at any given time there are 2.6 million mothers of ideal working age who are not participating in the workforce.²⁰ Their reasons for leaving or staying out of the workplace are primarily due to child care.

A Center for Work-Life Policy Survey found that among highly qualified women who dropped out of the workforce, more than two thirds would not have done so if their employers had provided more flexible work options.²¹

While the majority of people impacted by work breaks and reentry are women, the number of men now taking leave cannot be ignored.

Boston Consulting Group reports that 60 percent of working mothers and 52 percent of working fathers believe balancing work and family is difficult and that “...many of both (genders) step back from, or off, the career track as a result.”²⁵

U.S. Census Bureau data shows that in 2017 approximately 267,000 men were taking a break to stay at home with their children.²² This figure represents a significant increase over the previous decade, when the number stood at about 165,000. And Pew Research notes that “A growing share of at-home fathers say they are home specifically to care for their home or family.”²³

The status of fathers taking leave is changing rapidly and adds complexity to the overall issue. While 29 percent of organizations now offer some kind of paid leave for fathers, a significant number of men fear losing their job if they take leave, and almost three quarters believe that there is little workplace support for fathers.²⁴

Women Carry the Burden of Caregiving

Women, who represent 75 percent of caregivers, bear a disproportionate share of unpaid caregiving in the U.S.

They also are much more likely to deal with the difficult tasks related to eldercare, such as bathing, toileting, and dressing.

Even in married, two-income households, women are three times more likely to carry the bulk of the *cognitive load*, mentally carrying all of the behind-the-scenes work that enables the family to function. This ranges from doctors’ appointments and school obligations to social engagements, family finances, and home maintenance responsibilities.²⁶ See the CWB report *The Pipeline Predicament: Fixing the Talent Pipeline* for related information.

Companies need to do more to meet women where they are, and enable them to get to where they want to be. At every life and family stage, people have different needs. Young parents have different needs than empty nesters, and careers no longer take a straight line.

There's this big, ongoing conversation in the business world about how to improve gender representation, so let's figure it out, by providing onsite daycare, or providing work hours that enable all people — not just women — to have the flexibility to drop their kids at school in the morning. My organization believes that the workplace should reflect today's workforce and that companies need to proactively shift to better meet their needs.²⁷

—Addie Swartz, Founder and CEO, reachHIRE



Employer Understanding About Caregiving Demands is Mixed

Forward-thinking organizations are not only working to better understand employee caregiving needs, but also to provide solutions to what is becoming a national caregiving crisis. They recognize the imperative to create solutions for employees who remain in the workforce and to establish easier on-ramps for people who have taken career breaks.

Economics alone should drive these efforts, given that American businesses lose \$3 billion annually due to absenteeism related to family caregiving issues.²⁸ However, many organizations remain disconnected and lacking in understanding of the issue and its impacts.²⁹

- Few employers gather information on the care profiles of their workforce to learn which employees are impacted by caregiving.

- Most do not measure, or see the need to measure, hidden caregiving costs such as the negative impacts on their employees' productivity and well-being.
- Few invest in communicating about care-related benefits.
- Many are not sensitive to the manifestations of caregiving responsibilities — such as tardiness, unplanned absences, and missed opportunities for travel or promotion — and how they will negatively impact their employees' careers.

A Harvard report on the topic states that “...many employers remain largely oblivious to the growing costs of this hidden *care economy*—costs that hurt employers and employees alike.”³⁰ Indeed, only 24 percent of employers think caregiving has a negative impact on their employees, and a mere ten percent of employers offer any kind of subsidy for eldercare.³¹

SPOTLIGHT ON WOMEN - RETURNERS CONFRONT UNIQUE CHALLENGES

Women represent 75 percent of caregivers and carry the largest burden of unpaid caregiving in the U.S. Indeed, they are three times more likely than fathers to leave their job at some point to care for their family. And women are much more likely to feel that caregiving issues have negatively impacted their careers, with a significant majority who leave work feeling they would not have done so if more flexible options had been available.³²

After navigating a challenging reentry process, women, and especially women of color, often confront significant biases in the workplace. (For more details, see the CWB reports *Intersectionality in the Workplace: Broadening the Lens of Inclusion* and *The Pipeline Predicament: Fixing the Talent Pipeline*) Despite the biases they confront, the data shows that women, including returners, have a significant positive impact on the workplace.

Reentry is a Key Career Transition

Research shows that more than 3 million U.S. women are currently hoping to return to work after a career hiatus.³³ For many, returning to work after parental leave is a key career transition point. Before reentering, they feel mixed emotions: concern about leaving their child with another caregiver but eagerness to return to an adult, professional world where they have mastered the subject matter.³⁴ Tracy Saunders, CEO and founder of the Women's Job Search Network, calls the combination of fear, worry, confidence loss, and related emotional and financial stresses that impacts women and new mothers trying to relaunch their careers *return-to-work syndrome*.³⁵

Confronting a Biased Workplace

During the reentry process, women encounter realities such as lower callback rates on resumes, having to justify why they took a break, or being viewed as out of touch and under-skilled. After relaunching, they then must navigate a work environment often fraught with bias, the chief example being the *mommy penalty*, which refers to a host of negative behaviors and attitudes that impact women in the workplace.³⁶ Examples range from insensitive comments about a mother's commitment to work, particularly if they utilize flexible arrangements, to outright exclusion from visible, challenging assignments and promotions.

The *Wall Street Journal* profiled returner Mikaela Kiner who confessed, "Returning to work after maternity leave was like stepping into a tsunami." She said that when she left work at 5PM on her first day back from leave a co-worker quipped, "Only working a half-day?" She adds that a standing joke at the company was that you could work whenever you wanted, as long as you put in your 80 hours. Always having work hanging over her when she got home became draining. Eventually, she moved to a different company and negotiated more manageable hours, but the switch meant taking a significant pay cut.³⁷



The Mommy Penalty Negatively Impacts Wages and Earning Power³⁸



On average, mothers lose four percent of hourly earnings for each child they have compared to fathers, who make six percent more per child

\$59,000



\$41,000



\$-18,000

Based on median annual earnings for full-time, year-round U.S. workers, the *mommy penalty* costs women \$18,000 a year in lost wages



Mothers in the U.S. earn only 69 cents for every dollar earned by fathers

A woman with career goals and hardcore ambition can end up feeling that motherhood might be the key to career suicide, especially when there isn't a robust maternity leave in place. This diminishes her career's trajectory for growth and limits companies from accessing real diversity where it counts...More companies need to acknowledge this and take responsibility.³⁹

— Daina Trout, Health-Ade Kombucha Co-founder and CEO

Women Returners Make an Impact

The numerous challenges and biases that women encounter present a paradox to the volume of data documenting the positive workplace impact of women⁴⁰ and, specifically, women returners. A MIT report on women in STEM describes them as “...the hidden gems of the workforce: mature, skilled, and highly motivated...they have already navigated the complicated life experiences — marriage, career changes, children, and relocations — that still lie ahead of their younger counterparts.” The same report goes on to say that, as a result, hiring managers see them as “stable, energized, and capable.”⁴¹

Perhaps for this reason, Korn Ferry reports that “Women are returning in droves. The number of older women going back to work has seen a sharp uptick over the past year (2019), growing more than other populations.” Indeed, women over age 55 make up about 34 percent of the U.S. labor force and the number is growing. “Older women can be terrific at skills like navigating the matrix, which organizations still desperately need and often struggle to find in the current crop of talent,” says Korn Ferry’s Melissa Swift.⁴²



Workplaces Need to Take a Broader View

Organizations need to respond by increasing women returners’ access to mentors, to sponsors, and to critical networks, since all women — even those who don’t take leave — tend to have less access to these impactful relationships.⁴³ And because most women returners currently forfeit their chances of getting to top executive positions, employers should identify operational rather than staff roles for women returners.⁴⁴ Beyond providing the obvious additional technical skills support, businesses should be more intentional about integrating them into the new culture and be very specific about the changes such returners are likely to see compared to when they left.

Any company that truly cares about the women in its workforce...needs to be thinking beyond the maternity leave period itself to ensure that support exists when it matters most — when new moms are reentering the workforce.⁴⁵

— Vivian Maza, Chief People Officer, Ultimate Software

Black Women Caregivers Face Intersectional Workplace Bias

The Center for American Progress (CAP) identifies the enormous intersectional challenges that Black women face when it comes to caregiving and work leave.⁴⁶ A recent report highlights that when “sexism and racism intersect in the workplace, the effect is devastating.”⁴⁷ For related information, see the CWB report *Intersectionality in the Workplace: Broadening the Lens of Inclusion*.

CAP notes, “Black women have always been expected to work and have had the highest labor force participation among all women for years.”⁴⁸ This work expectation is deeply rooted in longstanding racial and gender biases...Black women still face the potent remnants of this historical narrative that devalued their status as women and as workers.” As a result, Black women face many negative stereotypes about workplace attitudes and work ethics, such as assumptions that they do not work hard and should be satisfied with any job rather than deserving of the best job.⁴⁹

The CAP report identifies a workplace narrative that deemphasizes the importance of Black women’s personal caregiving responsibilities. This is ironic given that today “Black women disproportionately work in caregiving jobs, and Black mothers with young children have the highest labor force participation rates among all mothers.”⁵⁰

Minimizing the importance of Black women’s care needs deeply impacts their earnings, job success, health, and well-being.⁵¹ Black pregnant workers who are denied accommodations — additional water breaks or access to light duty positions, for instance — might need to choose between harming their health or losing their job.⁵² Alarming, the report notes that “Black women’s unique challenges are often ignored or not raised at all.”⁵³



THE RETURN PROCESS

Returners — or relaunchers — often face unexpected obstacles. In this section, we explore the individual challenges, examine the long-term leave and reentry process, and discuss specific returner programs. We also highlight interviews with two returners and discuss a holistic approach to the exit and reentry process.

It's Harder than Expected

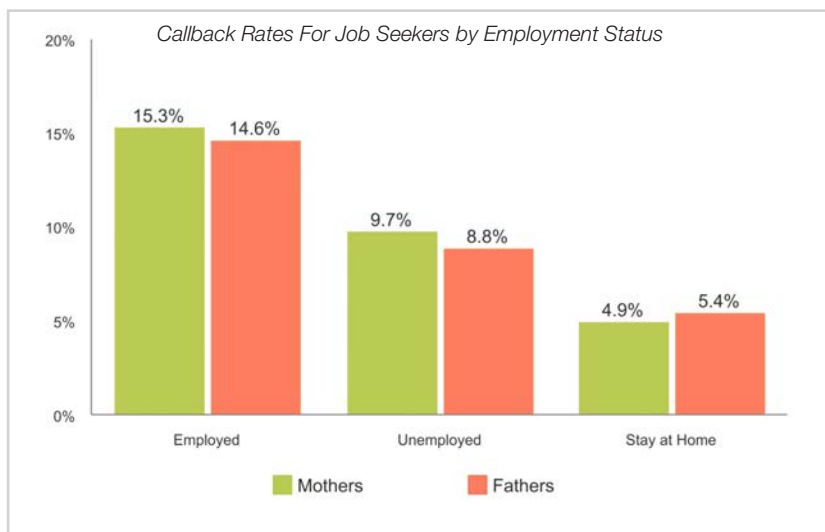
Despite the current tight labor market, which may encourage employers to look at resumes with gaps, research and first-hand accounts substantiate how difficult the reentry process can be for people of all ages, genders, or backgrounds. To begin with, relaunchers embody emotional and psychological barriers including: a lack of confidence; a fear that their knowledge base and technical skills have eroded; and a less robust professional network. And at least some of the fear is warranted: employers often do not have the time to get new workers up to speed on technical skills. Worse yet, hiring managers might not even look at resumes with employment gaps, and algorithmic hiring tools can automatically spit out resumes with gaps.⁵⁴

Ample research, including a recent study of women returning from maternity leave, documents the inherent difficulty of reentering the workforce. The researchers found that before the women went back to work they were excited and were looking forward to rejoining colleagues, despite concerns about leaving their children. When those same women returned, however, they reported a significant decline in positive emotions, reflecting the very real challenges of the transition. Women felt their careers had been derailed, that colleagues held unconscious biases against them, and that professional relationships had weakened.⁵⁵

A UNC Chapel Hill Study underscores these findings, noting that mothers and fathers who temporarily opt out of work to care for family fare “significantly worse” when trying to reenter the workforce than applicants who have been out of work due to a job loss.⁵⁶

Returners — and men even more so than women — cite the following as the top three challenges when returning to work from caregiving: a lack of formalized onboarding processes; too few mentors who can provide advice; and deficient support from supervisors or co-workers for caregiving responsibilities.⁵⁷ We provide strategies to overcome these and other challenges throughout the report and particularly on pages 28-30.

The Impact of Employment Status on Callback Rates



Source: Weisshaar, Kate. "Stay-at-Home Moms are Half as Likely to Get a Job Interview as Moms Who Got Laid Off." Harvard Business Review, 22 February 2018.

The results of an extensive 2015-16 survey of professional job seekers demonstrates just how heavily stay-at-home parents reentering the workforce are penalized.

A Returner Faces Her Fears

We spoke with a former marketing brand manager who took a ten-year break while her two children were young. When she prepared to return, she was impacted by a lack of confidence, especially around technical skills and perceived bias, but a supportive manager and a cohort of returners in her reentry program helped her.⁵⁸ Here's her story:

"After ten years at home, I worried about whether I could return at the same level as the one I'd had before I left. Part of the fear related to all of the technology changes while I was away. I had been in marketing, and things were being done completely differently than before I left. I felt employers only wanted the young, technical natives. It was hard because I knew I still had strong professional and strategic skills.

There were other challenges too. People told me hiring managers would be biased against me for having taken a break. And I had to confront the choice I'd made to step back. I went to a top business school for my MBA and had been a top brand manager, and couldn't believe that I now found myself at such a disadvantage. I wondered, *What the hell did I do?*

When I did land a job in financial services, I was told I needed to begin working in a week, which left me without time to arrange child care in advance, so I started the job with added stress. I didn't know how I was going to manage around my children's school schedule, ask for time off, or whether I would ever have an option to work from home.

Something else that really impacted me was the realization that my identity around work was now different. Before motherhood, I knew where I wanted my career to go, but when I returned I didn't feel like I was necessarily where I belonged. I wanted work-life balance but also wanted meaningful work. It's a different approach to it all. You kind of fight with your old self."

"The most helpful part of my return process was having a cohort of other returners – supportive women who shared similar experiences and feelings, and we all received coaching on things like presentation skills, regaining confidence, how to bring our past accomplishments to the forefront, resume building, and some technical know-how."

"I also worked for a really supportive manager — she was fantastic. She had faced the caregiving dilemma earlier in her career and had worked part-time for a while. She understood what I was going through and she wanted me to succeed.

If I were doing it all over again, I would try to set my goals around one business discipline, take some courses to become more proficient, get some specific technical skills with certification, and focus simply on that."



**Reentry
Journey**

A Holistic Approach to Leave and Reentry

Research suggests the need for a comprehensive perspective to both leave-taking and reentry, where employer and employee alike view the experience as a long-term, phased process. While not yet the prevailing approach, recommendations and personal accounts documented throughout the literature speak to the benefits of a more holistic course. Employees who adopt such an approach find themselves making better decisions about the leave period itself and feel more prepared to return. Organizations that follow this path better understand their employees' needs and are able to retain valued employees, all of which is better for the workplace culture and bottom line.

A Systematic Plan for Reentry

Kathy Newman, a marketing executive recently profiled in Entrepreneur Magazine, took an eight-year break and recognized long before reentering that she needed to have a systematic, phased plan for reentry, so she adopted a three-pronged strategy: re-establish her professional network, obtain relevant training, and pursue contract work.

Newman connected with old colleagues to learn about industry changes and desirable new skills. By attending professional association meetings and examining cutting edge marketing campaigns, she realized that her core knowledge was still relevant but that she had to sharpen her social and digital marketing skills, so she took online tutorials and attended social media classes at a local university. Next she focused on resume updates. Finally, she utilized the gig economy to take on freelance and part-time marketing jobs that enhanced her skills and established a track record of current success which, importantly, increased her confidence.⁵⁹

Reentry
Journey

From an employee perspective, the list of considerations from beginning to end is enormous: *Do I need to take leave and, if so, for how long? When I reenter, do I think I'll want part time, flex, full time? What do I expect my caregiving support at home to look like when I return? Am I prepared to revisit my current expectations for reentry? What part of this plan do I want to discuss with my employer? What will I do to prepare myself for reentry? How do I plan to communicate with my employer while I'm away? What are my expectations and hopes for the support I'll receive when I reenter? Do I even plan to return to the same organization, and if not, what are my plans for relaunching my career elsewhere?*

Employers should take an approach that mirrors workers' needs. To begin with, employers should be gathering information about what their employees' caregiving and possible leave-taking needs look like, and ask questions such as: *What are your caregiving demands? Can they be accommodated with a flexible work arrangement or do you need to take leave? How long would you like your leave to be? What kind of communications plan will work for you while you are away? What support do you need before you reenter and after you return?*

Health-Ade Kombucha Co-founder and CEO Daina Trout's personal story, based on taking two maternity leaves while launching a start-up, makes the case for taking a comprehensive, and when possible, customized approach to the process. She stresses the need for employees to start conversations early and to get creative with HR departments.⁶⁰ Harvard Business School researchers Joe Fuller and Manjari Raman reinforce the point, saying about employers, "They can't help you with something that they don't know about." And they urge employers to notice and ask the questions employees might not bring up.⁶¹

A Look at Reentry Programs

Many organizations offer formal reentry programs that provide on-ramps to help those who have been out of the workforce. These formalized approaches address some of the primary challenges job-seekers identify. To begin with, they introduce structured onboarding processes, and most provide some type of mentoring or professional advising. The strongest programs also incorporate a support network comprised of a peer cohort, supervisors, and other co-workers. In some cases, companies work with outside providers who connect them with candidates and provide training, mentoring, and other resources.

Returnships

Reentry programs that take the form of an internship have flourished in the past decade, and are most often referred to as *returnships* — a term coined and trademarked by Goldman Sachs in 2008. These and similar programs typically offer paid positions that range in length from a few months to a year and accept participants as part of a cohort that can provide support. Returnships are akin to internships and are designed for adults returning to work after a career break.⁶² Their beauty lies in the value they provide to both employers and employees: they allow employers to base hiring decisions on actual work rather than just interviews, while giving returning professionals training experiences, development, mentoring, and often a cohort of support.

Having a (returnship) program signals to a company's youngest employees, who are anticipating career breaks in greater numbers than we've ever seen before, that the company understands people go through life stages and that their career paths could include career breaks.⁶³

— Carol Fishman Cohen, Chair and Co-Founder, iRelaunch

Returnships are often extremely competitive, with acceptance rates as low as 2 or 3 in 100 at some firms,⁶⁴ while the conversion rate — the percent of participants who become full-time, permanent employees — ranges broadly from 50 to 90 percent.⁶⁵ We would be remiss if we failed to mention that returnships have their critics, who claim that the programs exploit the flagging confidence of returners, women specifically, by undermining the significance of their past experience and skills.⁶⁶

In recent years, returnship-style programs and firms to help people reenter have proliferated. Corporate offerings go by names such as Johnson and Johnson's *Reignite* and Dell's *Restart*, and they vary in goals and design. Citi and Deloitte, among others, run unique programs for veterans aimed at supporting these candidates as they transition from military service.

Beyond the extensive corporate programs listed on pages 34-37, players include: iRelaunch, which runs career reentry conferences and events for employers and individuals; Path Forward, a nonprofit that connects returners and companies; and Boston-based reachHIRE, that focuses on highly-trained cohorts receiving support and reentering together.

Addie Swartz, CEO of reachHIRE, believes that organizations providing return-to-work offerings should “Create a sustainable and holistic reentry program. This includes company-supported training, peer and alumni networks, manager support, mentors, senior leadership advocates, and positions tailored for more experienced professionals.” She adds, “It's essential that companies follow a cohort model for six months to accelerate success.”⁶⁷

We provide an extensive list of current corporate reentry programs on pages 34-37 and resources for employees on pages 38-40.

Light Duty Returner Programs

Employees who have taken leave for illness or injury can benefit significantly from a return-to-work approach crafted as a light-duty program. Such offerings typically excuse employees from performing certain tasks that they would normally perform and also reduce the number of hours worked. This approach allows those who are somehow compromised to keep working, to maintain some or all of their earnings, to preserve skills, to contribute productively to the organization, and to return to their pre-illness or pre-injury job more quickly.⁶⁸

SHRM identifies numerous employer benefits to such programs, including:⁶⁹

- Increased productivity
- Decreased administrative costs
- The ability to control disability costs and the cost of compensation claims
- Reduced absenteeism

Please see pages 22-24 for information on medical leave, including mental health.

A Broad View of Potential Talent

A 16-week program at United Technologies called *Re-Empower* provides mentoring, coaching and networking help for employees who have been out of the workforce for a minimum of two years. Candidates for the program go beyond mothers and include those who have been caring for aging relatives, or have been serving in the military, and even include people who have been working as missionaries or have taken time to travel.

Naveen Gopal, aged 40, took four years off from his job as an engineer for health concerns. After participating in the United Technologies program, he returned to full-time work as a senior engineer, and his view on the time away and the reentry program was positive.⁷⁰

**Reentry
Journey**

Recognize a Returner's New Skills

Rachel Book leads the diversity recruiting strategy for Fidelity Investments and oversees *Resume* — their six-month return-to-work program.

Fidelity sees people returning from an intentional career break as an untapped talent pool, and a group that can provide tremendous business value because of their unique experiences.

“We encourage managers to interview these candidates a bit differently. Many have had rich, value-add experiences during their career break, perhaps starting businesses, becoming entrepreneurs, or volunteering. We advise managers to ask about the skills they honed, and how those skills could serve them well in a role at Fidelity.”⁷¹

A Win-Win for a Relauncher, reachHIRE, and Wayfair

We spoke with Tripti Thomas-Travers, who left the workforce 11 years ago to care for her two children and recently returned. She worked with reachHIRE to land a position at Wayfair.⁷² Here's her story:

"During my break I was invested in more than just my children's lives — the broader community, the schools, and some consulting work. By the time I decided to get back in full time, I had identified two specific personal objectives: first, I wanted to get back into a career and second, I wanted to change fields. My masters and previous work were focused on public policy. Going forward, I wanted to work in the for-profit world but still be engaged in something either people, mission, or values driven.

I connected with reachHIRE, and they helped me identify a company I would not have considered on my own: Wayfair. And the final result was a permanent position in the learning and development space, where I get to focus on the company's culture and values.

During my returnship, I was part of a cohort of women relaunching, and we went through orientation together. In the first six months in my new job, we continued to have ongoing meetings and check-ins as a cohort and individually. I would not be here without my cohort."

"In addition to this peer-group, I think success relies on the hiring organization designing returnship projects that give returners the runway to get up to speed but also the responsibility and visibility to prove their potential."

"Supportive managers are important. So is the ongoing support that the company provides. Both reachHIRE and Wayfair assigned program managers who checked in with us regularly and ensured we had opportunities to get together as a group because the cohort program is so powerful.

When I think of my own journey and consider the challenges of getting ready to return, I would say there is a logistical piece and a mindset piece. Logistically, you worry about how your family will manage without you at home. The mindset piece is two-fold. The first has to do with confidence. You wonder, *Am I ready? Do I have what it takes?* The second has to do with the job search. You ask, *How do I craft my story? How do I explain my gap? In this age of AI-fueled resume tracking systems, will my resume even get picked up?* This is where a returnship can play a crucial role.

My advice to other returners is to take time before you get back in to define what success means for you. It's very personal, and it's important to know what that looks like. Take time to identify and muster your support systems — for example, the logistical support you need for your family — and reach beyond the obvious...I called on people I never thought I would.

Remember to celebrate small wins. Move away from perfectionism and understand that some doubt and discomfort is normal. Go into your job with humility and a growth mindset and a hunger to contribute, coupled with the confidence of everything you have achieved in your personal and past professional life. And if things work out for you, don't forget to pay it forward and help other returners make the transition."



**Reentry
Journey**

SPOTLIGHT ON VETERANS – VITAL EXPERTISE, SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES

Military veterans, with wide-ranging experience and skills, are a vital, highly-talented part of the U.S. workforce. In any given year, 200,000 to 360,000 members of the military are transitioning to civilian employment.⁷³ And while they face some similar challenges to other relaunchers, they also confront unique personal and external barriers, which contribute to the 43 percent rate of attrition in the first year of their post-military work and an 80 percent rate in year two.⁷⁴ Here, we explore both the veteran's and organization's perspective — including issues unique to women.

Personal Mindset is a Factor

When veterans are entering or reentering the civilian workplace, they confront psychological and emotional issues such as combat related physical disabilities, post-traumatic stress, and other mental health concerns. In addition, they can be intimidated by people who have always had traditional corporate careers.⁷⁵

Veterans can turn this dynamic around by leveraging the strengths they gained in the military, such as discipline, teamwork, mental toughness, professionalism, a strong work ethic, and experience in a diverse setting.⁷⁶ Fuqua School of Business Instructor Dorie Clark emphasizes the need for military relaunchers to harness the power of these strengths as they enter the civilian workplace.⁷⁷ For some veterans, doing so can be challenging.



Recognizing the Value of Military Experience

Chris Robinette served in the Army for 11 years, first as an armor officer, then in the Army Special Forces. Despite his significant qualifications, he doubted his ability to successfully transition back to civilian work. Chris admits:

“I felt very intimidated by undergraduate classmates who had gone into more traditional corporate careers. I felt like they had this decade of totally unique, impressive experience that I couldn't match.”

Yet he eventually came to realize that direct corporate experience wasn't necessary. “It's very much, *Can you learn? Do you have a strong work ethic?*” Chris ultimately leveraged his military and leadership skillset to lead a startup venture within a larger firm that specializes in security consulting.⁷⁸

**Reentry
Journey**

Helping Veterans Transition to Civilian Life

We spoke with veteran workplace consultant Eddie Dunn, a veteran himself, who believes that the hardest and often overlooked challenge for veterans transitioning to civilian life is their personal psychology around their identity.⁷⁹ Here's what he had to say:

“Based on my own military experience along with years of work coaching veterans and helping companies develop programs for them, I’ve come to the conclusion that...”

“...the hardest part for veterans, often overlooked, is their psychology of reentry related to their new civilian identity. This is critical to understand before they begin their transition. If they transform first, they will transition easier. If those of us working with veterans could help them address this, they would be *civilian ready* on the first day they leave the military.”

“The approach I recommend focuses on three core areas: cultural assimilation, emotional intelligence, and vocational alignment. Let’s talk about the cultural piece first. Leaving the safety net of the military and facing the fear of reentering civilian life is challenging. We have to help veterans navigate that psychology.

Second is emotional intelligence. The best example I can give you is this: when military people apply their military values in a civilian context, the intent can be misunderstood. Veterans are leaving a black and white value system and moving into the sometimes *gray values* of civilian life, and we have to help them understand why the gray is okay. We have to help them apply their military values appropriately.

As for vocational alignment, we need to help veterans take the purpose and passion that they embodied in the military and help them apply it in a civilian organization.”



Female Veterans Face Unique Challenges

Women veterans — currently numbering about two million — are the fastest-growing portion of the U.S. veteran population.⁸⁰ These women face the same challenges and concerns as male veterans, plus many more. For starters, they have been unconsciously trained to hide their differences and mask their visibility to succeed in a male-dominated military. Other critical issues include stress, domestic violence, and substance abuse.⁸¹ More than a third of women leaving the military report loss of income as a challenge — a higher rate than their male counterparts — and they take about three months longer to find civilian employment.⁸² Transitioning servicewomen are also more likely to be single parents and face child-care issues. And alarmingly, many female veterans report having suffered sexual trauma while in the service, and some are also confronting post-traumatic stress disorder.

As they enter the civilian world, existing challenges are compounded by the reality that both non-profit and government support and care services are more limited when it comes to women. And finally, women veterans say that they leave the military with less of a very important factor: social support. As a result, they are 1.8 times more likely than civilian women to commit suicide.⁸³

Despite the obstacles for female veterans, there are avenues that can provide help. Together, these women often learn to leverage a unique formula of social support, spirituality, and self-care to overcome their sense of isolation and to form new identities post-service. They then go on to become successful civilian workforce employees and leaders.

The *New York Times* recently profiled the Women's Veterans Network (WoVeN), a support group with national scope for women veterans founded in 2017. The community helps women adjust to life out of uniform, focusing on the unique issues confronting female veterans, such as self-esteem and relationships.⁸⁴ The Service Women's Action Network (SWAN), the Center for Women Veterans (CWW), and the Women's Health Sciences Division of the National Center for PTSD at the Department of Veterans Affairs also advocate for and offer support to female veterans. These and other workplace reentry resources are listed on pages 38-40.

Civilian Challenges for Women Veterans

Kyleanne Hunter, a Cobra pilot and decorated combat veteran, reports the difficulty of entering civilian life for herself and other women like her:

"...despite appearing *successful* and *normal* on the outside, we each felt a nagging sense of displacement and not belonging. We missed the sense of unit cohesion and good-natured support we'd so often enjoyed on active duty, and struggled to find that same sense of community in our civilian lives."

"Further, we had a hard time carving out new identities... We wore masks of invulnerability and strength, but felt lonely and often isolated."

"Even today, years after leaving the military, we find ourselves still searching for our place in a society that simultaneously praises veterans while unconsciously ignoring women."⁸⁵

Reentry
Journey

A Strategic Approach to Veteran Reentry

Experts identify numerous unique skills all veterans bring to the civilian workplace. They possess subject matter expertise, years of on-the-job skills development, and a commitment to honesty along with global perspectives, respect for team work, and knowledge in problem-solving and decision-making.⁸⁶ And yet, 70 percent of organizations fail to train hiring managers about veteran-specific hiring practices, and more than 60 percent do not provide onboarding or transition support for veterans who they hire.⁸⁷

By taking a strategic approach to creating an inclusive workplace for veterans, businesses can create environments where these unique employees contribute and thrive. This begins with the onboarding process, ensuring that candidates are placed in roles that suit their needs and strengths. A sampling of other recommendations is listed on this page.⁸⁸ For additional strategies, please see pages 25-27.

- Improve cultural competency of those hiring and interacting with veterans.
- Train managers on the value of veteran experience.
- Utilize tailored recruitment resources that reach veterans.
- Establish veteran-specific hiring practices.
- Provide formalized mentoring for veterans.
- Establish and actively support veterans' employee resource groups (ERGs).
- Tap into federal resources that allow companies to connect with and train veterans early in the transition process.
- Invest in veteran-specific onboarding, career development and retention efforts.
- Track veteran recruitment, performance and retention to better understand which strategies are most effective.

Translating Military Roles to Civilian Jobs

One option is for employers and recruiters to do a better job understanding a veteran's Military Occupational Specialty (MOS), the code used by military members to indicate their role while in service.

"Most recruiters have no idea what a person's MOS means," says Adam Kabins, a Korn Ferry senior consultant. "How do you translate what it is to lead a tank mechanic team into a fitting civilian job? It's not an easy translation."⁹⁰

A 2017 CareerBuilder survey found that employers are increasing their commitment to hire military veterans, with 40 percent of nearly 2,500 hiring managers and human resource professionals planning to actively recruit U.S. veterans over the next 12 months.⁸⁹

SPOTLIGHT ON MEDICAL LEAVE, MENTAL HEALTH, AND REENTRY

Medical Leave, Mental Health, and the Workplace

While precise numbers of people who take extended leave for medical issues are difficult to obtain, available data shows that about 20 million people take unpaid leave each year using the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).⁹¹ Under the 26-year-old law, eligible reasons to take time off include birth and care of a baby, adoption, care for sick immediate family members, and personal serious illness.⁹² Not all workers are protected by the FMLA — part-time, hourly, and low-income workers, along with women of color, are disproportionately excluded from coverage.⁹³ For more information on the disproportionate impacts on people of color, please see the CWB report *Intersectionality in the Workplace: Broadening the Lens of Inclusion*.

Of those taking FMLA leave, 73 percent use it to care for their own injuries or illnesses or for those of loved ones. Broken down:⁹⁴

- Over 50 percent of FMLA time is used for an employee's own medical condition.
- Nearly 20 percent of FMLA time is used to care for the health needs of a child, spouse, or parent.



In the workplace discussion around health and well-being, mental health is a rapidly growing concern and the increasing focus of much of the research. The data reveals that mental health is an invisible and often unrecognized disability, and yet:

- Diagnosable mental health conditions affect 20 percent of Americans in any given year, and impacted employees carry the many associated burdens such as social stigma, fear of repercussion at work, or lack of access to quality care.⁹⁵
- Almost half of those with mental health issues have taken extended time away from work for reasons directly related to their condition. Among these individuals, 11 percent said they knew they needed to go back to work but were hesitant to return.⁹⁶
- Employers are seeing an increase in health costs for their employees directly correlated to the treatment of mental illness, specifically anxiety.⁹⁷

Mental Health Issues Lead to Absenteeism

Unum reports that mental illness is one of the top causes of worker disability in the U.S. and that well over half of missed work days are related to mental health.

They note that half of employees impacted by a mental health condition take time off from work because of the issue, and 11 percent believe that although they need to go back they are uneasy about returning.⁹⁸

When Employees Return to Work After Medical Leave

Returning to work after taking medical leave — particularly for mental health — requires a number of considerations, the first often being whether and how to communicate about it. Legally, workers are able to keep their diagnosis private in most situations, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) provides extensive guidance on this, along with other employee rights.⁹⁹

Often, workers have already spoken with their manager about their condition prior to taking leave. Two dynamics impact whether individuals share information with managers and co-workers. The first is whether the employees who are impacted want to bring their whole selves to work and the second is whether the leaders provide understanding and support.¹⁰⁰

Honor Employee Privacy

When an employee returns from a medical leave, be sure to ask how they would like their return to be announced, and honor their privacy.

Executive coach Ann Sugar shares this effective, practical advice: “Unless your employee directs you otherwise, it’s a good idea to avoid proclamations about their health...An example of a return announcement might be: *We are delighted to announce that Amara is returning from her leave of absence. She will be back in the office on May 6.* It’s simple, but it gets the job done.”¹⁰¹

Returning to Work After a Mental Health Leave

Fairygodboss interviewed a woman who took a two-month mental health leave after her fiancé died in the World Trade Center on 9/11. In a candid discussion, she provided valuable tips for those returning: stay in touch with your boss; ease back into work; let people know that it’s okay to ask how you’re doing (if this is how you feel); take breaks; and prioritize your well-being. She added:

“Be honest with your bosses and coworkers about how you are doing and what you need, educate them on your struggles, and remember that you are entitled to privacy in the workplace.”

“If you are interviewing for a new job, do not be ashamed and do not feel that you have to share details; telling prospective employers that you needed time to take care of yourself and deal with a personal matter is sufficient.”¹⁰²

**Reentry
Journey**

Helping Employees Returning from Medical Leave

Employers can utilize an extensive array of strategies to ensure the most successful and supportive process related to medical leave and reentry. A sampling includes: jointly building a reentry and communications plan; helping the employee rebuild a sense of confidence; checking in periodically to let them know they are supported; and for those impacted by mental health, asking if the employee wishes to share nonclinical triggers such as challenging workplace relationships.¹⁰³

Many of the recommendations for employers listed on pages 25-27 are useful in the medical and mental health context.

Enabling Successful Medical Leave Reentry

While it's always important to establish an intentional communication and reentry process for a returning employee, managers might want to customize their approach even more for returners from medical leave.

An executive coach advises, "Recognize that because of medical appointments or fatigue, your employee's schedule might need to be different than before. For example, before their medical leave, a team member may have begun the day at 8 AM, but now a 10 AM start might be what they need....(also) focus on some small, quick-win projects to jump-start the employee's work in a meaningful manner."¹⁰⁴

Helping Employees Going Through Gender Transition

As workplaces become more inclusive for transgender employees, many are developing guidelines to help those making a gender transition, and extensive recommendations are emerging in the literature. We address the topic in the context of this report because transitioning employees typically take leave for surgery at some point during the process and, when they return, face challenges similar to other medical returners along with the complexities of their new gender identity.

The Human Rights Campaign provides a robust toolkit with workplace guidance to support transitioning employees. It covers topics ranging from cultural competency, best practices, and real-life scenarios to sensible checklists for managers and coworkers. Just a few of the specific guidelines to support those transitioning include:¹⁰⁵

- Outline what support and expectations a transitioning employee can expect from management.
- Communicate the organization's expectations for staff, the transitioning employee, and any support groups.
- Establish general procedures to implement transition-related workplace changes, including details like the necessary adjustments to administrative records.
- Develop a plan to communicate with co-workers and clients about the gender transition.
- Provide helpful educational material regarding transgender people and how co-workers can be supportive of an employee going through transition.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUSINESSES AND EMPLOYEES

Reentry programs are an important and effective strategy to help both returning employees and businesses in need of productive talent. Yet the challenges of the growing caregiving crisis and the increasing complexity of workplace demands call for broader solutions that fall under an organizational culture of care. With this as a backdrop, we offer concise recommendations for employer and employee alike on the following pages.

Create a workplace culture that positions parental leave and other work breaks as a step in a career journey rather than an off-ramp.

- Demonstrate commitment, acknowledging employees concerns about caregiving and investing in supportive remedies. The commitment should extend beyond financial investments to authentic, dedicated time and leadership.

Begin by learning more about your employees' caregiving responsibilities.¹⁰⁶

- Determine the reasons they take short or long-term leaves, how they are using benefits, and what would help them avoid unnecessary leaves.
- Utilize surveys, focus groups, exit interviews, and other communications vehicles that suit your culture in order to gain access to employee views.
- Conduct stay interviews, which not only provide information but build mutual trust.
- Track, analyze, and act upon relevant data.

Clearly communicate benefits and your commitment to understanding employees' needs.¹⁰⁷

- Tap into the communications vehicles proven to work in your organization — websites, email, team messaging, and meetings.

Offer family-friendly benefits like on-site child care, sick-leave options, lactation rooms, and flexible work schedules.¹⁰⁸

- The data shows that these benefits help reduce absenteeism and turnover, improve morale, and increase productivity.
- Reinforce support for these policies, assuring workers they won't be penalized for utilizing them.

Provide other caregiving benefits such as flexible spending accounts (FSA), elder care referral services, flexible work arrangements, and emergency or elder care options.¹⁰⁹

- A dependent care assistance plan (DCAP) is a form of FSA that provides a tax-free vehicle for employees to pay for certain dependent care expenses.

Recommendations
for
Businesses

Create a
Culture that
Supports
Caregiving

Assuming you already have a maternity leave policy, determine if you can expand it.

- When Google increased leave from 12 to 18 weeks, the rate at which new mothers quit decreased by 50 percent, and when Accenture doubled leave from 8 weeks to 16, its turnover rate for new mothers fell by 40 percent.¹¹⁰

Expand your leave options further, offering paternity leave or changing the maternity program to parental leave.

- 71 percent of organizations still do not offer paternity leave¹¹¹ despite data showing that two-thirds of men would take parental leave if they thought it wouldn't negatively impact their career.¹¹²

Implement policies to help with caregiving emergencies.¹¹³

- Consider options that allow parents to bring a child to work in an emergency or create a network of providers for emergency elder care.

Identify role models and strategies to help socialize a caring culture.

- Senior executives can serve as visible, authentic allies to employees navigating caregiving challenges, off-ramps, and reentry.
- Images on your career webpage or portal can reflect underrepresented groups, such as veterans who are transitioning to civilian work.

Whenever possible, customize leave programs for employees, regardless of the reason for the hiatus.

- Consider sabbaticals for employees who, though not in crisis, could benefit from a work leave for their personal well-being.

Work with the off-ramping employee to establish plans for the exit, the time away, and the reentry process.

- Be flexible and recognize that the plans might need to change over time.

Provide flexible options for returners, such as part-time, remote work, or whatever approach will help an employee phase back in.

- This could mean starting with three short days a week and slowly ramping up to full-time work.

Create dedicated mentoring programs for returning employees.

- Match employees with someone who also experienced reentry.

Offer support or coaching for re-launchers through informal networking groups and/or employee resource groups (ERGs).

- Groups should be centered around shared experiences such as parenthood or military experience.

Clearly communicate performance management expectations and the work evaluation process.¹¹⁴

- This will mitigate confusion and frustration from a lack of clear expectations.

Create an open dialog with those taking leave as well as those returning, acknowledging that both leaving and returning is an individual and deeply personal experience.

- Work together to identify the ideal communication plan before, during, and after break. It's important to check in during the actual leave period.
- Ask employees what they want to share with you and others in the organization, respecting their right to privacy.
- Find out the unique support each individual needs while they are away and during reentry.
- Check your assumptions about new parents' career and family priorities. Some employees may need or request changes to their work schedule; others may not.

Think of how you can help an employee maintain or rebuild a sense of worth and confidence throughout the journey and when they return.¹¹⁵

- Small gestures — the timing of meetings, sharing an agenda in advance, offering flexibility on a deadline, or providing notes from missed meetings — can make a big difference.

Finally, consider creating a formal returnship program, such as those explored on page 15 and listed on pages 34-37.

McKinsey finds that the top-performing companies in their research are more likely to provide extended parental leave and options that ease leave transitions. These companies "...are also more than twice as likely as those at the bottom of the distribution to offer emergency backup child-care services, and three times as likely to offer on-site child care."¹¹⁶



Recommendations for Employees

Take a holistic view of the entire process, reviewing the advice we provide on page 14. Employees who embrace such an approach often make better decisions and feel more prepared for all stages, including leave and reentry.

A holistic approach starts by considering a broad range of questions, such as:

- Do I need to take leave and, if so, for how long?
- When I reenter, do I think I'll want part time, flex, full time?
- What do I expect my caregiving support at home to look like when I return?
- Am I prepared to revisit my current expectations for reentry?
- What part of this plan do I want to discuss with my employer?
- What will I do to prepare myself for reentry?
- How do I plan to communicate with my employer while I'm away?
- What are my expectations and hopes for the support I'll receive when I reenter?
- Do I even plan to return to the same organization, and if not, what are my plans for relaunching my career elsewhere?

Depending on the reasons you might take leave, first explore whether there are alternative options.

- Look at the caregiving benefits your employer provides and be sure you are utilizing them as needed.
- Consider whether your work demands can be addressed differently, perhaps by utilizing flexible arrangements.
- Speak as honestly as possible with HR and your manager about your potential reason for your upcoming work hiatus, seeking appropriate advice and guidance.

If you know that a work break of some kind is certain, make a plan.

- Ideally in collaboration with your manager, consider the timing, how your workload might shift to others, how you can help prepare other employees who will be impacted, and other issues specific to your role.
- Communicate clearly with your manager and coworkers about all of these details.

Likewise, make a plan about when you will return and how it will look.

- If you are uncertain, it's okay to acknowledge this with your employer.

**Before
You
Leave**

Revisit the reentry plan you made before leaving.

- It's okay for your plan to change over time.
- If you've taken a temporary leave, maintain communication with your employer based on the plan made before leaving.

Stay up-to-date on advances in technology and industry-specific trends.

- Take online or in-person courses, read books, and attend industry events to hone your skills.

Assess your interests and strengths to tailor your reentry plan.

- Take a Myers-Briggs or CliftonStrengths test to learn more about your interests and work style.¹¹⁷
- Review performance evaluations from your last position, considering your strengths and how they will suit the needs of the organization you might be joining.¹¹⁸
- Think about your passions, and consider opportunities with organizations that fit well with your personal interests and values.

Leverage your networks, including extended family, friends, and former colleagues.¹¹⁹

- Ask them to make introductions, including those for informational interviews, and seek their advice on what you need to know.

Advice for Fathers Taking a Parental Leave

While 29 percent of all organizations now offer some paid leave for fathers — and high-profile companies such as Microsoft, Netflix, and Amazon have developed or expanded leave programs — many fathers feel pressure not to take it. In one survey, 21 percent of men feared losing their job if they took their full leave and 73 percent said there was little workplace support for them.¹²⁰

Josh Levs, who speaks and writes on modern fathers in the workplace, makes concrete suggestions:¹²¹

- Plan for leave in advance, if you can.
- Share your story to help socialize and normalize paternity leave.
- Understand your legal rights.
- Take and share a paternity leave pledge.



Preparing to Return

This section includes recommendations for reentry, whether you are returning to your existing employer after a short break or if you are reentering — and perhaps seeking a new employer — after an extended time away.

If you are returning to your previous employer...

Continue to communicate with them periodically, as you planned to do before leaving, and talk about return plans as they draw near.¹²²

If you are seeking a new employer after an extended period away ...

Consider working as a contract employee, a consultant, or a volunteer both to boost skills and to enhance your resume.

Think about utilizing a professional career coach, which might require some online research and discussions within your network.

Determine whether you want to pursue a returnship program. If so, learn more about specific offerings. *Read more on returnships on page 15 and see the list of workplace reentry programs on pages 34-37.*

- Research the curriculum details and look at the percentage of program participants who receive and accept offers.
- If you're a returning mother, explore the many resources and recruiting platforms that specialize in your demographic such as *Après*, *reachHIRE*, *The Mom Project*, *Second Shift*, and women-centric job boards like *Power to Fly* and *Fairygodboss*. *See the reentry resources list on pages 38-40.*

Get more specific about matching your values, interests, and work style with specific organizational cultures.

- For instance, do you want a highly collaborative environment or an opportunity to work alone, and do you want a highly structured environment or one that is less structured?

If you are either returning to your old employer after a short break or seeking a new employer after an extended period away ...

Update your resume and profile on LinkedIn.

- Highlight the soft skills you honed while away, such as emotional intelligence, mediation, problem analysis, and multitasking, and prepare to speak confidently about them.

Honestly examine your own fears, inhibitions, or possible flagging confidence, all of which impacts many people who take time away from work.

Renew professional connections that might have languished.

- About 80 percent of job openings are filled via word-of-mouth.

Prepare for formal interviews or informal reentry conversations.

- In addition to considering how you describe your work gap on your resume, think about how you will speak about it.
- Be transparent about your hiatus, acknowledging your work break and why you took it, so that employers don't make a faulty and often negative assumption.¹²³
- Don't apologize for the break you've taken.
- Be prepared to demonstrate how you remained current with trends and technology.

Evaluate the on-ramp plan you made before arriving and, if necessary, make real-time adjustments.

- For instance, you might need to reevaluate the speed of a phased ramp-up or part-time schedule and discuss alternative options with your employer.

Create meaningful connections.

- Consider joining an employee resource group or an informal support network of some kind.
- Request a mentor to provide support, especially during the critical early period of reentry.

Be a model and ally for others.

- Share the strategies and tools that have helped you with others.

Develop strategies to overcome setbacks and nurture your progress.

- Remember this: research demonstrates that failures have the most potential to help you grow *and* career setbacks can actually result in a stronger workplace journey in the long term.
- Be patient with yourself and others, and celebrate small successes as you adjust.

When
You
Return

Joni Hersch, an expert on employment law, advises women reentering the workforce to explain their time at home up front, since employers, fearful of anti-discrimination laws, don't bring up the subject but make assumptions that hurt the women's chances of being hired. She states, "Women who conceal personal information dramatically lower their hiring prospects."¹²⁴



GLOSSARY OF WORKPLACE REENTRY TERMS

Absence Management: Policies in place to manage employee absences, including procedures to follow when taking an absence, a plan for when an employee returns from a long absence, and information about pay for absences.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA): National legislation that ensures that individuals with disabilities are provided equal opportunities by prohibiting discrimination against an individual on the basis of a disability.

Bereavement Leave: Category of leave for employees who experience the death of a close friend or relative.

Caregiving: Providing assistance and other support to family members or others with physical, psychological, or developmental needs.

Contingent Workers: Employees hired as casual labor, part-time, freelancers, subcontractors, independent professionals or consultants.

Earning Power: A person's ability to earn money in their career.

Eldercare Providers: The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines eldercare providers as anyone aged 15 and older who has provided unpaid care to any adult age 65 and older in the last three to four months because of a condition related to aging.

Ergonomics: The measurement of physical characteristics of the human body and the development of equipment to fit them, so that strain on the body is reduced.

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC): The federal agency responsible for enforcing federal laws that make it illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of the person's race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, gender identity, and sexual orientation), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information.

Family Caregiver Alliance: A national non-profit group that provides services, education and advocacy for caregivers.

Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA): National legislation that entitles eligible employees of covered employers to take unpaid, job-protected leave for a period up to 12 weeks for family and medical needs. See page 22 for more information.

Flexwork: The ability to work flexible hours; can include non-typical hours, remote work, and family leave. See the CWB report *The Value of Workplace Flex: Options, Benefits, and Success Stories* for extensive information about flexible work arrangements.

Flexibility Gap: Describes a disparity between need and access to flexible work; data shows that approximately 95 percent of working women need access to flexibility, but only 34 percent are able to obtain it.

Fringe Benefits: Additions to compensation such as health insurance, tuition assistance, childcare reimbursement, employee discounts, and the use of a company car.

Leave of Absence: A term that refers to an extended, approved period of time away from work.

Maternal Wall: The motherhood equivalent of the glass ceiling that many women face. The maternal wall is a way of stereotyping a working mother. Working mothers are sometimes treated differently or perceived differently than women who are not mothers, and some employers see mothers as less capable to perform, produce, and remain committed to work than others. *See Mommy Penalty.*

Mommy Penalty: A term that describes a host of systematic disadvantages that women often experience in the workplace after having children. They can include lower pay and harsh judgments about competence, commitment to work, or utilization of benefits such as flexible work arrangements. *See Maternal Wall.*

On-ramp: A term likely coined by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, it is the process of reentering the workforce after taking a temporary career break.

Presenteeism: Refers to an inability for an employee to be fully productive at work due to ongoing physical or mental health conditions.

Returnships: An internship designed precisely as a mid-career on-ramp after a hiatus from work; trademarked by Goldman Sachs in 2008. Organizations hire people for a few months to a year during which they most often combine temporary paid employment with mentorship and training.

Return-to-work Syndrome: A manifestation of emotional and financial stresses such as fear, shame, worry, and a confidence deficit that women can experience when returning to work after an absence; most often felt after giving birth and during motherhood.

Sandwich Generation: The generation of individuals taking care of children and parents at the same time.

Reasonable Accommodation: Under the ADA, employers with 15 or more employees must provide any modification or adjustment to a job or the work environment that will enable an applicant or employee with a disability to participate in the application process or to perform essential job functions.

Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA): A federal law that establishes rights and responsibilities for uniformed U.S. Service members and their civilian employers. This guarantees an employee returning from military service or training the right to be reemployed at their former job (or as nearly comparable a job as possible) with the same benefits.

Work-life Balance: Having a measure of control over when, where, and how individuals work, leading to their being able to enjoy optimal quality of life. Work-life balance is achieved when an individual's right to a fulfilled life inside and outside paid work is accepted and respected as the norm, to the mutual benefit of the individual, business, and society.

Working Remotely: Implies that an employee is working outside of the office. This might be because he or she lives outside of the geographical area of the work location. Remote work does not necessarily imply that employees are working from home; it can also mean that they are working at a coffee shop, co-working space, etc.

Working Virtually: The substitution of technology for travel. An example is when someone takes work home after leaving the office.

WORKPLACE REENTRY PROGRAMS

The following list provides a representative sampling of reentry programs in the United States. Some programs are offered and managed directly by the hiring company while others are offered in partnership with reentry companies such as iRelaunch, reachHIRE, Path Forward, and Women Back to Work. Most programs target returners who have had a career break of at least two years.

Accenture *Technology Return to Work Program* is a 16-week project-based returnship for experienced technology professionals focused on refreshing skills and teaching new technologies.

www.accenture.com

Allegheny Health Network *The AHN RetuRN Program* is for nurses seeking to return to the workplace; includes a 12-week refresher course through the University of Delaware. www.ahn.org

American Express *The Finance Professional Re-Entry Program* is a 12-week program focused on insights and experience within a finance function; includes comprehensive training and senior leadership mentorship. www.americanexpress.com/

Barclays *The Encore! Americas* program is a 12-week fellowship program within targeted functions; offers leadership and development training, mentorship, and networking. www.barclays.co.uk

Boeing *The Return Flight Program* is a professional, mid-level program for individuals who have technical degrees and want to reenter the workforce after a voluntary career break. www.boeing.com

BP A nine-month returnship program that offers project-based assignments across various work teams, mentoring, and networking opportunities. www.bp.com

Caterpillar *The Returning Professionals Development Program* is a four-month program; returners receive mentoring and training in the engineering field. www.caterpillar.com

CDM Smith *The Reboot Re-Entry Program* is a 12-week training program for STEM career returners. www.cdmsmith.com

Cisco A 16-week returnship focused on software-related positions; includes training on the latest tools and platforms and mentorship from Cisco's leadership. www.cisco.com

Citi *Citi's Military Officer Leadership Program* is a transitional leadership development program for veterans; includes a customized plan to maximize growth in knowledge and skills in financial services management. www.citigroup.com/citi/

Credit Suisse *The Real Returns program* helps senior professionals transition back into the workforce through project work, training, networking, support and mentorship; the program runs for 12 weeks. www.credit-suisse.com

Cummings *The RePower Return-to-Work Program* is a six-month engineering internship; includes training, coaching, and development. www.cummins.com

Dell *Career ReStart* offers full-time positions that include mentoring and professional development; eligible candidates must have at least four years of experience. www.dell.com

Deloitte *The Career Opportunity Redefinition & Exploration (CORE) Leadership Program* at Deloitte University helps armed forces members and veterans translate their skills, knowledge, and experiences into a business environment. www2.deloitte.com

Dow Jones *The Returnship Program* is a 12-week program provides professional experience in various functional areas. www.dowjones.com

EMD Serono *The Path Forward* return to work program is a 16-week returnship for individuals who have at least 5 years of professional experience; includes professional development workshops and trainings, as well as a supportive network. www.emdserono.com

Fidelity *The Fidelity RESUME Program* is a six-month opportunity that provides structured training with a clear path to becoming a Financial Consultant at Fidelity. www.fidelity.com

FitchRatings *The CreditPath* talent development program is a 10-week internship for returners in the credit analysis or information services business. www.fitchratings.com

Ford Motor *The Re-Entry Program* offers a full-time position along with a curriculum that emphasizes professional development, mentoring, networking, and exposure to senior-level management. www.ford.com

General Motors *Take 2* is a 12-week reentry program that provides technical and professional development opportunities, networking, as well as mentoring/coaching. www.gm.com

Goldman Sachs *Returnship* is an eight-week internship that offers opportunities in a variety of divisions. www.goldmansachs.com

HubSpot *The HubSpot Returners Program* is a 20-week program that includes training and growth opportunities that enhance key skills and support the reentry process. www.hubspot.com

IBM *The Tech Re-Entry Program* is a returnship program for technical professionals; returners work as part of a multi-disciplinary team to regain and learn skills; includes a dedicated mentor. www.ibm.com

Ingersoll Rand *ReLaunch* is a 12-week returnship for engineers who have stepped away and want to relaunch their careers. company.ingersollrand.com

Johnson and Johnson *The Re-Ignite program* is a returnship for experienced professionals who have taken a break from a STEM, manufacturing, or design career; includes industry-specific skills training, on-the-job learning, and mentors. www.jnj.com

J.P. Morgan *The ReEntry program* is 14-week training program targeting candidates at the Associate and VP levels (or equivalent); includes hands-on learning as well as senior-level mentorship and coaching. www.jpmorganchase.com

LinkedIn *REACH* is a multiyear engineering apprenticeship that provides returners on-the-job technical responsibilities, mentorship, and dedicated time to independently develop technical skills. www.linkedin.com

LockHeed Martin *Chapter Next Program* is a 12-16 week returnship that exposes candidates to training, development opportunities, and mentoring to help them reenter the workforce in various career areas. www.lockheedmartin.com

Macquarie *The Returner Program* is a 16-week program with opportunities across business areas; includes coaching as well as mentoring and networking opportunities. www.macquarie.com

Mastercard *Relaunch Your Career* is Mastercard's 16-week returnship program for mid-career level individuals interested in the technology, financial services, e-commerce, or professional services fields. www.mastercard.us

Medtronic *Careers 2.0* is a six-month returnship for STEM professionals; the program is meant to refresh technical skills. www.medtronic.com

MetLife *ACT2* is a 10-week internship program that allows individuals to fill existing job vacancies for associates; managers and coaches provide feedback and guidance. www.metlife.com

Microsoft *LEAP* is a 16-week engineering acceleration program that provides experience through development and project management apprenticeships. www.microsoft.com

Moody's *The RE-IGNITE Program* is a 12-week returnship; includes weekly mentoring, guest speaker events, development workshops and leadership opportunities. www.moody.com

Morgan Stanley *Return to Work* is a 12-week program that places individuals into business areas that fit their skills and experiences. Offered in the U.S. and globally. www.morganstanley.com

Northrop Grumman *The iReturn program* is a 12-week returnship program that prepares returns for a career in one of several fields at Northrop Grumman; includes training, professional development, and networking opportunities. www.northropgrumman.com

PayPal *The Recharge program* engages women in technology who have taken a career break; returners participate in a bootcamp and apply for a 16-week program to sharpen their skills and facilitate the ramp-up process. www.paypal.com

Pepsi *Ready to Return* is a 10-week internship offered across a variety of business areas to refresh skills and build new ones; returners also receive mentoring and coaching support. www.pepsico.com

Proctor & Gamble *The ReLaunch program* is a 12-week returnship in STEM fields including information technology, research & development, and product supply; includes training, mentorship, and support. us.pg.com

Raytheon *The Raytheon ReLaunch Program* is a 12-week program that helps experienced professionals, including military spouses, return to the workforce across a variety of fields. www.raytheon.com

RBC Capital Markets *The RLaunch Program* offers senior-level candidates the opportunity to reenter the capital markets area through training, mentorship, networking, and relevant career experience. www.rbccm.com

Schneider Electric *Return2Work* is a program for returners with 5-plus years of professional experience in the engineering or supply chain field; focus on improving skills and acquiring new ones. www.se.com

TD Bank *The Career ReLaunch Program* is a 16-week career transition for financial professionals who are relaunching their careers; includes skill refreshers, mentoring, coaching, networking and a personalized development plan. www.td.com

Texas Instruments *The Encore Program* is a three-month returnship that offers hands-on experiences that help rediscover and build professional skills; includes personalized mentoring and coaching. www.ti.com

UBS This program offers a permanent position to returners that includes a support system of returner peers, coaching sessions, and a mentor. Opportunities are available across the firm. www.ubs.com

United Technologies *The Re-Empower Program* is a 16-week reentry program that includes on-the-job learning, personalized reentry coaching, and leadership sessions. www.utc.com

Walmart *Cleared for Re-Entry* is a four month program for returners who have at least five years of professional experience; emphasis is on learning and skill development; includes professional development and networking opportunities; after the program, qualified candidates may apply for full-time employment. corporate.walmart.com

Wayfair *Returnship* is a 6-month return-to-work program for experienced professionals on-ramping back into senior manager and director roles across various business areas; includes a 6-month assignment based on the employees skills, experience, and interests and mentorship from managers. www.wayfair.com

WhirlPool *Whirlpool Invites Returning Engineers (WIRE)* is a program for returners with five or more years of relevant engineering experience; individuals are placed on project and provided with a support system during their assignment. www.whirlpoolcorp.com

WORKPLACE REENTRY RESOURCES

The following list provides reentry resources that can serve as a starting point for both returners and employers navigating the workplace reentry journey.

Resources Supporting Workplace Reentry

FlexJobs: Job search site specializing in available remote, part-time, freelance, and other flexible job opportunities; also provides tools and resources to job-seekers. www.flexjobs.com

Get that Raise: Tools to analyze your current salary and help you map future goals. www.sofi.com/getthatraise/

Glassdoor: Job search site that includes employee reviews of potential employers. www.glassdoor.com

IRelaunch: An organization specialized in working with companies to implement career reentry programs and supporting the individual returner with returnship opportunities, coaching, and career reentry conferences. www.irelaunch.com

LinkedIn Learning: An eLearning site with an extensive selection of business-related, technical, and creative courses that can enhance and build key skills. www.linkedin.com/learning

OnRamp Fellowship: An experiential learning platform that facilitates year-long legal fellowships for lawyers reentering the legal field. onrampfellowship.com

Path Forward: An organization that partners with companies to create and run returnships and make these opportunities available to returners. www.pathforward.org

Payscale: Online collection of tools to help employees discover their market worth and for employers to define competitive salaries to attract talent; includes career and negotiations advice. www.payscale.com

The Pregnancy Pause: A toolkit of resume and cover letter templates that help current or former stay-at-home parents highlight their experiences and address the work gap. thepregnancypause.org

ResumeGo: A professional resume writing service. www.resumego.net

Salary.com: Online salary reference enabling individuals to determine “what you are worth” and explore salaries as well as well job opportunities by job function; also provides comprehensive compensation data for employers. www.salary.com

Werk: An analytics platform for employers to gather and analyze the flexibility needs of their employees. werk.co

Resources Supporting Women Reentering the Workforce

Après: Provides guidance and job postings for women looking to return to the workforce.

apresgroup.com

Ellevest: Global professional women's network focused on closing the workplace gender gap; offers career-related articles as well as virtual and in-person networking events. www.ellevestnetwork.com

Fairygodboss: An online community connecting career-minded women; includes community advice, jobs, and virtual events. www.fairygodboss.com

Power to Fly: Online recruiting platform that connects women to opportunities at companies who are interested in broadening gender diversity; includes career focused live chats as well as recruiting events. www.powertofly.com

reachHIRE: a Boston-based company that partners with organizations to create more career off-ramp and on-ramp opportunities for women. www.reachhire.com

ReBoot Accel: Helps women reenter the workforce through a kick-start toolkit, workshops, coaching, and job opportunities. rebootaccel.com

The Mom Project: Online platform that helps moms find work opportunities that align with their work and flexibility preferences; includes support resources. themomproject.com

The Salary Project: Collection of women's salary survey data to help women prepare for salary negotiations. www.careercontessa.com/resources/salary-project/

The Second Shift: A platform for employers to engage women in their company's part-time roles, interim needs or special projects. www.thesecondshift.com

Where Women Work: A guide that showcases women's achievements and companies that support them. www.wherewomenwork.com

Women Back to Work (WBW): Connects women returners to WBW partner employers and offers a structured reentry approach including skills assessment, job search training, and mentoring. www.womenbacktowork.org

Resources Supporting Reentry After a Medical or Mental Health Leave

Center for Workplace Mental Health: Online information and resources from the American Psychiatric Association on mental health in the workplace, including an organizational assessment. workplacementalhealth.org

Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN): Provides resources to help employers recruit, retain, and advance people with disabilities and create a more disability inclusive workplace. askearn.org

Job Accommodation Network (JAN): Online resource to help employers, employees, and job seekers explore and understand workplace accommodations for disabled individuals. askjan.org

Partnership on Employment & Accessible Technology (PEAT): Information and resources to help employers and employees understand value and impact of accessible technology. www.peatworks.org

Transgender Inclusion in the Workplace: A Toolkit for Employers: Provides employers practical guidance in creating a more inclusive workplace for transgender and gender non-conforming employees. www.hrc.org/campaigns/trans-toolkit

Resources Supporting Veterans Living and Working as Civilians

Employing Veterans Digital Toolkit: Resources for employers to help them attract, hire and retain veterans; also includes best practices for veterans. pages.shrm.org/Veteran-Employment-Digital-Toolkit

GI Jobs: Online portal to support veteran's transition to civilian life; includes job opportunities at employers hiring veterans, educational resources, and guidance on the transition. www.gijobs.com

Military Friendly: Listing of employers and educational institutions that are committed to supporting the success of the military and veteran community. www.militaryfriendly.com

National Veteran-Owned Business Association (NaVOBA): Certifies veteran-own business of all sizes and fosters corporate contracting opportunities for those companies. navoba.org

Recruit Military: Job search site for veterans that helps employers connect with candidates through a job board and job fairs; includes job search advice for veterans and military spouses. recruitmilitary.com

Service Women's Action Network (SWAN): Community of military women — past, present and future — who amplify for women veteran's opportunities, protection, and benefits. www.servicewomen.org

The Center for Women Veterans (CWV): Monitors and coordinates the Veterans Affairs administration of health care and benefits for women veterans; includes advocacy and resources for women veterans. www.va.gov/womenvet

Veterans in Business Network (VIB): A non-profit which hosts conferences and networking events to help educate and support veterans in business. www.vibnetwork.org

Women's Veterans Network (WoVeN): A national network for women veterans to enhance wellness, relationships, and connections. www.wovenwomenvets.org

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Over the last five years, a majority of employees have become new parents or dealt with a significant personal or family health issue. About half of these employees took leave. Many who did not take leave were able to handle the situation without a break in work, but others point to concerns about work responsibilities, fear that it might negatively impact their career trajectory, or financial concerns.

— *Women in the Workplace 2019*, McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org



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Contact

MAIL Bentley University
The Gloria Cordes Larson Center for Women and Business
LaCava Building, Suite 298
175 Forest Street, Waltham, MA 02452 USA

WEB bentley.edu/cwb

PHONE +1 781.891.2227

EMAIL cwb@bentley.edu



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