

JOB MARKET

Some Signs of Easier Re-entry After Breaks to Rear Children

By HILLARY CHURA NOV. 20, 2005

White-collar parents who take time off to rear children face an uphill battle when they seek to return to the land of W-2's. But because of the rising number of them trying to do so, cultural shifts since Sept. 11 and a possible labor shortage in a few years, extended sabbaticals need not be the kiss of death they were a generation ago.

Julienne Yi, a brand consultant, took time off when her son, William, was born. She and her husband, Thomas, had moved to New York from San Francisco in late 2001, when she was pregnant. When her son was about 18 months old, she tested the job market. She explained the gap on her résumé as stemming from relocation rather than child-rearing, but she was prepared when the baby issue came up. "Everybody could understand, it's your first child and you want to take some time off," Ms. Yi said. "Since it wasn't a lot of time to take off, and because I didn't leave a job, employers didn't think, 'Oh, she will quit on us.' I emphasized, 'I'm glad I did it, but I am ready to use my brain, I miss my challenges.'" Ms. Yi ended up with her former employer, Salt Branding, when her family returned to the West Coast in August 2004.

"An employer's biggest concern is that your head isn't in the game," she added. "You stress your strengths, and that is not an issue."

Still, many people seeking to re-enter the work force feel that employers are reticent about hiring back-to-work mothers -- and the few returning fathers. Employers are naturally concerned about technological innovations, merger activity

and regulatory changes the employees missed. What's more, returnees are at a disadvantage compared with colleagues who stayed and toughed it out through overnight feedings, childhood illnesses and limited quality time.

Episodic progress, however, has come over the last five years, said Kathie Lingle, director of the Alliance for Work-Life Progress, a nonprofit association.

"The skepticism is decreasing, though not everywhere," she said. "The war on talent is still out there. Losing good quality people is painful, and more companies are realizing that keeping people or welcoming them back -- providing an on-ramp as well as an off-ramp -- is a talent management problem."

Mothers of baby boomers who went back to work were largely limited to secretarial, teaching or nursing jobs. Their children, in turn, took hardly any time off, juggling home and work. Now, employees want it all, taking time off but retaining the ability to return to the professional positions they left.

While Fortune 500 companies remain skeptical, the most receptive employers are smaller companies, nonprofit institutions and community groups, said Laura Hill, president of Careers in Motion, a career-coaching firm in Manhattan.

"Big companies have specific jobs that require specific experience, and they want recent experience," Ms. Hill said. "Medium and small employers, with smaller budgets, cannot afford to be as choosy."

Career flexibility and multiyear sabbaticals came to the fore with Gen-X'ers in about 2001, said Carol Evans, chief executive and founder of Working Mother Media. She said parents who might want to return to the land of suits and collegial camaraderie should volunteer or consult, because even people who have been out of the work force for six months have found it difficult to step back in.

"If you've not kept your skill set up, it's not just about being smart," Ms. Evans said. "They are up against competition that is brutal and work that is changing very quickly in every industry. No one is going to say: 'Thank God you're back. I can't wait to hire you after 15 years.' "

Despite the warm, fuzzy reputation of community groups and nonprofits, a 2005 study from the Wharton Center for Leadership and Change said job seekers had received a frosty reception even there. While respondents knew returning would be difficult, 43 percent stayed out longer than they had anticipated.

According to a March article in the Harvard Business Review by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, president of the Center for Work-Life Policy, and Carolyn Buck Luce, global managing partner for Ernst & Young's health science industry practice in New York, 37 percent of 2,443 highly qualified female respondents in a Harris International poll report having left work voluntarily at some point. For mothers, the number bumps to 43 percent.

The article said that 93 percent of women who left their positions wanted to return but that only 74 percent were able to do so. Anne Weisberg, senior adviser to the Women's Initiative at Deloitte & Touche, said returning mothers faced personal challenges as well.

"Your sense of yourself and your confidence in being able to re-enter erodes over time," she said.

Leslie Greene, a Manhattan lawyer, was laid off during her maternity leave in 2003. She took a series of projects for more than two years as she looked for permanent employment. The consulting work kept her skills sharp and bolstered her list of contacts. She interviewed for several jobs and accepted an offer in October.

"Had I just been home with my baby, I would have had a finite set of skills applicable in fewer work environments," Ms. Greene said. "It helped me broaden the areas I could work in and gave me current projects I could talk about."

Returning workers and career consultants say that perhaps even more dangerous than letting résumés get dusty is to let contacts grow stale. Even though parents may have no energy amid late-night feedings, play dates, bake sales, doctor appointments, Spanish classes, soccer, music and ballet, it is vital to keep in touch with colleagues who eventually may be in a position to hire.

Volunteer experience, they say, must be strategic to be a résumé builder -- for example, leading big fund-raising campaigns rather than ladling soup at a homeless shelter.

"The prohibition on gaps is pretty great," said Barbara Ehrenreich, author of "Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream." "You have to be getting an education or making money for somebody all along every minute."

In researching the book, Ms. Ehrenreich presented an employment gap caused by child-rearing. Returning to the work force, she said, "was certainly fine in the blue-collar world, but there was total blank silence in the white-collar world." After hiring a résumé writer, career coaches and an image makeover consultant, she was still unable to find a job she would have wanted.

Job seekers' situations could improve by the end of the decade, when baby boomers start retiring and the growth of the labor force and population slow. At the same time, the projected number of jobs will increase, according to figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Of course, that does not take into account technological changes or a shifting of jobs overseas.

Though employers are aware of this, few are ready to change, said Tierney Remick, global managing director for consumer retail practice at the executive recruiters Korn/Ferry International. "I don't believe companies are planning for it," Ms. Remick said. "They know it's coming. They've read about it."

Joe Lovato, associate director for global diversity at Procter & Gamble, said consumer goods companies should be particularly receptive to returning mothers because women are their primary consumers. "The talent has to come from somewhere," he said, "and they are more in touch with the needs of families at that time. That's good for business."