

Returning to Work: What Executive Career Gaps Really Mean



For years, having a gap in your resume was a red flag. It was as if career breaks wiped out the knowledge and skills obtained before that time, instantly painting certain candidates in a negative light. Today, after decades of progression, is that still the norm?

Executive search professionals have seen a number of executives leave the workforce and later decide to return. While these individuals face unique challenges, there is a positive progression in the number of opportunities available to those with career gaps. Whether it's through a formal return-to-work program or not, professionals are erasing the taboos of yesterday.

Which Executives Experience Career Gaps?

When considering the backgrounds of those who choose to leave the workforce, there is a demographic that often stands out from other groups: female professionals who are raising families. In fact, [40% of American mothers](#) have taken reduced hours or time off to raise a family, but these individuals did not seek an early retirement. That's why, right now, there are three million U.S. women who desire to return to work.

This was precisely the case for [Aletha Noonan](#), currently a Vice President with CDW. Aletha's early success helped her advance into leadership early in her career at CDW. She became one of the first sales leaders and only the second woman in management at that time. As she grew through the ranks, the company also grew in revenue from the thousands into the billions. After the birth of her first daughter, Aletha continued to work full-time for a year before moving to part-time for the second year. Then, once her second child was born, she made the tough decision to leave the workforce entirely. Like many in her shoes, she desired to return to work once her children were in school.

Aletha's story reflects that of countless women executives across America, but female professionals are not the only group who desire career breaks. Considering that executives have skill sets that are of great value to companies, it's perhaps no surprise that many who retire are lured back. Looking at the numbers, [33% of retirees](#) do in fact reverse their retirement.

There are also those who step away in order to care for a sick relative, whether a child, spouse, or parent. Stay-at-home fathers are more common in modern families than they were years ago, and represent another group that leaves and returns to the workforce. Finally, there are also veterans who leave the military and seek to apply their skill set in executive positions, reflected by the [nearly 10%](#) of S&P 500 CEOs who were once military officers.

How Do Executives Return to Work?

While the reasons for taking time off can differ from one executive to the next, the challenges of returning to the workforce are the same. Industries evolve, and there are often concerns about how to even begin. To discover the keys to making a successful return, I spoke with [Kate Nau](#), the Global Operations & Supply Chain Finance Lead of food and agriculture company Cargill.

After establishing herself as a skilled executive, Kate stepped away from full-time work and focused on working part-time and remotely while raising her family. In order to make that happen, Kate took on a series of sales and marketing roles rather than continue to focus on her specialty of Finance. After raising her children and determining it was time to return to full-time work, it took Kate four years to reach the level her background warranted.

Kate revealed three distinct strategies that made her successful. The first is flexibility. If Kate only considered specific finance roles and wasn't open to sales or marketing, she would not have been able to move into part-time work so easily. Secondly, upon her return, Kate was prepared to accept a salary and title that were below her experience level, knowing that she simply had to get in and prove herself in order to reach the place she wanted to be. The third key strategy Kate employed was confidence. Kate approached employers with a strong mentality that showcased how her multi-functional experiences in other departments enhanced her marketability as a well-rounded finance professional.

Aletha's tips for returning to work go hand-in-hand with Kate's strategies. Firstly, Aletha focused on her strengths. Leadership skills don't become outdated, so Aletha showcased her poise as a leader while leaning on her learning agility to bridge any gaps in knowledge. Next, strategically tapping into her network was crucial. Aletha did so by being specific about her skill set and desired type of role when reaching out to others. Finally, Aletha let her core competencies guide her. Realizing she had a strong and unique knowledge of CDW's processes and people, she leveraged that fact to secure a role with Microsoft who needed someone with that knowledge.

What About Formal Return-to-Work Programs?

While the above examples showcase professionals who forged their own path for returning to executive work after a career gap, formal company-sponsored return-to-work programs are becoming more prevalent. Organizations like Amazon, Mastercard, Visa, Ford, Bloomberg, IBM, Johnson & Johnson, Dell, Accenture, and many more recognize the caliber of talent choosing to return to work after an absence. According to [Johnson & Johnson](#), "A healthier future is one in which people can take the time they need away from work without sacrificing personal, professional, and economic potential."

These companies see that executives who have left the workforce are an untapped resource that can effectively broaden their talent pool. The logistics or format of these programs may differ, but [Ford's re-entry program](#) is a good example. To qualify for this program, candidates must have been unemployed or underemployed for at least two years. Ford offers chosen candidates a full-time position that is designed to help them re-acclimate into working life. "Participants will experience a robust curriculum with an emphasis on professional development, mentoring, networking, and exposure to senior level management preparing them to shift gears back into the workforce while learning more about Ford and our culture." Programs like this see great success, with [86% of those](#) who complete rival

GM's return-to-work program staying with the company afterward.

To learn more about formal return-to-work programs, I spoke with [Carol Fishman Cohen](#), Chair and Co-founder of [iRelaunch](#). Her organization works with over 70 global companies to build and expand return-to-work programs while managing a community of over 75,000 professionals seeking to return after career breaks of one to over 20 years. Carol described how these programs originated in storied Wall-Street institutions starting in 2005. These old organizations had seen generation after generation of employees move through different life stages, with women leaving along the way. Over time, a sense of urgency developed around not having enough women in mid- to senior level roles, coupled with a recognition of the caliber of talent they were losing. In response, formal programs were implemented to encourage these individuals to return, typically structured as "returnships" 12 to 16 weeks long. Today, more companies are running return to work programs producing consistently high hiring results. As a result, managers are beginning to view employment gaps as less risky, and programs are expanding based on their merit.

Looking at Executive Career Gaps Differently

As the business world continues to evolve, so too must hiring strategies adapt. Given the current competitive talent landscape, executive search professionals and hiring managers can no longer afford to pass on potentially qualified candidates with career gaps. Talented individuals who decide to return to work are key players who can make a tangible impact in organizations everywhere. Whether you're a former executive looking to make a return or an employer seeking talent, you have an important role to play in setting a tone for the future. Focus on mutual goals, and the stigma surrounding career gaps will continue to fade into the past.

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