

## WORK & FAMILY

# You Can Overcome a Long Gap in Your Résumé

Employers are becoming more flexible about time spent away from work, thanks to a tight labor market and a greater cultural shift



ILLUSTRATION: MICHAEL GLENWOOD

By Sue Shellenbarger

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How long can you step out of the workforce without sinking your career? The answer may surprise you.

Employers are rushing to interview applicants with résumé gaps as long as two years, according to a recent study of more than 36,000 applications by the résumé-writing service ResumeGo. That's a marked change from a decade ago, when a career break as short as six months could be deadly.

This poses new opportunities for skilled workers, as well as challenges in navigating on-ramps back into a career.

Some early-job choices are simply a bad fit. Noah Kain, a 32-year-old from Baltimore, made an idealistic choice to join an environmental nonprofit after graduating from college. He was

promoted twice in two years. But he soon wearied of the low pay and 10-hour workdays spent canvassing and fundraising.

Mr. Kain took a career break, doing odd jobs while teaching himself to code and building a freelance portfolio. After about a year, he landed an entry-level job as a web designer and developer. He has since been promoted twice at Duckpin, a digital marketing agency in Towson, Md., and is now director of marketing and strategy.

Some 9.8% of applicants with two-year gaps in their résumés were contacted by employers for follow-up interviews. That response rate is only slightly lower than the 11.3% of applicants with no career gaps who were asked to interview, according to the ResumeGo study, which tracked employers' responses to simulated applications. Only 4.6% of résumés showing a gap of three years elicited a response.

The tight labor market is sparking employers' willingness to consider résumés with gaps. But a cultural shift also is under way toward greater acceptance of nontraditional career paths. Some 76% of U.S. workers ages 24 to 38 expect to take career breaks of longer than a month. One reason may be that nearly one in three millennials plans to work beyond age 70, and nearly one in eight expects to work until they drop, according to a 2016 ManpowerGroup survey of 1,000 adults.

Abby Lee Mosconi dreamed of becoming a singer and majored in musical theater in college. But after graduation, she took a job as a brand strategist for an ad agency because she thought she had to get a "real job." She found the work depressing, and wondered, "Is this the point of life? To just pick a career, do it for 30 years and stifle how you feel?" she says. Surrounded by hovering bosses, she began having panic attacks.

She summoned the courage to quit three years ago and began working as a freelance writer and singing at open mics in clubs near her Philadelphia home. She has since built a steady clientele for her writing, and is having growing success as a rock singer. It's possible to build a career that makes you happy. But you have to be willing to invest in the work, Ms. Mosconi says. "Build your skills, then fight for what you want."



Taking a career break enabled Abby Lee Mosconi to trade a job in advertising for more creative work as a freelance writer and rock singer. PHOTO: JOHN DOLCEAMORE

The skills employers need in their employees are changing so quickly that people who take a career break for education or retraining are increasingly attractive, says Sue Bhatia, founder and chairwoman of Rose International, a St. Louis staffing firm. Taking time off to retrain is seen as a sign of adaptability.

Others undertake new challenges, such as travel or sports, to reap a sense of accomplishment. Rupert Taylor, managing director of Nonstop Snow, a Fernie, British Columbia, ski-instruction and performance-coaching program, sees more clients on career breaks who want to pursue a personal passion or a new adventure, such as helicopter skiing.

Leander Angst took a break after four years working at a Boston cybersecurity consulting firm to train at Nonstop Snow as a ski instructor. He then took a five-month job as a ski instructor in Australia, a place he'd always wanted to live. The time outdoors helped him lay plans to train for a new career in environmental consulting. "It gave me the head space to think about what

challenges to tackle next,” says Mr. Angst, who lives in London now.

Working mothers were early adapters of career gaps, taking a few years off to stay home with small children. Now more women are extending their time away to five to seven years, based on a survey of about 400 women by Après, a website connecting employers with women returning to work after career breaks. And more companies are willing to work with them, says Stacey Delo, chief executive of the site.

Job applicants returning from breaks need to own the gap. Assert with confidence why you were away, then shift the focus to future contributions you hope to make. Avoid sounding defensive or apologetic, says Jennifer Gefsky, an attorney and co-author with Ms. Delo of “Your Turn,” a 2019 book about how mothers can combine child-rearing and career. And take the long view. “Five to seven years is a drop in the bucket over the course of an entire career,” she says. “You can really come back from that in a meaningful way.”

Corporate career re-entry programs are a solution for some. The earliest sprang up over a decade ago at employers hoping to lure skilled women who had taken breaks for child-rearing back to the workforce. The programs have multiplied quickly, says Carol Fishman Cohen, chair and co-founder of iRelaunch, a Boston career re-entry firm. Many employers have learned that hiring people who have been away for a while isn’t as risky as they once thought, Ms. Cohen says.

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*Which considerations should someone take to make a successful re-entry into the workforce after some time off? Join the conversation below.*

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Employers also are expanding the programs to recruit people who have taken career breaks for other reasons, she says. A 16-week program at United Technologies called Re-Empower provides mentoring, coaching and networking help for professionals who have been away from the workforce for at least two years. Among the Farmington, Conn.-based company’s recruits are mothers, but also those who have been caring for aging relatives, serving in the military, working as missionaries or simply enjoying some travel.

For Naveen Gopal, 40, the program was just what he needed. Mr. Gopal took four years away from his career as an industrial engineer to deal with health problems. After going through the United Technologies program, he returned to work full-time job as a senior engineer at the company late last year.

Looking back at his career break, he says, “it was an opportunity to sharpen the saw.”

## WHEN RETURNING TO WORK AFTER A CAREER BREAK

- \* **Consider** volunteering or taking courses in your chosen field before returning.
- \* **Renew** professional contacts before starting your search.
- \* **Don’t apologize** for being out of the workforce for a while.
- \* **Be ready** to show how you kept up with industry trends and technology.
- \* **Focus** when interviewing on what you hope to contribute in the future.
- \* **Be prepared** to show that you’re ready to perform under pressure.
- \* **Project** high energy and interest to ease any doubts about your readiness.

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