

## JOURNAL REPORTS: LEADERSHIP

# She Took a Two-Year Break in Her Career. Now She's CEO.

Deanna Mulligan of Guardian Life Insurance talks about how time off helped her find new focus

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*When she was 41 years old, Deanna Mulligan stepped back from the prime of her career. Now CEO of Guardian Life Insurance, Ms. Mulligan reflects on that move, and what it taught her—among other things, that “life is not a straight line.” What follows is an edited version of her reflections, as told to Wall Street Journal reporter Chip Cutter.*

My boss saw me waiting outside his door at 7 in the morning.

He said, “Oh no, what’s wrong?”

I said, “Well, I have to talk to you.”

I had a huge lump in my throat. I walked in, sat down and had the conversation: I wanted to take some time off.

I was 41. This is supposed to be the prime of your career. At the time, taking a break was considered a really strange thing to do. People said to me, “You can’t take time off. You’ll never get back on a career path.”

A few things in my life led me to believe it was important.

I had a relative who, unfortunately, died fairly early. It was clear at her funeral that she had made a big impact on a lot of people as a nursery-school teacher and then a director of a preschool. I thought about my life at the time: How many people was I having an impact on? Was my life going to make as big of an impact as hers did?

This happened after 9/11. You read a lot of people who say, “After 9/11, I thought differently about my life and my career goals and what I wanted to do.” I knew people in the building who escaped

- and, sadly, a few people who didn't. It was difficult being in New York around 9/11 and not having it affect you in some way. I remember thinking: If I wasn't going to be here tomorrow, what impact or what memory would I leave behind?

## **Stepping away**

Even though I had worked very hard up to that point, I was very happy with my career. I had the great experience of being a McKinsey consultant for almost nine years. I worked at AXA, a big insurance company. I tried not to let it define me as a person.

But I went around and talked to a few people who had taken breaks before. Interestingly, nobody who had done it said, "Oh, don't do it. Oh, that's a bad idea." Everybody who had done it said, "It was one of the best things I've ever done." And no one to whom I spoke thought that it had a negative impact on their career.

I intended it for it to be six months. But one of my friends said, "You think you're going to take six months off, but that's not enough. You have to take at least two years." And I remember at the time thinking to myself, "Two years?" I could never take two years off.

In retrospect, two years was the right amount of time. The first year I spent decompressing and spending time on activities I had neglected, like exercise. Of course, spending a lot of time with

my family, my friends. And, I have to say, time with myself. Time to really be alone and think about what I'd learned and what that meant for my future.

It was a big reset.



After her break, Ms. Mulligan started a consulting firm, then took a job with Guardian Life, one of her clients. Three years later, she became Guardian's CEO. PHOTO: KHOLOODEID FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The second year, I was able to focus on what I might like to do next. I cast my net pretty wide. I'm an equestrian; I looked at something in the equestrian field. I spoke to one of the major art houses about working in that field because I have a passion for art.

My original career was in insurance, and ultimately, I decided that I really loved it. I find it to be very meaningful—it affects people's lives in a major way. We're here for people at their worst moments. We provide help when someone dies, when someone is disabled, when someone is sick.

I had always wanted to start my own firm, so I started a little consulting outfit. From there, I went to work for Guardian, one of my clients.

I became an employee in July 2008. I went from an executive vice president, running the individual life and disability business, to becoming president and chief operating officer. In July 2011, I became CEO.

## Purpose and meaning

I worked really hard before I took the time off, but I worked really hard after. I always loved my job and was very engaged, so I don't think I approached work differently.

I didn't come out of my time off saying, "I want to be CEO." I came out saying, "I want to make a difference and contribute in a way that only I can. What can I do that's going to be significant?"

Leading with values was something I wanted to be distinct about. I find purpose and meaning in my job every day. Once you find it, you don't really lose it. I have a different point of view than, maybe, many people have today in society. It is OK to explore, and it's OK to take time to think about your passions.

There is a lot of advice that's been given to women over the years—and men, too—to find a path early, to go to the right school, to take all the right steps. There's pressure to get the right first job and to build toward this ultimate goal.

What I've learned is that life is not a straight line.

So, if your children, your spouse, your friends are taking a winding and meandering path, as long as they're discovering what's important to them, and trying to live by it, I think that's all you need to do.

You'll get to the right place eventually.

*Email Mr. Cutter at [chip.cutter@wsj.com](mailto:chip.cutter@wsj.com).*

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What factors do you think need to be at play for someone to make a successful comeback? *Join the conversation below.*

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## WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

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This article is part of a Wall Street Journal special report on women, men and work based on a study by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Co.

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