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IDEA WATCH

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TALENT

The 40-Year-Old Intern

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by Carol Fishman Cohen

Kathy Bayert has an MBA from Northwestern’s Kellogg School and a résumé that includes stints at IBM and PricewaterhouseCoopers. In 2003 she put her career on hold to stay home with her two children. Five years later, looking to return to work at age 42, she found that the gap on her résumé was the least of her problems: The economy was plummeting into recession. While scouring online job boards one day, she encountered an unfamiliar term: Sara Lee was advertising a “returnship.” It turned out that the opening

was a short-term paid position designed for a professional who’d been out of the workforce for several years—basically, an internship for an experienced worker whose time off might scare recruiters away. Bayert applied, was accepted, and signed on. After her initial six-month assignment, she was hired as a senior manager of organizational effectiveness. The program, she says, was “critical as a springboard back into the workforce.”

The challenge of relaunching a career after a hiatus (most often for full-time

HOW ONE COMPANY BUILT

Goldman Sachs has been a pioneer in creating return-to-work programs. The effort began in 2006, when the bank held one-day informational seminars in New York for women (and a few men) who'd interrupted their careers and were looking to go back to work. The following year the firm held a seminar in London as well.

parenting) is not new, of course. Women (and some men) have been dealing with it for decades, and the economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett has explored it in a series of groundbreaking HBR articles and books. Still, it remains a hot-button issue: It's an important part of the dilemma that Anne-Marie Slaughter laid out in her widely discussed essay in the July/August 2012 *Atlantic*, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All." Amid all the debate, however, some innovative organizations have been quietly experimenting with an option that may be part of the solution. "Returnships" (a term trademarked in 2008 by Goldman Sachs) help create what Hewlett calls "on-ramps" for people seeking to return to work. These short-term, nonbinding arrangements can be a valuable way to reduce the risks (real or perceived) of hiring people who've chosen to take an extended break.

Given the weak global labor market, this may seem a strange time for employers to be expanding their pipeline of prospective employees. But that view misses an important point. Even though unemployment is high, companies struggle to find the right applicants. The potential candidates for returnship programs are a high-caliber bunch. During the four years I've spent running return-to-work conferences, all the at-

tendees have held bachelor's degrees, 75% have held graduate degrees, and 75% had worked for at least 10 years before taking an intentional break. Returning professionals offer enlightened employers a rare opportunity: They allow them to hire people who have a level of maturity and experience not found in younger recruits and who are at a life stage where parental leaves and spousal job relocations are most likely behind them. In short, these applicants are an excellent investment. Using a returnship program as a screening tool lets employers skim the top talent from this pool and then make ultimate hiring decisions on the basis of meaningful work samples.

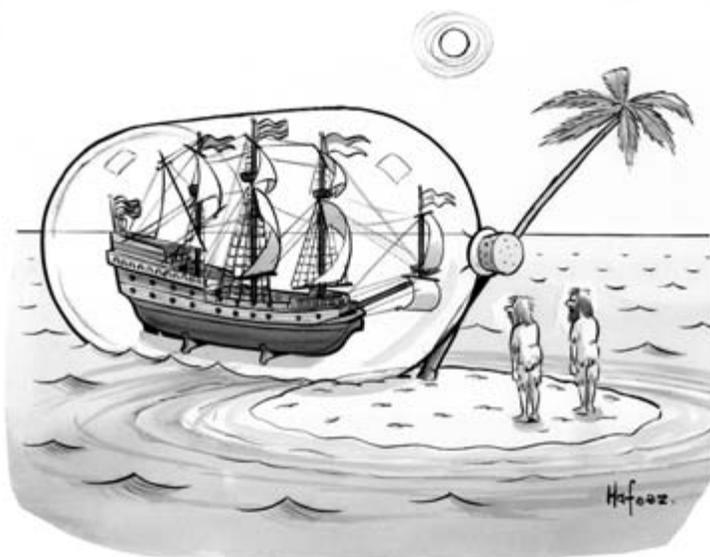
One of the oldest return-to-work programs is the UK's Daphne Jackson Memorial Fellowships Trust, which began in 1985. It offers flexible part-time paid research positions at universities and companies to UK residents with an academic degree in science, engineering, or technology and with at least three years of related work experience. To be eligible, applicants must have been out of the workforce for a minimum of two years. (Most organizations have a similar requirement, which generally makes returnships unavailable to people who've been recently laid off or are job-hunting while employed.) Fully 96% of

fellows find a regular position at the end of the two-year program. Although most of the 200-plus alumni are women, there are exceptions: In 2003 Sami Kafala, a nuclear physicist who had been the primary caregiver for his children for five years, became the first male Daphne Jackson fellow. Today he works as an analytical physicist doing environmental radioactivity research at Imperial College London—a position he connected with during his fellowship.

How can employers set up successful returnships? Having studied programs at 14 organizations (several of which, including Goldman Sachs, Sara Lee, and Pace Law School, have sponsored conferences held by my company) and interviewed program directors and dozens of participants, I offer seven recommendations.

Keep it small. Returnships are a new enough concept that even the companies that pioneered the practice keep them small; it's easier to get buy-in and to build a successful track record that way. Goldman Sachs, which created 11 eight-week stints for IT and back-office professionals in 2008, the first year of its returnship program, more than tripled that number in 2010 but dropped back to 16 the following year in order to ensure high-quality, high-touch support. About half the participants have gone on to regular positions at the firm.

Identify an internal champion (or two). Returning-professional programs typically thrive only if they have a strong advocate, whether that person is an HR executive or, as at Sara Lee, the CEO. (When that company initiated its returnship program, the chief executive was Brenda



"Well, that's incredibly frustrating."

ITS “RETURNSHIP” PROGRAM

In 2008 Goldman offered its first “returnships,” eight-week paid internships in non-client-facing departments such as operations and IT, in New York. After the program ended, it hired six of the 11 participants.

Assignments in the program are substantial. “We work with the hiring manager to identify really meaty projects that these individuals can work

on,” Monica Marquez, the vice president and head of diversity recruiting for the Americas, told the Glass Hammer, a blog for executive women. Participants might, for example, help lead an initiative aimed at improving client confidentiality or develop the curriculum for a training program.

In addition to actual work experience, the program

includes a special orientation, briefings on changes in the banking industry during participants’ absence from it, classes in confidence building, and opportunities to meet with the firm’s senior leadership.

Goldman’s returnships have proved popular: In 2009, for instance, more than 300 people applied. The program

has expanded geographically and has offered positions in New Jersey, Salt Lake City, Hong Kong, and Singapore as well as New York. According to the company’s 2011 Environmental, Social and Governance Report, the program has helped 120 people around the world navigate their reentry to the workforce.

Barnes, who had taken time off for child-rearing herself.) Cultivating multiple supporters can be crucial to a program’s long-term survival; if the sole champion leaves, the program may falter (as Sara Lee’s did after Barnes departed in 2010).

Model the returnship on your existing internship program. There’s no need to start from scratch. Many companies already have well-developed programs for college-age interns. The work assigned to returning professionals should be more challenging, but many other elements—the application process, the orientation, the duration, and mentorship arrangements—can be similar or even shared.

Introduce hiring managers to participants. Particularly in science and technology fields, managers are often reluctant to consider people who’ve been out of the workforce, fearing that their skills are out-of-date. These reservations can be overcome by face-to-face meetings between managers and returnship participants; the latter group’s talent and seriousness about resuming work will quickly become clear.

Identify current employees who are good role models. Although a returnship’s main purpose is to create an entry point for returning professionals, it’s important to give a good sense of the upward mobility participants can hope for if they attain a regular position. The best programs expose them to high-performing employees who took time off during their own careers. And when successful relaunchers tell their stories, they not only inspire returnees but also may influence skeptical hiring managers. Executives are often unaware

Despite high unemployment, companies struggle to find the right applicants. “Returnships” attract highly educated, experienced workers.

that a high-performing colleague once took a career break; spotlighting that colleague’s path can give them a positive view of aspiring returnees. To identify these role models, canvas the workforce or ask HR to examine employee records.

Expand campus recruitment to include returnees. This is the easiest—though most often overlooked—way to funnel returning-to-work professionals into your talent pipeline: When recruiting interns, make it clear that all ages are welcome. A student in the University of Chicago’s part-time MBA program, Erika Grinius, 41, had an unusual background: She’d earned a master’s degree in social work in her twenties and had spent the previous five years caring for her daughter. Nonetheless, she was accepted for a student internship at Whitney Automotive Group, an online auto parts retailer. After the program ended, she was offered a full-time job—and after finishing her MBA, she was promoted. By explicitly opening up traditional internships, companies can attract experienced workers without having to create special programs.

Partner with an academic program. Another way to provide opportunities is to reach out to universities and graduate schools, some of which are now offering short-term skill-building programs for the return-to-work demographic. Pace Law

School, for example, has a five-month part-time program, New Directions, for attorneys who took time off and are looking to go back to work. Enrollees work 20 hours a week (unpaid) as externs at a wide range of organizations, including Sikorsky Aircraft and the Juilliard School. Among the compelling comebacks the program has facilitated is that of Cynthia Wells, a mother of six who enrolled in 2009, after a 20-year professional hiatus. Her externship at Sidley Austin led to a position as a staff attorney there.

RETURNSHIPS ARE a valuable new tool, but it’s important to recognize that there have always been successful professionals who stepped out of the workforce and returned with aplomb. Sandra Day O’Connor took a five-year break from practicing law while raising her three sons. Ann Fudge took a two-year break before becoming CEO at Young & Rubicam. As more companies recognize the potential of skilled workers whose definition of “having it all” includes a few years away from traditional employment, such stories will become more common. ♥ **HBR Reprint F121A**

 **Carol Fishman Cohen** is a cofounder of iRelaunch, a company focused on return-to-work issues, and a coauthor of *Back on the Career Track: A Guide for Stay-at-Home Moms Who Want to Return to Work* (2007).