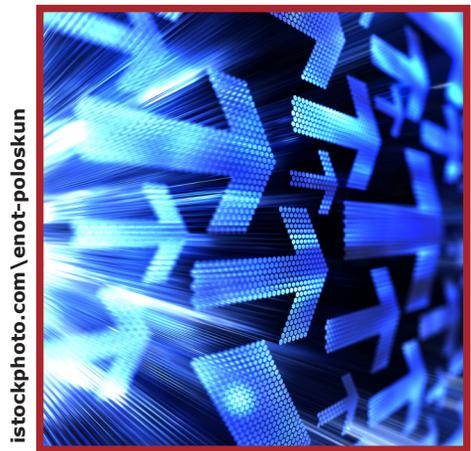


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Career Advice

Finding Your Way Back: Re-Entering the Science Work Force

By Brianna Blaser
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In the idealized career path, a scientist goes straight from earning an undergraduate degree to graduate school, and then on to a postdoc and eventual employment, without breaks between positions. For various reasons, however, not all scientists' career paths are nearly so linear. Although the most common reason scientists might leave the work force is to care for their own children, others might leave to care for family members, including spouses or parents, or because they had difficulty finding employment after their partner accepted a position requiring relocation. Some scientists also may find themselves in a career break due to funding cuts or layoffs. Here are some strategies for finding a new position regardless of the reasons for the hiatus.

In a Nutshell

- Network.
Search broadly.
Consider compromising.
Look at internships, postdocs, and part-time work.
Be patient and use your time wisely.
Be prepared to talk about your time outside the work force.
Educate yourself about topics relevant to career development.
Be determined.

Natalie Catlett took a career break for family reasons. After her postdoc at an industry-funded institute ended due to a lack of funding, she moved from San Diego to Berkeley for a second postdoc position and found herself in a long-distance relationship with her husband. After becoming pregnant, she decided to move back to San Diego to reunite with her husband. Catlett says, "I took time off and it was great." While her husband was finishing his postdoc, she was able to spend time with her child. When they moved to the Boston area, Catlett decided to re-enter the work force.

Sandra Wells spent several years in industry after finishing a postdoc at the US National Institutes of Health. During that time, she worked in regulatory affairs, clinical research, and as a medical science liaison. After her twin daughters were born, however, she decided to stay home with them.

Christopher Mazzochi, a former postdoc at the University of California, Los Angeles, left that position in March of 2008 for higher pay. "I obtained a position in September of 2008 that ended up



Jennifer Woolley

lasting for only 90 days. Then I had some family matters I needed to attend to, so I handled those while I was unemployed and took time off from my job search.”

Getting with the Program

Oftentimes individuals taking a career break are trying to find better balance between their home lives and their work lives. Because of their frequent connection to child-rearing and work/life balance, career breaks are traditionally thought of as something affecting more women than men. As a result, in recent years, programs have arisen to assist scientists in re-entering the work force with an eye to increasing the proportion of female scientists.

In 2006 the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) started its Career Reengineering Program. Since then, 37 students have started the 10-month program. According to **Dawna Levenson**, associate director for academic programs, MIT’s program was originally intended to help women re-enter the work force after child-rearing, but the focus of the program has become broader. According to Levenson, the program consists of both “people who have left to raise their children or for other personal reasons, as well as people who are looking to retool themselves.” One such student, for example, was a Ph.D. chemist who left the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to pursue a career in photography and eventually entered the MIT program with the hope of resuming his career in science.

Levenson emphasizes that the program “gives students something tangible to talk about when they’re pursuing that next job. They often need to rebuild their network, too, because they’ve either lost it over time or need to meet people in a new area.” The MIT program focuses on helping students to develop and refresh their skills while also helping them to network in their field. Students take an MIT class in the fall semester and in the spring semester complete an internship in their field of interest. They also are required to complete a project that helps them fine-tune their technical writing and presentation skills and to participate in a curriculum of professional development seminars. Many times, students’ internships have turned into full-time employment.

Like the MIT Career Reengineering Program, the UK’s Daphne Jackson Fellowships were originally created in 1985 with the goal of helping women to get back into their science, engineering, and technology careers after a break. It has since expanded to also include men. According to **Jennifer Woolley**, chief executive of The Daphne Jackson Trust, “Daphne Jackson developed a fellowship scheme where it predominantly involved research projects so that people could develop and update their skills, putting them on a level playing field with their peers.” Since their inception, 191 fellowships have been awarded and an impressive 96 percent of awardees have returned to science careers after completing the program.

Woolley notes that “most had taken breaks for personal reasons such as children, elderly relatives, or dual career issues.” Applicants to the program must have had at least a two-year career hiatus. The fellowship lasts for two years and is part time. Woolley says that “during that time, they are doing a substantial research project, normally in the area they were in before their career break. Part of the scheme is at least 100 hours of skills training on topics like presentation skills, work/life balance, media skills, and professional development. Many stay in the labs that they have their fellowships in, after the fellowship has been completed.” She notes that others transition to different opportunities including teaching, science communication, and science editing.

The MIT Career Reengineering Program and the Daphne Jackson Fellowships are not the only re-entry programs available for scientists. Other fellowship programs include the National Institutes of Health Reentry Program and the UK’s Wellcome Trust Career Re-Entry Fellowship. iRelaunch, a website focused on career re-entry, lists several companies, across various sectors, that have relevant programs. **Sylvia Ann Hewlett**, author of *Off-ramps and On-ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success*, notes that employers start such programs because they attract

promising employees. Hewlett profiles programs that take various strategies: some are internal programs offering part-time work for women to keep them up to speed while they're not working, and others welcome back individuals who have left by offering part-time work or by helping them to get up-to-date on changes in their sector.

Finding Your Way

Of course, many scientists re-enter the work force without the assistance of these programs. After moving to Boston, Catlett started considering several career options including research jobs in her field of fungal biology and in science writing. She began networking, which she says "was really tough because we didn't know anyone there other than the people my husband worked with." She attended events like meetings of the local Association for Women in Science (AWIS) chapter and did informational interviews with contacts she met through her husband. She explored job prospects she found through contacts in both of these settings and finally was offered a position in systems biology, helping other companies to analyze large data sets.

After being out of the work force for a year, Wells reconnected with an old classmate and "fell into an opportunity as a part-time technician at the University of Montana." Says Wells, "You never know where contacts are going to be helpful. It's amazing how connecting with people can lead to opportunities." She was setting up experiments unlike what she had done before, "but because it was a technical position, I wasn't expected to come back at the same level as when I left." Eventually her PI was able to offer her a postdoc position. During her time as a postdoc in that lab and in a second lab in Montana, she says, "I had an aggressive plan to get funding because after 10 years of not having a track record in science, I felt I had to have that. And I got papers out as quickly as I could." Within a few years, she landed a tenure-track position at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

Although Mazzochi hasn't secured a position yet, he has reignited his job search. He dedicates time to keeping up-to-date in his field, attending events in order to network, and learning about new career options. He has taken an internship with a policy organization that may have the potential to develop into something more.

Locating a job after time away from the work force may be more difficult than other job searches—applicants may find that their skills are rusty or they've lost contact with their networks. As the stories and programs described here illustrate, however, it's clearly not impossible. Re-entering workers can ease the process by making strategic preparations for the job search and by presenting themselves with conviction.

Advice for Returning after a Career Break

Network, network, network. Networking is a critical component of every job search. Particularly after you've been away from the work force, networking can help you learn more about current trends in your field of interest and can introduce you to individuals who may know of appropriate job openings.

Search broadly. Considering different kinds of positions not only allows you to learn about multiple career options, but also increases the number of positions available. Wells notes that she may not have been able to re-enter the work force so easily if she hadn't expanded her research focus. She says, "You can be flexible. Going beyond what I'd previously done opened opportunities. I looked at what interests me and what I could use my expertise to learn. If you've been trained in one area or one technique, you can then learn new things."



Courtesy of Andrew E. Nelson

"You never know where contacts are going to be helpful. It's amazing how connecting with people can lead to opportunities."

—Sandra Wells



Dawna Levenson

Consider compromising. MIT's Levenson notes, "When you go back to work, you can't have everything. You have to prioritize and figure out what's important to you." Levenson likes the iRelaunch model that suggests prioritizing what you're looking for in a job in terms of content, compensation, and control.

Look at internships, postdocs, and part-time work.

Levenson notes that students in the MIT program are better positioned for finding internships because "these are not your traditional intern; they are very knowledgeable people who are very mature." An internship can help individuals update their resume, network, and find their next position.

Be patient and use your time wisely. In the current economic climate, it may take longer than usual to secure a position. Stay focused: use this time to do things that help make you more

marketable and locate positions, such as participating in a re-entry program. Make sure your technical knowledge and skills are up-to-date. Take classes, read the literature in your field, and attend events related to your interests. Make use of opportunities like conferences not only to update your knowledge and skills but also to network with people who might be hiring.

Mazzochi says, "Looking to re-enter the work force is a job. I'm continually looking at the Internet and at ways to connect with people, through job fairs or meetings or networking events. It's a job and I do it several hours a day, every day of the week." A successful job search can be time consuming, but investing your time wisely will pay off.

Be prepared to talk about your time outside the work force. One concern about re-entering the work force may be how potential employers will respond to your time away. Be strategic about how you talk about this. In particular, you may want to underscore your enthusiasm for getting back into the work force. Catlett was candid about having taken a break, but feels she was too apologetic for her time off: "People didn't really seem to notice the gap on my resume." During one interview, when the employer said the organization wanted someone with recent lab skills, she regrets acknowledging that her skills were not particularly recent. Mazzochi notes that, when employers ask what he has done during his career break, he emphasizes ways that he is staying current in the field.

Educate yourself about topics relevant to career development. Both the MIT program and the Daphne Jackson fellowships offer significant professional development training to their participants. Even if you're not in a formal program, as you prepare to re-enter the work force, take some time to learn about topics such as networking skills, presentation skills, science writing, work/life balance, and preparing job application packages.

Be determined. Re-entering the work force can be challenging because of the need to develop one's skills, learn about advances in your field, and rebuild networks. Woolley says, "There's a need to be determined to get back in the work force. You have to be motivated and committed to return. Being successful means realizing that you want to get back into your career." Wells says likewise: "You really need to know what you want to do, have a plan, and have some confidence." Motivation and commitment go a long way toward preparing yourself, finding opportunities, and proving yourself to potential employers.

Brianna Blaser is Project Director for the *Science* Careers Outreach Program.

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Featured Participants

Association for Women in Science - www.awis.org

Daphne Jackson Trust - www.daphnejackson.org

iRelaunch - www.irelaunch.com

Massachusetts Institute of Technology - www.mit.edu

National Institutes of Health - www.nih.gov

The Wellcome Trust - www.wellcome.ac.uk

University of Montana - www.umt.edu

University of Nebraska Medical Center - www.unmc.edu

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