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Re-entry the workforce after a longer break

In my work as a coach, I am heavily involved with the topic of finding professional identity. For a long time now, work has taken on a much greater value in our lives than simply earning a living. It's more about the meaning of work and the recognition (good and bad) that work gives us.

Many of my clients followed a fairly linear career path. Often a longer education preceded followed by strong commitment and resulting increasing responsibility in professional life. Sudden events interrupt these linear career paths and require a rethink. For some of my clients this was a move abroad, motherhood or a general questioning of their own work-life balance. Many leave a promising career behind and adapt their profession to their life. Some decide to take a break and turn their back on the traditional job market. During this time, they go through very different emotions. They range from joy and satisfaction to frustration and questioning their own self-worth without pursuing a profession.

Many decide to return to the labor market after some time. They realize that getting this process started is more difficult than they thought. They struggle with a battered self-esteem, the question of what this re-entry might even look like, and how they can best deal with this gap in their resume.

It is precisely for these women, that I have written this study. On the next few pages, I provide insight into the scientific findings in this area and link them to the stories of 7 women who have successfully re-entered the workforce after a long break (between 6 and 23 years) and shared their story with us. These stories are proof that a happy end is possible and that not matter how long the break, there are always waiting exciting opportunities on the horizon.

It is my goal with this study to make it easier for you, the reader, to enter the job market. If you want to work specifically on your situation, I will be happy to assist you with my coaching offers!



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"A part of me is deeply grateful for the time I had with my daughter and when I look at what person she has become today I would like to think that providing her support helped her a lot.

But personally, for me, I would not make the same decision again. I should have gone back part-time after one year or so and kept a foot in the door.

Totally removing myself from this world was a disaster. I would not make this choice again."

Study participant asked about her feelings looking back at her decision to leave the job market

1. Why do women decide to leave the 9 to 5

About 62% of the workforce has taken a career break in their professional history at some point (LinkedIn, 2022). While in the past, career breaks have been a huge stigma and often led to career breakers not re-entering the workforce at all, we are experiencing a new era. LinkedIn just released a new feature in 2022 giving employees and potential candidates the chance to state their career break with confidence in their profile. I have written about this new feature and the potential impact on women returning to the job market on the blog.

While women are still facing the realistic chance that a career break will impact future salary and job responsibilities, taking the break is becoming more the norm than the exception. How significant the stigma of a career break is, will be seen over the course of the next decade. While changes such as the LinkedIn career break add-on are really helping to change the narrative, about 60% of people believe there is still a stigma attached to career breaks (HBR, 2022).

But why is it that employees, committed to their profession and boosting recognition and acknowledgment, are deciding to take a career break? In this chapter, I am shedding some light on the reasons for taking a career break.

1.1 The concept of alpha & beta careers

While most of the time, men and women start with equal passion and motivation in their professional life, there comes a time in women's lives when they start to reflect on whether their career is still matching their overall idea of life. While men often follow a so-called alpha career, women are sticking to the so-called beta career (Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007).

Unlike the linear 'alpha' career pattern, women tend to follow a 'beta' career pattern that is more complex and non-linear by nature. "The 'beta' career pattern is driven by challenge and ambition in the early career, followed by the need for balance and focus on caring responsibilities during the mid-career and finally seeking authenticity in the late-career. The 'alpha' career pattern is characterized by challenge and ambition in the early career, followed by the need for authenticity during the mid-career and then seeking balance in the late-career phase (Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007). So the alpha career can be described as more linear and straightforward, while the beta career is more flexible and allows for different work-life balances.

	Alpha Career	Beta Career					
early career	Challenge and ambition	Challenge and ambition			Challenge and ambition		
mid career	Need for authenticity	Need for balance and focus on caring responsibilities					
late career	Seeking balance	Need for authenticity					
	 Straightforward and often linear Followed primarily by men 	 Complex, and often non-linear Followed primarily by women 					

1.2 The current state of female employment

While we experience increased equality at work (in some countries) there are still certain life events that trigger women to take a career from the traditional job market. Especially the recent years of a worldwide pandemic have made the increased struggle to continue a linear career for women visible. According to a study in the UK, "the number of unpaid carers increased by 4.5 million by June 2020, the majority of whom were women. Women are also more likely to be caught in the so-called 'sandwich generation, fulfilling the responsibility of caring for elderly relatives as well as their children." (Vodafone, 2021),

Deloitte (2022) was performing a new study interviewing 5,000 women in 10 countries about their job situation to assess the current state of female employment. Here is an excerpt of some of the key takeaways of the study that are painting a clear picture of the challenges for women in the workplace and also explain why women are partially deciding to reduce hours or to quit entirely even without a specific trigger:

- Widespread burnout fueled by rising stress levels: Every second woman in the study by Deloitte stated that her stress levels are increasing. Every fourth woman interviewed felt burned out. As a consequence, one-third of the respondents have taken time off to take care of their mental health.
- The great resignation is set to continue: Every second woman in the study plans to leave her current employer in the next two years and the overall satisfaction index is dropping steadily. Next to burnout, the lack of opportunities to advance has been mentioned most often.
- Despite widespread shifts in working arrangements, flexibility is not a reality for many women: While some companies have introduced more flexible working policies over the course of the pandemic about 94% of women surveyed believe that requesting flexible working will affect the likelihood of getting promoted and 90% believe their workloads won't be adjusted accordingly if they request flexible-working options. While many women decided to reduce hours or shift to part-time during the pandemic they not only suffered financially but also mentally and were less motivated to work.

- **Hybrid working:** An opportunity for change— but challenges exist: Almost 60% of women who work in hybrid environments feel they have been excluded from important meetings, and almost half say they do not have enough exposure to leaders, a critical enabler of sponsorship and career progression. So while hybrid work enabled a better work-life balance the aftereffect on career progression is in question.
- Harassment and microaggressions are on the rise—and often go unreported: About 60% of women surveyed have experienced harassment. Speaking up about it is still a struggle for most women. 93% believe reporting non-inclusive behaviors will negatively impact their careers, and most feel that their employers won't take action even if they do report these behaviors.

1.3 Reasons for women to drop out

During the pandemic, certain challenges for women could be seen as if under a burning glass. Motherhood and the high proportion of unpaid work were even more difficult to reconcile due to limited childcare options. But even without a pandemic, there are specific triggers that drive women around the world to take a career break.

Such life events include:

- Becoming a mum
- · The challenge of facilitating or financing daycare
- Moving countries (often initiated by the partner's career)
- Focus on work-life balance (eg. avoiding long-distance relationships)

When talking to the women interviewed in the sample of my investigation, all of the triggers such as moving countries or becoming a mother have been mentioned. Often there was not this one reason to leave the workplace but a combination of different life events and the outlook on family dynamics over the next couple of years. Also, there was a combination of moving countries and becoming a

mum leading to the thought that motherhood is potentially on the horizon and entering a competitive foreign job market was not a priority. For others, the thought of shifting almost the whole salary to childcare just to be able to work did not feel right. Also not feeling the societal pressure of being a working mum led to the decision to leave the workforce.



In her own words:

"We moved abroad and first I did not have any work permits and then later my child was born and there was no real thought about going to work. And when we moved to {country}, the language was another added barrier for me to work."

"In the beginning, it was a liberating blow because I no longer had any desire to work. In {country}, I became a mother quite quickly and was therefore very busy. This pushed my professional ambitions very far back."

"Back then my partner took a break as well so we traveled the world for a year and when we were coming back I gave birth to my daughter. I was totally consumed by my motherhood then. There was no good support for working mothers and I knew my salary would be invested into childcare by 100% so I decided to stay at home with my daughter."

"First it was the pregnancy with our second child which was the reason for the exit and then it was extended a bit by our expat time in {country}. For my husband's job (we were not sent but initiated it ourselves) we lived together in {country} for six years."

"...and then came the desire to have children. At that time, it was totally normal to quit my job and concentrate on the children. Maybe you wouldn't do that today, where you have to perform all roles at the same time and at best still look good. Then we went abroad and the question of my own employment did not arise at first."

"In the beginning, with two children, there was no room to think about my career. In {country}, I was able to focus on my role as a mother with a clear conscience. Everyone around me was also at home. We had good financial security and I didn't have a work permit anyway. No one ever questioned it. That helped me a lot back then. Today you will always have to explain yourself, but at that time it was normal."

1.4 Motherhood and Career Planning

There is a lot of discussion on how motherhood influences the career progression of women in the academic world and many papers can be found who emphasize the one-way street that motherhood can lead to. This quote by McIntosh et.al from 2012 highlights that thought:

"The degree of women's restricted career progression is directly related to the school-age of the dependent children: the younger the child the greater the detrimental impact. Women who take a career break of greater than two years see their careers depressed and restricted. The results confirm that whilst gender has a relatively positive effect on male career progression; a women's career progression is reduced incrementally as she has more children, and part-time workers have reduced career progression regardless of maternal or paternal circumstances."

So who's fault is it that women face career breaks more often and that motherhood is playing an essential part in that development? Research reveals that there are two schools of thought that are worth to be mentioned in this context:

- 1. Women don't want a career after becoming a mother and paid job is more of a facilitator to make private life possible. There is this argument that the majority of mothers do not have a strong personal commitment to paid work after having children. And in case these women decide to re-enter the workforce, they are very adaptive in choosing a work that fits their life and not the other way round. There is a tendency to reject the greater responsibilities and additional hours of certain jobs in order to concentrate on the family (Hakim, 2016).
- 2. It is not intrinsically wanted by the mothers, but society has created this image of a stay-at-home mum and reinforces it. The family itself is the ideological site in which gender roles were constructed and legitimized. The male is seen as the provider and the wife as the nurturer. These gender roles are strongly anchored in our society and it is hard for women to break out of these norms. The pervasiveness and acceptance of these gender roles combined with a general belief in their worth and importance strengthen the trigger of leaving the workforce when becoming a mother (Houle et al., 2009). "Women's wider goals and desire to succeed within the remit of the family framework facilitate a situation that result in women limiting their career opportunities to accommodate these perceptions." (Longhurst, 2008 in McIntosh et al., 2012)

These two schools of thought can also be found in the answers to my interview questions. Some were aware of the social patterns but due to the lack of alternatives chose to follow them. Others have given up their career almost joyfully although they had enjoyed their career so far but switching from an alpha to a beta career was always part of the long-term career plan. For all women that I have spoken to, motherhood was a crucial element in taking a career break or prolonging the career break. While motherhood is not always the only reason for taking a break, it was always mentioned as an additional factor that influenced their decision-making process.

I have talked about the different approaches of handling motherhood and career in my "Thriving Female Expat" study, where I interviewed 30 female breadwinners about the coordination of family and career priorities. I wanted to shed light on the women who are pushing through the global glass ceiling and are more the exception than the norm. Naturally, the question of how they balance motherhood and career planning was a crucial topic to investigate. (You can download the study here). In that context, I shared the work by Moeller, Napier, and McGourty (2014) who categorized their findings into three different life models:

A fundamental distinction is made between the models of the choosers, the pragmatists, and the opportunists. All three models describe the interplay between parenthood and career and show which compatibility concept the mother or the parents as a couple feel comfortable with. The three concepts describe the woman's attitude towards the appropriate balance of work and family time. Here is a brief description of these three models:

Overview of different Family Models (as seen in Moeller, Napier, and McGourty, 2014)

OPPORTUNISTS CHOOSERS PRAGMATISTS Baby Boomers 1946-1964 Gen Y 1982-2000 Gen X 1956-1981 Women feel that they This concept is more The authors claim that could not have it all common amongst this family model is mainly and should decide Generation X and preferred by Generation between being a mother Y, labeling them as the states that you could and caregiver or a have it all but not most adaptive generation committed professional. simultaneously, Women always aiming for the "ideal state of life." They The authors see that who sympathize with this most common amongst model often reduce their refuse to decide between the Boomer generation job commitment when the two roles and seek to and state, "This forcedchildren are little or need thrive in both worlds. choice comes from more attention. They Technology is seen argue that realistically as an enabler. These societal mindsets of those born between speaking, both (family women have a greater 1946 and 1964 when and career ambitions) sense of flexibility about their lifestyles and a women (and men in their at the same time are generation) believed that not possible with the stronger desire to pursue commitment they prefer, women could not have it international careers. all." and their mantra is "there is a time and a place for a career, and then there is a time and place for family."

The strategies found in the sample of these 30 women have been manifold. While some decided proactively to forego motherhood and focus on career only (chooser), others pushed for the pragmatist model focusing first on family/career and later shifting their full attention to career/family. The younger generations are aiming more for the opportunistic model balancing all at the same time, mostly supported by their partner or an extensive support system. While some of the women in this "Thriving Female Expat" study, proactively chose to prioritize career over having a family or created an extensive support system around them to have it all at the same time, the women in this study's sample have chosen to focus on the family for an extended period of time.

As the following chapters will show, it is not as simple as that. Taking an extended career break was not always a very conscious decision but a journey of mixed reasonings and very mixed emotions. While we tend to take on the role of a judge and rate our major life decisions, none of these women can tell what her life would look like if they have chosen differently. Each and every woman was shaped by the experiences she made over the course of time and making peace with the decision-making process back then was often a crucial aspect of empowering themselves again. The bittersweet mix of deep gratitude and regret is part of many stories I will share in the following chapter.



2. The emotional rollercoaster

A career break is a phase in life that is always associated with self-doubt and uncertainty. Often women make their peace with this time after they have reentered the labor market and have found for themselves that they have enjoyed the best of both worlds. Only in retrospect are many women very grateful for this time and at peace with their decision. During the break itself, feelings are much more mixed and strongly influenced by how the social environment reacted. Women who immediately found a connection with mothers who were also not working had a much easier time than women who were swimming against the tide at their age and in their country at that time. The more often you have to explain yourself and your decisions to others, the greater the uncertainty about the decision you have made. Some were also surprised at the length of the career break. All the women interviewed reported that they had not expected that their career break would be that long.

2.1 The emotional rollercoaster women experience while not being part of the traditional job market

All women interviewed described their emotional state over the break as a rollercoaster with unexpected highs and lows. No matter how short or long the break, women experienced times of gratitude, followed by phases of feeling lost and insecure about their decision-making. Reflecting on their decision to take a break after being back in the traditional job market, women shared very mixed feelings. While all are grateful for the time they spend with their children or exploring the world, there is always this question of: How would my life look like if I chose to not step down.

The researcher Valente (2019) interviewed 6 women about their emotions before, during, and after the career break and the results totally overlap with the statements of my focus group. In the following chart, you can see the different emotions per state as a result of both interview streams:

Time	Early career experience	Deciding to leave	During break	Deciding to transition back	While re-entering	After re-entering
Common Theme	Self- assurance	Anxiety	Mixed	Surprise	Growth	Renewal
Emotions experienced	Pride Enjoyment Career-driven	Stress and balance Family Financially able	Frustration Anger Loneliness Depression Liberation Gratitude Resignation	Timing Misperceptions Pressure Self-Confidence Unexpected experiences	Self- Awareness Limitations	Identify Emotions Contribution

While many leave their job with a positive job attitude and fond memories on their former career there is a certain level of anxiety when deciding to actually take a break from the traditional job market. Reasons for taking a break have been discussed in chapter 1.3 and are confirmed by the findings of this study naming an imbalance of work-life, family reasons, and the fact that it is financially possible. The emotions throughout the break itself are not specifically mentioned in the study quoted. However, in my own sample, the interview responses show a very mixed picture of all kinds of emotions often felt at the same time. Some are frustrated about not being able to work (e.g missing a work permit), and others are actually feeling angry that they are the ones taking a break to accommodate family needs. Most interview partners mentioned a feeling of being lonely and excluded from certain social circles and having trouble introducing themselves when feeling insecure about their non-work-related identity. On a positive note, some felt a sensation of liberation to not being forced to work in a job context that was not a good fit or being more able to live according to what is important to them. Feeling grateful for the time focusing on the family was often an emotion that has been discovered in retro perspective. When deciding to go back to work many are surprised by how easy or how hard it actually is. Almost all of the interview partners have faced surprises or misperceptions along the way. The confidence struggle came up in almost every interview. Women needed to learn to connect with their own strengths again and once they are about to re-enter the workplace they are more aware of their own assets and limitations. After returning back to work, most women are experiencing a strong shift in their identity and declare positive emotions. More on the emotions in that later stage are discussed in chapter 5.2.3.

2.2 The influence of social circles

During the conversations, I noticed parallels at different points in the interviews. This was also the case here with regard to the influence of social circles. Some women reported that they were comfortable with their non-working identity as long as they were surrounded by women who followed a similar life and career model. Some women reported that certain cultural groups in which it was more common to stay at home helped them to come to terms with this situation. They literally blossomed, felt well connected and cared for, and felt less isolated due to their lack of employment.

Women who did not have this environment, on the other hand, found it much more difficult. They often felt alone and left behind. The situation is similar when social structures change. For example, two of the women told how more and more friends in their circle of friends returned to work and at some point, they were the only ones who had time during the day. This sudden change in the social environment was then taken as motivation to imagine a professional future for themselves. In that sense, social circles can have a pull effect and work as an incubator in both directions.

"I befriended many women who also had advanced careers and decided to stay home with their kids. So I just did not ask myself whether to work or not. But then one by one my friends returned to work and I was the only one left. I realized that a lot of years had gone by. I did not really feel the urge to go back to work but also lacked clarity on where else to focus my energy to."

"Then we went back to {birth country} and I didn't ask myself this question until my youngest started kindergarten. Only then did I notice that there were fewer and fewer women I could meet."



2.3 Case studies - following the emotional journey of 3 women taking a career break

Let's take a look through the keyhole into the emotional world of three women who have made their way back into the job market. In all three stories, I have changed the names and censored countries and languages. This is to protect privacy, but also to show that it is irrelevant where this person moved to. In my experience in career counseling, we give far too much weight to factors such as location. While one woman considers a country to be particularly supportive of working mothers, another woman reports that she left the country precisely because of the lack of support. It is, therefore, more about one's own character and ideas about life than about evaluating countries in terms of work opportunities and making a blanket assessment. The following case studies provide insight into the emotional world during the break and put it in context with exit motivation and the self-image of work after re-entering:

Lisa's experience

2.3.1 Case study of Lisa, struggling with her confidence after a career break of 7 year, moving countries and becoming a mum

Reason for exiting the job market: Lisa quit her career to follow her partner on his assignment abroad. She struggled to get back to her former job in purchasing due to work permits and language barriers. In the end, she will have not been part of the traditional job market for 7 years. Much longer than initially anticipated.

"We moved abroad and first I did not have any work permits and then later my child was born and there was no real thought about going to work. And when we moved to [country], the language was another added barrier for me to work."

Emotions over the course of the break: While Lisa has good reasons not to work in the beginning, the void that not working left in her personal and social life became more obvious over time. Lisa expressed that she felt very lonely and excluded at that time and it was hard for her to feel at home in a foreign country without work. Like many accompanying partners, she struggled with defining her own identity next to being a mother and a wife and expressed regret for not being more proactive during that time.

"The first years without a career were ok. I had a real reason not to work as I did not have a work permit and later had a baby. But when my child went to kindergarten I felt very lonely and also depressed. Everyone asked me what I do and who I am and I know they just have been curious but my inner voice told me that something is wrong with me. I only said that "I am the wife of.." and I did not like it. I was really depressed."

Trigger to get back to work: In Lisa's story, there was no actual sudden trigger like a new spot at a kindergarten or changed circumstances that made her go back to work. It was the ongoing level of frustration of not being part of this new country. While applying for jobs, she expressed many negative emotions regarding her confidence. She questioned her abilities after 7 years of not being part of the traditional job market. In the end, her concerns have not become true and while being back at work she realized that she was actually capable of more than she has thought and applied for a job that was a way better fit and challenged her more.

"I had a lot of fears. I was not confident at all. I thought I was not good enough. I was afraid they will fire me in my trial period. My husband always told me that they were not interested in firing but hiring but I was anxious. I thought my llanguage! was not good enough. But in the end, I left that first job as I found a better job...I see it with other colleagues now - they are doing way more mistakes. They are doing very obvious mistakes even though they are locals and they don't have the language barrier. I was really surprised by that and that gave me confidence. That first job made me very confident so I was ready for the dream job. Looking back I even think that I was overqualified for that job!"

Re-entry Ticket: While networking is a key ingredient for many to get back to the job market, networking was not working at all for Lisa. She was not very keen on networking as she was struggling with her confidence at that time and did not really know where to start. So she stuck to what she knew best: Using job portals and the traditional application approach to get the interview. She also skilled herself regarding local regulations on how to structure your CV and present yourself in interviews. She ended up working in the same industry that she left. She also talked about her career break very openly without trying to hide any aspects of that journey in the interview. She was not really heavily interested in volunteer work and did not cover up her time with such activities.

"I remember I had an interview for a job as a receptionist - a really low-entry job and I did not get it. I was devasted. I cried for two hours straight. Back then I did not understand that I was overqualified and that it was just not meant to be. I continued applying via Indeed and LinkedIn. Everyone around me told me I should network but this was just not working for me. I tried the network at my husband's company but that did not really work. Now I understand that I was looking for the wrong jobs. So basically doing traditional job portal applications worked best for me. I also signed up for career fairs from universities that were open to attending and learned a lot from the workshops there. I got lots of information about the local requirements....I changed my CV to the local format. I just googled some CVs and I did mention the break adding my volunteer activities. But the career break was always the first question in the interview and I answered straightforward and honest. I told them that I first did not have a work permit and then was on mum duty and after that, they never asked me again."

The role of work today: Asked about the meaning of her career today, Lisa is sharing very proudly and confident about the impact she has on her company. For her, work is not only giving back financial independence or a new part of her identity but also a social circle she did not know that she was longing for that much.

"Work is my daily life. It is networking and socializing. I was in a vacuum before, I was so limited in social interactions. Now I have daily social interactions, I am constantly learning, and receiving insightful ideas and I feel so satisfied knowing these people. Before I was alone in a foreign country. But now at work, I am not a mother but a coworker and we all have the same goal: To improve the company."



2.3.2 Case Study of Natasha, returning to work after 23 years

Reason for exiting the job market: For Natasha, work was a very important pillar of her life before exiting the traditional 9 to 5. Long hours have been the usual and she was very committed to giving all her heart and energy to the company she was working for. However, work also was leading to a long-distance relationship and at one point in her life, even before becoming a mum, Natasha decided to focus more on the LIFE part of her work-life balance. While she also went abroad for her partner's job, the assignment was not the initial reason for quitting the job she was so committed to but it served as a reason to prolong the career break. While talking to Natasha it was also very interesting to reflect on her insights on motherhood. Looking back she was very happy to focus first on her career, then on the family, and later back to her career again instead of juggling all roles at once. (I shared about this pragmatic approach in chapter 1.4)

"At some point, we didn't want to live a long-distance marriage anymore and we both applied for jobs. My first new job did not last long and I quit after three months and then came the desire to have children. At that time, it was totally normal to quit my job and concentrate on the children. Maybe you wouldn't do that today, where you have to perform all roles at the same time and at best still look good. Then we went abroad and the question of my own employment did not arise at first."

Emotions over the course of the break: Similar to the other stories, Natasha as well experienced a rollercoaster of emotions. In her specific case, her attitude towards her career break was highly shaped by her social surroundings and the moves they did as a family. After returning to her birth country and after realizing that she has not the same access to stay-at-home mums the idea of being professionally active in the traditional job market became attractive again. Natasha stated that she always felt privileged that they have been able to do that split in responsibilities and is happy that she is not going through these years in today's world where there is more pressure on women to do it all.

"In the beginning, with two children, there was no room to think about my career. In Icountry!, I was able to focus on my role as a mother with a clear conscience. Everyone around me was also at home. We had good financial security and I didn't have a work permit anyway. No one ever questioned it. That helped me a lot back then. Today you will always have to explain yourself, but at that time it was normal. Then we moved to [country! and there was such a big expat community that the question of work didn't arise at all and I enjoyed this time very much. Then we went back to [homecountry] and I didn't ask myself this question until my youngest started kindergarten. Only then I noticed that there were fewer and fewer women I could meet. In other cultures, such a long break would have been unthinkable. But with business trips and all, a return to work seemed illusory to me at the time, and we didn't really need it financially."

Trigger to get back to work: During Covid, Natasha experienced that family can also become too much so she decided to get back on the professional track. While other working mums reduced hours in that turbulent time, Natasha felt motivated to craft an occupation to her own needs and skills and to have something for herself.

"Corona was the catalyst. Suddenly all were back from study and work at home and although we have space it was tight at home and that gave me the necessary push to look for something for me."

Re-entry Ticket: Natasha faced the whole job application process fearless and with confidence. She knew that she was not on point with all the technical skills but had trust in her fast learning abilities. Besides the long career break, confidence was never an issue. Natasha also profited from the fact that she did not have to experience the long path of rejections. She almost applied by accident to a job offer on Facebook and got invited to the interview right away.

"I saw a Facebook ad and found it interesting. I wanted to know more and clicked on it and immediately a screen with an application process opened. It was late at night and I did not want to close immediately and leave a bad impression. I thought afterward they still evaluate the robot and it is rated as an application termination. So I wrote a short friendly message and said I submit a detailed application. They got in touch the next day and said they were looking forward to my application... I was very self-confident during the interview, also with regard to salary negotiations. That also impressed my boss at the time."

The role of work today: Over the course of time, Natasha's attitude towards work has changed. Today work has to fit her and her personal priorities and not the other way round. Besides being a naturally confident person she also recognized the additional booster a salary and professional position can have on your mood.

"My work helps my self-confidence. I am a self-confident person, but it has also done something to me not to work for so long. But I wouldn't work more than 20 hours for a company anymore. That has changed completely compared to the past. Flexibility and remote work are important to me. I can't say that I am necessarily loyal to the employer."



2.3.3 Case Study of Sandra: Feeling even more attached to work after a career break of 12 years

Reason for exiting the job market: Sandra was never really passionate about her job. She started working after university as everyone was doing so but she always knew that she would quit once she becomes a mum. She felt not really supported as a working mom in her home country and decided not to become too attached to her profession in the first place.

"I became a mother and back in {birth country} employers are not really supportive of the concept of part-time work or hiring mothers. There was a difference on how employers did treat women in the workforce compared to the country I am living in now. I was only able to continue teaching on a very low scale almost more like a hobby. The society here in {country} is way more welcoming to mothers and pushing them back to the workforce."

Emotions over the course of the break: Interestingly enough, Sandra got attached to her former profession while being on a break. While there was no financial pressure to work she was surprised by the intellectual void not working created for her.

"I always knew that I am able to make myself useful. In {country}, we did not need the money financially and I knew I could do charity. I found an occupation for myself but gradually I started to see the real value in my former profession. I missed programming and I started to like the software employment. The products and potential projects have been much more interesting and I realized that I missed programming...I am very grateful {for being able to take a break from work} but what I regret is my attitude towards my job before taking the break. I should have taken it more seriously back then."

Trigger to get back to work: When Sandra's children reached a certain level of independence the thought of getting back to work got louder and louder in her head. She left her home country and was now surrounded by a more supportive system for working mums. (By the way, the same country was mentioned as not supportive by others who consider this country as their home country. This shows that we all experience the infrastructure differently depending on our own experiences).

"The children were older and did not require that much attention. I had the choice between becoming a charity mum or going back to work. Returning to work just seemed logical and I also had a real interest in my profession and the field of coding...I had lots of fears regarding my hard skills. Programming is a fast-paced field and I felt like a sleeping beauty who awoke and everything changed."

Re-entry Ticket:

Sandra used her network to not only get the job in the end but also to improve her current skills and to prep for the fast-changing industry she was working in. She realized that people are actually happy to help and she recognized her network as a fastrack back to the working world.

"My network helped me a lot. I called them and we spent 30 minutes on the phone. They guided me and showed me how and where to upskill. People love to give advice you know. I also did a sabbatical project to improve my skills and showcase my competencies in the interviews to come... I started looking for jobs and also had a couple of interviews. But in the end, I got this job at a start-up through a friend of a friend."

The role of work today: Sandra has found a real new passion for the work she is doing. While it was not an active choice back then, she is realizing the great impact her work has on the world and the people around her. She is now more passionate about her work than before the break.

"In [birth country], I was working for a bank and the projects I was working on have been limited. Now I am working on projects for real people in the health sector and I am feeling way more dedicated to my profession and what benefit it brings to the world...I don't have a missionary feeling about my job and will stay as long as the workplace is good to me. However, I feel dedicated to programming and really appreciate its value now."



3. Why women decide to return to the traditional job market

Often there is a certain trigger to observe when women share their story of reentering the workplace. This specific trigger can be seen as the turning point. While many thought about returning while going through the emotional rollercoaster described in chapter 2, it seems like a certain event happens just before the decision is made to update the CV and send out job applications. The three most names triggers in the interviews are:

- Moving countries especially when returning to the birth country
- · Access to a new form of daycare such as kindergarten or school
- Financial need to support the family due to increased costs or less family income
- Change of social circles



In a more complex form, these events are accompanied by a growing level of confidence (e.g. because of being back in the birth culture or having adjusted to the new local culture), a decreased caregiving need (e.g. children have reached a certain age), and growing questions around financial security - especially after retiring.

In her own words:

"Slowly I got more confident being in a foreign country. I wanted to have a better answer to the question what do you do? I was only a housewife and that did not feel enough any longer. I also wanted to really integrate in the country and in my opinion, you can only do that when working."

"Towards the end, I started to think that it would be nice to have something else. A balance to being a mother."

"I had used the first year back in {birth country} to arrive again and to integrate the family. Then I slowly started to look for jobs again. I wanted a balance to the role of mother and also thought about my pension since I have not paid into the pension fund for so long."

"By moving back to {birth country}, working was possible again. I wanted to take responsibility again and do something meaningful, and I wanted to be financially independent again. Not that we needed money. My husband always provided for us, but I also wanted to have my own money again."

"The children were older and did not require that much attention. I had the choice between becoming a charity mum or going back to work. Returning to work just seemed logical." Combining these findings with the academic research on the influence of career identity on our well-being one can state that women always have a longing to fulfill themselves professionally but this need is suppressed by more urgent concerns that come up when becoming a mother or moving countries.

In a study regarding 28 women from the Indian IT sector, findings suggest that a strong career identity, a high level of work centrality, and an urge to regain financial independence motivated women to return to their careers after a break (Singh and Vanka, 2020).

Another study sent out random questionnaires to women graduates of an international business school located in the USA. The results revealed that 47% of the women surveyed had stopped working at some point in their careers. 70% of those women have eventually returned to work debunking the myth that women opt out and do not return. Interestingly enough, motherhood was not mentioned as the main reason for dropping out but the change of career focus (Cabrera, 2007).

In general, one can observe that when financial reasons are not the motivation behind re-entering the traditional job market, it has much to do with gaining back a sense of purpose and structure. Women are sharing the urge to gain back control and ownership of their life after devoting themselves to other areas of life. The urge to regain financial independence is often anchored in family needs. While some women are worried about their pension, most women interviewed in the study by Singh and Vanka (2020) are aiming for contributing to the financial situation of the whole family.

"Combining these findings with the academic research on the influence of career identity on our well-being one can state that women always have a longing to fulfill themselves professionally but this need is suppressed by more urgent concerns that come up when becoming a mother or moving countries."

(Kate)

3.1 A question of timing

When this moment of wanting to go back arrived was different for each of the interviewees. The duration of the break from the traditional job market varies greatly. I'm also specifically talking about a break from the traditional job market here, not a break from work. Many of the women interviewed were socially engaged, had set up their own projects, or had furthered their education in other ways.

In all cases, however, the break represents a time without a regular income and a stringent job title. There is no direct correlation between the duration of the break and the hurdle to entry or the emotional world. For example, the duration was felt to be long even though it was very short in direct comparison to the other interview participants. One participant with the longest break, for example, had the least problems with her self-confidence or re-entry. This shows that time is perceived very differently and has much more to do with one's own personality than with the assessment bases used by society. While the above-mentioned reasons for re-entry (relocation, age of children, etc.) seem universal, the definition is very individual. When the children are old enough or when one feels at home in a foreign country is different for each person. It becomes emotionally challenging when one's own assessment of when this time has come deviates significantly from the social norm and women find themselves in the situation of having to explain themselves while still struggling with their decision.







"It becomes emotionally challenging when one's own assessment of when this time has come deviates significantly from the social norm and women find themselves in the situation of having to explain themselves while still struggling with their decision."

5. The big entry ticket: What enables a smooth re-entry?

Just because one aims to re-enter the workforce it does not necessarily mean that the path ahead is smooth. In my study sample and in the one by Valente (2019) there has been a surprise element. Women have been facing unexpected difficulties and while thinking the door to return will always remain open, they have been surprised by the question marks their career break is triggering along the application process. As one of my interview partners states:

"I had this disilussional belief that I would just find work. I applied at my daughter's school and I was shocked to see how badly I was treated as a candidate. When I was not even invited to jobs I was overqualified for that which was a huge blow to my self-esteem."

However, one requirement to take part in my research was the fact that one is successfully reintegrated into the workplace. So all stories revealed in the

interviews had a happy end in the sense that these women managed to fight themselves back and claim their seats at the table. The question is now, how did these women manage to get to this point? Well, the approaches are as diverse as the women themselves and show that there is not this one right path in general but one right path for each individual. There are certain patterns that repeated themselves such as the role of networking, adapting to the local job market, being very honest and authentic about the career break, and building up skills and confidence before applying.

In the following, I present to you a list of all these findings combined. They can be seen as a source of inspiration for your own job hunt.



4.1 The power of networking

Half of the women interviewed got their job through networking. Instead of sending out several applications, they made an effort to get in touch with former colleagues or directed conversations on the playground to the fact that they are looking for a job. Remember the study on the 28 women working in the Indian IT sector? Networking was an essential pillar for them getting back into the workforce. The authors stated: "Women emphasized that networking demanded effort, but also brought positive results. Networks played an instrumental role in the referrals and return of participants (Singh and Vanka, 2020).

Here are some insights into how my sample of interview partners used networking in their application process:

"Then on the playground, I met another mother and we talked about the upcoming emergency care at the kindergarten. I said, I do not work yet but am currently looking for work, and for that, you need time and so also care. She then said a friend of hers is currently looking for an assistant. I had then on my 40th birthday the phone call with her and after a trial day to get to know all the tasks and after we have clarified all the formalities I had the contract."

"But I always say that you have to talk about it. Like when you're looking for a house or you have questions about the rent, you just have to talk to everyone you know about it and make it public. I myself am very communicative and that was definitely strengthened by the time abroad. We now have a very large network after about a year back in {country} and I used that."

"My network helped me a lot. I called them and we spent 30 minutes on the phone. They guided me and showed me how and where to upskill. People love to give advice you know. I also did a sabbatical project to improve my skills and showcase my competencies in the interviews to come."

"I met up with my former boss's wife for coffee after we got back. We are friends and have met again and again over the years. She had suggested that I return to work as a secretary for her husband. He didn't want to at first, but his wife said he needed one. That happened very quickly. On the day of the acceptance, I met with a friend who also wanted to offer me a job."

"I started looking for jobs and also had a couple of interviews. But in the end, I got this job at a start-up through a friend of a friend of a friend. It also helped that it was a start-up as they have been not interested in my break but only whether I could deliver or not. I also had access to webinars and CV courses to get better in the application process. In the end, this did not give me the job but it started the flow of having the right mindset and communication skills to get back on track."

As you can see from these excerpts, the women interviewed have been using networking in different ways:

- Gaining information: On potential companies and positions to apply to and to get a better understanding of the local job market dynamics
- **Upskilling:** One woman particularly used her network to get an idea of the biggest changes within her industry over the last couple of years. Thanks to the feedback she has chosen the best fitting courses to take.
- Get access to former profession: Using the network to stay in touch and be in reach when a position opens up.
- Spread the word: Similar to looking for a new apartment or house, women have been sharing the wish to return to the workforce very openly and got access to more informal job pools

4.2 The traditional application

While networking is a huge boost for the application process (especially with a rather non-linear CV) there still exists the traditional process where you search for jobs on job portals and apply. Some of the women interviewed chose this approach because they did not feel like networking and did not feel confident enough to share with the world that they are looking for work. Others just happen to find themselves at the right time and the right spot and one late-night application led to the job avoiding the long and emotional journey of rejection.

"In the end, it was probably luck and coincidence. I really sent a lot of applications via the traditional job portals. At one company I had already applied for a job but was rejected. Now the job profile fits me better but I was still not chosen. But they said they would add my application to the talent pool and actually 4 months later someone contacted me proactively and offered me the job because there was another internal staff change."

"I saw a Facebook ad and found it interesting. I wanted to know more and clicked on it and immediately a screen with an application process opened. It was late at night and I did not want to close immediately and leave a bad impression. I thought afterward they still evaluate the robot and it is rated as an application termination. So I wrote a short friendly message and said I submit a detailed application. They got in touch the next day and said they were looking forward to my application."



"I remember I had an interview for a job as a receptionist - a really low-entry job and I did not get it. I was devasted. I cried for two hours straight. Back then I did not understand that I was overqualified and that it was just not meant to be. I continued applying via Indeed and LinkedIn. Everyone around me told me I should network but this was just not working for me. I tried the network at my husband's company but that did not really work. Now I understand that I was looking for the wrong jobs. So basically doing traditional job portal applications worked best for me. I also signed up for career fairs from universities that were open to attending and learned a lot from the workshops there. I got lots of information about the local requirements."

4.3 Upskilling

All women interviewed felt insecure about their own skills. The feeling of not being up to date highly affects confidence and increases insecurity in the interview process.

Many women feel somewhat caught off guard when it then actually comes to actively market themselves and their strengths again. Of course, it makes sense to train your skills continously during a break and to keep them up to date. However, there were certain reasons for leaving the job and the focus during the break is usually on these reasons. Also, some women consciously turn their backs on their profession or industry and want to re-enter a new field, if at all. However, all women in the interviews were aware of the important role of an updated skill set. They either worked proactively on it during the months of application or addressed their fears about a skills gap.

This is also true for the study on 28 female applicants in the Indian IT sector:

"All the participants highlighted the importance of upskilling for career re-entry. Participants echoed that reskilling and upskilling play a crucial role in career restart in the IT sector where skill obsolescence is a norm. Responses revealed that women took every possible opportunity to enhance their knowledge, skills updated, and stay relevant. Upskilling activities, such as certification in a new technology, mellowed down the effect of the career break on resumes." (Singh and Vanka, 2020).

However, it is not only about upskilling, it is also about self-reflection and gaining the knowledge and confidence to articulate learned skills. As a study by PWC on career returners after a break in the UK puts it: "Although these women acquire important skills while on career breaks, such as organizational and project management skills, many women struggle to articulate these skills using corporate language, and their broader application to professional settings" (PWC, 2016).

Here is how the women interviewed in my study felt about their skills. Some would rate their skills even better than when leaving the workforce. They are aware of the value of the soft skills learned in between:

"Definitely better! {when asked about how she rates her skills compared to before the break} I have grown up and kids also change you. I am more patient now and see problems clearer. I also tried to do courses to stay up-to-date with my skills. I did those courses in {language} and really managed to write papers {in that language}. After one interview they told me I don't get the job as I can't do SAP {a computer program}. So after that, I took courses to learn this program."

"My technical skills are worse than before but I am a quick learner and my scrappiness skills are much better because of my experience of living abroad. I need less holding hands and I am more capable of finding a solution myself."

"I got involved and also did a lot of volunteer work. I remember the time as very instructive and exciting, and I definitely developed further."

Some are worried that they are mentally not able to cope with the current fast-paced work environment:

"I was also very afraid that my brain just doesn't work as well after motherhood and all the sleepless nights. I forget so much and my brain doesn't feel like it works the way it used to. I had a lot of respect for that."

"I had lots of fears regarding my hard skills. Programming is a fastpaced field and I felt like a sleeping beauty who awoke and everything changed. I upskilled myself before re-entering and I would say the current projects have improved my skillset immensely."



Changing industries is an additional obstacle for feeling up-to-date with one's skills

"I would consider my skills to be inferior due to the lateral entry. In the past, no one could fool me in my profession. I was a leader and an expert in the field. But who knows. There have been so many changes in recent years, even in retail, that I would probably have had to learn a lot again if I hadn't changed industries."

4.3 Community & Local job market insights

As the application process often is a rather long and often exhausting period of time, women are appreciating the help of communities around them. Friends and family members play a crucial role. Especially for gaining clarity on the path ahead, getting feedback on their interview skills and CV, and for emotional support. As found in the study on the Indian IT sector, "Friends played a crucial role in providing emotional support during the periods of low self-esteem and low self-confidence. Furthermore, friends provided information that helped women take an informed decision about career restart. Friends also provided appraisal support, which helped women in effective self-evaluation." (Singh and Vanka, 2020).

A supportive but knowledgeable community can also be found outside the circle of friends and family. On digital community platforms (similar to SharetheLove), women can network (check out my monthly global coffee dates, be mentored (check out my CV Lab program), and get inspired by success stories of other women who re-entered the workforce after a longer break (check out my role model section on SharetheLove). There is no need to walk this path alone or to re-invent the wheel. Thanks to technology there are lots of information out there waiting to be found.

4.4 Incorporating the career break into the CV

Many women find it difficult to show their career break on their CV. Some women choose not to disclose the gap at all, leaving recruiters with big question marks. In my <u>CV Labs</u>, I address this very issue and show how to present the gap in your resume in an authentic and competitive way. Also in my interviews in this study, I asked how women designed their CVs. The clear naming of activities during the time without a classic job was mentioned the most. Here are a few examples:

"I changed my CV to the local format. I just googled some CVs and I did mention the break adding my volunteer activities. But the career break was always the first question in the interview and I answered straightforward and honest. I told them that I first did not have a work permit and then was on mum duty and after that, they never asked me again."

"I had stated the years in [country A] and described them as creating a family and the time in [country B] I described myself as managing the family and putting the volunteering and cultural integration in a good light."

"I put maternity leave and move to {country} on there. I was really open about that. I also included the two hours of teaching. First I thought it was not so relevant but the employers have been really impressed by that and it proved to them that I would also be able to onboard new people."

"I didn't have to send a resume, but if I had, I would have listed the break as a time spent abroad with family."

"I had a highly tailored approach and customized each CV to the job posting. I included my volunteering work and highlighted those aspects that would speak for the job. In this interview, I was just really honest and told them my story."

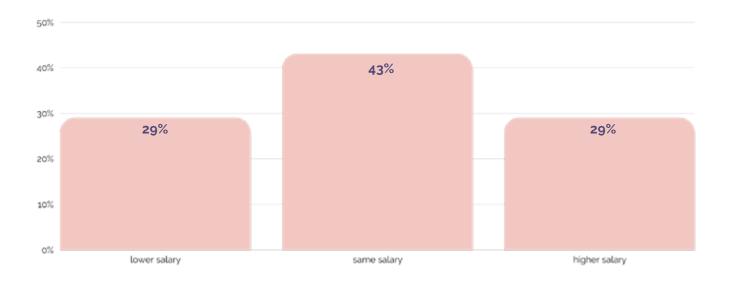
"I communicated this quite openly and honestly. When I was 27, I already had a bend in my classic resume when I went to Australia and the U.S. with 5,000 euros. But I don't have to hide either. I did a lot of voluntary work and the buzzword {country} sounds very impressive here in our small village."

"I clearly recommend standing by the gap in your resume and not talking yourself down, but rather spicing it up. I have managed relocations and repeatedly integrated my family into a new country and social structure. These are big tasks that have to be described transparently. Today I work in sales, so I can do that. One should not hide one's light under a bushel. There was a good reason for making a conscious decision to take a break from the traditional labor market, and you should stand by that."

5. The joy of working again and its effect on women's career capital

5.1 The financial situation

For every second woman the income level has changed before taking a break. Surprisingly, about 30% shared that they are earning more than before the break. About 30% are earning less which most likely is also connected to the fact that about 40% of the participants have re-entered the workforce with a part-time role. There are no significant correlations between lengths of a career break, age, or skill level when it comes to salary development in this sample.



5.2 The concept of career capital

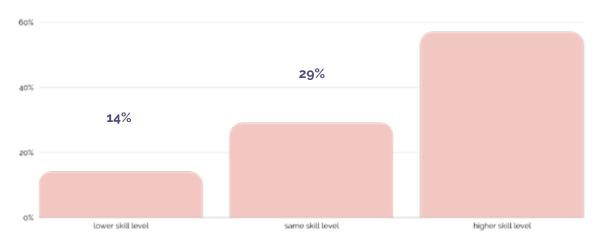
In today's world there is this understanding that a career needs nurturing. While this nurturing was mostly the task of the employer, the responsibility has shifted greatly to the employee.

To describe different ways to nurture your career the term career capital has been coined by DeFillippi and Arthur (1996). Basically, the term career capital describes the value created through ongoing improvement (rising on the career ladder) and recognition. The career capital model consists of three dimensions (summarized by Webb, 2016):

- The knowing-how career dimension refers to career-related skills and job-related knowledge. These skills and knowledge, build up, over time and cover a broad and flexible skill base, and emphasize occupationally-rather than job-related learning. These capabilities provide an individual with the career-relevant skills and work-related knowledge and understanding that is needed for performance.
- The knowing-whom career dimension consists of the professional and personal relationships formed over the course of a career – the 'network'. This includes relationships with others on behalf of the organization (such as customers and suppliers) and personal contacts (such as professional and social acquaintances)
- The knowing-why career dimension relates to the individual's identity and the fit between identity and career-related choices, which can change as a result of changing circumstances. This includes the values, meanings, and interests that determine how a person's career develops. The knowing-why currency is what most careers demonstrate in the earliest stages where the individual identifies with a sense of reason and purpose in his or her actions. This gives individuals a sense of purpose, energy, identification, and direction in their work.

In the following, I will demonstrate how each career capital dimension is affected by a career break:

5.2.1 The knowing how dimension: The effect of a career break on the quality of skills



Many women struggle with their confidence when re-entering the workforce, This missing confidence is strongly linked to the question of whether the skills are still relevant enough. I asked the participants of this study to rate their own skillset before the break and now after having already re-entered. About 60% stated that their skills are actually better skilled than before. They realized that their non-work-related skills gained over the course of the career break are actually coming in handy for the current job. Many feel more independent and able to tackle the unknown without needing as much support as in the past. Also, motherhood was mentioned as an additional skill booster:



"I would say that my job skills have improved to some extent. During my break, I also did a lot of volunteer work, which has improved my skills. Today, I am even the computer supervisor in our company."

"My technical skills are worse than before but I am a quick learner and my scrappiness skills are much better because of my experience of living abroad. I need less holding hands and I am more capable of finding a solution myself."

"Definitely better! I have grown up and kids also change you. I am more patient now and see problems clearer. I also tried to do courses to stay up-to-date with my skills. I did those courses in German and really managed to write German papers. After one interview they told me I don't get the job as I can't do SAP. So after that, I took courses to learn this program."

"I upskilled myself before re-entering and I would say the current projects have improved my skillset immensely."

"I got involved and also did a lot of volunteer work. I remember the time as very instructive and exciting, and I definitely developed further."

5.2.2 The knowing whom dimension: The effect of a career break on the quality of the network

As mentioned in chapter 4.1 networking is a huge asset for re-entering the workforce with a rather non-linear CV. But also on the job, nurturing a network is seen as an essential pillar of career capital. A network grows over the time of a career and theory tells that a substantial career break will affect the value of a network immensely. In my study, about 60% of participants would rate the value of their network the same, while for 30% the quality actually improved. This is mostly connected to the fact of living abroad. The international lifestyle has triggered many participants to discover the real value of networking (also beyond the question of career planning) and has strengthened their communication skills. It has become easier for these global women to get in touch with strangers and stay in touch with their networks beyond borders.



"I know how important a network is and we don't necessarily separate private and professional contacts. I am also in close contact with my husband's work contacts."

"I am good at that Inetworking]. I know a lot of people and networking is not intimidating to me especially after living abroad."

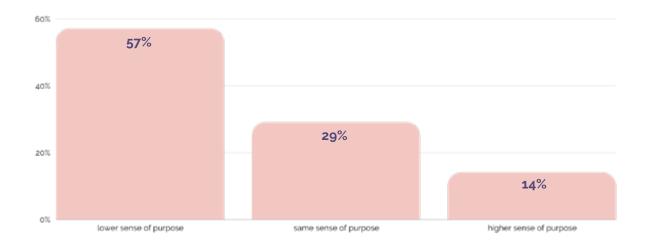
5.2.3 The knowing why dimension: The effect of a career

From a coaching perspective, the sense of identity is the most fascinating part of career capital. We all go through phases in our careers where we feel less or more committed to our industry, to our employer, and the goal and impact of our everyday tasks. Especially after taking a career break, many ask themselves whether they have been fulfilled in their former job and if they want to continue the familiar path or dare to start somewhere fresh in a new place. Also, priorities change over the course of life - especially after becoming a mother.

"One therefore draws the conclusion that individuals in today's labour market, very much, need to take responsibility for their own career development. Build career capital and understand how this can help you survive in an environment that is changing constantly and rapidly" (Webb, 2016)

There is still this social stigma, that mothers with an extended career break are less committed to their work and less loyal to the company. There is also this opposite sentiment, that mothers who re-entered are clearer about what they want and chose a better fit in the profession to implement their skills and strengths. They are also more committed to getting the job done to get home to their second job.

In this study's sample the majority of women expressed that they are feeling less detached to their work. While most reported being very committet to their employer and profession before taking a break, they do not feel the same connection to their profession today. For about 30% nothing as changed while one woman is much more emotionally connected to her job today.



Here is how the study's participants expressed their sense of identity towards their new career:

"In [country], I was working for a bank and the projects I was working on have been limited. Now I am working on projects for real people in the health sector and I am feeling way more dedicated to my profession and what benefit it brings to the world."

"The job is a great fit for me. My training back then as an educator didn't suit me. The office job suits me perfectly and I shaped the job then and now so that it fills me up."

For others, the shift in priorities became obvious, While work before taking a break was something they felt very committed to, this changed after taking a break:

"I don't have a missionary feeling about my job and will stay as long as the workplace is good to me. However, I feel dedicated to programming and really appreciate its value now."

"For a long time it was very good, but lately I've been questioning whether this is the right thing for me and whether I want to spend the last 10 years of my career this way. If I could make it possible, I would step back."

"For me, work means joy, earning money, and social contacts. But I have been questioning the meaningfulness for half a year now. Not in comparison to the time before the break, but rather now in relation to the next few years."

"But I wouldn't work more than 20 hours for a company anymore. That has changed completely compared to the past. Flexibility and remote work are important to me. I can't say that I am necessarily loyal to the employer."

6. How coaching helps women to re-enter the workforce with clarity and confidence

Coaching is a conversation technique that helps someone reflect on their thoughts, become aware of limiting beliefs, gain clarity on what is holding one back, and craft a plan to turn a goal into reality. Coaching is deeply working on someone's self-beliefs and detecting thought patterns that are preventing someone to get to a certain point by herself. In the context of re-entering the job market after a long break, often certain emotions and beliefs are stopping someone from just sending out the first application and getting the ball rolling.

All of the interview partners expressed emotions around feeling not confident any longer. They struggled to express their self worth and some of them even struggled to see the value they are still bringing to the table. Many women struggle with gaining clarity on the next step, especially when they don't want to re-enter their former profession or industry. When the world is your oyster and everything is possible again it is hard to become aware of what your priorities are.

The phase of actually aiming to re-enter the workforce is an emotionally raw and challenging phase for many women. Often, this phase is happening later than expected and it takes longer than anticipated. In the following, I am giving a short overview of how coaching can help with the struggle of gaining back confidence, finding clarity on the path ahead, and maintaining a good spirit until the actual phase of transitioning back to the workplace.

7.1 Self-Confidence Work

The lack of self-confidence is discussed in almost every paper you can find on the topic of taking a career break. I can see several reasons why the struggle of losing confidence in one's value is so universal here.

First, we are so used to functioning in a social system that we are struggling when this social system vanishes. When working we are always surrounded by people that give us feedback (good and bad), who deliver tasks to our desk (wanted and unwanted), and challenge us to grow. When this social system vanishes we also lose the constant acknowledgment we got over time.

Secondly, there comes a time when not working is not the norm. As described by my interview partners so beautifully, their mood changed when their social circle started to get back to work while they felt left behind. Or when interview partners talked about moving countries and finding themselves in an environment where their very own situation is more the exception than the norm.

Third, most career breaks take longer than anticipated. All interview partners planned to take some time off but never anticipated it to be that long. While my experience shows, that the length of the career break is not the most important determinator of how hard or easy it will get, it can mess with your mind when you feel you missed your sweet spot to re-enter.

Not feeling confident at all is a very intense but also very present feeling that won't last as long as people might expect it. Coaching helps clients to look beyond this momentarily feeling and see the big picture. All participants in my study confirmed, that their doubts have not become a reality. Now back in the workplace, they all feel way more confident. Actually, the person with the lowest self-esteem interviewed was the one sharing with me:

"I see it with other colleagues now - they are doing way more mistakes. They are doing very obvious mistakes even though they are locals and they don't have the language barrier. I was really surprised by that and that gave me confidence. That first job made me very confident so I was ready for the dream job. Looking back I even think that I was overqualified for that job!"



So it is this change of mindset that is necessary to take on the next big step. Research by Carpenter (2021) showed why having confidence is so essential during the process of re-entering the workforce:

- A lack of confidence could discourage women from beginning to look for work
- Women who do not feel confident are not communicating their wish to return and hence are missing out on opportunities (networking)
- Women with missing confidence struggle to communicate their skills to prospective employers and negotiate benefits
- While confidence is hard to teach, women are benefiting from learning about the job search and networking process. The more knowledge women are gathering, the more confident they feel throughout the process
- With coaching, they learn to focus on their strengths and successes rather than focusing on their deficits

That last bullet point perfectly summarizes how coaching helps with the confidence struggle. While I always include lots of information and guidance in my coaching, at its core it is all about learning to discover and trust your strengths rather than your (often way louder) weaknesses. It is about shifting your mindset to a professional future full of possibilities rather than being stuck in the past with missed opportunities.

7.2 Clarity Work

The whole journey of re-entering the workforce is a complex decision-making process:

When do I want to return to the workforce?
How will we manage the daycare situation of our children?
Do I want to return to my former industry/job?
Do I want to return full-time or part-time?
Do I want to return to earn money, to push my career, to gain acknowledgment, or is it a mix of all kinds of reasons?

What to do when I really don't like going back to my former profession?

Next to the challenging path of putting yourself out there and sharing your CV with confidence, gaining clarity on the actual goal is an additional struggle for many women returning.

Coaching is a great tool to gain clarity on the path ahead. I always find it magical to experience my clients gaining full clarity on what they want and as a consequence witness the energy and drive that is set free by that. Next to specific techniques to ask questions, coaching also helps with self-evaluating one's own skills and strengths. It is like taking an inventory of skills and abilities to conclude transferrable skills for switching professions or identifying knowledge gaps.

7.3. Community Support

Community support and networking are closely linked to each other and are benefiting each other throughout the application phase. Many women do feel lonely when sending out applications. Especially when they are rejected for a job they feel way overqualified for. On SharetheLove community is an essential pillar. Next to monthly global coffee dates, where women connect from all around the globe, I also offer group coaching and group labs for working on your CV. The group feedback is a huge asset. Not only to put one's own situation into perspective but also to learn from others who are in a similar situation and to feel understood and supported.

Within the academic literature, you find an overwhelming agreement that networking was one of the most beneficial skills to ensure job search success, barring the confidence to cultivate a group of people that could provide assistance.

Productive relationships could be used to increase confidence, knowledge, and skills needed to find work. Formal, informal, and local networking, are all ways to get the big entry ticket you were looking for. The easiest way to start is to network with women who are in a very similar position and understand your discomfort and insecurities. Networks help to gather information about job markets, and potential new industries, identify own strengths and generally provide encouragement.

On SharetheLove there are several ways to get in touch with like-minded women:

- Join a free monthly global coffee date
- Read a <u>role model story</u> of someone that has found her own way of re-entering the workforce and connect
- · Join a mastermind group coaching to jumpstart your career
- Join a <u>CV Lab</u> to work on your CV, elevator pitch and LinkedIn profile together
- Go all in and book a <u>free discovery call</u> to learn more about my <u>1:1</u> <u>coaching program</u>

"It was great.

Just to be greeted with the words "It's good to have you back". I received a lot of recognition right away."

Re-entry the workforce after a longer break

That's a wrap!

If you are currently facing the decision to re-enter the labor market, this study has hopefully given you a good basis for your decision.

It is important for me to emphasize that a lot of negative emotions during a longer break can make you feel isolated. But: In numerous conversations, both with the women from this focus group but also from the conversations with my clients, I have noticed how universal these feelings are.

They are very justified and common feelings that can also prevent one from taking the initiative and taking the wheel back into one's own hands. These stories are proof that there is a happy end when we dare to take initiative again. The approaches to tackle the re-entry processes are as diverse as personalities are. The most important part is to not loose ourselves in the process and to reconnect with our strengths. Be proud of the experience you bring to the table - even if these experiences are not usually part of a linear CV. I have seen many women flourishing after becoming clear of their own value and finding a great fit in the professional world!

If you need a push, look left and right, activate your network, find a coach and read up on the subject. I will be happy to accompany you on this journey and support you in word and deed! Join me at the next Global Coffee Date or send me a direct message to info@sharethelove.blog.

Career fulfillment is such a fundamental part of our self-esteem and satisfaction! Let's approach this with the necessary care as well!

All the best



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