

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

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supporting EAP professionals

Taking Time Off can be Risky Decision

Human resource executives know any number of recruiters who would jump at the chance to present candidates from a pool of talented mid-career professionals. Unfortunately, a perennial problem has afflicted one such talent source — mid-career professional women who have taken a leave of absence from the corporate world to care for their children and are now seeking to restart their careers. Many of these women go on leave fully intending to return to their careers, but employers who don't understand what they have to offer or what they need, frustrate them.

To harness the skills of mothers who want to return to work — sometimes known as sequencing moms — employers must avoid these twin traps: recruiters and hiring managers who have written them off; and the rigid policies that work against working mothers, often for no good reason.

Getting a Raw Deal

Several studies have concluded that women returning to the world of work after an extended leave of absence typically get a raw deal from employers, even those that might have welcomed them as recent college graduates.

“Off-ramps are around every curve in the road, but once a woman has taken one, on-ramps are few and far between...”

“Off-ramps are around every curve in the road, but once a woman has taken one, on-ramps are few and far between — and extremely costly,” wrote Sylvia Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce in an article in *Harvard Business Review*.

An independent study conducted in consultation with the Wharton Center for Leadership and Change Management, went on to say that: “Our findings indicate that despite their business degrees, these women were not necessarily viewed as attractive candidates for full-time positions and were rarely presented as possible candidates for executive roles.”

Many employers appear to lump sequencing moms together with all the other candidates who have long periods of professional inactivity on their records.

“Recruiters shouldn't be put off by long gaps in a resumé because a woman stepped out,” said Mary Gross, a co-author of the indepen-

dent study. However, it's still considered wise for human resources to assess whether a woman returning to work has made efforts to keep up or catch up with developments in her professional field.

Select companies in some industries — especially professional services — have made efforts to retain up-and-coming women who take years off to raise

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children. The accounting firm Ernst & Young has made such an investment. With less than 4% of its partnerships held by women, and facing employee replacement costs of 150% of an annual salary, the New York firm took several steps to lure women back to work and retain them.

First, Ernst & Young distributed telecommuting hardware to a wide range of workers. They promoted mentoring and networking among women employees, allowed more flexible scheduling, and they monitored project assignments and promotion opportunities to ensure that returning women were given opportunities on par with their male peers. The fact that the number of women partners tripled indicated a clear return on this investment.

Are Returning Women Effective?

Of course, employers can't assume that things will go smoothly when professional women return to the workplace after a change in family status.

"I've hired half a dozen marketers returning to work after time off with children, sometimes with great success, and sometimes with little success," said James Chung, president of Reach Advisors, a Belmont, Mass.-based marketing firm.

Mothers restarting their careers need to give as much flexibility as they receive. In exchange for their employer's flexibility, employees should be willing to make up for hours taken off on short notice, and to stay in close communication with co-workers and customers, even when tending to family needs. When emergencies arise, these employers need to come up with solutions rather than offer excuses.

How do employers contribute to the success or failure of a sequencing mom's return to the workforce? According to Chung, the factors include: whether the workflow of the industry can accommodate career sequencing and flexible schedules; and whether the boss has experience managing professionals as they re-enter the workforce.

What Companies can Do

"Human resources need to meet returning women halfway," stated Taylor Hatcher, a work and family policy analyst with the National Partnership for Women & Families in Washington, D.C. "HR needs to be able to help these women achieve a balance. Sick days need to mean that you can take two hours off to see the doctor for something urgent."

Put another way, Hatcher noted that working moms and other employees should be able to take brief periods of time off on short notice, take off just a fraction of a day, and request leave without giving a reason. (However, employees who ask for unpaid time off under the *Family and Medical Leave Act* may be required to justify their requests.)

Employers in the health-care industry often go to great lengths to accommodate women returning from leave — if only because the demand for these workers often exceeds the supply.

"The hospital has a huge initiative for flexible scheduling," said Judy Walker, lead occupational health nurse in the human resources department at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago. "Each year, employees get two weeks of free care in the home for a sick child, parent, or other family member."

But don't employees without children get jealous of a flexible-scheduling program that they

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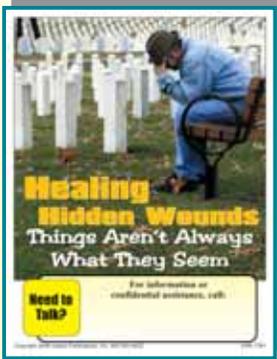
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believe was designed solely for working mothers? "We work through some of those issues," Walker noted. "What managers try to do is sit down with those employees and ask, 'What would you want?'" ■

Additional sources: John Rossheim, a Providence, R.I.-based journalist who specializes in workplace issues, employment trends, and changing relationships between employers and workers; and Veritude (www.veritude.com). This article originally appeared in Workforce Insights, an online resource center about emerging labor trends produced by Veritude — a provider of strategic human resources, and a wholly-owned subsidiary of Fidelity Investments, which services clients throughout the U.S. and Canada.

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Editor's Notebook



It's early enough in the year to review some of the reader survey highlights we ran out of room to discuss last month.

The majority of survey respondents indicated that you are **not** interested in *EAR* providing distance learning; the majority of you **do** find the new .pdf version of *EAR* helpful; the majority of you are very satisfied with this newsletter (thank you!) only two of you wanted to see longer, more in-depth articles in *EAR*, the rest of you like it as is; and finally, by a slim margin, the **majority** of *EAR* readers are counselors.

Suggested Brown Bagger top-

ics included: cultural issues, shift work stress, anger, workplace violence, and military issues. Additional requested topics for elsewhere in this newsletter included: emotional eating, child abuse, career transition, meth, ethics, and gambling.

We appreciate your time and vote of confidence, as surveys help immensely in keeping us "on track" for you. Call or email us with your questions, comments, or concerns at any time! Until next month.

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LEGAL LINES

Workplace Romance Seldom a Good Idea

If you haven't personally experienced romance in the workplace, you are probably aware of one. An American Management Association study found that 80% of workers knew of, or had been involved in a workplace romance.

Given the amount of time that many people spend on the job, it's no surprise that cupid's arrows often their way into the workplace. The problem is, even with consensual relationships, there are potential ramifications that affect co-workers and employers alike:

- **Productivity** — Overall work performance may suffer if the couple is distracted from their work. Resentful co-workers may devote excessive time gossiping about, or even plotting against the pair.

- **Conflicts of interest** — Despite the best of intentions, work-related decisions may be based on partiality and personal feelings.
- **Sexual harassment** — Sexual harassment exposure can increase when a workplace romance goes sour — especially when the relationship is between a supervisor and subordinate.

What's an Employer to Do?

To reduce favoritism, keep productivity from declining, and to minimize the risk of sexual harassment litigation, employers should consider adopting a no-fraternization policy. While such policies can be effective, if not drafted and enforced properly, they can also

cause unwanted litigation. Effective no-fraternization policies should have several elements:

- It should be narrowed to the supervisor-subordinate relationship;
- It should be clearly stated as part of a company handbook and distributed to all employees;
- It should narrowly tailor an investigation to the facts of whether there was a violation of the policy;
- It should be enforced objectively and consistently throughout the company; and
- Its enforcement should be consistent with local laws. ■

Sources: New York Schools Insurance Reciprocal, and Philadelphia Society for Human Resource Management Chapter.

Eldercare Issues Expected to Increase

Issues surrounding the aging American workforce will continue to be a big concern for companies and their employees. According to the U.S.

Administration on Aging, the number of adults over age 65 will increase to 40 million by 2010, and skyrocket to 71 million by 2030.

One national EAP firm reported an increase of 30% in eldercare-related requests during the first half of 2007. As a result, EAPs should encourage employers to examine how eldercare will impact

their workplaces, such as:

- **Developing committees,** focus groups, and leadership resources that can give the organization's workforce insight and direction for the future.
- **Connecting to organizations** that have insight into mainstream issues for the aging population, like AARP.
- **Looking to the EAP for trends** in the company's population. In many instances, the EAP can identify issues and trends before company officials become aware of

them. For instance, the EAP can offer consultation and training services to help employees with issues that arise during the aging process.

For additional information, EAP professionals may want to check out organizations such as the National Family Caregivers Association (www.nfcacares.org) and the U.S. Department on Aging (www.aoa.gov). ■

Source: Reprinted with permission from the Employee Assistance Professionals Association (www.eapassn.org).

Eldercare

Communicate Better with those Suffering from Dementia

A growing number of employees who care for aging loved ones are forced to deal with the effects of Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia.

As the disease progresses, caregivers find that communication becomes increasingly difficult as loved ones say things that don't make sense, or they become combative or hostile. The following tips can facilitate better communication between caregiver and senior:

- Speak slowly and calmly.
- Repeat yourself, if necessary, using the same words you used the first time.
- Use simple sentences or break longer ones into smaller parts. Instead of saying, "I'm going to the store to get some milk," simply say, "I'm going to get milk."

- Avoid complicated questions, and give simple, one-step commands. Instead of, "Would you like to have some of this apple to eat?" say, "Here is an apple." Instead of, "Come to the table for dinner," say, "Walk to the table. Sit in the chair. Eat your dinner."
- When trying to communicate, make sure your environment is free from distractions (i.e. turn off or turn down the volume of the TV, radio, etc).
- Give your loved one a chance to respond even though it might take a while.
- Pay attention to non-verbal cues. Sometimes it's easier to understand what your loved ones mean if you watch their body language and actions, rather than the literal mean-

ing of what they may be trying to say.

- Use non-verbal cues of communication to convey thoughts and ideas. Try facial expressions, hand gestures (like pointing), pictures, etc. With persistence and creativity, you'll find what works best.
- Keep communicating even if you think your loved one does not understand you. Do so in a calm, soothing way. This can also prevent mood swings or keep the senior from getting upset.
- Remain supportive, upbeat, and generous with affectionate gestures such as touching and hugging. ■

Source: LifeCare®, Inc. (www.lifecare.com). For additional information, contact a local chapter of the Alzheimer's Association (www.alz.org).

Competition is Good — Within Reason

Are corporate clients struggling with worker productivity? Then suggest that they hold an office competition of some type. Nearly nine out of 10 respondents to a recent survey reported that competitive office environments enhances employee productivity.

“Healthy competition encourages professionals to stretch their capabilities and come up with innovative ideas,” said Dave Willmer, executive director of The Creative Group, which conducted the study. “However,” he added, “it’s easy for employees to take gamesmanship too far, especially if they work for firms that reward winning at any cost.”

The following are some signs that employees may need to scale back their sense of competition and adopt a more collaborative mindset:

- **You’re leery of your peers.** If you view co-workers as more of a threat than a resource, the competition level is too high.

- **You badmouth others to your boss.** Occasionally, it may be necessary to discuss a problem colleague, but many of these conversations signal insecurity.
- **You’re the last one to know.** If colleagues rarely share their ideas, it’s a sign they don’t trust you to support their strategies, or they worry that you’ll pass off their ideas as your own.
- **There’s a paper trail.** Cubicle mates who frequently email instead of speaking to you may want to keep a record of their communications — another sign that trust has eroded.
- **You accept all the credit.** People who are excessively competitive often fail to acknowledge the roles that others play in making projects successful. ■

Source: *The Creative Group*
(www.creativegroup.com).

Management Agrees — Giving Back is Important

The majority of upper management polled in a recent survey agreed that corporate social responsibility is important any time of the year — not just during the recently concluded holiday season.

Almost three-quarters (73%) of chief financial officers polled by Robert Half Management Resources (RHMR) said programs that support charitable giving or community involvement are important to their organizations. The results mirror a similar survey conducted in 2002.

“Even though businesses have long recognized the importance of giving back to the communities they serve, growing interest in corporate responsibility efforts may be prompting firms to become more sophisticated at communicating their good works to employees and the larger business community,” said Paul McDonald, executive director of RHMR.

Perhaps more importantly, McDonald added, “Charitable initiatives help businesses attract and retain an engaged workforce by establishing an emotional tie between employees and the company. Active social responsibility programs enhance a firm’s reputation among clients, customers, and community partners.”

For more information on RHMR, visit www.roberthalfmr.com. ■

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Tackling Career Transition isn't Easy, but...

Getting a grip on career transition can be as difficult as trying to tackle an All-Pro running back in an open field. But it can be done. In fact, in today's rapidly changing world, and with many people working past traditional retirement age, having several different careers over one's working life is more common than ever.

The following are some ideas to help you land smack dab in the middle of your purpose.

- **Zap the time zappers** — Make time for your career transition. This is important. You may have to say “No” to volunteer activities, social activities, and even some family responsibilities in order to take the time you need to focus on you. Don't think you're being selfish! Bear in mind that while self-examination can be time consuming, it'll be worth it to you and your loved ones in the long run.
- **Exercise!** — Take advantage of the creativity and clarity that can take place when you're relaxed after going for a walk, bike ride, etc.
- **Write it down** — Once you've exercised and have a clearer mind, the next step involves “writing it down.” You needn't be a good writer to do this effectively. Rather, the idea is to *write* down your thoughts because it'll help you focus in a way that simply *thinking* about something can't.
- **Use the one-question only approach** — This method can

“...write down your thoughts because it'll help you focus in a way that simply thinking about something can't.”

help you arrive at difficult decisions more quickly. Is there something you're waffling about? Pose a question, but the answer HAS to be yes or no. “Should I go back to school next semester?” “Should I move?” Whatever the question, the key lies in listening for the “internal” answer. Don't second-guess yourself. It doesn't matter whether the outside world is in line with it. The initial response is usually the way to proceed.

- **Ask, ask, ask** — That being said, you can't always answer difficult questions on your own. If you're trying to decide whether to go into a certain career, ask someone who's working in that field. If you don't know anyone personally in that career, perhaps you know someone who does. Or, look into a professional association for the field of interest and contact a few of these folks. Whatever the case, prepare questions ahead of time. “What education is needed for the job?” “What skills are most important?” You might learn a lot, or you may find you already knew most of the

answers. But even if the latter is the case, you'll gain confidence by thinking, “What was I so worried about? I can do this!”

- **Keep on asking** — As well as what industry you want to work in, ask yourself what kind of work culture you want to work in, what benefits you're looking for, and what kind of record a potential company has in promoting people. Explore every possibility that appeals to you.
- **Jump in!** — It's natural to be hesitant, but remember that without action, things won't change. You may not want to announce your “jump” to the world, especially if you've been surrounded by people who've said, “You can't do that.” Go ahead anyway — your true supporters will remain on board. A “jump” needn't be a big thing either. For instance, you could “jump” by volunteering first for something you're interested in, before quitting the current job you dislike. This still counts. It's still action. It's still progress.

Soul-searching isn't easy, but most of us have to do it as some point. That's ok — just don't get mired in past failures and indecisions. Start a journal, ask questions, and listen to your internal answers. But get going, and remember that decisions are up to YOU. ■

Sources: Karen Okulicz (www.okulicz.com), author of “Decide! How to Make Any Decision” and “Attitude! For Your Best Lived Life”; and Caterina Rando, speaker, coach, and author of “Learn to Power Think” (www.caterinar.com).

Farmers Receive Counseling Help

Agricultural work is stressful, unpredictable, and dangerous for the entire family.

Agricultural workers, including farmers, ranchers, migrant workers, fishers, foresters, and their families, often find it difficult to obtain the behavioral health care they need to deal with these perils. Behavioral health services such as addictions treatment, mental health therapy, and marital and family counseling are often scarce in rural areas.

AgriWellness Inc., a nonprofit formed in 2001, is one of the organizations that's helping fill this need. It maintains hotlines in Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. Its website adds that it is not able to provide Internet or other online counseling.

These seven states are among those most impacted by farm crises, low commodity prices, and

disasters such as droughts and floods. Its *Sowing the Seeds of Hope* program has become a model for the provision of behavioral health support for the agricultural population, including:

- The development of aforementioned farm stress hotlines;
- Training of farm and rural residents as outreach workers who can respond to disasters of all types; and
- Weekend education retreats for farm residents.

Mental-health services, including building self-esteem in rural children, are particular needs.

“Recent analyses comparing rural with urban families indicate higher rates of substance misuse by rural children, a higher incidence of depression among rural residents concurrent with less use of mental-health services and a

higher rate of suicide among rural males than urban males,” state Shari Stucker, Shari Burgus, and Executive Director Michael Rosmann on the organization's website.

Other resources on the AgriWellness website include links to other organizations, including various colleges and extension offices, and the National Association for Rural Mental Health (www.narmh.org).

AgriWellness is not alone in its efforts. The South has been hit hard by drought, and the University of Tennessee Extension is among those assisting farmers in that part of the country. It also maintains a hotline, and a MAN-AGE program that provides assistance in financial planning, marketing, and stress management. ■

For more information, visit www.agriwellness.org, <http://utextension.tennessee.edu>, or <http://economics.ag.utk.edu/mang.html>.

Suicide Resources Abundant

Whether it's Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), mild depression, or major depression — possibly even with suicidal thoughts — the winter months, with its lack of sunlight, and cold, dreary days, can be a hard time for many people.

Fortunately, the Suicide Prevention Resource Center has

many services available for the EA professional, including:

- **A Best Practices Registry** that aims to identify, review, and disseminate information about best practices that address specific objectives of the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention;
- **A Training Institute;**
- **an Online Library** with a searchable collection of web-

based information; and

- **Suicide Prevention News**, a compilation of news and abstracts of selected research articles updated weekly. For more information, visit www.sprc.org/featured_resources/index.asp. ■

Source: Reprinted with permission from the Employee Assistance Professionals Association (www.eapassn.org).

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Telecommuting has MANY Benefits

By Ilyse Shapiro

Not long ago, telecommuting — the opportunity to work remotely, usually from one's home — was considered a one-sided “perk.” Employers could only see it as a benefit to the employee, a last-ditch effort to retain valuable staff.

However, with the advent of advanced technology, a mobile and flexible workforce, and increased competition for finite resources, telecommuting provides more benefits than ever. For one thing, telecommuting is an attractive recruitment and retention tool. It gives the employee the opportunity to have a better work-life balance, and it reduces stress while increasing productivity.

In addition, telecommuting allows employers to cut costs while helping the environment. The following are some examples.

Benefits to the Employer

Telecommuting enables employers to reduce their office space and real estate costs, as well as lower administrative expenses such as the need for desktop computers, office furniture, and phone lines.

In addition, telecommuting helps reduce employee stress, fatigue, and absenteeism, which in

turn makes employers better engaged and able to accomplish the organization's goals.

Benefits to the Environment

Telecommuting reduces highway congestion, pollution, and it provides energy and petroleum savings. In *The Green Book* (\$12.95 list price, www.amazon.com), authors Elizabeth Rogers and Thomas Kostigen found that telecommuting can save nearly two billion gallons of gasoline a year.



Benefits to the Employee

Telecommuting provides greater flexibility, job satisfaction, and control over one's time without the aggravation and money spent on commuting. Furthermore, telecommuters feel they are able to get more done because they have uninterrupted periods of time what would not have been possible at the office.

Technology is increasingly turning telecommuting into a reality. While it doesn't work for everyone, it's an ideal option for employees who don't require extensive face-to-face contact. ■

Ilyse Shapiro is the founder of www.MyPartTimePRO.com, a job search website that connects employers with accomplished and educated individuals seeking meaningful, flexible employment opportunities.

Micro- Managing isn't Necessary

Three-quarters of employees say they are equally productive when their boss is away, while another 23% say they actually work harder when the boss is out, according to a recent poll by ComPsych.

“The survey proves what smart managers have known all along — employees are self-motivated for the most part and micro-managing is not effective,” said Dr. Richard A. Chaifetz, chairman and CEO of ComPsych. “Employees perform and excel when they have a healthy work environment, clear-cut expectations and goals, and the right support from their managers. Training programs from behavioral health experts and consultants can help develop the sort of managers who bring about the best results.”

ComPsych asked employees: “Do you get more or less work done when your boss is away?” Answers were as follows:

- Same — My work is not affected. — 75%;
- More — I'm able to work without distraction. — 23%; and
- Less — I tend to procrastinate when the boss is away. — 2% ■

Source: ComPsych (www.compsych.com) is a leading provider of behavioral health, work-life, wellness, and crisis intervention services.