

Career interrupted

Reintegration programs help ensure effective transitions for women returning to work

BY SANDRA MILES

At some point, most women will face career disruptions that require an extended absence from the workforce.

Be it to raise children, act as a caregiver for elderly family members or to tend to personal health, time away from work may be a necessary, but not often permanent, option. Dual-income families have become the norm and few women can afford to stay away from work.

Being out of the game, anywhere from several months to a few years, however, can create an uphill battle for women who want to return to their professional careers.

But the demand for top talent remains constant, in both strong and weak economic times, and it makes sense to retain and re-hire individuals who have previously worked for the company during such ups and downs. Despite changes that may occur during their absence, their familiarity with both the company and industry can translate into significant savings when compared to hiring and training new staff.

More and more medium- to large-sized companies are recognizing the benefits of helping reintegrate these women back into the workforce.

To make the most of this talent pool, organizations need to create reintegration programs suited to the unique needs of those returning to the workforce, with new technologies in mind.

Using technology to bridge the gap

Women no longer have to be physically present in the office to remain connected

to the workplace. With online networks such as LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook, updates are just a few clicks away.

Whether it is staying on top of industry trends through shared articles, keeping in touch with colleagues and clients or creating new connections, professional online networks are essential tools. Encouraging the use of social media will not only help women stay connected during their absence but ensure their skills and knowledge remain up to date.

Offering women the option to register in online courses, programs or webinars while they are away from work can also help them stay on top of their game. Not only will this allow them to return with a fresh and relevant mind but it will help alleviate any gaps in confidence they may be experiencing. Moreover, online educational tools such as webinars often come at minimal or no cost.

Moving beyond online to personal approach

Although the benefits of using technology are many, it should be just one component of a larger, overall reintegration program that includes face time with colleagues. For example, offering internal, peer-to-peer coaching or occasional lunch-and-learn sessions can help women reintegrate and help them stay on top of their skills development and changes in the workplace.

Once a woman returns to the workplace, there are other reintegration components that need to come into play, starting with a positive work environment, because returning to work can be an intimidating process and a blow to a woman's confidence.

A focus on a positive work environment and a welcome-back celebration or greeting card can go a long way in ensuring an employee feels at ease. An in-house mentor can help ease her back into the work environment and guide her through any new systems, procedures or policies.

Compensation

When it comes to compensation, fairness and flexibility will not only ensure a smooth transition but talent attraction and retention as well. In most cases, being out of the workforce should not translate into a significant cut in pay. Fair market value should be provided for a returning professional's work. If a woman is returning to a new position, consider transferable skills as there may be little need for her to "start at the bottom."

Moreover, try to keep an open mind when it comes to work hours. Directly jumping into the Monday-to-Friday, 9 a.m.-to-5 p.m. work routine can be a difficult adjustment for women who have been absent from the workforce. Thus, offering flexible days and hours or a shorter workweek in the initial phases can help ease the transition.

Child care has become a larger issue companies need to address to be able to reintegrate women. The cost of child care varies, depending on the city, but can be upwards of \$50 per day, placing a significant financial strain on families. Many organizations on top employer lists offer some level of child-care benefits.

Having face-to-face time, creating an accepting work environment and offering a fair and flexible compensation package will not only help ensure an effective transition for women returning to the workforce but ensure talent attraction and retention for employers as well.

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