

# How to get your groove back

A break from work makes people rusty, writes **Margaret Harris**

**G**OING back to work after taking time off, whether to have a baby or to take a sabbatical, can be daunting. For those who want to get back on the corporate ladder, careful assessment is needed to make a smooth transition.

It is important for those who do not want to be left behind to understand how an absence from work can affect their careers.

Alison Reid, manager of the neXt programme at the Gordon Institute of Business and an executive coach, says it is useful to look at yourself as a "career capitalist".

"The phrase I love is 'building career capital'. If you think of yourself as a career capitalist, you understand that you need to build a range of capital — from technical skills to intangible social skills. This is then the capital you have to trade on a daily basis," she says.

Reid says when you take a break from work, this capital can get old and rusty without you even being aware of it. Making the transition back to work, therefore, involves understanding how well your account has withstood your absence and also what you can do to keep it in the black.

She advises that there are three areas you need to consider:

1. Your visibility. Assess how important your visibility is to your position and how you can remain visible to the stakeholders;
2. Life-long learning. This is mostly book-based learning, which you can



do while on leave; and  
3. Practical  
knowledge. This is  
trickier to keep up with  
because it is the  
learning you acquire as  
you work.

However, Reid warns  
that no matter how hard  
you try to keep on top of  
things, there will always  
be a bit of a step  
backwards or sideways  
when you return to  
work.

She also says the  
more senior you are, the bigger the impact will be.

Reid uses the analogy of driving very fast to  
symbolise being at a senior executive level: one small  
change at such high speed can have a big impact.

Another issue to consider is your particular  
industry.

A senior engineer could probably take a fairly long  
break without losing too much "career capital", but  
someone in IT — where change is relentless — would  
have more to lose if they took an extended break.

Whatever the reason for taking a break from work,  
your salary will probably be affected.

Sandra Burmeister, chief executive of recruitment  
firm Landelahni Business Leaders, says research  
shows that taking time off to have children affects  
women's earning potential.

Male and female graduates earn the same, but in  
their mid-to-late 20s women tend to earn less than  
men, says Burmeister.

The reasons for this are:

- This is the age at which women usually begin  
having babies, so they stop working, work shorter  
hours or even take on lower-paying work that allows  
them greater flexibility; and

- Meanwhile, men are becoming fathers and are  
focused on being the sole breadwinners and  
furthering their careers to ensure that they can  
support their growing families.

But, taking a break from work usually has more to  
do with finding a balance between work and home  
life than making more money.

Arlene Bernstein, director of LifeLine  
Johannesburg, says: "Work-life balance is the key to  
leading a healthy lifestyle. Wellness is the dynamic  
process of becoming aware of, taking responsibility  
for, and making choices that directly contribute to  
one's holistic wellbeing and that of the common  
good."

And you can't put a price on that.

As Reid points out, change is as good as a holiday,  
and changing the way you see life can be very useful,  
especially if you ask yourself: "What can I learn from  
this break?"

## 'Taking time off to have children affects women's earning potential'

