

How to navigate a MIDLIFE CAREER REBOOT



Being made redundant is a hugely stressful and emotional process, as Trish Halpin discovered when she lost her job at the top of her profession. She shares her insight into rebuilding a new way forward



There is a piece of paper, tucked away in a drawer in my bedroom, which has haunted me for well over a year now. It bears an infamous letter and two numbers that have been the punchline for many a corny comedian's gags, but right now it feels like the joke is on me. I received my P45 in the post in October 2019, a week after being made redundant from my role as editor-in-chief of *Marie Claire*, following a 30-year career in publishing. Up until then, at the age of 52, I had never had cause to lay eyes on it, but former colleagues, friends and family reassured me that with my experience and seniority, I wouldn't be in possession of it for long.

Being made redundant is stressful and emotional. Swept up in the drama that preceded the closure of the magazine I worked for, I didn't have time to think about what I might do next. However, I felt confident that my skill set would be transferable, and it sounded good on my CV, as far as I could tell.

After a few weeks of lying on the sofa exhausted, while discovering the delights of daytime TV, I began to feel excited

about the idea of moving into a new sector, or maybe working for a charity, as my midlife years seemed like a good time to be giving something back.

NEW RULES OF RECRUITMENT

I updated my LinkedIn profile, signed up for job alerts and began networking in earnest, but little did I appreciate just how much the world of recruitment had changed since I last searched for a job. For many companies, digital platforms and algorithms are a cheaper option than using recruitment agencies. Applying for roles involved filling in forms and answering questions online, with an automatic email confirmation of my application and then... absolutely nothing. No one to follow up with, no one to ask for feedback, no human interaction at all. After nine or 10 experiences like this, I began to feel like I was hitting a brick wall.

Then the pandemic happened, causing an unprecedented economic downturn, with the highest rates of unemployment in decades. In March 2020, when I finally got a response

from a digital application for a role that would have been my dream job, the interview was cancelled 24 hours beforehand. The country went into lockdown and the company closed the role.

Unfortunately, far too many women joined me in possession of a P45 in 2020, and the predictions are that many more will this year, too. Dubbed the 'Shecession', Covid has had a disproportionate impact on women's earning power for several reasons: the high proportion employed in the retail and hospitality sectors; the pressure of homeschooling; closure of childcare facilities, leaving some with little choice but to reduce hours or leave their roles altogether. Plus, the pandemic seems set to exacerbate the issue of pay gap disparity after the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) suspended the enforcement of gender pay gap reporting in 2020. After decades of fighting to make the workplace fairer for women, the setbacks keep coming.

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Don't ever apologise for having a career break
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'We're seeing three times as many applications for every role compared with previous years,' says Charlotte Davies, careers expert at LinkedIn.

So, if you have been made redundant, or are looking to return from a career break after caring for children or elderly relatives, what is the best way to approach such a highly competitive market? Preparation, a strategic approach, and perhaps most importantly, overcoming a mindset that might be holding you back.

'In a LinkedIn survey, we found 49% of women over 45 who have been made redundant saw their age as a disadvantage for getting a new role,' says Charlotte. 'While 63% admitted to stopping themselves applying for a job they wanted at least once because they felt they lacked the relevant skills.'

It's essential to put aside any doubts we might have about our age, those feelings of shame about losing a job, or concerns that time out from a career means that we haven't been developing or learning important skills.

So where can you turn for help? Julianne Miles is CEO and co-founder of Women Returners, an organisation that supports professionals going back into the workplace after a prolonged career break. While she admits that Covid has had a negative impact on programmes such as paid returnships, which are designed to help ease the way back into the corporate world, she is optimistic about the future.

'Most returner programmes have been paused rather than abandoned, so we expect a resurgence in 2021,' she says. 'It is really encouraging, too, that organisations that have continued to recruit through the pandemic, particularly in the tech sector, remain just as committed to broadening their recruitment.'

At the Bank of England, a partner organisation of Women Returners, a returnship programme will be launching this April.

'We've seen the benefits of career breaks with our own staff taking time out,' says executive director Charlotte Gerken. 'So returnships are a great opportunity to attract skilled, talented people, as well as improve our senior female talent pipeline.'

Charlotte also recognises the experience that comes from taking time out to care for a family. 'Our returners are very well organised with their time, they are self-starters and effective project managers who are strong at problem solving and decision making,' she says. Your experience and what you do while out of the workplace rounds you as a person, she says. 'Never apologise for having a career break.'

FIND YOUR MOTIVATION

Rather than taking a scatter-gun approach as I did, firing off my CV left, right and centre, Julianne advises first spending time thinking about your motivation. Is it purely financial? Or perhaps it's about mental stimulation and professional identity? And do you need flexibility? 'This is the start of a step-by-step process, that also includes rebuilding your networks and your online profile, as well as looking at any skills that need updating,' she explains.

Zoe Brodie, a 45-year-old business analyst from East Lothian, spent six months planning her return to work after a 10-year career break, during which she looked after her daughter and launched a micro print design business with her sister.

'It was proving harder and harder to make money from the business, so we closed it in September 2019 and, as my qualifications were getting a bit old, I decided to sign on to some courses,' says Zoe. 'Looking at job adverts, I could see the qualifications employers now required, and I also wanted to see if I liked being back in the analyst environment - which I did, as I thoroughly enjoyed the courses.'

Zoe started rebuilding her network through friends and former colleagues, one of whom told her about Women Returners.

'Using the information on the Women Returners website was incredibly helpful,' she says. 'I applied for a job at financial services company ComputerShare and started there in July 2020. There were challenges starting a new role during the pandemic, but it didn't stop me building relationships or feeling settled in the job.'

Being able to demonstrate to a potential employer that you have been proactive during your time out of work is important. Refreshing a skill, studying or volunteering will show your commitment to continued learning and



“It's important to show your values and authenticity”

will help you to feel positive and that you are moving forward.

Aparna Jani, 49, a project manager from Harrow, started her career aged 16 as a bank cashier and worked her way up the ladder until she took voluntary redundancy in 2016. 'I'd gone through a divorce and my dad had died not long before, so I thought if I don't leave now, I never will,' she says. 'With 20 years of working life ahead of me, it was time for something new.'

During her time out of the corporate world, Aparna completed a degree in Business Management, ran an Airbnb business, and taught English as a foreign language, as well as volunteering with Mind and the Refugee Council. 'It was really important for me to do something that gave me a sense of purpose,' she says. 'Future employers aren't expecting you to have done anything like learn a language when you take time out, but it's important to show your values and authenticity.'

In 2019, Aparna dipped her toe back into the corporate world on a short-term contract with a market research company, in order to finance her travel plans. But when the pandemic hit, she was put on furlough and her contract was terminated. 'I spent a couple of weeks in a daze,' she says. 'But then I got on with updating my CV, contacting everyone in my network to let them know I was available, and that led to a contract with a pharmaceutical tech company.'

Not only is Aparna the oldest member of the team - her MD is 34 - she is also new to the industry. 'My age was definitely

a factor in getting the role,' she says. 'I'm able to share my learnings from all sorts of situations that I've been in, which is helpful to a young team who have never had that experience. It's really boosted my confidence.'

As for me, I'm now taking a fresh look at my approach to applying for roles, as I've realised I don't want to go back to a full-time job. I've added to my skill set by launching a podcast, *Postcards From Midlife*, and am earning a living from that, as well as freelance writing. I'm also a volunteer tutor with The Access Project, which supports kids from diverse backgrounds getting into top-tier universities. I'm enjoying it so much, in fact, that a little thought is forming in my mind that I might even consider a move into teaching. So, while the past year might not have turned out how I, or any of us, expected, at least I am gathering the tools now to properly plan my second act. I'll keep you posted...

“Rebuild your networks and your online profile”

5 STEPS TO STARTING OVER

REFRESH YOUR LINKEDIN PROFILE

Members with a profile photo have 21 times more views and up to nine times more connection requests than members who don't have one. Regularly sharing your opinions and things that interest you, such as an engaging video or article, is a great way to stay connected with your professional community.



BRUSH UP ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Victoria Lindfield of Victoria Lindfield Associates, which recruits candidates for business support roles, says clients expect candidates to be up to date with apps. 'Companies use social media as a free marketing tool, so even if you don't use them, it's important to know your way around Twitter, Instagram and Facebook,' she says.

DO YOUR RESEARCH

Understanding a company's mission and objectives and being motivated by its purpose is really valuable. Read the company website and follow it on social media to get a feel for its culture and values.

GET COMFORTABLE USING ZOOM

You are likely to be interviewed virtually, so treat it as you would a face-to-face encounter. Find a tidy, neutral space. Dress professionally, use good lighting and find a flattering camera angle.

Make sure the technology and wi-fi are working properly. Turn your phone off and don't let the cat in the room - you need to be as focused as you would be in an office.



CONSIDER RETRAINING

Think about retraining as 'shifting' into a new area, because you are still bringing the skills, experience and knowledge you have from before, rather than starting all over again. You need to be really excited about the area you are going to retrain in though, because it will be hard work. However, if you enjoy it, then the effort involved will be worthwhile.

ADDED SUPPORT

● Tune into success stories: womenreturners.com has a library of 100 return-to-work stories and will be launching a podcast on 22 February. Visit techreturners.com for great advice, networks and returnship programmes.

● Free courses to brush up skills or try out something new are available from the Open University (open.edu), Massive Open Online Courses (mooc.org) and Free2learn (free2learn.org.uk).
● If you are going through redundancy negotiation, request outplacement support to help you transition to a new

role or prepare you for a job search. You can also pay for this yourself. Try workingtransitions.com.
● A midlife move into teaching is becoming a popular option for second careers - nowteach.org.uk supports professionals into teaching and beyond. □