



Returning Professional “Internships” A New Strategy for Employers to Access High Caliber Talent and for Professionals to Reenter the Workforce

by Carol Fishman Cohen
Co-founder, iRelaunch, Co-author, *Back on the Career Track*

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THE RETURN TO WORK EXPERTS®

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ABSTRACT:

Returning professional internships are quietly emerging as one of the most effective vehicles for professionals seeking to resume their careers after extended breaks for childcare, eldercare, or other reasons. Although little known within the employer community, these short-term, non-binding work arrangements provide a nearly perfect mechanism for reducing the impediments associated with hiring returning professionals. For the employer, an internship offers a low-risk structure in which to assess the potential benefits of hiring an employee. For the employee, an internship provides the opportunity to produce a work sample while gaining resume-worthy experience and evaluating the fit of the work environment. As the trend towards internships grows, and employers increasingly recognize the value of this highly qualified segment of the workforce, these programs should become an accepted and commonplace part of employer hiring practices.

Returning professional internships come in various forms including consulting projects, special projects, contract assignments, research fellowships, externships, returnships¹, temp work, executive in residence programs, strategic volunteering projects, or field studies, and have proven successful in all different fields and work configurations. These internships have become the basis for formal career reentry programs and in special situations for promising individuals.

The enormous potential of returning professional internships as a career reentry vehicle came to light from the convergence of a number of events beginning in 2006. MIT Professional Education in 2006 and Pace Law School in 2007 created return to work programs that included an internship component, producing fascinating success stories. On the corporate side, Goldman Sachs and Sara Lee established internship programs for returning professionals in 2008. A year later, BBN Technologies initiated a return to work internship program. Three pioneering programs involving internships or equivalents, the Daphne Jackson Fellowship Program in the U.K. with its 27-year track record of over 200 success stories in scientific and engineering fields, the National Institutes of Health Career Reentry Grant Program beginning in 1992 with 135 grants awarded to date, and the University of Massachusetts McCormack Graduate School of Policy Studies Women in Politics and Public Policy Graduate Certificate Program, over 40 years old with 700 alumni (some of whom are returning from career break), lent credence to the concept. Further reinforcement came from successful "relaunchers" who

¹ Note that Goldman Sachs has trademarked the term Returnship®

spoke about their internships at 14 iRelaunch Return to Work Conferences held in the U.S. and London beginning in 2008.

The use of internships for returning professionals broadens the candidate pipeline to help solve a common problem. Despite the large supply of available candidates due to consistently high unemployment rates, employers are often unable to fill open positions because the "right" candidates cannot be found. Additionally, as employers prioritize the recruiting of high-caliber women for leadership roles at their firms, using internships to access the pool of women returning from career breaks increases the supply of candidates for such roles. Finally, companies with college internship programs have the systems and structures already in place to add returning professional interns to the mix without significant additional costs.

The idea that companies should want to capture the energies and talents of women after their childbearing years, or of men and women after a career break for eldercare or other reasons is catching on. Employers are attracted to the relauncher pool because of its quality. The return to work population consists primarily of women who have taken a career break to care for children. There are an estimated 2.3 million women, ages 25-54, with children under 18 and a Bachelor's degree or higher who are not currently in the labor force, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics microdata. Studies indicate 70-93% of them would like to return to work, so a rough cut calculates to nearly 2 million "relaunchers" at any given moment in this dynamic and ever-shifting demographic.² Women returning from a career break caring for children are in a perfect life stage to contribute meaningfully to an employer: They have fewer maternity leaves; their households are more established so they are less likely to relocate, and they are liable to have timed their "relaunch" because childcare responsibilities have ended or lightened significantly.

Although still under the radar, the consistent success of the "returning professional internship model" in a range of fields from financial services, to medical research, to consumer marketing to technology, and even in the elusive realm of tenured academia, makes it worthy of a broader understanding. To that end, this study examines returning professional internship programs in large and small companies, foundations, government agencies, non-profits, and academic institutions. It looks at arrangements that function as internship equivalents and at creative "one off" or customized, single opportunities that have been crafted for specific individuals. It identifies best practices from those programs with strong track records, while examining the reasons why other programs failed. Finally, it offers employers a concrete roadmap for getting ahead of the internship curve and becoming leaders in this growing trend.

² Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey Basic Microdata 2006; data provided courtesy of Katharine Bradbury, Sr. Economist, Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. Also Aquent 2004 survey, Center for Work-Life Policy 2004 survey.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carol Fishman Cohen is the co-author of the career reentry strategy book *Back on the Career Track: A Guide for Stay-at-Home Moms Who Want to Return to Work*, and the co-founder of iRelaunch. iRelaunch (www.iRelaunch.com) produces career reentry programs and content for employers, universities, organizations, and individuals.

The iRelaunch Return to Work Conference (www.returntoworkconference.com) is the only large scale gathering of high-caliber professionals who want to return to work after a career break and the employers interested in meeting and recruiting them. Focused on career reentry strategy, tactics, and targeted networking, the content-intensive and educationally focused Return to Work Conference is not a job fair. It is held four times a year and has attracted over 2,500 attendees at 14 conferences across the U.S. and in London since 2008. Participants are 95% female, with 100% holding a Bachelor's degree, 75% with Master's degrees, 75% with 10 or more years of work experience before an intentional career break for child care, elder care or other reasons, and 70% looking to return to full time work. Major corporations sponsor and attend the iRelaunch Return to Work Conference in order to meet and recruit talented returning professionals. iRelaunch also runs small group coaching workshops, produces webinars, and creates customized courses and career reentry programs for employers and universities.

Carol and co-author/co-founder Vivian Steir Rabin are both Harvard Business School graduates and relaunchers themselves; between them, they have nine children, and they each returned to work after multi-year career breaks before writing *Back on the Career Track* and starting iRelaunch. Their thought leadership on career reentry strategy has helped thousands of women and men on career break return to the workforce. They have presented their return to work strategies at over 140 events to date and are regularly featured in the national press. Carol's return to investment firm Bain Capital after 11 years out of the full-time workforce is documented in a Harvard Business School case study about professional career reentry. She can be reached at info@iRelaunch.com or on Twitter [@iRelaunch](https://twitter.com/iRelaunch).

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Disclosure: Some of the companies and universities discussed in this report have been sponsors of the iRelaunch Return to Work Conference, either once or multiple times.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PAGE #

I. Returning Professional Internships via Universities, Foundations and Government Agencies

| | |
|--|----|
| A. Science, Engineering & Technology: Daphne Jackson Fellowships..... | 5 |
| B. Science, Engineering & Technology: National Institutes of Health Career Reentry Grants. | 8 |
| C. Science, Engineering & Technology: MIT Career Reengineering Program... | 10 |
| D. Law: Pace Law School New Directions for Attorneys | 13 |
| E. Public Policy: University of Massachusetts McCormack Graduate School of Policy Studies, Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy, Women in Politics and Public Policy Graduate Certificate Program..... | 15 |
| F. Business: Lake Forest Graduate School of Management Daytime MBA..... | 18 |
| G. Returning Professionals Applying for Traditional College Internships..... | 19 |

II. Returning Professional Internships at Companies

| | |
|---|----|
| A. Goldman Sachs Returnship®..... | 20 |
| B. Sara Lee Corporation Returnships@SaraLee® | 23 |
| C. BBN Technologies (now Raytheon BBN Technologies) Technical Relaunchers Initiative..... | 26 |
| D. ThoughtWorks Back to IT..... | 30 |
| E. Daily Grommet Executive-in-Residence | 32 |
| F. AboutOne Comeback Mom Returnship..... | 34 |
| G. Hera Hub Experienceship..... | 35 |

III. Returning Professional Internships at Non-Profits

| | |
|--|----|
| A. The ThinkFlex Internship Program..... | 36 |
| B. The Nature Conservancy GLOBE Program..... | 39 |

IV. Returning Professional Internship Equivalent

| | |
|---|----|
| A. Adjunct Professorships or Lectureships..... | 41 |
| B. "Strategic Volunteering"..... | 42 |
| C. Field Studies and Temporary Roles..... | 43 |
| D. Part-Time Roles and Consulting Projects..... | 45 |

V. Benefits of Non-binding, Short-term Work Arrangements.....

VI. Report Summary: Recommendations for Employers.....

VII. Report Summary: Recommendations for Returning Professionals.....

VIII. Resources.....

EXHIBITS.....