



# The Relaunching Attorney: Returning to Your Legal Career after a Break

By Carroll Welch

Sandra loved her practice as a real estate attorney at a Hartford firm, and when she left to take maternity leave for her first child, she fully intended to return after six months. Twelve years and three children later, Sandra, a stay-at-home mom, found herself yearning to return to the challenges of the law, and the income that came with it. During her career hiatus, Sandra had been active at her kids' schools, sat on the board of a local nonprofit, and even started a small business focused on one of her favorite hobbies—landscape design. But she'd disconnected entirely from her legal career. Reclaiming her identity as a lawyer seemed like a daunting if not impossible goal.

The law is a rigorous and demanding profession and many women (and some men) choose or need to step away at some point for personal reasons, which can include parenting, caring for aging parents, dealing with one's illness or a family members', following a relocating spouse, or pursuing a non-legal career or other endeavor. These career breaks can be as long as 20 plus years and begin before attorneys even had computers on their desks.

Getting “back in the game” and landing a paid legal position after a long hiatus is immensely challenging. Fortunately, in the last ten years, the conversation about relaunch talent and how to make it part of a diverse and inclusive workforce has become exponentially more active. Many more resources and programs designed to assist and provide entry points for relaunching professionals, and attorneys in particular, have become available.<sup>1</sup>

## Challenges

Even with aids, the path back into the law is challenging and filled with obstacles. Re-entering attorneys must consider the hurdles and how their relaunch strategies will address them. Some of the most common obstacles faced by a re-entering attorney include:

- **Low Confidence:** The fear of showing up as an attorney for networking and job searching activities when one hasn’t practiced for years is, for many, an overwhelming and anxiety-provoking prospect. Regardless of how successful they may have been prior to their breaks, many relaunchers feel like “imposters” when trying to get back to the law.
- **Rusty Skills:** For relaunchers who did not do any pro bono or legal work during their breaks, rusty substantive skills and a lack of knowledge about changes and developments in the law can also be a barrier. Nonexistent or weak technological skills can also diminish confidence dramatically.
- **Lack of Clarity on Target:** Sandra knew that she wanted to return to real estate law. Leveraging her seven years of experience would likely make her relaunch easier. Many relaunchers, however, do not want to return to their pre-break practice areas or employment venues and they prefer to re-enter in a new capacity. The problem: they just don’t know what they want to do and what the possibilities are. This lack of clarity can be paralyzing, and lead to their running unfocused and unwieldy job searches that never gain momentum and result in despair and discouragement.

- **No Network:** Sandra had kept in touch with two of her law firm colleagues by sending holiday cards and meeting for lunch once or twice a year during her career break. Contacting them (her supervising partner and fellow associate who since made partner) to enlist support when she decided to relaunch was a critical first step. For many, though, a nonexistent professional network can lead to a feeling of disconnectedness, isolation, and an overreliance on online search sites to apply for positions. This is not an optimal strategy, and it can soon feel like resumes and cover letters are being dropped into black holes.

- **Ageism:** The sting of ageism in hiring can be very strong for relaunchers who return to run job searches in their 40s, 50s, and 60s. They face employer reservations and fears about their rusty skills, lack of commitment to work,<sup>2</sup> unsophisticated technological skills, inability to work with intergenerational teams, or disinclination to be supervised by younger colleagues.

- **Lack of a Support System:** Like any other person setting a goal, relaunchers need support to be successful. Surrounding oneself with friends and family who encourage and help the attorney to adopt a positive outlook is crucial. Having a positive demeanor is as important as having a good resume and directly impacts networking and interviewing performance.

## Strategies for Success

Sandra, our relaunching attorney above, was able to land a temporary, six month position with a small real estate practice in Farmington after connecting with her brother-in-law’s best friend (a partner at the firm) at a family holiday party. She’s hoping that it will become a permanent and/or full time job. Despite the difficult challenges listed above, many attorneys are successful in finding paid legal work after extensive hiatuses by employing key strategies, some of which are listed below:

- **Self Assessment and Targets:** Before diving into preparing resumes and cover

letters, relaunchers should spend time inventorying their skills, interests, values, and goals for their re-entry processes. They should be prepared to describe their skills clearly and not expect that prospective employers will try to figure this out. This will facilitate their clarity on skills that are rusty, nonexistent, or strong so they can plan how to prepare. Also, figuring out at the outset of the process what practice area or employment venue to target is key and helps prevent an unfocused and unwieldy job search. The approach of, “I’ll do anything. I just want a job!” is not helpful and undercuts rather than advances a relauncher’s process.

- **Networking:** The rule of thumb that 80 percent of jobs are achieved through networking is likely closer to 95 percent for relaunchers, who need the boost of a contact or connection to provide an entry point or opportunity. It is simply too difficult for attorneys with career breaks to compete via online job search sites with the general population of candidates without career breaks. Relaunchers should mine their networks of friends, family, neighbors, and community contacts to raise their visibility and explore opportunities.

- **Engagement:** Relaunching cannot happen by looking at one’s computer screen or simply thinking and planning. It’s important to get out and engage! This may include talking to former colleagues; conducting informational interviews; attending CLE classes; going to panel programs; writing an article; joining a bar association committee; or doing pro bono, volunteer, project, or temporary work. Engagement builds confidence, clarity, skills, and a network.

- **Prepare Tools:** Have a strong pitch or marketing message. An excellent resume and LinkedIn profile are important tools for a good job search. They should be updated with information about skills developed through substantive volunteer or community experience, whether legal in nature or not.

I have seen many attorneys relaunch and

accomplish amazing things in their careers with positivity, proactivity, resiliency, and the support of a network. Employers are increasingly recognizing the value of relauncher talent. Despite sometimes needing initial support or orientation, relaunchers often bring a refreshed perspective and skill set to their legal practices after their career breaks, and are motivated and enthusiastic about resuming their careers.

## Where to Begin

### Thinking of Relaunching? Here's What You Should Do First

- Seek support from a career coach, counselor, or mentor to help you clarify your skills, interests, and goals.
- Go public with your relaunch plans. Tell everyone you know that you plan to go back to work. This will make your goal more "real" and can lead to helpful contacts.
- Reach out to former colleagues to reconnect and share your plans. For many,

this is a daunting initial step but can help the relauncher remember that others thought highly of her professional reputation and want to be of help.

- Engage! Get out and have experiences that will build confidence and help to build momentum.
- Revise and update your resume to include leadership or substantive volunteer and community experiences. **CL**



Carroll Welch is a career, executive, and leadership coach who has supported hundreds of attorneys seeking to return to legal practice or alternative legal careers after career breaks. She is a past director of New Directions for Attorneys, an attorney re-entry program previously run by Pace University School of Law and a former practicing employment law attorney.

## Notes

1. These include courses such as Pace Law School's now defunct *New Directions for Attorneys* program and the online Transformative Impact/Relaunching Attorney Platform. Employment programs such as the On Ramp Fellowship provide slots at law firms and corporate legal departments, and programs at many major financial institutions such as Morgan Stanley's Return to Work Program and Credit Suisse's Real Returns offer some legal positions on a shorter term basis that may transition into permanent roles. iRelaunch offers resources, conferences, and consulting services to relaunchers across industries and employers interested in their talent. The Connecticut Bar Association has joined many other bar associations in offering programming and information for its membership on career reentry.
2. A recent *Harvard Business Review* article described a researcher's findings that stay-at-home moms are half as likely to get an interview than an applicant who was unemployed or didn't identify parenting as a reason for her employment gap. <https://hbr.org/2018/02/stay-at-home-moms-are-half-as-likely-to-get-a-job-interview-as-moms-who-got-laid-off>

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