



A CAREER BREAK PLANNING GUIDE
FOR PEOPLE IN THE IT INDUSTRY



TAKING A BREAK

© BCS 2007

Edited by John Kavanagh

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**Building a profession that is good
for women and better for all.**

BCS – working together with sector leaders and
IT professionals to attract, retain and advance
more women into leadership in the IT industry.



C O N T E N T S

FOREWORD	04
INTRODUCTION	06
FIRST STEPS: PLANNING A BREAK	07
A CAREER ON HOLD?	15
PAUSE FOR REFLECTION	25
PREPARING TO RETURN	28
GETTING BACK INTO WORK	35
RESOURCES	40
SWOT ANALYSIS	48



FOREWORD

Managing and maintaining a high standard of IT professionalism is of paramount importance to the BCS. Ensuring the supply and retention of skilled and quality professionals is a major concern.

There is increasing workplace flexibility and adaptability, partly encouraged by technology advances, and also as people make choices about careers, lifestyles and personal commitments. Part of this workplace flexibility is an increasing number of mid-career professionals taking career breaks to travel, to volunteer or to provide care for a partner, family member or even themselves. As more people move temporarily in and out of the workforce for varied reasons, it is vital we encourage them to return to IT to maintain a healthy and diverse profession.

Recognising this through our support and involvement in the Equalitec project that focused attention on helping women to return after a career break, we have produced this short self-help guide. Research from the Institute of Physics and Equalitec suggests that the people who plan for a return before they take a break are more likely to be able to return at a higher level, reduce their re-skilling time, and enjoy better benefits from their employer.

This guide is put together from the personal experiences of those who have taken career breaks, to provide useful tips and give helpful resources. It is important for you to

maintain a positive attitude to returning to work.

Recognise that you have specialised skills that employers and customers will value. BCS offers many opportunities for networking and keeping professional knowledge up to date, many at no cost to members. Take advantage of these.

We hope the tips and resources offer you a useful springboard in planning your way back to a successful IT career. Good luck.

Rachel Burnett, BCS President





I N T R O D U C T I O N

Many people consider taking career breaks these days – but, as they excitedly plan that world tour or prepare for parenthood, few look beyond the break itself to the important issue of getting back into work.

If you hope to return to work you need to plan for your break carefully and then make sure you take all opportunities to improve your prospects of going back to the right job at the right level.

This guide aims to show how, with proper planning and the right approach during a break, leaving work for months or even years need not mean the end of your hard-won career or professional ambitions.

FIRST STEPS: PLANNING A BREAK

There are many reasons why people take a career break:

- Parenthood, especially motherhood, is by far the most common reason. Such a break might last anything from months to several years.
- People are increasingly following the example of their children and going off on a world tour.
- Some have a break forced on them by redundancy or illness.
- Some take a break to care for an elderly parent, get a degree or qualification, or just have a rest from working long hours and perhaps do some freelance work from home.
- To catalyse change and be reinvigorated.

The nature and length of a break raise issues for the way you plan and manage it with a view to returning to work:

- Some new mothers might take minimal leave to get back to their careers with the same employer; others might see their children through to school age.
- A sabbatical might be planned to study a specialist area of IT with the next promotion in mind or to pursue a personal research interest.
- A world tour could be a very long holiday – but if you bear in mind the need to get back to work you might look out for opportunities for international networking or bringing back new contacts to impress your employer.

Whatever the reasons and the type of break there is planning to be done.



PREPARE YOUR EMPLOYER

If you hope to return to the same employer, if not the same job, you need to talk to your line manager as early as possible.

Research any company policies on career breaks, sabbaticals, home working, part-time working, refresher training and support for mothers on maternity leave. It might be best to be armed with this information when you meet your line manager.

If your break will be relatively short and you have a choice about timing, think about the best time to take it:

- Could it start over a traditionally quieter time such as the summer?
- Is a lull in new development approaching after some current major projects?

KEEP IN TOUCH

Look at formal and informal ways of keeping in touch with your employer and colleagues. After all, in most cases IT will move on, there might be an organisational restructuring, new management or new office procedures. Keeping up to date with such changes during a career break could be important for your future and prospects:

- Is there an emailed or paper newsletter?
- Could you be allowed access to the company intranet and to team or department web pages?
- Would you like to be invited occasionally to department or team meetings, or company events?
- Is there a mentor scheme for allocating a staff member to someone on a break to keep the person in touch with what is happening at work?

Setting up such links will be easier while you are still physically at the office.

Other mentor services are also available, some specifically for people in IT, engineering and science (see the Resources section of this guide). Nearly two-thirds of people on career breaks find mentors useful, according to a survey by the Daphne Jackson Trust, which encourages women into technology, engineering and science. Benefits include the provision of information, the chance to discuss ideas, and help with self confidence.

MONEY MATTERS

You will no doubt work out the financial implications of taking a break – including salary loss and benefits entitlements – and as part of that consider putting some money aside for training and conferences to keep your knowledge and skills up to date during the break.

Initially, either through choice or necessity, many women return from leave in a part-time capacity. This has an effect on their salaries. University of Manchester research found that women returning to work after taking a break from caring or maternity leave experienced, on average, a 16 per cent drop in wages, through being over-qualified for the part-time job they took.

Significantly, research commissioned by parliament from the London School of Economics showed that, in the context of qualifications, higher skills raise productivity and lead to higher wages for individuals. This could be

useful information for women returners to use negotiate better wages for part-time work.

Apply for the BCS reduced membership fee that the Society offers members on a career break. Free BCS branch and specialist group meetings and many other events will be important for networking and keeping knowledge up to date during your break. Online careers services are available to BCS members.

If you're not online at home, get a PC, an internet service and a broadband link while you're still working and can afford these. Access to websites and email will become vital as you look at getting back to work. Websites are useful for job ads, free online courses, training, bursaries and other schemes for returners, discussion groups, mentoring services, tax and benefit information. You can also usefully post your CV on many websites.

MAILING LISTS

If you receive trade publications at work, arrange for them to be redirected to your home. Sign up for their email news services, and research other general IT and specialist news services that might be useful. If you can't afford to subscribe to these, many good libraries, particularly at universities and colleges, hold copies.

CHECKLIST

Use this list to chart your progress.

- Research company policies on career breaks.
- Think about the best time to take a break to suit both you and your employer.
- Talk to your manager as early as possible.
- Look at ways of keeping in touch with your

employer – and set them up.

- Put money aside for training during the break.
- Apply for the BCS reduced membership fee.
- Get on mailing lists for BCS branches and relevant specialist groups.
- Buy a home PC and broadband internet access.
- Arrange for trade publications to be sent to your home.
- Sign up for email IT news services.



*Jon with new friend
in Sri Lanka*

CASE STUDY

PLANNING PAYS OFF

When freelance web designer Jon Austin decided to take time off to travel the world with his partner, he saw planning as vital for his business.

‘A month before we left I emailed my plans and the exact dates to all my clients – who range from a car manufacturer to a fashion designer and a restaurant,’ Jon says. ‘This gave them time to think about any work they might need doing before I went. I was kept pretty busy for the next four weeks.

‘I set up an email auto-response and a phone answering message saying I was away. I told clients I’d look at emails once a week in case of emergencies; in fact I did this every two or three days. I didn’t take a laptop – we

were travelling very light to Thailand, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Australia, Hawaii and the US – but there were plenty of internet cafes for checking emails. No emergencies came up.

‘I thought about passing my business to another designer I know but decided it would be more hassle than it was worth, because we all have different styles and use different technologies.’

Jon planned a departure date that fell at the start of the relatively quiet Christmas period, to keep business impact at a minimum for some of the trip at least. His partner, Jo, negotiated an unpaid sabbatical with the primary school where she teaches.

The trip raised business opportunities, especially among hotels without websites – but Jon and Jo were there mainly for the surfing.

Giving clients precise details of dates and staying in

touch by email if needed certainly paid off.

‘I expected to lose 20-30 per cent of my business but I didn’t lose any,’ Jon says. ‘I was back at work on the first day, with quite a backlog, typically updating websites with new content. Most of my clients have been with me a long time and it may have been that they didn’t want to have to start again with someone else.

‘I was quite prepared to have to find more work. If work dries up I quickly go out and find more by personally distributing cards, networking and talking to people.

I’ve now got so much work on that I could do with another trip.’



A CAREER ON HOLD?

A career break takes you away from the workplace but that needn't mean giving up working on your career.

There are so many things you can do during your break, both for self-development and to impress employers as you rejoin the jobs market later.

Career development, through assessment of where you're at and where you want to get to, followed by action planning – often involving training – is a critical factor. Good books on this are *Second Chances*, *Enhancing Your Employability* and *The Art of Building Windmills* (See Resources).

Equally important is keeping in touch with your industry sector and trying to forecast likely developments. This is difficult, but worth a try. *Enhancing Your Employability* looks at a currently popular topic – the end of the traditional job patterns, as we know them, and the move

towards much more varied work patterns. In this new world it is employability that is important and how to achieve this.

IT'S YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

During employment your employer helps you look after your development; during a career break it's down to you. Your employer might help by including you on newsletter mailing lists, providing intranet access, allocating a mentor; colleagues might keep you up to date with changes at the office; organisations exist to provide bursaries for training and work placements – but it is still up to you to initiate all such support.

Things to think about include maintaining your knowledge and skills, developing new skills, and keeping in touch with the world of work.

HOW LONG?

The longer you are away, the more you have to work on these things. A break of more than two years can make it extremely difficult to get back, according to a government-backed study for Equalitec, an organisation for women in IT, electronics and communications. It says, starkly, 'A career break creates a knowledge gap, a tremendous deficit in confidence, loss of self-efficacy and a loss of opportunities to network; thus the longer the break the greater the impact.'

The good news is that there are many and varied resources to help.

There are some free and simple ways to keep professional knowledge up to date.

And with IT there are many professional development training courses to help.

PUBLICATIONS

Make sure any trade publications you received at work get redirected to your home. These not only keep you in touch with current industry issues and developments but also help you spot emerging technologies that you might train in, ready for when you return to work.

The web is naturally an infinite source of general and detailed specialist information.

FREE EVENTS

BCS branches and specialist groups have regular meetings on a huge variety of topics, with leading experts and experienced IT people speaking. Some of these groups and the BCS itself organise conferences at low cost. These events not only help you keep up with the IT industry and trends but they also offer unrivalled opportunities for networking and making contacts who

could prove useful now, as mentors, or in the future as potential employers or as ways in to an employer.

Locally, professional associations, sectors of industry or careers services often organise annual job fairs and training events, which are always worth visiting, even if their main target audience is young people.

FREE INFORMATION

Many BCS branches and specialist groups have useful websites, often with speakers' slides and reports from meetings. Some groups have informative paper newsletters or magazines too.

The BCS offers a reduced membership fee to people on career breaks. Conferences often charge reduced rates for people who are not in full-time work.

USE THE LIBRARY

Use your local library and, if possible, a local university or college library. Between them they provide everything from teach-yourself books on IT skills – and on getting a job – to trade publications, scientific journals and newspapers with job ads.

Many libraries also provide free internet access.

CAREER SUPPORT

Support services are available from various organisations (see the Resources section) – with the BCS offering services specifically for IT professionals.

BCS members have free access to online career support services, notably CareerBuilder and SFIPlus, the Society's enhanced version of the national Skills Framework for the Information Age.

SFIPlus describes more than 250 IT roles and shows the likely work activities, knowledge, skills, training and qualifications at different levels in each role.

CareerBuilder enables you to review your skills against SFIPlus, create a personal job description, and identify skills gaps and actions in line with your career aspirations.

If you want face-to-face advice it is worth seeing if the local careers service has an adult service. There is also a pilot scheme, currently being run by LearnDirect, providing free telephone advice for all. 'nextstep' providers, operating across England can usually offer you at least one free IAG (information, advice and guidance) session. Their staff are good 'sign-posters' to other local provision (see the Resources section).

Parliamentary discussions have highlighted the importance of adult career services and it seems highly likely that more services will be provided. Lucky Wales

still has a free all age guidance service with funding support from the National Assembly.

QUALIFICATIONS

A good starting point for filling your skills gaps could be the short courses on IT management and other topics offered through the BCS Information Systems Examinations Board. These lead to widely recognised certificates and diplomas.

Consider getting chartered status through the BCS to boost your profile.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The BCS CareerBuilder service has details and facilities for recording continuing professional development: qualifying activities include attending events, studying and writing.

In addition there are some useful books (suggested in the reference section). The online and centre-based courses provided by LearnDirect are also worth exploring. Distance and e-learning are good options if you are moving around or at home with children or a sick relative.

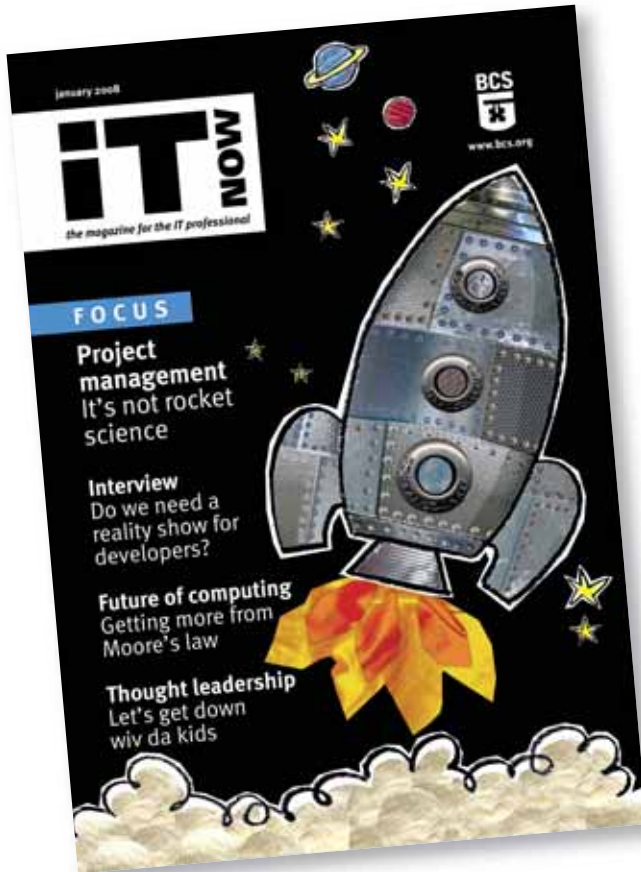
ANY VOLUNTEERS?

Voluntary work can both provide good practical opportunities to keep work skills fresh and introduce new experience. Keep a record of what you do and the skills you use.

The BCS IT Can Help scheme and IT4Communities both use IT volunteers to help individuals and charities with their IT.

Volunteering to sit on the school parents' association committee, organising the church fete, visiting elderly housebound people or many other voluntary activities can help develop communication and organisational skills.

A very good source of vacancies is your local Volunteer Centre or Bureau. These may have in excess of 400 different vacancies on their database at any one time.



GET PUBLISHED

Consider writing some articles on specialist topics for IT or scientific journals. The BCS electronic newsletter, eBCS, is a good way to start. Formulate and present your ideas to the journals before going to the trouble of writing. This exercise can help clarify your professional interests and focus your own thoughts on specific areas.

It is also a good talking point at future interviews.

PROVE YOUR DETERMINATION

All these activities also help to maintain your self-confidence – and show prospective employers that you have not been idle during your break, have used your initiative and have developed new skills.

When you are ready to return make sure your CV reflects the activities you have been involved in. (See 'Preparing to Return' section.)

CHECKLIST

Use this list to chart your progress.

- ❑ Accept that your career development is now down solely to you.
- ❑ Make sure you receive any promised newsletters and other contacts from your employer.
- ❑ Make sure you receive any trade publications that were previously sent to you at work.
- ❑ Use free BCS branch and specialist group meetings, to keep your knowledge up to date and for networking.
- ❑ Get access to BCS branch and specialist group websites and publications.
- ❑ Explore libraries for useful books and journals and free internet access.
- ❑ Use career development and support services such as those from the BCS.
- ❑ Use the advice available from job centres, careers centres, 'nextstep' providers and the LearnDirect helpline.
- ❑ Analyse your skills to identify likely gaps, using SFIAplus.
- ❑ Consider voluntary work to keep your skills fresh and to develop new ones.
- ❑ Ensure you update your CV in line with activities undertaken.



Diane: 'You have to take the initiative yourself.'

CASE STUDY

THE WAY BACK TO WORK

Redundancy may have forced IT consultant Diane O'Brien into a career break, but she never stopped working.

The difference was that her work shifted from paid consultancy to getting back to a permanent job.

'It doesn't matter how long you're away from the workplace, or the reasons – your CV remains a living document, and continued self-development is important,' Diane says.

'I did a variety of freelance IT work, some of it voluntary, including setting up a wireless home network for a family, upgrading a website for a graphic designer,

helping a clinic automate its administration and looking at a virus problem for a minicab firm.

'Personal networking is very important. I go to as many BCS events as I can. Branch meetings are free and cover a wide range of topics. I also went to women returner seminars and other events run by Equalitec, the Daphne Jackson Trust and the UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology.

'Through BCS and other events I met working women, some of whom had had career breaks for various reasons, and got advice from them. It was hard to find a formal mentor: women are in a small minority in IT and there aren't enough in higher positions.

'I also picked up some work by networking at events, just by talking to people and exchanging business cards.' At the same time Diane sought out useful courses, often free of charge. These ranged from a course to help mid-career women take leadership roles, at Cambridge

University's Lucy Cavendish College, to the Open University's online T160 course for women returners in science, engineering and technology.

'I took full advantage of as many of the free courses and networking opportunities as possible,' Diane says. All this, plus looking for a permanent job, demanded determination and self-discipline.

'You have to take the initiative yourself,' Diane says.

'There's no other way.'



PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

A career break can be a good time for radical reflection on your career and your work and life ambitions.

Such reflection might be inspired or influenced by activities undertaken during your break.

Useful publications in this area are *What Colour is My Parachute?*, *Build Your Own Rainbow* and *The Art of Building Windmills*.

GATHER THE WHOLE PICTURE

Analysis of your professional skills, speakers you have heard at BCS events, voluntary work, hobbies and interests, and new parenthood skills could all lead to a change of direction.

As a simple example, if you have internet skills and enjoy

graphic design at home, could you return as a web designer?

If you have become a school governor or joined a parents' committee, have you found confidence and skills as a speaker and presenter, or a flair for organising events?

FIND THE TIME AND PLACE

Now could be a time to reflect on all your skills in a formal way and question what you want from your career and your life.

'Self-reflection is a powerful yet sometimes overlooked tool for making decisions,' says a government-sponsored report by Equalitec, an organisation helping women return to careers in IT, electronics and communications.

'It can help you to make appropriate career and education choices, increase your occupational knowledge, understand your own decision-making process, write an

effective CV and sell yourself to an employer in an interview.

‘It can be quite difficult, requiring time and a quiet place for some hard thinking.

‘Uncertainty and worry that we will not find the answer sometimes prevent us from taking that necessary quiet time alone to reflect.

DIG DEEP

‘Consider your interests, likes and dislikes, your personal and work values, preferred working conditions, your personality and how this might affect whom you want to work with, your skills and especially those you would like to develop. Think about a summary of what is important to you in evaluating different job opportunities.’

SELF - REFLECTION EXERCISES

Equalitec suggests two self-reflection exercises.

FIRST, RECOGNISE YOUR ACHIEVEMENTS

List 12-15 things that may have been difficult but which you enjoyed doing and did well. Half should be from your career and half from your personal life. Put them in order of importance.

Reflect on the top 10 and write down the steps you took, the skills you used, the personal traits you showed.

You now have a list of your best achievements and patterns of your skills and other features across them. This can give a clearer idea of the direction you might take. It can also help you put together or update your CV.

THE SECOND EXERCISE INVOLVES CLONING YOURSELF

Let yourself go and list the careers, jobs or activities you would pursue if you could clone yourself into five people.

For each clone write down why you chose that activity and the skills you have now that would help you do it.

By matching your skills to activities you have chosen, this exercise helps reveal your dream job.



PREPARING TO RETURN

Getting ready to go back into the discipline of IT work itself, whether part or full time, can be a good way to awaken your self discipline.

TOP PRIORITY: YOUR CV

Your CV is a top priority. There is endless advice on how to structure and write a CV, not least in the careers section of the BCS website and on the BCSWomen Specialist Group website. The BCSWomen group also offers feedback on your CV.

The basic tips are to keep it simple, short and concise, adapt it to individual jobs, and don't be shy about promoting yourself (without lying).

Don't think of your career break as a gap in your CV but as a time when you gained new experience and

transferable skills. These could be: speaking confidently as part of a school parents' association committee, organising a church fete to a strict deadline, organising a growing family, working as a volunteer for the BCS IT Can Help scheme, gaining customer service skills as a volunteer in a charity shop.

Meanwhile you should be able to show evidence of attending BCS branch or specialist group events and other examples of continuing professional development to stay in touch with the IT profession.

Make sure your CV reflects all this. Show prospective employers how you have used your initiative during your break to maintain and develop your skills.

Just sitting down with your CV and reflecting on everything you've done can help boost your confidence about getting a job. Help with writing your CV is a key service provided by Adult Career Services, 'nextstep' providers, skills coaches (usually accessed via referral by

job centre staff), LearnDirect and other advice and guidance organisations in your area. Ask the job centre for details of local organisations offering help.

A PERSONAL SWOT ANALYSIS

While updating your CV try a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats). The SWOT analysis is used by organisations and can also help you prepare to approach the jobs market (see the Resources section).

COURSES FOR RETURNERS

The Open University's T160 online course for women returners in science, engineering and technology helps you think about your CV and also about issues such as the possible impact on your family and how to avoid feeling guilty if you aren't there if the children need you.

Self-confidence is often an issue for people returning to

work, so consider a course on this or on topics such as career assertiveness at a further education college. Colleges also often run refresher courses on specific industry topics and general courses for people returning to work. The WEA (Workers' Educational Association) and other local organisations run courses of this type. These often include topics such as 'coping with stress' and 'personal presentation'.

MENTORS

If you haven't had a mentor through your break, now is a good time to find one. A working mentor can remind and update you on life at work, talk about IT trends and issues, advise on your CV, perhaps share experiences of returning and issues like child care, and generally nurture your confidence. Local services such as adult careers guidance, FE colleges and 'nextstep' organisations can point you in the right direction.

BURSARIES AND PLACEMENTS

Bursaries and work placement schemes are offered by several organisations, especially for women. These can help ease you back into work, refreshing and updating your skills on the way (see the Resources section).

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Your career break might have made you think about your work-life balance, especially if the break was taken to start a family or due to ill-health. Your desire to work part or full time might be further influenced by decisions about levels of pay, seniority and commuting time and how much you are prepared to travel to do the job.

Another factor might be whether you can return on at least the same salary as before, and whether you now have to pay childcare fees.

CHILDCARE

Childcare is an issue that cannot be put off.

Nearly 50 per cent of women returners questioned in research for Equalitec put this as their biggest problem.

Options include sharing it with your partner, parents, grandparents and other family members, a child minder, a nursery or a nanny perhaps shared with another family, or a live-in au pair. Sources of information on childcare and benefit entitlements are in the Resources section.

Childcare in the early years can be straightforward with up to 12 hours, or in some places overnight, care provided. Things don't get easier when children start school, though new government guidelines on 'wrap-around' care with breakfast and after-school clubs might help. Don't forget to find out about childcare vouchers, the cost of which will be taken from your gross, rather than your net, salary.

The school holiday options need planning in advance and include extended after-school clubs, leisure centres, outdoor activity centres and schools offering all day activity days.

For older children, opportunities as helpers or mentors in kids clubs offer good experience.

It is important to establish and maintain strong support networks with friends, neighbours and other parents through ante-natal groups to establish support and emergency care options.

Local day nurseries can also be helpful in emergencies even if you aren't a regular client.

CHECKLIST

Use this list to chart your progress.

- Make your CV your top priority. Use some of the many free resources to get it right.
- Do a SWOT analysis.
- Hunt down courses for returners.
- Get a mentor.
- Look into bursaries and work placement schemes.
- Think about your work-life balance and life-salary balance.
- Get childcare firmly sorted out.



*Samantha: 'Show employers
you're serious.'*

CASE STUDY

ENHANCING THE CV

A long break from full-time work created barriers when Samantha Wallace started looking for a job back in IT – so she boosted her skills and CV with everything from a PRINCE2 project management course to helping at her children's school.

Samantha had worked in software development for 13 years, progressing from graduate trainee to team leader, and left work in 2001 after her twins were born. She then took a part-time contract at a software firm and when that ended she became a part-time maths tutor.

Later she became treasurer of the school's parents' association, keeping the books and getting involved in selling advertisements in the annual school fair programme.

'This helped me keep up my skills in organising and motivating people,' she says.

She also worked as a volunteer at the school, doing everything from helping children read to putting up displays.

'I'd always intended that my break would be temporary and that I wouldn't give up my career altogether,' Samantha says.

'When I started looking at returning to a permanent job I noticed that many job ads asked for PRINCE2 experience. Through a friend who had also taken a career break I discovered Equalitec, which supports women trying to return to a career in ITEC, and found that it would provide a self-study PRINCE2 Foundation Certificate course and pay for the exam.'

At the same time Samantha took on the Open University's free 10-week T160 course for women returners in

science, engineering and technology; this starts with a tutorial and continues with online materials and discussion, plus assignments and email or phone support from a tutor.

‘The course helped me focus my mind and think about things you might skim over,’ she says. ‘I’d thought about practicalities like childcare and travelling but the course also made you think about the possible impact on your family, and how to avoid feeling guilty if you weren’t there if the children needed you.’

Samantha had kept up with networking, staying in touch with friends from work and in particular with a former manager who was willing to provide references. She also started attending specialist IT events.

At the same time she joined a mentoring circle run by Equalitec, which provided yet more support.

‘All these different things – the courses, the mentoring

circle, the networking, the voluntary work – help to boost your self-confidence and show potential employers that you’re serious about developing your skills and knowledge and getting back to work,’ Samantha says. ‘Having such things on your CV differentiates you and shows that you’re someone with commitment and initiative.’



GETTING BACK INTO WORK

Returning to work after a career break is bound to be nerve-racking.

You've been away from the daily routine of choosing office wear, catching the 7:14, confidently using your knowledge and technical skills and holding your own in project meetings.

But remember that you've organised a school fete or braved terrorists in far-flung places, developed new skills in bringing up a family, and held your own in networking conversations at BCS events.

RETURNING TO YOUR EMPLOYER

If you're returning to the same employer, talk to the human resources department and your line manager as

early as possible. You might want to discuss flexible working, home working, part-time working, refresher training or retraining.

Be realistic: not all jobs can be done from home or part-time, for example. Be prepared to justify your requests. But also make sure you are aware of your legal rights (see the Resources section).

A NEW JOB

Looking for a new job with a new employer can be even more nerve-racking – but also exciting, given the huge range of opportunities available through job websites, including a service on the BCS website. A useful publication here is *Finding a Job on the Internet*. The relevant sections in *Enhancing Your Employability* and *The Art of Building Windmills* are also good.

Direct approaches to local organisations, job agencies and your own networking contacts might also lead to

potential jobs. Don't forget your local job centre and national website.

GOING FREELANCE

You might consider contracting as a freelancer: the careers section of the BCS website offers advice. Let all your contacts know you are now ready to return to work and would appreciate any jobs leads they may encounter.

GETTING THAT JOB

Numerous books and websites on getting a job are available: again the BCS website careers section and the BCSWomen Specialist Group website provide good, concise advice.

This is a time when using a careers advisor can be invaluable. An advisor can objectively assess your CV and covering letter, help you prepare for interviews and

ensure that your action plan includes what to do if you DON'T get the job your heart is set on. You need to keep planning, with an ultimate goal in mind and strategies to get you there. This is the best way to build and maintain your self confidence.

Basic issues include:

- The need for a good covering letter to go with your CV, tailored to the specific job and company.
- The need to be accurate – and to follow the instructions – when completing application forms.
- Interview preparation, including researching the company and its industry.
- Preparation for interview questions with your answers showing examples of your successes where appropriate.

- Interview rehearsal with friends or a mentor.
- Presenting yourself smartly, punctually and confidently on the day.
- Body language, including eye contact, keeping your hands calmly in your lap, avoiding fidgeting.

Prepare questions that you want to ask, too. You might want to ask about training, company policies that cover flexibility and general working practices such as flexible and home working.

Increasingly, competence based application forms and interviewing are used. Such application forms can take a great deal of effort to complete, especially in the first instance before you have built up your own competency file. However, investing the effort can pay dividends as it is an excellent opportunity for you to sell yourself to a potential employer.

LOTS TO OFFER

You might think you are at a disadvantage, having been away from work, but consider all the extra skills and benefits you can now offer. Your break might be bringing you back to work refreshed and with new enthusiasm. You have gained a much broader experience of life, and extra maturity. If you now have children you might be less likely to move home and leave the company, or to job-hop. This potential for loyalty is a good selling point during the interview process.

DON'T BE MODEST

Don't be afraid of applying for a job even if you don't apparently meet all the criteria. Women are more reticent than men here – and many employers don't expect you to meet more than 70 per cent of the criteria.

CHECKLIST

Use this list to chart your progress.

- Talk to your employer's human resources department and your line manager as early as possible.
- Be realistic in your requests.
- Explore all possible sources for a new job.
- Consider going freelance as a contractor.
- Look at the BCS and other free resources for advice on applying for jobs.
- Be accurate and truthful in your application.
- Prepare for the interview by researching the company and thinking about questions your might be asked.
- Think about all the ways you have developed during

your break, and the benefits of employing a more rounded and refreshed person.

- Don't be afraid of applying for a job even if you don't meet all the stated criteria.

FLEXIBILITY

If you are returning to the same employer, talk to them about flexibility options. Increasingly, employers (small and large) employ a wide range of working styles that vary from the old eight hours, five days a week. Options include the nine day fortnight, shifted hours, condensed hours, stretched hours, term time only, home working, teleworking, remote working and many other creative schemes. These all recognise that people have different needs and demands on their time.

Examples and case studies are available in *Time Lords the Equal Opportunities 2007* report.

GET YOUR SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN PLACE

Can you juggle work, commuting, a social life and all your caring and household responsibilities?

Consider buying in domestic help.

Take recommendations from your networks or use professional companies.



RESOURCES

IT people considering or on career breaks have many support sources available.

This section lists just some of them.

GENERAL SUPPORT FOR WOMEN IN IT

BCSWomen networking group

www.bcs.org/bcswomen

Equalitec

www.equalitec.org.uk

European Association for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology

www.witec-eu.net

Intellect Women in IT Forum

www.intellect.org.uk

RETURN The UK National campaign for returning to SET careers

www.setwomenresource.org.uk/careers

UK Resource Centre for Women in SET

www.setwmenresource.org.uk

Where Women want to Work helps women research and compare large, progressive companies and apply for jobs directly

www.wheretowork.com/women

Wise Campaign

www.wisecampaign.org.uk/returners.html

Women Returner's Network

www.women-returners.co.uk

Women and Equality Unit

www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/research

Womenintechology.co.uk is an on-line job board for women working in the IT profession in the UK.

www.womenintechology.co.uk/content_static/home.asp

MENTORING AND COACHING SERVICES AND ROLE MODELS

Coaching and Mentoring Network

www.coachingnetwork.org.uk

Inova Consultancy Mentoring Circles

www.inovaconsult.com

Talking Talent coaching and support through the tricky return to work times.

www.talking-talent.co.uk

MentorSET UK based mentoring service for women

www.mentorset.org.uk

UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology

www.setwomenresource.org.uk

UK Database of Women Experts in SET

www.setwomenexpertsuk.org.uk

MentorNet US based mentoring for students

www.mentornet.net

BOOKS AND PAMPHLETS

Returning to IT: employment and development after a career break in the United Kingdom.

www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-25439799_ITM

Overcoming the Career Break: a positive approach.

Published by UMIST, Women At Work Unit, Manchester (1986)

Returning Women: their training and employment choices and needs by Veronica McGivney. (2001)

What Colour is Your Parachute? by R. Bolles.
Ten Speed Press. (2005)

Build Your Own Rainbow by B.Hopson and M.Scally
1995. Management Books. (2000)

Enhancing Your Employability by Roderic Ashley.
How to Books. (1999)

The Art of Building Windmills: career tactics for the 21st Century by Dr Peter Hawkins. Graduate into Employment Unit. (1999)

Women In The IT Industry: Phase 2 Research How To Retain Women In The IT Industry.
Department Of Trade And Industry (2005)
www.berr.gov.uk/files/file9335.pdf

Best Practice in Career-Break Management.
Institute of Physics (2006).
www.iop.org/activity/diversity

Examining the potential for women returners to work in areas of high occupational gender segregation.
Tomlinson, J. et al. (2005) Manchester: University of Manchester.
www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/publications/women_returners_dtinov2005.pdf

What women want
www.computing.co.uk/computing/analysis/2172750/women

TRAINING

Learndirect

www.learndirect.co.uk

Open University Course T160: Science, Engineering and Technology: A Course for Women Returners

www3.open.ac.uk/courses/bin/p12.dll?C02T160

The Daphne Jackson Trust helps people return to a research career in science or engineering careers by helping them update their knowledge and gain research experience

www.daphnejackson.org

WEA (Workers Education Association)

Local WEAs often run self help, presentation, confidence building and assertiveness courses.

These can get you over the first hurdles of going for interviews and speaking to potential employers.

Local university or FE college

It is worth checking with your local university or FE college as they often offer useful courses in their continuing education or adult part-time prospectus.

RIGHTS AND BENEFITS

HM Revenue & Customs

www.hmrc.gov.uk

Commission for Equality and Human Rights

www.cehr.org.uk

Women & Equality Unit

www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk

ChildcareLINK

www.childcarelink.gov.uk

VOLUNTEERING

Volunteer bureaux and centres hold a database of local volunteering opportunities. These can be considerable and varied.

IT Can Help formed through the BCS Disability Group
www.itcanhelp.org.uk

iT4Communities
www.it4communities.org.uk

vinspired
www.vinspired.com

do-it!
www.do-it.org.uk

PRACTICAL ADVICE ON CVS, INTERVIEWS, GETTING A JOB

BCS wide-ranging advice available from the BCS
www.bcs.org/careers

BCS Women's Forum provides advice and other support, including a discussion area, for women in IT in general and returners in particular
www.bcs.org/forums/women

BCSWomen Specialist Group has information on CVs, including a CV review service, job application letters, and getting a job
www.bcs.org/bcswomen

BCS CareerBuilder this online service enables members to maintain career details and review skills against the enhanced BCS version of the national Skills Framework for the Information Age
www.bcs.org/careerbuilder

CAREERS SERVICES AND CONNEXIONS OFFICES

There are local offices in most towns, which, although created to help young people, may give you access to library resources and information. Some Connexions services may be able to offer career guidance help for adults. This varies across the country. In Wales there is still a free all-age service. New government plans may see a return to this formula in England – read recent parliamentary debates.

Job centre plus

Offers a variety of job vacancies via its website. This is worth using for their advisory help and knowledge of local jobs market. If you sign on – even if it is only for your NI contributions – you can use their touch screen job search facilities and find out about local recruitment events etc. Job centre staff are often

very helpful, although they may also be very busy. Staff are able to signpost to local organisations offering job search help in local area: help with CVs, skills assessment and specialist help (if, for example you have a mental or physical disability).

'nextstep' contractors

These are nationwide centres offering career information, advice and guidance funded by the Learning and Skills Council. You can usually access at least one guidance interview. The government is planning to make these services more comprehensive so that more help is available – keep your eyes and ears open for announcements.

LearnDirect

Offers a wide range of services from telephone based careers advice and web based skills assessment tools to courses delivered through local training providers.

www.learndirect-advice.co.uk

OTHER LOCAL SOURCES OF HELP (NETWORKING, TRAINING, INFORMATION)

Business Link

If you are considering setting up your own business, Business Link can be very helpful. It is government funded and offers practical advice on areas such as business start up. After the initial consultation sessions are charged. www.businesslink.gov.uk

Chambers of Commerce

This is another potentially useful point of contact for meeting local businessmen and women and keeping in touch with local industrial and commercial news and events.

Trade Unions

If you belong to a union, particularly one of the large ones such as UNISON or NALGO, they can be another source of networking opportunities, information and possibly training for their members.

Libraries

As well as the obvious information on local events, societies and reference and IT facilities, libraries can sometimes have specialist magazines and reference sections.

University libraries are good sources of information on local companies. There may also be published research papers relevant to your own interest areas. Keeping abreast of developments and research in the field can make a big difference at interviews.

Don't forget KOMPASS for company information before you go for an interview.

CHILD CARE

The Daycare Trust www.daycaretrust.org.uk

Local authority early years team for a list of local registered childcare providers.

Libraries

Parentsonline

www.parents.org.uk

The Children's Society, Childalert directory

www.childalert.co.uk/directory.asp

National Childbirth Trust

www.nct.org.uk

Surestart Childcare Approval Scheme

www.childcareapprovalscheme.co.uk

Childcare Vouchers information

www.4children.org.uk

ELDERCARE

Help the Aged

www.helptheaged.org.uk



SWOT ANALYSIS

The SWOT analysis technique is a useful tool when planning your next career steps as it helps you identify your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and the threats or barriers you face.

STRENGTHS

Bring out your strengths by asking yourself questions such as:

- What was your motivation for an IT career?
- Do you have a clear vision of the organisational level at which you plan to return?
 - What role do you aspire to?
- What are your most notable achievements and successes and to what do you attribute them?

- How do your experiences and accomplishments during your career break add to the strengths you can offer an employer?
- What skills, knowledge and experience can you offer an employer?
 - What business competencies can you offer an employer?
 - What do you do really well that could give you a competitive edge?
 - What positive behaviours do you typically exhibit?
 - Do you have an effective professional network?

By answering these questions your strengths might emerge as: strong motivation; relevant academic and other qualifications; relevant role and industry sector experience; business competencies such as creativity, good communication skills, teamwork, leadership

qualities and influencing and negotiation skills; personal characteristics which might include an active learning approach, self-management, ability to assimilate new skills / materials, ability to meet deadlines, attention to detail; an effective professional network; active BCS membership; work and career flexibility.

WEAKNESSES

- Is your motivation for returning to IT clear?
- Are you ready to return?
- Do you lack any academic or professional qualifications for the field you are targeting?
- Are the qualifications you have outdated?

Are your business competencies weak?

- Do you lack recent work experience in the field to which you wish to return?

- Do you have a full understanding of what is required when performing the type of role you are targeting?
- Are your professional or employment aspirations low with respect to your capabilities?
- Do you have the relevant industry experience?
- What were the root causes of your least successful activities?
- Do you believe you exhibit behaviours which could inhibit your job search?

Your weaknesses might include: lack of recent work experience; insufficient / outdated qualifications: lack of recent job-hunting experience; lack of relevant technical knowledge; lack of understanding of what your targeted role involves; the inability to work effectively as part of a team; poor planning skills; creaky communication skills; weak job-hunting skills; lack of confidence; low

aspirations; lack of support from family and friends; lack of confidence, poor self-discipline, prevarication and an unwillingness to put yourself forward.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Where are the promising prospects for you?
- What training and education could you undertake to increase your opportunities?
- Have you looked widely enough to identify all the options?
- Are you doing everything possible to enhance your prospects?
- Are there any new challenges in your immediate environment that aren't obvious because they are out of your comfort zone? Eg new business opportunities.
- Are you gaining optimum benefit from your BCS

membership and any other professional memberships?

- Are you missing out on potential opportunities through not being aware of all options?

Opportunities might include:

- Growth in your field, resulting in more jobs and increased advancement prospects.
- Public sector IT spending growth, such as in health informatics and e-government.
- Courses leading to additional qualifications in your field.
- Strong professional support networks in your area.
- Strong personal support networks and childcare in your area.
- Gaining an increased understanding of recruitment processes and employability criteria.

- Awareness of further options through the reading of trade press and attending networking events.
- Geographical location and transport links increasing the distance you can travel without increasing your commute time.
- Changes in government policy with respect to diversity (eg legislation with respect to age discrimination).

THREATS AND BARRIERS

- Have the requirements for your targeted role changed significantly since you last looked?
- Are there trends that may decrease openings in your field?
- Do advancements in your area of expertise make it difficult for you to compete with other jobseekers without further training?

- Could your work area lead to conflict with your new work-life balance targets?
- Will an employer provide enough flexibility, retraining or other support to help you re-establish and advance your career?

Examination of such questions might highlight negative trends in your field, for example: competition from new graduates and other job seekers leading to supply outstripping demand; competition from others more suited to the roles you are targeting; others with greater awareness of effective job search; limited opportunities for part-time and flexible working or your desired work-life balance; inadequate child care in your area.

An honest SWOT analysis can identify strengths you can promote to prospective employers, and highlight threats and weaknesses you need to work on.

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Equalitec

Equalitec is an initiative of Portia, the not-for-profit organisation whose purpose is the advancement of women in science, engineering and technology. Equalitec focuses on the opportunities in information technology, electronics and communications (ITEC). Equalitec is a partnership of 70 organisations and is part funded by the European Social Fund. www.equalitec.org.uk

Intellect

Intellect is the UK trade association for the IT, telecoms and electronics industries. Its members account for over 80% of these markets, including blue-chip multinationals and early stage technology companies. These industries generate about 10% of UK GDP and 15% of UK trade.

Recruiting and retaining experienced women in our industry is fundamental to the future competitiveness of the UK and its IT industry. www.intellectuk.org

The British Computer Society

BCS is the leading professional body for the IT industry. We are committed to delivering an inclusive profession that is good for women and better for all. With members in over 100 countries, BCS is the professional and learned Society in computers and information systems.

BCS is responsible for setting standards for the IT profession. It is also leading the change in public perception and appreciation of the economic and social importance of professionally managed IT projects and programmes. In this capacity, the Society advises, informs and persuades industry and government on successful IT implementation.

BCSWomen Specialist Group

BCS is proud of the commitment and support offered to its women members by this active specialist group.

www.bcs.org/bcswomen

Joining BCS

BCS qualifications, products and services are designed with your career plans in mind. We provide essential recognition through professional qualifications and many other benefits to our members at every level.

BCS Membership demonstrates your commitment to professional development. It helps to set you apart from other IT practitioners and provides industry recognition of your skills and experience.

Employers and customers increasingly require proof of professional qualifications and competence. Professional membership confirms your competence and integrity and sets an independent standard that people can trust.

Professional Membership (MBCS) is the pathway to Chartered IT Professional (CITP) Status.

www.bcs.org/membership

NOTES

Building a profession that is good for women and better for all



THE BRITISH COMPUTER SOCIETY

NORTH STAR HOUSE, NORTH STAR AVENUE, SWINDON, SN2 1FA, UK

TEL: (UK) 0845 300 4417 TEL: (Overseas) +44 (0)1793 417 424 FAX: +44 (0)1793 417 444

CUSTOMER SERVICE: www.bcs.org/contact WEBSITE: www.bcs.org

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