

Hazards of taking a career break

Women returning to work after a long gap face most problems

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CHENNAI: Sujatha Ramesh (34), an IT engineer by profession, took a break from the job seven years ago to raise her child. Recently, having decided to come back, she found the wait amid a group of young graduates at a job fair quite an experience. "Competing with people abreast of the latest technology and armed with so many extra certifications makes me feel a little uncomfortable, but I cannot give it up like that," she says.

Constraints

She is also apprehensive about making the right decisions if she gets selected. "There will be constraints on both my side and the employer's. While I am willing to compromise on the domain of work or the pay packet, I will not do so with designation, location or the work timings," she says.

Changing human resource policies, supportive families and facilities such as day care centres enable women employees in the city to rise through the ranks and manage home and office. However, many women employees feel that though most growth opportunities are favourable to them as long as they are

- Many software engineers are offered only jobs in software testing when they return
- Use the break to clear certifications or pursue correspondence courses

working there, it is not easy for them to return after a break. While those with experience in finance, trade or legal matters find many takers, the ones in customer servicing, HR and IT find few jobs that suit their requirements.

Shamina Ansari, a designer at an ad agency, says: "I was a graphic designer ten years ago. Now when I return, I find so many changes. Companies prefer training young people on certain tools rather than investing in us," she says.

Testing times

Many software engineers are offered only jobs in software testing when they return. "It all depends on how long the break was. Women who have lost touch with coding or language syntax cannot be offered important positions straightway. They need to settle down, start work with documentation or fix bugs, and over time, prove their commitment to learn and stay," says Abhirami Ranjit, recruitment and hiring professional.

Kalyani Venkataraman, an HR consultant at an IT company, however disagrees. With companies losing more young employees every year, it has become convenient for them to recruit women who come back, she feels. "Candidates who perform promisingly and have excellent track records are always welcome," she says.

The scenario in jobs associated with customer service is no different. "At least in IT, there is respect for the qualification, for us it is just the experience. If you quit with less than three years of experience, you can not expect to join with a better designation," says Janani Suresh, an employee with a tele-marketing firm.

"And families often are not comfortable with women working in front-end offices, especially after marriage," she adds.

Not prepared?

Saundarya Rajesh, president, Avtar I-win, a forum that caters to the employ-

ment concerns of women, says that while over 18 per cent of women quit the IT industry annually never to come back, many of those who return are not mentally prepared.

"Some join and lose focus midway affecting their performance," she says. Nearly 30,000 women who wish to return to work after a break of seven to 10 years are registered in the forum.

A solution, says Neeraja Ramnath, an HR manager, who has taken several short breaks in her career, is to make sure women upgrade their skills while on a break. "Clearing certifications, or correspondence course makes up for the lost time and adds value to the resume," she says.

Another option is an associated work profile, says B. Kalai Selvi, a former programmer, who is now a technical writer.

Companies lose many 'asset employees' and with them goes waste the over Rs.1 lakh spent on training an employee.

"Day care centres and work-from-home facilities are provided to ensure that more women flock to the industry and make up for the attrition rate," says Ms. Kalyani Venkataraman.