

Next Act for Women

- Now What?

Women Reinventing Themselves in Midlife

Let's Hear From an Expert: Mary Beth Barrett-Newman of 2nd Career Consulting

Encore Career, Second Career, Coaching and Counseling

Tell us about some of the midlife women you work with at 2nd Career Consulting.

I work with women covering a wide variety of ages, education, and interests. While there is no "typical client," they tend to average in age from late 30s to the 50s, have a college education, and have previously worked in a professional capacity for a number of years before taking a career break.



The reasons for returning to the workforce and what they are looking for vary. Some are returning due to increased financial demands like saving for their children's college education, a reduction in a spouse's income, or a change in marital status. For many, however, they have always planned to return to work, want to be a good role

model for their children, or would like to get paid for the "pro bono" work they have done in volunteer roles.

What challenges do these women face that might be different from younger women or women who have been in the workforce all along?

The two biggest challenges I see clients face are technology and self-confidence.

Technology is moving at warp speed and if you haven't stayed up-to-date with some of the basics, that can be a big hurdle to reentering the workforce. What you need to know will depend upon the position and industry. Taking classes is a good start, but you also need to have used the technology! For those who find themselves in this position, I suggest doing some "strategic volunteering" where they are able to do things like create Excel spreadsheets, newsletters and mail merges in Word, etc.

Lack of self-confidence is another area that I see impacting a successful return to work. If you don't believe in yourself, no one else will. It's not unusual for someone to tell me they haven't done anything during the years they've been home. I always joke that there really aren't any Stay-at-Home-Moms (SAHM) because they're never at home. While they might not have been paid for the work they've done, many have created fundraising campaigns, planned large nonprofit events, managed sizable groups of volunteers, done freelance work, etc. They need to value these experiences.

What mistakes do you see these women making? What advantages do they have that they may not realize?



Some of the mistakes I've seen women make include undervaluing their abilities, both in terms of compensation, the value they bring to an organization, and not having a focus in terms of the types of positions they are seeking. I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone say, "I can do anything." Well, sadly no they can't, AND there are no "anything" jobs. This applies to anyone looking for a new position. You need to be focused on the types of positions that you're interested in and qualified for, and be able to put the equal sign between your skills and experience and what the employer is looking for.

One other mistake they make is not tapping into their network. Like the saying "it takes a village to raise a child," I believe it takes a village to find a job. So let your network know you're returning to work and use your village!

There are many advantages that these women bring to the workforce. Some of these include maturity, which shouldn't be discounted. I guarantee the way you will deal with a difficult customer situation at age 50 versus age 25 is worlds apart. More mature women typically want to stay at an organization longer than a younger colleague, don't have unrealistic expectations to be promoted in 12 months and, since they've been out of the workforce for a while, are really excited to go to work.

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How do you help them find their way, when they may not know what they wish to do?

For those unsure of what they'd like to do next, I use a three-prong approach that includes a variety of assessment work. In addition to the standard, career focused assessments like Myers-Briggs® and Strong Interest Inventory®, I have them do some self-assessment or introspection, thinking through likes and dislikes of various jobs and volunteer positions. The final step involves getting outside opinions about their strengths and skills—others are frequently able to see us (and our strengths) better than we see ourselves.

While the majority of my clients are in the Chicago area, I've worked with a number of clients across the country as well—I work both in person and via phone. For most clients finding a coach that is "a fit" is more important than location.

What resources do you recommend to women wishing to return to work after a long absence?

There are a number of great resources out there and I strongly encourage clients to use as many as they can.

- [iRelaunch](#) is a website that is focused exclusively on women returning to the workforce.
- [Back on the Career Track: A Guide for Stay-at-Home Moms Who Want to Return to Work](#) by Carol Fishman Cohen and Vivian Steir Rabin, [iRelaunch](#) co-founders
- Your University Alumni Career Services—many universities have wonderful resources for alumni to tap into, including workshops, job postings, and networking opportunities, including some events exclusively focused on women returning to work.
- [100 Conversations for Career Success: Learn to Network, Cold Call, and Tweet Your Way to Your Dream Job](#) by Laura M. Labovich and Miriam Salpeter—a practical resource providing many scripts that can be used in a job search.



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