



How to Jump Back into Work After a Leave

WHETHER YOU TOOK TIME TO HAVE A BABY OR CARE FOR A PARENT, THE TRANSITION CAN BE STRESSFUL. HERE'S HOW TO EASE IN.

By Maggie Puniewska

**Let your partner,
kids, and new
caregivers pitch in.
Remember you don't
have to do it all
yourself.**

IT'S NO EASY feat to return to the office after an extended absence. Think of how much time you need to get back in the groove after a three-day weekend—now multiply that by...a lot! During your leave, you were likely figuring out a new role, like parent or caregiver, and it's possible things have changed in the office too. You might have new colleagues, a different boss, an additional set of responsibilities—possibly even a work space that looks more like a coffee shop than any office you've worked in. Navigating all these adjustments can create a lot of uncertainty; even seasoned employees can feel like the new kid. No matter why you left or where you left off, here's what you can do to return with confidence.

Check in before you return.

A week or two in advance, if your company allows it, call or meet with your supervisor and any coworkers who covered for you. What changed while you were away? What is your boss's vision of your role now? "Setting clear expectations about your priorities for the first day, week, and month back can ease the pressure of thinking you need to tackle everything you missed right away," says Jenna Hess, a career coach in Chicago. Alert your boss to any non-work-related responsibilities you'll have (like pumping or taking an ailing parent to doctor's appointments) and ask how best to handle them.

**Prep for questions
about your absence.**

Coworkers might be curious about your time off. If you were on family or medical leave, consider what you're comfortable sharing so you're not caught off guard by questions, says Hess. Practice a polite and concise response, such as a friendly "Thank you so much for asking, but I'm just not ready to talk about that right now." Fill in closer work friends during coffee breaks to minimize desk-side check-ins those first few days, and ask for their discretion around other colleagues.

If you're reentering the workforce after years away, don't feel pressured to overexplain—whether you are interviewing or have landed the job. Just say you were gone for *x* number of years to do *y*, then pivot to what you've done to prepare yourself and how your previous experience relates to the new role, says Jennifer Gefsky, cofounder of *Après*, a company that helps women return to the workforce, and coauthor of *Your Turn: Careers, Kids, and Comebacks*.

**Work out a new
routine—early.**

A few weeks before your restart date, get the family together to discuss how things will change for them and for you, says Hess. Tell everyone your work hours, the best times to reach you, the best way to get in touch (text or call or email?), and how you prefer to handle both nonurgent and emergency situations. "Let your partner, kids, and new caregivers pitch in. Remember you don't have to do it all yourself," says Henna Pryor, an executive coach in Philadelphia.

Ideally, your first day back won't be the first time your elderly parent stays with an aide or your kid goes to day-care. Book good, reliable caregivers as early as possible and do a few trial runs. Practice getting ready, commuting, and leaving the house for longer stretches. (It's the perfect excuse to meet a friend or squeeze in an exercise class.) Follow up with family and caregivers after the first week of the new routine, and then a month later, to see how everyone—including you—is doing.

**Brush up on news
and technology.**

Things can change around the office in just a few weeks—new rules or regulations might kick in, the software you've mastered might be phased out. Build confidence by getting up-to-date on industry news and trends, says Pryor. Check out your company's website, professional

organizations, and trade journals for the latest info. Find out about office tech too: New employees should review any tools they'll regularly use; returnees can ask about changes to the ones they're familiar with. Online tutorials or a close coworker can bring you up to speed.

Make it a short week.

Try to return on a Wednesday or Thursday. Working only a few days (with the promise of a weekend) feels less daunting than committing to a five-day stretch. "Midweek is typically slower, so colleagues may be able to

carve out more time to answer questions," says Regan Walsh, an executive coach in Columbus, Ohio. Avoid scheduling big meetings or presentations your first few days back. An important event can mean more things to prep for, and the transition to work already puts a lot on your plate.

Stick to a flex-time schedule.

Returning employees may be able to work part-time or remotely their first few weeks or months back. If that's you, set clear boundaries with your team so they know what your

schedule is. When Dana Hundley, cofounder of Career Cooperative, a career consulting firm based in Oakland, California, returned from maternity leave, she clocked out at 3 p.m. every day. At 2 p.m., she would check in with colleagues, remind them she was leaving soon, and ask if she needed to address anything urgent. "I didn't make any exceptions to this rule," she says. "This helped everyone adjust to the new schedule more quickly than they might have if it was sporadic."

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