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Five ways to stay professionally relevant when taking time off

By [Ruth Mantell](#), MarketWatch
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WASHINGTON (MarketWatch) -- After she had her first daughter, Melanie Reinersman took a year off of work. But she didn't let go of her professional self.

Instead, Reinersman used her career-counselor skills to volunteer at a local church and with nonprofits. Reinersman's strategy was a smart one, experts say, because volunteer work is a top method for caregivers who leave full-time work to stay relevant in today's job market.

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"I was able to say that I was keeping up my skills through volunteer work," said Reinersman, who is now the Web site editor for the National Career Development Association.

Especially during these tough economic times, those who give up full-time jobs to take care of kids or sick family members will do themselves a favor if they work at keeping up with the latest

developments in their field, experts say.

1. Volunteer with a purpose

Caregivers should look for volunteer work in their professional field, said Allison O'Kelly, chief executive and founder of Mom Corps, a staffing firm that specializes in flexible employment.

"There are things that people can do through volunteer work so that in a few years they have a résumé that still looks current, even if they haven't been in the paid work force," O'Kelly said.

Lois Frankel, author of "Nice Girls Don't Get The Corner Office" and "Nice Girls Don't Get Rich," said caregivers can volunteer in ways that keep their skills sharp.

"Say you are in finance. Go to a nonprofit and volunteer to help develop budgets for them. That's a higher level of order," Frankel said.

2. Network

Those who leave the full-time work force should try to maintain their networks, Frankel said.

"It can be very isolating to take care of kids or the elderly. And if you let your network entirely go it will be very difficult to get back into the job network when you're ready," Frankel said.

She suggested that caretakers attend meetings of professional organizations or join a nonprofit board.

"You can keep your network and stay relevant. It's a great way to get out of the house," Frankel said. "There are so many nonprofit organizations that need the skills of women who are ramping off for awhile. It's a great way to

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stay connected, make a difference in your community and to keep your skills up."

Caretakers looking for part-time work can also benefit from even casual networking, O'Kelly said.

"Just get out and talk to friends or acquaintances, to let them know that you are looking for something with flexibility," O'Kelly said. "Some companies are not interested in finding a full-time employee they have to give benefits to. So if someone wants to work part time they might be a more attractive candidate."

3. Keep up with technology

Depending on your field, technology can change quickly and it can be important to make sure you are current.

"You have to be very careful to stay abreast of technology. You can do this as easily as going to Apple stores and looking to see what's out there. Check out blogs," Frankel said.

Caregivers can take classes and work on home projects such as building a Web site, experts recommend.

"If you are in a technical field, you need to maintain your skills," O'Kelly said. "Find out what the newest things are and make sure you are not dated. Make sure you are using skills you need to be using to keep your skills up to date and your brain active."

4. Work out your body and mind

Mary Melchior had triplet boys, and found that she had to mentally prepare for returning to the work force after taking off several years.

"It was a big culture shift," said Melchior, who is now director of direct marketing for the National Organization for Women. "I just had to start thinking that my kids were not going to be driving me to wake up, but going to work was. No more being in pajamas until it was convenient for me to shower and change."

While caregivers can be swamped by their responsibilities, Frankel said it is important for them to stay physically and mentally fit.

"Once you start wearing sweats around the house it's very easy to let yourself go, and when you do you wind up not feeling as good about yourself, and you won't want to go to meetings," Frankel said.

5. Look for flexibility

A flexible work arrangement can be a good option for workers who need a break from their full-time schedule, O'Kelly said. Caregivers can start off by asking employers about telecommuting and other at-home work opportunities, she said.

"Sometimes people assume there is nothing available. But for awhile now employers have done [telecommuting] for their top performers. It's easier than it has been because of technology," O'Kelly said. "A lot large companies now have it set up so that somebody can be a customer-service representative from their home." ■

Ruth Mantell is a MarketWatch reporter based in Washington.

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