

RETURNING TO WORK

From baby to boardroom

Help is at hand for mothers who want to get back to the office, writes **Kim Kind**.

Ann-Marie Egger realised it was time for her to go back to work when she noticed she was doing more than her fair share of tuck-shop duty.

After eight years at home looking after her children, the mother of two felt her time had come to re-enter the workforce.

"I needed to have a bit of a life outside this community where I am a mum and everyone sees me as the mum down the road," she says.

"I walk into the school and they say: 'Can you work the canteen this week?'"

Egger isn't alone. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2006 social trends study, less than half of mothers with a child under five (45 per cent) work, yet almost three-quarters (71 per cent) of those with a youngest child between 10 and 14 have a paid job.

Emma Walsh, a mother of three-year-old twins, is also the founder and director of Mums @ Work, a provider of return-to-work services for parents and employers.

She says a number of services have appeared in the past five years to help mums such as Egger get back in the workforce.

Her website provides a free resume appraisal service, return-to-work checklist and a job-hunting tips column.

"It really gives [mums] the key things they need to think about and follow," Walsh says.

She also advises mums to contact their former industry association to enquire about courses and skills refreshing.

This is exactly what Egger, a former dialysis nurse, did. She contacted her local nurses'

association and was directed to a program designed to help former nurses return to a nursing career.

"Initially I'll be working two days a week... under supervision by another staff member," she says. "Ten weeks will take me through the course and at the end I'll slot into a position."

Kate Sykes, the founder of Careermums.com.au, a job board and careers centre for working parents, hears from many women who have been out of the workforce for years and don't know where to start.

"The first thing we say is: 'Is your resume up to date?'" she says.

"A lot of women say: 'Oh, I haven't looked at that for years.' And we say: 'Well, get it out and start looking at it.'"

Sykes, who has three young children of her own, says mothers often worry about the gap in their resume and fear they have "nothing to say for the past five years because [they've] just been a parent".

Not so, she says. "Parenting is by far the hardest job you'll ever have in your life."

Sykes advises women to look at all the different things they have done while "at home" and translate them into "work speak".

Tuck-shop duty is an example. "It's customer service, you've handled money, worked in a team," she says. "That's 'work speak' and that's what [employers] want to hear."

Sykes also emphasises the importance of staying in touch by reading the newspaper.

"[Stay-at-home mums] often completely disconnect from any kind of business world... you have to get back in with the lingo of what's going on in your relevant industry," she says.

"Start talking the talk, go to industry trade shows and networking functions. You might just pick up a lead."

Sykes says job seekers often undervalue the powerful network of family and friends.

"Email 100 people and say: 'Hey guys, I'm looking to get back into work. This is the type of role that I'm looking for. Can you pass my name around and see if you know someone that might be interested in taking me on a couple of days a week to start with,'" Sykes says.

Mother-of-three Betina Perrignon found a part-time job

this way. After eight years at home she had begun telling friends that she felt ready to go back to work.

When one of them landed a position at a real estate agent, she asked Perrignon if she would like to join the job share.

"I had been doing up houses and had enjoyed it and was worried that when I finished I wouldn't know what to do with myself," she says.

"Then this opportunity came up in real estate and property, which is something I'm interested in, so I took it.

"I knew it was a job that I'm very capable of doing so it hasn't been stressful. It's a really good starting point and it will allow me to work out what I want to do next."

And for those mums nervous about taking that first step back into the workforce, Walsh has this advice: "Having to negotiate, deal with conflict, manage time, organise and plan and multitask. Those are all everyday chores [parents] often manage in a sleep-deprived state.

"So if you can do that, you can certainly take those skills back into the workplace.

"And as they say, there are a lot of children in the workplace."

LINKS

careermums.com.au,
mumsatwork.com.au,
workathomemums.com.au,
nine2three.com.au.

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