

# Taking a Career Break

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It will probably not surprise you that there is a “workaholics” Web site. Given today’s corporate climate and the pace of change in the marketplace, people are working harder than ever before. In early 2007, MSNBC published an article about more and more workers “opting out of the rat race.” And while this is certainly not a new phenomenon, it does seem like the number of people seeking a break from unrelenting work is growing.

The questions to consider are: *Do I need just a short work break, say, a long weekend? Do I need to take an extended break? Do I need to consider an entirely new career?*

Obviously, these questions frame three different problems:

1. Some people just need a few extra days of rest to recharge their personal batteries.
2. Some people need a time of extended rest and a period for new learning, or at least a period to reflect on one’s work and life—a sabbatical.
3. Some people have reached a major burnout stage and need to redirect their lives.

This article is aimed at people in the second category, people who need a career break without the prospect of changing careers entirely. A career break is a period away from the usual working role and its routine, and there are many reasons to consider taking one. A new parental role is the most common reason, but study, travel, trying out a business idea, or caring for a sick relative are other priorities that trigger people to spend an extended period away from work.

Sometimes the only reason you need is that you are feeling overwhelmed by your work. Stress and pressure, office politics, and turbulent periods of upheaval can all make people look for a change of scene, to get back in touch with their core values and maintain their health.

Happily, in today’s work world, companies are more likely to look on career breaks favorably rather than losing the investment already made in training and development and job experience. Companies have seen how career breaks can contribute to employees with increased commitment, renewed loyalty, a broader perspective, and perhaps newly added skills.

## What You Need to Know

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### **I’ve been working for a long time. If I take a break, am I throwing my career away?**

This depends on how you spend your break. While time off doing nothing will be very hard to sell on your résumé, having and achieving some valuable personal objectives during your time away may well affect your career for the better. You’ll often be perceived with respect (and perhaps a little

jealousy) for having the initiative, confidence, and determination to manage your career imaginatively and constructively.

## What are the main obstacles?

You are often the biggest obstacle to taking a career break. Giving yourself permission is often the hardest aspect of converting this prospect into reality. Many people think about a career break and then forget about it, citing commitments to their partner, family, house, career, or sports ambitions (if you play regularly for a local team, for example). For most people, giving up work for a period of time means a loss of income on which they have become dependent.

## Will my skills be downgraded?

It's possible that 12 months away from a fixed job role will cause you to be out-of-touch with what's happening in your workplace. But such a break will not generally leave you with a skills issue. The more technical your role and the longer you spend away from it, the more time and effort you will have to put into either staying in touch or catching up when you return. Then again, it is also possible that you will acquire new skills that could allow you to perform your work, upon your return, in a more efficient or productive fashion.

Keep in mind that there are innumerable ways to make your career better as a result of taking an extended break.

## What to Do

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### Set Objectives

Taking up to a year off work requires advance thinking and planning. Step back and take some time to ask yourself why a career break holds such appeal. You need to start off with an idea of what you hope to experience or achieve. What secondary or underlying objectives do you have? Visualize the beginning, middle, and end of your time away and your eventual return to work. Make notes about how you want it to be in an *ideal* situation, but also think about how it might work realistically.

## Prepare to Ask Your Employer

With a clear focus on what you are trying to achieve in your career break, it's time to approach your employer. Take along some notes as prompts if you'd find that helpful. Know what you are asking for, including the length of time away, pay and benefits, continuity of employment, possibility of return to the same position, and so on. To make the idea seem as attractive as possible, you need to be able to explain what benefits your break will bring both for you and your employer and to prepare a statement about wanting to return. Make a business case that would encourage your employer to support your request. You could also find out whether there's a policy that provides for sponsored sabbaticals. Your employer might be prepared to provide what you request or suggest a compromise. Be ready to be flexible; after all, your employer most probably does not want to lose a valued employee for an extended period of time. This means that you might want to have a preliminary discussion or two before actually submitting a formal request to take a career break. Keep in mind that many others have made career breaks a win-win proposition for both employee *and* employer.

## Dealing with Rejection

Be patient. There could be lots of reasons why your proposal was turned down. The most important first step: Find out why you've been turned down. The provision of career breaks is purely at the discretion of your employer; but if they are made available to some and not to others, that raises the question of whether the company has a fair policy on such matters. At this point, your main alternatives fall into abandoning the idea of taking a break, filing a grievance, or leaving the company. A rejection can make you reconsider just how determined you are to take a career break.

## Achieving Your Goals In Other Ways

You could consider part-time work, which can free you up to realize your dreams without having to take such a significant drop in earnings. If you stay with the same employer, it can also help you to maintain your work routine as well as your professional and social network.

Another idea to consider: transferring your work to another locale or even working abroad, both of which can be a great way to satisfy a craving for novelty and variety while furthering your career ambitions at the same time. If you have the option of working for your company in a different country, you'll have the chance to master a foreign language and to gain an understanding of another nation's culture. Even moving to a new state could be a "break" from the routine of work life as you have known it. Don't forget the financial benefits too: You'll still be earning wages while giving your work life a whole new perspective.

Should you decide to change employers, the transition time between jobs can give you the chance to negotiate how long before you start your new job. Leaving one job often opens up many other

options. Perhaps you could delay the time when you join the new company, affording you a few months to explore new vistas.

Looking for a new position in a new company can give you complete freedom, and it's certainly a good choice if your application to take an extended career break is rejected and if staying put causes you great concern. It may also be the most suitable route if you intend to retrain, take a completely new direction in your career, or care for children or other family members for the long term. Obviously, these are all major life and career decisions not to be made capriciously. As Po Bronson phrased it in the title to his book, there are times when everyone has to address a central question: "What Should I Do with My Life?"

## **Tie Up Loose Ends**

If you decide to leave your current job when you go on your career break, make sure that you leave with the best possible reputation so that you'll get a glowing reference. This will also mean that you can apply to your previous employer for work on your return, if you so wish. If you *are* planning to return to the same position after your break, it's even more important to make sure that tasks are properly completed or handed over efficiently and that you train your successor as well as possible. Start making a list of important contacts and duties well in advance of your leaving date to act as a helpful resource to others in your absence. If at all possible, arrange for a handover period so that your successor can see what you do on a daily basis.

## **What to Avoid**

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### **You Don't Keep In Touch**

On the one hand, taking a career break means not having to follow the work routine that you feel you've been doing for too long. However, keeping in touch is vitally important if you want a smooth transition back into your previous job. It's also important if you will be moving on to a new career. Stay attuned to who's who and catch up with relevant communications in your business or industry. This is much easier to do these days, wherever you are, because of e-mails, Web sites, company publications, and trade journals. And it's not inconceivable (depending on where you're located) to brief your former boss—perhaps over lunch—on the progress you've made in rekindling your career.

### **You Mismanage Your Finances**

There are many factors to consider when planning a career break. Make sure you have completely thought through how you will finance your time away from work. There are excellent checklists available for thinking about all phases of a career break.

Working out financial matters can be difficult, but it can be done as long as you're clear about your priorities. For example, identify where your money currently goes. If you are off work for an extended period (with reduced or no salary) and if you are traveling as part of your break, you will need to pin down your current non-discretionary spending (for example, health insurance or mortgage/rent payments) and your discretionary spending (spending on hobbies, entertainment, etc.). The worst mistake you can make is to commit to a career break and find that you can't afford to take it.

## Where to Learn More

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### **Book:**

Snodgrass, S. Gary. *Stepping Up: 12 Ways to Rev Up, Revitalize, or Renew Your Career*. Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2007.

### **Web Sites:**

CareerBreak: [www.thecareerbreaksite.com](http://www.thecareerbreaksite.com)

Workaholics Anonymous: [www.workaholics-anonymous.org/index.html](http://www.workaholics-anonymous.org/index.html)