

# Weighing Your Career-Break Options

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If you're thinking of taking a break from your job or career, you'd be well advised to do some advance planning. As with most things in life, you will get the most out of this endeavor if you give it careful consideration. While some career breaks are dictated by circumstance—such as parenthood, illness, or layoffs—it's remarkable how few breaks are properly prepared for. Even many high-level professionals make minimal or no plans for what they are going to do with their time away from work, with the result that they often feel isolated and dissatisfied with what should be a wonderful opportunity. On the other hand, spent wisely, a career break can actually enhance your career prospects and give you a whole new outlook on life.

## What You Need to Know

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### What can I gain from a career break?

A career break can give you a chance to immerse yourself in something completely different—whether it's to improve your skills in your current profession, to pursue a related field, or to delve into an entirely new interest. There are a number of ways you can approach this, from gaining your employer's blessing for a short break away from your job, to quitting altogether and embarking on complete retraining for a new career. The main options are explored below.

### How should I propose this idea to my employer?

While some employers are likely to be agreeable to the idea of sabbaticals or study leave, and may even have formal career-break options in place, this is often not the case. Universities usually provide for sabbaticals after a particular term of employment, but you may have to work hard to convince your boss of the efficacy of such a plan if you are part of a profit-making organization. Nonetheless, options like these are a good way of demonstrating long-term commitment to employees, and organizations also benefit from the fact that people who return from extended leave are more likely to want to stay in their current job. Study breaks are also easy and cheap to organize and help to prevent mid-career burnout.

If your employer has a career-break policy, find out what the requirements are and check to see if you are eligible for it. Look at the terms of the break, such as pension benefits, arrangements for keeping in touch, and returning to work. Do these meet your requirements, or at least offer a semblance of what you want? If there is no career-break policy or you are not sure about it, find out what other similar organizations are offering and collect information to sell the idea to your managers and human resources department. Ask your professional organization or union to help you in your negotiations. Put forth a reasonable plan in writing and stress the benefits of study leave to the

organization. If you're successful in winning your case, it's essential to ask for a formal agreement with your employer. Then you will both know what decisions have been made and how to proceed in any future discussions.

## What to Do

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### **Weigh Up Your Options**

To make the most of this chance to get away from your everyday life, then, it's important to think through your options carefully and decide what will best suit you and your circumstances. Are you looking for a short break as part of your annual leave, a slightly longer break that you can probably get without too much effort, or a longer, life-altering experience?

### **Consider a Paid Sabbatical**

The purpose of a paid sabbatical is for you to engage in activities that will allow you to gain knowledge that will boost your skills and prospects within your current job. You will receive either full or partial pay during this period, and the learning itself may be paid for either by you or by your employer. For example, if you are in a management position, your company might well feel that it would be a good idea for you to pursue an MBA (Master of Business Administration) degree, and fund the training. Many organizations—particularly large employers—use sabbaticals as a reward for long service, or in order to retain valuable staff.

### **Think About Unpaid Study Leave**

Study leave is time off from work to pursue a course of study or a particular interest that's not necessarily related to your job. With this type of agreement, your employer promises that your job—or a similar one—will be available to you when you return from the study leave. You, in turn, agree to return to work on a specific date. Taking a career break of this kind could fulfill a long-held dream such as joining an archaeological dig or pursuing your passion for fine art or drama. The downside is that pay and benefits usually stop, and you may temporarily cease to be an employee of your company. Such breaks could last from a summer to five years.

## Consider Retraining

If you're thinking about changing your career path completely, you may need to leave your job altogether while you gain the new skills or qualifications you need. There are a bewildering number of courses and training providers in the marketplace, so it's important to think about what you want carefully before you choose which direction to take. While you can never know completely what a new career will bring, do your best to prepare. Decide what you'd like your future role to be, identify the skills and qualifications you'll need, and then work out where the gaps are. There are many areas to consider. Some important things to think about are

personal skills such as communication, teamwork, and time management. You'll also need to consider the technical skills you'll need to acquire, for instance various computer applications. Finances also play an important role in retraining, including how expensive the training is, and how you'll manage for money while studying. And of course you will need to think about what format of training will be most suitable for you and your personal circumstances, how much time you have, and where and how you want to study. For example, would you prefer a full- or part-time course in a college or university, a distance-learning program that you can undertake at your own pace, or a one-time event on a specific topic?

## Explore the options for traveling

A career break can be a time to do something you've never done before, and for many people, that means taking a trip to a place they've always wanted to visit or participating in projects in remote places. This is because traveling abroad can give you the perfect opportunity to do any of things we've already discussed above—expand your horizons, refresh your enthusiasm, learn a new skill, get a temporary transfer, take part in volunteer or non-profit work, and so on.

All kinds of organizations have been quick to spot this potential, and there are literally thousands of Web sites offering opportunities to work on conservation projects build orphanages or health clinics, teach adults to read, and engage in many other projects in all parts of the world.

Some of the best options might be to combine your various goals and interests. There is no comparison between taking an evening class in Italian at your local community college and learning Italian in Pisa or Palermo, for example. While vacationing in Costa Rica, you could also join a conservation project, or you could pre-empt your employer's team building and leadership training courses by rafting on the Nile or leading a trek through the rainforest!

You may even find that combining a particular purpose with your desire to travel might give you access to certain countries that you wouldn't be given otherwise, or enable you to stay longer than you could simply as a tourist.

Traveling, and to an even greater degree, working in poorer communities, will give you a new outlook on life. While the people you will be working with will probably have comparatively little materially, they may have a much stronger sense of community and family. By living among people with different

values from your own, you can learn to appreciate both their way of life and what we have in the more developed world.

Many organizations that offer opportunities to work on overseas projects are run in conjunction with governments, world agencies, and non-governmental organizations. Often there is the opportunity to receive in-depth trainings while becoming deeply involved in the projects you're working on.

## Think About Taking a Temporary Assignment Elsewhere

If you enjoy what you do but feel as if you need a change of environment or a new perspective, think about taking a temporary transfer to another position or employment. This might be a good choice, as employers are increasingly recognizing that this can be valuable for development. In the past few years, organizations have adopted flatter management structures with fewer levels in the hierarchy, and opportunities for promotion aren't easy to come by. Temporary transfer offers an alternative way of keeping a fresh outlook, as well as developing invaluable skills.

Temporary transfers can be either internal or external:

- Internal, to another department within the same organization, which is especially useful when staffing short-term assignments or projects. The *advantage* is that you gain wider experience and new skills without the disruption of relocation and with the benefit of continuity of employment. The *disadvantage* is that you don't get the completely fresh outlook that an external placement could bring.
- External, to another organization (public sector to private or vice versa, for example, or to a non-profit organization). The *advantage* is that you can gain experience within a completely different working environment, industry, or professional discipline. The *disadvantages* are that you may experience culture shock in your new organization, or find it difficult to settle back into your old one when you return to it.

For a temporary transfer to be successful, everyone involved—you, your regular employer, and your temporary employer—needs to be clear about their expectations, responsibilities, objectives, and accountabilities. It's important that you think about the main issues *before* you make a formal agreement.

- **Eligibility.** This varies from organization to organization. It may be open to all, or be restricted to managers, technical and professional staff, those with obvious executive potential, or employees with a specified length of service. Even if your employer doesn't have a policy for temporary transfer in place, it may be possible to persuade them to let you do this—if you can make a compelling case for the benefits. It might well be in the interests of a firm of lawyers, for example, to be perceived as altruistic or community-minded by lending their staff on a temporary basis to a deserving non-profit organization. There are a number of groups that specialize in seeking temporary transfer opportunities for skilled workers.

- **Duration.** This depends on circumstances, and ranges from less than 100 hours (often part time) to over a year. You should discuss with all parties whether the placement will be for a fixed term or for an indefinite period that may be subject to change.
- **Remuneration arrangements.** Generally speaking, your employer will continue to pay your salary during this period, though if you're sent somewhere on a commercial basis, the costs may be paid back by the organization you're temporarily assigned to. You'll need to discuss the arrangements for overtime, bonuses, expenses, and training.
- **Recruitment.** Methods also vary, but the process should be no different from that for a normal job (advertisement, application, interview, etc).
- **Management responsibilities.** How will supervisory and disciplinary matters be dealt with? What will happen if long-term absence or persistent short-term absence occurs? If the arrangement is long term, how will performance management and development be handled? Do you need to have indemnity insurance? Who will fill your usual role in your home organization, and what will that person do when you return? How will you keep in touch?

## Check out the non-profit sector

There are many myths surrounding the non-profit sector. You may have heard that there are few paid jobs, that the scope for acquiring new skills is very limited, or that working in this sector leads to a second class career. None of these, however, is true. This means that there is an opportunity for anyone, whatever their interests or skills, to find employment within the non-profit world. Actually, non-profit organizations often experience difficulties in recruiting staff. There are many interesting and stimulating jobs within the non-profit sector. The main drawback is that these jobs usually do not pay as well as those in for-profit organizations.

Unsurprisingly then, this sector is extremely popular with career breakers, particularly given that it has other advantages.

Non-profit jobs often provide an opportunity to undertake work in tune with your values. Unlike working in a large corporation, you may be rewarded by seeing the results of the work you do. The non-profit sector may provide an escape from the rat-race, and you will probably be working as part of a team of like-minded people. There is the opportunity to gain satisfaction from contributing to an improvement in the lives of others. Regular employers are likely to look favorably on releasing you part time or for a set period to work for a good cause and may well have a community relations budget for funding such options. This will give you a chance to learn new skills in a completely different environment.

Given the enormous scope of the non-profit sector, it's difficult to be specific here about what kinds of jobs are available or what the entry-level requirements are. It's best to narrow down your field of interest and then research the opportunities on the Internet.

## Keep the Future in Mind

There is a downside to keep in mind when considering a career break, and that is the difficulty you may have in getting back into your old work when you return. This is especially true if you're coming back to the same job as before, and if you used your break to do something completely unrelated to your usual work. You may find that you are not the same person as you were before, and that your job no longer suits who you are!

## What to Avoid

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### You impose limits on yourself

A career break gives you an opportunity to do so many different things, so why spend it doing something that you'd probably be able to do during the course of your normal life? It really is possible to dream big and pursue your fantasies, whether they involve helping people or the environment, learning about ancient Egypt, or exploring digital photography. There are no limits, other than those you impose on yourself by not opening your mind!

### You don't think about life after your break

While planning for the wonderful experience you're going to have, it's hard to take into account what will follow when you return. But like all good things, your career break will eventually come to an end. At some point you will have to come back to your regular life, and the more you take this into account when planning your break, the easier it will be. Make sure you know (and can explain clearly) what the benefits of your break might be to your current boss or a potential employer, and pin down the terms of your existing job. It's important that all parties involved in a career break know where their responsibilities lie. Time spent ensuring that your break joins as seamlessly as possible with your future is best way to guarantee that it really is the best thing you've ever done.

## Where to Learn More

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### Web Sites:

Careerbreaker.com: [www.careerbreaker.com](http://www.careerbreaker.com)

Responsible Travel: [www.responsibletravel.com](http://www.responsibletravel.com)

InterAction-American Council for Voluntary International Action: [www.interaction.org](http://www.interaction.org)

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