

Weighing the Pros and Cons of a Career Break

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Career breaks have never been more popular, as overworked employees look for some time away from their same old, same old routine. Most often people have one of two motivations for taking time off: either other priorities demand attention, or there's a need to get away and gain some perspective about career direction. There are many positive reasons to consider taking a break: starting a family is the most common one, but caring for family members, traveling, going back to school, or even scratching an entrepreneurial itch can set people thinking along these lines.

Sometimes we just want a break from the parts of our jobs we don't like. Office politics, pressure, or periods of upheaval can take their toll, and some time out allows us to rest up, recharge our batteries, and revisit our core values.

If you decide to take a career break, you should consider what your options will be once you return. You may come back with a fresh outlook, yearning for new challenges. Many companies now are willing to look favorably on career breaks, and some organizations—reluctant to lose the investment they've already made in you—may agree to breaks hoping you'll eventually return to employment with new skills and an increased zest for work.

What You Need to Know

How can I avoid losing ground in my chosen career path if I take a break now?

While it would be difficult to justify time off doing *nothing* as a brilliant career move, attaining some personal goals during your break could actually give your career a boost. Others will respond positively to your having had the tenacity and initiative to pursue a dream. That said, take care to stress clearly and positively what you've gained from your break when you're refreshing your résumé. Emphasize the benefits when you describe what you've been doing, and quantify your achievements if possible. For example, if you have a talent for financial management and you spent some time volunteering abroad for a charitable organization, you could say: "I helped to apply for and secure government funding for a clean water initiative. The provision of ten new water pumps brought clean water to more than 500 people."

Will my skills become outdated?

Unless you work in a very technical environment, in most cases, a year away from a job won't have that dramatic an impact on the skills you offer. The longer you're away, though, the more you'll need to do to get back up to speed and get on top of current trends and developments.

Some industries are also better attuned to the needs of returning workers than others. For example, it's so crucial to keep trusted employees in the healthcare profession that some employers not only have no problem with workers taking an extended break, but will also pay for them to train during their break or when they get back. In other areas, it may be up to you to take the initiative in getting yourself back up to speed. For more specific advice on this area, talk to the relevant managers in your company or organization, or contact an industry body for advice. If you belong to a labor union or professional organization, they may also be able to help.

Might I lose my job while on my career break?

It is possible, yes. Your employing organization should consult with you and your labor union or professional association before any plans are finalized, however. If you have an agreement and your employer decides to lay you off *solely* because you are on a career break, though, this could probably be held to be unfair labor practices and you should take professional legal advice.

The length of time you've been working for your organization will have a bearing on the situation. If you've been with the same company for several years, and your employer considers your reasons for taking a break to be sound, you probably won't have any problem returning to work. This is a complex and relatively new area of employment provision, so it would be a good idea to discuss it with your human resources department and ask for a statement about continuity to be added to any documents regarding your career break arrangements.

What to Do

Think Through Your Motives and Plans

It's a good idea to step back and ask yourself why a career break seems so appealing at the moment. Begin by formulating an idea of what you hope to experience or achieve. What secondary or underlying objectives do you have in mind? Do you want to learn a new language, for example, take part in a humanitarian project, or simply visit places you've never quite made it to yet?

It can also be helpful to visualize the beginning, middle, and end of your time away and your eventual return to work, whether at your same job or at something completely new. What would be the ideal situation for you? And what is more realistic? Jot down some notes for both, envisioning several different outcomes.

Having some focus about what you want to do and achieve during your career break is extremely important. And don't worry: thinking about the details needn't dampen your spirit of adventure; in fact, it will probably help it along. The more you think about and research how things might work out in

reality, the more detailed your plans will become and the more likely it is that you'll follow through and make a success of your break.

Consider Any Possible Obstacles

More often than not, the main obstacles are actually the other priorities in your life. The most common reasons for not taking a long career break have to do with your partner, your family, your career, or your house.

It is a fact of life that for most people, giving up work for a period of time means a loss of the income that they have come to depend on. Broadly speaking, the fewer commitments you have (and the younger you are), the more likely you are to take the plunge. On the other hand, there are some people who are able to take a career break of 12 or 24 months by relying on savings or independent income, which allows them to return and pick up their previous routine without too much change.

Talk It Over with Family and Friends

It's not just you who may be affected by your career break, especially if you have dependents, so talk through your plans with the important people in your life and make sure that you have their backing before you put your ideas into action. You can, of course, ignore what they say if they don't back you up, but you should ask yourself whether your break is more important to you than your relationship with that person (or those people). Perhaps there's a compromise solution to be found?

Talk to Your Boss

Once you've fully decided to go ahead with your career break plans, the next person to deal with is your employer.

Be as clear as you can be about what you want when you raise the issue with him or her and take some notes as prompts if you need to. Plan what you're going to say so that you're not vague about what you're asking for: in particular, be clear about how long you plan to be away, how likely it is that you can come back to your current job, what will happen with pay and benefits, and so on.

Unless you've been trailing the idea for some time, remember that your announcement may come as a shock, so don't be surprised if your boss is unenthusiastic about the idea, at least at first. To help them out, make the idea seem as attractive and realistic as possible and explain the benefits your break will bring both for you and for the organization. Make a case that would encourage your employer to get behind your request. Let's say you've been wanting to learn Chinese for some time. You work for a multinational organization, so you could say that the skills you'll gain on your break will

be useful when you return, as you'd be able to communicate more quickly and work more effectively with your organization's branches mainland China.

However you phrase your request, your employer may be prepared to accept your request, or suggest a compromise. Be flexible and carefully consider any counter-offers you receive. If your request is coming completely out of the blue, it might be useful to e-mail your boss about your idea first, giving just a rough outline that you can talk about in more detail: this may lessen the shock somewhat when you discuss it in person.

Be Prepared in Case Your Request Is Turned Down

It is possible, of course, that things may not go according to plan. If you receive a flat "no" to your request, take a few deep breaths and find out what prompted that response. Providing for career breaks is usually at the discretion of your employer, but if they are available only for maternity leave or only to people at a certain level within the organization, you may be able to prove discrimination.

If other coworkers have been given comparable breaks (for study purposes or parental leave, say) and you receive no satisfactory explanation for why you have not, you may want to claim a grievance through your human resources department or your union.

If you sense that you are clearly not going to get what you want, you're bound to be disappointed. On the positive side, however, you have been given some freedom. If a career break means that much to you, you'll probably just take it, whether your employer will keep your job open or not. This way, you are under no obligation to return.

Consider Alternative Plans

If your request is turned down, there are a variety of other ways to achieve at least some of your goals. Whether they suit you will depend on what you want to do while you are away, but you could consider the following options:

- *Working part time.* This can allow you to devote time to other pursuits without having to see your salary dwindle. If your current employer extends this option to you, you will also still have access to your existing work colleagues and friends and your daily routine won't change too much either, both of which can help to reduce the stress related to significant changes in your life.
- *Telecommuting.* This option will help you be more flexible about *when* you work, and it will also help you to work *where* you want. This route is particularly popular for those with new or growing families, and as your working hours are normally not reduced, your salary won't be affected. If you are working full time, however, you will probably want to spend at least some time in the office, so as not to lose touch with your colleagues. And like most things, there can be a down side to working from home. You may find that work still eats up a good deal of your time and attention, and that you feel isolated outside of your everyday comfort zone. On the other hand,

some people find it impossible to concentrate and keep to a schedule, with the result that they can't get anything accomplished. It may also mean that you are unable to spend as much time focusing on the new challenges you're hoping to explore. Think through an average working week and think about how that might translate to a home-office setting.

- *Working in a foreign country.* This solution allows you to develop your career while experiencing another nation's culture and way of life. (It's also far and away the best way to learn another language.) There are also financial benefits: because you're still receiving a regular paycheck, you can fund your wanderlust. You could opt for a complete change of career such as helping to set up a farming cooperative or teaching English, or you could continue to work in your field through a transfer or new employer.

Bear in mind that if you would like to work broad, you must have the necessary visas and/or work permits, some of which can be difficult to obtain. Whatever you do, make sure you start researching this option well beforehand and that you have all the appropriate documents before you travel to your chosen destination.

- *Switching jobs.* Looking for new employment is one way of agreeing contract terms that will allow you take a break in the future. This option is particularly useful if you want to travel or study, but may not be suitable for parental breaks: if you (or your partner) are already expecting a baby, moving changing employers could mean you lose out on parental leave. This may not be at the top of your priority list right away, but is worth considering.

Job hunting when you return is another alternative, and will be particularly sensible if you want to take an extended break. It is also a good route if you have long-term caring responsibilities, want to take a new career direction completely, or if you want to retrain.

Create a Workable Plan

Now is the time to look back over the notes you took when you were daydreaming about your career break and to begin to prioritize your objectives. Which are most important to you? These are the basics of what you hope to achieve. You'll also need to come up with contingency plans for dealing with any obstacles you could hit. You won't be able to plan for every possible situation, of course, but thinking about the most obvious ones (what will you do if you lose your passport/money/ID documents?) will make your plan more realistic.

Investigate the gap between where you are now and where you want to be, as well as a time frame to get there. As you make your plans, try to break them up into small sections, with milestones along the way. For example, if you want to take on humanitarian work overseas, your first section will be to find out which organizations operate in the area you want to visit, and the first milestone will be to find out how they recruit or assess volunteers.

Having a plan is a great way of moving toward your goals, but you can be flexible: don't worry if you need to change it. For example, you may decide to rethink your objectives or some of the steps along

the way as a result of experiences you have early on. It's okay to make these changes, as long as you remain focused on your general plan.

Cover Your Bases at Work Before You Leave

If you're going to leave your existing job when you go on your break, you want to head off under the best possible circumstances so that you're in line for an excellent reference. This also leaves you the option of being able to apply to your previous employer for work at some point in the future.

It's even more crucial to hand over well and finish up any key projects before you go if you think you'd like to return to your job. Train your temporary replacement as well as possible so that there is a smooth transition, and also create a list of key contacts and duties well in advance of your leaving date so that coworkers have a useful reference. If possible, schedule a crossover period during which your successor can shadow you around the office to see what the nuts and bolts of your job really are.

What to Avoid

You Don't Keep Up with Colleagues or Industry Developments

Moving back into your previous role when you get back will be much easier if you keep in touch while you're away. It will also be useful if you want to move into a new role or industry. Try to keep up to speed on any major shifts in trend, policy, or personnel—the Internet has made this much easier to do, wherever you travel to.

You Don't Think About Your Finances Beforehand

Thinking about financial issues is probably the least attractive part of your prebreak preparation, but it is an essential part of it. Be clear about your priorities so that you can budget appropriately. For example, identify where your money currently goes. What alterations could you make to this spending pattern? What are the benefits of continuing to spend as you do now, compared to using some of your money for your career break? How can you cut down on spending to boost your savings?

You Lose Track of Why You Are Taking a Break

Everyone needs to get away from time to time, and sometimes it feels as though you can't survive another day in your current situation. It's important, though, not to jump ship without a plan in mind, even if it's just a time frame in which to consider two or three options before taking the next step. You may not know beforehand whether you will want to retrain for a completely new career path, return to your current position, or get an advanced degree such as an M.B.A. to enhance your employment possibilities. Taking a career break is an exciting and challenging idea, but one that requires a lot of thought and planning in order to be a success.

Where to Learn More

Web Sites:

Careerbreaker.com: www.careerbreaker.com

tefl.com (Worldwide TEFL jobs database): www.tefl.com

TEFL.Net: www.tefl.net