

Managing Intellectual Property

The Global IP Resource

MAINTAIN YOUR NETWORK: TIPS ON RETURNING TO WORK AFTER PARENTAL LEAVE

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An in-house lawyer at Barclays, two private practice lawyers and a former non-profit corporate counsel speak to Managing IP about returning to the workforce after taking a break to raise a family and balancing work and home life



IP lawyers who want to take a break from the workforce to raise a family should stay up to date on the market and maintain their networks, according to practitioners who have taken the step.

Parents who are considering taking time off to raise a family might fear a “parenthood penalty”. At least some data backs this up. Kate Weisshaar, an assistant professor of sociology at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill sent 3,374 fake job applications to companies.

According to an article she published in [Harvard Business Review](#), Weisshaar said that some of the fake applicants had no employment gap, some claimed to be unemployed and others were from fictitious

stay-at-home parents. Though the study was not specific to the legal industry, Weisshaar found that 9.7% of the unemployed mothers received a callback compared to 4.9% of stay-at-home mothers.

Meanwhile, 8.8% of unemployed fathers received a callback compared to 5.4% of stay-at-home fathers

Although Weisshaar’s study was not specific to the legal industry lawyers who spoke to Managing IP, report that the legal industry is becoming more welcoming of parents taking time off and say they were able to return to the workforce after taking a break to look after children.

Networks and education

Lauriel Dalier, Washington, DC-based counsel with Sterne Kessler Goldstein & Fox, worked at USPTO for several years before leaving in 2005 to raise a family. After she left, she remained active in the IP community through providing consulting services, and also maintained a small stationary business.

“For me, trademark law isn’t just a job. I really love it, and I stayed on top of it,” she says.

She adds that she made an effort to stay in touch with her network during her time away and made use of this when looking for a job.

“The number one way [I job-searched] was starting to let people know that I wanted to return.”

Through her networking, she was able to land what was supposed to be an informational interview at Sterne Kessler. While preparing for the interview, she discovered a part-time trademark attorney position being advertised at the firm. She quickly tried to find out more information, so that she was able to talk about the position during the interview.

“A number of law firms are offering different flexible schedules and telecommuting, but at the time that I was looking, I hadn’t heard a lot about it, so seeing that opportunity there while I still had young children and wanting that work-life balance was a perfect situation.”

She still works part time and her firm promoted her to counsel from associate this month.

Other lawyers agree that networking and staying on top of issues can be valuable.

“The advice I would have would be to constantly stay in touch with your network and be creative in creating opportunities and staying in touch with issues,” says Jessica Copeland, a member at Bond Schoeneck & King in Buffalo, New York. “Read articles and journals and blogs and anything on the internet or in print that is relevant to [your] interest or practice area.”

A former corporate counsel at a non-profit, who is now in-between jobs, says that she also made an effort to stay abreast of the market while she was off work.

“I kept myself in touch and relevant. I continued to work, even part time or [through] individual projects. It’s important to do that. Keep abreast with changing laws, and try to involve yourself. You can be useful and have something to contribute based on your skills even if you’re not in a full time role. There are ways.”

Anna Leipsic, a New York-based vice president of data privacy and IP for the Americas at Barclays, took nearly three years off from the workforce.

“While I was gone I maintained my Continuing Legal Education (CLE). In New York, it’s possible to go inactive on your attorney registration but I opted to stay with my CLEs anyway thinking at some point in the future I might go back to work. I also did a fair amount of *pro bono* legal work.”

Leipsic was working at Fross Zelnick Lehrman & Zissu when she took a break from the workforce. When she returned, she initially went back to the firm.

Change in location

Copeland found herself considering next steps not only because she stayed at home until her child was more than one-year-old but also because she had relocated from New York City to Buffalo, New York.

While in New York City, she specialised in patent litigation. After moving to Buffalo, she expected that she would either have to focus on patent prosecution or commercial litigation. Upon reflection, she realised that she really enjoyed litigating.

She found a position at Hodgson Russ in Buffalo as a business litigation associate. When doing her research she discovered that the firm had a solid presence in IP litigation, which further drew her to the firm.

She is now co-chair of Bond Schoeneck & King’s cybersecurity and data privacy practice and is still active in IP litigation matters.

“One thing that I did try to maintain while I was out of the workforce was connectivity to the law through associations [such as] the New York Intellectual Property Law Association,” she says.

“I maintained my membership with them and worked on committees when I wasn’t working as a lawyer and also maintained my business contacts, so that hopefully when I re-entered the workforce, I would have people I could list as referrals or contacts that might help me find my way back.”

You’ll always be a lawyer

Some lawyers say that the legal world is taking steps to be a place where a parent who takes time off can return.

“I feel [like] the legal industry might be one of the easier [industries] in terms of going back to work after a period of time off. In my experience, talking to other lawyers I know, it seems that culturally there is a lot of attention being paid right now to helping parents reenter the workforce after time off,” says Leipsic at Barclays.

Copeland adds that being a trained as a lawyer can act as somewhat of a safety net to parents who want to return.

“If you maintain that status and fulfil the obligations of your CLE and maintain your membership with [your] state bar you’ll always be a lawyer and there is a certain freedom in that,” she says.

On the other hand, Copeland adds that because of the nature of the law, it becomes extra important to stay up to date.

“The law is constantly changing and if you don’t stay abreast of those changes and you’re out for six months, a year or three years, you might not be at the forefront of where the law stands on a particular issue.”

Managing it all

Leipsic says that when she returned to the workforce, the challenges she faced were more emotional than professional.

“I missed my kids after being with them 24/7. It was a bit tough to go back even though I felt it was the right decision at the time.”

She adds that returning to the same firm that she had worked at previously helped because she had a good rapport with her colleagues and felt more comfortable asking to leave at a certain time if she needed to.

Copeland says that while balancing a family and a career might not always be easy, it is worth it.

“Before making the decision to completely leave the workforce, consider a future of what your life will look like post your children going off to college,” says Copeland.

“I feel very fulfilled although stretched beyond means with a full time legal career and raising two kids and a household, but I wouldn’t have it any other way and I’m so happy that I made the decision to return to the workforce. I’m a proponent of women seeing it through and understanding that you can manage it all. It’s not going to be easy, it’s not going to look pretty, but it is possible, and at the end of the day, for me, it’s quite fulfilling.”
