

# Career Interrupted

*How 14 Successful Women Navigate Career Breaks*

*'Oh, you're pregnant. Well I guess you're off the fast-track now!'*

How do women defy the odds and get their careers back on track after a break? How do women manage the mummy mafia at the school gate? Is there a motherhood penalty? Can women really have it all — a successful career and a rewarding family life? Does overseas experience really accelerate your career in Australia? How do you recreate your career after a setback?

From the author that brought you *Sideways To The Top – 10 Stories of Successful Women That Will Change Your Thinking About Careers Forever* comes *Career Interrupted: How 14 Successful Women Navigate Career Breaks* profiling fourteen high-achieving women talk openly about their challenges in carving out a successful career after a break. These women come from all walks of life — from battlers to privileged backgrounds, from large corporates to small business, from professional services to the community sector. Several women had children and talk candidly about what it's like to be in the throes of mother guilt and come out the other side; some are expatriates who returned to Australia to rebuild their career, yet others had to re-establish their career after a misstep. These stories are interwoven with the latest research from thought leaders around the obstacles and pitfalls in leaving the workforce for a time, and include practical and proven strategies to overcome these hurdles.

*Career Interrupted* contributes to the discussion and debate in business and the broader community about how to develop workplaces where the contribution of everyone, including women, is recognised, nurtured and optimised. It explores the shared experiences of women who have had to navigate a break in their career and provides a beacon for other women about to embark on a similar journey.

#### Some of the women profiled include:

**Moira Rayner - Principal, Moira Rayner & Associates**

**Her Excellency Frances Adamson - Australian Ambassador to the People's Republic of China**

**Dr Helen Szoke - Chief Executive, Oxfam Australia**

**Tracey Spicer - Journalist and newsreader**

**Dr Margeurite Evans-Galea - Scientist, Bruce Lefroy Centre, Murdoch Children's Research Institute**

**Anna Burke - Federal Member of Parliament for Chisholm**

**Kelly O'Dwyer - Federal Member of Parliament for Higgins and Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer**

**Lucinda Nolan - Deputy Police Commissioner, Victoria Police**

**Lisa Croxford - Capability Development Manager, Herbert Smith Freehills**

**Jodie Sizer - Co-owner Principal, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Indigenous Consulting Pty Ltd**

**Jennifer Keyte - Seven News Melbourne Weekend News Presenter**

**Lucinda Dunn, OAM - Artistic Director, Tanya Pearson Classical Coaching Academy**

**Lucy Roland - Marketing specialist and Communications Coach**

**Dr Sharon Lierse - Lecturer in Education, Charles Darwin University**

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Breaks Norah  
Breekveldt

#### About the author

**Norah Breekveldt** has been passionate about positioning gender equity as a key business driver for organisations throughout her career. She is the author of *Sideways To The Top – 10 Stories of Successful Women That Will Change Your Thinking About Careers Forever* (Melbourne Books 2013), a publication that chronicles the journeys of eleven extraordinary women and the career paths they took to get to the top of their profession. She contributes regularly to debates, discussions, professional publications, journals and blogs on diversity and inclusion perspectives. Norah is sought out as a contributor to diversity and inclusion think tanks and as a speaker at corporate events and conferences. She is a recipient of the Telstra Business Women's Award.

#### The Three Experts

**Samone McCurdy**  
*PhD candidate and Program Consultant, Monash University*

**Dr. Jenifer Whelan**  
*Director, Psynapse Psychometrics & Research Fellow, Melbourne Business School*

**Dr. Hannah Piterman**  
*Consultant, advisor and author, co-founder of Gender Worx*

## Q & As for *Career Interrupted*

### What is the book about?

This book explores a range of stories from women whose careers have been interrupted for a host of reasons — to start a family or take on carer responsibilities for a while, to travel and gain overseas experience, to restart their career after a setback, or to explore starting their own business. It looks at the nitty gritty of human experience — the frank, fearless and sometimes funny accounts of events that have happened when women disrupt their career path. Taking time out from the workforce — at what price, under what circumstances, and is it worth it?

*Career Interrupted* is the sequel to *Sideways To The Top – 10 Stories of Successful Women That Will Change Your Thinking About Careers Forever* (Melbourne Books 2013) which explored the experiences of 14 women who have challenged the status quo and chose alternative pathways to the top.

### Why this book?

The business case for diversity and inclusion has been well documented and researched. Yet despite the overwhelming business case for diversity, and the introduction of a range of policies and practices designed to attract and retain women, overall there has been negligible progress in the number of women rising to the top. It is relatively easy to put policies in place, much harder to make them work.

Taking a career break can be career suicide and the barriers to returning to a fulfilling career can sometimes seem too high to climb over. But there are ways forward. *Career Interrupted* explores stories of women who have challenged this trend, successfully returned after a career break and carved out a successful career for themselves. Many women will find their own life stories reflected in these chapters, having faced, or are going through, similar issues and may be at a loss about what to do. These women can gain insight and inspiration from the experience in this book.

This book also aims to contribute to the development of industry best practice by describing how specific leaders decided to change the inflexible, out-dated practices in their own organisations and create workplaces that recognise the needs of their whole talent pool.

### Why are women not progressing?

One significant barrier to women's career development lies in the double burden for women having to combine work and domestic responsibilities. Australian research shows that women are penalised for taking a career break — their salaries often take a hit and their career prospects are gloomier.

Other research shows that mothers are considered to be less competent, less committed and less worthy of salary increases when they return to work than non-mothers or men.

### What are some of the key findings?

1. *Build and shape the life you want.* A starting point is to identify what is important in your life – in your relationships, family and career and your spiritual needs – what do you want for your life? Plan it out and then take steps to make it happen.
2. *You have many chapters in your life.* See your situation in the perspective of your whole of life –how does this stage fit in with what you want for your whole life?
3. *Be authentic.* Be the person you want to be, make choices consistent with your values and don't be influenced by the community, society, or others expectations about how to live your life.
4. *Prioritise ruthlessly.* You have no time to waste, so eliminate time-wasters. Efficiency will be paramount especially when you are back at work.
5. *Take charge.* When you are away ensure you keep in touch. Out of sight is often out of mind, no matter how invaluable you are. When you are ready to return, set boundaries. Learn to say no when arrangements are not going to work for you.
6. *Do whatever it takes.* Don't pretend you're fine or you can do it without help. Ensure your partner is a true partner in sharing responsibilities equitably. Involve your family to the extent they and you want.
7. *Let it go.* Don't set yourself up for failure by setting unrealistic expectations for yourself. Accept that things won't always be perfect.
8. *Mentors and advocates are invaluable.* Many of the women profiled in *Career Interrupted* had a mentor who has had a strong influence on their career progression. These mentors are often integral to the development of informal networks and gaining access to key decision-makers.
9. *First secure your own oxygen mask before assisting others.* Balancing daily chores, childcare, relationships and careers is physically and emotionally exhausting and we all need down time.
10. *Work for an organisation that can provide for your needs.* Culture doesn't have to be a lottery. Family-friendly clues abound if you know where to look. When choosing an employer ask yourself the following questions: Are there pictures of children and families on senior leaders' desks? When are meetings held– do they start early and finish late or are the times respectful of family needs?

*"I do think women can have it all, but not all at the same time."* Madeleine Albright, former US Secretary of State