



12 min read

# FROM CAREER Gap TO CAREER Growth

## REENTERING LEGAL PRACTICE WITH CONFIDENCE

By Neta Borshansky and Meredith O'Keefe

**A**s career coaches, we know that lawyers' career journeys are increasingly non-linear and multi-sector, and we frequently meet with lawyers who have taken time off from the profession at some point in their careers. And while career gaps – whether chosen or not – have always been a part of life as a lawyer, we have noticed in our work that job applicants returning to work after a break often carry shame and pessimism about their job prospects, despite having unique skills and perspectives to contribute to the legal market. The purpose of this article is to normalize career gaps as more common than is perhaps recognized. Job seekers returning from a career gap may feel isolated; yet gaps are common, and we believe that open conversations about this topic can help build a more inclusive legal profession.

We also want to provide some advice, strategies, and resources, to give job seekers, as well as coaches who work with lawyers, useful tools to be as successful as possible in the job search process.

There are many reasons that lawyers take breaks in their careers. In our work, we've seen gaps related to needs and decisions around family, childcare, and other care-giving responsibilities; relocation; burnout; bereavement;

health needs; military service; layoffs or restructuring; and bar passage issues. We have worked with many lawyers who experienced unique challenges during the pandemic and/or were impacted by upheavals in the federal workforce. We also know lawyers who stepped away from legal practice to work in other legal settings or roles (such as law schools or lawyer development in the field), run entrepreneurial businesses that are both legal and non-legal in nature, return to school to advance their learning, or live temporarily in another country. While no comprehensive study tells us exactly what percentage of lawyers take a career break, broader workforce data suggest that nonlinear careers are increasingly the norm. A recent LinkedIn survey found that 62 percent of workers have taken a career break at some point, and more than a third say they would like to do so in the future.

A throughline across the career gap examples we have seen is that lawyers who have left legal practice for whatever reason or amount of time, return energized and highly motivated to contribute their talents and skills in meaningful ways. They also know a great deal about the practice of law and what it takes to be effective. The legal profession is a demanding one, and it is not surprising that career gaps are commonplace; lawyers often give all their efforts



to their work, at the expense of other priorities and needs. But as Sajana Granquist, Director of Diversity Lab, observed, “Many of the same qualities that made someone a strong lawyer earlier in their career also support a smooth transition back into practice.” Our primary goal is to lay out a few tools and strategies that will help reground lawyers as they re-enter legal practice so that they can approach their job search process with confidence and perhaps more ease.



## The Power of Reflection and Narrative-Building

A starting point for lawyers who are returning to work from a career break is to take time to reflect on how a break (under any circumstance) has served them, strengthened them, and prepared them both personally and professionally for this next step. Breaks can be healthy for all of us, can renew our energy, can give us clarity around our goals, can foster flexibility, and can help us appreciate opportunities

to contribute our skills and make an impact. For some, a break might have been a time to learn new skills. Reflecting on the gains that come from a career break can facilitate a positive mindset, and we view reflection as a foundational step to starting the job search journey. We encourage thinking as broadly as possible and to be mindful of self-judgment. Breaks due to a personal or health challenge can be especially hard to talk about but are often the ones that lead to the most growth and resilience in the face of adversity.

One technique that has helped us in our work is to encourage our clients to write a short career break statement that is factual, succinct, and positive, highlighting tangible and intangible skills. This exercise helps remove shame and apologies from the equation, allowing clients to own their story and become comfortable sharing it. Shauna Bryce, CEO and Chief Coach of Bryce Legal Career Counsel, emphasized that, “A key part of the narrative is to keep it clear and concise, which reduces the likelihood of the employer inadvertently asking questions that may be uncomfortable, and to emphasize that you’re ready, willing, and able to restart employment now, which is what employers care most about.”

Developing a narrative and practicing talking about it with confidence make all the difference in the job search process. It can turn a break into a true selling point and a way for an

applicant to positively stand out in a pool of job seekers.

## Reconnecting to the Legal Community and to the Practice of Law

Once you’ve developed a clear, positively framed narrative, share it and engage with the legal community! Reconnecting with your network can be a lifeline during professional re-entry. Reach out to former colleagues, mentors, and classmates to let them know you’re exploring next steps. Your professional connections can support you once they know you’re looking. As you refresh your application materials, reconnect with professional references so they are prepared to advocate for you.

Expand your reach by attending alumni and bar association events and telling people what you are looking for. While clarity about your target employment may bolster your outreach, do not let a perceived lack of clarity stop you from attending events and reaching out. A quick catch-up call or email does not require certainty of next steps on your part, and your contact may have a valuable perspective to share. For those who prefer virtual engagement, LinkedIn can play a meaningful role: update your profile, highlight skills, and volunteer experience, and contribute by sharing articles or commenting on others’ content and updates. Setting goals often helps

such as, “I will engage thoughtfully on LinkedIn four times this month and attend three events per quarter.” Reestablishing your professional identity (for self) and presence (to the external world) can be an ongoing process at your pace.

Another important element, depending on how much technology has changed since you left the industry, is to become aware of and get trained on new legal technologies. Learn about new legal tech by reading industry news, having conversations about it with your network, and engaging in training that will prepare you for your next role and communicate to employers your willingness to learn.

Swati Parikh, Career and Leadership Coach at Greater Good Careers, commented on the value of finding substantive work as a way to pivot back. “I think one of the best things that a job seeker can do after a career break is to quickly jump back into legal practice through pro bono work, bar association committee participation, and part-time or temp roles. Public sector and public interest employers want candidates who have a demonstrated commitment to the mission of their organization. Being strategic about finding opportunities that align with the work that you want to do after a career break can be a really effective way to show employers that you have the skills and interest in the work that you’re now pursuing.”

Seemingly small engagements can generate significant momentum, given that feelings of

loss of professional identity may be at play. We have seen increased confidence and renewed energy when returning job seekers take on project-based work, serve on bar association committees or nonprofit boards, volunteer, or write short articles. These activities can help a candidate reconnect with their professional identity and may lead to new opportunities.

### Putting It in Writing

A big question is how to represent career gaps in application materials. We encourage clients to think strategically about where and how to describe a gap in their written materials, but in general recommend accounting for a full timeline and either describing a gap in the chronology of a resume, or in an ‘Additional Information’ section of a resume. Bryce notes that with no acknowledgment of time spent during gap(s), “You’re losing an opportunity to control your narrative, and leaving it to the resume reviewer to make assumptions about what was going on during the break. You don’t have to give all the details of why you were out. Something as simple as ‘Personal Sabbatical’ or ‘Caregiving and Preparations to Return to Practice’ can do the trick.”

In addition, a cover letter is a great place to elaborate, using the narrative work above to highlight the learning and resilience gained during a career break. We also suggest being comprehensive in your materials about any work – paid or unpaid – you may have done

during your time off, which may include volunteering with your community, political work, project-based experiences, caretaking responsibilities, fundraising, etc. The specific language used and framing is something that may take multiple iterations to get right, and we encourage job seekers to work with a coach to workshop language that most positively captures their narrative in the eyes of employers.

### Role Flexibility, Career Hiatus Programs, and Other Support

Our research suggests that other industries (e.g., tech and corporate) currently offer more visible and established return-to-work programs than ours. Within the legal industry, candidates may consider individual firms with re-entry or “alternative track” roles, and Diversity Lab’s one-year OnRamp Fellowship may be an option for certain candidates who seek a role in corporate legal or a BigLaw/mid-size firm. On the public sector side, we encourage job seekers to be open to term-limited positions that may come up; filling in for a six-month leave or serving in a role that has one year of funding may be a foot in the door and can offer an opportunity to demonstrate worth to an employer, who may be able to find the funding to make a full-time job offer. At the very least, a short-term gig can allow a job seeker to get back in the game and is a great building block for next steps in a job search.

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Bar associations and law school career development offices (CDOs) often offer alumni toolkits, access to job postings, career support, and invitations to events. Lawyers seeking additional, personalized support in this process may consider working with a career coach. Granquist shared her observation that one of the key traits among the most successful returners is “a growth mindset and a high degree of adaptability. They also exhibit strong communication and relationship-building skills. Finally, they approach reentry with intentionality and a commitment to continuous development.”

Coaches can help candidates draw out examples from their past that support and demonstrate these attributes, and they can be useful as lawyers not only seek jobs but also navigate the process of returning to legal practice. Coaches can also provide accountability and encouragement to help returning lawyers reframe self-doubt, own their narrative, clarify goals, and take practical steps toward their next chapters.

## Concluding Advice

To summarize, here are a few high-level takeaways around re-entering legal practice:

- **Reflection is a critical first step:** identifying the skills, resilience, clarity, and

- **Own a clear, positive narrative about a career gap:** one that is factual, concise, and strengths-based can turn a gap into a differentiator.

- **Reconnecting with the legal community matters:** networking, alumni engagement, bar involvement, and LinkedIn activity help rebuild professional identity and momentum.

- **Substantive experiences are meaningful:** including pro bono work, project-based roles, committee service, volunteering, writing, or temporary positions, as well as training and

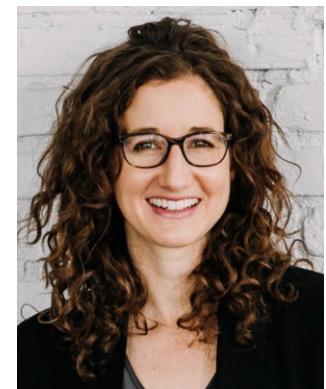


motivation gained during a break can help shift mindsets towards confidence in the job search.

independent learning about new legal technologies and tools.

- **Application materials should reflect a full timeline:** with resumes that provide a thoughtful framing of career gaps and cover letters that highlight growth and transferable skills.
- **Flexibility opens doors:** term-limited roles and re-entry programs can provide meaningful pathways back into legal practice.
- **Support systems make a difference:** bar associations, law school career offices, and career coaches can help returning lawyers reframe self-doubt, refine narratives, and move forward with intention and confidence.

While they may feel isolating, career gaps are quite common and need not be a barrier to lawyers who want to get back in the game. We hope that this article provides validation and support to those who are in the job market after some time away, and that those in hiring and advising roles see the unique strengths and perspectives that these lawyers bring.+



**Neta Borshansky** ([neta@fitlerconsulting.com](mailto:neta@fitlerconsulting.com)) is a lawyer and ICF-certified coach. She coaches for UC Berkeley School of Law, has worked as a lawyer in both the federal and state government,

and is the owner of Fitler Consulting, LLC, a career coaching, and organizational consulting practice.



**Meredith O'Keefe** ([meredith@findyourpathcareercoach.com](mailto:meredith@findyourpathcareercoach.com)) is an attorney, career counselor, and coach with experience in both large and small firm private practice. Through O'Keefe Consulting, LLC, she helps attorneys navigate career strategy, transitions, and professional growth.