

# Women who leave careers face hard road back

**Many must convince bosses - and themselves -they're ready to return**

**BY JULIE FORSTER**  
**Pioneer Press**  
**TwinCities.com-Pioneer Press**

Article Last Updated:

Looking for a job isn't easy, but getting back into the work force after being out for years can be overwhelming.

Julie Printz's journey back hit a wall as she took her first steps. When she first mentioned returning to work after a 5½-year hiatus to raise a family, the moms she talked to during the day had a suggestion: Try retail.

In a way, the suggestion was understandable for a computer programmer who had sat on the sidelines while technology marched on. A retail job wasn't so scary.

"It's such a daunting thing, thinking about going back," said Printz, who lives with her husband and two children in St. Paul's Macalester-Groveland neighborhood. "You just think the world has gone on without you."

Printz's decision to return to work, prompted in part by her husband's layoff, is common for women who leave their jobs to raise a family, return to school, or for other reasons.

About 93 percent of women who leave corporate America want to return eventually, according to research from the Center for Work-Life Policy in New York.

The odds of success are stacked against them. Just four in 10 of those women find full-time work, the policy group found. Most take hefty pay cuts. Few find opportunities in their former line of work. Initial optimism turns into frustration.

Up against long odds and fresh off the counsel of her fellow mothers, Julie Printz started out with modest expectations.

She liked coffee. She liked people. She could be a coffee barista. "If worst comes to worst and I can't find a job," she said at the time, "that's what I'll do."

Printz, now 42, never envisioned that she would be a stay-at-home mom. After she had her first child, she continued working long hours as a systems analyst at Minnesota Life. Emergency calls late at night and on weekends weren't uncommon.

After her second child arrived, things went haywire. With an infant at home, Printz was battling glitches in a new computer system at work. The demands proved too much. During stress-counseling sessions offered through work, she decided to make a change. In 2000, she reluctantly quit her job.

"So many women seem to make the balance work," she said. "I worked with women whose seemed to be successful at it." She kept asking herself, "What's my problem? Why couldn't I get this to work?"

The years as a stay-at-home mom went by, and Printz figured she was pretty much done with her former career. Any longer than a year out, she thought, would render her obsolete.

She was forced to put that to the test when her husband lost his job as a software test analyst at Lawson in late 2003. Debt piled up. They agreed she had little choice: She'd return to work.

Where to start? Printz felt everything about her was outdated, even her work wardrobe.

Through a friend, Printz heard about a group of other so-called opt-out moms who wanted to get back into the work force but didn't know how to do it. Printz jumped in.

The women had some common characteristics.

"Their confidence was not where it needed to be," said the group's leader, Sherry Essen, a management consultant and executive coach based in Mendota Heights. "They didn't know how to refer to their time off, how to talk about it."

Essen helped Printz tackle task one: patching holes in her résumé. Her volunteer work would be key. She was a board member at Early Childhood Family Education. She spearheaded a photo directory project at her church. She coordinated volunteers at a homeless shelter. Such work showed ambition and initiative.

Printz also enrolled in a class at the Science Museum about online job searches. She quickly sent out résumés and began filling out applications.

After this burst of activity, nothing happened. Her ego took a bruising.

Printz had run smack dab into a common problem faced by most women trying to get back in: the big silence.

The challenge of getting back into the work force is outlined in a 2005 study by the Wharton Center for Leadership and Change. "Back in the Game" looked at experiences of 130 women who had left management jobs and had returned or were looking to return to work.

The upshot: "Women felt unprepared for criticism and ambivalence, and they were stymied by indifference and blocked by their own sagging confidence," the study concluded.

Printz was among them. Her husband, Greg Berger, offered encouragement.

"She was concerned that she didn't have the qualifications," Berger said. Even friends who had kept current with computer technology were having trouble finding jobs.

Printz developed a list of 80 company Web site links where she routinely looked for job postings. She targeted insurance companies because she knew they would have a need for mainframe computer programmers, an area of technology that hadn't changed much.

Finally, at the beginning of summer 2005, a breakthrough. The University of St. Thomas wanted to talk with her about an opening.

It had been 11 years since she had interviewed for a job. She bought a new suit and a few "how to" books on job interviews.

In a cramped office, she faced off with five interviewers. Those books didn't pay off. She felt ill at ease, unpolished.

Then, someone put a document in front of her and asked her to spot any typos or grammatical errors. An odd request, she thought, for someone interviewing for a technology job. While she nervously scanned the letter, her interviewers chatted.

"I can't find anything," she choked out, pushing the letter back across the table.

As she left, she told them: Good luck finding the right person.

With no offer from St. Thomas and no other interviews lined up, a discouraged Printz put her search on hold that summer. Then, in August, came a call from what was then St. Paul Travelers.

This time, she met with just two interviewers. They asked about technology. She shared her ideas. They listened, asked questions and the conversation flowed.

After five years away from computers, she felt like her skills were still valuable. She didn't get a job offer in the end, but she got something almost as good: momentum.

The give-and-take reminded her how much she liked collaborating with others to solve problems. She even liked being in an office.

The confidence boost spurred another flurry of applications. But it all came as job postings - and callbacks - dried up.

Meanwhile, at home, things were becoming more precarious. Her husband was just a few months into a new job, earning less than he did at Lawson. To pay the bills each month, they had maxed out their home equity line of credit.

"If it had gone many months more I would have had to look at anything," Printz said. "Like Starbucks."

Christmas passed; the new year brought a belated present: a January hiring thaw. Printz received a phone call from Thrivent Financial. They wanted to talk about an opening.

Barry Sweeney, a Thrivent manager who oversees hiring of technical workers, had been sifting through some 400 résumés looking to fill eight technical jobs. When he scanned Printz's résumé, her technical skills were solid: She had programmed in the same languages used at Thrivent. She already had passed a first set of interviews. But ...

"I know when I first saw her résumé, I immediately picked up on the gap there," he recalled.

He phoned Printz and focused on what she had done during her time away. He quickly came to understand that she was a devoted mother and even though she was out of the work force, she was very active doing other things.

She came across as someone who would work well on a team and pick up new things quickly.

He offered Printz a job, one that would provide her flexibility when she needed it to pick up kids from school or accompany them on field trips from time to time. The base pay would be slightly better than she received at Minnesota Life. She accepted.

Faced with a steep learning curve, Sweeney advised Printz to take her time. He sensed early on the balance would be a challenge for his new employee.

At home, Printz and Berger have coordinated their schedules. Berger has shifted his hours to help get the kids to school. Two days a week, Printz starts early and leaves at 3. She still feels like she's sneaking off.

Things appear to be working out, however. Printz, once worried she was obsolete, has been asked about a management job.

"I said I would consider it," she said. "Yes. I would be up for it."

Julie Forster can be reached at [jforster@pioneerpress.com](mailto:jforster@pioneerpress.com) or 651-228-5189.

**93%**

Women on leave from careers who want to go back to work

95%

Women on leave who don't want to return to previous employer

74%

Women who get jobs

40%

Women who get full-time jobs

In Business: More employers are working to retain women with families, Page 1D.

Online: For related videos, including advice, go to [twincities.com](http://twincities.com)/ business.

Close Window

Send To Printer