



Why You Should Be in Two Places at Once

A recent poll in *USA Today* asked whether unplanned absences have a negative impact on long-term career development and compensation. Almost six-in-ten (58%) of the respondents said “No,” while 41% said “Yes,” and 1% didn’t have an opinion. It’s hard to know what these results mean, however, as the survey question, itself, was miscast. The issue for most of us isn’t an unplanned absence—when kids get sick, for example—but a lengthy one, a situation that keeps us away from work for two years or more. A growing number of us are dealing with such challenges as we care for parents or young children, and the impact on our careers is likely to be negative and long lasting.

Whatever employers may say about being family friendly, the reality is that given two candidates with identical work records, they will almost always select the one with the unbroken work record. Why? Because employers assume that when people turn away from the workplace they also turn off their careers. And sadly, in most cases, they are correct. Working at home is every bit as consuming as working for an employer, so there’s precious little time left over to protect our career from the diminishing impacts of a lengthy absence. So, what happens? At some point, we readjust our family responsibilities and return to the workplace, but with a gaping hole in our resume that all but ensures we will take a gigantic step backward in our career.

There’s been considerable hand-wringing in the media about this situation, and while I would agree with the criticism, I also think it does us a disservice. Complaining about the unfairness of the situation, no matter how justified, isn’t going to change the reality of corporate behavior. A better course of action, it seems to me, is to take whatever steps we can to protect our careers within the constraints imposed on us by our responsibilities. Here’s what I mean.

Care-giving responsibilities, whether they involve parents or children, limit our time and attention span. Basically, there is little or no opportunity in our daily schedule to engage in those activities that are most likely to preserve and advance our careers. These activities include:

- Maintaining our occupational knowledge and expertise;
- Staying in touch with our professional colleagues and peers; and
- Keeping abreast of trends, developments and changes in our industry.

Normally, these activities would be accomplished within the woof and wane of our workday. They would occur during our interactions with coworkers, discussions with clients, participation in training sessions and even the reading we do in professional publications while struck in an airport on a business trip. We are able to do them because we are present in person.

But what if we could do these same activities when we aren't present in person? And equally as important, what if we could do them whenever it was convenient for us or, more likely, whenever we could fit them into the tiny chinks of free time that do occur in our busy schedule of home-based responsibilities? If that were possible, we could actually be in two places at once: we could be at home so we can meet our care-giving responsibilities and we could be in the workplace so we can participate in the activities that advance our career. How is that possible? With the Internet.

The Internet keeps you connected to the world of work and supports that connectivity whenever and wherever it's convenient for you. You can be online once the school bus leaves in the morning, during a parent's afternoon nap or in the evening when you have a quiet moment to yourself. And when you are, you can:

- **enroll in and take online courses to ensure that you stay abreast of the state-of-the-art in your field.** Many of these programs involve self-paced instruction, so you can move at a speed that is comfortable for you, given your schedule and responsibilities. Taking (and completing) these courses, moreover, permits you to add a development experience to your resume where otherwise there would be a gap.
- **network with your peers at the discussion forum of a career portal or association site that specializes in your field.** Out of sight need not be out of mind if you remain actively engaged in a dialogue with your colleagues via the asynchronous communications capability of the Internet. Such interactions enable you to maintain a presence in their mind where otherwise there would be a gap when you're not present in the workplace.
- **read the professional journals that are available at trade organization and business sites and/or the leading blogs in your field.** Not only do these online publications enable you to avoid any gap in your current knowledge of your industry or field, but they also provide a way for you to expand your workplace visibility with a minimum of effort. By posting a message to the editor or blogger, you can strut your stuff even as you bake cookies for the school Halloween party or your parents' coffee klatch.

It's not easy to maintain your career momentum while you're attending to family responsibilities at home. It's critical to do so, however, as a gap in your resume can significantly limit the arc of your career. Thankfully, the Internet provides a way for you to sustain the momentum in your career by enabling you to be in two places at once.

Thanks for reading,
Peter

This content is provided to your association by Boxwood Technology, Inc. It may be used online or in written publication with the following appropriate attribution: © Copyright 2007 WEDDLE's LLC.