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Office Culture and Well-Being: What Now? Tactical Actions to Take After The Pandemic Steals Your Job

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In April 2020, about one month into the pandemic, unemployment for women rose 2 percentage points above that for men, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In September 2020, when children returned to school, 80% of those who left the workforce were women, and in December, women accounted for 100% of the net job losses.¹ Women of color suffered disproportionately, with employment for Latinx and Black women 3–4% lower, respectively, than their white counterparts.² White women were also more likely than Latinx or Black women to be in management and financial operations occupations that allowed them to work from home.³

The numbers were so dire that a *2020 Women in the Workplace* study, conducted by McKinsey and LeanIn.org, projected that “1 in 4 women are now considering leaving the workplace or downshifting their careers.”⁴

The pandemic has shown a harsh light on the fragile nature of our labor market, earnings gaps, and the disparity of women shouldering the burden of unpaid care (children, parents, households). Now, inching toward 2022, we are picking up the pieces in the post-pandemic recovery with hard-won knowledge about how to process our losses and take advantage of emerging opportunities.

Our goal for this article is to show you how women who have left the workforce, whether involuntarily or by choice, can come back stronger than ever before.

The Secret Truth

First, however, let's squarely face the secret truth about job loss: it has a lot to do with our identity. Megan Marzo, a licensed clinical social worker with the Weill Cornell Psychiatry Collaborative Care Center, observed, "There's a phenomenon where our job isn't just about gaining resources. It's about who we are, so when we lose that, we feel we're failing at the purpose we decided upon."

It's safe to say that because we're a mission-driven profession, fundraisers are more vulnerable to having our sense of identity wrapped up in the roles we play at our nonprofits. If we work for human rights organizations, we're human rights activists. A recent survey by the Chronicle of Philanthropy found that 9 out of 10 fundraising professionals are driven by mission.⁵ In a field dominated by women (71%),⁶ who are leaving the workforce in record numbers, the impact of job loss is amplified. When we lose our jobs, we lose our mission, we lose our purpose, we lose our identity—and down the rabbit hole we go.

It doesn't have to be that way. In fact, the pandemic helped many women step back, reflect, and re-invent themselves. Companies like SelfMade—a marketing management company—sprang up like mushrooms during the "Shecession" (what economists have called the early months of the pandemic since the

number of women losing their jobs outpaced men) to help women become entrepreneurs and find their strengths and true passions.⁷ According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the top three skills a fundraising professional needs are persuasive speaking, writing and active listening.⁸ What entrepreneurial business or new job couldn't we break into with those gifts? After all, if we can turn words into millions, we can turn our loss into gain.

Juliana's Perspective

I know the importance of mentorship first hand. I have had valuable mentors in the past and currently serve as a mentor for the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) at both the global and local levels. I also chair the AFP-NYC Mentorship Program—helping a cohort of professionals reach their goals annually through program and partnership. Mentorship is truly my North Star. Nothing in my career thus far would have been possible without the guidance I have received from my colleagues, for whom I have the deepest appreciation and from whom I have derived the ambition to challenge myself at each stage of my career. My mentors have helped me realize the potential to make a true difference through our profession and have saved me from confusion more than once.

If you suddenly find yourself a job seeker, the first thing to do is tap into your networks and reach out to your mentors. There have likely been moments in your life where you've leaned on someone you trust for advice or assistance. Whether the person you turned to is a professor, friend, family member, or colleague, the importance of mentors is undeniable. These people can help to shape your present situation and future opportunities for the better. From helping you make career decisions to fostering partnerships, a mentor can help you successfully navigate your fundraising journey, especially in times of crisis or uncertainty.

Remember, it is paramount to seek out quality mentors early on and before a potential job loss occurs. Think of your mentors as your personal coaches and career advisers. Each of your mentors should serve a different purpose and bring a different strength. It is important to form relationships with those who will not only be your biggest champion but who will also challenge you when you need an extra push or coaching through crisis or isolation. The last thing you want when experiencing job loss is to go it alone.

Robin's Perspective

I have been helping mid- to-senior-level women fundraising professionals since before the pandemic—when the trauma of losing a job was a private

conversation that we had only with those we trusted. My book, *Involuntary Exit: A Woman's Guide to Thriving After Being Fired*, is based on women's authentic experiences of successfully navigating the emotional roller coaster of job loss and re-entry. Here are some takeaways for you to reflect upon:

- If you've lost your job or had an involuntary exit, step back and take the time to ask yourself: *Do I want to replicate what I had or do something completely different?*
- Remind yourself that the qualities that got you your job in the first place don't disappear the minute the job does.
- Give yourself the gift of affirmations, no matter how cheesy they may feel at first. Make a 20-second video, for example, of you telling yourself: *"I'm a hot property. My biggest challenge is going to be choosing the right opportunity."*
- Take comfort in the fact that you're not alone. Almost every woman I know has been fired or knows a woman who has been fired, especially in the development field, where the turnover is so high. Talk to your colleagues or people you admire to come away with at least one new way of thinking about your possibilities.
- And, finally, perhaps the most difficult but most cathartic: fear less. Fear stops us from moving forward. Without fear you'll be more able to embrace uncertainty as an opportunity, not as a threat. The bonus: you'll be surprised by the people you didn't even know existed who come to your aid.

The Good News

Here's the really good news about possibilities: Projections on job growth for fundraisers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics are very strong. Fundraising jobs are expected to grow by 14.3%. This is much higher than the 3.71% average rate of national job growth over the same 10-year period.⁹ This may seem like an

empty promise while you're still trying to let go of the past and wondering how many emails you should send to your network of friends and colleagues to say you're out on the market. But take heart, the market for you and your talent is on the rise, if not about to be turbo-charged. Nonprofits need your help to give back to the public good. Not only that, having survived the pandemic in whatever way you did means you are more resilient now than ever before. A colleague who lost her job last year as a chief fundraiser only to find a better opportunity told me, "I can't tell you how many people were helpful, how many people were so generous with their time and connections. It's amazing how these things just show up when you need them." Resilience, opportunity, hope. Let's hold on to that and emerge stronger than before.



Robin Merle, CFRE, most recently served as vice president of advancement and executive director of the John Jay College Foundation of Criminal Justice and is currently principal of Robin Merle Associates LLC. She has raised more than a half-billion dollars in philanthropy during her nearly 40 years working with nonprofit organizations. She is an active AFP member at the Global level and in the New York City Chapter. Robin is the author of *"Involuntary Exit: A Woman's Guide to Thriving After Being Fired and founder of The*

Professional Guide," a witty, honest resource for professional women who are navigating their careers. Check out her book and her blog

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