

Happy returns

Getting back into work after some time out takes a bit of planning, says *Georgiana Head*

As the tax market picks up, we are beginning to see candidates who have been out of work for some time being able to come back. These individuals range from mothers who have taken extended maternity leave to newly-qualified CTAs who have taken a career break to go travelling, or tax professionals who have been made redundant in the recession and who have found it difficult to find a new role because of the poor economic climate. Whatever the reason for their sabbatical from tax, these individuals all face the same problem: how do they persuade an employer that their skill set is still relevant and that they can get back up to speed with tax quickly?

Once in a lifetime

Luke Barletta is a good example of someone who planned his return to taxation. He recently joined Clough Taxation Solutions LLP after spending a year travelling. As he explains: 'I decided shortly after passing my CTA that as the state of the economy was likely to mean that my career progression would be frozen for a year, I could use this as an opportunity to take a once-in-a-lifetime trip. I travelled round South East Asia, Australia, New Zealand and Fiji. Along the way I did some voluntary work. I returned to the UK in mid-August and set about improving my chances of getting a role in tax. I knew I had to do things to make myself both affordable and up to date, so I invested in myself – I paid for a CIOT weekend conference and BPP courses to get my CPD up to date. I also did volunteer work for Tax Help for Older People to get myself back into the frame of mind for client meetings. I also caught up with a year's worth of copies of *Tax Adviser*, and when I was abroad I made sure I kept up with the Budgets that had taken place in the UK.'

I think that Luke had a very mature attitude to taking time out, and that the effort he made to get himself back up to speed technically was part of what impressed his new employers at interview. As he explains: 'If you decide to take a sabbatical you can't expect your new employer to pay to get you trained back up; you have to invest in your own start-up costs, so an employer sees you as affordable, and so that you can compete against other candidates.'

There are simple and cost-effective ways to help you keep your specialist knowledge current. The local branches of the CIOT, for example, run lectures; Leeds branch offers a very affordable £95 season ticket that covers



the whole year. Charities such as Tax Aid and Tax Help for Older People offer voluntary work opportunities for tax professionals.

Preparation, preparation

Preparation for interviews is also vital when you are looking to return to work. Last year I placed a tax lawyer in a top 20 accountancy firm. She had been made redundant by an international law firm because of the devastating effect of the recession on the transaction tax market. As she explains: 'I was made redundant in January 2009 and it took until October 2009 to get back into employment. I knew the firm that I wanted to join from the moment I had my first informal meeting with them in the February, but they had to be able to justify the business case before they could take me on.'

'A key part of the interview process was a technical interview. To prepare for this I borrowed back copies of *Tax Adviser* and other tax press from Georgiana, and went back to my old team. I asked them to help me by letting me use their tax library and chatting through recent changes and issues that we thought may come up. As I had left under very amicable circumstances, they really made a great deal of effort to help me, for which I am very grateful.'

The other side of the fence

I asked Harriet Hart, HR manager at Grant Thornton in Leeds, her thoughts on people returning to work. 'As someone who has taken a period of maternity leave,' she says, 'I think Grant Thornton is pretty well geared up for

supporting people in their return to work after a period of absence. We undertake an induction programme for their first few weeks. Part of their return includes a focus on their objectives during the first few months, which includes time built in for training in any new changes or systems that came in while they were away from work.

'All staff also have a personal development plan, which helps us to help them get the right support and training for their individual needs. For people on maternity leave we offer "Keep in Touch" days, which help them to still feel part of the practice and encourage our career-break people to pop in for visits.

'As a firm we actively encourage people to take paid sabbaticals or career breaks during the recession as a way of retaining good people and limiting redundancies. When these individuals return to us we are very protective of them, and make a concerted effort to make them feel welcomed back and enabled to get their CPD up to date.'

I think that both employers and employees can learn from this example and see that there is a balance to be struck between the individual and firm investment to ensure a successful return to work.

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