

Mom for Hire: Industry Springs Up Around Mothers Returning to Work

BY HILARY STOUT AND ANNE MARIE CHAKER

ON A RECENT MORNING in Ridgefield, Conn., 20 women paid \$79 apiece to attend a job-hunting workshop. All were college-educated. Many had professional degrees. Many had held important jobs such as attorney, portfolio manager and human-resources director. Most were unemployed — out of work for an average of 10 years.

The workshop was conducted by Women@Work Network, a job-placement firm founded two years ago to help women re-enter the work force after long interludes at home. Its clients are largely mothers who decided to give up careers to care for their children.

The firm is part of a burgeoning cottage industry of employment consultants, counselors and Web sites that help the increasing number of women who have chosen to bow out of the work force for a time. As women prepare to get back into the game, they're often unsure how to do so. And these businesses provide advice on everything from how to present volunteer work on a resume to how to answer that dreaded question: What have you been doing the past decade?

It is a promising market. Potential clients are generally affluent, having been able to afford to stay home, and willing to pay for advice. And as more women decide to take leaves from their careers (the percentage of new mothers who work fell to 55% in 2002 from 59% in 1998, according to the Census Bureau), more eventually will be looking to return. (For a look at struggles of women trying to go back to work, see related article on page A1.)

Mary Jane Murphy, a job counselor in Atlanta, says the number of stay-at-home moms looking to re-enter the work force has grown to constitute about a third of her practice. She charges \$90 for hourlong sessions that also might incorporate her background as a therapist.

Laura Yamashita, an Atlanta mother of two who holds an M.B.A., but has been out of the work force for almost eight years, says her sessions with Ms.

Murphy helped enhance her morale. "I think one thing that hurts women is that you don't have a real feel for your strengths because you've been at home for so long," says Ms. Yamashita, 41 years old, who is considering returning to work in the fall when her youngest child is in school full time. Her visits, which included taking a personality test, "helped me see what kind of different areas I wanted to explore."

Part of what these businesses offer is simply hand-holding and confidence boosting. Women@Work plugs clients into an online network of peers who also are trying to re-enter the work force after having taken time off. At the firm's Ridgefield, Conn., seminar one participant observed, "It's like a job-hunting Weight Watchers."

Many of the services also help clients with unconventional options. Jobs For Moms, in San Antonio, specializes in helping women find employers who will let them work from home. Nancy Collamer, founder of the similarly named Jobs and Moms, in Old Greenwich, Conn., offers counseling on how to start a home-based business. Ms. Collamer, who often conducts counseling sessions over the telephone to fit in with mothers' busy schedules, also advises clients on how to negotiate flexible hours with prospective employees. Woman for Hire, which serves women job hunters of all types, not just those looking to re-enter the work force, conducts job fairs in cities across the country to pair employers with prospective female hires.

Employers also are exploring ways to reach out to women who have taken long leaves from their professions. In February, more than a dozen big companies and law firms in the U.S. and Britain formed a task force titled the "Hidden Brain Drain," whose mission is to advance women and minorities in the workplace. In the group's first meeting, representatives from industrial conglomerate General Electric Co., of Fairfield, Conn., to New York investment bank Goldman Sachs Group Inc. discussed strategies for creating "on-ramps" for women seeking to get back in

the labor force.

"There is this whole body of high-potential women out there ... that are unrealized assets," says Sylvia Ann Hewlett, founder of the Center for Work-Life Policy, a New York nonprofit group that is sponsoring the task force.

Some of what these niche career counselors say is just common sense: Revamp your resume. Other suggestions are less obvious. Here are some tips they offer:

-- Getting started. If you don't have a professional network anymore, tap into people you know well in other contexts -- maybe someone you've worked with on a school committee.

-- Where to look. Try smaller companies, which may appreciate the value of a stay-at-home mom's skills for a little, entrepreneurial firm. Investigate nonprofit groups. Since they often rely on volunteers, they may have more respect for a resume filled with school and community volunteer work. And check out the Occupational Outlook Handbook from the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor

Statistics (<http://www.bls.gov/oco/home.htm>), which lists accreditation requirements for different professions, along with salary ranges and professional organizations that you can contact.

-- While you're out of work . . . Be strategic about the volunteer work you do, choosing leadership-oriented work rather than, say, making cookies for the school bake sale. If you're in marketing, help produce a brochure for a school or community program. And try to keep abreast of your field. Read industry journals, retain memberships in professional associations, and stay in touch with former colleagues.

For other recent Work & Family columns, see CareerJournal.com. Sue Shellenbarger returns May 20; e-mail her at sue.shellenbarger@wsj.com.