

Career makeover: Seeking meaningful new job after break

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By Allison Ellis / Special to NWjobs

After a 12-year career hiatus, Heidi Singh, of the Seattle area, is ready to return to the traditional job market.

Before having kids, Singh held director-level positions in the federal government, legislative affairs and health-care policy arenas as a public policy and health-care communications professional. She holds a bachelor's degree in international relations, a master's in public health policy and a certificate in nonprofit management.

During the years she was primarily focused on raising her family, Singh led the communications and outreach efforts for several nonprofits, including the [Madigan Foundation](#), [Peninsula Schools Education Foundation](#) and [Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure](#).

Singh says she isn't looking for merely a job, but a meaningful leadership role that leverages her communications, project management and advocacy skills in the global health care or nonprofit fields.

Since she began her search this year, Singh has experienced some common frustrations. They include lack of focus; job bank "black holes," where she's applied for positions and never heard back; and not having a confident, succinct answer to the question, "What kind of job are you looking for?"

"I can waste a lot of time scrolling [job sites] Glassdoor or Indeed aimlessly," she says.

Turning to the experts

As a participant in NWjobs' career-makeover series, Singh was most interested in how to focus her search, expand her network and update her interviewing skills. To that end, she spent time with three local experts: Seia Milin, a human resources professional; [Lisa Quast](#) of [Career Woman, Inc.](#); and career coach [Kathryn Crawford Saxer](#).

After meeting with Singh, Milin suggested that she remove all work experience prior to 2000 ("employers only look at the last 10 to 15 years," she explains) and put more emphasis on her skills instead. "This is a common error that I see: Candidates market their employers instead of their value [to the organization]," Milin says.

She also recommended that Singh target local staffing agencies and recruiters that focus on filling roles in her fields of interest: [Volt](#), Adecco, Randstad and Ajilon. "Staffing agencies provide great avenues of becoming re-employed after career interruptions," Milin says.

In terms of nailing the interview, Quast recommended a step-by-step checklist that Singh found to be most useful. First, Quast says, Singh should highlight keywords and requirements in each job description, and customize her résumé to showcase her skills and accomplishments that are most relevant to those requirements.

Then, Singh can brainstorm questions the hiring manager might ask and practice those answers out loud. As a final step, she can think about questions she could ask the hiring manager to get clarification on the role.

"Working through this preparation process prior to your interview will increase your odds of a successful interview," Quast says.



After a 12-year career break, Heidi Singh is seeking a meaningful leadership role. (Seth Archer / Special to NWjobs)

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Expanding career network

Saxer offered strategic networking tips to Singh. "Rather than get discouraged looking at job postings, I advised her to go out and make some new friends in those fields," Saxer says. She suggested that Singh "identify two nonprofit professional association groups that she is interested in, find out when their meetings are and go!"

LinkedIn is another tool Singh can maximize. Saxer suggested that Singh seek out 25 professionals with job titles similar to the ones she's interested in, and send them a note via LinkedIn to request an informal phone interview or coffee date.

"It all starts with a conversation," Saxer says. "You need to have lots of conversations and make lots of connections, because you never know which conversation will be the one that leads to that interesting next job."

After meeting with all three experts, Singh noted that a lot of the takeaways were simple but important strategies that she was thankful to be reminded of: catering her resume to each job description, attending professional networking events and identifying people of interest via LinkedIn.

"Even if I only get two people to respond out of 25, I'm still ahead," Singh says.

Another important tactic she plans to tackle, per Saxer's suggestion: Write a personal narrative on what kind of work she's most interested in, so she can better articulate her answer and feel confident when people ask.

"I'm thinking more energetically about my job search than I have in a while," Singh says.

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