

Women Taking Care of Business – Again

Written by Katrina Daniel Tuesday, May 29 2012



**Ann Cramer, director,
IBM Corporate Citizenship
and Corporate Affairs**

On Sunday nights, Alicia Florrick, the central character on CBS's hugely successful drama "The Good Wife" returns to the workforce as an attorney after taking a 15-year hiatus to raise her two children.

Because her husband is sent to prison, she is on the brink of divorce and needs to support herself and her children.

Thanks to an old law school buddy, she waltzes right into a job at one of the top (fictitious) law firms in Chicago. Exuding workplace chic, she proceeds to wow them with her work ethic, her up-to-date grasp of current technology and her ability to execute complicated legal maneuvers after 15 years of shuttling kids to soccer games and baking cookies for fundraisers.

That said, there are the millions of working moms who need to return to work because of a terrible economy, divorces, mates who have been downsized, a variety of other reasons or because they just want to be back in the mainstream.

So, who are the real-life Alicia Florricks? And how did they reconnect with their chosen professions, even after taking a long time off to raise children, care for elderly parents or care for their own health?

One of the most visibly successful is Ann Cramer, who now serves as director of IBM Corporate Citizenship and Corporate Affairs for the Americas.

Cramer has a long, loyal history with IBM; she went to work for them 10 days after graduating from Salem University.

"It was a time," she says, "when women were going to either get engagement rings or become nurses. My guidance counselor told me IBM was hiring, and since I was a math major, of course I asked, 'Where do I go to sign up?'"

IBM snapped her up immediately and Cramer climbed steadily up the corporate ladder until the birth of her first child, Megan, in 1978. That, says Cramer, was when she opted to become a stay-at-home mom. "I had an extraordinary desire to be at home with her."

While Cramer was on hiatus from her corporate job for approximately 10 years, she nonetheless kept busy doing volunteer work on a very high level.

"I overcommitted to charities. My husband used to joke, saying that I didn't have time to have a real paid job because I was too busy with all my volunteer projects," Cramer says. "I realized my gift was to be able to work with boards and community services."

Cramer didn't just take on small committee positions; she aimed straight for the top, serving as president of the Junior League in Atlanta, Leadership Atlanta and the United Way. Two weeks after giving birth to her second child, Will, in 1984 this commitment to community was recognized when she won the coveted YWCA Women of Achievement Award. "I laughed at that back then," she says, "because then I was so foggy, and I was feeling so inadequate."

But she kept her name out there and when IBM needed someone to act as a liaison for IBM and the Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta in 1996, they called on favorite daughter Ann Cramer. "They knew I was very familiar with the community." She adds, "I'm a math major. I love to solve problems, and I love my community."

Ann Cramer was able to parlay those passions into her current job with IBM, which takes her all over the western hemisphere, exploring and developing new market opportunities.

Another high profile corporate executive who used board service during her time away from the boardroom was Brenda C. Barnes, the former head of PepsiCo Corporation.

Barnes dropped out of the daily business routine to spend time with her family in 1998, but during her hiatus, she served on the boards of several high profile organizations, including the New York Times, Lucas Film and several others. In 2005, Barnes re-entered at the top of her profession as CEO of Sara Lee and was named as one of the highest earning women by Forbes Magazine.

What both of these high achieving women had in common during their several years away from their professions was that each woman remained professionally active by serving in volunteer positions that kept them engaged, and above all, visible to people in decision-making positions.

Lisa Quast, president of Career Woman, Inc. and author of the award-winning book "Your Career, Your Way" presents several other plans to aid women who want to go back to work.



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Quast offers these strategies for women seeking to reenter the work force.

Get rid of negativity. “Detox your brain,” she says, “by getting rid of negativity. Start your job search with a fresh, positive outlook that, ‘Yes, I will find my dream job.’”

Analyze, analyze, analyze. Review the job requirements for the positions you want and then analyze those requirements against your own skills, education and experience to see how you compare and understand where there are gaps.

Research, research, research. Research the company and the industry to prepare for the interview. Most hiring managers will ask, “What do you know about our company?” - and you need to be ready to respond.

Practice, practice, practice. Brainstorm the questions the hiring manager will probably ask you to find out how your background fits the job and then practice your answers with family or friends before the interview.

Find sponsors and internal coaches. Try to find someone who already works at the company for which you want to work and who is willing to be your internal sponsor or coach. Because they are an insider, they will know the key players, understand the culture, environment and politics, and hopefully they’ll even know the department or hiring manager.

Shine, shine, shine your resume. After writing or updating your resume have at least two other people review it and provide feedback for improvement. After all, your resume is the best advertisement for your product: you!

Update your skills. It is critical, Quast asserts, that women reentering the workforce update their computer skills. Technical knowledge should include Microsoft Office Products, Word, Excel, PowerPoint, as almost every company uses these programs.

Out with the old. Rid yourself of outdated clothes, hairstyles and makeup. Dress to impress and try your best to look the part of the position you want.