

Making a Change: How Rebecca Thompson Successfully Transitioned from Full-time Mother to General Counsel

Career Development



"I never regretted taking time off to raise my children," says Rebecca Thompson, whose three children are now fully grown. Although Thompson is now general counsel and VP of human resources at Special Olympics Northern California and Nevada, she actually took the job after a long period as a full-time mother. After having her first two children, Thompson began working part-time. After she had her third child, however, she realized that even the part-time arrangement was insufficient to meet her goals as a mother.

"When I was a private practice attorney," she explains, "I focused on being the best private practice attorney I could be. Then I became a full-time mother, and focused on being the best full-time mother I could be. Then I became a general counsel and human resources specialist, and dedicated myself to being the best I could be at that." Thompson is proud of her achievements, both in the professional workforce and as a mother, but admits that the transition from full-time mother to full-time professional can be challenging. Based on her own experiences returning to the workforce, Thompson has the following recommendations for mothers going through the same process.

Be honest with yourself

Before returning to full-time work, Thompson believes it's important to take an honest look at how having a child and taking time off may have changed you. She explains that your perspectives, interests, and priorities may have shifted. So, understandably, your ideal job may have changed as well.



In Thompson’s case, she became very interested in mission-driven organizations. She explains, “I love the mission and educational and special needs components of Special Olympics. These issues have become very important to me after raising my children. And I’ve also realized the bigger picture — these issues are important to everyone generally.” She adds, “To this day I make it a point to attend the events that we organize for children and adults with special needs.”

Before embarking on your journey, Thompson recommends asking yourself many questions. For example, what are you passionate about now? What causes do you care about? What drives you to return to work? What do you want to learn about? It can also be helpful to seek feedback from those around you, especially any friends or former colleagues who have seen you grow through your years of parenthood. After this honest reflection, you can decide where to focus your energy during the career search.

Let your network know

It may take a village to raise a child, but it can also take a village to renew a career. “Tell your family, friends, neighbors, and former colleagues that you’re returning to the legal workforce,” recommends Thompson. “Consider reconnecting with former colleagues and classmates.”

When she made her decision, Thompson told everyone in her network that she intended to return to work. “First, I told everyone I knew. Then, I told everyone at my kids’ school, where I was working part-time. Eventually, I told all my husband’s connections,” she says. Through her networking, Thompson found her next opportunity.

Before jumping into networking, it’s a great idea to have your resume, LinkedIn profile, and elevator pitch ready. People will have questions about your absence, so you should be ready to answer them. “Be prepared to articulate what you can bring to the table. How has your work absence enriched you

as a person and professional? You want all pertinent information at your fingertips and ready to flow naturally," Thompson advises.

Include your experiences during your absence

Did you volunteer at a school PTA during your absence? Did you fundraise, supervise projects, plan activities, review contracts, or run meetings? Did you use your superb interpersonal skills to accomplish a difficult task, become proficient in social media, or negotiate an amazing deal? You can use these experiences to your advantage when transitioning back into the workforce.

Don't write off your absence as "just being a mom." Take a good look at how you spent your time and identify any skills and perspectives that your prospective employer may value. Thompson explains that if you do anything well, you will develop useful and transferrable skills — and that includes being a mother. "These are relevant and transferable skills, and they will give you and your prospective employer something to talk about," she explains.

Give temporary, freelance, pro bono, special, or part-time work or projects a shot

It may be a good idea to return to work gradually through part-time, freelance, pro bono, special, or temporary projects. This gives you an opportunity to build a more recent track of achievements, show interest in returning to work, gain relevant skills, and sample several types of employers, job roles, and responsibilities.

Thompson, for example, initially joined Special Olympics as a part-time general counsel. "It was a perfect way to return to work," she explains. "I got a chance to make sure that I loved the people and the organization." Over time, as the organization grew, she became full-time and absorbed the human resources function.

Making the transition from full-time motherhood back to the full-time professional world can be challenging, but being confident, honest, and focused will make it much easier. And if anything, it can't be any more difficult than motherhood itself. By following Thompson's advice, you too can enjoy a satisfying transition from one of the most challenging positions of your life, to your next exciting opportunity.

Olga V. Mack



Fellow

CodeX

Olga V. Mack is a fellow at CodeX, The Stanford Center for Legal Informatics, and a Generative AI Editor at law.MIT. Mack shares her views in her columns on ACC Docket, Newsweek, Bloomberg, VentureBeat, Above the Law, and many other publications.

Mack is also an award-winning (such as the prestigious ACC 2018 Top 10 30-Somethings and ABA 2022 Women of Legal Tech) general counsel, operations professional, startup advisor, public speaker, adjunct professor, and entrepreneur. She co-founded SunLaw, an organization dedicated to preparing women in-house attorneys to become general counsels and legal leaders, and WISE to help female law firm partners become rainmakers.

She has authored numerous books, including Get on Board: Earning Your Ticket to a Corporate Board Seat, Fundamentals of Smart Contract Security and Blockchain Value: Transforming Business Models, Society, and Communities. She is working on her next books: Visual IQ for Lawyers (ABA 2024), The Rise of Product Lawyers: An Analytical Framework to Systematically Advise Your Clients Throughout the Product Lifecycle (Globe Law and Business 2024), and Legal Operations in the Age of AI and Data (Globe Law and Business 2024).

Katia Bloom



Commercial Lawyer and Associate General Counsel

ForgeRock

Katia Bloom is a fast-paced and strategic commercial lawyer. Currently, she is the associate general counsel at ForgeRock. Previously, she headed up legal for Avira, Inc., was a founding partner at E Squared Law Group, advising many start-up clients and was in-house counsel at Anesiva. She is actively involved in the Association of Corporate Counsel and a number of organizations promoting

women in the legal profession.