



Comeback Community™

# CAREER FUEL

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO

**PROFESSIONAL IMPACT AND  
PROGRESSION AFTER MATERNITY  
& OTHER WORK BREAKS.**



[comebackcommunity.co.uk](https://comebackcommunity.co.uk)

A solution from The Talent Keeper Specialists



# WELCOME BACK

Hello, hello, how are you?

I've written this short guide for you as a follow on from *Mothers Work! How to Get a Grip on Guilt and Make a Smooth Return to Work* (Hay House, 2011).

*Mothers Work!* was designed to smooth the journey back into the workplace after maternity leave - and much of it is relevant for people returning from other types of leave too.

**CAREER FUEL** is the next step on the journey.

It's for when you've returned to work and (more or less) got your head back in the game. You're feeling (a bit) more comfortable than you did at the start and you're thinking about professional impact and progression. You might be feeling frustrated and that you've fallen behind your peers?

**CAREER FUEL** is for you.

Jessica Chivers

Developer of Comeback Community™  
CEO, The Talent Keeper Specialists



P.S. My dream is for the percentage of men taking Shared Parental Leave to skyrocket and to republish *Mothers Work!* as *Parents Work!* in recognition of that. Dream on....or damn right?



# 1.WORK OUT WHAT YOU WANT NEXT

Know what the next step is for you? Great. If not...

**TRY THIS:** The 'ideal day' exercise. Ask yourself what your ideal day would look, sound, smell, taste and feel like. This is a good one to do whilst walking (research shows better divergent thinking when walking outdoors). Write down your responses and consider if there are particular roles (within or outside your current workplace) that are more likely to lend themselves to that ideal day. Don't discount the smell and taste – we once worked with a woman who moved from marketing financial services to marketing coffee based on this.



## 2.KNOW YOUR WHY

Why do you want what you want in your career?

When you've got your answer, ask yourself 'why?' again. And when you've got the answer to that, ask it again. Keep going until you get to the root. ***I want to make partner.*** WHY? ***Because I want to have more control over the work I do and to earn more than I do now.*** WHY? ***Because I want to live in a bigger house, give my children opportunities I didn't have and I value freedom.*** When you understand what's driving you, you can scrutinise what you want and ask yourself, is this really the best way of getting these needs met? If it's a yes, you've got a solid base to work from. You'll have traction when competing priorities threaten to derail you. You'll have the grit and determination when things get tough. You'll also have a purpose that energises you every day. If it's a no? Give yourself time to consider other options. It's OK to change or delay goals.

# 3.YOUR STORY IS WORK IN PROGRESS

Think of your career as a book still being written.

Not everything you want to achieve in your career has to go in the chapter that immediately follows your period leave from work. Think big and be ambitious for sure but don't expect it all to happen immediately. Episode 9 of our podcast **Comeback Coach** is a great listen on this note. YOU DO NOT NEED TO MAKE UP FOR 'LOST TIME'. You're not competing with anyone else and a consistent pace is better than frantic surges of intense work – see chapter 10 of *Effortless* by Greg McKeown for a real-life illustration of this.



# 4.SHARE YOUR GOALS WITH COLLEAGUES

Ask senior colleagues to meet with you.

When you return from leave you have the perfect 'hook' to have conversations with anybody and everybody, including very senior people. **TRY THIS:** Send e-mails like this:

*"Sarah, I'm coming back from maternity leave and my coach has encouraged me to reach out to key people. I would love to have 25-30 minutes with you to understand what's happening in your part of the business. I'd really value your insights on X in particular. Would one of these work for you (dates in here) or please suggest other times. Thank you, Robin."*

Now you've built a foundation with Sarah you can comfortably loop back to her (and other senior figures you meet with) when you've got your head back in the game and ready to dial things up. As senior figures get closer to the end of their career they become more focussed on legacy and many want to fuel the development of younger colleagues. Here's the e-mail you might send:

*"Sarah, I really valued the conversation we had nine months ago when I first returned from maternity leave. I've given a lot of thought to how I'd like to move my career on within (name of organisation). Could you give me 25-30 minutes in the next month? I'd like to share what I'm thinking and get your perspective on the next steps. Thank you, Robin."*



# 5.PLAY TO YOUR STRENGTHS

Something you're good at and that energises you.

Don't know what your strengths are? Check out [www.strengthsprofile.com](http://www.strengthsprofile.com) – it's the tool we use with our coachees coming back from extended leave and during other career transitions. The power is really in the debrief conversation with a skilled coach but even reading the the profile report by yourself will give you ideas.

Playing to your strengths is about spending more of your time operating in a way that feels natural and energising to you.

It isn't about avoiding the bits of your job you don't like, although if you dislike much of your role it's probably time to move on or redesign it.

Here's an example of leveraging strengths to be successful at parts of your role you find challenging. Liz has to do new business development as part of her role. Before discovering the strengths-based approach to work she thought it meant a competition mindset ('beat the competition') and bravely cold calling potential new clients. Both made her feel seriously icky (no wonder, competing and courage are her weaknesses).

After she'd had her Strengths Profile debrief she discovered the key to her doing BD was compassion. Compassion for the potential suffering of the end users of her company's solutions if they didn't have access to them. Compassion is her top strength and with this in mind she set about finding creative ways to get in touch with potential new clients. Everything became a lot more comfortable and the results spoke for themselves...



# 6.MAKE THE MAIN THING THE MAIN THING

Ever heard the story of rocks, pebbles & sand?

Imagine you have an empty vase to fill with rocks, pebbles and sand. The rocks have to go in first, then the pebbles and the sand fills the gaps. If you do it in reverse, it won't all fit. What are the 2-3 big rocks in your work life that, if done consistently, would make you successful in your current role and/or move your career on?

Making five business development calls a week? Devoting 3 hours a week to strategic thinking? Taking the lead on a cross-team customer experience project? Putting your hand up to lead client presentations? **TRY THIS:** Think about what your boss' boss really cares about.

# 7.FIND THE DEEP WORK HABIT

Start your day with a focussed period of concentration.

Aim for 90 mins intense concentration, e.g.

- drafting a document
- identifying the key points for a presentation
- reviewing a proposal
- reading a company report.

You'll get into a state of flow (where time passes quickly because you've been absorbed in something stretching) and go home feeling you've had a good day. Perhaps you've read the HBR article *The Power of Small Wins*? The authors report their study of 238 people which found the single biggest contributor to a good day at work is feeling like you've made meaningful progress.



**TRY THIS:** Regularly block time in your calendar for deep work and write the goal for the session, e.g. *read quarterly management report in entirety and mark edits to send to Amaya*. Diaries aren't just for scheduling time with other people: they're for marking out what you're going to do when, regardless of whether other people are involved. Remember the point about making meaningful progress...

# 8. CONSCIOUSLY CULTIVATE YOUR BRAND

Shape the perceptions others have of you.

Let's be clear. Nobody needs a personal brand. But consciously cultivating how you want to be perceived by others *will* fuel your career. Your brand is how somebody sums you up if asked "You know Alex Adelman, what's she like?"

**TRY THIS:** Thinking about where would like your career to go, what five words would you like people to use to describe you if asked "You know X, what's she like?"

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adaptable, creative, dependable, resilient, commercial, strategic, ethical, bright, assertive, strategic, visionary, bold, courageous, kind, empathetic, smart, purposeful, witty, considered, measured, gregarious, customer-focussed, clever, academic, intelligent, insightful, authentic, warm, unusual, entrepreneurial, determined, persistent, collegiate, savvy, mysterious, charming, energetic, upbeat, mindful, thoughtful....

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To become a person with a career-fuelling personal brand you need to:

- Have a clear 'message' (your five words). This is who you are and the value you bring.
- Be congruent. This means your attitude, behaviour and appearance are all aligned. (Unlike the smart woman in a messy bathroom).
- Be consistent. This means repeatedly demonstrating and reinforcing your brand message over time.





# 9.ASK FOR MENTORING CONVERSATIONS

Make specific requests for one-off chats.

You're much more likely to get 45 minutes in a senior person's diary if you explain you'd like to tap into something **specific** and it's a one off. A request on e-mail might look like this:

*"Lucy, I was in awe of the way you Chaired the Operations Committee on Thursday. I was standing in for my line manager and was really pleased to have the opportunity to see you in action. I wonder whether it would be possible to have a one-off 45 minute mentoring conversation with you about how you developed the skills and confidence to lead a meeting like that? Looking forward to hearing from you, Chris."*

# 10.CONNECT & BE CURIOUS

Look around at your wider world of work.

Keeping your head down and getting the job done isn't enough to get you where you want to go next. It's vital you regularly lift your head up and notice your wider world of work.

- See what your organisation is posting on Twitter.
- Look at what your organisation's peers are posting on LinkedIn.
- Listen to your professional body's podcast (and maybe offer yourself as a guest).
- Ask a new hire out to lunch and be curious about the organisation they joined from.
- Attend a peer's team meeting.
- Ask colleagues what informal CPD (continuing professional development) they do.
- Say yes to LinkedIn connection requests and ask how you can help the 'connectee'.

All of these things potentially put you in touch with ideas that might assist you in your role and lead to connections that could help with your next steps. In practice it means diarising a slot each month (at least) to do it. The amount of time you spend matters less than the habit.

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# 11. PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR WINS

Celebrate the good stuff. Save it in a brag folder.

I was going to label this guide "10 top tips" but along came number 11 who begged me to let her in. I'm so glad she's here, and that you are too. Here's your bonus....

Bonus. Now there's a word. Not every great thing you do will be reflected in a pay rise or bonus or even receive the praise it deserves.

That's why YOU, yes YOU have to get good at noticing your small wins and saving them (in a 'brag folder') to re-live them later:

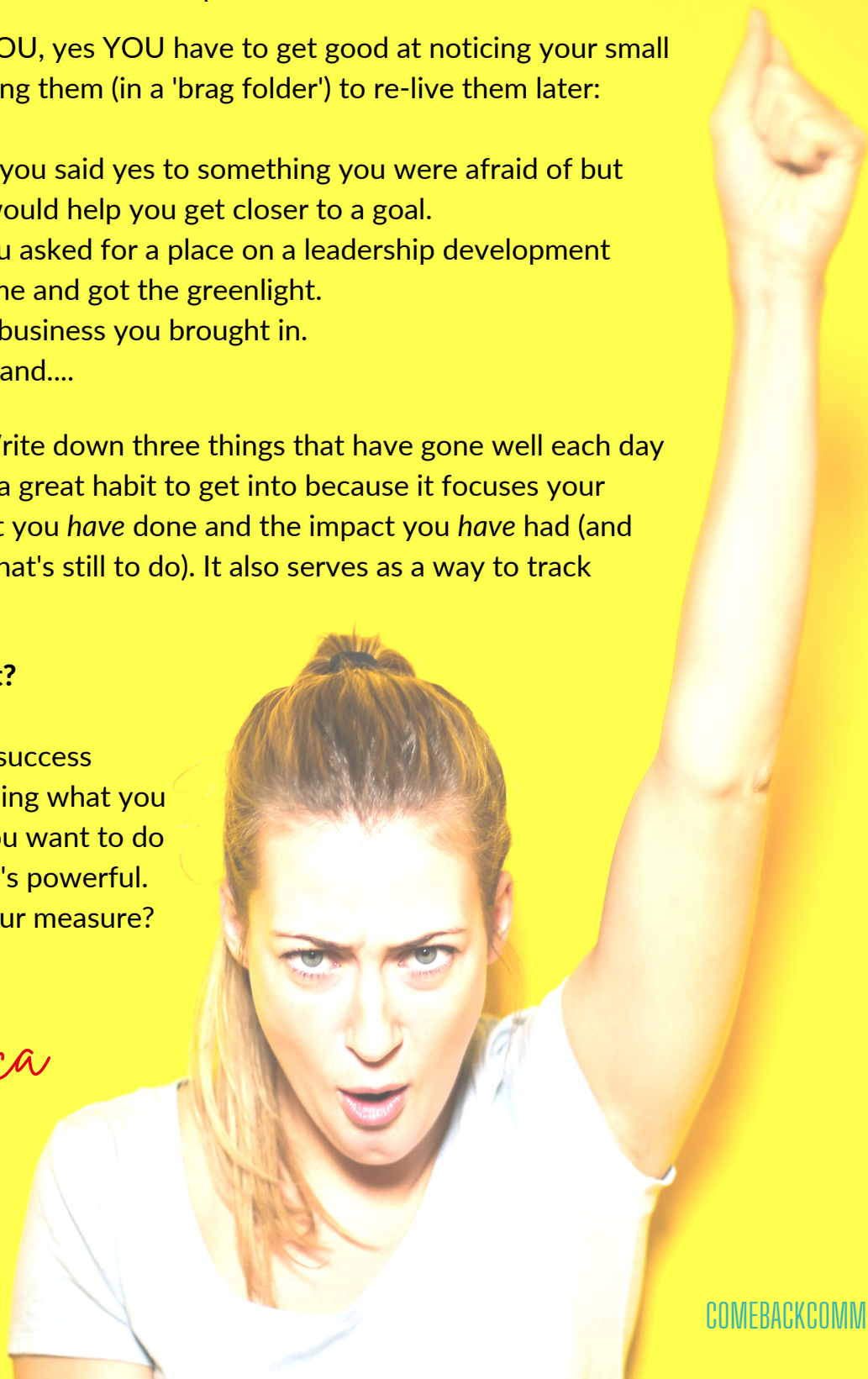
- The time you said yes to something you were afraid of but knew it would help you get closer to a goal.
- When you asked for a place on a leadership development programme and got the greenlight.
- The new business you brought in.
- And, and and....

**TRY THIS:** Write down three things that have gone well each day and why. It's a great habit to get into because it focuses your mind on what you *have* done and the impact you *have* had (and away from what's still to do). It also serves as a way to track progress.

## Final thought?

I once heard success defined as doing what you want, how you want to do it. I think that's powerful. Make that your measure?

Jessica



# NEXT STEPS

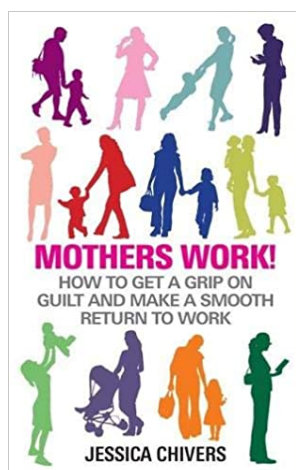
Identify three actions to take in the next three months.

Write down three actions and block time in your diary. Remember your why and go do.

**TRY THIS:** Tell a colleague what you're doing for accountability and/or encouragement.

# REFERENCES & RESOURCES

- Divergent thinking: Oprezzo, M. and Schwartz, D.L. Give your ideas some legs. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* (2014) Vol. 40, No. 4, 1142–1152
- The power of small wins: <https://hbr.org/2011/05/the-power-of-small-wins>



BOOK



PODCAST



MONTHLY EVENTS

## ABOUT US

**Comeback Community™** is a scalable, digital solution from The Talent Keeper Specialists.

We are on a mission to keep everyone everywhere feeling confident, connected and cared for when they take extended leave from work. Our clients include ITV, CIPD & BlackRock and **we'd love you to tell your HR Team about us.**



Join our conversations: @ComebackCommUK | @TalentKeepersUK

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