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In Science and Technology, Efforts to Lure Women Back

By SUE SHELLNBARGER



It will come as no surprise that many career re-entry programs, designed to help at-home mothers return to the work force, are disappearing, victims of hard times among the Wall Street firms and banks that led the so-called on-ramping trend.

But a new bright spot is emerging. Small, innovative return-to-work programs are springing up in other sectors -- specifically in science, engineering and technology. Prospects for long-term job growth in these fields are relatively good, and many employers expect a talent shortage, partly because of high quit rates among experienced women.

Honeywell, General Electric, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and even the British government have all launched programs to provide women scientists, engineers and technicians the tools they need to jump-start stalled careers. Some of the new programs provide only training, coaching, networking and referrals, while others offer actual jobs with lower return-to-work barriers through special training or mentoring.

"Even in this troubled labor market, their prospects are good," says Carol Fishman Cohen, a career re-entry consultant, of women in these fields. Government contractors, engineering-related businesses and other employers that stand to benefit from the government's economic-stimulus plan, in particular, are faring relatively well, adds Ms. Cohen, co-founder of iRelaunch.com, a Web site for professionals, employers and universities.

Rachelle Berk, Northborough, Mass., a nuclear engineer and a student in a "Career Reengineering" retraining program offered by MIT, is among those who stand to gain. The MIT program, now in its third year, is instilling the confidence she needs to return to work after four years at home with her children, now 3 and 6, says Ms. Berk, who hopes to find work developing sustainable-energy sources. "It was exactly what I needed," she says of the MIT program. Dawna Levenson, director of the 10-month program, sees enrollment expanding to 24 as early as next fall, up from 10 currently.

The new efforts aim to counteract a "brain drain" caused by the exodus of large numbers of women from these fields in the prime of their careers. While 41% of highly qualified scientists, engineers and technicians in lower-tier jobs are female, more than half eventually quit midcareer, based on research by the Center for Work-Life Policy's Sylvia Hewlett and others, published last year in the Harvard Business Review. Women in these fields face isolation, extreme job pressures and long hours; they often become most discouraged about 10 years into their careers -- just as family pressures also tend to intensify.

Still, after years at home, many women scientists and engineers yearn to return to research and development. Last November, Honeywell launched a hiring program with an extensive training and mentoring component for engineers who have been out of the work force, in partnership with the Society of Women Engineers. The company has received hundreds of resumes and plans to begin hiring soon, says Lee Woodward, a vice president. Among the applicants: Karen English, an Alpharetta, Ga., product-development scientist. After six years at home with her daughter, now 12, Ms. English is excited about her prospects; "everything looks possible," she says.

BBN Technologies, a 700-employee research concern in Cambridge, Mass., is stepping up recruiting efforts to lure at-home professionals back to work, with plans to start holding luncheons for ex-employees this year, says Susan Wuellner, vice president, human resources. The networking seems to be working: Barbara MacKay, an engineer who rejoined BBN in 2007 after five years at home, now is recruiting another at-home mom to the company, Ms. MacKay says.

On a larger scale, IBM offers an extended-leave program that enabled Tami Garneau, a software product manager in Research Triangle Park, N.C., to return to work there amid the economic gloom of last October, after an extended leave with her two children.

Despite the sagging economy, "IBM was fully receptive," allowing her to work from home, she says. "That transition back in was great."

Internationally, General Electric has launched a program called Restart in its Bangalore, India, research center, offering flexible work and other incentives to lure female technologists back to work after having children, a spokesman says. And the British government is funding a 12-week on-ramping program in Bradford, England, and recently began handing out re-training grants, says Annette Williams, director.

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