

**Jonathan Dahl**

VP, Chief Content Officer, Korn Ferry



## The Right Homecoming

I have missed her. A colleague whose contagious energy and wit touched the magazine I ran back then with one creative flair after another. And then she was gone. Off to travel some, start a family, and, I hear, launch a thriving freelance business.

Now, after all these years, she is back. At least metaphorically. In one of the more important jobs developments this year, US Labor Department stats suggest that older women, many of whom took hiatuses like my colleague, are coming back and joining corporate payrolls. And doing so in force.

It makes sense; many have watched their kids move on, or gone through a divorce, or watched their successful entrepreneurial or freelance ventures run out of steam. Still others worry about retirement or health coverage. But whatever the reason, their return raises a critical question: What roles will companies offer them?

The assumption is that someone like my colleague would be judged by the great work she has done and the years of experience she has (not to mention her savvy, leadership potential, and so on). It's how we'd assume men would be judged, right? But we know, of course, that's going to be battle number one. Men, after all, continue to hold the huge majority of higher management and higher

executive roles. And, no matter what sex you are, companies tend to devalue experience from a distant past.

The upshot from all this is how these returning women will affect a pressing issue: the gender pay gap. As we have pointed out before, the gap between what men and women earn is not large when the same company and same job are involved—usually a 2 percent to 3 percent difference globally, according to Korn Ferry research. But once you pull the lens back and move across sectors and countries,

that same research shows the gap grows disturbingly large—as high as 20 percent and 30 percent. As Ben Frost, a rewards data expert at Korn Ferry, explains, it's the male dominance in higher paying roles that creates the gap.

Now comes a chance to attack this persistent problem in perhaps in a meaningful way, by placing women who are returning to work in strong and sensible roles—and at pay levels their male colleagues are getting. To be sure, it's going to be complicated for firms to balance the experience someone had in their past with the tech skills and time lost during their break. But, in my mind, the winning firms will be the ones that create career ramps for this group to deal with issues of rust, and to ensure they land in promising positions and at the right pay levels. In other words, the homecoming they deserve. ▀

