

# BusinessWeek

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IN DEPTH -- SECOND CAREERS

## Time Out Well Spent

### A playbook for getting the most out of your break between jobs

Not all career changers move fluidly from job to job. Many seasoned professionals take a respite, perhaps to travel, write a book, or just contemplate what they really want to do next.

But even though you're between jobs and treading into unfamiliar territory, you still want to make sure you're never really out of the market. Whatever you do to occupy yourself can become a selling point on your next résumé if you manage your time wisely.

Vance W. LaVelle, now 49, took a number of unexpected turns on her path toward switching from a career in banking to satellite radio. She chose to leave her job as chief marketing officer at PNC Bank in Pittsburgh ([PNC](#)) after five years of commuting from her New York home. "I was feeling a pull, ready to do something new and different," she says.

LaVelle tried a number of different things in her 10 months of searching for a new gig. In the end, her pursuits during the transition "made her more attractive to employers than if she had just passed her résumé around," says Hope Dlugozima, author of *Six Months Off: How to Plan, Negotiate, and Take the Break You Need Without Burning Bridges or Going Broke*.

Using LaVelle's experience as a model, here's a playbook for how you might structure your own professional interregnum:

#### 1 IMAGINE WHAT YOU'D LIKE TO DO IF YOU HAD NO CONSTRAINTS

LaVelle started her transition period with a long to-do list of what she wanted to accomplish. But first, there were practical concerns. LaVelle launched her own marketing consulting firm to provide income and help her stay connected in her field while giving her the flexibility to branch out. Then she turned her attention to new opportunities she wanted to explore: As a dog lover, she thought it would be fun to try dog training. She was also interested in pursuing some board directorships and taking some classes. "It's O.K. to have that sophomore-in-college mindset," says Dlugozima, now vice-president of community and membership at WebMD.

#### 2 CREATE AN ELEVATOR PITCH

What is this? It's a 30-second answer to the inevitable question, "What do you do?" It's how you describe your transition time to the world, and it gives potential business associates an easy way to remember you.

LaVelle didn't know whether she wanted to build a big consulting business, become a consultant with a larger firm, or go back into a corporate position. By telling people she was a marketing consultant, she had the elevator pitch she needed to network into new business situations. It's important to be honest. "If you intend to take some time off to do some exploration, don't be shy about telling people that," Dlugozima says.

### 3 HIT THE PHONES AND THE E-MAIL LIST

An old boss of LaVelle's said to her: "Build relationships before you need them, and keep them strong because they are more important to you than what you know how to do." Such relationships launched LaVelle's consulting business. "With three phone calls to my professional network, I had more consulting work than I wanted," she recalls.

LaVelle also plugged into the conference circuit. After learning of a chief marketing officer summit taking place at Harvard University, she made a cold call to the sponsor and talked her way into a key speaking slot on the program. "Such visibility is invaluable," says Janice Reals Ellig, co-CEO of Chadick Ellig, a New York executive-search firm, and co-author of *Driving the Career Highway*.

### 4 JUST DO IT

In between consulting assignments, LaVelle started checking things off her list. She attended OnBoard Bootcamp in New York, a program to help director candidates master the board selection process, took cooking and home-repair classes, and hosted a business-development event with the government of New Zealand for the America's Cup trials in Spain. "I tried to do all the things I couldn't do because I worked full-time," she says. One of her biggest fears was that she would lag behind on the technical side of her business. So she enrolled in a course to become proficient in new media trends, such as RSS feeds and blogging.

What intrigued her most was the chance to become a dog breeder and trainer. "Dogs are my passion," says LaVelle, who has room for one goldendoodle in her apartment. Through a contact she landed an informal apprenticeship with the chief of the canine unit of the Port Authority of New York/New Jersey, who allowed her to shadow him for the day. "He told me I'd fall in love with the dogs, and I'd never be able to let them go," says LaVelle. Realizing she would have serious separation issues convinced her she wasn't cut out for dog training.

LaVelle also pursued opportunities she didn't anticipate. In the fall of 2005 a fund-raising event she organized for her University of Alabama sorority along the Gulf Coast of Florida had to be evacuated when Hurricane Katrina hit. While the disaster unfolded, she had an idea. She knew the inner workings of filing insurance claims from her experience on an insurance company advisory board. Why not help homeowners navigate the insurance claim process, coordinate contractors, and negotiate with the local governments to get services? Within days, she had several homeowners willing to hire her. The only problem was that she was supposed to be living in New York with her husband, so she decided not to take the business. "It's O.K. to try new things, and then move in a different direction if things don't work out," advises Dlugozima.

### 5 MAKE A DECISION

At some point, professionals in transition are apt to have all the information they need to move forward. Although she enjoyed consulting, LaVelle realized in the summer of 2006 that she wanted to go back to a corporate job. "I'm an operator," she says. "I like to get my hands dirty and do the work, vs. telling others how to do it," says LaVelle, who still might return to consulting some day.

Her robust network led her to two promising marketing positions based in New York. One, with General Electric ([GE](#)), would have required a lot of travel. The other is the one she took, as senior vice-president for customer sales, service, and marketing at Sirius Satellite Radio ([SIRI](#)). "I never thought I'd end up in the entertainment industry after nearly 20 years in financial services," says LaVelle. Coincidentally, Sirius is another name for the Dog Star. So on a psychic level, she says, her new job married her divergent interests.

By Toddi Gutner

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