



## Equality Talks Podcast - Transcript

### Episode 6: Career breaks, confidence and networking for returners

Today's guest is Michelle Ayyuce. She started her career in B2B business development roles within the tech industry, working for a large multi-national. Her first leadership role was managing the Australia and New Zealand marketing team and strategic direction, before being appointed to an Asia-Pacific marketing operations' role.

In between the two she had children, which led her to part time, job share, do contract work, and then with three kids under five, she stepped out of the workforce for four years. She then experienced first-hand how her past skills seemed irrelevant, and no-one could see past the gap.

This eventually led Michelle to co-found ZIPWIRE, with a mission to make this market visible and create re-entry pathways for women who press pause on their careers. I'm so excited to talk to you today Michelle, thank you so much for joining me.

Michelle Ayyuce:

Thank you for having me.

Samantha:

I met your co-founder, Andrea, and we had a great chat about ZIPWIRE, and what the mission of ZIPWIRE is. I was wondering if you could share a bit about that with everybody who's listening?

Michelle Ayyuce:

Yeah, it's nice. So ZIPWIRE was obviously started because of my experience and frustration of trying to return to work. I sort of found, with going through that process that equally had seen women who are amazing talent and high calibre expertise that we're not getting back in. And then on the flip side, seeing that businesses were looking for talent and we were having the discrepancy between women in leadership and at that point cited that my gut feel said like this isn't right.

Michelle Ayyuce:

We should be able to get back in. And our past previous experience that was just as relevant as they were. And so that's where ZIPWIRE was originally set up. We wanted to start to change the conversation with businesses and to really raise the visibility of this talent pool and to create, re-entry pathways for women returning, which we'd known to be quite successful overseas with more formalized programs. So really that's our mission is to get your talented women back into their careers and working perhaps for roles.

Samantha:

Why is it, do you think that women who've had career gaps like that become kind of invisible to the workforce?

Michelle Ayyuce:

So I think for a number of reasons, I think when you step out that probably is an assumption that you, maybe you're less interested in your career. And I think that's the first thing that we're trying to make people aware. That it is most people are taking these breaks pressing pause and not objecting. And so when you're on these breaks your life becomes you're focused on different things, you've got different priorities and so corporations aren't seeing that.

Michelle Ayyuce:

You're not on anyone's email distribution list anymore. You're not engaged or have access to the networking activities that were previously there. So you're really just not seen. So I think that's probably the main bit of the visibility factor to it. And in talking to so many corporations when we start these conversations, you hear that they're like, "Oh no, we wouldn't discriminate against anyone who's had a career break."

Michelle Ayyuce:

And then I'd ask the question I go, "Well how many people within your leadership team or in your high management have had career break?" And then they start kind of thinking and they realize there isn't anyone there. So I think sometimes invisibility is just because the people who are generally in senior positions have had linear careers. And I just don't have to lift experience of knowing that there is this whole cohort of talent out there that's just not entering the workforce and they ended up working what we find is generally below competency to get their foot in the door.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And that's probably the main option that there is at the moment so that they're just grateful to have a job at the end of the day when after they returned. So I just don't think, yeah, people are saying that.

Samantha:

It's so interesting the idea that people who have a career break it, that it means that they're not interested in their career like that's the assumption, like I love these, that they're pressing pause, not pressing eject. And I was actually having a really interesting conversation with a friend just the other day about how there is a really big focus at the moment on women in senior leadership.

Samantha:

But actually to be a CEO of an ASX 200 company is a single minded pursuit and a very tiny portion of any people get into that position. And actually maybe we could start looking at success through a different lens that isn't just, that's one single path to really senior leadership in big organizations. And I think that women who've taken quite a bit of time off to look after children like Ken have changed their opinion about what success is.

Samantha:

Not because they're hitting pause in their career, but because like you say, all the people in senior leadership usually have a very linear path towards that and there's people now starting to look outside that one path to success.

Michelle Ayyuce:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think it's also I guess that definition of what success means to someone is going to be something different for someone else. And I think being able to work to your full potential and have a purposeful role is really what drives most humans to be honest, in terms of just feeling like they're contributing to something that's greater than themselves.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And this is a fundamental need of everyone. And there's actually an interesting study that was put even that spoke about even just the need for one day a week. I think it was and it was a Cambridge report that you need one day a week of being paid to work for that sense of mental health benefits. And I think it's a really interesting thing because a lot of women who do take the timeout, will continue doing volunteering type roles.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And yet what if that sense of purpose and fulfillment does come from the workforce to a degree as well. So it's really important that they have the opportunity to get back in and find those purposeful roles. And I think when we look at the skills we need to actually take on the roles of the future problem solving, having that resilience, adaptability, communication skills, this is what this particular cohort bringing in abundance and they're the things that we should also be looking for when we're looking at what type of people we want to hire and to I guess, take on those roles that we're looking for tomorrow.

Samantha:

So can I go back to the study you just mentioned, because I have not ever heard of this study. So what's they found that you need to do one day a week of paid work to feel like you have a meaningful career. Is this what...

Michelle Ayyuce:

No, not so much meaningful career but it's just the mental health benefits of being paid to do work. So although volunteering work is absolutely can be fulfilling, I think that what it kind of identified was you don't need having being paid actually increases there is a mental health benefits and we say that a lot with women coming back in to the workforce of wanting that sense of purpose.

Michelle Ayyuce:

So it's actually there's a need within them to actually be paid and it is for financial because when you're on having a career break, you're financially dependent and although we're not no matter how great your relationship is that sense of needing to contribute is equally as important. But I guess what this study also demonstrated was there was also mental health benefit of having these women back in.

Samantha:

I actually had no idea that there was a sort of studied link between mental health and being in paid work. But it does make sense. It also makes sense given the way our society is structured, where this

success path is about getting to the senior leadership in a big company. And so the financial contribution is valued really strongly in our society without very strong male breadwinner model and stuff. So that's really interesting.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And I think that's, I mean, and it's particularly in Australia, that breadwinner mentality is very, very much entrenched and kind of sort of dictates a lot of what decisions get made within their family structures across Australia. But I think is where I guess it hasn't been a massive shift in how our society operates, is that more women have got educated, they've had the experience of working within corporate environments progressing and achieving and experiencing what it's like to be in these leadership positions.

Michelle Ayyuce:

But then that's still taking that time out. And I think that's why in particular in this point in time now that we've got such an abundance of people that sit within this particular pool of talent that we haven't had in previous generations. And that's why we saying that workforce has really needs to evolve and how do we engage them? Because at the moment they're quite excluded from recruitment processes and just generally engagement within the business community.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And so a lot of it's about how do we include them moving forward because we can't keep I've got a 13 year old daughter and like watching her flourish and the opportunities she has and watching her grow. And I'm just sort of like I don't want her to get to the point where we get to the same situation. Whereas if she does take time out that everything she has to step back and begin her career again, I think we should be building them up to have to accept that people are going to have disrupted careers, which at the moment disproportionately affect women. And I think if we can just start to be a little bit more open minded about how we go about doing that will make a massive difference as we move forward.

Samantha:

So one of the things you sort of asked rhetorically a couple of times then is how do we include these women? How do we include them when they've stepped out? And so how do people include them? How do you include women who stepped out of their career and want to re-enter the workforce?

Michelle Ayyuce:

Yeah. So look, I mean, there's this number of ways and I think first of all there's the option of actually strategically recognizing that this talent pool exists and to include them by way of return to work programs. So there's sometimes termed returnships, which was first coined by Goldman Sachs in 2008 when their first returnship program. And that was essentially an internship program, but it was targeted at professional women who had two plus years out of their career and they wanted to engage that group and bring them on board.

Michelle Ayyuce:

So what would happen was that we're competing against other returners. They were women who had degree qualify and they were able to come on the onboarded with transitional support. So having the mentor, having coaches and having line managers who were trained to actually help them transition back into the workforce. And so this model has continued to evolve and has been extremely successful.

And probably it's best sort of evidence-base we've got of showing that the transition, if there's a support a transition that these women can flourish.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And if organizations actually just acknowledged and say, "Yeah, we want you." That makes a massive difference not only to the confidence of returners, but it really helps to engage them to actually want to apply to the organization. So it's sort of a win-win for both organizations. And so that's one way that they can be included. I mean, another way that they can be included also is simply by like a lot of organizations offer training programs, webinars there's networking conferences, so all these things that when you're in the workforce, you sort of take for granted that their accessibility and you're seeing that all the time.

Michelle Ayyuce:

Whereas returners are sort of shut down of that market because they don't belong to a company. They're not on anyone's radar, so no one's talking to them. So I think there is a massive opportunity for organizations to start talking to this group and offering various strains, some depending on what industry it is, where returners are welcome to come in and are in fact invited to come in. Because as you can imagine, if you had a career break, and we have spoken to women who have had up to 17 years out of the workforce turning up to a networking event, I think even the word networking sends them into a state of paralysis of fear.

Michelle Ayyuce:

But if they're wanting to turn up to one of these events and you don't have a title, you're dreading the question tell me about yourself or what do you do? They're not really a comfortable environment to one even turn up to, but two present your best self because that's just not really an inclusive environment. So again, I think there's an opportunity to welcome them back and provide, engage them within that, those sort of parameters.

Samantha:

So with the returnship I've seen some of these advertise before actually, and it's a really interesting idea. I like what you said that it shows women predominantly who are looking to return after a career gap that the company does value them and wants to bring them in. I suppose my question about them is that there are kind of two sides to the issue. I think of someone having a career gap and a lot of what you talked about initially was that women, they're kind of excluded in like you said your own experience was that it was like all of your other years of experience pre having your career break where relevant and you didn't have those skills anymore. And then the other side of it is the kind of the confidence of the women who are applying.

Samantha:

And I would have thought that things like the transitional support and having mentors and stuff, definitely a positive thing to do. But that sounds to me as if they're suggesting that the issue is the confidence of the women returning to work, not the opportunities available to women returning to work. And I wondered whether when people come into these returnships, if they end up in that position of working below their capability, being underpaid, that kind of stuff or if they really do provide stretch opportunities then and a legitimate kind of pathway to a big strong career forward, what do you think about them?

Michelle Ayyuce:

Yeah, really good question. So the thing, I guess the great thing about the returnship programs, I mean if they're delivered correctly, is that the women go in and I mean roles at competency and at the pay that the value of what that job is. So that kind of takes out all those other elements of whether they're sort of going in the low competency. So it's very much that what the returnship does is actually takes a career path, I guess off the table. Like, I mean, I guess it's the one incident where you need to have had it to actually even apply for the role.

Michelle Ayyuce:

So because otherwise if you're just generally going out to the normal broader recruitment pool, if you're up against someone who's doing a role today versus you've had maybe a five year career gap, it's very difficult. Hiring managers will almost always go with someone who's doing it recently because you're seen as a risk. So I guess what the returnship programs do it. It is actually put you into roles that you're going to be working at competency. And the success rate of the women's staying on in these programs is quite high, varies between industries.

Michelle Ayyuce:

But I know sometimes in the tech industry when they're from them it's up to them money percent retainment of the women once they've gone for through the three month program. So, and look, and again, a lot of the coaching is really just helping, probably not so much confidence, but also more so around just that transitional process. So if you have been a primary carer for a long period of time you identify as that person. So, there's a psychological element that goes on when you now going, "Okay, no, I'm going to re-engage the professional identity that I had," and throwing yourself back into that.

Michelle Ayyuce:

So it's not a matter of clicking your fingers and hoping everything comes back to you in terms of identifying with that person. So it's really just coaching them through to say to be comfortable with being back into the workforce, managing the home front, a little bit of transitional parts of maybe needing to outsource some other things and really just helping them to navigate the new environment that they're working in.

Michelle Ayyuce:

Which is sometimes not just similar to anyone starting a new job to be honest and working in new organization, but perhaps sometimes the language of just something you acronyms or new ways of working maybe if they're in an agile environment, for example. So some of those things just to provide that little bit of extra support may be required or it may not be. I'm really, I mean obviously it depends on the company and the role but again, what this does is just provide a really streamline approach back in.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And look, ideally it'd be great if we didn't actually have to do a returnship program and people the recruitment process it didn't have the biases that exist today. And returners were seen as extremely valuable on the onset and they didn't have to sort of justify their career breaks away.

Samantha:

Yeah, totally. So let's talk a little bit about what ZIPWIRE actually did because you were on workshops with people who are in or have had career breaks. And what do you do in those workshops? What do you do for these women and what's your kind of... How do you help them?

Michelle Ayyuce:

Yes. So what we do in the workshops is really go through a number of the key barriers that we see that women face from a personal level when returning. So, we try to address those so they can overcome them to move forward. Because returning to work is definitely a journey that's broken up into phases of, from that moment of going that little secret, it's like, right, I'm going back to work to the point of re-entry. It can be anywhere from months to years.

Michelle Ayyuce:

So, depending on what stage you're at, I guess in your own mind. So some of the things we go to throw is really for returners to be clear on what they want to and to get that clarity. So the asking the questions, what's the career you're on before still of interest? Is that still where you want to go or do you want to do the same thing but perhaps in a different industry or maybe upon reflection your past career isn't really what you want to do anymore. And so really it's just trying to get that clarity start the ball rolling.

Michelle Ayyuce:

Because what we find is that without that clarity, it's really difficult to explain yourself to potential employees and really have a really crystal clear message that you're taking out to market. And we find that a lot of returners will because a lot of them have achieved so much in a lot of different areas and it's sort of trying to narrow that down a little bit so we don't, you don't make employers try to join the dots to where you want to go. So really that's the first thing.

Michelle Ayyuce:

Another thing is looking at believing in the value that they have to offer. So over the course of a career break the value that you bring in the skills that you had and still do have, because that's like the number one thing. You don't lose your skills, you don't unlearn things. So it's really believing in that again and being confident in what you have to offer for your skills, your knowledge, your expertise and take really believing in that because if you don't, and an employer is going to they want to be able to believe in it either.

Michelle Ayyuce:

So that's like, we really encourage and I think one thing we talked to our returners is about, and I experienced this myself just last week where I went to a Christmas catch up with old colleagues from Nortel where I used to work and I hadn't seen some of those people for 15 years. And, but when you turn up to these events your vision and your memory of people, it's really frozen in time. And that's what we speak to returners about, that people, they don't know what's happening in between, but that'd be out of sight and I have three things that they thought about you back then.

Michelle Ayyuce:

So sometimes we I mean encourage returners when we're going through this believing in your value is to go back and talk to people you used to work with and say, "Can you tell me three things about what you remember about working with me?" And they'll be able to say it at the drop of a hat because yeah,

you'll remember someone who was a really great communicator, although the best project manager I ever worked with. And sometimes just having that affirmation makes a massive difference to building that belief again. And then I guess one of the major other things we focus on is really around networking and building a network.

Michelle Ayyuce:

So we know that most people returners in light of not many, I guess return to work programs then available in Australia at the moment is that we encourage returners to really focus on building up their network. And this is a little bit different to a typical job search because you've got to, you need to go sort of beyond I guess just the ex-colleagues. It's sort of really opening up to different avenues to re-engage yourself within the professional workforce. So we encouraged them to draw out a map of I guess all the different areas of their life.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And that can be from kids sporting teams to your hobby groups to make it obviously still include ex colleagues but friends, family and looking at different people in different industries and wringing dating with buyers and having conversations that are work related as opposed to talking about your children potentially. So we find that's a really important part. And another part of that is also at the network is attending industry events, attending there so many free activities that go on way.

Michelle Ayyuce:

You kind of have an opportunity to learn new things. But also taking that opportunity to when you go to these events is to perhaps talk to the speaker at the end of the event. Set yourself a goal of meeting one new person, whatever it might be. We find that extremely important, not only to feel kind of rebuild that professional identity again, but build that confidence and get the industry language fresh in your head.

Samantha:

One of the things you said that I really liked was the idea that when people come back after career break, they need to be really clear on what they want to do because I do think it's important to acknowledge that having kids does change you and it changes your priorities. And a lot of people have kids and they're like, "Well, I don't want to be away from them if it's for something that doesn't feel meaningful and doesn't actually bring something to my life." And so do you find that often when you're talking to women at this stage that they're reconsidering what they used to do and what they actually want to do that feels meaningful enough to even kind of bother going back into the workforce?

Michelle Ayyuce:

Yeah, absolutely. And we go, we have a lot of people who are being very defined in terms of I'm definitely not going back into what I was doing before. I want to do something completely different. But sometimes as I go along the journey, they actually when I really consider it, they actually do end up wanting to go back down there because it actually is what they find actually got a lot of personal fulfillment from doing those particular jobs.

Michelle Ayyuce:

But again, for other people it's sort of if I'm going to spend time away from my family I want to make it worthwhile. I want it to be turning up somewhere each day where I feel I'm making a difference, I'm

growing or whatever the personal drivers are. And I think that's the main important thing about it is understanding what it is that you personally want to get out of it.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And I think we can sometimes get a little bit fixated in this linear career world sometimes they've you get your degree, you go to work and you progress up and this is how it all works. And I think after having kids it really is I don't know your perspective changes and how you evaluate the situation it is different and I think a lot of career breaks are filled with such variety of activities that it's just, it gives you a different perspective on what you'd want out of life.

Michelle Ayyuce:

So I think that's it is an important, I guess, part of returning, which we actually tell returners to you need to spend a lot of time doing this part of it where, I mean most people just need reaction is, I'm going back to work, I'm going to update my saving. And it's actually it's not the worst thing you can do. I mean you have to do that at some point, but it's really, I think the time's ending understanding who you are and what you want to do is the better use of time. And then before you go on that next stage.

Samantha:

Yeah. So interesting. So a friend of mine has... She works with mothers about kind of finding meaning in their life, not necessarily through career. She's not a career coach particularly, but often of course trying to find meaning does result in changing your career or going back to work. But she has actually coined the term we go through adolescence when you move from being a teenager into being an adult. And this transition like this metamorphosis.

And then she's talked about the idea of Matrescence, like the adolescence of motherhood. So when you go from being a woman to being a mother and how it does there's a few years where you're kind of deep in the trenches and not getting enough sleep and then you do get changed by that. And I really resisted that idea for such a long time. I didn't really know why I have a six year old and then it's like, actually, of course you do. Like you cannot be changed by such a big life experience and all the things that go along with that.

Michelle Ayyuce:

Yeah, I absolutely agree. And I think, well, I found in particular myself is my kids now 13, 11 and nine, so I look at life. I, that every phase is slightly different and there is lots of different phases. So when that sometimes you think something is such a going to last ever, but then it changes again. And I think that ability to adapt and realize that something's not forever either.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And that just to have that mindfulness at it. Life is a bunch of different phases that we're going through and kids are going to need you less at certain times more at other times it might be more physical support of helping them feed them and dressing them. So then it becomes a sickening, all of the more emotional support. And just having that presence and being able to listen to them and say, "Download their day to you," so that's what I'm becoming quite mindful of as we go through this phase.

Samantha:

Yeah. And so then one of the other things you talked about was people going and talking to old colleagues and people that know them and people they've worked with to help kind of help them believe in the capabilities again. And I just wanted to kind of point out with that sometimes to us it can feel like it's been a really long time since we spoke to someone. And so then it's like, "Oh, I don't want to call that person. I haven't spoken to them for five years and how can I call any longer? How can I call them and say, "Tell me what was so great about working with me."

Samantha:

But I recently, I've had two experiences where one was a guy that used to be my boss and I can't even quite recall how he got the initial, I think maybe I asked him to be a referee or something. And then he was like, let's have lunch. And we went and had lunch and it was just like, even though I hadn't seen him for probably six years, it was actually like a reigniting of that professional relationship, which was really great.

Samantha:

And then similarly, a guy who used to report to me is trying to go through some career transition and wanted some advice. And so I definitely haven't spoken to him for more than six years and he reached out and asked if we could meet up for coffee. And even after all this time I was like, "Of course we can." Like he's still definitely part of my active network. We just haven't spoken to each other for a while.

Samantha:

And so I think that's a good thing to remember too when you're going out that no one is thinking that you should be in touch with everyone from your whole network all the time. They're still part of your network. Even you haven't seen them for five years, in 10 years, they'll remember you if he had a good working relationship at the time.

Michelle Ayyuce:

Yeah, absolutely. And we see a lot that returners are quite hesitant and so we encourage them start with you've kind of friendly people that you know and do it step by step because every time you tell me a story and have these conversations, it gets easier and easier. So it's sort of you just needs to start is what we encourage them to actually do. And even just to sit down with a friend and just say, "Tell me honestly, give me yes three things that you think I'm great at, or tell me about me just to start to build that.

Michelle Ayyuce:

But that's just, I looked at her, I need to be in touch with everyone throughout your career break constantly. But what you did need to be mindful of is when you're ready, it's take that opportunity and be confident that they actually people will remember you and they will be willing to have a conversation with you. And I've found that in particular, even with starting ZIPWIRE, how many people are willing to sit down and talk, which is brilliant.

Samantha:

Yeah. Totally people are so willing to help aren't they? And people often I think feel really, I mean honoured is probably quite too strong a word, but they feel really happy to be asked for advice and suggestions and what they think. People I think really appreciate that.

Michelle Ayyuce:

Oh, absolutely. I mean to feel like your opinions valued and that they might be able to help you in some ways. I think it's that sort of basic giving the human need that people have their fulfillment. It's like, yes, I've been able to help someone move forward and share their advice and I think it's quite powerful.

Samantha:

Yeah. Totally. So tell me a little bit more about what you've learnt doing ZIPWIRE. So what are the challenges that women are talking about most commonly and for each of those challenges, how do you help people work through them?

Michelle Ayyuce:

Yes, there's a variety of challenges that you come up against. So like, so one for example is just the home front. So from a personal point of view, it's sort of trying to work out if you're being the primary carer. And I guess maybe at this point I'll also point out that returners build on majority have come been raising children. We are saying a lot who have also had time out to look after their elderly parents or also other women who have had illnesses and been recovering from that.

Michelle Ayyuce:

So there is still a variety, but one is the coming back looking at the home front, if you're being the primary carer and you've had a partner who has gone to work. There's been a sort of a natural operating rhythm of how division of stuff has been done. Now if you're making that decision to return to work, we highly encourage our returners you need to sit down and have a conversation at home.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And it's not just once it's an ongoing conversation because what we find is that although there's the actual activities people do, there's also the mental load that a lot of women shoulder so looking at just kind of, okay, we've got that party coming up. I need to get a gift, I need to, I don't know, organize that appointment. And all those elements that kind of can build up, push it to sort of breaking point of mentally trying to coordinate everything in your life.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And that's quite stressful. So what we encourage you to do is take the time to start the transition even before you go back to work and what it's going to look like, who's going to do what and how you're going to make it work. And that sometimes it's also about letting go of standards. So even though something's been done a certain way, let the needs to be sort of maybe a balancing of those things out a little bit. So maybe you do the washing this way and your partner does it another way. That's okay. The clothes are clean we're all good.

Michelle Ayyuce:

So it's really starting that transition to start with as well. Because I've had a number of returners who have start up the conversation going yep, looking forward to going back to work. I'm just looking for some part time work in school hours where hopefully I can get some school holidays time off as well. And it's like, "Wow. Okay, good luck with finding that because your job search has gone from a whole a massive list or a very defined list which is going to be highly competitive if those jobs even exist.

Michelle Ayyuce:

So instead of saying, "okay, that might not be possible. So being realistic about what is available out there and if you're not possibly going to find a job just in school hours, so is there a way that there's other ways you can manage your family arrangements to allow you to work other hours within the day as well. So that's probably one of the challenges we focus on and that we find women come up against. The other one is really just around within the recruitment process you find the gap here is definitely an issue and we kind of call it like those, this last title syndrome where your last title is just one. It defines everything that you've done in the past, what you can do in the future.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And so we can sort of get past that fixation as that defines who you are and the company you worked for is also dictates what you're going to do potentially as an employee. It really cuts off returners so what we'd just tell returners is just, I mean, you can't... That's a big societal change we need to do to get past the stigma. But equally I would just say, "Look, I mean, again, it goes back to if you believe in your value, you've really just got to work out be able to explain to employer the value you can bring to the role and really research the role, the company and be able to explain how you as a human resource is going to make a difference to that organization and be really specific and focused so they're not joining dots.

Michelle Ayyuce:

You're taking them on that journey. And so that's sort of one of the main advice. The other one is really just looking at yeah, this concept comes up. A lot of women asking should I just get my foot in the door and take any role? And unfortunately that's probably the outcome at the moment for a lot of returners when they going in. So they're starting low because they can't get anything anywhere near their returner levels. So when we had an interesting conversation with the CIO of Computer Share and Shirley had taken four years off to raise her children and she couldn't get back in.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And so she had to negotiate to get into an entry level role. They wouldn't give it to her because they thought she going to be a flight risk and-

Samantha:

Oh my God it's such a catch 22. You can't get a job you're qualified for and you can't get a job that you're overqualified for because you might leave to get a job that you are actually qualified for.

Michelle Ayyuce:

Yeah, exactly. And so here's someone who's sitting there negotiating for a job that she is completely overqualified for. So I mean she's got, she has a really strong technical background and just put it in perspective. What she was doing was organizing the room and presentation material making sure a projector are working like literally just ridiculously far below what her skills and capabilities were. But she goes, I just needed to get my foot in a job.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And like sure enough, she was the one, I guess the lucky ones to be able to have a manager who actually ended up within sort of three months going, okay, hang on. There's obviously a lot more opportunities

within this organization that you should probably be looking for. We could probably use you in other parts. But what her advice was in particular for this is showing that if you're going to take something lower is to work out ways to be able to demonstrate your capabilities.

Michelle Ayyuce:

That every opportunity that you have put your ideas forward and be able to take other projects if they come available. And really just let people know where your skill sets actually are. Get the job done that you have to, that your employees do that use it as a stepping stone and kick sort of that end goal in mind. Now it's not ideal, but I guess the worst case scenario is you don't want to get into it that low level job and just stagnate there either because it does nothing for confidence and not to mention this is where I guess you look at a lot of superannuation, lower wages and all those other elements start to fill the next.

Michelle Ayyuce:

So really. Yeah, I guess that's probably been one of the main challenges if you do have to start in lower levels, is to really just yet focus on that end game and see it as just a step in the process.

Samantha:

And one of the things that you said was that you really encourage people to really research the role, connect the dots through their CV. So it's easy for someone to see how they can do that role of that kind of stuff. But what is your suggestion around getting through that first barrier? So when you're trying to get the interview, you're trying to get through you can put your CV in and you can do your research and you can write a great cover letter and stuff, but when people are getting 200 applications for a job, how do you get through that, this barrier?

Michelle Ayyuce:

You know what networking, your network. Like, I mean, I think I'm yet to find anyone who's actually within there. So it's been able to apply for a job online and be able to get through to be honest. So a lot of it is to find someone who can get that introduction and start that process or be able to if there is a job that is advertised is to find another connection point into it is really the best strategy that we're seeing today.

Michelle Ayyuce:

I don't think it shouldn't need to be that way, but that's always saying, I mean it's other things in terms of where we look at the keywords and stuff that you put into their resume and things like that. But look, ultimately, I think it really comes down to just, yeah, getting in front of more and more people telling them your story, telling them when people ask so how you going? It's like, yeah, great. I'm actually looking at transitioning back into the workforce.

Michelle Ayyuce:

My background staying. Yeah. I'm looking in the health industry and I've got a great project management experience and just starting those conversations with more and more people because what we're finding is that I love the time employers just as frustrated with having to find candidates all the time and when they have to put it up to the broader market and then go through all those resumes and stuff. That's a really, it's a hard process to kind of how do you know?

Samantha:

Right. Yeah. So when you said you don't know anyone who's gone through this process, who has just got a job through applying online my initial reaction was, Oh, that's like dissident heartening. But then I thought, actually I know through another friend of mine who's a career transition coach that she says just across everything that approximately 80% of jobs

Samantha:

achieved through networking and only 20% of jobs that people get are actually from online applications or SEEK or whatever. And so whilst it still is more like you're suggesting that pretty much, most if not all return to work career job seekers are going to have to find them through network. It's not going from zero to a hundred. It's going from 80% to 100%. And so that's actually less of a difference than it might feel like when you first say that.

Michelle Ayyuce:

Yeah, exactly. And I think, and again, when you look at, I mean to me just networking generally, if you've got a recommendation from someone of someone, it just, the risks, the process as well. And I think at the end of the day you just want to find someone who's going to be able to do the role, fulfill the role and meet the KPIs of whatever that is. So I think that's where I see networking even for me when I've hired in the past is definitely I'm much more inclined to do a recommendation versus going broader all the time.

Samantha:

Yeah. Because actually on the flip side, I've had to hire people in the past where I've put it out to SEEK and you can get sometimes two or 300 applications in a couple of days and it's difficult to even figure out how to sift through that, which I think is one of the reasons why people fall into that last title trap that you talked about because you're sifting through a million things. How do you start even to go from 300 to 20 to even kind of consider them properly?

Michelle Ayyuce:

Yeah, absolutely and then you think about, okay, so then as someone who's had a 10 year career break on that, it's the easiest day, my patient point to screen an out. So I said, and that's why this is why the unit fall into no man's land of being screened out and not actually even having a chance to put themselves forward, even if I might be the right candidate for the role. So I guess again, that's what ZIPWIRE is all about is to go, okay, so maybe these traditional models that were, that running for so long in terms of how we recruit, maybe we just need to re look at that a little bit to accommodate.

Michelle Ayyuce:

If the angle is seriously to find talent, we need to kind of redefine and what does that tell look like and how do we get them to be engaged with our company?

Samantha:

Yeah. Okay. And so for someone who is listening and hearing the message that networking is a really critical component of it. You gave a couple of suggestions earlier, but if you were going to give someone two things to go and do right now to increase this other network or engage with the network, what would you say to go and do?

Michelle Ayyuce:

So look, I'm going out right now. What I'll do is to one go back and know, what you're going to do, draw in drawing at work. Now we say you draw a circle in the centre and just met that everyone that you're going to talk to and commit to it and start that process. Because every time you meet someone, a lot of the time they're going to suggest someone else for you to meet with. And then you have that ripple effect that goes on.

Michelle Ayyuce:

So it's really get uncomfortable and just start that journey. So number one is really yeah, go get that clarity and then go map out who it is you want to go talk to. And as I said, all those things, they start to build the confidence in getting out there. I guess another important thing is and I guess part of what we're doing right, and we find this from the workshops, which is an overall thing, is that when people go to that, one of the key things that they all come away with was, I thought I was the only one going through this.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And I think having that I guess being included as in the sort of returner group what it is, is that you're feeling that you're not alone and you haven't failed. And the fact that you're not getting a job or you're not getting the feedback to applying for 20, 100 different things and no one is even acknowledging that you've put the application in, that you've spent hours customizing to get the role. And I think understanding that it's not necessarily a you thing, it's a system thing.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And I think that makes some SM from the workshop and people walk away, they're like, yeah, I thought it was just me. And it's so nice to know that I'm not the only one going through this journey. So I think that's sort of another, I guess piece of it. Not so much what to do, but to keep, be mindful of that yeah, it's something that a lot of women are experiencing no matter what industry they come from.

Samantha:

Yeah, absolutely. And knowing that you're part of a group of people and it's not just you is helpful, isn't it? Because like you've said a couple of times, it's not just about the individual, it's about the system that we're operating within. And when you know that it definitely necessarily make the next step particularly easier. But it does make you realize that it's not personal, that this is what's happening. It's not because you're not good anymore. It's not because you're a failure. It's because the system is set up and structured in such a way that doesn't support people in that circumstance.

Michelle Ayyuce:

Yeah, and it's funny, I'm actually looking at my desk now and I'd put it up and I forgot about this when I was going through the job search and it was a quote by Thomas Edison and it was, I've not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work. And man just, I don't know, like just kept me going because I was just like going through the process, I spent nine months looking full time and yeah, it didn't come up with anything. And after that period you, it's a real struggle.

Michelle Ayyuce:

You start to question yourself and your ability and it's a really tough predicament to sometimes get out of I think. And at that time I didn't realize there's other women going through that. It was not until I started really researching and analysing this market and like completed it was about four to six months of interviews with returners, how to building up ZIPWIRE that I was blown away one by the talent, but also just see a sense of loneliness and isolation these women felt because we don't talk about it when we talk to know people at the school gate or within other social circumstances we don't normally talk about. Yeah, I've been applying for work for now for nine months and haven't got a job. I feel great just, it doesn't come up.

Michelle Ayyuce:

So you're kind of a little bit not so much. Well for me I probably felt a little bit embarrassed to be honest and like, it's like I had failed and I thought I really hadn't failed at anything in life. I've been quite a high achiever and it was a really confronting period. And I think that's probably what sits behind so much of my motivation around ZIPWIRE is that we shouldn't make to feel that way. And I think there's so much steps that are really easy to implement that we can actually change this whole paradigm.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And I think we can get this neat career cohort back in and start actually changing some of these leadership gaps. And I'll only, the other issues that kind of flow on from that in particular for me, like superannuation is a massive eye opener we need to be able to plan for the future. And we need to have that control. It's really important.

Samantha:

Yeah. And one of the things you've said a couple of as well, which I really like is talking about the idea of building your confidence through action. And I really love to live my life by the idea of the concentric circles of comfort zone. So in the middle of the comfort zone and that's the things that you feel totally happy to do. And that's going out to dinner with friends, you know, well and living your normal life.

Samantha:

And then outside of that you'd have your growth zone. And this is where we feel uncomfortable doing these things. But as you do the things that are in your growth, then your comfort zone actually expands. And so when you're talking about networking, the first time you going to have coffee with someone and you're trying to talk about your career, and your job hunting and what you're looking for.

Samantha:

Like it feels really hard. And you don't know what you're going to say and you stumble over the words and each time you build confidence because you have practice saying the words and you've practiced asking them to introduce you to someone else and you've practiced all that stuff so you feel more confident. But also your comfort zone is growing through that comfort is through that confidence as well.

Samantha:

And so then the thing that puts you out of your comfort zone is a bigger, scarier thing that initially you probably would have even tried doing because it felt too scary. But now as your comfort zone expands, you can do it. And so I liked that. The idea of action building your confidence.

Michelle Ayyuce:

Absolutely. And like I've lived that journey firsthand as well to say, I mean I didn't know intended to, start my own business to be honest. So that was that first step out the comfort sign. And it is amazing that every little step you do. Like, if I look back now two years ago and into what I'm actually doing today, it's like, Oh my God, I never, I can't believe I'm doing that.

Michelle Ayyuce:

But each little step so yeah, it does. It does build it. So it does become comfortable. I mean up till then you know what I mean, running workshops with Andrea and stuff and I took her lead in a lot of that because that's her background and yet now that ability to do that is because I just took those actions to feel a little bit of discomfort and do it made such a massive difference.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And I think networking is a great. There each step you do that does make a massive difference. And I guess just another point on that, networking is awesome when you do that and you're turning up it's okay that some conversations are going to be messing and they don't actually go where you think they're going to go. And they might not give you the outcome you're expecting, but just persevere.

Michelle Ayyuce:

I think as you go, just build that clarity also in terms of if I'm going to meet someone, what's my ask? What is it that I can actually... What do I want from the end of this meeting? Because a lot of the times it's not necessarily going, Oh gee, you have a job. Do you want this? It might be just asking them, "I'm looking in this industry, is there any you guys any, I don't know, people I should be following on LinkedIn or articles I should be rating or terminology I should become familiar with or programs or software, whatever it may be that might be of interest.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And so make sure you've got that clarity on what it is that you actually want to ask from people to make it more concise as to helping you move forward in your journey.

Samantha:

Yeah. And I think also the idea of asking for introductions is a great way to have a clearer that gives you a step forward and it gives you also a connection point in the future. So once you've met with that person, you can send that with them. And we talked about this and that was really great and keeps that relationship going. And it helps build a network. Like that to me is a really easy ask to always be considering.

Michelle Ayyuce:

Yeah, absolutely. And I also remember it was actually a little bit of advice from a Holly Ransom and she'd said, if you turn out when you're ending a conversation, also ask them, is there anything I can do for you, which no one ever does. And for particularly for a returner where they're in a state of feeling, what do I have to offer anyone? You'll be surprised what the answer is.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And it might not be right at that moment, but at the end of the day, everyone comes with skills, experience. There are networks and a whole lot that you have got value to offer people. So just the process of asking that question gives you a sense of empowerment, although it might feel awkward and silly. It's like a bit of what am I going to this person is the senior, blah blah blah.

Michelle Ayyuce:

But you'd be surprised what people go. Actually I wouldn't mind knowing blah or actually did, you know, such and such as well. So that's another, I guess a bit of a tip.

Samantha:

Yeah, that is a really good tip. I do want to ask you as a final question, if you could go back in time maybe to pre children and talk to young Michelle, what would you say to her about what was coming?

Michelle Ayyuce:

Oh my gosh, I've actually thought about this question a lot. What I would say to her is, be comfortable with your decisions that you make and there's no right or wrong answer and you have to do what's best for your family and your needs. And to own it. Don't question it. Don't go, I don't know like what society thinks or what your friends think or as if there is some sort of one answer to it.

Michelle Ayyuce:

It's really important to be authentic and true to yourself. The main bit of advice and I think embrace, I guess my period of having the career break was embrace, not having a title. I found that I didn't realize how much my identity was wrapped up in my professional title. And it was about only until I sort of stepped out of there that I realized that you're more than that and I think not to feel uncomfortable about not having an intro, a title and a company that sort of you identify with is actually just be your own person and to take that time to explore the ideas and your sense of self a lot more on my career break because I never want career breaks because someone actually asked me, would you have not done your career break if you knew what was ahead.

Michelle Ayyuce:

And I stopped and thought and the more I thought about it is like absolutely not, but I would've appreciated it more if I had just been a little bit true to myself and saw it as an actual growth experience as opposed to, "Oh my God, I should get back in because this is what I should be doing. If I ever want to get this position or this money or this or that." So that's what would say.

Samantha:

I really hope you enjoyed today's chat. If you can help us spread the word by giving us a review on iTunes, that helps even more people find Equality Talks. To find out more about our mission, check out current opportunities with WORK180 endorsed employers and to read and listen to more inspiring stories. Please head over to [www.work180.co](http://www.work180.co)

See you next time.