

By Emily Nicholson

# Accounting for career breaks

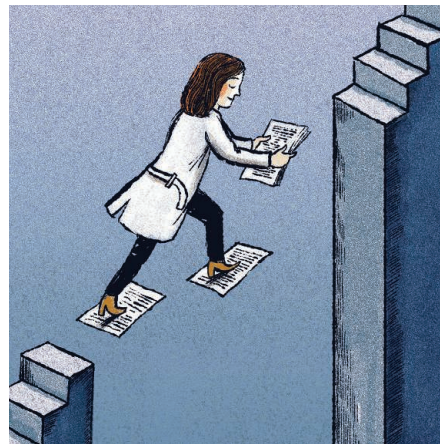
Early in my scientific career, I pursued research while remaining blissfully unaware of the difficulty of securing a permanent academic position, especially for women and mothers. I drifted happily through a Ph.D. and two postdocs abroad, guided by interesting science, people, and places—and a nonscientist husband with ideas about where he wanted to live. It wasn't until I had been a postdoc for several years, with two children and a third on the way, that I recognized the need to adopt a sound strategic approach to securing a tenured faculty position, particularly given my career breaks.

For each of my three sons—born in 2009, 2011, and 2013—I took 8 months of maternity leave, and since then I've worked largely part time and continue to do so. Counted over calendar years, these breaks make my track record look ordinary. My early job applications—using a standard CV that mentioned my maternity leaves only in passing—reflected the apparent ordinariness of that track record: I didn't get so much as an interview. Then, with mentoring and advice from colleagues and friends, I reshaped my CV to account for the time I'd spent raising my family. I put my career breaks front and center, and I reported my productivity metrics to account for my time away from work. Numbers of publications, citation rates, and grant income are used widely to assess and compare researchers, so I wanted to make sure I was judged fairly.

The result: My first application after I made the adjustments yielded a tenured position in the city we had already settled in. Reframing my track record undoubtedly helped. Here's how I did it.

*Get the data.* First, I calculated how many years of full-time equivalent work I've done by tallying the time worked each month (e.g., 0% when on maternity leave, 60% when working part time, and 100% when working full time). Accounting for time off and part-time work, I've worked 5.6 full-time years during the 8.5 calendar years since I finished my Ph.D., the equivalent of 66% of full time. Since my first child was born 6 years ago, I have worked the equivalent of 3.3 full-time years, or 55% of full time. Next, I worked out how much I'd achieved each year in terms of publications, grants, student supervision, and so on.

*Do the math.* Rather than hoping the readers of my application would do the math on their own, I did it for them. I cor-



*“I wanted to make sure I was judged fairly.”*

rected the number of publications I had each year to account for my maternity leaves. For example, in the 6 years since my first son was born I had 23 publications—equivalent to about 42 publications if I had been working full time. Similar corrections can be made to other common metrics: citations, grants, and so on.

*Write about career interruptions up front and in a positive way.* I present the data on career breaks, effective years worked, and achievements at the top of my CV, in cover letters for job applications, and in a prominent position on grant applications. Here's an example: “Since 2009, I have worked the equivalent of approximately 3.3 full-time years, 55% of full time. Yet it has been a highly productive period: 23 publications—including 12 as lead or last author—a research fellowship, and a major grant. On a pro-rata basis, that equates to about 42 publications in 6 years of full-time work.”

I also like to emphasize—without complaining—that working part time while raising kids isn't easy. “This does not account for the effect reduced working hours and travel opportunities has on networking opportunities, which affect collaborations and citation rates. I have nonetheless established several fruitful national and international collaborations, and my research has scientific and practical impacts.” I want readers to think, “If she managed this working part time, with breaks and sleep deprivation, imagine what she'll do once the kids are older!” ■

*Emily Nicholson is a senior lecturer at the Centre for Integrative Ecology at Deakin University, Melbourne Burwood, in Australia. She is grateful to Mick McCarthy and Emma Johnston for their advice. For more on life and careers, visit [sciencecareers.org](http://sciencecareers.org). Send your story to [SciCareerEditor@aaas.org](mailto:SciCareerEditor@aaas.org).*

# Science

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