mastery of important technological advances, warns Kim First, president and chief executive of the recruiting firm Agency Worldwide in Encino, California. As a headhunter who searches for PhD graduates for jobs in biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies, she says that she encounters few candidates who have interrupted their doctoral programme. “The way technology is changing, taking a break can become difficult,” she says. “How do you stay cutting edge?”

Other recruiters say that taking time away to have children or for other life events can hurt a researcher’s scientific reputation, and that students should find ways to incorporate those obligations into their PhD programme without putting their research on pause.

Some think that the stigma might be worse for women. Justin Schwartz, head of the materials science and engineering department at NC State, has helped students to organize leaves of absence. When it comes to parental leave, he says, women are more likely than men to take the time off — but those who do are often stereotyped (sadly, with some reason, he notes) that faculty members will think that they lack the drive to be the best and will extrapolate that women aren’t suited to doing science.

But whether female or male, most students experience one clear consequence after taking the break: they lose momentum. Harding says that although there was a benefit to delaying her dissertation — a competing paper helped her to solve a problem in her data — she now has few job leads near her husband’s medical residency in the Netherlands, and attributes that to having lost potential publications and chances to attend more conferences.

“One of my most important aspects of success is my connections. And you have to keep in touch with them,” she says. “They want people with publications. Life doesn’t always cooperate.” Harding is now networking locally — getting involved, for instance, with a organization in the region that funds research into Parkinson’s disease.

O’Keefe wishes that the harsh judgement weren’t there, but says that it seems specific to academia. “People feel badly and a lot of scientists out there judge them harshly,” she says. “There’s a lot of, ‘If you had to take time off, you’re not really good enough to finish.’” She says that many early-career scientists she knows that interrupted their PhD programs eschewed academic research in the end, and instead, accepted positions in industry or teaching. In her early 40s and a mother, she says that she wouldn’t have done anything differently, and looks forward to expanding her research.

“I was on the fast track and I was moving too fast,” she says. “A lot of good comes from taking a break and reassessing your priorities. A year off is sometimes the best thing you can do. The big message is, it’s OK and you’re not alone and you can go on to be what you want to be.”

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