WLI Hong Kong Event: Managing a return to work after a career break

By Stephanie Liao, Colliers International

On Tuesday, 30 August 2016, the Women’s Leadership Initiative of the Urban Land Institute hosted a lively discussion panel focusing on managing a return to work after a career break. Traditionally it hasn’t been the norm to take extended leave in Asia nor has the real estate industry embraced return to work programs, contract or flexible working roles as witnessed in European and North American markets.

One-third of college educated women will depart from their chosen career track at some point with most professionals having their first child after ten years work experience, a critical, point in their careers. Returnships are part of a new way employers are embracing the concept that people at some point take a career break for various reasons, children, education, health, travel or to take care of their aging parents.

Flexible working is one of the key elements necessary to create a more diverse and engaged workforce. These balanced work environments are seen as particularly important in advancing women’s careers in the real estate industry. Employers like JLL and Goldman Sachs are seeing the benefits of retaining educated, experienced and performing female talent. Therefore these employers are working towards providing more flexible career paths and working arrangements through various employee return focused programs.

One of the important challenges identified for returnees was overcoming the perceived stigma of taking a career break. Therefore it is essential that both employee and employer are aware of the obstacles facing returnees and work collaboratively to develop an effective program that balances expectations and reinforces the positive contributions that the program provides to their organization.

Tips on how to plan for a career break include assessing the appropriate time to take an extended career break, whether you wish to return to your current employer, building networks, developing peer support and mentors. Seeking guidance and inclusion from senior management may assist in smoothing the way and also allow women who “take time out” to still be included in significant developments within the organization. Critical self-assessment of strengths and weakness, expectations, priorities and entitlement are all important. All panelists agreed that a career is a long game and there will be times of progress and advancement and other times when its more appropriate and comfortable to take a step back, It’s about being able to step down and seeing the situation from a rational point of view.

Some women lack the confidence that they have the established skills, education and competencies to integrate back into employment within their field of expertise and so the ability to market and advertise yourself, creating a story line that makes sense in your resume may assist a potential employer to assess your situation in a positive light.

Finally, the Women’s Leadership Initiative, would like to thank the speakers, Louise Kavanagh, Katharina Koenig, Antje Peterman and Kimberly Arth for their time plus DLA Piper for their sponsorship and support of the event.