

The keys to success

GOING BACK TO SCHOOL

GOING BACK TO SCHOOL

Back to school at age forty?	3
A few myths about adult education	3
Taking control of your education	6
Easing your transition 6	
Some advice on maintaining your motivation	7
Balancing education and family life	9
Studying memory	10
Understanding memory 10	
...all the better to use it! 12	
Conclusion	14

Text: Caroline Levasseur

Back to school at age forty?

Why not! After all, the needs of the labour market have changed a lot recently, and so have educational requirements for professionals.

You're certainly not alone in making the leap back to school. Almost 40% of university students in Quebec have chosen to study part-time or to return to full-time studies after a break of at least two years.

You might think that going to school is like riding a bicycle: once you learn, you never forget! But in reality, education should be approached more like cooking: once you know the basic techniques, you can make all kinds of dishes. That doesn't mean your recipes will be easy though!

It's important to remember that persisting through the difficult times in your education will prove profitable in the long run. Returning to school is not only a great opportunity to start a new, stimulating career; it also offers important cognitive benefits. Adults who successfully complete their return to school say that the experience honed their analytic skills, gave them a greater understanding of society and the way it works, and improved their self-image.

As with any change, a successful return to school will require a transition period. You'll have to adjust your routines, adapt your working habits and maintain your motivation. The information and advice you'll find in this pamphlet may help you.

A few myths about adult education

Though it's more and more common to see them at university, false representations of adult students continue to circulate. Here are some myths and realities that will help you identify your worries and test your knowledge.

"My chances of completing my education are lower than those of students who haven't interrupted their studies."

Good news: research has indicated that middle-aged adults are just as capable of tackling intellectual work as young adults. What's more, returning students are usually more highly motivated and have better organizational skills than their younger colleagues.

Nevertheless, talent and intellectual ability (which you certainly have!) can't guarantee a successful university education by themselves. Choosing effective work habits is crucial for academic success, as is managing social factors like financial health, family life and social support. If the right study habits are selected and they have a handle on their numerous everyday responsibilities, middle-aged adults' chances of success are just high as those of any other student.

"I can rely on my professional experience to ensure academic success."

Experience is a major asset for professionals in any training program. Students with work experience generally have a more refined ability to link their studies to the reality of the labour market, as well as more refined critical thinking, than their peers.

But experience alone cannot guarantee academic success. It can't replace study habits that will enable you to understand and memorize the body of knowledge that you will be tested on. Better to think of your experience as a sort of trump card: it will improve your performance only once you've mastered the rules of the game.

"I can make sure that my decision to change my career won't effect my personal and family life by working hard enough."

Deciding to go back to school will have a major impact on both you and your friends and family. Your schedule will change, and in addition to attending class, you'll need to set aside

time to work at home, to deal with the stress of exams, to continue taking care of your children, to remain physically active and to keep in touch with your friends and relatives. Oof!

Even if you make this decision in good faith, it's impossible for it not to change your everyday life and the lives of those around you. Better, then, to face these changes head-on than to shoulder all the responsibility yourself.

Luckily, it's a sure bet that you've done your best to prepare yourself and your friends and relatives for this new situation. It's fruitless to feel guilty - you can't predict everything, but you can make the necessary adjustments as time goes on.

"If I'm having trouble, it's because at my age, memory doesn't work as well anymore."

There's no denying it: as we get older, our minds change. It's understandable, then, that starting a university education after a long period outside of school might cause stress. The normal problems that one bumps into during one's first semesters might make you doubt your abilities. Give yourself the time to adjust before jumping to any conclusions.

Our ability to memorize doesn't just decrease with age: it changes. By better understanding such changes and the workings of memory, you'll be able to choose appropriate study habits and combat the effects of time.

"At the end of my education, I'll have lower chances of finding a job than younger students."

This is a perfectly legitimate source of worry. After all, coming back to school is an investment: you accept the necessary sacrifices with the idea that you'll start a new more profitable and more motivating career. Luckily, the labour market is more and more open to middle-aged workers.

Many employers recognize that professionals who have changed career paths have strong leadership and personnel management skills. They know how to take their place within a work team and have often already learnt how to balance work and family. If you want to learn how to emphasize these qualities, make use of the university's orientation services. The staff can help you prepare for employment interviews and find business internship opportunities. After all, it's when you're in the thick of the action that you notice who's experienced!

Now that you have a clearer image of the worries most common among adults undergoing a career change, here's some concrete advice that might interest you.

Taking control of your education

Starting a new program takes a lot of courage; finishing one takes a lot of work. The advice that follows is targeted to three important areas for adult students: adaptation to the academic context; motivation; balancing education and family life.

Easing your transition

Going back to school means facing a number of changes. Some you might have suspected, and others will surprise you. Here are a few tips to ease your transition back to school.

Start slow. When you're starting a university education after having spent time on the labour market or taking care of your family, it's better to start with a light semester. By registering for a smaller number of courses, you can gradually familiarize yourself with the demands of student life.

Some might worry that this is a waste of time. Experience shows that on the contrary, adult students who recognize the changes caused by their career change and who take the time to

seek solutions to new issues are more likely to obtain their diploma than those who dive in headfirst.

Learning how to study again. A lot has changed since the end of your last educational experience. You. Your family status. Your work habits. (And certainly your haircut!) So it's normal that you'll have to find a new way of balancing things.

Work better rather than harder: that's the secret of productive students. If you feel that your productivity is inversely proportional to your effort, don't hesitate to ask for help from the student services office. There, you'll find professionals who can listen to you and advise you on appropriate working methods.

Perfect your basic skills. Before starting your classes, it might be beneficial to evaluate your mastery of certain useful skill sets. Are you out of practice with French, English, math or computers?

You can find a list of upgrading courses at either the student services office or your faculty office. If you've already started your education, remember: it's never too late to upgrade! Your academic results will improve and you'll save time.

Some advice on maintaining your motivation

Academic motivation is the state of mind that results from the evaluation you make of your personal abilities, the value of the task at hand, and your capacity to control how the task is dealt with and its results. For more information on this subject, please consult our text on motivation and time management.

Motivation can easily fluctuate between and during semesters, and even more so in a new environment. Here's some advice to help keep your spirits high.

Avoid fear of failure. Tests can be stressful, especially when you haven't written them in a long time. After having been far away from the classroom, you might find that learning how to be evaluated regularly might take time.

Fear of failure can induce a kind of stress that might impede you from performing as you normally would. To keep yourself from losing heart, it's important to understand exams objectively. They are not designed as the yardstick of your value as a person. They're opportunities to test your knowledge and identify points that need working on. Our document on stress management will be able to give you more concrete tips on making exam periods less difficult.

Reevaluate your expectations. The decision to come back to school is often part of a larger life plan. It implies certain sacrifices. Don't hesitate to visit the university's orientation services if frequent self-questioning is lowering your chances of success. The professionals there will be able to help you consolidate your career plan so you can focus on your academic work.

Furthermore, it is essential not to confuse performance with success. If your academic results don't seem good enough to you, remember that you have other assets, like your experience, and that you also certainly have many other responsibilities that require your time. Consider these factors and give yourself time to adjust - that way, you'll be able to set realistic goals.

Avoid isolation. A lack of social support is a major factor in decisions to drop out of university. Adult students are vulnerable to isolation, since returning to school at, say, age forty, generally implies a change in social circles and can leave you little time to make new friends.

Luckily, campus life offers you many opportunities to take even out your personal equilibrium: social and cultural activities, sporting events, study groups, etc. Such activities can help take

your mind off things and meet other students with whom you can build relationships of mutual support during more difficult moments.

Balancing education and family life

Since one most often chooses to change careers in order to have a better future, it's normal to be worried when one's studies are limiting the time and resources that one can devote to family life. Here's some advice to make things easier for you and your loved ones.

Take care of your financial health. With courses, tests, the kids at daycare and a part-time job, do you really need an additional source of stress? If your financial situation is worrying you, various kinds of financial aid are available. It's up to you to take advantage of them by going to the university financial aid office.

If you can't figure out whether you should be worried about your financial health, then the time seems ripe to start budgeting!

Seek support from your friends and family Having the support of your partner will be an essential ingredient to your success as you change careers. This is why it's important to discuss any difficulties that you might encounter and any changes that might come with all the members of your family.

Delegating household chores and asking for help are not signs of weakness. Your friends and relatives will be able to help you with correcting your homework, last-minute babysitting, or preparing for an exam. By opening up to them, you'll be allowing them to play a role in your success. Remember to thank them when you get your diploma!

Adapting to student life For every hour you spend in class, you ought to be devoting another to work at home. Such a ratio can be difficult to maintain. Making several small changes might help you fit your student life to your family life.

Make sure you have a space set aside for homework. If you can't concentrate at home, you might need to try working at the library or in a café. A daycare service or a generous friend or relative can help you find a couple of hours of extra study-time during exam season. Thus you'll be able to finish your work more quickly and you'll have more time for your loved ones.

A busy life means that you have to be creative when planning your study sessions. Why not study while your children are in bed or when they're doing their homework? If you can't free yourself up for several hours at a time, you'll be happy to learn that short study sessions are generally more effective. By clearing setting aside work times, you can avoid putting off tasks and having to cut into family time at the last minute.

Adult students often need to adopt new work habits. The next section will help you understand why and especially how.

Studying memory

Memory is often compared to a muscle: the more you exercise it, the better shape it will be in. As with other parts of the body, certain types of exercise are recommended specifically for middle-aged adults.

It will be important to understand the effects of aging on the memory first, and then to choose the most effective memorization methods based on that knowledge. For more advice on studying, you can also take a look at our document on effective work habits.

Understanding memory

The secrets of memory are many. One thing we learn as we age is certainly that "memory is a faculty that forgets"...

Short-term and long-term memory. Memorization is the result of the combined work of two kinds of memory: short- and long-term memory.

Short-term memory is your working memory. It's responsible for managing all of the parcels of information that you're conscious of. Unfortunately, it can only store so much information, and for a limited time only. Long-term memory, on the other hand, keeps stock of memories and knowledge that's accessible long after it's learnt.

The memorization process consists in transferring selected information from the short-term memory to the long-term memory by connecting it to other ideas or by classifying it into a pre-existing or new mental category. Whatever your age, the role played by memory and the general process of memorization remain. But that doesn't mean you can study like you did when you were twenty!

Aging memory. Memory varies widely between people. Nevertheless, research has brought to light several tendencies.

Over time, short-term memory weakens. We retain details less easily and for a shorter time. In addition to aging, the frenetic rhythm of life today might have something to do with such changes. Indeed, the demands placed on middle-aged adults' short-term memory are particularly important - what groceries you need, when your children's swimming lessons are, where the car is parked, etc. Since the bits of information retained by the short-term memory are very rapidly replaced by others, there's little chance they'll be transferred to the long-term memory.

Long-term memory is less affected by aging, but the impression that one is forgetful becomes more common. This is in part because one's memory is undergoing certain transformations. Middle-aged adults generally deal with memorization tasks in a more pragmatic way than young adults. With experience, the mind filters information differently. It gives priority to applied information and to general understanding than to superficial details.

When you've left the academic routine behind for a couple of years, "superficial details" often take on different connotations. So it's important to give your memory the time to reorient itself back toward academic work and to support it with adequate study habits.

...all the better to use it!

Do the good old days when you could study for exams the night before seem pretty far off? Then it's time to change your habits!

Whatever your age, memorization takes time and concentration. To find out more about the right conditions for memorizing information, take a look at our document on effective work habits.

Make a study plan. Repetition is the only way to make information pass from the short-term into the long-term memory. Because memorization is no longer as easy as it was when you were younger, it will be necessary to devote more time to it. Of course, time is now a precious resource.

Luckily, you can take advantage of how the brain works by starting to study early and by spreading it out over many short review sessions.

To stimulate the memorization process, you should test your own understanding between evaluations. Complete your readings, summarize your class notes and do exercises on a regular basis. You'll be helping your memory distinguish the most important information as early as possible.

As you prepare for exams, it's better to focus on a limited number of concepts per study session so you can better assimilate them. It's fruitless to study for more than 45 minutes at

a time. As time advances, the productiveness of studying diminishes. So avoid pointless headaches.

And finally, the transfer of information toward your long-term memory will happen largely when your mind is at rest. Thus you drastically increase the effectiveness of your study sessions by spacing them out with solid nights of sleep.

Make connections The better organized the material, the more easily remembered. A number of study habits can be effective at any age: making summaries or charts of your material, transcribing your notes and reading them out loud, testing your knowledge with the help of a colleague, etc.

Nevertheless, with time, the categories that the mind creates in the long-term memory become fixed. It's difficult to wipe the slate clean and to learn new concepts by heart.

This is why it's necessary to make connections between new ideas and old ones in order to anchor the new information in your long-term memory.

Experience can prove an asset by allowing you to anchor new knowledge to your past. For example, long-term memory more easily retains emotionally-charged moments. If you can relate an idea to a professional experience, you'll be able to recall that connection during your exams and thus remember the information in question. It might be a positive experience - "This reminds me of what we did when I worked with X" - or a negative one - "This is what caused that problem when I was working at Y". The important thing is to attach your academic knowledge to significant moments, which you can do much more easily than a less experienced student.

Memorization is one of the most difficult parts of taking classes. So it's normal to be worried when you notice your short-term memory weakening. Luckily, you can count on your long-term memory! Changing your study habits isn't easy, but doing so will mean that the material

studied won't disappear from your mind a couple of hours after your exam. Isn't that a wonderful reward for the time you've invested?

Conclusion

It's never too late to develop good work habits! It may not be relaxing, but you'll feel the benefits in your personal as well as your professional life. Give yourself ample time to achieve the changes you'd like to see. It's quite possible you'll experience moments of weakness on your way to these goals. It's important to be forgiving about detours and relapses. Remember that persistence is acquired through practice. And also that you're never starting from scratch - you're just continuing down the same path!

References

Ministère de l'Éducation. **Guide de retour aux études**, 2002

Simard, Marie-Hélène. **Le retour aux études**, Centre d'orientation et de consultation de l'Université Laval, 2005

Guidon, Michel. **Le retour aux études chez l'adulte : répercussions personnelles, familiales et professionnelles**, Éditions du Renouveau pédagogique, 1995

Bee, Helen, and Denise Boyd. **Lifespan Development**, Prentice Hall, 2011