



Government
Equalities Office

Returner Programmes: Best Practice Guidance for Employers

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Co-authored by

timewise
TALENT THROUGH FLEXIBILITY


Women Returners

Contents

Summary	3
Introduction & Overview	4
Background	4
Definition of terms	4
1. Organisation, positioning and engagement	5
a. The business case for a returner programme	5
b. Factors important to returners	7
c. The importance of a supportive organisational culture	8
d. Communication and internal positioning	8
2. Creating a programme framework	9
a. Deciding what type of returner programme to offer	9
b. Key structural elements of returner programmes	10
3. Building flexibility into your returner programme	12
a. The principles of flexible job design	12
b. From principles to practice: designing flexibility in	12
c. Discussing flexibility with candidates	13
d. Managing a flexible returner	14
4. Attracting and recruiting candidates	15
a. Attraction and promotion	15
b. Recruitment and selection	16
5. Supporting your returners	18
a. Line manager support	18
b. Other participant support roles and components	18
c. From returnship to ongoing role	20
6. Considerations for SMEs	21
7. Evaluating the programme	22
8. Developing and embedding your programme	23
a. Develop a career pathway for returners	23
b. Incorporate the returner programme into your broader talent strategy	23
c. Involve your supply chain	25
Case Studies	26
Additional resources and support	27

Summary

This best practice guidance was co-authored by **Women Returners** and **Timewise** based on their extensive experience of working with those returning to the labour market following a break to care for others.

- **Women Returners**

Women Returners is a consulting, coaching and networking organisation which specialises in enabling women professionals to return to work after an extended career break. Their Professional Network provides free return-to-work advice, information and inspiration centred on their online resource hub. They pioneered the introduction of 'returnships' into the UK, and developed the 'supported hiring' concept. Women Returners works with organisations across sectors to design and support best-practice returner programmes which benefit both businesses and returners. For further research, guidance and information for organisations and individuals, please visit www.womenreturners.com.

- **Timewise**

Timewise is a social consultancy whose aim is to unlock the flexible jobs market, enabling those who need flexibility to find good quality flexible jobs. They provide in-depth research, best-practice guidance and up-to-date insights for employers who are seeking to build and embed a flexible workplace culture. For further research and resources, and to learn more about the business benefits of flexible working, please visit their website www.timewise.co.uk

Introduction & Overview

Background

- There are 1.9m women who are economically inactive for caring reasons, a large number of whom have professional/managerial experience¹. Around three quarters of women surveyed by Opportunity Now would like to return to work at some point; however significant barriers, both personal and structural, stand in their way².
- In the Spring Budget 2017, the Prime Minister announced £5 million to “promote returnships in the public and private sector.” The 2017 Conservative Manifesto pledged to support organisations to take on parents and carers “returning after long periods of absence”.
- Returner programmes which lead to permanent roles were pioneered in the UK in 2014. Their number has grown from just three that year to over 40 in 2017, primarily in the financial services, consulting and STEM sectors.
- The Government Equalities Office aims to increase the number and scope of returner programmes, and ensure that employers are offering good quality, evidence-based opportunities to returners at all levels.

Definition of terms

For the purpose of this guidance, returners and returner programmes are defined as follows:

- **Returners** are defined as people with existing work experience who have taken an extended career break for caring or other reasons and who are either economically inactive or now working in lower paid, temporary or part-time work or in home-businesses or freelance roles. Returners can be male or female, but are predominantly women³.
- **Returner Programmes** are programmes targeted at people returning to work after a long break (typically 2 years or more). There are many forms of returner programme, including return to practice and retraining programmes. This guidance focuses on returner programmes involving paid work, on a temporary or permanent basis, and providing a supported route back to permanent employment. These programmes can be for one person or a cohort. To date, programmes have largely targeted professional and mid-to-senior managerial level roles; as this is our evidence base, this provides the focus of the best practice guidance, however the development section discusses broader applicability to other occupational skill levels.

¹ PwC/Women Returners/30% Club, 2016/[ONS, Sept-Nov 2017](#)

² Opportunity Now Project 2840, 2014 a survey of over 25,000 women between 28 and 40 (<https://gender.bitc.org.uk/all-resources/research-articles/project-28-40-report>)

³ 89% of economically-inactive carers are women (December 2017 ONS Labour Market Statistics)

1. Organisation, positioning and engagement

Before starting to design and implement a returner programme, it is important to be clear about the benefits of doing so, and to ensure that the rest of the organisation understands these benefits.

a. The business case for a returner programme

Returner programmes offer real benefits to employers and employees alike. As well as helping people who have taken a career break to return to work, they also deliver real competitive advantage for employers.

A way to tackle skills shortages

Some sectors, such as retail, hospitality and the tech sector are experiencing, or will face, a shortage of workers. A returner programme creates access to an extra pool of people who either have the right skills or could easily be trained to develop them.

Improved gender, age and cognitive diversity

Returner programmes can support the drive for diversity in a number of ways:

- Given that 89% of people out of paid work caring for family or the home are female⁴, returner programmes can support greater gender diversity across an organisation.
- Hiring returners can also improve the age diversity of an organisation, bringing in individuals with high levels of experience, maturity and commitment.
- Employers report that returners tend to offer a different way of looking at problems and situations, which can help enhance an organisation's cognitive diversity.

Access to a new high-calibre talent pool

Although around three quarters of women aged 28 to 40 on a career break surveyed by Opportunity Now said they wanted to return to work at some point⁵, few organisations have targeted this group until recent years. But when they do, they get access to high-calibre employees.

There are a large number of women with professional/managerial experience who are economically inactive for caring reasons, and many women who are working in lower paid, lower level roles to fit around family commitments. These women have a high level of skills, education and experience, as well as new skills gained during their career breaks. The right programme could attract this talented pool of women back into the workplace.

4 December 2017 ONS Labour Market Statistics

5 Opportunity Now Project 2840, 2014 a survey of over 25,000 women between 28 and 40 (<https://gender.bitc.org.uk/all-resources/research-articles/project-28-40-report>)

Support for the female talent pipeline

The 'brain drain' of female talent at middle and senior management is a challenge familiar to many organisations. Hiring experienced returners is an innovative way to expand your female talent pipeline and boost the presence of more senior women in your organisation. This can also have a positive effect on your gender pay gap.

Improved broader attraction & retention

A successful returner programme can have a positive impact on brand image, clearly signalling your organisation's support for parents and carers in the workplace. It shows that your organisation is open to and accepting of non-linear career paths, and values the role that caring plays in society. This can play a key role in both recruitment and retention of talented employees.

Cost-effective recruitment

A returner programme can be a cost-effective way to bring a number of experienced hire employees into the organisation in comparison with using a recruitment agency, as organisations do not incur percentage-based success fees for successful hires.

Business for Good as well as Good for Business

Supporting people who have taken a career break back into the workforce is beneficial for society and the economy. Creating routes back to suitable-level roles will provide a viable choice for people to pause their careers. This can help to reduce the gender pay gap.

“ We all know talented friends, family and ex-colleagues who have taken time out of the workforce for caring reasons. Returner programmes enable organisations to reach out to this hard-to-target group and to provide them with a supportive fast-track back to a suitable level role. Our employer partners consistently tell us that they are blown away by the quality of returner applications and many are now making returner programmes part of their regular annual recruitment. ”

Julianne Miles

Co-Founder & Managing Director, Women Returners

b. Factors important to returners

No two returners are the same, and so each will have their own reasons for returning to work. However, an internal survey conducted by Women Returners in 2017 within their network identified some key drivers that employers should consider when planning a returner programme:

- **Money is important, but so is identity and satisfaction**

When asked what their key motivator was for returning to work, over half of the returners who responded said it was related to identity and satisfaction. They missed the sense of achievement and social side of working and also wanted to regain their professional identity.

This doesn't mean that pay isn't important – around a fifth cited financial need as their key reason for going back to work. Returners are also clear that they want to be paid in line with their skills and experience.

- **Returners would like support to help them re-integrate**

Nearly three-quarters of the returners wanted to return to work through a supportive programme that would help them re-integrate into the workplace. They also saw the support of line managers as vital to making a successful return to work.

- **Returners want to refresh their skills, knowledge and confidence**

Although many returners work hard to maintain their skills and knowledge during their career break, most said they would like some time and support to bring them up to speed on their return. The majority also felt that their professional self-belief was reduced and that being supported to rebuild this confidence would make the return to the workplace more successful.

- **A degree of flexibility is key**

Research⁶ has indicated that the majority of women coming back to work after a career break would want a returner programme to result in a flexible job.

Whilst a part-time role was the most popular option, it's important to note that it isn't the only kind of flexible role you can offer: other full-time flexible options, such as working some of the week from home, having flexibility in daily start and finish times or working condensed hours, can also be an attractive option. You may also want to consider whether a job share might be suitable.

- **Career aspirations differ**

Some returners value a returner programme with a built-in trial period, others prefer to be recruited directly into a permanent role. Some want to take a similar position to their pre-break job, others to take the opportunity to change role or sector using transferable skills.

⁶ More than 70% of women surveyed wanted a flexible job
(www.timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/What_women_returners_want.pdf)

c. The importance of a supportive organisational culture

Whatever kind of returner programme you choose to run, the culture of the organisation needs to support it. Culture change does not happen by accident; it takes time and requires the commitment of senior leaders, the engagement of key stakeholders and the support of the team on the ground.

Here are four key principles for creating a culture that supports returners:

- **Do your research**
Find out how returner programmes are perceived in your organisation. Are there any barriers that you need to overcome, or prevailing myths that need challenging?
- **Lead from the top**
Senior buy-in is critical to the success of returner programmes. Make sure your leaders understand the business case so that they can champion the returner programme internally and externally.
- **Create on-the-job supporters**
As line managers are likely to be the ones working with returners on a day-to-day basis, their support is vital. They need to be trained to understand the reasoning behind the programme and the benefits that hiring returners can bring, and to share this knowledge with the rest of the team.
- **Encourage visible role models**
Having positive examples of how returner programmes work in practice will help persuade wider team members of their benefits, as well as providing extra support for returners themselves.

d. Communication and internal positioning

For a supportive culture to flourish, you will need to position returner programmes carefully. Here are some things to think about in terms of how you communicate the value of these programmes:

- **Make talent your key message**
Although hiring returners has clear societal benefits, it's important that the programme is seen primarily as a talent attraction strategy, rather than a corporate social responsibility scheme. This will give the returners the credibility they need to integrate into roles at a suitable level, without any suggestion of being patronised or undervalued.
- **Plan your communications carefully**
In both external and internal communications, consider your wording carefully, focusing on talent attraction and other benefits to the business. Avoid terms such as: 'A scheme to help women to get their confidence back'. Make sure it's recognised that returners are not all 'returning mums', not all women and could have taken their break for eldercare, health or relocation reasons.
- **Communicate the rationale widely**
Help people across your organisation to understand the rationale and benefits of a returner programme. When returners join, they are then more likely to feel supported and encouraged.

2. Creating a programme framework

Having decided that you would like to bring one or more returners into your organisation, you need to decide which kind of programme to offer, and how it will be delivered. Here are some guidelines for designing a returner programme that suits your business.

a. Deciding what type of returner programme to offer

One of the first decisions you'll need to make is what type of returner programme to offer. Although returner programmes can take different forms (see definition of a returner programme on [page 4](#)), the majority are 'returnships'⁷ or supported hiring programmes:

- A 'returnship' is a fixed term contract for experienced hires, with a strong likelihood, but no guarantee, of an ongoing role at the end of the programme, if the placement period goes well for both sides.
- A 'supported hiring'⁸ programme involves hiring returners directly into permanent experienced hire roles.

With both types of programme, returners are paid competitively and are provided with additional support such as coaching, training and mentoring to help them make a successful transition back to work.

Each type of returner programme has its own advantages:

Advantages of a returnship

- Allows you to assess the returner's skills, experience and motivation on the job before hiring permanently.
- Creates a trial period for returners to assess whether the fit and timing is right for them.
- Allows time to assess the level, salary, flexibility options and type of work that would suit the returner in the longer term.

Advantages of a supported hiring programme

- The returner has the certainty to plan and become part of the team.
- Headcount has already been ring-fenced for the returner in line with the broader hiring plans and talent strategy.
- It is easier to develop into ongoing business-as-usual recruitment.

Some programmes, particularly within the public sector, use a different model because of the need for professional registration. If returners have not worked in their profession for a few years then they will need to update their registration, and public sector returner programmes often focus on training to support this. It's worth considering whether you need to offer professional registration as part of your returner training.

⁷ The term 'returnships' was coined and trademarked by Goldman Sachs

⁸ The term 'supported hiring' was coined by Women Returners

Some employers have tried various types of programme and some offer both returnships and supported hire opportunities. Returners programmes can change and evolve as you learn from experience what works best for your organisation and those that you hire.

b. Key structural elements of returner programmes

Once you have decided which type of programme best suits your organisation, you then need to look into its scope and logistics. Here are the most important structural elements that you should consider when designing any programme:

Timing

First, you'll need to think about when would be the best time to start a returner programme - both for your organisation and for returners themselves.

- For your organisation, avoid any time of year which is typically very busy, as that would make it difficult for managers to provide returners with support.
- For returners, avoid times of the year (such as school holidays) at which returners might find it difficult to find cover for their caring responsibilities. This is particularly important for returnships, when temporary care will need to be put in place.
- For both parties, ensure that a returnship doesn't finish at a time of year when there is little or no headcount.

Length

The typical length of a returnship is three to six months.

- Any shorter than this, and the returner won't have enough time to get up to speed with your organisation and show what they can do on the job.
- Furthermore, the hiring manager won't have long enough to assess their suitability for an ongoing role.
- Any longer than this prolongs the uncertainty for the returner and increases the pressure they are under to prove themselves.

The ideal length will depend on the complexity and typical time horizons and decision-making speed of your organisation. It will also depend on whether the programme is being offered on a full-time or part-time basis.

Intake

Returner programmes can be run for one person or for a group of people.

- A group programme has the built-in benefit of a ready-made peer support network, which is greatly valued by returners.
- Bringing in a cohort also allows for economies of scale in coaching and training programmes, and can have a bigger impact on diversity targets.
- However, you will need to ensure you are able to offer the right levels and types of support to different returners if you opt for a large cohort.
- This is particularly important in terms of managing a smooth transition from a returnship to ongoing roles.

Area and nature of work

When considering where a returner would fit best:

- Focus on suitable-level, CV-worthy work which gives them the opportunity to make the most of their professional skills and experience.
- Ensure they are able to demonstrate the strengths that they bring and the high standard of work that they can deliver.
- Allocate them to a line manager who is engaged with the programme, excited about bringing returner talent into their team, and prepared to accommodate flexible requests.

For a returnship, most companies prefer to structure the placement period as a 'temporary' position, rolling over to a permanent role if successful. Other companies have focused more on project work to enable greater flexibility. For both options, targeting an area where there is headcount post-placement is critical for success.

Level of seniority

In principle, returners should come back to work at the same level as they were when they left. Any out-of-date skills or knowledge can usually be overcome by training, a supportive and helpful team and a transition period in which they can get back up to speed.

- For returners who have had a very long break, a stepping-stone approach may be required, initially taking a lower-level role while skills and knowledge are rebuilt. In this case, ensure that there is a clearly developed plan which plots their route back to their previous level.
- Some returners may choose to take a lower-level job to manage family or other commitments better, or to move sector/role, so it is unwise to reject an applicant for being over-qualified without checking their goals and expectations. In this case, it would be worth discussing what the barriers to a more senior role might be and whether you could overcome them. For example, offering flexible working might enable them to join your organisation at a higher, more appropriate level.

Pay and budget

- It is essential for quality and fairness that returners are paid at a competitive level which recognises their skills and experience, the nature of the work they are doing and the level at which they are returning. For supported hire roles, and permanent or contract roles after a returnship, make sure that there is pay parity with existing employees.
- Consider upfront where the budget will lie: all with the business unit or with some centrally funded component.

3. Building flexibility into your returner programme

Whether they have taken a career break for family, health or other reasons, flexibility is likely to be high on the list of priorities for your candidates. As noted earlier, research by Timewise⁹ has indicated that the majority of women coming back to work after a career break would want a job which is part-time or flexible in some way.

Here are some guidelines for ensuring that the returner programmes you create and deliver are truly flexible:

a. The principles of flexible job design

Flexible working is most successful when a recruitment programme is specifically designed on a flexible basis, rather than trying to shoehorn flexibility into one that already exists.

There are three core elements that you should consider when thinking about flexible job design:

- **WHERE** people need to work
- **WHEN** people need to work
- **HOW MUCH** people need to work

Many flexible programmes or roles include a combination of these elements.

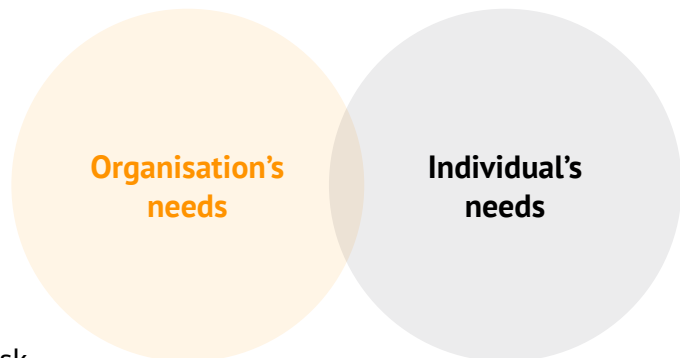
b. From principles to practice: designing flexibility in

A good starting point when designing a flexible returner programme is to remember that flexibility works best when it works both ways.

Ideally, therefore, the parameters of the programme will meet the needs of both employers and employees.

Here are some questions that you should ask yourself to ensure that your returner programme is designed on this basis:

- **When considering WHERE the returner needs to be based**
Can this programme accommodate a degree of working from home, across different offices, or from a variety of other locations?
- **When considering WHEN the returner needs to work**
Could this programme incorporate flexibility around start or finish times, compressed hours or, if it is a supported hire, annualised flexibility (such as term-time only)?
- **When considering HOW MUCH the returner needs to work**
Could this programme be fulfilled on a part-time basis or, if it is a supported hire, include an element of unpaid leave?



⁹ https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/What_women_returners_want.pdf

It may be that thinking through these questions for the returner programme will get you thinking about how you could embed flexible working more broadly within your organisation. Perhaps you could use the returner programme as a pilot to see what works and what doesn't.

“ We know returners have a lot to offer employers in terms of skills and experience but lack flexible working opportunities. By sticking to the traditional 9 to 5 model, employers are missing out on the wealth of talent that's out there. By making what are often minor adjustments to allow flexibility, many more returners will be able to simultaneously access work and manage their caring commitments. ”

Jemeela Quraishi

Senior Development Manager, Member, Branch &
Community Engagement, CIPD

c. Discussing flexibility with candidates

Given the likelihood that returner candidates prefer a degree of flexibility, it is best for both parties if this is brought into the open. Here are some suggestions for how line managers should raise and discuss flexible working:

- **Demonstrate your flexible credentials up front**

If you are willing to offer flexible options, either for a returnship or a supported hire, say so within your advertising. This will widen the pool of people who apply and help you attract the best talent.

- **Raise it during the application process or interview**

Candidates may be keen to ask about your approach to flexibility but unsure about how or when to do so. Mentioning it yourself will put everyone at ease and allow for a full and frank conversation.

- **Understand your limits**

If you have designed flexibility into the returner programme, you should have a clear idea about what could and couldn't work in practice. So if, for example, a candidate is keen to join a returnship on two days a week, and you know that four are required to make it work, say so.

- **Consider a trial period**

If you are able to offer a returnship or supported hire on a flexible basis, it is worth suggesting a trial period, after which you can jointly review whether the agreed flexible working model suits both parties and make any appropriate adjustments.

d. Managing a flexible returner

As line managers will be responsible for the returner on a day-to-day basis, they need to be trained in how to get the best from them. Here are some guidelines on managing the relationship, through the returner programme and beyond.

- **Do your homework**

Be clear about what has been agreed in terms of flexibility. For example, if the returner has negotiated a number of days working from home, make sure that's factored into your team meeting schedule.

- **Think about how best to manage performance**

It's particularly important to base flexible workers' targets on outputs rather than inputs. Identify goals carefully and make sure they're achievable within the agreed job description. Take a close look at your KPIs and see how the measurement of these may need to be adapted for a returner, particularly during their internship phase.

- **Give them the tools to succeed**

Making sure your returner has the technology and other equipment they need, such as a laptop and a Skype connection for remote working, will help the programme be a success.

- **Check in regularly**

While all employees need to feel trusted to get on with their job, it's particularly important that returners also feel supported. If flexible working means you won't always be in the same place at the same time, build in opportunities for catch up and review.

4. Attracting and recruiting candidates

When you're designing your attraction and recruitment process for returners, you should not assume that your existing process is fit for purpose. Instead, look at it with a fresh pair of eyes to ensure you are being open and encouraging, keeping the process simple and not creating bias against people who have taken a career break.

If working for you means a returner would need to be on a professional register, think about how you could support them to regain registration, as this will have a big impact on your ability to attract high quality candidates with experience in the relevant professional area.

“ A flexibly designed returner programme is a brilliant way to attract and recruit a wider pool of talented people – but its value doesn't end there. The tools and approaches outlined here can also be used to develop flexible career pathways for your employees, which will help you keep their skills and experience in-house for longer. The result is a diverse, inclusive culture, matched by a motivated and productive workforce: in short, a win-win. ”

Emma Stewart MBE
Co-Founder and Joint CEO, Timewise

a. Attraction and promotion

The advert that you create, and the channels through which you promote it, can have a big impact on the quality and quantity of applicants. These principles will help you ensure that you are attracting high-calibre returners to your programme:

- **Describe clearly what you're offering**

Make sure you set out clearly what the returner programme involves and what your expectations are in terms of time commitment, flexibility and other parameters. This will prevent misunderstandings later in the process.

- **Don't be too prescriptive, but be clear what the role requires**

Experience has shown that returners only tend to apply if they tick every box on the job description; you could miss out on a strong candidate by being too prescriptive. Keep the criteria of who you're looking for as open as possible. But be clear about what experience and skills you require, or you may be deluged by irrelevant applicants who you have to reject.

- **Target channels where returners are likely to be looking**

Returners can be hard-to-reach through the standard channels such as LinkedIn or recruitment agencies. Instead, focus your attention on organisations which have a specialised returner network and job sites that promote returner roles with built-in flexibility. Internal referrals are also a good source of candidates and your social media channels can help to promote the programme more broadly.

[See further resources for suggested channels.](#)

GOLD STANDARD

- **Include cultural aspects**

Shared values and a welcoming environment are important for many returners. Talk about your organisational culture and why it's a great place for women and parents/carers to work.

- **Ensure the tone of your advert is welcoming**

Review your advert from the perspective of a returner – are the language and tone you are using open, inclusive and encouraging?

[See further resources for organisations and sites that can offer support.](#)

b. Recruitment and selection

The assessment process can be daunting for people who have had a career break, particularly those who have not applied for roles for a number of years. Even highly experienced people lose confidence in their professional skills and abilities after a long career break, so you want to ensure that the recruitment process is not too intimidating.

By making a few simple changes to your existing recruitment processes, you can reduce any anxiety and ensure returners have the opportunity to showcase the skills and experience that they bring:

- **Keep the application process simple**

Review your application process to make sure it is as straightforward as possible and avoids any elements which might discourage returners, for example asking for a recent work reference or examples of recent work experience

- **Provide as much information as possible**

As returner candidates may not have recent experience of applying for a role, it is helpful to give them plenty of time to prepare. Tell them what to expect well in advance, and provide timelines to support their planning.

- **Keep assessments straightforward**

Review any assessments that you would normally use to ensure they only assess skills that the role directly requires, and do not demand or prioritise recent knowledge or experience.

- **Discuss salary and flexibility during the interview process**

To ensure expectations are aligned, inform candidates about the salary range for the supported hire role or for during and after the returnship period. Raise the topic of flexibility to check what's on offer is a suitable fit for the returner.

- **Provide interview guidance for all interviewers**

It is important that interviewers are aware of potential unconscious biases that could count against returners, and that any questions which might reflect this bias are adjusted accordingly.

- **Follow up promptly**

Acknowledge applications and contact promptly with outcomes.

GOLD STANDARD

- **Offer support before or during the assessment**

Providing online links and offering supportive webinars, workshops or familiarisation days before the assessment day and/or workshops on the assessment day will help candidates perform to the best of their ability. It will also have a positive effect on their career development, even if they aren't successful at this time.

- **Provide structured assessor training**

Assessors may be biased against returners without even realising it. Raising awareness about potential stereotypes and providing practical tips will help them make more objective hiring decisions.

- **Accelerate the process to allow time between offer and start date**

Many organisations have streamlined their usual experienced hire recruitment process for their returner programme to facilitate more rapid decision-making. It's important to define roles in advance so hiring managers are involved in the assessment process. With such forward planning, offers can be made well in advance of start date, allowing time for returners who are carers to make arrangements before joining.

- **Tailor your responses**

Soften rejection responses, to make returners feel more positive about their performance rather than further reducing their professional self-confidence.

- **Offer personalised feedback**

Any insights that you can offer unsuccessful candidates about what they did well at the assessment and how they could improve will help them secure a role in the future.

5. Supporting your returners

Providing a strong support framework helps to maximise the likelihood of returner satisfaction and a successful permanent hire. However, it is also important to make sure that the support element is not overwhelming.

a. Line manager support

Line manager support is critical to ease returners back into work. Here are some suggestions to help you put this support in place:

- **Set clear objectives**

Make sure that the returner understands their targets, timeframes, how success will be measured and the process for ongoing recruitment (if a returnship).

- **Provide regular interaction and feedback**

Ask line managers to schedule regular meetings with the returner to discuss what they are doing well and how they could improve. This will help them be clear about what is expected of them, as well as providing an opportunity for them to ask any questions.

- **Make connections**

Help the returner settle into their job and build strong networks by introducing them to key stakeholders in the early weeks.

- **Adjust support through the transition period**

Adjust the level and type of support you offer as the returner re-integrates.

GOLD STANDARD

- **Train line managers in how to support returners**

Offer line managers specific training on how best to support a returner. This should include the structure and objectives of the programme, common concerns felt by returners and how best to provide support through the first few months.

b. Other participant support roles and components

These are the key support elements that you should consider:

Roles

- **Line manager**

As discussed above, a supportive line manager is critical to the success of any returner programme.

- **Programme manager**

Make one or two relatively senior people responsible for your returner programme. They should act as primary contacts for the returners, manage the internal organisation and take responsibility for resolving any issues.

- **Human resources**

Introduce the returner to their key HR contact(s) as early as possible in the programme.

- **Buddy**

Appoint a 'buddy' for each returner: a peer or junior who can help with day-to-day questions as the returners re-integrate.

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- **Mentor**

Allocate a mentor who can advise about organisational culture and values, help them to resolve any internal conflicts and provide longer-term career management support.

- **Coach**

The majority of returners surveyed by Women Returners saw individual or group coaching support as very important or important to their return-to-work transition¹⁰. It can help with practical aspects such as developing clear personal objectives and with psychological challenges such as rebuilding professional self-confidence.

- **Allies**

Identify and introduce other supporters in the business, such as leaders of women's or parent and carer networks.

Other support components

- **Induction**

Provide the standard new employee induction, even for a returnship. If you have a full cohort, it would be worth tailoring it to their specific programme.

GOLD STANDARD

- **Induction plus**

Include introductory sessions with relevant networks and the opportunity to talk informally with working parents, carers, other returners and/or other new employees (taking care to acknowledge that not all returners are carers/parents). This may be equally relevant for non-returners.

- **Training**

Identify ahead of time any training that will help them deliver in their new role as quickly as possible.

¹⁰ Women Returners Network Survey, 2017

- **Networking**

Provide networking opportunities with leaders in the business. Some organisations combine these sessions with expert knowledge updates.

c. From returnship to ongoing role

If your returners have come in on a returnship with a temporary contract, the objective is usually to offer ongoing employment to all participants, providing that the programme has worked for both sides. Here are some important elements in managing that process:

- **Ensure suitable pay**

Make sure that pay parity with colleagues is established in the ongoing role.

- **Confirm ongoing employment as soon as you can**

An offer of ongoing employment should be made to the returner as soon as the hiring manager has made their decision. Make sure that returner interns are able to take their desired flexibility with them into their ongoing employment.

- **Have a Plan B**

If, due to business changes, a permanent role is not available for a successful returner at the end of the programme, look at alternatives. For example, you may be able to offer contract or project work, or opportunities in a different part of the business.

- **Ensure the programme ends positively**

You may decide that the returner isn't the right fit for your organisation. Equally, the returner may decide that your role or organisation is not what they are looking for. If you do part company at the end of the programme, take the time to review the returner's learnings and achievements, offer constructive feedback and celebrate their successes.

6. Considerations for SMEs

Small and medium sized businesses have also run successful returner programmes, often bringing one or two returners into the organisation. The experience, skills, perspective and flexibility that returners bring can be of particular benefit to SMEs.

Here are some specific points for SMEs to consider:

- **Supported hiring might work best**

A supported hire programme is an excellent way to attract and recruit returners into your business on a permanent basis, and can make more sense for bringing returners into business-critical roles where you want them to integrate fully from day one.

- **Returnships can also work**

Some SMEs prefer the in-built trial period that a returnship offers, particularly for a new role or where they are considering people with different backgrounds than their usual hires.

- **Consider returners for senior roles**

SMEs targeting returners usually report that they attract higher-calibre candidates than usual. Returners are more likely to be able to trade-off the higher pay levels offered by large companies against the flexibility offered by SMEs.

- **Recognise a returner's broad skills**

Returners have often gained a broad range of skills on their break, through routes such as self-employment or volunteering, which enhance their other experience. This breadth and flexibility of skills can be of real benefit to a smaller organisation.

- **Flexible hiring can have budget benefits**

Considering flexible working options at the point of hire may be particularly applicable for SME budgets. For example, having a part time Finance Director supported by a full-time junior could be a cost-effective way to get the finance team you need.

Similarly, if you tend to be quiet during the summer, you could consider offering optional unpaid leave or an annualised contract. Job design is pivotal to making part-time and flexible arrangements work, so ensure that you take time and care when allocating responsibilities for these roles.

- **Local roles in a supportive culture can appeal to returners**

Returners are often keen to work close to their home, to minimise their commute and help them manage other commitments. You can use this to your advantage if you are outside of a large city, by advertising locally on social media and getting your employees to spread the word within their local networks.

- **Gaining buy-in for a returner programme can be more straightforward**

Once the business rationale is clear and the senior management team are on board, implementing the programme should be much more straightforward for small and medium organisations, which don't have multiple organisational layers and stakeholders to engage.

7. Evaluating the programme

It's important to evaluate each programme to identify what's working well and what can be improved. Look at both qualitative and quantitative measures:

- **Quality of candidates**

If you didn't get the calibre of candidates that you were hoping for, you'll need to review your attraction and recruitment processes.

- **Conversion into on-going roles (returnship only)**

A key success factor for the programme is the majority of participants being offered and accepting on-going roles. Low conversion rates are a signal that changes need to be made next time round. However, if one or more returners decides that it's not the right time or fit for them, this can also be a positive outcome as it is a trial for both sides.

- **Satisfaction of stakeholders**

Less tangible but just as important is the satisfaction of returners, line managers and programme managers with the programme. Obtaining qualitative feedback helps you to identify specific areas of strength and possible improvements.

GOLD STANDARD

- **Adapt and develop your programme**

It's worth taking the time to use the insights from your evaluation to adapt and develop your programme. This allows you to create a framework for best practice which you can share both internally and externally.

8. Developing and embedding your programme

Once you have successfully run a returner programme, you will be well-placed to build your learnings into your ongoing talent strategy – and to encourage your supply chain to do the same. Here are some suggestions for how to maximise the impact of your programme across your organisation and your wider networks.

a. Develop a career pathway for returners

It's critical that support for returners doesn't stop once the programme is over, and that you are planning for their long-term retention and career development. These are some ways you can build career progression pathways:

- **Discuss their aspirations**

At the end of their first few months, discuss career aspirations and ambitions with your returner. You can use this to build a career development plan for the medium to long term.

- **Offer development opportunities**

Additional training could help your returner develop their skills. Similarly, there may be particular projects which would offer them further opportunities to develop their experience and profile.

- **Review their level**

It's not unusual for returners to take a few months to get up to speed, but then quickly accelerate up the learning curve and contribute at a higher level. Schedule a review within the first 12-18 months to assess whether they deserve a promotion.

- **Support flexible working**

Challenge your teams to incorporate flexibility into roles at all levels of your organisation, and support them to design senior jobs accordingly. Ensure that you have visible, vocal role models who are showing by example that flexibility can work at a senior level.

- **Mentoring**

Ideally, any mentoring relationships that have been put in place for the programme would be carried into an ongoing role. Mentors can be particularly supportive in terms of offering longer-term career advice and inspiration.

b. Incorporate the returner programme into your broader talent strategy

As with any talent programme, it is critical that the principles and practices for returner success are incorporated throughout your organisation, rather than being treated as an add-on or HR issue.

Many of the learnings from running a returner programme can be disseminated more widely across your business to foster an inclusive culture and support the attraction and retention of a more diverse workforce.

The following suggestions will help you ensure that your returner programme is robust, responsive and embedded at every level.

- **Share success stories and best practice**

Encouraging different teams, departments or offices to share their experience and success stories of hiring returners will support its implementation across your business. You could:

- Create a forum for managers to share best practice, such as an online discussion group or through training sessions.
- Share case studies and returner success stories.
- Take the learnings from any trial or pilot schemes and roll them out elsewhere in your organisation.

- **Extend programmes into annual or ongoing recruitment**

Once you've identified the best time of year to bring in returners to your organisation, it would be worth making your returner programme an annual or bi-annual event. You could also:

- Build the returner programme into your existing talent and resourcing framework and timelines.
- Consider returners for some, or all, of your ongoing recruitment.
- Include in relevant job adverts that you welcome applications from those who have taken a career break.

You may need to brief those who are involved in the recruitment process – screeners, assessors, external recruitment or search agencies – about potential biases that they might hold about returners and how to overcome them.

- **Extend programmes to include more junior skill levels**

Although returner programmes have tended to be targeted at professional and managerial returners, they are an equally valid way to recruit less senior or less skilled individuals. Extending your programme to incorporate these kind of roles would immediately widen your pool of candidates by including those who have taken a break.

- **Encourage flexible hiring**

Being open about your willingness to offer flexibility at the point of hire will increase the likelihood of attracting returner candidates, as well as widening your overall talent pool.

Demand for flexibility in the way they work is not just for returners; advertising the flexibility you can offer to a candidate could also help you to attract younger people into your workforce. You could therefore:

- State clearly in all job adverts that you are open to discussing flexible options.
- Train managers and HR personnel on the best way to discuss flexibility and CV career gaps with candidates.
- Encourage your managers to consider flexible options and look at flexible job design when they have a vacancy.

- **Set openness to returners as a default**

Some organisations direct their managers to incorporate flexibility as standard, and expect them to explain why if they don't. This results in a talent strategy in which flexibility is the norm, and is built into every stage of the process.

In the same way, you could make welcoming returner applications your organisation's default position, requiring hiring managers to justify why candidates need to have recent experience.

c. Involve your supply chain

Once you have developed your own best practice, you could use your influence to encourage other organisations to follow suit. For example:

- You could share your success stories with your suppliers and customers/clients as well as other organisations in your industry to inspire them to consider returner programmes.
- You may also want to be clear with your external recruiter agencies and search firms on the approach they should take to find candidates for a returner programme.
- You could even build a request into your procurement process that suppliers set out the initiatives they are taking to hire returners, and take account of this when making your decisions.

Case Studies

Successful returner programmes should be developed taking into account this best practice guidance and the specific requirements of the organisation involved.

Below are examples of returner and employer experiences of returner programmes:

“ The first time I met a cohort of returners in 2015, I was blown away by their calibre and energy. I was also struck by the potential economic waste if they were not able to get back into work.

Since then, Golin has welcomed three returners on placement. Laura Weston, our first, has now had two phenomenally impactful years as our permanent marketing director. Our MD refers to her as “our best hire ever.” The Golin role has taken her out of her comfort zone and similarly, she has brought something relevant but very new to us.

We found three months to be an ideal contract length for our returnship placement and that discrete, well-defined projects made for mutually successful outcomes.

For us, it is vital to secure senior buy-in upfront, to devote time upfront to meticulous job design, thorough line management, objective setting and coaching, and comprehensive on-boarding and to ensure that all parties involved are appropriately briefed. In return, you’ll get someone with a lot to offer and an ambassador hugely committed to the success of your organisation. ”

Jane Fordham, Executive Director Marketing & Talent
GOLIN is an integrated PR agency with offices across world.

“ I’ve spent my working life as a Project and Programme Manager. After five years out of the workplace caring for our foster child, I started looking for work and soon realised that I had a serious obstacle – my CV was ‘not current’. I didn’t want to re-train as I wanted to go back to doing what I had been doing and had kept abreast of changes to the sector and attended networking events.

I came across the Career Returners @ Enfield Council programme in my local paper. Re-joining the workplace as a returner really worked for me. I had a post-holder to shadow, a network of supportive returners, and coaching which enabled me to determine if the post was a good fit for me and for the organisation.

After four months, I was appointed as Strategic Programme Manager for the division. I now find myself in a very happy place, doing work I know how to do, and do well. I would recommend a returner programme to anyone contemplating returning to work after an extended break. It will help you adjust to the new realities and find that place you feel fulfilled. ”

Oluyemisi Morgan-Raiwe, Strategic Programme Manager
Enfield Council is a London Borough council.

Additional resources and support

Want to know more about returner programmes? These websites contain valuable insights and recommendations, as well as targeted business advice and support.

- **Government Equalities Office**
www.gov.uk/government/organisations/government-equalities-office
- **Timewise**
Timewise is a social consultancy whose aim is to unlock the flexible jobs market, enabling those who need flexibility to find good quality flexible jobs.
<https://www.timewisejobs.co.uk/>
- **Women Returners**
Women Returners is a consulting, coaching and networking organisation which specialises in enabling women professionals to return to work after an extended career break.
<http://womenreturners.com/>
- **CIPD**
The Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD) is the professional body for HR professionals with more than 145,000 members worldwide.
<https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/flexible-working/factsheet>
- **Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and Working Forward**
The EHRC is the national equality body for Great Britain. The body working in conjunction with businesses and industry has launched the Working Forward campaign to support pregnant women and new parents in the workplace.
<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/working-forward>
- **Women's Business Council**
This government-backed, business-led council has the aim of ensuring real action to maximise women's contribution to economic growth.
www.womensbusinesscouncil.co.uk
- **Acas**
Acas (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) provides free and impartial information and advice to employers and employees on all aspects of workplace relations and employment law.
www.acas.org.uk
- **Business in the Community**
Business in the Community is a business-community outreach charity promoting responsible business, and is one of the Prince's Charities of Charles, Prince of Wales.
www.bitc.org.uk
- **Working Mums**
Working Mums is the largest female focussed jobs board in the UK with over 250,000 registered users. <https://www.workingmums.co.uk/>

Want help to review the tone and language of your adverts? The websites below are just three of a variety of tools available that may be able to assist.

- **Textio**
<https://textio.com/>
- **Eploy**
<https://www.employ.co.uk/resources/toolbox/check-my-job/>
- **Gender Decoder**
<http://gender-decoder.katmatfield.com/>



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