



Introduction to supporting parent returners into flexible jobs

A practical guide to designing and developing a flexible-focused returner strategy.

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Introduction

There is a growing recognition of the value that experienced, returning employees can add to a business. Known as 'returners' for short, these are people who have had a career break, usually of at least two years, and are looking to get back into the workplace.

Many returners are women who have taken time out of employment for caring reasons. They may be economically inactive, or working in low-paid, temporary or freelance roles. Others have taken a break for health or personal reasons. But whatever the factors leading up to their break, they are likely to be experienced individuals who are motivated by the opportunity to return to work.

Increasingly men are taking, or wanting to take, parental leave and are faced with the same obstacles of finding work that is compatible with caring responsibilities and family life.

This guide aims to help you start tapping into this valuable group of people. It focuses on creating a clear attraction strategy, the right induction support and properly flexible roles, to encourage returners into your organisation and support their transition back into work. This will give them what they need to hit the ground running and start delivering for your business.

Over half a million professional women are on an extended career break for caring reasons in the UK.

(Source: PWC/Women Returners/30% Club 2016)



Why should you recruit returners?

It's easy to see why returners might be keen to get back into work, but employers also stand to gain a great deal from recruiting them. Here's a summary of the business case.

- **Accessing a wider talent pool**
By targeting returners, employers will get access to a group of people with valuable experience and expertise that they might otherwise miss out on.
- **Overcoming skills shortages**
With many employers and sectors struggling to recruit people with specific skills or the capacity to develop them quickly, returner campaigns can offer an effective solution.
- **Supporting inclusion and diversity at all levels**
Targeting returners can help increase the number of experienced women within and across an organisation. This can support gender and age diversity, and create role models for those coming up behind. This also includes fathers who want, or have to, combine work and family commitments.
- **Tackling the gender pay gap**
The increased presence of women in senior roles is an important factor in closing the gender pay gap.
- **Enhancing internal and external reputation**
Being seen to encourage and support returners sends a clear message to your own employees and the market that you are a supportive employer. This will, in turn, aid recruitment and retention.

There is also a clear benefit to society as a whole in creating more opportunities for people who might otherwise struggle to re-enter paid employment.

Fully addressing the career break penalty for female professionals could increase the UK economic output by £1.7 billion.

(Source: PWC/Women Returners/30% Club 2016)



What do returners want?

Understanding what returning employees want and need will help you design an approach that works in practice.

Internal factors

These relate to psychological health, financial security and social status:

- Financial reward, ideally in keeping with the returner's skills and experience
- A sense of identity and purpose
- Fulfilment of personal and professional ambitions
- Social interaction

External factors

These relate to the characteristics of the role and the working environment:

- Training and development opportunities to refresh skills and learn new ones
- Support to re-integrate into the working environment and build confidence
- Built-in flexibility, allowing a better balance between work and other responsibilities
- Opportunities for progression whilst working flexibly

Parent returners will have extra considerations, specific to their circumstances, such as:

- The need to balance income with childcare costs
- Additional flexibility that works with the needs of their family (such as school pick-ups or the long summer holiday)

As flexibility is such a critical element of attracting returners, we have covered it in more detail in the next section.

Why flexibility is important, and how to build it in

Many of the reasons why people take a career break, such as caring responsibilities or health issues, also make it likely that returners need flexibility. A Timewise survey of potential women returners¹ backs this up, with 70% saying they would want a flexible job, compared to only 13% who would want a full-time job.

It is therefore critical to make sure you are clear on the types of flexibility you can offer when seeking to attract returners. Here are three steps you should take.

Step 1 – Assess your level of flexibility

Consider where your organisation is in terms of flexible working. Then build on this to evaluate what you're doing well, and what you might need to change, before you start advertising.

This will include:

- Looking at your existing policies and how they are interpreted by HR, leaders and managers
- Looking at teams in which flexible working works well, and identifying what they are doing right
- Looking at teams in which flexible working is less successful, and identifying the reasons why



¹ https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/What_women_returners_want.pdf

Step 2 – Design flexibility into returner roles

Work with managers to:

- **Consider WHERE the returner needs to be based.** Can some of the work be done from home, in different offices or at a different location?
- **Consider WHEN the returner needs to work.** Is there scope for late starts or early finishes? Can the work be compressed into four days, or be done on a term-time only basis?
- **Consider HOW MUCH the returner needs to work.** Is there scope for the role to be done part-time? Is it possible to incorporate some unpaid leave during quiet periods?

You will also need to think through what you are prepared to offer on an informal basis (such as changes to start and finish times, or occasional home working) and on a formal basis (such as part-time, or annualised hours).

Step 3 – Be explicit about flexibility when you recruit

You are more likely to attract good numbers of high-calibre candidates if you are open about the flexibility you are offering. You should:

- Make sure you state on your advertisements that your roles are open to flexibility
- Consider advertising on a flexible jobs board such as Timewise Jobs and GPS Return
- Create space within the interview process to discuss flexible working

We've included more detail about attracting the right candidates in a later section.

A five-step checklist for designing roles for returners

Working through these steps will help you design an approach that works as well for your business as it does for the returners themselves.

1 Define the business need

Start by working with senior and middle management to identify how recruiting returners will support your strategic people objectives. This will allow you to define specific targets and agree how you will measure success.

2 Scope out the role or roles

Consider what the role will involve and what support and training you can offer. Make sure you build flexibility into both the individual role and the training which supports it.

3 Agree pay and conditions

If you want to attract high-calibre candidates, make sure the salary level and conditions of employment reflect the scope of the role and of potential applicants' skills and experience.

4 Factor in performance management

Work with HR and line managers to decide how to evaluate your returner or returners' performance. Your existing performance standards and indicators can be a starting point, but make sure you adapt them to acknowledge the potential time needed to get up to speed, and to take flexibility into account.

5 Plan your evaluation

Finally, remember to build in how you will assess the impact of your approach. Success factors could include:

- whether the line managers were fully on board with taking returners
- the number and calibre of successful applicants
- whether the returners had a positive experience of being recruited
- how many of the returners remain in the organisation after 12 months



Attracting and recruiting talented candidates

Once you have identified the roles and support you can offer, you need to make sure you attract and recruit returners with excellent potential. Here are some suggested approaches.

When you're marketing your roles:

- Highlight the scope for flexibility and be clear that you are happy to discuss it. Be clear it is open to both mothers and fathers.
- Share details of your inclusive culture, as well as relevant benefits like parental leave.
- Encourage your current staff to spread the word and recommend potential candidates.
- Use social media as well as your company website to promote the opportunities.

Returners can be harder to reach than other candidates, but there are specialist organisations who you can work with, such as GPS Return and Women Returners, who have extensive experience and networks. You may also want to consider advertising on flexibly-focused job boards, such as Timewise Jobs.

When you're interviewing and assessing candidates:

- Make sure all interviewers are provided with specific guidance on interviewing returners (such as how to talk about their career break).
- Be open about which skills are required for the role, so candidates understand what is needed up front and what can be learnt on the job.
- Discuss the options for flexibility within the roles, so candidates are clear that it will not hold them back.
- Provide opportunities for candidates to talk about what they have learned during their career break, as well as their previous employment experience.
- Ask questions which reveal character traits such as an appetite for learning, determination and motivation.
- If you decide to include assessments, base them on testing aptitude and skills rather than experience, and make sure candidates have sufficient time to prepare.

Supporting your returners to succeed

Some organisations offer extra support to returners to ease the transition back into work. Here are some ideas for how you could approach this:

- 1 **Include feedback from candidates.** Discuss what support candidates feel they might need during the interview process, and factor in their suggestions.
- 2 **Extend your induction process.** Returners may need extra help with everyday processes other people in the office take for granted.
- 3 **Support line managers.** It is vital to help line managers understand the best way to support returners, including managing their flexibility, setting objectives and building in regular check-in sessions.
- 4 **Provide information on benefits such as buying additional leave.** This will help returners feel supported to manage their outside commitments.
- 5 **Create links with HR.** Allocate responsibility for providing regular and ad-hoc support for individual returners to a member of the HR team.
- 6 **Give each returner a buddy.** Having a go-to person for informal advice and day-to-day questions can help returners settle in more quickly.
- 7 **Offer career coaching.** Group or individual coaching can help returners work through issues such as setting personal objectives, building confidence and overcoming setbacks.
- 8 **Set up a support group.** Help your returners learn from each other and share their experiences by setting up a group within your organisation or with external support.
- 9 **Enlist previous returners.** If any of your current employees joined you after a break, ask them to share their insights and experience with your new recruits.

90% of respondents said there was no returner support provided and 92% said a dedicated programme would have been beneficial.

(Source: MMB website survey of 1000 working mothers, 2018)

Creating a flexible culture within your teams

The teams that your returners will be joining will need to be supportive of any flexible working arrangements you have agreed. Creating a flexible culture is a more in-depth process than we can cover here, but these are some useful points to consider:

- Make sure everyone feels they have an opportunity to speak to you about their working pattern and flexible working options. Encourage the team to support each other to achieve a working pattern which works for them.
- If having a flexible team member will mean potential gaps in service or response times, you will need to plan how this is handled, to avoid their team mates being given extra work.
- Ensure you have good channels for communication, so that if someone is out of the office or not working some of the time, they will not miss out on key communication.
- Make objectives outcome-focused not input-focused, so that individuals are clear on what they need to deliver, but have some choice about how and when they do the work.

Conclusion

Creating a successful returner strategy is not an off-the-shelf process. You will need to design and deliver roles and support that suits the specific needs of your business, with engagement from your leadership team and buy-in from managers and other team members. But the rewards to your business are well worth the investment of your time and energy.



Additional resources

Timewise and Women Returners have previously worked with the Government Equalities Office to create an in-depth guide to returner programmes. If you would like to dig deeper into the subject, you can access it here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/685064/Returner_Programmes_-_Best_Practice_Guidance_for_Employers.pdf

Other useful contacts and resources include:

- **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>

- **Timewise**

Timewise is a flexible working consultancy, helping employers design innovative solutions that attract talented loyal people and create fair workplaces. They also run a flexible jobs board, Timewise Jobs.

<https://timewise.co.uk/>

<https://www.timewisejobs.co.uk>

- **Government Equalities Office**

The GEO is responsible for equality strategy and legislation across government. They take action on the government's commitment to remove barriers to equality and help to build a fairer society.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/government-equalities-office>

- **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/>

- **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



timewise
TALENT THROUGH FLEXIBILITY

CIPD commissioned Timewise to produce this guide.

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