



Government  
Equalities Office

# Encouraging hiring of returners: an email trial

Research report

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## Executive Summary

Currently, 2 million people are out of the labour market because they are caring for their home or family members, nearly 90 per cent of whom are women.<sup>1</sup> Many would like to return to work but face difficulties in finding work after taking a time out of employment. GEO have committed to promoting returner programmes and encouraging returner recruitment among employers. Both the term ‘returners’ and returner programmes are fairly new. Employers currently have limited awareness of returners and the skills they have, and it is not clear what could increase employer interest and engagement on this topic. Applying approaches based on behavioural science can be highly effective at increasing engagement. To explore this, we tested how behavioural approaches could be used to increase interest in and engagement with the topic of returners through sending different informational emails.

We ran a randomised controlled trial to test the effects of sending four different emails to human resources (HR) professionals. All four emails contained information on returner recruitment and included a link to a webpage containing further information on how to recruit returners. In addition to this content, three of the emails also contained “behaviourally informed” content, drawing on evidence from behavioural science. The email without behaviourally informed content – the simple, information-only email – served as a comparison to allow us to understand the impact of only providing information about returners versus complementing this information with behaviourally informed content. Each of the three behaviourally informed emails employed a different behavioural principle. The principles included:

- Salience - linking the topic of returner recruitment to a currently salient topic for HR professionals i.e. the gender pay gap
- Social norms - indicating that an increasing number of returner programmes are being set up, with the implication that this may become a future norm, and
- Loss aversion - highlighting that employers may unintentionally miss out on the skills that returners have to offer by not targeting this group.

The impact of the four different emails on HR professionals’ engagement was measured based on email open rates, click-through rates from the email to the information webpage, and time spent on the webpage.

We found that the social norm email – the email with a message indicating that the number of employers implementing returner programmes is increasing and is forecast to

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the Labour Force Survey (2018). Table INAC01: Economic inactivity: People aged 16 to 64 by reasons for inactivity (seasonally adjusted).

continue increasing – was most effective among the tested messages in increasing engagement. Open rates for this email were significantly higher than all other emails, and in particular, around 15 per cent higher than the simple information-only email. Click-through rates were also higher for the social norms email, but were only significantly so in comparison to the salience email. As a secondary measure, we planned to compare webpage engagement by measuring length of time spent viewing the webpage. We were only able to collect aggregated data, and we found this data did not correlate well with the data collected via the email platform, so were unable to conduct a robust analysis. However, the directional effects for time spent on the webpage again suggest that the social norms email was most effective.

In summary, social norms messaging that complements information about returners appears to be most effective at increasing engagement with information about returners, relative to either information alone or information combined with salience or loss aversion. We also found that, overall, levels of engagement were lower than those in a past email trial involving HR professionals on the topic of flexible working. One possible explanation for this is that there are low levels of awareness of, or interest in, returner recruitment, meaning that broader efforts are likely to be necessary to improve employers' understanding of the potential benefits of returners.

# 1. Introduction

The Government Equalities Office (GEO) are interested in facilitating the return to work for individuals who have taken an extended time out of work for caring responsibilities ('returners'). One avenue for facilitating the return to work is through the use of returner programmes. Returner programmes target individuals who have taken extended breaks from work and offer paid positions that act as a supported route back to work. GEO have committed to encouraging and supporting the public and private sectors to establish returner programmes.

There is a vast body of research on how to communicate effectively, and the way in which something is communicated matters greatly in terms of generating interest and action.<sup>2</sup> However, there is no direct evidence about how best to promote information about returners and the hiring of them to employers. This is largely because the concepts of 'returners' and 'returner programmes' are fairly new and have therefore not been the subject of research. GEO have partnered with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) on a two year collaboration - the Gender and Behavioural Insights (GABI) programme - to generate evidence on what works to improve gender equality in the workplace. As part of this programme, BIT has conducted research to test what works to increase HR professionals' engagement with and interest in returner recruitment through this email trial.

## 2. The policy challenge

Women are more likely than men to leave the workforce for periods of time to care for children or other family members. This can be seen in the large gaps in workforce participation between men and women among parents of pre-school-aged children in the UK: although 93 per cent of fathers with pre-school aged children work, only 66 per cent of mothers do.<sup>3</sup> While men also leave the workforce to take on caring responsibilities, the vast majority of returners (and potential returners) are women. A recent quantitative analysis of the Labour Force Survey confirmed that over 90 per cent of potential returners are female. Of these women, 95 per cent stated that they would like to return to work at some point.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Behavioural Insights Team (2017). Update Report 2016-17. Pg. 22, 24, 25, 40; The Behavioural Insights Team (2016). Update Report 2015-16.

<sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics (2017). [Families and the Labour Market](#), England: 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Paull, G. (2017). Quantitative analysis of those returning to the labour market following a break to care for others. Presentation to the Government Equalities Office, 14 November 2017.

However, many women who wish to return to work find it difficult to find a job. They face a number of barriers in returning to work. The most common include a lack of flexible work options, high childcare costs, discrimination from employers and recruitment agents, and a perceived loss of skills and self-confidence.<sup>5</sup> As a result of these barriers, many women end up in positions below their level of skills and experience.<sup>6</sup>

This is problematic for a number of reasons. It generates a financial and emotional cost for these women.<sup>7</sup> It also generates large economic costs for the UK by reducing productivity and GDP. The OECD has estimated that equalising participation of men and women in the labour market could increase GDP by 10 per cent by 2030.<sup>8</sup> Women returning from career breaks and finding jobs that match their skills and experience is also, one of many, important ways to seek to address the gender pay gap (GPG)<sup>9</sup> in the UK.

While this problem of course does not have a single solution and needs to be tackled in a variety of ways, one of the key components to successfully tackling the problem will be to increase employer awareness of and interest in returners and their recruitment.

### **3. Research aims and trial methodology**

We conducted the research presented in this report to build evidence on what messaging is effective in generating interest among employers around returner recruitment. We focussed on HR professionals as a key group to target as they are responsible for recruitment and for setting up returner programmes in organisations.

Working in partnership with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the professional body for people management and development in the UK, we ran a randomised controlled trial (RCT) to test different messaging approaches to increasing engagement and interest in returners. The CIPD worked with the BIT on this email trial as they have been actively supporting parent and carer returners through their Steps Ahead mentoring programme since 2016 and wanted to use this email trial as an opportunity to generate insights that will be useful to HR professionals in inspiring change in their organisations.

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<sup>5</sup> Kendall, S. (2017). *Analysis of responses to the call for evidence on returning to work after time out for caring*. Research Report. December 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Timewise (2013). [Jobs not careers Report](#).

<sup>7</sup> Timewise (2013). [Jobs not careers Report](#).

<sup>8</sup> Thévenon et al. (2012). [Effects of Reducing Gender Gaps in Education and Labour Force Participation on Economic Growth in the OECD](#).

<sup>9</sup> Costa Dias, M., Elming, W., & Joyce, R. (2016). *The gender wage gap*. IFS Briefing Note.

This trial involved sending one of four different variations of emails on returner recruitment to a sample of 23,095 HR professionals selected from CIPD's mailing list.<sup>10</sup> The emails varied both in their subject lines and in their content. All four emails contained information on returner recruitment and included a link to a webpage containing further information on how to recruit returners hosted by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). The content in three of the emails was "behaviourally informed", based on evidence from behavioural science. The email without behaviourally informed content – the simple, information-only email – served as a neutral, business-as-usual comparison to allow us to understand the impact of just providing information about returners versus complementing this information with behaviourally informed content. Each of the three behaviourally informed emails employed a different behavioural principle: salience (linking the topic of returner recruitment to a currently salient topic for HR professionals i.e. the gender pay gap); social norms (indicating that an increasing number of returner programmes are being set up, with the implication that this may become a future norm); and loss aversion (highlighting that employers may unintentionally miss out on the skills that returners have to offer by not targeting this group) (see Section 4 for details).

## Research Ethics

Any trials that may present a risk to participants are reviewed at BIT using methodological and ethical criteria before they go live. BIT Research staff involved in trial design produce a Trial Protocol document for internal purposes, which describes the trial to be run in detail. This document also outlines any ethical concerns associated with the trial, and details how risk or harm to participants will be minimised. A trial can only be launched after the Trial Protocol has been reviewed and signed off by BIT's Chief Scientist or a Senior Member of the BIT Research team.

This trial was reviewed and approved following BIT's internal ethical assessment. BIT concluded that the risk to participants in this trial was low, meaning that the trial was of a routine nature and was non-contentious. Specifically, it was judged that the content of the messages and webpages were unlikely to cause distress or harm of any kind to recipients, and the privacy and confidentiality of participants would be maintained throughout the trial.

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<sup>10</sup> The emails were only received by 20,408 participants. For 2,687, the addresses either failed or had previously unsubscribed. We do not find any significant differences in non-receipt of the email across the four arms.

## Sample selection

Our participants consisted of individuals with email addresses on CIPD's database. Their database consists of HR professionals within the UK who have signed up to receive email communications from CIPD. All participants in the trial had previously consented to be contacted by CIPD via email and had either expressed an interest in recruitment and selection or worked in a specialist role related to recruitment and selection.

Working with CIPD, we aimed to build a sample of over 20,000 individuals to contact via email. In building the sample, we prioritised inclusion of several sub-populations of particular interest to GEO, which consisted of: larger organisations (100+ employees); more senior employees (manager level and above); employees who have indicated they are in roles focussed on recruitment, talent management, HR management, resourcing and workforce planning; and employees who have indicated an interest in recruitment, workforce planning, and diversity and inclusion. Data on these sample characteristics was not available for the full sample, as CIPD does not require that email subscribers or members provide this information when they sign up. The sample characteristics are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1. Sample characteristics**

		n	% of sample
Organisation size	Large (>= 100 employees)	9,173	39.7%
	Small (< 100 employees)	3,139	13.6%
	Unknown	10,783	46.7%
Seniority	Management level or higher	9,714	42.1%
	Junior	6,490	28.1%
	Unknown	6,891	29.8%

## Outcome measures

To assess the impact of the email trial we used one primary and two secondary outcome measures.

### Primary outcome measure

We used one primary outcome measure:

- **Click-through rate** - whether or not recipients clicked on the link in the email to the EHRC webpage within a week of the emails being sent. We examined the

relative impact of the four different emails on this outcome measure, which was tracked and quantified by Marketing Cloud, CIPD's email platform.

This was chosen as the primary outcome measure because if participants clicked the link, we could assume that they had been attracted to what the email contained. This would suggest that the behavioural insight being deployed had been successful in increasing interest in returner recruitment.

It would have also been of interest to investigate more concrete behavioural outcomes, such as whether different emails ultimately resulted in employers actively carrying out actions to recruit returners. For example, if the different emails led to employers advertising job openings as being suitable for returners. However, it was not feasible to track such outcomes, as gathering the relevant data would have required web-scraping multiple job aggregator websites (e.g., Monster.com, Indeed) with unique scripts and matching an organisation's job postings to individuals in our sample. BIT explored this as an option but concluded that scraping over a meaningful period of time and matching job postings with individuals in the data would be prohibitively time-intensive. This is why we ultimately decided on click-through rate from email to webpage as the primary outcome measure, even though it is only one early step in the journey that employers can take to recruit returners.

## Secondary outcome measures

We used two secondary outcome measures, which are described below.

- **Open rates** - whether or not a recipient opened the email within a week of it being sent. This tested the impact of the variation in the subject line of the emails and whether recipients take the first step of engaging with email. This outcome measure was also tracked by Marketing Cloud. Open rates were not selected as a primary outcome measure, as we are more concerned with a deeper level of interest and engagement as indicated by click-throughs.
- **Time spent on web page** - how long an email recipient who clicked through to the EHRC returner recruitment webpage spent on the page. We chose this measure as a proxy for engagement with the website content, as we were unable to track clicks within the page. This outcome measure was tracked by Google Analytics. This measure was not selected as a primary outcome as we had questions about how accurate the data would be, as well as power.

**Table 2. Summary of outcome measures**

<b>Outcome Measures</b>	<b>Data to be collected</b>	<b>Point of Collection</b>
Primary: Proportion of recipients who click on the link in the email within 1 week of sending	Click-throughs	1 week after email is sent <sup>11</sup>
Secondary: Proportion of recipients who open the email within 1 week of sending	Opens	1 week after email is sent
Secondary: Time spent on the webpage	Length of view	1 week after email is sent

## Randomisation

This study was conducted as a randomised controlled trial. Each individual was randomly assigned to one of the email groups in order to ensure that the groups did not differ in any systematic way prior to treatment. As a result, we can causally infer that any difference in outcome between the groups is due to the type of email they received rather than a systematic difference between the groups.

Individuals were identified by unique email addresses<sup>12</sup> and randomised by BIT to receive one of four different emails. The randomisation was stratified by gender (male, female, other/unknown) and seniority (junior, manager, senior, unknown). We carried out balance checks on the following observable characteristics: gender, seniority, company size, and membership status (binary). The balance check tables are included in Appendix 3.

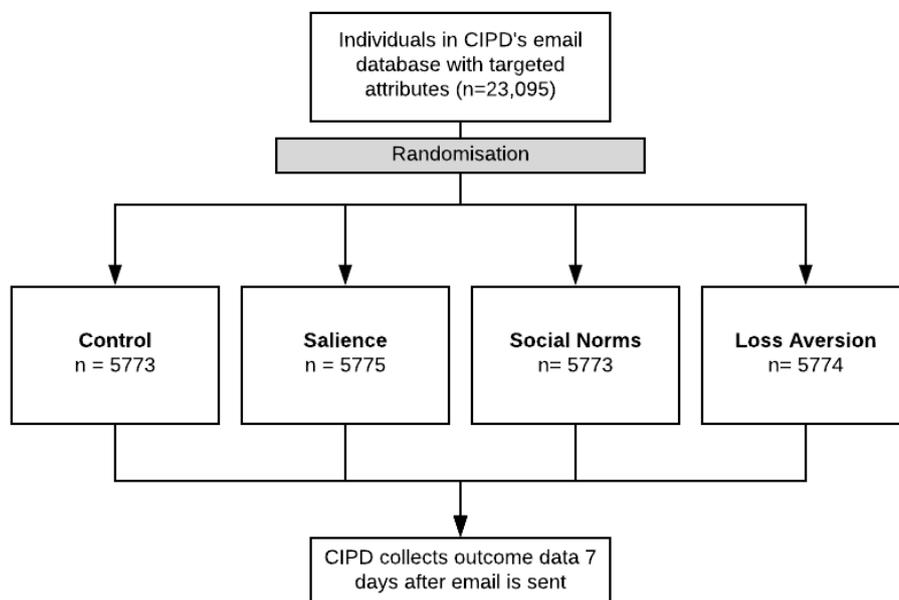
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<sup>11</sup> We selected one week as the cut-off time based on a previous email trial conducted with CIPD in which we found that 71% of recorded opens occurred on the same day the email was sent and 97% of recorded opens occurred within 7 days. Past that point, the number of opens sharply drops off, and we see little benefit in continuing to collect data.

<sup>12</sup> BIT and CIPD used anonymous ID numbers when exchanging data in order to protect participants' privacy. No personally identifiable information (e.g. name, email address) was shared by CIPD at any point in the project.

Figure 1 below summarises the trial implementation and shows how many different people were sent each different email.

**Figure 1. Trial implementation diagram**<sup>13</sup>



## Challenges with outcome data

During analysis, we encountered two issues with our outcome data.

Firstly, email open rate data was unreliable. Of recorded click throughs, 44 per cent did not have a recorded open. A potential reason for why this happened could be that many email platforms track opens by at least one pixel of the image in the email being downloaded, and some organisations turn off auto-downloads of images by default. Therefore, a recipient might click on the link without having any of the images download which would result in a click being registered but an open not being registered. Where we were able to directly observe unrecorded opens associated with a recorded click, we converted them to recorded opens.. As all four trial arms were affected by this issue, the comparative results for open rates (while an underestimate across the board) stand, and we did not observe significant differences in the rates of these conversions across the four trial arms.

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<sup>13</sup> Due to different sizes of stratification bins which are not always divisible by four, group allocations are not perfectly equal.

Unfortunately, there was no means of identifying unrecorded opens that did not result in a click-through. We were provided with anonymised data so were not able to identify organisations that appear to block the downloading of images, which might have been one way to improve our estimate of the true open rate. Based on the conversions described above, we have no reason to believe there would be a significant difference in unrecorded opens that did not result in a click-through across the four arms. Analysis results on open rates can therefore be assumed to be an underestimate.

Secondly, we were unable to attain participant-level data regarding the time they spent on the webpage, only overall descriptive statistics for the whole sample was available. This meant we were unable to draw any causal inferences about this outcome measure. Aggregated data on the number of unique page visits was consistently lower than click-through rates per arm. This may be due to some browsers stripping the tracking code in the URL. We therefore only provide descriptive statistics on time spent on page, with the caveat that the dataset is incomplete for this outcome.

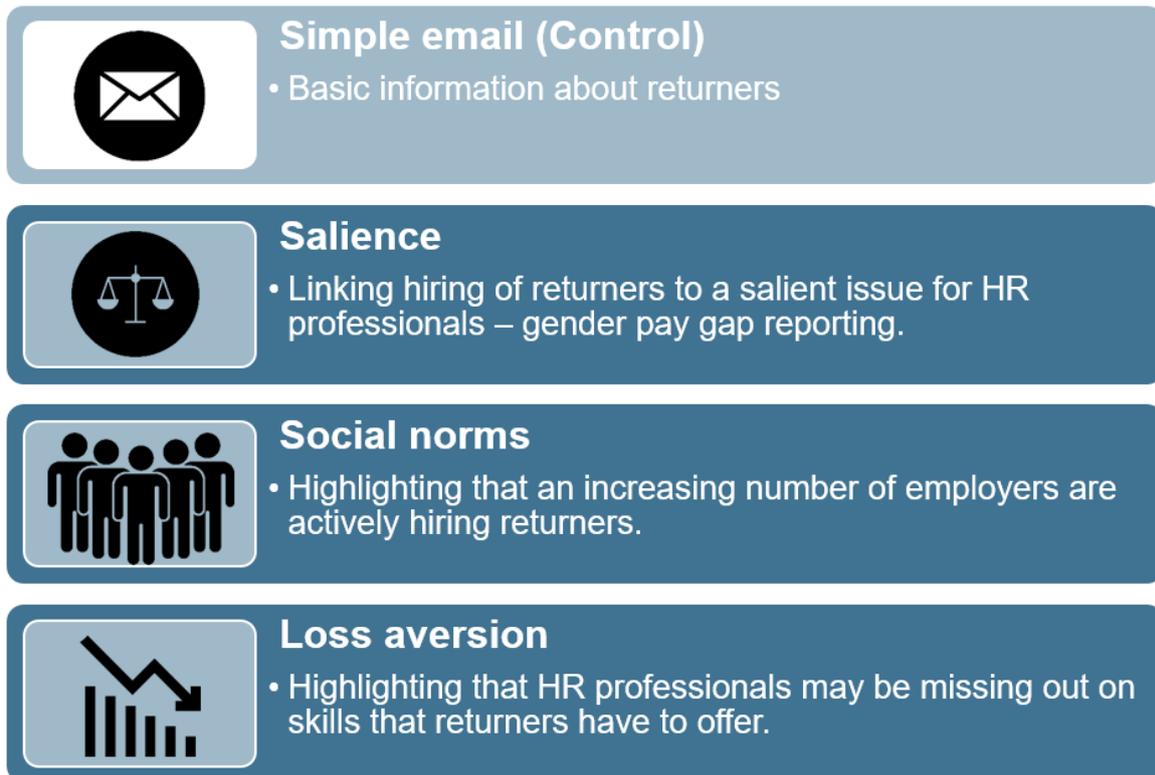
## **4. Behavioural principles tested**

This section outlines the email content and the rationale for using the behavioural principles that were applied to the emails. We tested which behavioural principles was most effective at increasing interest in returner recruitment among HR professionals.

To explore the context and determine which behavioural insights might be most relevant to apply, we conducted a literature review on previous research. Understanding and insights were gained on behavioural barriers to returner recruitment and possible behavioural levers that could be applied to raising interest in returner recruitment. Email content for four emails was then designed using these insights and in collaboration with CIPD and the GEO.

We created a simple information-only email that acted as a comparison email. The three behaviourally-informed emails contained content based on three behavioural principles: salience, social norms, and loss aversion. Figure 2 summarises all four emails and the behavioural principles that were applied to the three behaviourally-informed emails (see Appendix 2 for the full email content). These principles are outlined in more detail below.

Figure 2. Behavioural principles applied to emails



## Salience

Our behaviour is influenced by what we pay attention to,<sup>14</sup> and our capacity to absorb and process information is limited<sup>15</sup>. Beyond a certain point, information overload<sup>16</sup> and decision fatigue<sup>17</sup> can impair our ability to think and make decisions. This means that anything that is deemed unnecessary is quickly filtered out. This is particularly true online where we face an overload of information on a daily basis.

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<sup>14</sup> Kahneman, D., & Thaler, R. H. (2006). Anomalies: Utility maximization and experienced utility. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 20(1), 221-234.

<sup>15</sup> Miller, G. A. (1956). The magical number seven, plus or minus two: Some limits on our capacity for processing information. *Psychological review*, 63(2), 81.

<sup>16</sup> Eppler, M. J., & Mengis, J. (2004). The concept of information overload: A review of literature from organization science, accounting, marketing, MIS, and related disciplines. *The information society*, 20(5), 325-344.

<sup>17</sup> Rice, T. (2013), 'The behavioral economics of health and health care', *Annual Review of Public Health*, 34, pp. 431-47.

Increasing the salience of messages by highlighting their novelty or relevance is an effective way to encourage people to pay attention.<sup>18</sup> We therefore thought it would be important to attract HR professionals' attention to information about returners using a message that clearly communicates why returners are relevant to them. An issue that is currently salient to most HR professionals is the gender pay gap, as new legislation has been introduced requiring organisations with more than 250 employees to publish information on their gender pay gaps.<sup>19</sup> Hiring experienced women who are returning from a career break into senior positions could help towards addressing this gap within organisations. To increase the relevance (and salience) of returners, we highlighted the link between returners and the gender pay gap in the salience email. By connecting these points, it would enable HR professionals to quickly understand and associate returners, and returner recruitment, to a topical subject that would potentially benefit their organisational goals.

## Social norms

People are strongly influenced by the behaviour of those around them as well as by implicit or explicit expectations within a particular society or group.<sup>20</sup> Social norms – the norms that groups have that group members feel compelled to comply with – have proven to be highly effective at influencing behaviour across a variety of contexts. For example, telling people that 'nine out of ten people pay their tax on time' – a very strong and clear indication of what the norm is in terms of tax-paying behaviour – has been found to make people more likely to pay their own taxes promptly.<sup>21</sup>

Social norms messaging is particularly effective if messages employ descriptive norms (indicating how most people behave), local norms (indicating how groups similar to you behave)<sup>22,23</sup>, or majority/minority norms (indicating that you are currently in the minority and are at odds with the majority).<sup>24</sup> Social norms messaging should be as specific to the

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<sup>18</sup> For example in a BIT trial, we improved the salience of notices about fines by adding a red 'Pay Now' stamp on the top. This simple change led to a 3.1 percentage point increase in the payment rate (Behavioural Insights Team (2016). *2015-2016 Update Report*.)

<sup>19</sup> Employers with more than 250 employees are required to report their gender pay gap figures in April 2018 according to new legislation.

<sup>20</sup> Cialdini, R.B. and Trost, M.R. (1998), 'Social influence: Social norms, conformity and compliance', in Gilbert, D., Fiske, S., Lindzey, G. (eds) *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, 4th edn. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 151-92

<sup>21</sup> Hallsworth, M., List, J. A., Metcalfe, R. D., & Vlaev, I. (2017). The behavioralist as tax collector: Using natural field experiments to enhance tax compliance. *Journal of Public Economics*, 148, 14-31.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> The Behavioural Insights Team. 2014. EAST: Four simple ways to apply behavioural insights, p.18.

<sup>24</sup> Hallsworth, M., List, J. A., Metcalfe, R. D., & Vlaev, I. (2017). The behavioralist as tax collector: Using natural field experiments to enhance tax compliance. *Journal of Public Economics*, 148, 14-31.

group you are interested in influencing as possible and point out where behaviour deviates from the current norm.

Although social norms have proven to be very effective in other trials, a challenge in the present trial is that targeting and recruiting returners is not the prevailing social norm among HR professionals. However, there is evidence that even just referring to a *future* social norm is effective at influencing behaviour. In a previous email trial that focused on encouraging flexible recruitment, we included a reference to research that found that the majority of UK employers are open to flexible working and suggested that flexible working is the trend of the future (i.e. on its way to becoming the majority norm).<sup>25</sup> This future social norm was the most effective message in that particular trial, increasing the likelihood of HR professionals opening emails on flexible working by 16 per cent compared to the simple information-only message.

Given the past success of future social norms in influencing behaviour, we decided to test whether the use of a future social norm might be effective in increasing interest and engagement with returner information in the current trial. To do this, we referenced the large increase in recent years in the number of returner programmes that have been set up and indicated that this increase was likely to continue, suggesting that it would become a future social norm among HR professionals.

## Loss aversion

The third email explored loss aversion as a behavioural insight. Many HR professionals are not making an active choice to specifically target returners in recruitment. This may be because they are unaware of the specific barriers that this group encounter when faced with standard recruitment practices.<sup>26</sup> HR professionals are therefore unaware of a potential loss they are incurring by missing out on the skills and experience that returners have to offer.

Choices can be presented or 'framed' as generating either gains or losses, and this framing can strongly influence people's behaviours.<sup>27</sup> How this effect plays out depends on the riskiness of a given situation. Behavioural research suggests that people will on average tend to accept risks when faced with potential losses or negative consequences,

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<sup>25</sup> Likki, T., Londakova, K., & Sweeney, M. (2017). *Encouraging flexible recruitment: an email trial*. Equalities and Human Rights Commission.

<sup>26</sup> Kendall, S. (2017). *Analysis of responses to the call for evidence on returning to work after time out for caring*. Research Report. December 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Wheatley, J. J., & Oshikawa, S. (1970). The relationship between anxiety and positive and negative advertising appeals. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 85-89.

but avoid risks when faced with potential gains or benefits of a decision (this is referred to as the prospect theory).<sup>28</sup>

In practice, this means that when a situation is perceived as risky, people strongly prefer avoiding losses. On average people tend to find a loss roughly twice as painful as an equivalent gain and as a result will work twice as hard to avoid it.<sup>29</sup>

This email draws on these findings to test if framing the 'choice' to not target returners in recruitment as a loss increases interest in returner recruitment. The email focuses on drawing attention to how employers will be losing out on returners' skills by citing potential barriers in recruitment that HR professionals may be unaware of, such as the use of gendered wording in job adverts<sup>30</sup> or recruitment agencies' automatic screening systems that discard applicants with no recent 'work' experience or professional reference.<sup>31</sup>

## 5. Trial results

This section explores the results of the email trials. The analytical strategy can be found in Appendix 1. We first discuss the overall level of click-through and open rates as a whole and then discuss the findings from each outcome measure.

### Overall levels of engagement

Both the open and click-through rates for this email trial are lower than has been found in a past email trial run by BIT with CIPD. For example, a trial run for EHRC by BIT in partnership with CIPD on flexible working found open rates of between 21.4 and 24.8 percent and click-through rates of 2.1 to 3.1 percent. By contrast, open rates for this trial were lower, ranging from 16.4 to 19.4 per cent. Click-through rates were also lower, ranging from 1.47 to 2.01 per cent.<sup>32</sup> This means that the average open rate across all behaviourally informed emails was 22 percent lower and the click-through rate 25 percent lower than the CIPD flexible recruitment trial.

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<sup>28</sup> Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1986). Rational choice and the framing of decisions. *Journal of business*, S251-S278.

<sup>29</sup> Kahneman, D. & Tversky, A. (1992). "Advances in prospect theory: Cumulative representation of uncertainty". *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*. 5 (4): 297–323.

<sup>30</sup> Gaucher, D., Friesen, J., & Kay, A. C. (2011). Evidence that gendered wording in job advertisements exists and sustains gender inequality. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 101(1), 109.

<sup>31</sup> Internal GEO research.

<sup>32</sup> In both trials, we observe the same issue with unrecorded opens, and the rates of click-throughs with unrecorded opens were very similar.

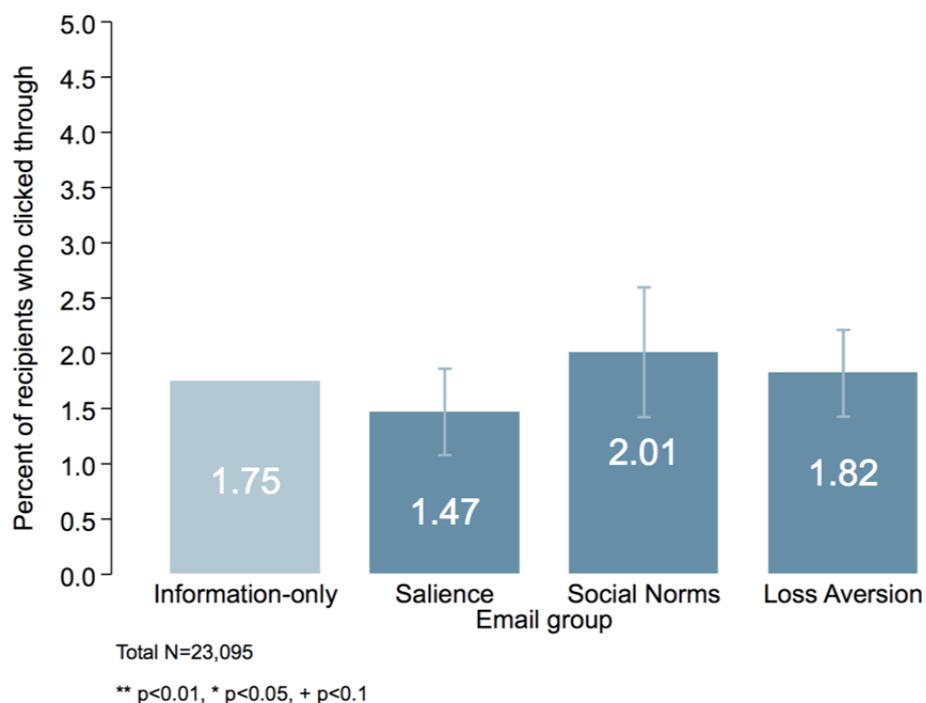
This could be due to a number of factors such as the time of the year in which the emails were sent (close to the end of the financial year) or due to a change in the system used by CIPD to send emails which record open and click-through rates differently. However, it may also be due to lower levels of engagement and interest on the returner topic overall. More research would be needed to confirm the reasons for the lower engagement levels we find in this trial.

## Primary outcome measure - click-through rates

In order to assess the outcomes of the behaviourally informed emails, we ran two comparisons of click-through rates across the emails tested. First, we compared the click-through rates of each of the behaviourally informed emails to those of the simple, information-only email. Second, we compared click-through rates of each of the behaviourally informed emails in relation to each other.

Figure 3 shows the results of the first comparison (i.e. behaviourally informed emails in comparison to the simple, information-only email).

**Figure 3. Click-through rate - comparison to simple information-only email**

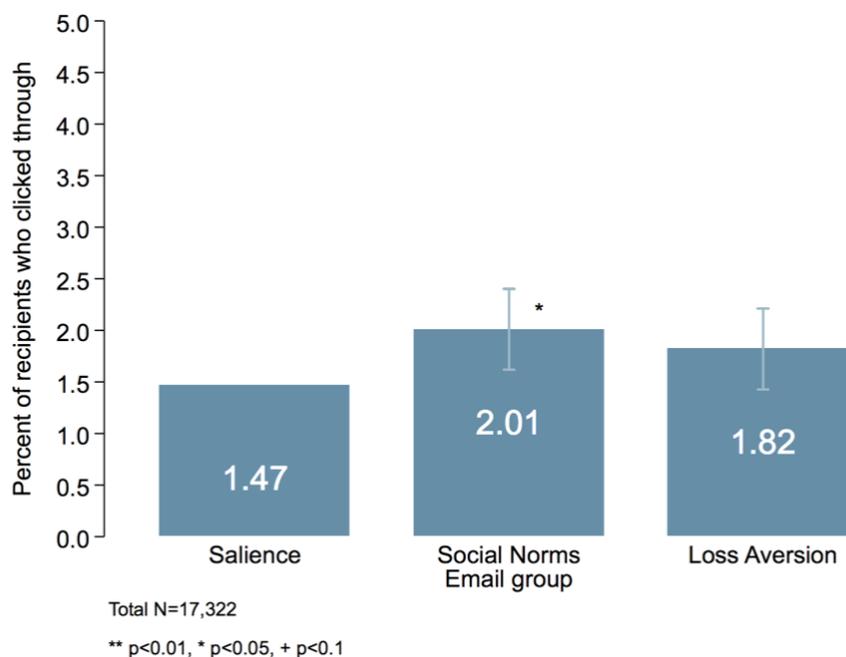


We found no statistically significant differences between emails. This suggests that, statistically, none of the behaviourally informed emails outperformed the simple, information-only email. In terms of non-significant, directional effects, we see that the social norms email had higher click-through rates and the salience email lower click-through rates, relative to the simple, information-only email. The loss aversion email had

similar rates to the simple, information-only email. Being statistically non-significant means that we cannot achieve adequate levels of confidence that these directional findings would occur again if we ran the same test again, and the directional differences we observed here may be due to chance.

We do, however, find a statistically significant result in the second comparison (shown in Figure 4) where the behaviourally informed emails are analysed relative to each other (excluding the information-only email). The social norms message (highlighting that other employers are recruiting returners) performed significantly better than the salience message (highlighting the link to the gender pay gap).<sup>33</sup> The social norms email click-through rates were 0.5 percentage points higher, which translates to being 37 per cent higher than the click-through rates of the salience email.

**Figure 4. Click-through rate - behaviourally informed email comparison**



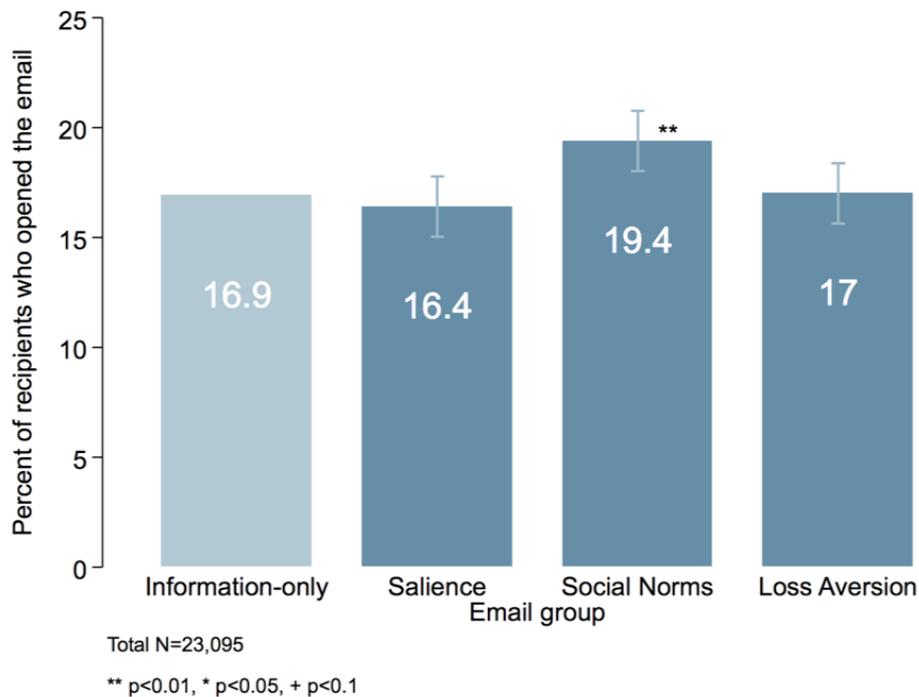
## Secondary outcome measure - open rates

We compared the open rates of emails relative to the simple, information-only email. This provides an indication of how responsive people are to the subject lines of the email. Figure 5 shows the open rates for each of the emails.

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<sup>33</sup> (0.5pp, p=0.027)

**Figure 5. Open rate – comparison to simple information-only email**



We find that the social norms message in the subject line ('Many employers are recruiting returners - are you?') performed better than the simple, information-only email ('Find out more about how to recruit returners'). This difference is statistically significant, meaning that we can be confident that it is not due to random chance. Open rates were 16.9 per cent for the simple email and 19.4 per cent for social norms. Open rates for social norms emails were therefore 2.5 percentage points higher than the simple email, which translates into a 15 percent increase in open rates.

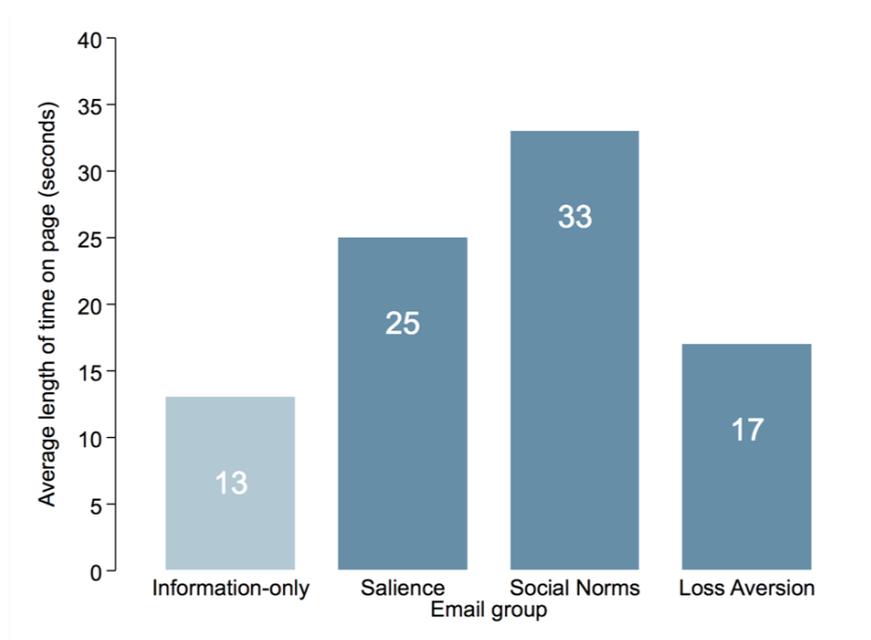
We also found that the social norms subject line performs better than both of the other behaviourally informed subject lines: open rates were significantly higher than both the salience subject lines ('Could returners help your gender pay gap') and loss subject lines ('Does your recruitment block good hires?'). The directional effects for open rates are similar to those of the click-through rates: open rates for the loss email are similar to the simple control and salience is slightly lower. However, again, these differences are not statistically significant so we cannot say that the salience or loss emails are any different in effectiveness from the simple, information-only email.

It is worth noting that we believe we may be underestimating the true open rates given the data issues described earlier in this report, but we still believe these comparisons are valid given that we have no reason to believe that the rates of unrecorded opens vary across arms.

## Secondary outcome measure - time spent on web page

In addition to open-rates we also examined time spent on the web page linked to in the email. Through Google Analytics, we collected information on the average length of time spent on the landing page for each email group. As previously mentioned, we observed some inconsistencies between the data provided by the CIPD's email platform and Google Analytics. Google Analytics recorded fewer page visits than CIPD's email platform registered click-throughs (298 visits vs. 407 click-throughs across all arms). This may be due to some web browsers removing the tracking code from the URL. We do not have a big enough sample size to be able to test for statistical significance across the email groups, but we outline the directional effects in Figure 6 below.

**Figure 6. Average time spent on webpage (seconds)**



Looking at the Google Analytics data on time spent on the web page, those in the simple, information-only email group spent the least amount of time on the landing page - an average of 13 seconds. Average time spent on the landing page was higher for all the behaviourally informed email groups - 17 seconds for the loss aversion group, 25 seconds for the salience group and 33 seconds for the social norms group. This increased engagement is likely to be purely the result of our email intervention, given the landing page was the same across the treatments.

The finding of increased engagement by those in the social norms group aligns with findings of higher click-through and open rates for this group. This offers further evidence that using social norms in the email increases interest.

## 6. Findings from the trial

There are two overarching findings for this email trial:

1) **Social norms are effective compared to other tested messages:**

Highlighting the fact that increasing numbers of employers are recruiting returners (future social norm) generates higher levels of interest and engagement among HR professionals. The results allow us to be confident that this is the case for open rates, while directional non-statistically significant results from click-through rates and Google Analytics also suggest an increase in interest and engagement.

2) **Salience and loss aversion are not effective:** Highlighting the link to the gender pay gap (salience) or the fact that employers may be unintentionally missing out on returners' skills due to their recruitment processes (loss aversion) do not seem to be particularly impactful in terms of increasing HR professionals' interest and engagement in finding out more about hiring returners.

## 7. Conclusion

The research described in this report sought to understand how different behaviourally informed messages could be used to increase HR professionals' interest in and engagement with information about returners. Our research found that social norms messages were most effective among the tested messages in increasing HR professionals' engagement with information about returners. This was interesting because social norms tend to be effective when they describe a current norm and make it clear how an individual is currently deviating from it. But our message simply emphasised that an increasing number of employers were setting up returner programmes and that this was likely to keep increasing in the future. We therefore show that this potential future social norm is effective in this context.

The other behavioural approaches we tested – linking returners to a salient topic (the gender pay gap) or highlighting a potential loss of skills from not recruiting returners (loss aversion) – were not particularly effective at increasing engagement. The trial results indicate that using future social norms may be an effective way of increasing interest and engagement in future communications. We also recommend, however, that further research should seek to understand employers' current perceptions and understanding of returners and returner programmes, and use this information to further adapt and refine communications to maximise interest and engagement.

## Appendix 1 - Analytical strategy

The analytical strategy described below was specified prior to randomisation and was used to generate the findings described in the *Trial Results* section.

We estimate the following model:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 T_{ij} + \psi_i \Gamma + \epsilon_i$$

Where:

$Y_i$  is the proportion of users who click the link in the email;

$T_{ij}$  is a vector of treatment indicators, equal to 1 if participant 'i' is assigned to treatment condition 'j', and 0 if assigned to the control condition;

$\psi_i$  is a vector of covariates that is composed of:

- Gender (dummies: male, female, unspecified)
- Organisation size (dummies: e.g., 100-249, 250-499, 500+)
- Seniority (junior, manager, senior, unknown)
- Membership status (binary)
- type of company (e.g., private, public, not-for-profit);

$\epsilon_i$  is an independent error term with White robust standard errors.

### Secondary analysis

We use the same model as above for our secondary outcomes where:

- $Y_i$  is the proportion of users who open the email

We also test for the existence of heterogeneous treatment effects by gender (male vs. female). This analysis used two different models. The first model pools all the treatment arms and compare their overall effectiveness relative to the control using interactions:

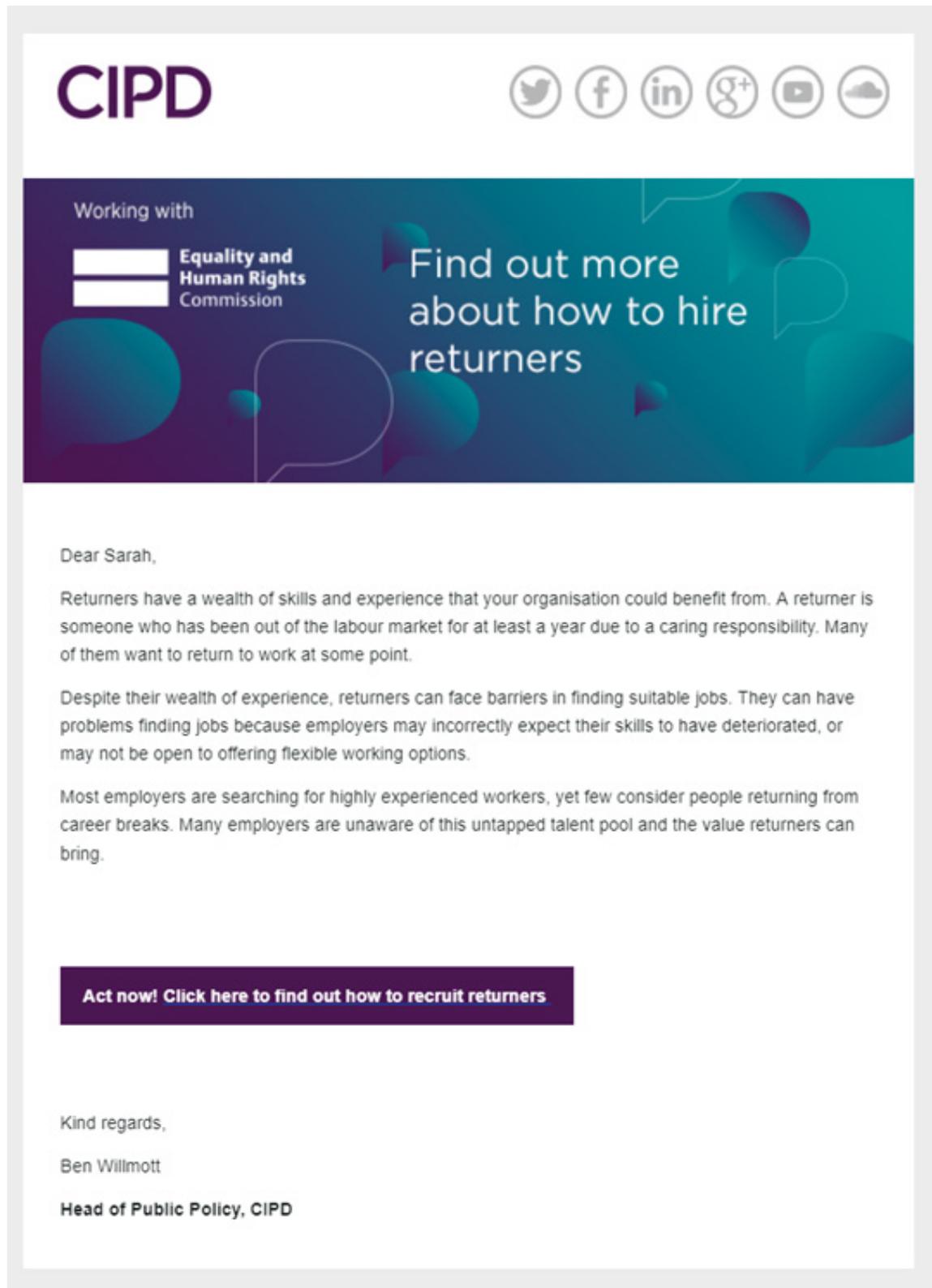
$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 Any\ treat_i + \beta_2 Female_i + \beta_3 Any\ treat * Female_i + \psi_i \Gamma + \epsilon_i$$

The second model tests for the existence of heterogeneous treatment effects individually for each treatment arm:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 T_{ij} + \beta_2 Female_i + \beta_3 T_{ij} * Female_i + \psi_i \Gamma + \epsilon_i$$

## Appendix 2 - Information-Only and Behaviourally Informed Emails

### Simple information-only email



The image shows a screenshot of an email from CIPD. At the top left is the CIPD logo. To the right are social media icons for Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+, YouTube, and SoundCloud. Below this is a teal and purple banner with the text "Working with Equality and Human Rights Commission" and "Find out more about how to hire returners". The main body of the email is white and contains a salutation "Dear Sarah," followed by three paragraphs of text. The first paragraph defines returners and their numbers. The second paragraph discusses barriers to finding jobs. The third paragraph highlights the value of returners. A purple button with white text says "Act now! Click here to find out how to recruit returners". At the bottom, it says "Kind regards, Ben Willmott, Head of Public Policy, CIPD".

**CIPD**

Working with  
**Equality and Human Rights Commission**

Find out more about how to hire returners

Dear Sarah,

Returners have a wealth of skills and experience that your organisation could benefit from. A returner is someone who has been out of the labour market for at least a year due to a caring responsibility. Many of them want to return to work at some point.

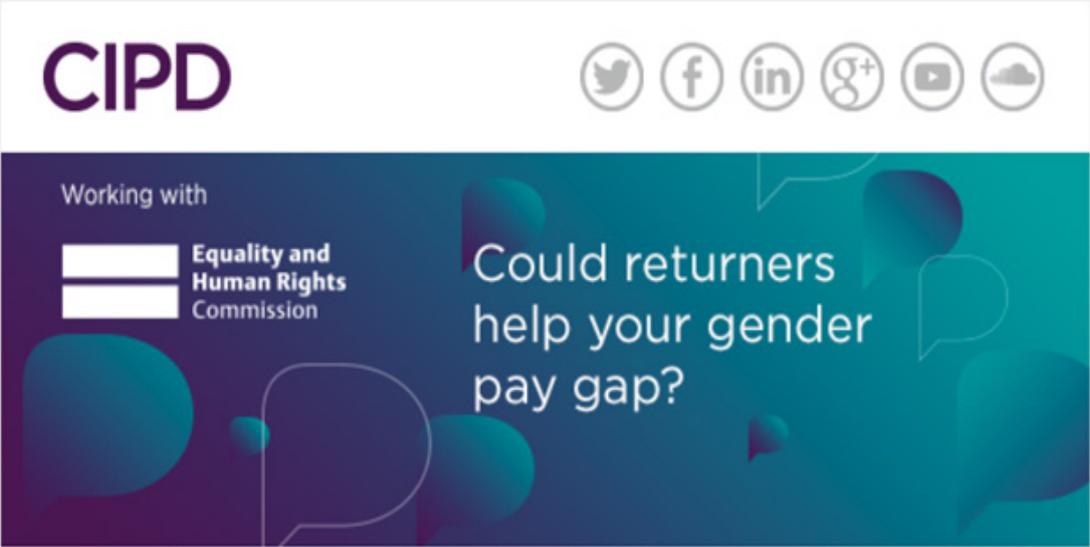
Despite their wealth of experience, returners can face barriers in finding suitable jobs. They can have problems finding jobs because employers may incorrectly expect their skills to have deteriorated, or may not be open to offering flexible working options.

Most employers are searching for highly experienced workers, yet few consider people returning from career breaks. Many employers are unaware of this untapped talent pool and the value returners can bring.

**Act now! Click here to find out how to recruit returners**

Kind regards,  
Ben Willmott  
Head of Public Policy, CIPD

## Behaviourally informed email 1 – Saliency



**CIPD**

Working with  
 **Equality and Human Rights Commission**

# Could returners help your gender pay gap?

Dear Hannah,

The deadline for gender pay gap reporting is fast approaching. Organisations like yours are wondering what they can do to reduce their gender pay gap.

Search no more. One promising action to add to your overall plan is the recruitment of returners - experienced women returning to work after a career break. Hiring and progressing returners broadens your talent pool and helps build your talent pipeline.

This is a clear win-win: you can contribute to your broader work on addressing the gender pay gap AND benefit from hiring experienced and motivated professionals.

**Act now! [Click here to find out how to recruit returners](#)**

Kind regards,  
Ben Willmott  
**Head of Public Policy, CIPD**

## Behaviourally informed email 2 - Social norms

**CIPD**

Working with

 **Equality and Human Rights Commission**

**Many employers are recruiting returners - are you?**

Dear Kristina,

The number of employers actively recruiting returners - highly experienced people returning to work after a career break - has more than quadrupled in just two years.<sup>1</sup> And this upward trend is predicted to continue.<sup>2</sup>

Targeting returners opens up access to highly skilled, experienced and motivated professionals. If you don't act now, you could be among the few who will miss out on this pool of experienced hires.

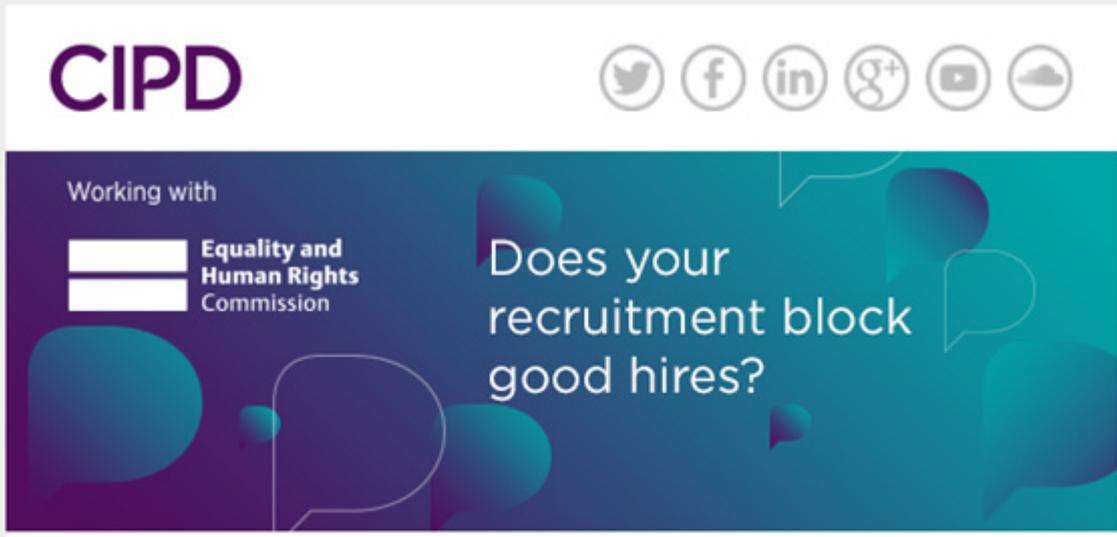
**Act now! [Click here to find out how to recruit returners](#)**

Kind regards,

Ben Willmott

**Head of Public Policy, CIPD**

## Behaviourally informed email 3 - Loss aversion



**CIPD**

Working with  
**Equality and Human Rights Commission**

# Does your recruitment block good hires?

Dear Kelly,

Small details in your recruitment process can unintentionally block experienced applicants.

Words like 'decisive' or 'competitive' in job adverts have been shown to deter experienced women from applying.<sup>3</sup> And automated screening often filters out strong candidates who can't specify they are currently working.

This could mean that you're losing out on returners - highly experienced people returning to work after a career break - for your key roles. Organisations like yours are making small tweaks to their processes to avoid missing out on this expertise. You can too.

**Act now! [Click here to find out how to recruit returners](#)**

Kind regards,  
Ben Willmott  
Head of Public Policy, CIPD

<sup>3</sup> Gaucher, et al. (2011). Evidence That Gendered Wording in Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Gender Inequality. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

## Appendix 3 - Balance checks

We observe balance between treatment groups across gender, seniority, organisation size, and membership status suggesting that the randomisation was balanced on these observable characteristics.

**Table 3: Balance Checks of participant characteristics on assignment of email received**

	(1) Gender	(2) Seniority	(3) Size	(4) Member
Saliency	1.78 (0.008)	1.33 (0.021)	2.60 (0.055)	0.66 (0.009)
Social Norms	1.78 (0.008)	1.33 (0.021)	2.61 (0.055)	0.67 (0.009)
Loss Aversion	1.78 (0.008)	1.33 (0.021)	2.60 (0.055)	0.67 (0.009)
Simple Information-only	1.78 (0.006)	1.33 (0.015)	2.62 (0.039)	0.66 (0.006)
Observations	N=23,095			

Robust Standard Errors in Parentheses,  $p < 0.1$  +,  $p < 0.05$  \*,  $p < 0.01$  \*\*

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