Returners qualitative analysis

Organisations' experiences with returners

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Executive summary

There are two million people out of the labour market due to caring responsibilities and almost nine in ten are women. Most of these women would like to return to work, but face significant barriers including discrimination in recruitment and a lack of flexible working options. Many of these women are considerably proficient professionally, but often have to accept job roles incommensurate with their skills and experience. If these women had facilitated access to the workforce into occupations that matched their capabilities, this would contribute considerably to reducing the gender pay gap.

Study aim

The main aim of this study was to identify key barriers and facilitators for **organisations in recruiting and integrating returners,** from the perspective of **Human Resources (HR) professionals.**

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with 20 HR professionals. The organisations involved were of a range of sizes and sectors selected to achieve a likely diversity in flexible working availability and uptake, and by extension experiences with returners.

HR perceptions of returners

There was mixed awareness of the term 'returner'. Many felt they had a good understanding, but some had not come across the term before. They understood them to be mostly women who had been out of the workforce for caring responsibilities. There was some confusion as to whether women returning from maternity leave should be included, or periods out of work for reasons beyond caring responsibilities.

Some organisations had many returners, but most had few or none - or were unsure. Some organisations ran returner programmes or provided targeted support for returners, but most did not.

Barriers and facilitators for returners

Three spheres of influence emerged from the data at the **individual**, **organisation** and **society** levels. Each sphere of influence determined key barriers and facilitators for both recruiting and integrating returners.

Table 1 Summary findings

Sphere of influence	Impact on returners
Individual	- Returners can influence their successful application to and integration into organisations - How likely they are to apply is influenced by how they perceive the organisation fits with their needs
Organisation	Organisations control whether they actively target returners in recruitment and their allocation of resources into their training and support
Society	Society influences the stereotypes about returners and the availability of infrastructure to support returners and organisations

Conclusions

The insights from this research enabled us to identify behavioural solutions to facilitate returners across three areas. We have identified a need to:

- **Signal to returners they are welcome in organisations** by explicitly encouraging them to apply to job roles, if not actively targeting them in recruitment. State that job roles are available in a flexible working arrangement and advertise jobs through channels targeted at returners. Conduct welcoming conversations when returners join the organisation to instil a sense of belonging and better understand their needs.

- **Ensure returners are not disadvantaged in recruitment** by not dismissing CVs with gaps automatically through software or agencies. Follow up unexplained gaps if a gap would result in rejecting a candidate. Require candidates to fill out application forms designed to focus on relevant over recent skills and experience. Support candidates to showcase their skills at interview, by providing candidates with a checklist of the key skills they will be asked about and stating they use examples from professional and non-professional settings. Make interview times flexible.

- **Help integrate returners in organisations** by focusing resources for training and support by making conversations about needs with returners part of the induction process. Share case studies of the kinds of successful training and support provided to returners from other organisations. Provide opportunities to build social networks in the organisation, for example, through care networks.

Introduction

Returners in the UK

There are two million people out of the labour market due to caring responsibilities and almost nine in ten are women. Many of these 1.8 million women have professional skills and work-experience, and the majority would like to re-enter the labour market.

However, women often face significant barriers when attempting to return to work, including a lack of flexible working options, discrimination from recruitment agencies and employers, and high childcare costs. As a result, women are more likely to take up lower-skilled or lower-paid roles. Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that women returners' average yearly earnings are reduced by 2% for every year that they are out of the workforce.

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), equal participation of men and women in the labour market would increase the economy by 12% across the 30 OECD countries. Facilitating returners returning to work would boost the UK economy and contribute towards reducing the gender pay gap.

The Government Equalities Office (GEO) have partnered with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) in a three-year collaboration to generate evidence on what works to improve gender equality in the workplace - the Gender and Behavioural Insights (GABI) programme. This research provides greater insight into experiences of returners and will inform our wider work in the programme.

Study aims

The aim of this study was to identify key barriers and facilitators for **organisations in recruiting and integrating returners,** from the perspective of **Human Resources (HR) professionals.**

This study explored HR's perceptions of and experiences with returners in their organisations to find out:

- What is understood by the term 'returner'
- The processes in place targeted at returners in their organisation
- The number of returners at their organisation
- The barriers and facilitators for the organisation to recruit and integrate returners

Methodology

Topic of research

This research on returners was conducted as part of a larger piece of research examining HR professionals' perspectives on flexible working. These two topics overlap considerably, as people returning to the workforce after leave for caring responsibilities may have greater need for flexible working arrangements. However, returners are also a unique group of people in terms of their priorities and potential motivations for working. For this reason we split the two topics into two reports, but methodologies for both topics were the same as they were part of a single piece of research.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews

For this qualitative study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with 20 senior HR professionals working at UK organisations. Interviewees provided full informed consent to participate. The interviews were carried out by telephone between May and July 2018 and lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour. The interviews were recorded digitally and the digital recordings transcribed in full.

In-depth interviews were chosen to achieve a deep insight into the perceptions and practices of HR professionals from a variety of organisations. We chose not to carry out focus groups as these are more exposed to social desirability or influence from dominant characters, and so would not achieve the richness of data we desired. Interviewees were asked questions about both flexible working and returners in the same interview.

Sampling

To gain a deep understanding of HR professionals' perspectives of returners, we sought to achieve range and diversity with our sample of interview participants.

This research on returners was part of a larger piece of research on flexible working. For this larger piece of research, we sought to interview participants from organisations of a range of sizes and industries. We originally planned to recruit organisations to achieve a range of flexible working practices. However, it was not possible to identify accurate indicators of flexible working that could be used during recruitment. There were no clear objective indicators and it was not until we had conducted the interviews that we could retrospectively make a judgement of an organisation's flexibility. At this point, we found that the majority of interviewees were from organisations that might subjectively be judged to be quite flexible, with formal flexible working policies and active strategies to encourage flexible working. This is in line with increasing prevalence of the availability of flexible working in UK organisations.

Given the problems with identifying the flexibility of organisations before interview, and the importance of obtaining perspectives from individuals in organisations less invested in flexible working, we adapted our sampling strategy. We continued to focus on obtaining diversity across industries, but targeting industries that were more traditionally male or female-dominated. The rationale was that more male-dominated industries might subscribe to more traditional beliefs about working practices. This was not guaranteed, but we hoped that this proxy measure would achieve greater diversity in our sample in terms of the range of perspectives on flexible working practices. We believed that this approach would also capture diversity in approaches and perceptions regarding returners. There was also no clear indicator we could have used in advance to determine how supportive an organisation was of returners.

The sampling was carried out in two waves. Initially we used a contact list of organisations held by GEO. To supplement this, we employed a recruitment agency to fill the gaps in our sample by providing hard-to-recruit interviewees from particular industries in order to obtain diversity in our sample. Agencies gave incentives to such interviewees ranging from £80-£100.

Table 2 Size and sector of participating organisations

Industry	Size (number of employees)		
	Small (<250)	Medium (250-3,999)	Large (>4,000)
Financial services		1	1
Legal	1	1	
Professional services	1	1	1
Technology & software	2	2	
Manufacturing			1
Construction		1	
Hospitality			1
Public service			1
Charity	3	1	1
Total	**7**	**7**	**6**

The full list of organisations and their industries, size, interviewee gender and gender pay gap is listed in Appendix A.

Analytical approach

Researchers conducted a thematic analysis of the data. The transcribed interview data were processed and sorted into themes using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, Dedoose. The process of thematic analysis ensured all data were line by line coded, categorised and labelled to represent similarities and differences in all participants' (HR professionals) experiences of returners. Codes were initially identified and organised into groups, then revised, collapsed and refined until they formed the overarching themes represented in this report. This iterative approach ensured that themes that accurately represented all participants' experiences emerged from the data. The range of perspectives and experiences were critically analysed, and notable connections within and between themes were identified. Verbatim quotations were extracted from interviews to illustrate or highlight particular conclusions.

Interpreting this research

There are three elements to keep in mind when interpreting the research findings presented in this report.

- **Focus on experiences:** Qualitative research provides in-depth insight into the variety of experiences and views people have, rather than attempting to quantify them or measure the prevalence of them. The sampling approach ensured that a range of views on the application and uptake of flexible working in organisations was captured.

- **Narrow perspective:** The interviewees were all senior HR professionals. They provided understanding from the perspective of those in organisations with a high level of power over the implementation and use of flexible working options. However, the data cannot speak to other viewpoints towards flexible working, such as employees, managers or the wider public.

- **Selection bias:** The types of organisations that agreed to take part in this research may be different from those who were given the opportunity to take part but declined. Efforts were made to recruit difficult-to-reach participants through recruitment agencies, however, this does not entirely resolve the issue.

Report structure

The report is structured around three key spheres of influence that emerged from the data as a conceptual framework to best understand the themes. These spheres establish the facilitators and barriers to the successful recruitment and integration of returners:

- **Individual** employee level: the role that returners themselves play in recruitment and integration into the organisation.

- **Organisation** level: the role that the organisation's culture and its policies facilitate or hinder the recruitment and integration of returners.

- **Society** level: the role that societal norms and infrastructure play in facilitating or hindering returners getting into and remaining in work.

These spheres of influence are nested. Individual returners are the core drivers of returning to work and they are directly influenced by the organisation's recruitment campaign and available support, which is in turn influenced by wider society.

The spheres interact with the others to facilitate or hinder returners, for example, society influences individual returner and employee beliefs, but also provides enabling or disabling infrastructure to organisations for returners.

Figure 1: Spheres of influence

Society

Organisation

Individual
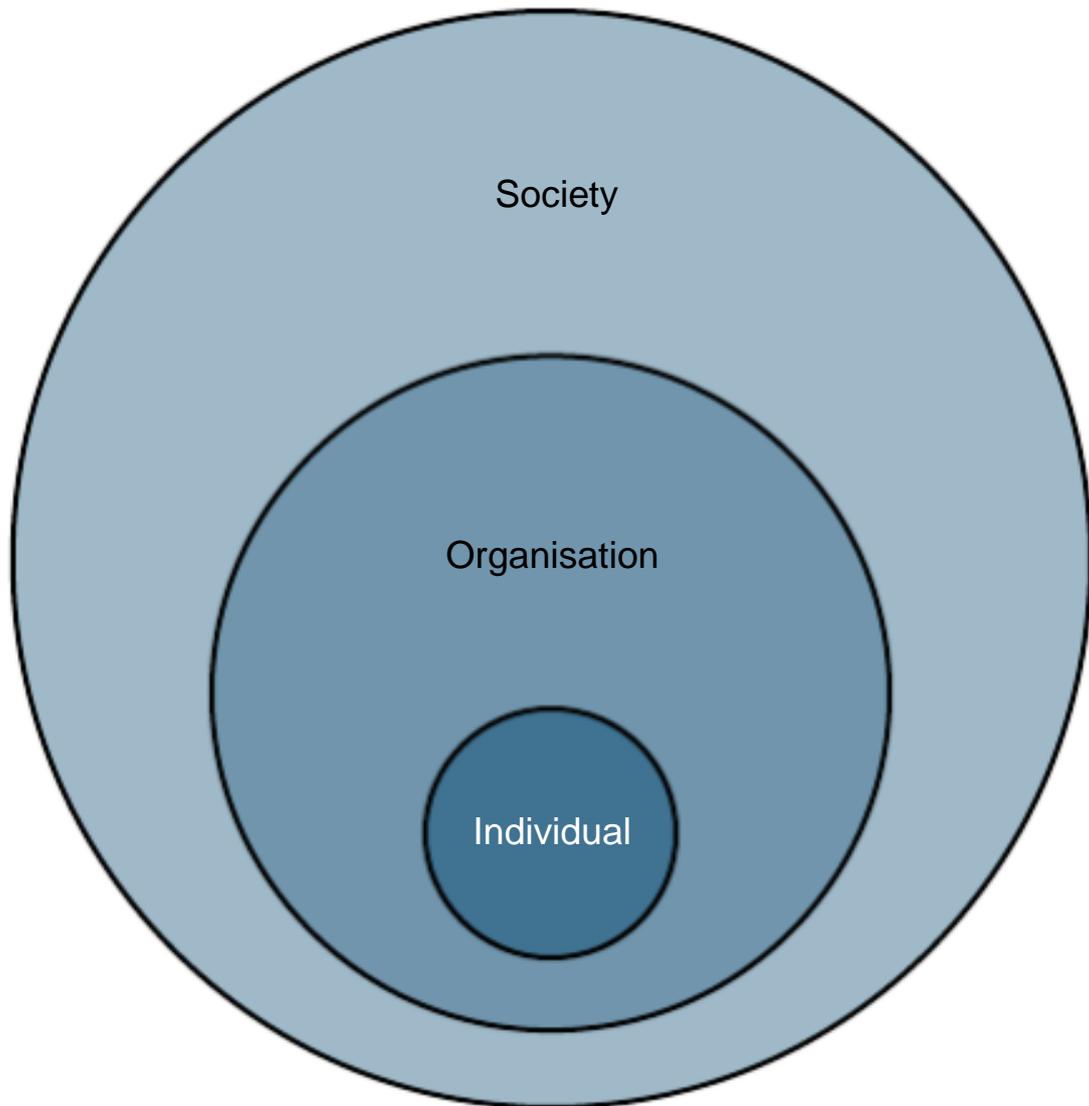
1. What is a returner?

The Government Equalities Office definition of a 'returner'

Returners are defined by GEO as people who have taken time out of employment for caring responsibilities and want to return to paid work. They have previously had a job and have been economically inactive (not in work and not seeking work) for at least one year. The time taken out of work is longer than statutory parental leave.

Returner programmes are programmes of training and support targeted at returners. Returner programmes can result in a guaranteed job at the end (supported hire) or not (returnship). These programmes can be for one person or a cohort.

HR had a mixed understanding of 'returner'

There was mixed awareness of the term 'returner' among those interviewed. Most had at least heard of the term and many felt they had a good understanding. A few had not come across the term but understood it once it was explained.

According to the HR professionals, returners were thought to be mostly women who had been out of the workforce for caring responsibilities such as children, parents or someone with a chronic illness. Some interviewees aligned closely with the GEO definition by pointing out that the time taken should be longer than statutory maternity leave. However, one of the HR professionals identified returners as employees coming back from maternity leave, and many spoke about returners in the context of individuals returning from parental leave to the organisation.

In some cases, HR professionals spoke about individuals taking time out of the workplace for any reason, say for traveling or through redundancy, interchangeably with returners. Thus, there was some mismatch between the sample's understanding of a returner and GEO's definition.

Most organisations had few or no returners

Whether organisations regularly hired returners or had any as employees might affect their views. A few organisations had hired many returners either through a large returner programme or through general recruitment. One organisation specialised in kick starting careers for graduates as well as returners and had recently hired over 100 returners through a returner programme and 50 outside of that. Another thought they must have had *"hundreds if not thousands"* over the years (Organisation 12, Conservation Charity).

One of them considered returners to be a *"bread and butter … staple"* in their employee make-up (Organisation 15, Social Care Charity).

Several could think of a few examples in their organisation, but not many, with estimates ranging between one and nine. Some of those who perceived that they had many returners were not sure of the exact figure as they did not collect data on them. In some cases, they were aware of many women who had returned from maternity leave or other employees returning to the organisation after a period out of work, but not the GEO definition of a returner. Many had not been recently personally involved in the recruitment process of a returner. Several were not sure if they had any returners and one did not think they had any. It was not clear whether this was because they did not conceptualise existing employees as returners and therefore could not bring them to mind or if they simply did not have many returners.

The full list of organisations and their estimated numbers of returners, how many returners the HR professional had personally recruited recently and whether they ran a returner programme is listed in Appendix B.

How many returners organisations had and how much recent experience the HR professionals had in recruiting them has informed how the data has been interpreted. It is also worth noting that throughout the discussion the HR professionals talked about their perception or understanding of a returner, which may not have always aligned with the official GEO definition.

2. Individual

The first sphere of influence to explore is at the individual returner level. The decision to return to work starts with the individual. How they feel about their chances of success in both the hiring process and transitioning back into working life might affect how they approach recruitment and their first few months at the new organisation. Stereotypes about returners inhibit their chances of success at organisations that have little direct experience with returners. Meanwhile, confidence is informed by the realistic likelihood of success. Underlying this is their perception of how well they think the organisation is likely to support them.

Summary of findings

Facilitators

- Recent experience and practice going through a recruitment process was considered to help some returners overcome low confidence
- Confidence varied by individual returner and was thought no different to any other candidate applying for their first role in a long time
- Returners were perceived by some to have valuable skills and experience developed by their caring responsibilities

Barriers

- Before returning to work, HR professionals felt returners were worried about whether they could still have a successful career, which could be a self-fulfilling prophecy
- They felt returners might be less confident in the recruitment process and undersold their skills or their career break
- There were mixed views as to how far returners would need support or had maintained skills from their time out of work
- Stereotypes of returners in organisations that had historically employed few returners or none at all might inhibit their chances of success

Returners worry about their career before coming back to work

Some HR professionals spoke about how returners were concerned about whether they could still have a thriving career if they came back to work. They felt that returners worried they had lost touch with their industry and had been left behind. Some of these concerns were driven by how they felt the organisation might treat them as flexible workers. One interviewee found in conversations with women returning from maternity

leave that they were concerned that reducing their hours would annoy colleagues and set them back. This was echoed by another HR professional who felt that women returning from maternity leave thought their career was over if they came back and worked flexibly.

"I think in the backs of people's minds if you are career driven then yes, the perception would be that flexible working means that you've dumped your career. Certainly returning mothers feel that their career is over for that reason, but for us it would be their choice.[If] they wanted to go for it… we would be fine with it, but it would have to be driven by them." (Organisation 17, Conservation Charity)

Some HR professionals felt that returners could be underconfident about restarting their career. This might impact the likelihood that returners apply for roles, their performance in the recruitment process, and their successful transition into the organisation. It is important to note that some HR professionals pointed out that confidence differs among individuals as with any pool of candidates. Another interviewee felt that their confidence was in line with anyone who has not applied for a new role in a long time.

Only one of the interviewees talked explicitly about why returners might wish to come back to the workplace. This HR professional felt that in their time off returners had often reassessed their career and chose to apply for the not-for-profit sector as a result.

Confidence may be determined by recent experience in a hiring process

Some HR professionals spoke about a lack of confidence negatively impacting returners' performance throughout the recruitment process. They felt that returners undervalued their skillset and found it difficult to showcase themselves because of their lack of confidence. This could disadvantage returners as one interviewee felt employers were unlikely to *"bend over backwards"* (Organisation 8, Arts Charity) to get them to sell themselves. Speaking about their work in recruitment from over 15 years ago, one HR professional was frustrated with candidates who described themselves as 'just a housewife' and encouraged them to reposition their skills.

"Using the classic example of childcare, people I think sometimes subjugate themselves in terms of their self-value, and they don't possibly sell themselves effectively like that. In my humble opinion, there is no such thing as a housewife or a househusband. You are managing, you're juggling decision-making skills, budgeting for household shopping and things like that, dealing with emotional conflict with children, mediating. There's a whole range of value there that actually can be interpreted and utilised in the workplace in various different roles." (Organisation 8, Arts Charity)

Some of the HR professionals felt that returners could let themselves down by not explaining their time out appropriately in their CV or at interview, especially if the recruiter

did not probe them. An HR professional who had not recruited a returner felt that they might struggle with interviews and technical tasks during recruitment as they could be rusty.

However, this potential difference in performance, if there is one, could be due to a lack of practice. One interviewee felt returners were just as nervous as candidates in employment who had not been interviewed in a long time. Meanwhile, returners who had completed a few interviews were less nervous. Another HR professional felt that individual performance at interview varied with returners in the same way as other candidates, and some people might take more practice to perform at the same level.

"Some individuals need more support, more coaching, and more time. But for other individuals I would say it's actually - it's exactly the same as any individual who is going for a role. And I think that would be true for the employment market generally, right. Obviously you have people going for interviews who always get the job, and people who maybe it takes a bit more time to do that." (Organisation 11, Professional Services)

In some experiences, returners had excelled at interview, as one HR professional reported their best interview had been with a returner who had been out of work for 14 years. This was echoed by another who found that *"when those folks come and interview they do very well, because it's like getting back on a bike"* (Organisation 1, Computer Technology).

Support is required to transition back into the workplace

As with returners' performance in the recruitment process, HR professionals felt a lack of confidence could act as a barrier to successful transition into the workplace once they have been hired. One interviewee who did not have returners in their organisation hypothesised that they could be less likely to ask for help when they start.

Many of those interviewed felt that returners would struggle to adjust to the demands of the workplace, potentially in a similar way to graduates. One HR professional who did not have returners at their organisation felt that more than four or five years out of work would result in a deterioration in skills, particularly as technology advanced. Others echoed the concern that returners would be behind on changing technology, however, it was recognised that most would learn quickly. A few pointed out that the loss of client and support networks whilst on a career break limited returners' quick adjustment to the workplace.

"A lot of women think they want to get back to work but don't really. Because when they come in and they see what it entails, and they don't have their support network in place it throws them off balance." (Organisation 6, Professional Services)

Returners have unique skills

Some roles may require skills that are more impacted than others by a career break. For example, an HR professional from a law firm cited that lawyers needed to maintain requirements under the solicitor regulation authority, but this did not apply to admin roles. Elsewhere, an HR professional from a software company felt five years out could make engineers less comfortable with the latest software languages, although there were no returners at this organisation.

In contrast, many other HR professionals felt that returners represented valuable candidates because of their skills and experience. They thought that returners had greater common sense and were more mature and experienced, which made them strong candidates. Some believed that their caring responsibilities built valuable skills and knowledge. One HR professional felt that hiring returners was a great opportunity as they are more grateful.

"My view is that [candidates with CV gaps are] an opportunity to hire somebody into a role who is slightly more mature and more grateful than the average worker."
(Organisation 2, Legal)

Returners seek organisations with a strong flexible work offering

When considering new jobs, returners might look at whether or not an organisation is adapted to their needs. Many HR professionals cited the importance of flexible working provision for returners. Some interviewees considered a barrier for returning to work was the cost of childcare, particularly if the salary or flexible working options were not optimal.

Conclusion: Negative perceptions of returners may act as a self-fulfilling prophecy

Perceptions of returners differed among the HR professionals in terms of returners' skills and value, which is likely because of the different levels of direct experience they had had with returners. It is possible that many did not think of some of their employees as returners even if they would fit the definition. These differing experiences and perceptions meant that it was not clear if returners are in fact lower in confidence than the average candidate. It seemed as though low confidence might be due to a lack of recent practice in recruitment and recent experience in the workplace, which would be similar for those currently working but not having changed roles in a long time. It is also possible that HR professionals were perceiving a lack of confidence where returners might have realistic or uncertain expectations of the challenges they face returning to the workforce. This means it is important for organisations to create a hiring environment and offer support upon joining that signals returners are welcome. Given that HR professionals with little direct experience of hiring returners nonetheless held quite firmly formed ideas of the

limitations of returners, it is also important that the processes of hiring and onboarding returners are debiased such that these stereotypes do not present an additional barrier to this cohort of candidates.

2. Organisation

The next sphere of influence to explore is at the organisational level. Whether organisations consider returners as valuable additions to their workforce dictates how far they are willing to dedicate resources to them. Organisations can facilitate the hiring of returners by specifically targeting them in recruitment and designing the process to ensure they are not disadvantaged. They can implement policies to ensure their ongoing retention in the organisation, such as flexible working. However, many organisations did not see returners as a priority over other underrepresented groups or the broader candidate pool.

Summary of findings

Facilitators

- Most organisations were open to returners where they fit with diversity goals
- Some organisations targeted returners in recruitment through focused campaigns or returner programmes
- Some organisations had received feedback that returners wanted to be treated like other candidates
- Learning and development considered important for returners focused on technical skills or building support networks
- Positive outcomes from returner programmes included successfully attracting applications from returners and retaining high proportions of returners after the programme
- Flexible working was identified as important for long-term retention of returners

Barriers

- Most did not actively target or prioritise returners as other forms of diversity were considered more important
- Some aspects of the recruitment process disadvantaged returners; agencies excluding those not currently in employment or with unexplained CV gaps
- Few had specific training and support in place or returner programmes
- Concerns raised about returner programmes included dropout rates, their limited application across the business and signalling that returners were significantly more challenging candidates
- Perceived cost was considered a significant barrier for offering specific training and support to returners or running returner programmes

Organisations are open to returners if they fit with their diversity objectives

Many organisations considered returners to fit with their organisational objectives. HR professionals from companies with significant numbers of returners also had leaders who were returners. They felt their leadership was passionate about returners, which filtered through to their management teams. Some thought hiring returners fitted well within their goals to increase representation of women and close their gender pay gap. Others felt returners would fill their skills gaps. Some HR professionals were supportive of returners because of personal experiences taking a career break. Others had the appetite to hire returners and wanted to do more, in one case, conducting their own fieldwork to understand their barriers.

Other HR professionals felt that while they were open-minded as an organisation and wanted to improve their gender balance, they did not see hiring returners as a priority. For example, one company was focused on recruiting more female engineers through university channels, and did not think returners would help with this agenda. For some organisations, other forms of diversity were a greater priority, such as increasing their BAME (black and minority ethnic groups) representation. In one instance, an HR professional talked about their initiatives to target people with career breaks for other reasons such as illness, redundancy, and criminal records rather than caring responsibilities. Others had not thought about hiring returners or discussed it within their organisation.

"I have not thought about specifically targeting returners. I'm thinking more on ethnic diversity and, kind of, social background diversity is what I am trying to focus on at the moment … We are looking at apprenticeship side of things for more juniors."
(Organisation 16, Marketing Software)

Some HR professionals felt that employees and managers within their organisation needed convincing. In some cases, they took the lead in encouraging hiring managers to be more open-minded about candidates with CV gaps. There was an understanding that different parts of the business were less open to returners depending on the real or perceived investment required to hire and integrate them.

While none of the interviewees expressed strongly negative opinions about returners, some identified individuals in their organisations with backwards views about them. For example, the *"Edwardian dad"* employee who thought that returning mothers were less reliable as they would take more time off to look after unwell children (Organisation 17, Conservation Charity). Another HR professional described 'business-oriented' colleagues focused on profit who *"turn an eyebrow up"* at returners (Organisation 8, Arts Charity).

"I only have one individual who has … ideas that returning mothers are not reliable, that kind of thing. They're always going to be off looking after their children, their kids are always going to be sick so the mother's going to be off work … I call him an Edwardian dad, anyway ... He's been overt with his perceptions which means that I know he is going to do them, which means I cut him off at the knees before he gets to even think about it."
(Organisation 17, Conservation Charity)

Given that most of the organisations had fewer than nine returners, the enthusiasm expressed by most of the HR professionals towards returners had yet to translate into action.

Few organisations actively target returners in recruitment

Some organisations actively targeted returners in their recruitment, either through focused recruitment campaigns or returner programmes. Recruitment campaigns targeted returners by reaching out through a family and friends scheme or personal networks, or advertising on websites such as Mumsnet. In some instances they put effort into ensuring pre-existing employees came back to their organisation after parental leave, for example, with a return-to-work bonus.

"It's not a tick box exercise, it's about actually finding talent and talent sits everywhere, and not being kind of sidetracked by past misconceptions or whatever it might be."
(Organisation 1, Computer Technology)

These organisations considered active recruitment of returners important because of the shrinking talent pool due to 'Brexit' and the ageing population, or because they had 'life skills' relevant for roles such as social care. Others gave practical reasons such as their immediate start date or that they could be paid a lower salary for their experience and skills. However, even some of these reasons would still be detrimental to returners if it means that they have to occupationally downgrade or are channelled into stereotypical 'women's work' because of their time out for caring.

"[Returners] have probably been in really challenging social situations during the time away from work either kids, teenage kids, support, you know, trying to balance family life and stuff. That's perfect for me from a behavioural skills development perspective... You get a lot of loyalty in that as well in that space because people have got more life experience, so that's not a problem." (Organisation 15, Social Care Charity)

Some HR professionals were open to focusing aspects of their recruitment campaign on returners although they had not done so. One organisation stated in some of its job adverts that roles were open to returners although other candidates could apply. Most did not explicitly state that their roles were open to returners.

Many HR professionals did not want to exclusively target returners as they preferred to recruit 'the best person for the job', but they would welcome a returner with the right skills and experience. Some organisations did not think returners were relevant to them as they tended to hire graduates or young people. One interviewee felt they had so many applications they did not need to worry about targeting returners. Concerns were raised about targeting returners for roles where it would be important to keep up with current practices, such as social care or software engineering. Others worried about the difficulty of finding returners.

Most organisations do not adjust their recruitment process for returners

There are several aspects of the recruitment process that could affect returners' best chances of success: role requirements, the application process, and interviews. Some organisations made adjustments for returners, but most did not.

Many organisations considered it important to treat returners during the interview process like any other candidate. One organisation had had direct feedback from returning mothers that they did not want to be treated any differently at interview and upon joining the business. However, one interviewee felt that comparing individuals currently in work with those who are not would disadvantage returners.

"I don't think we treat them any differently. If you're going to join the business, you join the business. All the paths and avenues and career paths, training etc., is absolutely open to everyone in the same way. And the research that we did [found that] returning mums [and] over 55s don't want to be treated differently. I think the feedback that we got was two things - I don't want to be treated differently, but actually I want to see a little bit of myself in the organisation as well." (Organisation 9, Hospitality)

Agencies were frequently used to source candidates and some noted they had not explicitly told them to include applicants who were not currently employed. They realised agencies rarely put forward candidates out of employment.

"I guess where we could do better is to say, 'please don't think that we would not entertain someone who is a returner.' That could be part of our message to [the agency], because … when I'm silent I don't know what they do." (Organisation 17, Conservation Charity)

When assessing returners, many HR professionals looked for candidates with relevant skills and experience. Some HR professionals were more interested in returners if they could demonstrate they had put effort into developing their skills and keeping up-to-date with the industry. One HR professional found it helped to imagine the candidate after six months in the organisation rather than at the time of interview.

"What you have got to do is try and trade off what is this person going to look and feel like at the end of a six-month acclimatisation programme … But clearly for me that is a really valuable employment pool. I think if you can be patient and get people acclimatised back in I think you will get tremendous loyalty going forward." (Organisation 15, Social Care Charity)

However, one HR professional felt that stipulating very specific experience would disadvantage returners. Others felt that cultural fit was more important as knowledge could be taught. One organisation believed their assessments and psychometric tests (standardised tests to measure mental capabilities, personality and behavioural style) could be relied on to ensure that any candidate, including returners, was suited to the role.

Others adjusted the recruitment process for returners. Some organisations trained hiring managers to ensure they created a supportive environment for returners to relate their experiences to the business context in interviews. Offering flexible interview times was considered potentially important for accommodating returners. One organisation had mentors answer candidate questions throughout the recruitment process. Mentors would also check in with returners a few months after starting. Another organisation planned to involve employees in similar situations to the returners in the recruitment process so they could *"see a little bit of themselves"* in the organisation (Organisation 9, Hospitality). For these HR professionals, this personalised approach would help to both attract and retain returners.

"Sometimes there is a confidence gap because individuals are, kind of, out of practice, and haven't, I suppose, been in that type of environment or in that situation for a period of time it might mean that they take slightly longer to answer questions, or they underestimate or undersell the skills and experience that they have. But often it's about the organisation and individual engaging in that interview, creating a supportive and open and friendly environment so that the individual can best showcase their skills and talent." (Organisation 11, Professional Services)

CV gaps can disadvantage returners especially if unexplained

A key recruitment barrier for returners is their CV gap. Most interviewees felt that CV gaps were not important as long as the candidate had the right skills for the job and their break for caring was explained. However, one HR professional was suspicious that candidates with CV gaps had been unemployed for a long period of time. Other HR professionals felt that for certain roles CV gaps were more problematic, such as regulated roles where safeguarding was important, or for roles that required up-to-date technical knowledge. Some felt that even an explained CV gap would still create a disadvantage when choosing between otherwise identical candidates.

"If you have candidate A coming from [a financial services organisation] and you have candidate B coming from a 19-year gap, the two will never be able to compete for the same role, ever. Candidate A from [a financial services organisation] will always get the job because they can give you a live example from yesterday in their job to prove that they can do it." (Organisation 4, Financial Services)

Some HR professionals recognised that candidates might be rejected if the organisation did not proactively find out the reason for their CV gap. One of them noted that they only followed up unexplained CV gaps if the candidate was exceptional. Others felt it was the organisation's responsibility to follow up on CV gaps and they made sure they did. One interviewee suggested that LinkedIn (professional networking and recruitment site) could help returners by capturing the reason someone had been out of work. Sometimes the HR professionals had to persuade members of their organisation not to reject someone because of a CV gap. In one case, they hid CV gaps to get candidates through to interview at which point the gap became irrelevant. However, it was also considered important the business made the final decision so they could not blame HR if it did not work out.

CV sifting software can potentially automatically remove candidates with CV gaps. While some interviewees did not use this software, not everyone was sure. Some HR professionals preferred to require candidates to fill out application forms. They felt this would both encourage returners to apply and remove the disadvantage from having a CV gap, considering it to be *"quite a good leveller"* (Organisation 12, Conservation Charity).

"What we found was if a person comes into an organisation and asks if there is any jobs available, and that organisation says yes leave us your CV. That person then tends to say 'okay, I will do' but goes out the door and never returns because they don't feel, they feel that they can't hand in a CV because they have got a gap." (Organisation 9, Hospitality)

Returners have individual needs for training and support

Opinions differed as to how far returners needed training and support to successfully reintegrate into the organisation. Organisations from a range of sectors felt that individuals with many years of experience who had maintained their skills during their career break would not need much training upon return. One HR professional felt that since lawyers are expected to be self-sufficient, returners would be expected to start immediately without training. However, most interviewees felt that returners would need at least some training or support, but it was not clear if this was significantly more than other new joiners. At one organisation with some returners, the leadership felt passionately they could be easily trained and progress from any starting point. An organisation with no returners believed that the adaptation process was underestimated

by organisations and individuals. Another HR professional gave the example of one returner taking four or five months to adjust.

"When she started, she did have quite a challenge adjusting to working again, and she struggled with some of the things that she could obviously do previously, especially the juggling of different priorities and that type of thing in a work environment. I would say that it took her longer than it would – and you can't really generalise, but for her it took her longer to adjust than I expected. But when she did readjust and I was patient with her – because she worked with me, I was patient with her then she was great … It took her probably four or five months [to adjust]" (Organisation 19, Technology)

Outside of a returner programme, few organisations had specific training in place for returners. A few interviewees tailored training and support to the employee's needs upon joining the organisation after any kind of career break. Another organisation had a return-to-work plan in place for women returning from maternity leave that involved training on mandatory regulation, client-based role-play and conversations about the employee's needs. A few HR professionals thought it would be important to train returners in any new technology that had been introduced while they were on their break. Others had either trained or thought it would be useful to train returners in any new technical or business knowledge and skills.

Returners need to rebuild their support network

Some interviewees thought it was important to make returners feel they belong and are welcome in the organisation. One HR professional suggested putting stronger emphasis on welcoming interviews in the induction to aid a sense of belonging. Others recognised that returners should be supported to build relationships with new colleagues and have strong support networks. Some organisations achieved this through parents or carers networks, buddy systems or as part of the induction process. Some felt that returning after a long period could be an emotional upheaval so wellbeing support was also important.

"Some of the things that people may need don't really cost you, they're intangibles, you know they may be just a welcome conversation for an hour with somebody. I think a lot of that comes into the manner in which the company does its induction … If I was the God of HR - which I'm not - but if I had my way, I think employers should put a lot more onus on welcoming interviews rather than exit interviews … To capture somebody when they have got the enthusiasm and starting their new role or they've returned to a role - to capture the positives of why it is they have chosen to work for you, what they can offer, what they want to do and what their aspirations are" (Organisation 8, Arts Charity)

Organisations should find out returners' needs directly from them, but few had policies to ensure they did. One organisation had a return-to-work interview with all employees

returning from parental leave to understand the adjustments they required. A few others trained managers to have those conversations. One HR professional focused on male managers as they found that they were unsure how to ask their female employees about their requirements before and after maternity leave.

Perceived cost to train and support returners is a barrier

The perception that returners require significant costs in training and support was a barrier for many organisations. In one instance, the HR professional from a social care charity felt returners should bear the cost of an initial period of training and support as they should consider it an investment in their careers in the same way as interns. At this organisation they had all candidates complete training and development unpaid before their pre-employment checks were finalised to assess their dedication to the role. However, one HR professional believed that training and support for all employees should be tailored to the individual, which included their returners. They recognised that this was *"easy for us to do as an organisation because of the resources we have"* (Organisation 11, Professional Services).

Few organisations have returner programmes

In the UK there are a few comprehensive returner programmes offered to prospective employees. These provide comprehensive training and support for at least a few months while the returner transitions back into the workplace. Sometimes they have a guaranteed job at the end ('supported hiring') and other times not ('returnship').

Within the sample, there were a few instances of returner programmes. At one financial services organisation they ran a programme of 20 paid weeks of training for nine returners in technical and soft skills, including confidence, networking and resilience. The programme was part of a longer term goal to build a reputation as an organisation open to returners to attract them in future. The first year of the programme successfully attracted many applications otherwise expensive to obtain. In selecting candidates, the HR professional felt that comparing returners with returners levelled the playing field. They did not run the programme in parts of the business considered less compatible, including retail, call centres and branches. They did not elaborate why these areas were less compatible, but it could be because of their less flexible working patterns or lower pay discussed at other points in the interview. However, some parts of the business previously uninvolved had requested to take part in the programme next year. It was recognised that the programme was expensive and expected to take at least three years to see a return on investment. Despite the cost, the organisation still felt it was successful as 70% of the returners went on to become permanent employees.

"To try and make sure your return on investment is actually, for us, success is retaining 70% of our heads to prove that actually we did find great talent and they are a cultural fit

and that we've retained them post 20 weeks and converted them into permanent employees. Because of course, that's what all organisations are trying to do, you're trying to find talent in a unique location that doesn't cost you a lot of money, come year three" (Organisation 4, Financial Services)

Another professional services organisation ran an eight-week programme of training for 100 returners in technical, business and soft skills. They wanted to fill their skills deficits and increase the representation of women in the workplace. Participants in the programme were guaranteed a job at the organisation for a minimum of two years, but it had to be in a full-time arrangement. They put *"a lot of money and resource"* into the programme to ensure its success (Organisation 6, Professional Services). The HR professional believed it was probably one of the most challenging programmes they ran due to the 10% dropout rate and difficulty in finding returners to recruit. However, they felt that those who finished the programme did *"fantastically well"* when working with industry (Organisation 6, Professional Services).

"It is probably the most challenging program that we run. We probably get the greatest number of dropouts of any program because sometimes the returners come in and they can be a bit flaky. But the ones who have succeeded through the program have gone out to industry and they're doing fantastically well so it's very positive." (Organisation 6, Professional Services)

At another professional services organisation, they had set up a returner programme in an area of the business where they felt there was a particular skills gap. They found it useful for increasing applications from returners through external websites. However, the HR professional was sceptical of extending the returner programme to all areas of the business. The concern was that it resulted in treating returners as though they were a more difficult subset of the population.

"So the view of, hang on a second, we know there are talented women out there, why do we need to be treating them almost like a separate subset? Why are we not pipelining them into experiences and roles where we know where we have gaps, where we know we have headcount, or where we have a budget and need that filled. And also, providing the support is very, kind of, easy for us to do as an organisation because of the resources we have. That's why we took the decision to move away from the formalised programme." (Organisation 11, Professional Services)

Perceived costs are a barrier for setting up returner programmes

Other organisations were interested in setting up a returner programme or were in the early stages of developing one. They were motivated to address skills shortages, encourage more women back into the workplace, and increase inclusivity and diversity. One organisation wanted to create a low budget version and had started with a buddy

system to help employees returning from maternity leave acclimatise. Another HR professional felt a returner programme required comprehensive training, resourcing and support for each individual to be successful. The potential cost for this was considered a barrier.

"I think potentially budget could be [a barrier to setting up a returner programme]. Depending on what type of program we offer, i.e. whether you get put into a job and there is a development programme with it, or it's a training programme and then you see if there's a job at the end of it. Budget slots, headcount slots could be a challenge, depending, as well. The right type of development for some of the technical roles could also be something… It might be something that you need a lot of people to run a program for to make it cost-effective, or it could be a timing issue. So some of those type of things could all be challenges." (Organisation 3, Automotive Manufacturing)

Some HR professionals believed it would be difficult to get buy-in from leadership at their organisations for a returner programme. Reasons included that they did not like to invest in training or their organisation was not big enough to run a returner programme. Some felt they would need a very strong business case for filling specific skill gaps. Thus, for some the perceived costs along with insufficient resources were a barrier. Returners were not valuable enough to justify the expense. Others had not thought about setting a returner programme up.

Flexible working important for long-term retention of returners

Organisations might deter returners without the infrastructure in place to support them on an ongoing basis. The most cited was flexible working options. Multiple HR professionals identified this as important for the long-term retention of returners. One HR professional considered this part of an employer's responsibility to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate employees' needs.

Conclusion: Perceived costs of returners often outweigh perceived benefits

Whether organisations considered returners a priority or as more difficult than other potential new recruits was critical to how accommodating their recruitment and induction processes were. A lack of consideration for how such processes might impact returners meant that simple barriers had not always been tackled, such as recruitment agencies only putting forward candidates currently employed. The perceived costs to host returners put organisations off from targeting them in recruitment, a barrier that was amplified for returner programmes. However, it was not clear whether these perceived costs were justified as the sample had mixed views about returners needs for training and support. If training and support should be tailored to suit the needs of all employees, then this should be sufficient to support returners and challenge the perception that they

are especially costly. Nonetheless, this perception contributes to the attitude that they are difficult candidates. This was reinforced by their comparison with interns that implied returners owe organisations for giving them job roles or should expect lower pay or lower skilled roles in return. Such attitudes about returners make it more difficult to persuade other layers of the organisation, evidenced by the fact that some HR had to hide CV gaps from hiring managers. In addition, their potential requirements for flexible working make them increasingly less valuable to employers. Societal stereotypes about returners as carers and mothers combined with stereotypes about flexible workers contribute towards these negative perceptions.

3. Society

The final sphere of influence to explore is at the societal level. Broader societal stereotypes can impact how organisations and hiring managers perceive returners as well as how returners perceive themselves. These can influence the broader availability of facilities to those with caring responsibilities affecting the feasibility of returning to work.

Summary of findings

Facilitators

- Existing government legislation, such as the Returners Fund, could help alleviate some of the challenges associated with returners

Barriers

- Low societal value attached to care work was cited as a barrier by creating negative stereotypes of returners, particularly in male-dominated sectors with more 'traditional' views, such as manufacturing

- High childcare costs prevented mostly women from returning to work, especially if they earned low salaries

- Several called for increased government support and it seemed that awareness of existing support was low

Some HR professionals cited broader societal stereotypes as a potential barrier for returners. Such stereotypes were driven by the societal value attached to paid work over unpaid care. This underlying societal stereotype drove the view from some members of their organisations that they would be less committed to their job.

"I do feel that from a sociological perspective, we do tend to perceive a value on a human being by virtue of their work ability, and people that aren't able to work or can't or don't want to, do tend to get pushed down the rung of our sort of social expectation." (Organisation 8, Arts Charity)

Many HR professionals provided examples of other employees who had expressed such stereotyped views, such as the previously discussed 'Edwardian dad'. Similarly, one HR professional was frustrated by interview candidates who had internalised these stereotyped views about care work. In their previous organisation they had experienced many interviews with women who had said *"I'm just a housewife"*. They encouraged such candidates to reframe their skills and found *"when you reposition what their value [is],*

people think about it differently" (Organisation 15, Social Care Charity). In some cases, the interviewees made stereotyped assumptions themselves. One HR professional who had not personally recruited any returners assumed that they would struggle more than graduates with their recruitment process.

"If you were an able candidate and you were slightly older than [graduates] and had had time out for kids, [the graduate process] might be a bit of a shock to the system" (Organisation 2, Legal)

It was noted that some sectors may be more traditional in their views. One HR professional from a charity felt that career breaks were *"unofficially"* frowned upon in the private sector (Organisation 15, Social Care Charity). Meanwhile, in the charity sector *"the thought that you wouldn't work around childcare, it just doesn't seem acceptable"* (Organisation 17, Conservation Charity). However, the HR professional from the social care charity felt that the charity sector could think more carefully about preventing discrimination against career breaks, which they considered should include individuals with criminal records. Others from technology companies discussed experiencing more stereotyped views at the previous organisations they had worked at with more *"traditional environments"*, such as retail and manufacturing (Organisation 19, Technology). However, they felt that it was better in their current organisation.

It was also considered that this view was becoming rarer over time. Some of the interviewees felt that historically people would have been concerned by a CV gap and saw it as a signal that the individual was not as good as a similar candidate without one. However, they also noted that *"that was a good few years ago and people's attitudes to returners were different in those days"* (Organisation 19, Technology).

"I think historically, in other organisations then yes people have been concerned if there has been a gap and think that … it means that that individual isn't as good as they could be." (Organisation 20, Retail Software)

Some HR professionals noted that if parents, particularly women, earned low salaries this would make childcare costs unachievable. In a few cases, interviewees called for further government intervention. This included to legislate against returner discrimination or to use the £5 million Returners Fund for the creation of a centralised hub for returners looking for work. Arguably some of these protections already exist under the Equalities Act 2010 on the grounds of not discriminating indirectly on the grounds of gender where a woman requires adjustment to her terms and conditions of work in order to provide care. Similarly the Women Returners Professional Network website provides a central hub for returners seeking work, though it may not be widely known by HR professionals. For one public sector organisation, the national workforce strategy and budget directly impacted their capability to hire returners, especially if it required a reduction in numbers.

Some HR professionals were aware of the government funding for returner programmes, but most did not explicitly talk about it.

"Those on low incomes, we know ourselves that somebody who works in our retail processes or in some of our branch staff, actually, having a child there is no value in coming back to work because your income does not cover your childcare bill. So unless you have parents or family helping you doing it for free, you cannot afford to come back to work." (Organisation 4, Financial Services)

Conclusion: Societal stereotypes are improving but still represent a barrier

Stereotypes about returners appear to be informed by stereotypes about mothers. Such stereotypes contribute to attitudes that returners are less dedicated workers and are costlier or more difficult for organisations to recruit and integrate. These attitudes prevent managers and leadership within organisations from considering returners a priority. The additional higher likelihood that women are primary caregivers and earn lower salaries than men make the high cost of childcare a significant barrier for women considering returning to the workforce. Existing government support has started to address these issues, however, there was low awareness of initiatives such as the Returners Fund. Nonetheless, the enthusiasm displayed by most interviewed to put further thought into it and the changing attitudes in society mean that there is certainly appetite for change.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research has been to provide an in-depth understanding of attitudes to returners to consider behavioural solutions. Initial ideas for these are detailed below. These will be developed further as the Gender and Behavioural Insights programme progresses.

Behavioural solutions could signal to returners they are welcome in organisations. The desire to return to work starts with the individual. The likelihood that they will follow through with an application is driven by their perceived chances of success and whether the new role will result in a fulfilling career. They might also worry about how employers will perceive their time out to care, whether they think they will be costly in training or problematic for requiring flexible working arrangements.

Potential solutions include:

- Signpost to potential returners that they are welcome in the organisation by explicitly stating in job adverts that individuals returning from career breaks are encouraged to apply, if not running a returner programme

- State that job roles can operate in a flexible working arrangement in job adverts

- Minimise the use of 'essential' criteria in job adverts where they are not core requirements for performing the role. Similarly, remove the need for 'recent' experience and place the emphasis on relevant overarching experience

- Advertise job roles through channels targeted at returners, such as parents' websites and returner hubs

- Integrate 'welcoming conversations' into the induction process to instil a sense of belonging in the organisation and to better understand individual needs. Include a 'values affirmation' exercise where new joiners reflect about what is important to them about being at the organisation

Behavioural solutions could ensure returners are not disadvantaged in recruitment. Organisations may be unwittingly creating barriers to returners in the design of their recruitment processes. Returner applications may be rejected by sifting software, unexplained CV gaps may not be followed up and agencies may not put forward candidates not currently employed. Interviews may emphasise recent experience or discourage candidates from sharing experiences beyond a business context.

Potential solutions include:

- Ensure that CV gaps are not automatically sifted by software and that agencies are explicitly instructed not to ignore individuals not currently employed

- Prompt CV gaps to be explained through the application process or follow up candidates with unexplained CV gaps. Suggest that CVs are arranged in terms of overall years of experience rather than by chronological chunks of work experience

- Have candidates fill out application forms instead of submitting CVs to ensure returners are not deterred and CV gaps do not influence hiring decisions

- Provide candidates with a checklist of the key skills they will be asked about at interview and emphasise that these can come from both professional and non-professional settings, such as volunteer or community work

- Make the interview environment more supportive of returners by avoiding questions about recent experience and, again, by explicitly stipulating that examples of skills do not need to come from a business setting

- Ensure that interview times are planned such that they can be flexible so as not to disadvantage returners and ensure that their flexibility is explicitly stated

Behavioural solutions could help integrate returners in organisations. How costly returners should be for organisations is unclear. It is likely to vary by individual situations and job roles. However, training in recent technical knowledge and technology changes is likely to be helpful. To ensure longer term retention, an improved sense of belonging and improved performance, returners would also be facilitated by help building their client and support networks within the organisation. Seeking information about individual returners' needs ensures resources are focused optimally to successfully integrate them.

Potential solutions include:

- Focus resources for training and support by integrating conversations about specific types of needs such as flexible working arrangements into the induction process. Make targeted training and support to address every individual's skills gaps the norm for all employees

- Share case studies of the kinds of successful training and support provided to returners from other organisations with HR teams

- Provide opportunities for returners to build their networks in the organisation and with clients, for example, through formalised returner or parent buddy schemes, or caring networks

The impact of broader gender equality issues upon returners is slowly being realised. There is an opportunity to take advantage of renewed enthusiasm for returners by publicising existing government resources clearly to organisations. In turn, there is a wider need to counter the perception that returners are difficult or costly to ensure that this stops acting as a disincentive for organisations. This will support returners to feel

confident about applying to organisations that consider them to be valuable additions to their workforce.

Appendix A

Table 3 Sample detailed characteristics

Code	Industry	Interviewee gender	Size	GPG
Organisation 1	Computer Technology	Man	Medium	-
Organisation 2	Legal	Woman	Medium	+
Organisation 3	Automotive Manufacturing	Woman	Large	-
Organisation 4	Financial Services	Woman	Large	+
Organisation 5	Public Service	Man	Large	-
Organisation 6	Professional Services	Woman	Medium	-
Organisation 7	Financial Services	Woman	Medium	+
Organisation 8	Arts Charity	Man	Small	-
Organisation 9	Hospitality	Man	Large	-
Organisation 10	Professional Services	Woman	Small	N/A
Organisation 11	Professional Services	Woman	Large	+
Organisation 12	Conservation Charity	Woman	Large	-
Organisation 13	Construction	Woman	Large	+
Organisation 14	Conservation Charity	Woman	Small	N/A
Organisation 15	Social Care Charity	Man	Medium	-
Organisation 16	Marketing Software	Woman	Small	N/A
Organisation 17	Conservation Charity	Woman	Small	N/A
Organisation 18	Legal	Woman	Small	N/A
Organisation 19	Technology	Woman	Small	N/A
Organisation 20	Retail Software	Woman	Medium	-

Size	
Small	<250 employees
Medium	250 – 3,999 employees
Large	> 4,000 employees

GPG	
-	Below UK average (< 18%)
+	Above UK average (> 18%)

Appendix B

Table 4 Estimated numbers of returners employed and recently hired

Code	Estimated number of returners overall	Number of returners recently recruited	Returner programme
Organisation 1	Few	Few	No
Organisation 2	Few	None	No
Organisation 3	Unsure	None	No
Organisation 4	Few	Few	Yes
Organisation 5	Unsure	None	No
Organisation 6	Many	Many	Yes
Organisation 7	Unsure	None	No
Organisation 8	Few	None	No
Organisation 9	Not stated	Few	No
Organisation 10	Few	Few	No
Organisation 11	Many	Many	Yes
Organisation 12	Many	Many	No
Organisation 13	Unsure	None	No
Organisation 14	Few	Few	No
Organisation 15	Many	Many	No
Organisation 16	None	None	No
Organisation 17	Unsure	None	No
Organisation 18	Few	None	No
Organisation 19	Few	Few	No
Organisation 20	Few	Few	No

Number of returners	
Few	Assumed to be < 10 employees
Many	Assumed to be 10+ employees
Unsure	Did not know
Not stated	Did not explicitly state

Reference: GEO-RR-009

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government Equalities Office.

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