# Equality Hub

# Guidance for employers: **helping people return to work**

# Contents

# Section ①

## Top tips for helping people return to work

# A returner can be a person of any gender, returning from any type of career break.

**There are many benefits to your organisation from supporting returners, such as:**

- accessing a high-calibre talent pool of experienced and mature people
- tackling skills shortages within your organisation
- creating a more inclusive workplace with gender, age, and cognitive diversity

**There are different ways to bring returners into your organisation. Whatever kind of return to work programme you choose, you need to get support from across your organisation. Options include:**

- supported hiring – bringing returners directly into permanent roles
- returnships – fixed-term contracts that offer competitive pay

**You can improve the likelihood of a successful programme by considering:**

1. **Sponsorship –** getting buy-in from leadership, management and teams.
2. **Onboarding –** understanding the barriers and enablers for returners.
3. **Support –** promoting coaching, mentoring and peer support networks.
4. **Training –** using online learning, workshops, webinars and upskilling sessions.
5. **Wellbeing –** having points of contacts to address concerns and offer support.
6. **Work opportunities –** offering site visits, practice interviews and career reviews.
7. **Evaluation –** gathering insights and making improvements in real time.
8. **Governance –** assessing programme progress and return on investment.

Our evidence shows that making small changes to recruitment practices can have a big impact on the number of returners applying to vacancies. Best practice includes:

1. Enhancing and promoting your flexible working policies, including advertising jobs as flexible.

Research shows that many non-workers want to work flexibly. Job adverts offering flexible working attracted more applicants than adverts where flexibility was not mentioned.

2. Avoiding unnecessary requirements that might discourage returners, such as asking for recent work experience or references.

Research shows that presenting roles in terms of years of experience increased callback rates, compared to using chronological dates.

3.  Advertising your job vacancy as suitable for returners, and part time if possible.

Research shows how advertising jobs as part-time had a positive effect on the number of women that apply.

**To benefit from the returner talent pool, you can also consider:**

1.  Developing a communications plan with targeted digital and media activity.

2.  Timing your process to avoid peak periods such as school holidays.

3.  Using inclusive and encouraging language and tone in your communications.

4.  Keeping assessments straightforward and assessing only the skills that the role requires.

5.  Designing a flexible onboarding process, with sufficient notice of dates and format so that returners can make plans for their caring commitments.

Find further guidance on actions to support women to progress and 100 ways to work flexibly.

# Section ②

## About this guidance

# This guidance is for employers who are looking to support people returning to work after a career break (referred to as 'returners').

This includes employers wanting to provide a return to work programme in their organisation. It has been produced by the Equality Hub, which has extensive experience of managing return to work programmes in the public and private sector. It includes insight from industry experts, programme providers, employers, and returners.

This guidance focuses on supporting people returning from time out of work for childcare or other caring responsibilities. It may also be useful for people who have taken time out of work for health, relocation or other reasons.

## Acknowledgements

This guidance is an update of documents initially co-authored by Women Returners and Timewise. These organisations have extensive experience of working with people returning to work following a break to care for others.

### Women Returners

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

### Timewise

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

# Why support returners?

It is important to be aware of the challenges faced by people looking to return to work after a career break. Returners often change or downgrade their occupation due to a lack of suitable opportunities available to them. This can have a big effect on their pay and opportunities to make progress in their careers.

**Barriers faced by returners may include:**

- recruitment biases against candidates without recent experience, due to a perceived lack of up to date skills
- a lack of flexible job opportunities
- a loss of confidence
- needing to refresh sector specific knowledge

Returners may have ongoing caring responsibilities to consider and may be looking to balance their professional and personal lives.

Organisations and employers are able to provide support in many different ways. The way that support is provided may vary depending on the size and resource of the organisation.

Running a returners programme or providing other support to returners can have many benefits for your organisation. These include having cost-effective access to talented people, and creating a more inclusive workplace with gender, age and cognitive diversity.

Support for returners may take the form of a structured programme. For smaller organisations, it may be more practical to run a smaller initiative. This can be as simple as improving awareness in your organisation of the barriers that returners face, or ensuring that flexible working is displayed as standard in any job advert.

**This guidance will share further examples of best practice, including:**

- asking for job history in terms of years of experience rather than dates of previous roles
- considering people's individual needs and career goals
- providing additional training and support such as coaching
- sharing plans, insights, and induction materials with line managers and employees

# Who are returners?

A returner can be a person of any gender, returning from any type of career break.

In this guidance, a returner is someone who left paid employment to take on a caring responsibility. This more often refers to women, as they take on a disproportionate amount of unpaid care work in the UK. In 2021, out of the people who were economically inactive due to caring for their family or home, had previously had a job and not worked for at least 12 months, and would like to return to work in the future, around 86% were women (Equality Hub analysis of Office for National Statistics, Annual Population Survey, 2021). The returner's caring responsibility may be ongoing or former, and may relate to children or adults.

A returner can be someone who has not yet returned to any form of paid employment following their career break. A returner may also be someone who has already returned, but to a lower-skilled or lower-paid role, potentially in a different sector to the one they worked in before. In this case, the returner may be looking to move into a role that recognises their skills and experience.

# What is a returner programme?

Returner programmes target people returning to work after a career break of at least one year, but typically 18 months or more. There are many types of returner programmes, which have different support, training, and work elements. This guidance focuses on returner programmes involving paid work, on a temporary or permanent basis, that give a supported route back to permanent employment. These programmes can be for individuals or a group of returners.

# Section ③

# Benefits of supporting returners

# Your organisation can gain many benefits from supporting returners.

It is important to make sure that the rest of your organisation understands and reflects on these benefits as well.

**Benefits of supporting returners may include:**

- accessing a high-calibre talent pool of experienced and mature people
- tackling skills shortages within your organisation
- improving how your organisation recruits, supports and promotes women
- creating a more inclusive workplace with gender, age, and cognitive diversity
- improving your organisation's brand and reputation
- achieving a cost-effective recruitment process
- improving your recruitment practices to access the best candidates

## Accessing talent

There are talented returners who are economically inactive for caring reasons. This includes those who may work in lower paid, lower level roles to fit around ongoing caring commitments. These returners have a wide range of skills, education, and experience, as well as new skills gained during their career breaks. With the right support and targeted recruitment, your organisation could attract this talent pool back into the workplace.

Some sectors are experiencing or will experience a shortage of workers. Returners are an extra pool of people who either have the right skills or could easily be trained to develop the necessary skills.

*A fantastic initiative, we are hoping more employers see the importance of supporting work returners and retain and employ top talent.*

Quote from an employer participating in the
Returners Grant Fund.

# Creating a more inclusive workplace

Around 9 in 10 potential returners in the UK are women, so supporting returners can increase gender inclusivity in your organisation. It can strengthen how women are recruited and promoted in your organisation, and improve representation in senior roles.

Hiring returners can also improve the range of ages represented across your organisation. It can bring in people with high levels of experience, maturity, and stability. Returners can offer a different way of looking at problems and situations. This can help to enhance your organisation's cognitive diversity.

**31%** of Return to ICT programme participants were aged between 50 and 59.

A successful return to work can have a positive influence on the returner and the economy. It can also positively influence your organisation's reputation. It clearly signals your organisation's commitment to helping parents and carers back into the workforce. It also shows that your organisation is open to non-linear career paths and values the role that caring plays in society. This can boost both recruitment and retention of talented employees.

*It is a great initiative and important to our gender equality and flexible working ambitions.*

Quote from an employer participating in the Returners Grant Fund.

# Improving recruitment methods

Returner programmes can be used to recruit experienced returners into your organisation. This can be both cost-effective and sustainable. Programmes can also offer lower costs than recruitment agencies, who may include additional fees for successful hires.

Implementing a returner programme, or considering support for returners more broadly, provides an opportunity to improve recruitment practices and processes.

For example, research into CV formats by the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) looked at how UK employers react to employment gaps in CVs. It found that presenting previous roles in terms of years of experience rather than chronological dates increased the positive callback rate for job applicants by 4.8 percentage points. This may be something for employers to consider, particularly if they have a set format for applicants to submit CV information. Asking about previous roles in terms of years of experience, rather than requesting employment dates, could help talented returners with CV gaps get through recruitment stages.

Research by Timewise showed that 9 in 10 non-workers want to work flexibly but few jobs are advertised as such.

A study by BIT and the jobs site Indeed also demonstrated that job adverts offering flexible working attracted up to 30% more applicants than adverts where flexibility was not mentioned. Both women and men were more likely to shortlist job adverts with specific details of flexible working options, compared to jobs with no mention of flexible working.

Consideration should be given to the language used in job adverts and marketing activity. CIPD's guide to inclusive recruitment for employers talks about how certain terms such as, 'dynamic' and 'energetic' may discourage older returners from applying. Older returners may well possess these characteristics, but might not identify with the language, or may worry about how they will be perceived by potential employers. Similarly, when women see job adverts with more stereotypically masculine words, such as 'ambitious' and 'decisive', they are more likely to assume that the team is predominantly male and that they are less likely to fit in.

# Section 4

## Things to consider before you start

# Return to work programmes can take different forms depending on your organisation's goals, capabilities, size, and target workforce.

Considering these factors can help you to decide what is right for you and the returners you want to hire.

**To set up for success, you may look to:**

1. Raise awareness of returners and get buy-in from across the organisation (from leadership, management and teams).

2. Understand the characteristics and motivations of returners.

3. Understand the barriers and enablers for returners.

## Getting support from your organisation

Whatever kind of return to work programme you choose, you need to get support from across your organisation. This can take time and requires the commitment of senior leaders, the engagement of line managers and other stakeholders, and support from the team involved.

**To get support from across your organisation, you might:**

1. Explore how returners and initiatives are viewed in your organisation.

2. Address any misconceptions about returners and barriers to returning.

3. Develop a business case for targeting and supporting returners.

4. Get buy-in from senior management and find a senior sponsor.

5. Consider resourcing a programme support team.

6. Get support from line managers who are likely to be working with returners.

7. Train line managers on the psychological transition for those returning to work.

8. Train wider teams on the benefits of hiring returners.

9. Find visible role models who have benefited from returner support before.

10. Embed support for returners into your organisation's talent attraction strategy.

11. Develop plans to raise awareness of the initiative internally and externally.

*These types of programmes create results and positive outcomes. The (ICT) sector will need to adopt initiatives such as this one to help tackle the reported gaps within the profession and to create the talent pipeline, which will develop the innovative, authentic and passionate leaders of the future.*

Quote from an ICT training provider participating in the Return to ICT programme.

## Understanding people returning to work

Returners tend to be a diverse, experienced pool of people. The term 'returner' can refer to a broad range of people. Although returners can be any gender, most returners are women, as they take on most of the unpaid care work in the UK. Many returners live in a household with dependent children. Most potential returners are aged between 25 and 44, but returners across all ages are looking to return to work. In addition to childcare, people may also take time out of work to care for elderly relatives. Older returners may have different characteristics to the general workforce, for example workers over the age of 50 are more likely to be self-employed than younger workers (Office for National Statistics, 2021).

Women over 50 represent the fastest-growing segment of the workforce, and perceptions about how menopause is treated within the workplace could create a barrier for some of them. This is an area of organisational policy and culture that is increasingly important to consider.

Findings from the [Returners Grant Fund](#) show that returners have a range of motivations for returning to work. These include to:

- increase their household income
- improve their personal and living standards
- be able to provide for their children
- regain pride and confidence through financial independence
- improve their daily lives
- regain their sense of identity
- do something for themselves after spending many years caring for others
- be a positive role model for their children

> *I know I have tons to offer but I didn't know how to put that down and convey that to someone else.*

Quote from a returner participating in the
[Returners Grant Fund](#).

## Barriers and enablers for returners

Returners may have worked hard to maintain their skills and knowledge during their career break. But they are likely to need time and support to bring them up to speed. Their confidence can be affected when they are out of work. Regaining belief in their work-related abilities is an important part of the return to work journey.

Other barriers faced by returners may include:

- managing ongoing caring responsibilities, including childcare
- low confidence or recognition of transferable skills
- bias in recruitment against candidates without recent experience
- a lack of flexible job opportunities
- misconceptions about recruiting older workers
- employers not understanding or supporting health conditions such as menopause

Flexibility is likely to be high on the list of priorities for returners. This is particularly likely if they have ongoing caring commitments. You should consider building in flexibility to your return to work programme.

Returners may want different working patterns, such as part-time work, remote working, compressed hours, or job sharing. Offering a variety of working patterns can be appealing for people who have ongoing caring responsibilities and those looking to balance their professional and personal lives.

**Flexibility works best when it works for both the individual and the organisation. There are 3 elements to consider:**

1. Where people need to work (for example, from home, across different offices or sites, or from a variety of locations).

2. When people need to work (for example, flexible start and finish times, compressed hours, or term-time working).

3. How much people need to work (for example, working part-time, or taking unpaid leave).

Similarly, career aspirations differ between returners. Some may be looking to return to a role or profession that they previously left. Others may be looking to transfer their skills to new career opportunities. Some returners may find a trial period more attractive, while others may be looking for permanent roles. By accommodating different return to work pathways, your organisation can access a wider pool of talent to hire from.

> *My job is less senior than it was before, but that suits me. I work 4 days a week, and on 2 days I finish at 3pm for the school pick-up.*

Quote from a returner participating in the
[Returners Grant Fund](#).

# Section ⑤

# Designing a return to work programme

Before launching a return to work programme,
it is important to consider its format and who
to get involved.

**When considering a return to work programme, you may be looking to:**

- understand the different types of return to work programmes
- understand how many returners you could manage
- consider timings for recruitment and onboarding
- consider the length and format of the programme
- identify the level and type of role that would be suitable for returners
- understand who to involve in your organisation and the roles they will play
- communicate with colleagues who can help raise awareness of the return to work programme

## Types of programme to consider

Return to work programmes can take different forms. Some employers try various schemes. It is common to evolve the schemes as you learn what works best for your organisation and the people you hire.

### Returnships

A 'returnship' is a fixed-term contract with an employer. There is a possibility of a permanent role at the end if it goes well for both returner and employer. A returnship allows employers to see the returner's skills, experience, and motivations before any permanent job offer is made. It also allows time for both the returner and employer to assess the appropriate type and level of work, salary, and working pattern for the returner. By having a trial period, returners can also assess whether the timing of their return to work and the organisation or role is right for them.

### Supported hiring

'Supported hiring' means hiring a returner directly into a permanent role. This is best suited to returners who are certain they want to become part of the organisation, and can make personal arrangements to do so. You should make sure this role is accounted for in the headcount and longer-term hiring plans. You might consider avoiding roles that need filling urgently. If more than one role is being advertised, you could allocate one specifically for a returner. You can also add the hiring of a returner to the objectives of relevant hiring managers.

## Return to practice

A 'return to practice' programme is sector-based and provides training and work experience to enable returners to practise again in a particular area, typically a regulated profession, such as health or teaching.

## Fellowship

A 'fellowship' is where an employer or third sector organisation provides a salary, research funding, and academic support to a returner to complete a research and development project. This is usually intended for people at an early stage of their academic careers but can apply to people at any stage who have taken career breaks. The appointment may lead to a permanent position.

*The placement is just what I need. Some experience, a reference, and help to seek employment.*

Quote from a returner participating in the Returners Grant Fund.

Some return to work initiatives may need to include professional registration, for example supporting returners to social work, security roles, and medical practice. Returners may need to re-register with a particular registration body and specific training may need to be factored in. This is likely to be the case if a returner has not worked in a profession for some time.

You may decide that a formal return to work programme is not suitable for your organisation if you do not have the resources to support it. Even if this is the case, many aspects of a programme can be easily incorporated into a less structured or comprehensive scheme. Pick the aspects that will work best for your organisation and the returners you are looking to support. Less comprehensive schemes can still provide benefits to returners and your organisation.

The Return to Social Work programme was funded by the Government Equalities Office. It was designed to support previously registered social workers back into the profession. The marketing campaign received 773 applications. The programme **retrained 184 returning social workers** within 12 months.

# Logistics of your return to work programme

It is useful to think about the intake, timing, and length of your return to work programme.

## Intake

Your programme may be for individuals or a group of returners, depending on your organisation's capacity. Onboarding a group of returners has the benefit of a ready-made peer support network. This is highly valued by returners. It allows for economies of scale with support and training. It can also have a greater influence when creating an inclusive workplace. But you may need to adapt the level and type of support and training for different returners if you choose a group programme.

## Timing

You should consider the best time to launch your return to work programme for both your organisation and for the returners. Consider avoiding times of the year which may be typically busy periods for the business. This could make it more difficult for colleagues to support returners. Try to avoid times of the year where returners may find it more difficult to find cover for ongoing caring responsibilities, such as school holidays. This is particularly important for returnships because temporary care will need to be put in place for the placement period.

## Length

Returnships typically last for 6 months. With shorter return to work programmes, returners may not have enough time to become familiar with your organisation or put their skills and experience into practice. In addition, hiring managers may not have enough time to assess a returner's suitability for any ongoing or permanent roles. In contrast, with longer return to work programmes, there is a risk of uncertainty for returners. They may feel increased pressure to prove themselves when trying to find a permanent role.

The ideal length of a return to work programme will depend on the timeframes for decision-making in your organisation. It will also depend on the type of working patterns your organisation can accommodate. If you hire returners on a temporary basis, you should confirm any offer of ongoing employment as soon as possible. If a permanent role is not available, you should look for alternatives to help support the returner. You could offer project work or opportunities for employment in different parts of your organisation.

# Types of roles to offer

You should offer roles that acknowledge the ability, skills, and experience of returners.

Suitable areas of work should be identified for returners. This allows returners to make the most of their professional skills and experience. It is important to have line managers who are engaged with the programme. Managers should understand the skills that returners can bring to the team, and should be prepared to accommodate flexible working arrangements. You can support line managers by connecting them with managers who have previously supported returners. It is also worth getting agreement from senior leaders, so that managers feel more encouraged to dedicate proper time and energy to the process.

Returners have often gained a broad range of skills during their break, such as through self-employment or volunteering. This can add value to your organisation. It is important that returners are paid at a competitive rate which recognises their skills and experience. Pay should reflect the nature of the work and the level to which they are returning.

Returners may seek to return to work at the same level they left at. Outdated skills or knowledge can be overcome through training and support from others. Sometimes it may be beneficial to take a gradual approach to the role, with a clear development plan to refresh the returner's expertise. This is particularly applicable for returners who have had longer career breaks.

Some returners choose lower-level jobs. This can be to manage caring or personal commitments or to transfer into new careers. You should avoid rejecting a returner for being overqualified, and first check their career goals and expectations. Consider discussing any actual or perceived barriers that stop them applying for more senior roles.

# Setting up a support network

Providing a strong support network increases the likelihood of having a successful returner. A support network can consist of many different people.

**'Programme managers or coordinators'** are the primary contact for returners, and can manage and resolve issues with the programme. This is the person with overall oversight for the programme, often someone in a senior position.

**'Line managers'** are responsible for returners on a daily basis. Their responsibilities may include setting goals based on the role description and providing support through regular catch ups and reviews. They may also include incorporating flexible working patterns into team operations. Line managers should also ensure access to technology and equipment.

**'Human resources'** are able to provide general support. This can include identifying any roles available following temporary placements.

**'Buddies'** can help with day-to-day queries. They can provide support whilst returners familiarise themselves with the workplace.

**'Mentors'** can advise the returner about the organisational culture and its values. They may be able to help to resolve any internal conflicts, and provide longer-term career management support.

**'Coaches'** can provide support with the practical and psychological transition back to work, including rebuilding confidence and finding a work-life balance.

**'Learning and development providers'** can provide technical and transferable skills training. They can also offer access to additional development programmes.

**'Networks'** within the organisation may offer valuable support and advice. These may include peer networks for returners and networks to support women, parents, and carers,

For a supportive culture to flourish, all staff within the support network should be briefed on the returner programme. You should also position your return to work programme carefully with existing colleagues.

You can consider making talent your prominent message. Although hiring returners has clear societal benefits, it is important that your initiative is seen as a talent attraction strategy and not just a corporate responsibility. This will give returners the credibility they need to integrate into roles at a suitable level.

Benefits to your organisation should be shared, both internally and externally. Ensure that communications are planned carefully and shared widely. They should recognise the wider pool of returners, including returning fathers, adult carers, and people who took a career break for health or personal reasons.

# Section ⑥

# Engaging and onboarding returners

To get participants for your return to work programme, it is important to consider how to target returners and ways to support them before they start the programme.

**When considering how to attract and support returners, you may be looking to:**

- launch an effective campaign to raise awareness of your return to work programme
- improve your job advertisements to attract returners
- improve your assessment and feedback process for recruitment
- consider your approach for onboarding returners

## Running a recruitment campaign

The return to work advert that you create can have a big influence on the quality and quantity of applicants. The channels you use are also important to consider.

**To raise awareness of the return to work programme, you might:**

1.  Develop a communications plan with targeted digital and media activity.

2.  Include video content and case studies in your communications plan.

3.  Amplify successes and achievements of your return to work programme.

4.  Use a separate website or page to direct online traffic and self-referrals.

5.  Use targeted messaging through social media.

6.  Advertise on platforms or jobs boards used by returners, such as Timewise Jobs, Mumsnet, and Working Mums.

7.  Use specialist networks and recruitment organisations for returners, such as Women Returners, The Return Hub, and Capability Jane.

8.  Advertise through local community networks, including schools, to reach returners who may want to work close to home.

9.  Review the quality of applicants and amend your campaign as needed.

For the application process, you might:

1. Link the timing of recruitment to your organisation's recruitment cycles.

2. Avoid peak periods for returners such as school holidays.

3. Define roles in advance and involve hiring managers in the application process.

4. Provide clear information on programme criteria and the application process.

5. Set out development opportunities the programme will offer.

6. Include information about the salary, location, and flexible working options for roles you advertise.

7. Consider advertising the role as part time.

8. Keep the application process simple and eligibility criteria as open as possible.

9. Avoid unnecessary requirements that might discourage a returner, such as asking for recent work experience or references.

10. Be clear about what experience and skills are critical for the role to minimise ineligible applications.

11. Use inclusive and encouraging language and tone in your communications.

12. Share your organisational values and culture.

13. Explain why your organisation is a good fit for returners.

**Do you want help to review the tone and language of your adverts? These websites can help:**

- Textio
- Eploy
- Gender Decoder

Do you want to read more about inclusive recruitment? The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) has developed guidance that can help.

# Assessing candidates

Assessment processes can be daunting for people who have had a career break, particularly if they have not applied for a job for a number of years. Making simple changes to your recruitment processes can help returners showcase their experience.

**When assessing candidates, you might:**

1. Keep assessments straightforward and assess only the skills that the role directly requires.

2. Consider focusing on behavioural assessments, not technical knowledge.

3. Avoid prioritising recent knowledge or experience and anonymise applications.

4. Offer support before or during the assessment stage, such as practice interviews.

5. Ask applicants if they need reasonable adjustments.

6. Provide online links and supportive webinars before assessment days.

7. Provide interview guidance or training for all interviewers.

8. Start discussions on salary and flexibility during the interview process.

9. Acknowledge applications and share assessment outcomes promptly.

10. Tailor responses to boost confidence, even for unsuccessful applicants.

11. Provide personalised feedback to help unsuccessful applicants find roles in the future.

# Onboarding successful applicants

One of the most important aspects of a return to work scheme is the induction. Consider creating networks and providing opportunities for returners to talk with others. This can allow returners to familiarise themselves with the working environment. Your approach will depend on whether your programme has a fixed or rolling start date. It will also depend on whether returners start the programme individually or in groups.

You could consider sharing induction information on your organisation with existing employees. Things may have changed since they joined, and a 're-induction' could be helpful for their learning.

**When onboarding returners, you might:**

1. Ask candidates what support they think they will need.

2. Make sure that the onboarding process is comprehensive and that you brief everyone involved.

3. Ensure the process has a clear structure, but is also flexible.

4. Create plans that cover the first days and weeks, but also the following months.

5. Give sufficient notice of onboarding dates and format, so that returners can make plans to cover caring commitments.

6. Time your process to avoid peak periods such as school holidays

7. Put returners in touch with fellow recruits and other returners in your organisation.

8. Allocate a buddy to returners.

9. Consider holding experience days and tours of your organisation.

10. Create an induction pack for returners.

**For an induction pack, you might include:**

- induction itinerary
- programme overview and objectives
- information on the organisation, including structure and culture
- working hours, systems used by the organisation, and dress code
- details and timeframes of training and employment
- overview of any learning modules and where to access them
- support available, including employee networks and colleagues
- points of contact for queries
- FAQs

# Section 7

## Delivering the programme

# To deliver a successful return to work programme, it is important to identify suitable programme elements.

**You should also consider ways to monitor and evaluate their effectiveness. For example, you may be looking to:**

- consider what support and training you might provide for returners
- consider the type of employment opportunities your organisation can offer
- agree governance mechanisms to assess the scheme and return on investment
- find providers, partners or networks to support the scheme's running and governance
- develop an evaluation plan to capture data and gather programme insights

## Programme elements for success

Providing a strong support and training framework can help to maximise returner satisfaction. It also increases the likelihood of a successful programme for both returners and employers. It is important to make sure that this is not too overwhelming or time consuming for both parties. For all programme elements, you should consider the cost difference between face-to-face, virtual, and pre-recorded support.

**For support, you can consider:**

- group or one-to-one coaching (for example, addressing confidence and motivation)
- mentoring and buddying
- peer support through returner communities (for example, online messaging, emotional support, and role modelling)
- peer feedback (for example, to develop CVs)
- webinars with returner alumni
- networking (for example, speed networking online and in-person)
- line manager in-work support (for example objective setting and regular feedback)
- introductory sessions with relevant colleagues and teams
- points of contact for wellbeing and raising concerns
- ongoing learning and development opportunities
- award ceremonies and celebration moments

Coaching sessions were the activity most commonly rated as very helpful by participants of the Return to ICT post-programme survey.

For training, you can consider:

- online training platforms and materials
- interactive webinars (for example, on workplace knowledge)
- workshops (for example, on transferable skills)
- technical, digital, business, vocational, and language upskilling
- career counselling (for example, providing employability support)
- career and CV clinics (for example, using LinkedIn, how to position your career gap, and how to ask for flexible working)
- job searching (if required)

For work opportunities, you can consider:

- site visits
- jobs fairs
- practice interviews
- guaranteed interviews
- assessment days
- paid or unpaid placements
- permanent roles

**1/4** One-quarter of survey respondents from the Return to Practice programme said that they would not have been able to access training without the support of the programme.

**To enhance these opportunities, you might:**

1.  Capture returners' career aspirations through a career development plan.

2.  Take time to review the returner's learning and achievements.

3.  Allow time to offer constructive feedback and celebrate successes.

4.  Consider long-term mentoring opportunities.

5.  Identify additional training, projects or management opportunities for returners.

6.  Schedule performance reviews and identify suitable promotion opportunities.

7.  Redesign roles to be more flexible, understanding what can and cannot work in practice.

8.  Use trial periods to test new working patterns and make adjustments.

9.  Raise performance concerns early so there are no surprises at the end of the programme.

10. Reflect on the size of the returner group and make adjustments as needed.

*(The) programme was a great success in upskilling participants and building their confidence to return to work. Many of the participants didn't want the training to end, which is testament to the excellent high quality of training and support provided.*

Quote from the programme manager for the
Return to Planning programme.

Guidance for employers: helping people return to work

# Establishing governance mechanisms

It is important to establish strong governance based on agreed outcomes for the activity. This will help you to show evidence of value for money and assess your return on investment.

**When establishing governance mechanisms, you can:**

- set performance indicators or targets for the programme's milestones and outcomes (accounting for programme attrition)
- establish regular governance meetings to track and monitor performance
- review data protection requirements during and after the programme
- develop materials to share progress and insights
- dedicate resources to managing and evaluating the programme

*Now we have a great model to be able to try the project again and expand it out further.*

Quote from an employer participating in the Returners Grant Fund.

**In terms of resources to support the scheme's running and governance, you can consider:**

| | |
|---|---|
| programme managers or coordinators | coaches |
| administration | mentors |
| finance | buddies |
| communications | referral officers |
| assessors and interviewers | recruitment agencies |
| technical support | liaison or engagement officers |
| evaluators | business advisers |
| trainers and tutors | |

*It's been great to mix with other organisations and learn from each other.*

Quote from an employer participating in the
Returners Grant Fund.

You will also need to consider your budget and where it comes from in your organisation. When reviewing the budget, it is important to consider costs that might be incurred by returners and whether these can be covered by the programme.

**When considering costs, you can think about tracking:**

- communication and promotion costs
- staff costs (for example, programme managers and coaches)
- returner-related costs (for example, sifting, shortlisting, bursaries, and expenses)
- employer-related costs (for example, due diligence, commercial or contractual costs)
- training costs (for example, design and publication of course content and materials)
- digital and venue costs
- qualifications and licence costs for accreditation
- programme event costs (for example, market engagement, recruitment events, best practice roundtables, and celebration events)

# Evaluating your return to work programme

It is also important to take the time to evaluate each returner initiative. You can identify what is working well and what can be improved for future schemes.

**When evaluating your programme, you might:**

1. Test the return to work programme before launching it (for example, through stakeholder feedback or identifying potential challenges).

2. Agree a framework for evaluating the programme (for example, by developing a set of research questions for stakeholders and identifying assumptions to test).

3. Develop an evaluation plan, including data collection methods and frequency.

4. Identify participant groups to compare through evaluation and the minimum returns needed.

5. Agree what materials will be produced and published (for example, survey results, evaluation reports, and toolkits).

6. Track programme attrition, and conversion into permanent employment.

7. Collect real-time data and feedback on withdrawals and participation.

8. Monitor stakeholder satisfaction (for example, through feedback from line managers, programme managers, coaches, buddies, and partners).

9. Create forums for sharing best practice and networking.

10. Share success stories and best practice externally using case studies.

**For data collection, you can consider:**

- pre-programme online surveys
- mid-programme online surveys
- post-programme online surveys
- anonymous feedback survey
- wellbeing indicators
- analysis of open text
- interviews using interview topic guides
- focus groups and site visits
- video or written case studies
- roundtable discussions
- social media polls

When evaluating your programme, you can consider reviewing:

- website visits
- application forms
- data monitoring forms
- skills assessments
- governance reports
- cost versus outcome calculations

Once you have successfully run a return to work scheme, you will be better placed to incorporate learning into your ongoing talent strategy. You can also encourage your supply chain to do the same. It is worth taking the time to use the insights from your evaluation to adapt and develop your returner support. This allows you to create a framework for best practice which you can share internally and externally.

The principles and practices for returner success should be incorporated throughout your organisation. They should not be treated as an add-on or separate HR initiative. This will help to create an inclusive culture and support the attraction and retention of a more diverse workforce.

After running your programme, you might:

- test what you've learned elsewhere in the organisation, with different teams, departments, or offices
- include your return to work support in business-as-usual activity
- extend your return to work support to include a range of junior and senior levels
- run specific return to work recruitment events
- encourage managers to review the flexible working potential of roles within their teams
- state in all job advertisements that your organisation is open to discussing flexible working options
- challenge hiring managers who exclude candidates without recent work experience
- involve your supply chain, prioritising working with suppliers who champion return to work initiatives

# Section 8

# Final reflections

## Celebrating successes

# Supporting returners can result in successes for both returners and employers.

**Employers who have implemented a return to work programme in their organisation have stated successes such as:**

- access to a wider pool of potential employees
- better understanding of returners' circumstances
- hiring more returners after successfully recruiting one returner, due to their high quality of work
- satisfaction with the work readiness of returners
- increased support for returners already employed in an organisation

*I am honoured to have been part of the project and to work with other organisations that were passionate about supporting parent returners. It has supported a direction the company was keen to explore and develop.*

Quote from an employer participating in the
Returners Grant Fund.

**Returners who have participated in return to work programmes have stated benefits such as:**

- being equipped with the necessary skills and support to return to work
- having increased confidence in their own workplace skills and abilities
- feeling supported in balancing their caring responsibilities and work
- improving personal and financial wellbeing, and retirement prospects
- developing an identity outside of the home and the carer role

It is important to recognise and celebrate these successes, sharing them across your organisation. You can do this through celebration events, and by promoting outcomes and case studies through internal and external communications.

# Employer case study

Rachel Dackombe, Returner Champion at Victoria Plum and part of the
[CIPD Parent Returner Programme](#) funded by the Equality Hub.

*We are determined to remain an employer of choice and are now more aware than ever that this will require a creative and flexible-focused approach to recruitment and retention.*

## Background

Victoria Plum is an online national specialist bathroom retailer based in Yorkshire, with an interest in encouraging members of its community to stay and work in the area rather than leave to work in big cities. Due to the digital nature of its business, it needs to be able to attract employees with specialist skills including IT, website development, digital marketing, and data analysis.

## The problem

The Victoria Plum team were finding that people with the skills they needed were not coming forward. They were also conscious that only 30% of their workforce, and just one of 11 executive team members, were female. As early adopters of flexible working, they were aware that their competitors were catching up with them in terms of the flexibility they were offering, and that they needed to do more to retain their edge. As a result, they decided to take a more strategic approach to widening their talent pool, by targeting returners and enhancing their flexible offer.

## The solution

**The team planned several changes, including:**

- stating on all recruitment adverts that roles are open to flexible working and being open to facilitate different working patterns.
- encouraging a culture shift by educating leaders in the business about the benefits of flexible working.
- introducing work-life balance schedules to support those colleagues who require a more flexible working pattern.
- reviewing home working opportunities for existing colleagues who had long commutes or parental or caring responsibilities.
- introducing a wellbeing site for colleagues, which provides opportunities to reach out to trained Mental Health First Aiders.

## The outcomes

As part of the CIPD Returner Programme, Returner Champions such as Victoria Plum collectively effected 89 changes in their organisations and onboarded 100 returners over the duration of the programme.

The enforced home working caused by COVID-19 also increased awareness of the benefits of flexible working. Some employees within Victoria Plum moved to permanent remote working from January 2021 following a successful consultation process. This is a hybrid approach, with a campus and studio available to enable colleagues to meet and work as and when required.

# Further support

This guidance has covered the benefits, design, and running of returner programmes. For more information, including evaluation reports and research, please visit:

- For employers
- For returners

Equality Hub