



Equality Hub

Toolkit for returners: **helping you return to work**



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Section 1

Top tips for returning to work



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

Getting back to work takes time and commitment. If you are starting to think about returning to work, here are some first steps you can take:

- **set yourself up well** – make time to prepare for your return, create a plan, and think about your options for childcare and eldercare
- **build your support** – talk to friends and family, and seek out others who are also on the return to work journey
- **build your work confidence** – think about your strengths and achievements, address your self-doubts, and recognise the benefits of your career break
- **think about your career** – consider what you want to do and what is the best route

There are many different ways that you can return to work. Options include:

1. Supported hiring – returning directly into a permanent role.
2. Returnships – fixed-term contracts that offer competitive pay.
3. Return to practice – sector led programmes offering training and certification.

There are several steps you can take to prepare for your return:

- **use your networks** – talk to people you know to get advice and information
- **update your skills and knowledge** – think about what learning you need to do
- **consider social media and networking** – refresh your work connections
- **identify opportunities** – look at job boards and government-funded schemes

Whatever your reason for taking a career break, you may want or need a role that is flexible. There is more to flexibility than just part-time roles, and you can work out an arrangement that works for both you and your employer. Options include:

- home or remote working
- hybrid working (home-working part of the week)
- job share
- working part-time
- flexible start and finish hours
- term-time work
- compressed hours

Section 1 Top tips for returning to work

Once you are ready to return to work, you will need to update your CV and navigate the application process. You might:

- **tailor your CV and cover letter for each role** – sell your achievements and be open about your break
- **prepare for interviews** – research the organisation you are applying for, identify whether the interview is competency or strengths-based, and prepare and practise your answers
- **negotiate** – don't feel you need to accept the job straight away and think about what, if anything, you want to discuss further before accepting

When you have a new job in place, there are some final things you could think about before you start:

- **plan for changes at home** – find solutions for ongoing caring responsibilities and think about how you want to share out jobs at home
- **get into a return to work mindset** – boost your confidence, and accept that change can be tough for anyone at first
- **let go of any guilt and focus on the positives** – remember the reasons why you want or need to work, and remind yourself of the rewards it will bring
- **congratulate yourself!**

Section ②

Introduction and overview



How to use the toolkit

Whether you're just starting to think about getting back into work, or you're part-way through the journey back and looking for some extra advice and support, this toolkit can help.

It's been designed to take you through every stage of the return to work process, with a wide range of information, ideas and actions. You can start from the beginning and work through it, or dip in and out of the stages that are most relevant to you.

A number of resources are mentioned throughout the toolkit. You'll find links to these and other sources of support in [section 13](#).

This toolkit is aimed at supporting returners back to work. It focuses on people who have taken a break of over a year for caring reasons, but we hope the advice is helpful for those returning after other types of career break too. People returning from caring are more often women, as they take on a disproportionate amount of unpaid care work in the UK. However, this guide can help returners of any gender, returning from any type of career break.

You may have been not working at all, or you may have taken a lower-paid, part-time, temporary or self-employed role to fit around your caring responsibilities, and are now looking for a job which is more in line with your skills and experience.

Regardless of your gender, age, seniority, career length and previous industry or occupation, we've designed the toolkit to cover all the different stages of getting back to work, giving you advice, tips and support to make the process of returning as smooth as possible.

There's never been a better time to be a returner. More companies are investing in returner programmes, and more employers are waking up to the value of returners' skills, experience and maturity. Between 2017 and 2021, the Equality Hub delivered 25 returner programmes across the private and public sector to support returners. They awarded £1.5 million to sixteen organisations supporting returners in the private sector and delivered returner programmes that target key workforces in the public sector, including social workers and health professionals.

People around the UK are returning to great jobs using their skills and experience, even after 15 to 20 years out of the workforce. We hope that this toolkit will help you to join them, and we look forward to hearing your return to work success story.

Equality Hub, Women Returners and Timewise, 2023

Acknowledgements

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/>.

Section ③

Thinking about returning



Getting back to work takes time and commitment. Here are some practical steps to help you to create the time you need, and to stay focused, positive and productive.

Set yourself up for success

Make time for your return to work

Finding work after a career break is a job in itself, which can be hard to fit into your already busy life. These ideas can help you create some space.

Balance your needs with those of others. If your career break was for caring reasons, you may be used to putting everyone else's needs ahead of your own. It's time for that to change. Set aside a regular time in the day for your job search, rather than waiting until all your other tasks are completed.

Identify activities you can stop doing, delegate or make alternative arrangements for. Can you start to get support with your caring responsibilities? Do you have others in your family (such as a partner or older children) who you can allocate more household chores to? If you're involved with time-consuming voluntary or community work, can you find someone to take this on? These actions will not only help you to make time now, but will also help you to be ready for when you start work.

Make a return to work plan

You stand a better chance of being successful if you treat your return to work like a project, breaking the process down into manageable steps, with related actions:

1. Give your job search a project name, such as 'Project back to work'.
2. Decide on a specific and motivating end goal, such as 'Find a well-paid marketing job in Manchester'.
3. Break down the process into smaller steps, with a first step such as 'Investigate childcare options' or 'Assess my skills'.
4. Create a set of small and achievable actions with realistic deadlines.
5. Set aside some regular time to tackle one or two actions at a time.
6. Avoid getting stuck by tackling actions at the start of the day, or breaking down actions into easier alternatives.
7. Track your progress by reviewing your actions regularly to see what you've achieved.
8. Celebrate the small successes, such as every time you meet a deadline.

Get in the right frame of mind

Recognise that there are often ups and downs on the road back to work, and it may take longer than you think. Returners who have had a longer break can take a year or so to get back into a suitable role in the workforce.

Returning to work can be a challenge, but it is possible. If you hit a setback, see it as a barrier to overcome, not a reason to give up trying. Consider how you can:

Let go of any guilt. If you're feeling guilty about spending less time caring for your family, list the reasons why you need or want to work. If you are happy in your work, your return to work could benefit your family life.

Get active. You're unlikely to find a job just by sitting at home thinking about your options or trawling online job sites, and this can be very dispiriting. To make progress, and to keep your energy levels up, get out and about to test out your ideas and create new opportunities. Arrange a coffee with a former colleague, sign up for a short update course or look for other ideas highlighted in [section 7](#).

Look after yourself. Job searching can be tiring, especially when you've got other responsibilities. Don't cut down on sleep to fit the job search in, and keep up with any activities you enjoy and find energising.

Start exploring childcare and eldercare options

If you took a break to look after your children, it's worth exploring your childcare options at this early stage. Some options may take time to set up, or require a place to become available, so it's important to plan far enough ahead.

The childcare options available will depend on the age of your children, your potential income, and your location. Here are some things to think about in advance:

- Could your relatives offer free or low-cost help if you give them time to plan?
- If you are thinking about returning part-time, could you do a childcare swap with a friend?
- If you have a working partner, could they work part-time or flexibly to take on more childcare responsibilities?
- If you will need to pay for childcare, what's your budget likely to be?

There are a range of options, with different costs, including childminders, nurseries, nannies, au pairs and (if your children are at school) wrap-around care, such as breakfast and after-school clubs.

There are childcare benefits available in some circumstances. Take time to work through the government services on GOV.UK- see [section 13](#). You can also get further advice and information from [Working Families](#) and [Carers UK](#).

If you have been caring for relatives, start exploring community and private caring options early, as it may take some time to find the support that works for you and your family.

The eldercare options available to you will depend on your specific circumstances. Here are some things to think about:

- Can other family members take on some of your caring responsibilities?
- Will the person you care for be able to stay in their home with community or private care support?
- If you need to investigate residential care, what options do you have to fund their care?
- Have you needed to attend regular medical appointments with the person you care for? Could anyone else support you with this?

It's also worth noting that, if you have been receiving a Carer's Allowance or Child Tax Credits, and you start earning over a certain amount, you will need to notify the government.

Build your return to work support

None of us are superheroes – we all need support to succeed. Think about who can give you practical and emotional support, helping you to stay energised and positive, both during your job search and when you're back at work.

Friends and family

Talk about your return to work journey with positive friends or family members who will support and encourage you. If you have a partner, older children or extended family, ask them for practical help with your home responsibilities. If you have children, it's helpful to build a support network of other working parents so you can help each other out when needed. Consider asking friends with experience in your area of work or in HR whether they could mentor or coach you through your return to work.

Fellow returners

Look out for other people in similar circumstances to talk to regularly, to share experiences and ideas, and to keep each other on track. Local return to work events or the Women Returners professional network are good places to find them. Your local authority or Jobcentre Plus may also be able to point you in the direction of job search, mentoring or other support networks in your area.

You can find out more about building and using your networks in [section 7](#).

Section ④

Building your work confidence



We know that returning to work after a break can be daunting - but you're not alone. Lots of very capable people feel apprehensive after time out of the workplace. To boost your self-belief, spend some time reminding yourself of what you've got to offer.

Identify your strengths and skills

Write a list of both your strengths – things that you're naturally good at and enjoy, such as being creative or well-organised. Do the same for your skills – things you have learned to do, such as using specific software, managing budgets, or speaking a foreign language. It can be hard to pinpoint your strengths, so here are some ideas to help.

Ask family and friends

Get the people who know you best to tell you what they think you're particularly good at – they often see strengths you take for granted.

Think of times when you were at your best

When have you felt like you were full of energy and doing a great job? What were you doing (your skills)? What made you so good at this (your strengths)?

Take stock of your skills

Think about all the different jobs you have had, whether they were paid or voluntary. For each job, list the skills and strengths that you used. Don't dismiss skills you haven't used for a long time, as most can be updated relatively quickly. Now add the skills and strengths you have developed through your caring 'jobs', such as time-management, multi-tasking, empathy and influencing. Note any skills developed through your hobbies or other interests.

Look at old work reviews

If you still have these, they can help you to remember what skills and strengths others valued in you.

Remind yourself of your experience and achievements

Create a list of your experiences and achievements and then pick out the highlights. As well as boosting your confidence, this will be helpful when you start thinking about your return to work introduction ([see section 7](#)) and writing your CV ([see section 10](#)).

Experience

Consider all the different experiences that you have had – paid and volunteer jobs, periods of study, and cultural experiences such as living abroad. Include experiences you gained during your break, like setting up a small business from home or doing work in the community. This all adds up to the person you are now.

Achievements

What are your proudest work and personal achievements? Think back year by year about what you've achieved in all areas of your life. Note down any qualifications or certifications, no matter how long ago you received them.

Recognise the benefits of your break

Time away from work isn't time wasted – you will have gained a great deal. Try to focus on the advantages of your break, not the disadvantages.

Maturity

You're returning to work older and wiser. Many employers are recognising the benefits that maturity brings to a team. Older workers can draw on a range of past experiences when looking for solutions and are likely to stay calmer when difficulties occur.

A new perspective

Your experiences outside of work will have given you a fresh perspective which will be valuable to your next employer, helping the team to be more innovative in their approach.

Energy

Having had some time away, you'll bring renewed energy and enthusiasm into working, which can boost others as well as yourself.

New skills

Whether you were caring, volunteering, or taking part in other activities during your break, you will have developed a wealth of skills which are readily transferable to the workplace.

Address your self-doubts

It's easy for fears and doubts to stall your progress back to work. Tackle common return to work worries by looking for facts to challenge them and taking actions to reduce them:

I've been out of the workplace for too long. I'm too old to get back to work.



Many people have returned to great jobs in their 50s or 60s after breaks as long as 15 to 20 years.



Read through your lists of what you can offer an employer in terms of your strengths, skills and experience. Recognise the benefits of your break ([see next section](#) for more details) and read the [success stories](#).

I cannot get to grips with new technology.



Technology in the workplace is similar to the technology we use at home, and it's not hard to get back up to speed.



Work on your IT skills by taking a course before you get back to work – see [section 6](#).

I'm too out-of-date.



The valuable base of knowledge you have is still there – you just need to fill in the gaps.



Start to refresh your knowledge through networking, update courses and social media.

I won't have enough energy.



Many returners find that being back at work is energising rather than draining.



Start thinking about how you'll manage your work-life balance when you're back at work and try to target work you will enjoy.

I've lost my work skills.



Returners find their skills come back very quickly once they're using them again.



Think about how you use work-related skills, such as organising events or influencing others, in your everyday life. Consider refreshing your skills through targeted volunteering if you've had a very long break.

Section 5

Getting clear on your
career direction



You don't need to know exactly what you want to do, but a scattergun approach rarely works. If you're clear on the type of work you want, you're much more likely to get it. Here is some advice to help you navigate this stage.

Think about what you want from your next job

Priorities can change over time, so the first thing you need to do is identify what is essential and what is 'nice-to-have' for you right now. Ask yourself these questions:

What do you want from work?

What's motivating your return – is this just about needing or wanting the extra money? Or are you missing the social side of work? Perhaps you want to challenge yourself, regain the sense of achievement or to get back your 'work identity'?

What do you need from work?

Do you need to work part-time or flexibly? How much do you need to earn? What locations can you work in? You can find more information about flexible working in [section 9](#).

What type of work environment do you prefer?

Would you rather be employed, or work for yourself? Would you rather work for a large or a small organisation? Does the brand name matter? What sector(s) do you want to work in? What sort of culture suits you best?

Which type of work do you enjoy?

To feel happy and productive when you're back at work, you need to like what you're doing day-to-day.

What opportunities exist in the current market?

Look for appealing sectors and organisations that are hiring. Look for those offering returner opportunities, such as returnships. If necessary, consider how your skills and experience may be transferable.

Do you want to return to what you did before or to change direction?

Based on your answers, think about whether you want to return to a role using your previous skills and experience. If you are looking for a change, can you use transferable skills – that is, using your existing skills in a different type of role or sector? If you want a complete change of direction requiring retraining, are you ready and financially able to commit to this, or is funding available?

What do you want from your career in the long term?

Ask yourself these questions:

- Where would you like to be in one year? What about in 5 years?
- What new responsibilities would you like to take on?
- What skills will you need to develop? What training will you need?
- What jobs will help you get to where you want?

Work out the best route back in

Having pinpointed your overall career direction, you should then start thinking about which route or routes might be the best ways to pursue it. Here are some of the options that are available to you.

Returning as an employee

You could apply directly to a job advert, ideally with a returner-friendly employer or one who champions flexible working and diversity. You could also apply through:

- a formal returner or return to work programme
- interim roles, such as maternity cover
- an apprenticeship scheme

Becoming self-employed

You could explore freelancing, project or contract-based work, or setting up your own business or franchise. [Talmix](#) is a freelance network where you can pitch your talent to innovative companies worldwide.

Other opportunities

You could retrain into a new career, study to gain extra qualifications, or look at strategic volunteering or work experience.

What is a returner programme?

Returner programmes are typically set up and run by the employer. They offer a supported pathway back into work for people who have had a career break, usually of 18 months or more. Most returner programmes fall into one of the categories below.

Returnship

A 'returnship' is a fixed-term contract with an employer. It is usually for 3 to 6 months and competitively paid. There is a strong likelihood of a permanent role at the end if it goes well for both returner and employer. Support, such as coaching, mentoring and training, is usually provided for the placement period.

Supported hiring

'Supported hiring' is also employer-led and involves hiring returners directly into permanent positions, with support provided for the first 3 to 6 months

Return to practice

A 'return to practice' programme is sector-based and provides training and work experience to enable you 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 so that you can 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.

Returnships and supported hiring programmes are still relatively new. They were first introduced in the UK in 2014. Their numbers are rapidly-growing, covering more sectors, regions and job levels each year, so it's worth looking out for new programmes that are relevant to you.

Section ⑥

Updating your skills
and knowledge



After taking a career break, you may be feeling out of date. However, it's easier than you might think to get back up to speed, and there's a great deal of support available.

Follow these steps to help get yourself workplace ready.

Identify what skills and knowledge need updating

Look at relevant job advertisements. What skills and knowledge consistently appear as required or desirable? Don't be put off by very long lists of what companies are looking for – remember that successful candidates usually don't tick every box.

Focus on your key gaps to fill. Which work-related skills do you feel least confident about? What are the most important knowledge areas for the jobs you are targeting?

Explore training courses and learning

Do you belong to a professional association or industry body, or could you join one? Often, they hold free or subsidised events as well as on-line and off-line training courses. Also, look at seminars and conferences – volunteer to help or ask about subsidised rates.

Government funded programmes, such as [Skills Bootcamps](#), offer a range of free, flexible courses of up to 16 weeks.

There is the [National Careers Service](#), which offers free and impartial advice.

Many local authorities run adult education courses, covering skills such as computer literacy. There may be training courses running in your local community, in a central city location or online. There are also a growing number of free open learning platforms, including courses run by leading universities.

Consider how else you can update

Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn are good sources of topical updates on what's happening in an industry or job area. Follow relevant companies and industry experts on Twitter and Facebook, and join groups on LinkedIn. See [section 7](#) for guidance on using these platforms.

Subscribe to a relevant journal or publication (many are free-of-charge) and read related press. Learn the new jargon.

Meet with people you used to work with and talk about their experience of their workplace right now. They can give you information on anything that has changed and point you in the right direction for ways to find out more.

Reboot your digital skills

Many returners feel nervous about their digital skills, concerned about how technology in the workplace has moved on since they left and whether they'll be able to catch up.

It's worth remembering that technology in the workplace is not so different to the technology you use at home, so you may not be as out of date as you think. And technology moves so fast nowadays that even people who are working can find it hard to keep up with developments. If you take some time now to get back up to speed, you may find yourself in a stronger position than others who haven't had that time.

There are various free or low cost online courses that can help polish up your digital skills, including training in typical business applications. See [section 13](#) for options, including Microsoft's free online courses for Office (Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook and Word) and Google's free online Digital Garage course.



Section 7

Preparing to return



As you prepare to return to work, your network can be a big support.

Here are some tips on how to use networking to support your return to work.

Identify and use your networks

Networking is a great way to gain advice and information for your job search, to get referrals to people who can help you and to find job opportunities – especially ones that may not be advertised. It may sound like a formal process, but in reality, it's quite the opposite.

Use and develop your networks

Everyone has a network. You probably network all the time without realising, with neighbours and in your local community. Networking is not handing out business cards or asking for a job. It simply means talking to people and exchanging information or asking for advice.

Your network is bigger than you think

Who do you know? Grab a piece of paper (or a spreadsheet) and map out your network. Note all the groups that you are part of, now and in the past, and those you can create or join. Look for ideas here:

- personal connections, including current and old friends
- family, neighbours, school gates or carers' groups
- clubs, hobbies, community groups
- volunteering, religious community, local organisations
- work-related connections, including ex-colleagues and ex-clients
- industry or professional associations
- other students from school, college, or university
- contacts from training courses, alumni groups
- returner or job search groups

Networking is all about conversations

Start talking to people in each of these groups about your plans to get back to work.

Start by telling your personal connections – friends, family and regular contacts – that you want to go back to work and the type of job you're looking for. They may have great ideas and useful contacts to refer you to.

Get back in touch with old contacts and seek to make new contacts whenever the opportunity arises – Facebook and LinkedIn can be particularly useful for this.

To build your network, sign up for events where you're likely to meet people who work in your target area – volunteer to help out to keep the costs down. Start talking to people in each of these groups about your plans to get back to work.

Use your network to get information and advice

Remember that most people love to feel their advice is valuable, and to be recognised as having useful knowledge. They are likely to be open to helping you if they can.

Identify people from your network map who might be able to give you information about an organisation or job area you are targeting. Organise a time to meet with them, ideally face-to-face. Be clear on your objective. Tell them you're asking for information, not a job.

Talk to your contacts about what they do. Be interested and curious, and spend as much time listening as talking about yourself. You never know what they might say that could lead to an opportunity.

Think about any helpful information you can give back to your contacts – networking is a 2-way process.

Create your return to work introduction

To help with your networking conversations, create a short introduction to yourself which makes you feel credible and confident. This should include a few sentences about who you are, the skills and experience you bring, and the type of role you're looking for.

Women Returners has developed the 'Career Break Sandwich' to help you structure your career break story.

Start with your background

First summarise your work experience. For example, 'I have 15 years of customer service experience in the consumer goods sector'. Then mention key companies and clients (especially household names), as well as a few relevant projects and achievements. State any relevant qualifications, however old – a related degree from 30 years ago still boosts your credibility.

'Sandwich' your career break in the middle

Don't defend or apologise for your career break, nor make it the focus of your story. You don't need to say the length of your career break. Keep it concise for example 'I took a parental career break with my young family' or 'I have been caring for an ill relative.' Include activities from during your break if relevant or unusual.

Finish with what you're looking for now

Summarise the job you're aiming for: 'I'm now looking for [type of role] in [industry] where I can use my skills in [x] and [y]'.

Put all those parts together into a concise, confident summary – around one minute or so – and practise it out loud with friends and family until you can say it naturally. You can use a longer version, with a similar structure, to answer the 'tell me about yourself' question in an interview.

Consider social media and networking

Social media platforms are increasingly useful ways of refreshing work connections, demonstrating your availability, and identifying potential opportunities. LinkedIn is seen as the primary platform for professional roles.

LinkedIn tips

- Use a recent professional-looking headshot, not a holiday photo
- Describe yourself based on your skills and experience – put 'Marketing Manager', not 'On Career Break' or 'Looking for work'
- Talk about your experience, qualifications, interests and what you are looking for now – use the 'career break sandwich' structure to include your break
- Fill in the Experience and Education sections – you can summarise, group or exclude earlier experience if you've had a long career, and include a '[parental or caring] career break' section to explain what you have been doing in recent years
- Check settings and privacy – set 'Sharing Profile Edits' to 'No' while you make profile changes
- Send a personalised invite to connect with people you know from your networks, even if you have not been in touch for a long time – use this as a first step to arranging a call or a coffee in person
- Follow relevant companies, industries, groups, and people
- Keep an eye out for what's advertised and who's hiring – many jobs are posted on LinkedIn

Check your online image

Think about what your social media presence says about you to a potential employer. Google your name and see what comes up. Make sure your Facebook settings are private if you do not want an employer to see your personal photos.

If you have an informal email address, or a family email account, set up a new account based on your name that you can use specifically for job applications.

Social media platforms are also useful ways to network and to update any knowledge gaps.

Section 8

Finding job opportunities



Having decided on your overall career direction, worked out which routes you could follow to get there, updated your skills, and identified potential networks, you're ready to start job hunting.

Here's some advice on how and where to look.

Networking

Networking is the best way to find out what is available, and isn't daunting as it might sound. It simply means being open about wanting to get back to work, and talking to anyone you know who might be able to help. You can find detailed information on building and developing your network in [section 7](#).

Jobs boards and recruiters

Increasing numbers of recruitment agencies and job boards are now specialising in flexible work, and some are specifically targeting returners.

Look at the listing of returner programmes and returner roles on the Women Returners website and get updates about new returner opportunities by signing up to their free professional network.

Search jobs boards with a flexible focus, such as Timewise Jobs, and sign up for alerts for returner programmes through their returner register.

Talk to recruitment agencies who focus on flexible or returner roles.

If you have decided to go freelance, or work on a project or contract basis, there are sector-specific agencies which place candidates. People in your network should be able to help you find out which are the best.

Government-supported schemes

There are a range of government schemes available to help people get back into the workplace.

Return to practice programmes are sector-specific schemes for people who want to return to the same profession that they previously worked in, often where practice certification is required. They usually offer an element of retraining and skills refreshing, and are sometimes funded. See the examples in [section 13](#).

The introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in 2017 is encouraging more employers to offer apprenticeships. Schemes now include both entry-level and higher-level roles, many open to older applicants, and offer a real opportunity to retrain whilst working. See what's available here: <https://www.gov.uk/apply-apprenticeship>

Speculative applications

If there is a company that you would really like to work for, where you don't have any contacts, it may be worth putting in a speculative application. Even if they don't have a specific job advertised, this will show them that you are proactive and enthusiastic, and may help put you at the top of their list when a suitable role becomes available.

Here are 4 tips that will improve your chance of success:

1. Do your research into any employers you're interested in contacting.
2. Target your applications to companies which have potential – avoid a scattergun approach.
3. Identify the right person to write to – never use 'Dear Sir or Madam'.
4. Follow up on any approaches you make – for example, you could call and ask to discuss your CV and cover letter after 7 days.

Retraining support

If you want to train into a new career, you can search for courses across a range of subjects and sectors through the government's [National Careers Service](#) for England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. You can also speak to an advisor to help your search.

There are a number of organisations which offer specific opportunities targeted at returners, such as retraining to support a move into the tech industry.

You may also need to refresh or upgrade some of your core skills such as IT or numeracy. You can find more information in [section 4](#).

Start-up advice

If you've decided you would like to set up your own business, there are many useful resources.

Buying a franchise offers a supported route into setting up on your own. You can find more information from the [British Franchise Association](#).

HMRC have produced [a guide to the legal implications of setting up on your own](#), covering everything from registering your business to tax and insurance requirements.

Volunteering opportunities

For some returners, skilled volunteering can be a good stepping-stone back to work. It can help you to re-familiarise yourself with the workplace and expand your network. You could update your skills in your previous field or gain skills and experience in a new area. Adopt a targeted approach by thinking about what kind of opportunity would help support your career plans.

You can search for volunteer opportunities through national organisations such as [Do-it](#) or [Timebank](#). You can also seek out senior-level volunteer posts through organisations like [Trustees Unlimited](#).

Work experience isn't just for teenagers. Use your network to approach local organisations in your area of interest to ask if you can work with them to refresh your skills or try out a new area of interest. However, if the work experience is unpaid, make sure it's only for a short period.



Section ⑨

Exploring flexible options



The world of work has changed significantly in recent years, partly due to the impact of COVID-19, with an increased focus on hybrid working, work-life balance and employee wellbeing.

With the technology available to support people to work anywhere and at any time, employers are changing their attitude to flexible working. And you do not have to have worked somewhere for years to reap the benefits – many people will be able to request flexible working on day one of employment.

Whatever your reason for taking a break, you may want or need to return to a role that is part-time or flexible in some way. And you wouldn't be the only one: Timewise research has shown that 9 in 10 jobseekers want to work flexibly¹.

As a result, an increasing number of employers are exploring the option of offering flexible working – and not just in office based jobs. For example, several large retailers, and organisations within sectors such as nursing and social care, have been working with Timewise to design and develop flexible roles.

There is much more to flexible working than part-time jobs. The important thing is to find a flexible working pattern that suits both you and your potential employer – you'll be more successful if you spend some time thinking about it before you get to the interview stage.

Work out what kind of flexibility you need

In [section 3](#), we explored issues like childcare and social care which could have an impact on the kind of flexibility you need. These are some of the questions you need to ask yourself now you're getting closer to returning:

Where could you work?

Does the role require you to be in a certain place or have face-to-face contact with clients or colleagues? Is commuting going to be an issue? Do you have space to work from home if you need to?

When could you work?

If you have children, will you need to be available for school drop offs and pickups? How would you manage school holidays? If you have other responsibilities, are there any other factors that might regularly affect what time you could start or finish?

¹ [Timewise Jobseeker survey, 2020](#)

How much could you work?

Do you have responsibilities, health issues or other factors which would limit your ability to work full-time?

Write a list of all the things that apply to you, in order of priority, to help you work out what kind of flexibility to ask for. Some of them may be deal breakers, but you may be able to compromise on others.

Think about how and when to ask for it

However important flexible working is to you, it should not be the main focus of your application or interview, even for a role which is advertised as flex-friendly.

Focus on your skills and experience first, and explain why you would be suited to the role.

If an opportunity comes up at an interview, you could ask about the company's approach to flexible working, but it is generally best to wait until you have been offered the job.

When you're ready to raise it, treat it as a discussion not a demand, and don't expect an immediate answer. It may need to be discussed more widely within the organisation.

Look at it from the employer's perspective

Research the company to see what kinds of flexibility they currently offer. They're more likely to agree to an arrangement that they're already familiar with. You can usually find information on work-life balance and examples of what it is like to work at a company on the careers page of their website.

Unpick the role to show how it could be fulfilled within the arrangement you would like to suggest, and how it could benefit the employer. For example:

- If it involves some solo work, could it be done remotely?
- Would you be able to concentrate more on in-depth projects if you were working from home?
- Could you deliver the same number of hours by starting and finishing earlier (or later)?
- If the organisation has particularly busy periods throughout the month or year, could working less in the quieter times and more in the busy times be an option?

To think about what might work well for you, consider how you have worked flexibly in previous roles, and examples of others that work flexibly. [Acas Code of Practice](#) provides guidance on making a flexible working request.

Types of flexible working

Types of flexible working include:

- home or remote working
- hybrid working (home-working part of the week)
- job share
- working part-time
- flexible start and finish hours
- term-time work
- compressed hours

Working part-time

Working a set pattern of days each week, for example 3 days a week, Monday to Wednesday. Or working a percentage contract (for example, 80%) which can be applied on a weekly, monthly or annual basis.

Flexible start and finish times

Some employers will have core hours, say from 10am until 4pm, when they need everyone to be working. Otherwise, they will leave it up to each person to make up their hours either side of that time.

Term-time work

As the name suggests, some organisations are able to support term-time working. This might mean that no work is done during school holidays, or it might mean that a percentage contract is divided into portions. For example, you work 4 days a week for the 39 weeks of term time during the year, and 2 days a week for the 13 weeks of school holidays (a total of 70% full-time equivalent).

Compressed hours

For example, you could work 5 days in 4. This is where you work 4 longer days to make up the hours of your 5th day, working 8 days across 2 weeks. Alternatively, you could work 10 days in 9. This is similar to term time working but spreading the hours of your 10th day over 9 longer days, and having 1 day off every 2 weeks.

Go to the [Women's Business Council website](#) for information on 100 ways to work flexibly.

Section 10

Writing your CV and cover letter



For most roles that you apply for, you will need an up to date CV and cover letter.

This is your first chance to stand out in front of your potential employer, so it's important to spend time on them.

Drafting your CV and cover letter

Tailor your CV and cover letter to each specific role

A generic application is a missed opportunity to get your most relevant skills and experience up front. Create a skeleton CV and cover letter, and then tailor them for each role you apply for.

Begin with a profile statement

Recruiters don't have much time to read a CV, so summarise your career experience and highlights at the start. Write a tailored personal profile, focusing on your tangible experience, qualifications and skills - not a list of generic strengths.

Consider presenting previous roles in terms of years of experience

[Research](#) from the Behavioural Insights Team has found that presenting previous roles in terms of years of experience rather than chronological dates increased the positive callback rate for job applicants. If you have gaps in your CV, consider presenting your experience in years, rather than dates, to help you to progress through recruitment stages.

Be open about your break

If you are applying to a returner programme, it is important to include a section on your career break, as the employer will need to see that you fit the eligibility criteria. Include a reason for the break – for example, parental career break or health-related career break. If you have gained any extra qualifications or relevant experience during your career break, include these too.

Consider which format suits the role

There are 2 common ways to lay out your CV.

Reverse chronological CV

Put your personal profile at the top, followed by your career summary in reverse chronological order, then your education history, and any qualifications and skills you have gained, such as languages, digital skills or project management courses.

Skills-based CV

For some applications, it may make more sense to group your previous jobs together by skill set, such as all customer service roles, instead of chronologically. This will make it easier for an employer to see the experience that is particularly relevant for the role you are applying for.

In either case, you may want to highlight any specific skills that meet the requirements for the job you are applying for at the top of your CV. This can be particularly useful if you have had a number of different jobs for relatively short amounts of time. For example, if the role you are applying for requires significant project management experience, it would make sense to pull out these aspects from your career summary.

Consider further advice and tips

Sell your achievements

When summarising your career history, don't just list the duties you carried out. Look at the skills, qualifications and experience that the job requires, and build your brief summary around how you have demonstrated them in your previous roles.

Limit your CV to 2 pages

A CV should not be an in-depth account of your career to date. It should be the highlights, clearly presented, so a potential employer can quickly get a sense of whether you match what they're looking for. Prioritise what is most relevant to each role.

Use your cover letter to say more

Use your cover letter to provide extra information rather than repeating your CV. Explain how you meet the requirements for the role, using your most relevant skills or achievements as evidence. State why you are interested in the job and would like to work for the organisation, based on your research.

Get a friend to read through your CV with you

You want your CV to be clear and concise so that a potential employer can quickly see what skills and experience you have. It may be helpful to get someone from your network to read through your CV before you send it, as they will be able to point out areas that are unclear or where you have used acronyms or jargon that an employer may not be familiar with.

Check for mistakes before sending

Employers often reject CVs with spelling mistakes or poor grammar. It's easy to miss your own mistakes, so get a friend to check if you can.



Section 11

Returning to work



It may be many years since you last had an interview. Knowing what to expect and preparing well will help you feel confident and communicate what you have to offer.

Be sure to ask which type of interview you will have to help you prepare effectively.

And remember, it's a 2-way process. You're also assessing whether you want the role and want to work with this organisation. They've offered you an interview because, based on your CV and application, they believe you can do the job. Focus on giving them the evidence to show you are the person that they need.

Understand the different types of interview questions

General

Most interviews start with questions to assess your motivation and 'fit' for the job. Questions may be about you as a candidate ('What are your strengths and weaknesses?', 'What are your career aspirations?'), your last job and your break ('How did you keep up to date on your career break?'), or the job itself ('Why do you want this job?', 'Why do you want to work for us?').

Competency-based

Larger organisations often use structured interviews of this type, to assess if you have the skills and experience to do the role. Questions ask for concrete examples from your experience, such as, 'Tell me about a time when you' or 'Give me an example of when you ...'.

Strengths-based

Some companies now use questions focused on what you enjoy rather than your abilities. Typical questions include: 'What energises you?', 'When are you at your best?' or 'What do you find draining?'.

Technical

You may be asked questions to assess your industry and functional knowledge, such as your views on an industry development, a discussion on your experience in a certain area, or how you'd handle a technical job scenario.

Prepare for interview questions

For general interview questions

- look at a list of typical questions and prepare a few bullet points to answer each type
- do your research on the organisation and the job
- stick to around three points per question, for example, the three reasons why you want this job
- keep your answers concise and focused on the question

For competency-based interview questions

Identify the relevant competencies. Look through the job description and highlight the competencies or abilities which the role requires (for example leadership, communication, teamwork).

Develop personal examples. Think back on all of your work experiences to date (paid and unpaid) and your personal achievements outside work. For each competency, pick 2 examples that demonstrate your ability, and prepare to talk about them enthusiastically and in detail.

Structure your answers using the STAR model. This simple technique is a helpful way to make sure you cover all the relevant points:

- **Situation** – set the scene and give some context
- **Task** – what had to be done, by when, and what were the challenges?
- **Action** – describe what you did to achieve this objective (always reply ‘I’ not ‘we’), and give evidence of the competency
- **Result** – describe what you achieved, sharing quantifiable results or feedback

Keep your answers concise. Focus on the information that is most relevant to the question you’ve been asked. Aim for around 3 minutes per answer, and make each point count.

For strengths-based interview questions

- think about what you most enjoy and are energised by
- think about situations when you have felt at your best
- find examples of experiences you have enjoyed which relate to the achievements on your CV

Consider more interview tips

Leading up to the interview

Research the organisation, department and role. If it has not been made clear to you, you may want to contact the employer in advance to ask what format the interview will be, and whether it will be virtual or in person. Remember to treat any interaction with the employer as part of the interview process, so be polite and engaging at all times.

Prepare thoroughly for potential questions and practise your answers out loud. Organise a mock interview with a friend, if possible.

Think about any questions you might want to ask the interviewer – for example, asking about the company or the team you will be working in.

If the interview is virtual, try out the technology in advance and install any platforms (such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams) if necessary.

On the day of the interview

If the interview is in person, allow time for travel, plot out your route, and have a contingency plan. If it is virtual, log on to check your connection in advance.

Relax and breathe – it's okay to feel nervous but remember they wouldn't have invited you for an interview if they didn't think you could do the job.

Listen to their questions. If you're not sure what they're asking, clarify. Keep your responses positive and brief. Show your enthusiasm and interest in the role and the company. Think about your body language. Smile confidently, sit straight in your seat, and make eye contact. Close the interview positively and thank them for their time.

Talking about your career break

Your interviewer may ask what you did during your career break. Never justify, defend, or apologise for your break. Follow these steps to create a concise, confident answer.

1. State the reason: 'I took a career break to [raise a family, relocate with my partner, care for my elderly father, recover from an illness].'
2. Say what you did: 'During that time I [any relevant achievements, experiences, volunteering, qualifications or learnings that you've gained during your break].' If you haven't got any experiences from your career break that you think would be appropriate to share, go straight to step 3.
3. Say what you want now: '[Now my children are at school, I've fully recovered, my father has passed away, we're back in the UK], I'm ready to return to work and am looking forward to using my skills and previous work experience in your organisation.'

Following up afterwards

If you don't get the job this time, ask for feedback, and treat it as a learning process.

Some vacancies attract so many applications that it is not possible for the employer to provide individual feedback. If so, don't worry. Remind yourself about any questions that you struggled to answer and take some time to think about how you would answer these at future interviews.

Remember that it takes time to get back into a suitable role after a career break. Stay positive and persevere – the perfect job might be just around the corner.

Negotiate effectively

Getting through the application and interview process and being offered a job is a real achievement, particularly after a career break.

However, returners sometimes feel less confident about negotiating things like salary, level, or flexibility than they would have done before. The fact is, you've been offered the job because you're the best candidate, so you shouldn't be afraid to discuss the terms on which you would be able to accept it.

Don't feel you have to accept the job straight away. Thank them for the offer and clarify when they need to know by, when they would like you to start, and the proposed location, salary, and hours. Then take the time to decide what, if anything, you might want to discuss further before accepting.

Before you start negotiating

Negotiating is normal, and yet a lot of people, women in particular, don't do it. It is important to recognise that negotiating is a common part of the recruitment process today. So remind yourself of the value you will bring to the company, and make sure that you are getting the best deal for you.

Work out your priorities. There are a number of points that you might want to negotiate – 4 big ones are salary, seniority, flexibility and benefits, such as holidays. Decide which ones are deal breakers and which you could compromise on. Think about what the employer's priorities might be, too.

Do your research. Arm yourself with some facts and figures before you start negotiating. For example, look at what similar roles are paid in other organisations, or find out whether other people in the organisation are working flexibly. This helps make the conversation less about what you want and more about what is generally acceptable.

Think about your pathway. If you have decided to take a stepping-stone approach to coming back to work, and want to take a less senior role than you held previously, it's also worth thinking about how quickly you could get back up to speed. Consider asking for a regular review to be built in to help you progress.

Be realistic. Some routes back into work may have specific timeframes or working hours which are not up for negotiation. For example, you may not be able to negotiate start dates or working hours for a formal returner programme. If this is the case, it's worth remembering that there may still be opportunities to renegotiate later on.

At the point of negotiation

Negotiation is all in the delivery. So be clear, calm, and professional. Don't let your emotions come into play and remember that it is a discussion, not a series of demands. Never be apologetic about your career break. Instead, focus on your skills and what you will bring to the organisation.

If you can, take the lead in the negotiation. Thank the employer for the offer, and explain that you would like to explore the terms with them.

Set out your proposal as a whole rather than splitting it into separate issues. Show how the different points you are negotiating (for example salary, flexibility) are connected, rather than negotiating one point first and then starting again with the next point. If you are able to give and take on some of the points on offer, that will help you achieve your main priorities.

Listen to what they have to say. Respond creatively to any points they raise, and always remember the option of a trial period for anything you're suggesting. Remember to look at the whole package they are offering – additional benefits may make a baseline salary more acceptable.

Seal the deal. Once you've come to an agreement that works for both sides, make sure you get it in writing as soon as you can. And if you really can't agree on the terms you need, don't be afraid to walk away.

Negotiating flexibility

We explored flexible working options and how to decide what flexibility you might need in [section 9](#). Here are some specific tips on how to negotiate flexibility once you have a job offer.

Be clear about how the organisation could benefit. For example, you could explain that you could be more productive working from home on certain tasks, or that you are confident that you could fulfil the role in fewer days. By doing the thinking for them, you're making flexible working feel like a solution, not a problem.

Think creatively about flexibility. For example, if you have school-aged children and the company's activity tends to slow down in the summer, you could suggest an annualised approach, in which you work more hours in term-time and fewer in the long holiday. This would give you time off when you need it most, and help your employer be staffed efficiently at a quiet period.

Give examples of how you have made it work in a previous role, or share case studies from other organisations. You can find inspiring stories on Timewise Jobs <https://timewise.co.uk/> and read more about the flexible successes who make up the Timewise Power 50 <https://timewise.co.uk/power-list/>.

Explain that you're willing to be flexible in return. For example, if you're asking for a part-time role because of caring responsibilities, but would be able to switch your days if there were team meetings, say so.

Suggest a trial period, after which you and your employer can review how well it's working and make any changes needed. This is particularly valuable after a long career break, as what you think you're going to need and what you actually need may be quite different.

Flexibility works best when it works both ways, and this approach will demonstrate that you understand the employer's needs as well as your own.



Section 12

Getting ready to return to work



After all your hard work, you've been successful, and your new job is about to start. Here are some suggestions to help you prepare for the role itself and the changes it might bring.

Plan for changes at home

Share out the jobs

If you've been on a career break, you've probably been taking the lead on the home front – bills, shopping, cooking, cleaning and caring. If you have not already done so, now is the time to share out these tasks if you can. If you have a partner or older children, have a conversation about who will do what once you're back at work.

Think about what you can stop doing

Can you book a regular food delivery to save you shopping? Can you simplify your cooking? Can you hand over any volunteering activities?

Find solutions for ongoing caring responsibilities

If you still have caring responsibilities, pin down how these will be taken care of while you're at work. Decide what option or combination of options will work for you and your family, to allow you to return to work fully focused.

Start the arrangements well before your first day back at work, to give everyone time to settle into the new routine and iron out any challenges. Remember to plan a back-up option – and have a back-up for the back-up.

Get into a return to work mindset

Boost your work confidence

Reflect again on your strengths, skills and experience, and practise your introduction to new colleagues. This will help you feel confident that you have lots to offer in your new job.

Accept that change can be tough at first

For anyone starting a new job, the first few weeks can be a steep learning curve, and can be exhausting at times. And the longer you've been away, the more of an adjustment it will be. Be kind to yourself during this time and remember that within a couple of months you will feel much more settled.

Let go of any guilt

You may feel guilty about spending less time caring for your family. Remember the reasons why you want or need to work, and how it improves your wellbeing and helps your family. Guilt can come from judging ourselves by impossible standards, so don't aim for perfection – good enough is usually good enough.

Focus on the positives

Remind yourself of the rewards, personal and financial, that working will bring you and the family. This will help you to feel positive about your work-home balance and to overcome any challenges.

Work through your finances

It can come as a bit of a shock when wages are paid in arrears – often a full month after you've done the work. And as a returner, you may have additional costs to pay upfront such as buying work clothing and season tickets, or paying for care. So it's worth making sure you have the funds to cover those costs and bridge the gap until you receive your first salary payment.

Congratulate yourself

Pause to reflect on how far you have come since you first started on the road back to work. You have sharpened your job search skills and effectively demonstrated your abilities to an employer. It is a great achievement to successfully get yourself back into the workforce after taking an extended break. Good luck for the next stage of your life!

Returner case study: Angela



When I left university I became a transport planner, ensuring that the rail network in the UK operates as efficiently as possible, but I took a ten-year career break after having children. I began working flexibly around childcare as a fitness instructor, but when COVID arrived, the gyms closed and I was furloughed from my position at a local school. With my children now older, I decided it was time to pick up my earlier career.

I saw the Government's [Return to Planning programme](#) online and honestly didn't think I'd be successful. I'd been out of work for such a long time. I thought, "I'm punching for the stars, but I've got nothing to lose". Many of us had been out of the field for a few years, so it was daunting. I kept thinking, "Why would an employer choose me over a 25 year old?" Part of the course focused on personal growth and confidence building, and coaches supported us to write our CVs, do mock interviews and just believe in ourselves again. It wasn't only about finding out how transport planning had changed, it was empowering us to know we were still capable in industries we'd left long ago.

There were a lot of us going through the Return to Planning scheme with the Planning Advisory Service: architects, town planners, transport planners like me. Over the 8 weeks, being on the scheme made us feel like a real team. I made good friends there and we still keep in touch now.

As a transport planner, it's my job to mitigate the impact that transport development has on the surrounding road network, and figure out how much the developer has to pay to balance that out. A lot of members of my team are civil engineers. For me personally, it's about getting people out of private cars. With my passion for health and fitness, it feels like two sides of the same coin. If we can encourage people to walk, cycle, catch a bus, it's taking traffic off the road and making them healthier at the same time. I really believe that effective public transport can create positive lifestyle changes.

Within a month of finishing the programme, I landed a job. The team I'm in now encourages me to grow. They're a pleasure to work with and I'm really enjoying being back in planning. I want people to know that they shouldn't be afraid of what they've done during a career break. If you've been caring for children, you've been project managing and developing all sorts of transferable skills! I was afraid I wouldn't be able to catch up, but the principles of transport planning are still the same as they were ten years ago, and I'm so glad I did it.

Section 13

Resources and links



General advice

[Gov.uk](#) covers everything from information for carers and parents to benefits advice:

- [Government help with childcare costs](#)
- [Childcare related benefits](#)
- [Carer's allowance](#)
- [General advice on benefits](#) and [benefits calculators](#)
- [National Careers Service](#)

Support and advice is available for anyone facing additional barriers:

- [Disabled people](#)
- [People experiencing domestic abuse](#)
- [People needing a visa to work in the UK](#)
- [People seeking asylum](#)
- [Victims of crime](#)

[Women Returners](#) is a consulting, coaching and networking organisation which specialises in enabling women professionals to return to work:

- [a list of returner opportunities](#)
- advice on [return to work](#) topics, including [writing a CV](#)
- [a library of inspiring return to work success stories](#)
- [a career returners podcast](#)
- [return to work signposts from recruitment agencies to professional associations](#)

[Timewise](#) is a social consultancy whose aim is to unlock the flexible jobs market, helping people to find good quality flexible jobs:

- [a flexible jobs board](#)
- [practical careers advice](#)
- [CV and interview advice](#)

[Acas \(the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service\)](#) provides free and impartial information and advice to employers and employees on all aspects of workplace relations and employment law.

[The Equalities and Human Rights Commission \(EHRC\)](#) is the national equality body for Great Britain, and supports pregnant women and new parents in the workplace.

Training and support

- [Open University](#)
- [Learn Direct](#)
- [Massive Open Online Courses](#)
- [Shaw Academy](#)
- [CIPD mentoring](#)
- [Microsoft digital skills](#)
- [Google online marketing training](#)
- [TechPixies](#)
- [Code First Girls](#)
- [Founders and Coders](#)
- [Now Teach](#)

Work opportunities

- [Women Returners](#)
- [Timewise](#)
- [Civil Service Jobs](#) and [career matcher](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)
- [UCAS Career Finder](#)
- [Mumsnet Jobs](#)
- [Working Mums](#)
- [2 to 3 Days](#)
- [Ten2Two](#)
- [Return to Teaching](#)
- [The Return Hub](#) (financial services)
- [F1 Recruitment](#) (advertising and marketing)
- [Reignite Academy](#) (law)

Negotiating salary

- [Salary](#)
- [Glassdoor](#)
- [Payscale](#)
- [Emolument](#)
- [Timewise advice on negotiating flexibility](#)



Equality Hub