

Professional Transitions

Return-to-Work Programs Come of Age

by Carol Fishman Cohen

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Alex Eben Meyer

Summary. Millions of American women left the workforce during the pandemic, mostly to provide care for families when schools and other support systems closed. As the economy rebounds, companies will need to lure this talent back—and return-to-work programs provide a vehicle for doing so. These programs—aimed at mid-career professionals who’ve taken time off from employment—have been around for 20 years, and the author has been writing about (and consulting with companies on) them for nearly that long. In this article she gives an overview of the evolution of these programs, describes the various types, and suggests best practices to make them most effective. [close](#)

During the past few years Amazon has been experimenting with programs to recruit mid-career professionals who've spent a few years away from the workforce. Like most other companies, the online retailer started out small, hiring a few dozen people at a time in pilot cohorts. But in June 2021 Amazon made a stunning announcement: It would expand its return-to-work initiative by hiring 1,000 returning professionals—an order of magnitude larger than any other company's program. Each participant would be given coaching and mentoring as part of the paid 16-week program, with potential to land a permanent position at its conclusion. "We've formed a dedicated team that recruits specifically for professionals who are restarting their careers," says Alex Mooney, Amazon's senior diversity talent acquisition program manager. And instead of looking skeptically at résumé gaps or skills that may need refreshing, Amazon's recruiters are directed to focus on each candidate's potential.



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Although the size of Amazon's initiative is unprecedented, return-to-work programs are not new: The first of them originated nearly 20 years ago. I've been working with them for almost that long, after resuming my career as a financial analyst at an investment firm following an 11-year break for childrearing. (Harvard Business School did a case on my reentry to the workforce.) I wrote a book on returning to work in 2007 and have written about it for HBR since 2012. My company runs training programs and produces conferences on relaunching, which allows me to both influence these programs and observe how they have evolved—and to identify the best practices that help them succeed.

The recession triggered by the pandemic has made the need for these programs especially acute. The downturn has been remarkably sector-specific: Even as many businesses closed and others downsized, companies in tech, finance, e-commerce, and other

industries experienced record growth, which created demand for certain types of talent. At the same time, in the United States, research by the National Women's Law Center indicates that roughly 1.79 million women and 1.75 million men have left the labor force entirely since February 2020, many of them to care for family members when schools and other support systems closed. This population is expected to resume full-time work, although over what time period is still unclear.

Even before pandemic-related career disruptions, return-to-work programs were becoming an important way for companies to hire professionals. According to research by ManpowerGroup, 57% of male and 74% of female Millennials anticipate taking a career break for childcare, eldercare, or to support a partner in a job—a much higher rate than was true for prior generations. Return-to-work programs not only provide a source of talent but also send a powerful signal to employees at all life stages and those who left the company to take a career break: This company recognizes that careers needn't be linear and normalizes the idea that professionals may leave for a time for personal reasons.

In this article I offer a brief history of how these programs have evolved, classify the types that companies offer, and detail best practices that can help participants and employers achieve their shared goal: increasing the number of professionals who move on from a career break to succeed in a new role.

Bias Built on a Myth

Return-to-work professionals are educated, have great work experience, offer a mature professionalism, and are at a relatively stable stage of life. Because they were employed in the past, they understand how to work in teams and with differing personalities, and they've navigated tight deadlines and high-pressure situations. They don't need to learn basic skills that entry-level employees often lack. They have cost-effective, easily accessible means to update skills or learn new ones through online courses (many of which are free), certificate or credentialing programs, and even additional degree programs. As predominantly female, this talent pool is of particular interest to companies focused on gender diversity.

All those attributes may seem obvious now, but for decades the idea that professionals on hiatus could resume their careers was inconceivable. An employee who left the workforce for an extended period would have outdated skills and diminished drive—or so it was thought. But in the early 2000s the male-dominated finance sector faced an urgent and now-familiar problem: As women advanced in their careers, more left the workforce, until the shortage of female talent in the mid-to-senior ranks became acute. In response, Wall Street drove the resulting innovation, starting with Lehman Brothers and UBS in 2005–2006. In 2008 Goldman Sachs and the consumer food products company Sara Lee offered the first corporate “returnships,” with Sara Lee’s led by its visionary then-CEO Brenda Barnes (deceased since 2017), whose own career had been interrupted.

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Companies running these early programs recognized that the bias against mid-career job hunters was built on a myth. People who’ve interrupted their careers don’t show less drive; in fact, many crave a return to paid employment. Often the biggest obstacle they face is a weakened sense of self from being professionally disconnected for an extended period in a society where identity is largely rooted in what someone does for work. That’s one reason that relaunching is different from a regular job search: People who’ve taken a career break need to build back confidence, reinvigorate their networks, figure out what they want to do all over again, and then upskill or reskill—all on top of what a job search normally entails.

Over the past five years the urgency around both talent acquisition and diverse hiring pools has led to a sharp increase in the number of companies offering return-to-work programs. Roughly a third of the *Fortune* 50 now have them in-house for mid-career professionals.

Since 2015 the STEM Reentry Task Force, led by the Society of Women Engineers and my company, has worked with 34 leading U.S. employers to establish their return-to-work programs and continues to train groups of program managers annually.

The need for top STEM talent and the interest in hiring women in technology have been major motivations to tap this talent pool; Facebook, IBM, Oracle, Apple, and other tech giants have active programs. It makes sense that the largest companies, which have the greatest hiring needs, are the most likely to run such programs. Among the *Fortune* 500 companies, fewer than 10% currently have one; meanwhile, return-to-work programming is only beginning to emerge in the public sector. Thus the potential for the concept to grow is enormous.

Program Design

These programs come in all shapes and sizes, and companies should determine the length of the program, the size of participant pools, the times of year offered, the lines of business and managers involved, and locations according to what works best for them. The programs generally fall into two categories: *returnships* and *direct hire*.

Returnships. Most companies bring relaunchers in as a cohort, the way they bring in college interns in the summer. Cohort size typically ranges from five to 25 participants, although some companies have recently increased the number of participants in each cohort or the number of cohorts per year. Programs may last from eight weeks to nine months, with 12, 16, or 24 weeks being typical. Normally they don't take place in the summer, to avoid conflicting with the company's college internship programs, families' childcare needs, or vacations. Some returnship programs have moved to a "rolling admissions" format in which participants start at different times and form a loose cohort or class. In this format programming is primarily online and self-paced, and participants have occasional opportunities to gather with those who have "graduated" and been hired as employees.

Returnship participants are given customized onboarding and orientation sessions, professional development, technical training, and exposure to senior leadership. Usually each “relauncher” is assigned a mentor and a buddy for additional support. As for actual work performed during the returnship, companies typically use one of two formats:

Project-based. The earliest returnships gave participants a short-term project, and the focus was on evaluating each person’s performance, with high performers usually receiving an offer of permanent employment. But this format created a challenge: Absent a perfect match between participants and available full-time positions at the close of the program, some qualified participants could not be placed.

Role-based. To address that problem, some companies began recruiting program candidates for current open positions or those planned for the future, with the expectation that candidates who performed well during the program would move permanently into those roles.

Returnship compensation is closely linked to whether the participant is taking a specific role or is doing a project in an area where hiring is active. Payment may be on a prorated salary, stipend, or hourly basis. A best practice for determining returnship compensation is to look at the salary band for each role, pick a number toward the lower end, and prorate for the number of weeks in the program. If a participant converts to employee status at the end of the returnship, adjustments can be made according to factors an employer might typically consider for an offer: education level, work experience, geographic location, and so forth. That ensures room to adjust upward if appropriate.

When distinguishing among returnships, one phrase is especially important: “Intent to hire.” This indicates that the program is not like a student internship, with only the *possibility* of a permanent job offer at the end. Instead the company assumes that barring poor performance, the participant will convert to permanent status after completion of the program. That encourages everyone—recruiters, managers, and teams—to hire, onboard, and integrate participants

just as they would ordinary full-time hires. Thus managers and teams are more likely to invest time and effort in developing relaunchers than they would be if they viewed them as contractors or temporary workers “dropped in” for a few weeks. On average, more than 80% of participants convert to full-time employees.

Direct hire. A less-common type of return-to-work program is the direct-hire model, whereby companies hire participants as full-time employees right from the start, with no trial period. Transitional support is provided through one-on-one coaching, online learning, and mentoring, since participants typically don’t start at the same time or as a cohort. One variation on this is the new Oracle Career Relaunch program, in which participants are hired as employees and start on the same day as a single cohort, benefiting from 12 weeks of supplemental programming as they begin their new roles.

Dell Career ReStart launched in 2018 as direct hire, and Ford Re-Entry, Boeing Return Flight, and P&G STEM ReLaunch changed over to direct hire after starting as returnships and experiencing high conversion rates in their initial cohorts or observing high rates in the programs of peer companies. As career breaks become perceived as normal, and as companies become comfortable offering permanent roles to people with gaps on their résumés, more organizations may migrate to the direct hire model or adopt it at the outset.



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To be eligible for either a returnship or a direct-hire program, participants must generally have had a career break of at least two years and prior work experience of at least three years, although companies often require five to seven years of experience (and sometimes more). Some programs, such as Ford Re-Entry and Amazon's, include "underemployed" as part of their eligibility criteria. Oracle, Amazon, IBM, and Raytheon Technologies have lowered their career-break minimum from two years to one to include people who left work during the pandemic. The minimum break for Deloitte Encore is now just six months; for Accenture Return to Work it is 18 months.

For employers running global programs, local laws and regulations may dictate program length. For example, Australia requires a six-month minimum. China's labor laws require a one-year work contract. Canada, Brazil, and others have mandatory probation periods for all new employees that are sometimes used in lieu of returnships.

Training

Training, both for relaunchers and for employees who interact with them, from the first interview to the last day of the program, is one of the hallmarks of a successful program.

For recruiters, managers, and other company stakeholders. After concluding a pilot program, companies frequently comment that they should have devoted more resources to training their managers. This training focuses on demographic information about the pool of relaunchers, what their résumés and LinkedIn profiles look like, and how to talk during interviews about career breaks and past volunteer and paid experiences. It also involves adjusting the interview process to avoid missing out on high-potential candidates, discussions of level and compensation, how an “intent to hire” mindset affects manager-and-team relationships, and the importance of familiarity with the program and what happens at the end of it. For example, recruiters and managers must ensure that they convey respect for mid-career professionals during interviews. (Some interviewees report that recruiters sound like they’re reading from a script used for recent graduates applying for entry-level positions, which can feel demeaning.)

For relaunchers. Participants arrive with excitement, questions, and, frequently, great uncertainty as they embark on this new chapter in their lives. Topics covered at the orientation session include goal setting, normalizing concerns, “new elevator pitches,” technology challenges, when to ask a question, confidence building, dealing with “impostor syndrome,” how to network inside the organization, and how to engage with managers and teams.

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The midpoint and the end of the program provide opportunities for relaunchers to take stock of where they are in their transition back to work and how much they have evolved since the first day. Meeting as a cohort with an expert facilitator (from outside the company) at those junctures provides a safe space where they can be honest and vulnerable without worrying about the effect on their performance evaluation or relationship with their manager or team. They can review goals set at the program's start, celebrate successes, voice concerns, troubleshoot, and course-correct together. This is also a time to prep for midterm and end-of-term evaluations by rehearsing how to respond to positive or negative feedback. The end-of-term session focuses on "life after relaunch," whether participants will continue at the company or move on to a position (or a search for one) somewhere else.

For manager cohorts. Just as relaunchers benefit from being in a cohort, so do managers, especially if this is their first time participating in a return-to-work program. It is especially important that they meet before conducting midterm evaluations and before the "conversion decision" (whether to make a permanent hire). Managers need to understand the evaluation process, the timeline for decision-making, how to handle conversations about level and compensation, and how to give positive or negative feedback to participants. Other topics might be setting goals and expectations for relaunchers and specific situations in which managers might benefit from peer feedback.

Eight Steps to Success

After working with leading employers in a broad range of industries to build and expand their return-to-work programs, I can recommend eight best practices that every company hoping to hire relaunchers should keep in mind.

Identify an executive champion. Return-to-work programs don't necessarily conform to all the practices a company uses to hire its other employees. It is essential to have buy-in at the senior level and an executive champion to evangelize about the concept and run interference during the program launch. This person often pilots the program in his or her line of business, working directly with mid-

level managers to provide budget and other assistance to get the pilot off the ground—and, crucially, to support full-time positions for relaunched when the program ends.

Designate a program manager. The program manager (PM) owns the program and is the center of all internal and external activity around it. As programs grow and scale up nationally and globally, the PM can ensure consistency across business lines or manage variations that may arise from countries' differing regulations. It's vital to establish a succession plan for program ownership in case the PM takes another role or leaves the company. Programs that lack strong leadership, are managed by committee, or have no solid succession plan in place may languish or close. For a savvy manager seeking to make a mark, proposing a return-to-work program and taking a leadership role in implementing it presents a rare opportunity to build one from scratch with senior-level visibility.

Banish the word “intern.” Treat program participants like the seasoned professionals they are. Although returnships share obvious characteristics with student internships, participants should never be made to feel that they are in the same category as interns. Using a classification such as “fellow,” “returner,” or “relauncher” makes a big difference in terms of optics and increases the odds that participants will immediately be treated as members of the team.

Use cohorts. A strength of most returnship programs is the opportunity for participants to be part of a group that is going through the training and experiencing the readjustment to a work environment together. From the company's standpoint, cohorts make training easier and more efficient. And participants report that being part of a cohort is the best aspect of their return-to-work program. Having one another to share resources, ask questions, and get reassurance significantly eases the transition and creates bonds that may last for years. Additionally, the cohort members have an instant network of contacts within the organization. One difficulty with this structure is that managers must coordinate start dates for “their” participants with the start date of the cohort, which may fall at a less than optimal time for a manager's business unit—especially if the program is offered only once or twice a year. Starting cohorts more

frequently can solve this problem, affording managers greater timing flexibility.

Give the program a name and a website. Phil Anderson, who created return-to-work programs at Moody's and the Depository Trust & Clearing Corporation, says that branding is important. (Disclosure: Anderson is on the board of my company.) "Name the program—it makes it real," he says. Giving it a dedicated landing page on the company website creates visibility and a focal point for program activity. (For examples of well-done landing pages, see those of Merck, Oracle, Johnson & Johnson, IBM, Morgan Stanley, Facebook, Credit Suisse, and Raytheon Technologies.)



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Use the program to engage with company alumni. Some companies refer to high-performing employees who left for a career break as "regrettable losses." Most lose track of them after they leave. But some, such as consulting firms, systematically track departing employees, partly because they may be potential clients. (See "Turn Departing Employees into Loyal Alumni," HBR, March–April 2021.) Companies should target their alumni for participation in their return-to-work programs, because they are already known internally, they understand company culture, and they may be more inclined to come back to a familiar place than to look elsewhere. Make sure your company identifies in exit interviews who is taking a career break and tracks that person carefully so that employer and employee will be top of mind to each other when the former employee wants to return to work.

Leverage employee referrals. A strong internal campaign to educate employees about the program can create word of mouth and drive referrals, which are often the top source of candidates. Some

companies include return-to-work referrals in their paid referral programs. Current employees who relaunched and people with a personal connection to someone who did so can be critical allies (as well as managers, speakers, and mentors) for a program.

Highlight success stories. Relaunchers at the most senior levels, inside and outside a company, can provide powerful examples of career paths following a break. Jacqueline Welch, the CHRO of the New York Times Company, is a relauncher, having taken four years off earlier in her career, and she regularly talks about her nonlinear career path. (Disclosure: Welch is on the board of my company.) Similarly, Annette Rippert, a mother of five who took an eight-year break from Accenture, returned in 2012 and is now group chief executive for Accenture’s strategy and consulting business. She tells her story when promoting Accenture’s return-to-work program.

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The global pandemic has changed perceptions about the way people work. Managers have come to recognize that working remotely can be more productive than working in an office. Companies that would not have considered recruiting, hiring, and onboarding an employee without an in-person meeting had to immediately start doing just that—and many will continue to do so. Companies should reexamine their attitudes toward relaunchers as well. Return-to-work programs provide access to a high-quality, diverse talent pool while simultaneously signaling to current employees and alumni that their company is forward-thinking and employee-centric. These programs have grown dramatically over the past 20 years, and many more companies can benefit from launching one.

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break” has more than 3.5 million views and has been translated into 30 languages. She is the author of the Harvard Business Review article “The 40-Year-Old Intern” and writes regularly for HBR on career-reentry topics.