



Government  
Equalities Office

# Employer research on returner programmes

Research report

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# 1. Executive summary

## 1.1 Introduction

The Government is committed to supporting those who want to return to the labour market having taken a break to care for others (“returners”). To build the evidence base on how to help this group, the GEO commissioned qualitative research among employers that had recently run specialist programmes designed to bring returners back into work in the UK.

The research sought to understand the motivations for launching these programmes and the factors that contributed to their success (or otherwise), along with details of the characteristics of the programmes (e.g. duration, applicant numbers, selection criteria, completion rates). The findings will ultimately be used to inform both the GEO’s best practice guidance for private sector employers and, where applicable, the delivery of public sector schemes.

A total of 22 qualitative interviews were undertaken with organisations running returner programmes. Interviews were conducted by OMB Research in October and November 2017, and this summary outlines the key findings from the research.

It should be noted that this qualitative research was based on interviews with a relatively small, self-selecting sample of returner programmes. It is primarily the views of those responsible for managing programmes which form the basis of any judgement of their success. As such, it does not constitute a formal, independent quantitative evaluation of the impact and success of returner programmes, but rather serves to provide insight into the perceived benefits and pitfalls associated with them.

## 1.2 Characteristics of returner programmes

- Most programmes in the sample were identified as paid “returnships”, involving a cohort of returners working in placements for around three months.
- Cohorts typically consisted of between 2 and 10 returners. The size of cohorts tended to change from year to year. While some programmes were consistently growing in size, others had fluctuated depending on the demand for new talent within organisations.
- All programmes were open to men and women, but the majority of returners participating were women.
- The vast majority of programmes were open to people who had taken a career break longer than 2 years, with some also placing an upper limit (usually 10 years)

on the length of break. Most were seeking to recruit senior-level applicants with experience in management positions.

- Programmes were set up with different objectives in terms of the roles they were seeking to fill. Most were looking to fill specific roles in particular departments. Others were designed to attract talent within a relatively broad range of skills, with the intention of potentially 'matching' them to roles at the end of the process.
- Programmes had adapted their recruitment processes to suit the needs and circumstances of returners. This included use of different channels such as established networks of returners, parent-focused online forums and social media. It also involved an adapted recruitment message, focusing more on the personal attributes of candidates and less on technical experience.
- All programmes provide a suite of support to returners, often outsourced, but also provided through internal mechanisms such as buddy schemes, mentoring, internal training and regular interaction with the returner programme manager (or similar).

### **1.3 Motivations to launch a returner programme**

- The main motivation to launch a returner programme was to increase gender diversity within (parts of) the organisation. This was usually due to a sense of social responsibility within organisations and/or a perceived need to improve corporate reputation.
- Employers were also motivated by the need to fill key skills gaps, and by the potential to tap into a pool of valuable talent to increase productivity and commercial performance.
- Key individuals often play a very big role in getting programmes off the ground. These are often people in HR, talent acquisition, or equality and diversity roles. Programmes had usually also been supported or encouraged by a very senior person within the organisation, often with a passion for increasing diversity and inclusion.

### **1.4 Evaluating returner programme success**

- Programmes were generally not formally evaluated, nor were firm, quantitative targets usually set. The approach to evaluating and considering the success of programmes was typically more 'fluid'. The success criteria depended on the individual motivations and objectives of each organisation, and were not entirely consistent across the sample. However, the most common criteria were:

- The ‘conversion rate’ of programme participants to permanent (or contracted) members of staff.
- The overall impact and contribution of returners to the business units into which they were placed and the organisation as a whole, and the degree of ‘buy-in’ from business units and managers.
- The experience of the returners themselves. Feedback from returners was regularly sought through informal meetings and formal mechanisms like surveys.
- Most organisations had a (sometimes loose) target for the number of returners *accepted* onto the programme. In the vast majority of cases, this figure had been consistently met.
- A minority of organisations had targets to recruit a specific number of women into roles at particular levels. Some were routinely monitoring data on their gender pay gap, the numbers of men and women in senior roles, and other equality measures. While their returner programme’s direct impact on these was not always formally monitored, some organisations were able to attribute shifts in these measures to the programme.
- Most organisations felt that their programmes had been successful and a worthwhile exercise. Most had run their programme on more than one occasion, and were looking to continue to do so in future. Some were also expanding and/or looking to ‘industrialise’ their programmes.

## 1.5 Returner programme success factors

Respondents identified a number of different factors and issues which contribute to the success (or otherwise) of programmes:

- **Achieving buy-in from hiring managers.** Described as a common challenge or barrier, the support of the departments and individuals who will be hiring returners is said to be critical.
  - This can be achieved through delivery of clear evidence on the potential impact of employing returners on diversity metrics and on overall performance and productivity.
  - It is also necessary to work closely with managers to encourage a shift in attitude and behaviour which could previously lead to the rejection of candidates with CV gaps or less tangible skills and talent.
  - Sponsorship from senior managers can also encourage buy-in from lower tier managers in terms of their willingness to take on returners.



- **Securing necessary funds and resources.** The financial cost and drain on resources associated with running a returner programme were sometimes a barrier to their success or growth. It is therefore said to be important to start with a modest size programme, which can be managed by a single person or very small team. This enables the programme to demonstrate positive outcomes and a stronger business case for investment, before seeking to scale it up.
- **Providing flexibility in terms of support.** Returners have quite varied needs in terms of the support they require at all stages of the process (e.g. pre-interview, coaching, mentoring, buddying etc.). Respondents stressed the importance of adapting to these differences as much as possible, and not forcing support where it is not needed.
- **A suitable recruitment process.** It is important to recognise that returners often have different needs, with some feeling less confident or unsure about how the process will work than typical job applicants. As such, respondents stressed the importance of a tailored application and interview process.
  - A pre-interview stage of coaching and interaction was described as important to ensure candidates are not overwhelmed at the interview stage.
  - The application process itself should be also be adapted, with applicants assessed in less typical ways (e.g. providing letters and statements rather than CVs, and adapting interview questions to be more focused on values and behaviour, rather than being highly technical in nature).
  - Sufficient time should be set aside to set-up and recruit the programme. Recruiting returners can be a longer process than usual. It is therefore important not to be too ambitious in terms of programme start dates.
  - Hiring managers need to be prepared. Those responsible for assessing candidates needed to be coached about the appropriate way to approach the interactions so as to elicit the most useful information and not alienate the candidates, and potential line managers needed to be prepared to offer a different type of (and often more) support than that provided for other new starters.
- **Striking the right balance between specific vs. general skills.** It was said to be important that the candidate specification for returners was not too rigid, and that candidates were given an opportunity to demonstrate a range of skills during the period they were being supported.
- **Offering suitable roles and working conditions.** Returners value flexible and/or part-time working and this should be offered. However, it is not always required, so a flexible approach should be adopted if feasible.
- **Providing a meaningful role for returners during placements.** It is important that returners have 'meaty' enough roles to fulfil during the placement period.

Without this, there was said to be a risk that the returners would become disillusioned, potentially bored and ultimately less likely to perform well or want to stay on at the end of the period.

- **Involving past returners.** Returners who had joined in previous cohorts can provide a highly valuable source of support to new returners. They should be utilised as buddies or to form support networks. They can also play a valuable role in promoting the value of returners (and the programme) to the rest of the business.

## 1.6 The need for external support

- Most respondents felt that the most valuable input from Government would be the setting up of a broad directory of returners from which they could recruit in the future. Most had not considered the details of how this would be delivered, but generally assumed a searchable online portal of some kind would be most suitable.
- Some also felt that organisations seeking to set up programmes in the future could benefit from best practice guidance about recruiting and supporting returners.

## 2. Introduction

This report provides the findings from a study commissioned by the Government Equalities Office (GEO) and carried out by OMB Research. The study sought to explore and provide evidence about what works in delivering programmes which support people who have taken career breaks in their return to work (so called “returner programmes”).

The research used a qualitative methodology and was conducted in October and November 2017.

### 2.1 Background

In the 2017 Spring Budget, £5 million was allocated to the Government Equalities Office (GEO) to support people who have taken career breaks to return to work in the public and private sectors. The intention is to use these funds to support the delivery of public sector returner schemes, and to develop best practice guidelines for the private sector.

Until now, only limited evidence exists as to what is successful in supporting returners back into work. Therefore, the GEO commissioned research to build an evidence base around the topic. The GEO worked with the Women Returners<sup>1</sup> network to identify 79 private sector returner programmes, run across 54 organisations since 2014. The aim of the research was to engage with as many of these organisations as possible in order to explore and understand what works in supporting returners back to work.

The findings will be used to inform the GEO’s best practice guidance for private sector employers, and – where transferable – the delivery of public sector schemes.

The primary aims of the research were therefore to:

- Explore employers’ motivations to launch returner programmes;
- Understand the form that programmes take, or have taken;
- Understand how employers evaluate the success of programmes;
- Identify how successful programmes have been, what is driving success and the barriers to delivering a successful programme.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://wrpn.womenreturners.com>

## 2.2 Methodology

OMB Research conducted 22 qualitative telephone interviews with organisations running returner programmes in the UK. Interviews were conducted by OMB executives using a discussion guide developed in collaboration with GEO. They lasted approximately 30 minutes. Interviews were recorded for analysis purposes.

The sample universe of organisations was generated by the GEO through a process of desk research to identify employers who had run returner programmes in recent years. The development of the sample was assisted by Women Returners, a consultancy, coaching and network organisation that provides services to employers setting up and running returner programmes. We aimed to interview as many programmes as possible from this sample.

In order to boost participation rates, programme managers were contacted in advance by either the GEO or Women Returners in order to explain the purpose of the research and ask permission for their details to be shared with OMB Research. The OMB Research team then made the arrangements and completed the interviews. Participants were offered £65 as a token of appreciation for their time. This was given as either a payment to the participant or as a charitable donation made on their behalf.

The vast majority of participants had used Women Returners' services. Evidence suggests that this is an accurate reflection of the population of organisations running programmes, given the small population of such programmes at this point in time. However, it is important to note that those willing to participate in the research were self-selecting and this may reflect a greater degree of engagement with Women Returners than among those organisations unwilling to take part.

No quotas were set on sector, size or location of employers. Rather, we sought to interview as many programmes as possible. However, the sample reflected the profile of the current population of programmes, which have so far been conducted primarily among certain industry sectors. The sample therefore covered employers within the following sectors:

- Financial services;
- Consulting and business services;
- Construction;
- Public sector;
- Utilities and telecoms.

## 2.3 Analysis and reporting conventions

It should be noted that this qualitative research was based on interviews with a relatively small, self-selecting sample of returner programmes. It is primarily the views of those responsible for managing programmes which form the basis of any judgement of their success. As such, it does not constitute a formal, independent quantitative evaluation of the impact and success of returner programmes, but rather serves to provide insight into the perceived benefits and pitfalls associated with them. This will help the GEO better understand the nature of these types of programmes as it looks to encourage them, and potentially evaluate their impact in the future.

Although the weight of opinion has sometimes been provided for clarity and transparency, these findings should be treated as indicative and cannot necessarily be extrapolated to the wider population.

Direct quotations have been provided as illustrative examples. However, in some cases these have been abbreviated and/or paraphrased for the sake of brevity and comprehension (without altering the original sense of the quote).

### 3. Characteristics of returner programmes

This chapter provides details about the characteristics of the returner programmes covered in our sample. Specifically, we will describe the programmes included in terms of:

- The types of returner programme;
- Approach to matching talent with opportunities;
- Programme size and scale;
- Applicant profiles and recruitment criteria;
- Recruitment process;
- Programme contents.

#### 3.1 Types of returner programme

The organisations interviewed adopted a variety of different approaches to delivering returner programmes. At a general level, these can be categorised as follows (in order of prevalence in the sample):

- **Returnship run by employers:** Most programmes in the sample identified themselves as “returnships”. They characterised this as an opportunity to gain paid work experience for a set period of time, with a view to being offered continued employment of some kind at the end of that period. While programmes varied in how they were structured, their size and length, they all involved the provision of some type of support for returners during the duration of the placement. They also all took on returners in cohorts, usually on a regular basis (e.g. annually). Most offered part-time working hours, usually 4 days per week.
- **Supported hire as an on-going programme:** A number of programmes identified themselves as supported hire arrangements. They had policies and procedures in place to attract returners to their businesses on an on-going basis, seeking to find them permanent positions and provide support during the first few weeks and months of the returner’s contract. Some organisations had moved to a ‘rolling supported hire’ approach after initially running returnships. They explained that they wanted the flexibility to take on returners throughout the year. In our sample, on-going or rolling supported hire was observed among larger employers. Most offered part-time working hours, usually 4 days per week.
- **Returnship organised by third party provider:** One programme in our sample was run by a third-party organisation (with the support of some public funding), on behalf of a number of different employers. Within this model, returners join the programme as part of a cohort, receiving coaching and support at a general level,

before being considered for a placement with one of the participating employers. Most placements offered were part-time, usually 4 days per week.

*“This year we have a cohort of forty returners with fifteen participating employers.”*

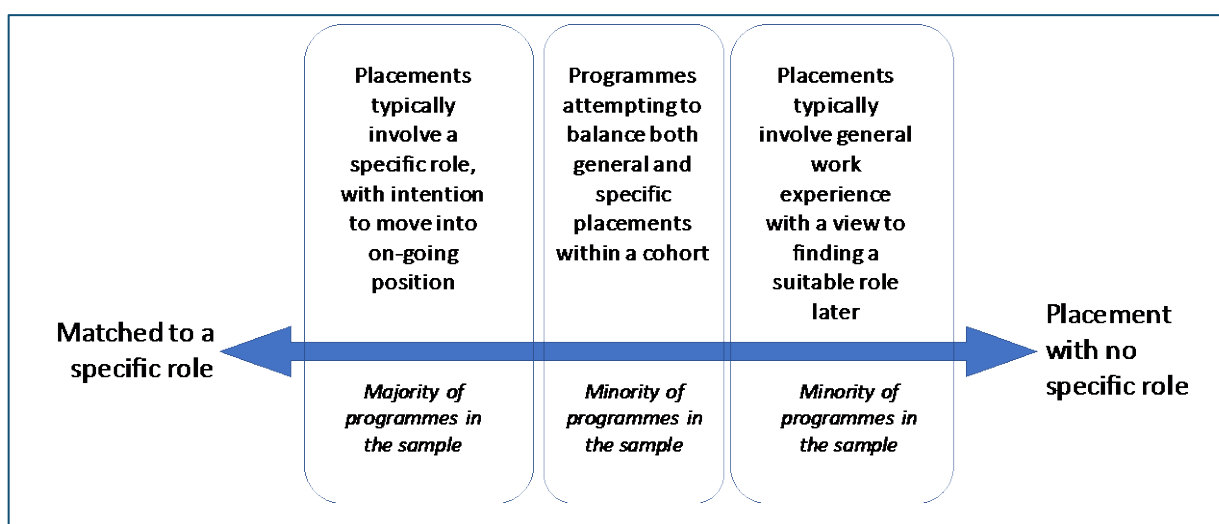
- **Supported hire as a one-off exercise:** One smaller employer in our sample had recruited returners into two specific vacancies using a supported hire model. They did not have a plan to recruit returners in the future, but were open to doing so.

*“We had a very specific need to fill some vacancies which opened up when two long-serving colleagues retired. We needed people with the right level of gravitas and experience.”*

### 3.2 Approach to matching returners with roles

Programmes reported different approaches and objectives around attracting suitable returners and finding a suitable role for them. All programmes described a degree of targeting around the types of roles they were hoping to fill. Many targeted particular business units or departments (either one or multiple, depending on the size of the employer). However, they differed in the degree to which they were seeking to fill specific job roles or vacancies. We can consider this variable as a sliding scale, with programmes either adopting a targeted approach, a general approach or seeking to do both within a cohort. Figure 1 below shows how programmes within the sample approached the issue.

**Figure 1 - Approach of programmes to matching returners with roles**



The majority of programmes had identified specific roles for returners to fill, which could potentially become permanent (or extended contract) positions. They described the value in finding ‘real’ jobs for returners to do which would be a true reflection of what they

would be expected to do as members of staff. Some had identified specific roles which were typically difficult to fill or into which they had traditionally struggled to recruit women.

*“We worked with the managers to find gaps and identify which roles were difficult to fill.”*

Only a minority of our sample adopted a broad approach to recruiting returners into their placement cohorts. In these cases, programmes had identified areas of their businesses into which they were seeking to place returners, but were keen to avoid pigeonholing applicants too early on. They wanted to have the flexibility to utilise the (often broad) skills of returners in the most appropriate way, after they had spent time in the business.

*“We will focus on certain parts of the business, identify people with relevant skills and then after the 12-week placement we review everyone and look to find them a permanent place.”*

In a small number of cases, programmes explained that they had adopted a broad approach to recruiting and placing returners in their first cohort, but subsequently decided to shift to a more targeted role, filling specific roles.

A minority of programmes in the sample had identified specific job opportunities that they hoped to fill with returners, while also intending to place returners in as yet unspecified roles, following completion of the placement. They were usually intending to benefit from the increased engagement and better ability to assess ‘fit’ associated with placing in a ‘real’ role, while also providing the flexibility to take advantage of the skills displayed by returners during the placement period.

*“We have a dual approach. We are very much project driven, looking for people to feel these roles, but we are also very open to finding transferable skills and using them wherever we can.”*

### **3.3 Programme size and scale**

The size and scale of programmes in the sample varied. This section outlines the profile of programmes in terms of number of returners participating, length of placement, and number and frequency of cohorts.

It is important to note that in virtually all cases, programmes were said to be adapting and changing over time. The majority of programmes had been running for one or two years, with none running longer than three years. In all cases, the number of returners recruited to the programme had changed from year to year. In some cases, the length of placements had also changed over time, based on the experiences of the first years’ cohort.



## Cohort size

19 programmes recruited participants into cohorts (the remaining 3 recruiting on a one-off or rolling basis). Table 1 below summarises the size of the most recent cohorts of returners for the programmes in our sample.

**Table 1 - Number of returners in most recent cohort**

	Size of most recent cohort					
	0 - 5	6 - 10	11 - 15	16 - 20	21 - 30	31 - 40
Number of programmes	7	6	4	0	0	2

Base: All programmes recruiting into cohorts

The majority of programmes reported cohorts of up to 10 returners. Only a small proportion of programmes run by larger organisations reported cohorts larger than this. The largest cohort in the sample (40 returners) was associated with a returner programme covering fifteen employers. As such, the number of returners placed per employer was considerably lower in this case. The largest cohort for a single employer was 35 returners.

Programmes in their second or third year explained that the size of their cohorts had changed from year to year in different ways:

- A minority of programmes reported that their cohorts had consistently expanded year on year. In these cases, growth was attributed to increased interest in hiring returners, either from the organisation as whole or from specific departments. Some also explained that they had intended to increase the size of their programmes after an initial small-scale pilot, and that the expansion in size reflected this.

*“It is our ambition to industrialise the process more in the future, to make it more akin to a graduate scheme, covering more departments and more locations.”*

- Some programmes had contracted in size from the first to the second year. Others reported fluctuating cohort sizes over a three-year period. In these cases, the size of cohorts was said to be affected by number of different factors, and a reduction in numbers was not considered a failure of the programme. They explained that the size of the cohort reflected the demand for new talent within the organisation, which was affected by wider strategic considerations.

*“We had fewer in the second and third years but this was really just a reflection of where we were in the lifecycle of the project.”*

The vast majority of programmes consisted of a single cohort per year. However, a small minority reported a more frequent intake of returners. Some took two cohorts per year, run at different times and covering different areas business units or departments. Other programmes described an ambition to expand their programmes to include multiple cohorts over time.

The size of **supported hire programmes** in our sample varied considerably from 2 returners recruited three years ago (and none subsequently), to a programme taking on over 20 returners last year, with an ambition and expectation to growth this to around 50 by the end of 2017. This difference reflects the different sizes of organisation, as well as their differing objectives and ambitions around employing returners.

*“We have had 20 people go through the process so far and are looking to have 50 go through in total this year, provided we can attract the right number of qualified applicants.”*

## Placement length

Table 2 below summarises the length of fixed term, paid placements reported by returner programmes in our sample.

**Table 2 - Length of fixed term placements**

	Length of fixed term placements				
	8 weeks	12 weeks	16 weeks	20 weeks	24 weeks
Number of programmes	1	11	2	2	3

Base: All programmes involving fixed term placements

The majority of programmes in the sample ran 12 week placements. Many had based this duration on the advice and experience of Women Returners. This was considered an appropriate length to provide sufficient time for returners to become accustomed to the workplace and the skills and responsibilities expected of them.

In some cases, longer placements were offered. This was usually a reflection of the perceived complexity of the role in question, or the amount of time required to become suitably immersed in a project.

In other cases, employers had increased the length of their placements to more than 12 weeks based on feedback and assessment after the first cohort had completed the programme. They noted that more time was required than they had initially anticipated. Others had built in the option to increase the length of placements if required. They wanted to provide the flexibility to give returners and those managing them more time to consider the success of the placement, if required.

*“In the second year, we increased to 16 weeks. The first cohort told us that they didn’t have enough time to really get involved with the projects they were working on.”*

In the case of supported hire, a period of intensive on-boarding (period of inductions and training) was consistently reported, usually lasting approximately 2 weeks. This was followed by a less defined, longer term period of support, which varied in length from three to six months.

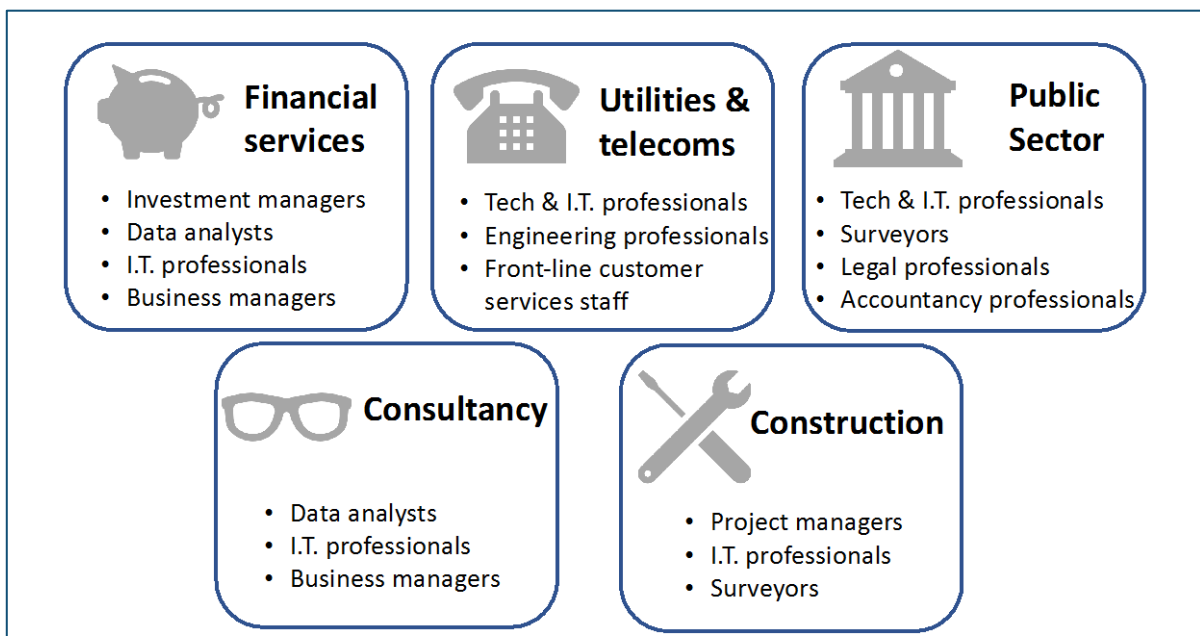
### 3.4 Applicant profiles and recruitment criteria

#### Job roles

Across the sample, a relatively wide range of positions and roles were covered by returner programmes. The current profile reflects the fact that the list of returner programmes provided by the GEO for this research contained many organisations in the finance, construction and technology sectors. The roles that programmes were focussing on were usually either considered difficult to fill in their particular sector, or roles into which women were traditionally difficult to recruit.

While the range of roles varied from programme to programme, some broad areas were commonly mentioned. These are summarised in figure 2 below.

**Figure 2 - Common job roles covered by returner programmes**



The majority of programmes were looking to recruit returners into middle management positions or above. Returners were seen as potentially valuable in senior positions due to their previous experience and relative maturity.

However, a minority of programmes were also looking to fill less senior roles. For example, returners were considered by some to offer valuable skills suitable for customer service roles. Some employers explained that their aim was to recruit returners into levels of seniority slightly below that which they had previous experience at. They wanted to ensure that those returning to work after a break were able to feel comfortable and capable before increasing their levels of responsibility. Some explained that this approach usually resulted in returners progressing quickly to more senior roles.

One employer had initially focussed on attracting candidates into very senior positions to help address a gender imbalance at that level. However, subsequent cohorts had targeted slightly less senior positions with a view to the successful candidates progressing into higher level roles over the next few years.

Programmes described different needs in terms of the previous sector experience of returners. Some employers were seeking senior managers with direct experience of particular roles within their sector. For example, some financial or construction sector positions were said to require specific knowledge and qualifications.

However, many programmes were open to accepting applications from candidates seeking to switch sectors or careers. In the case of the programme designed to service multiple employers, candidates with a wide range of experience within a defined sector area (STEM industries) were considered for placement with a range of different employers. Overall, employers generally agreed that the skills returners have acquired in other jobs, as well as in life outside of work, had strong potential to be very valuable.

*“We have learned not to be too prescriptive but rather try to find really talented people and find ways to utilise them if we can. We want to make sure there is a fit with our values and then find ways to upskill them.”*

## **Entry requirements**

All programmes in the sample defined returners as people who had taken a career break. The vast majority of programmes required a break of at least 2 years to qualify. They felt that this was long enough to constitute a genuine break. The most common consideration reported about the length of career break requirement was the importance of differentiating returners from those who have taken extended maternity leave.

Only a minority stipulated longer than this. One programme only accepted those who had not worked in a relevant position for at least 5 years. The programme manager felt strongly that the programme should only benefit those who had become truly dislocated from their careers. Another required candidates to have taken a break of 2.5 years, for similar reasons.

*“We have stipulated two and a half year minimum. We really wanted to avoid crossing over with people just on maternity leave.”*

The majority of programmes did not place an upper limit on the length of break of their returners. Most wanted to cast as wide a net as possible and consider each candidate on their merits. However, two programmes imposed an upper limit of ten years on the length of break of their candidates, explaining that they wanted to avoid candidates who might feel too out of their depth due to a very lengthy career break.

All programmes defined a ‘break’ as time spent not working within their chosen career (the career for which they are applying for a position). However, they also noted that candidates who had been working in other jobs or who had been volunteering were not excluded. Indeed, they were usually actively seeking evidence of having exercised their skills in other ways through volunteering, hobbies or other work.

*“As long as they had not been working in this field, they would qualify. In fact we actively sought people with transferable skills, and who could show they had been keeping themselves busy, whether that was running a sports group or their own business.”*

Programmes reported a range of requirements in terms of qualifications and previous experience, depending on the roles they were seeking to fill. However, in most cases they were seeking to fill senior roles, and as such often required a higher level of qualification (graduate or equivalent), or a suitable professional qualification.

## **Demographic profile of participants**

Programmes did not provide a detailed demographic breakdown of participants during the interviews as most respondents did not have the data available. However, all programmes reported that they were open to anyone who met their recruitment criteria, as outlined above.

While the majority of programmes were set up with the intention to attract women back into work, none actively excluded men. However, given the approach to recruitment adopted by programmes (see below) and the profile of those who take career breaks, across the sample the majority of returners were women<sup>2</sup>. Around half of the programmes in our sample had only taken on women. The remaining programmes had all taken on a majority of women.

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<sup>2</sup> ONS statistics for October-December 2017 suggest that 88% of those currently economically inactive due to looking after home or family are women (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/economicinactivity>).

*“We were hoping to attract more women through the programme, and so far, everyone we have taken has been female. But we do not exclude men, and would be happy to take on male returners too.”*

Programmes reported a spread of ages within cohorts, with most describing an average age of around 40 for returners. Some examples were given of returners in their late 40’s or 50’s.

Programmes had not set any other quotas on the profile of candidates. However, some programmes reported a wide mix of ethnic backgrounds, which contributed positively to their general diversity and inclusion policies or targets.

## **3.5 Recruitment process**

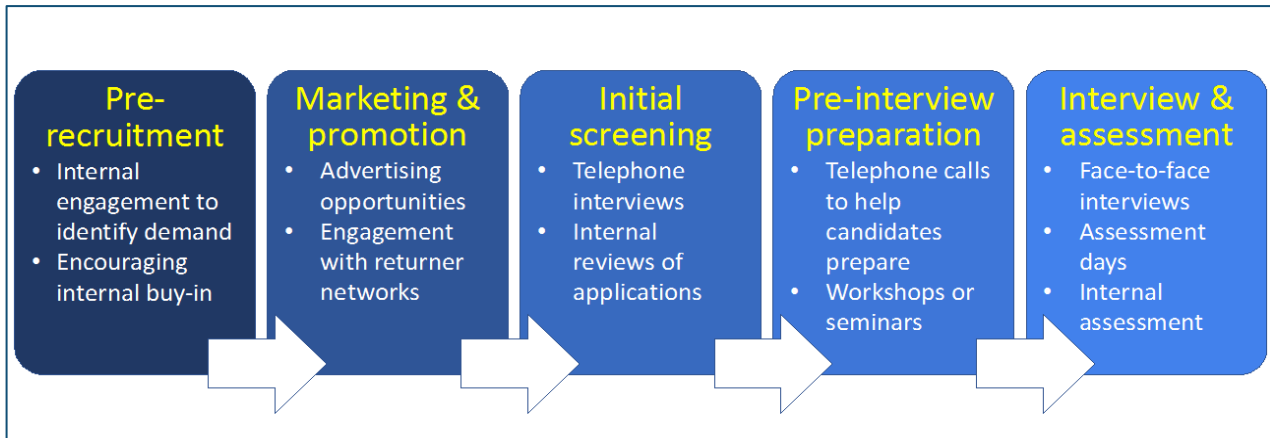
### **Overall approach to recruitment**

Respondents explained that their approach to recruiting returners was a key factor determining the success of the programme. In general, they had adapted and tailored their general approach to recruiting staff to reflect the needs of returners and those with whom they would be placed within the organisation. Respondents explained that the recruitment process typically takes longer for returners than other new starters due to the need for some additional stages and time for assessment, preparation and on-going communication with candidates and managers.

Some larger employers had previously developed recruitment programmes and approaches designed to encourage diversity and inclusivity. They used these as the basis for developing their returner recruitment approach.

While the approach varied across the sample, it is possible to identify some key stages in the recruitment process. These stages are common for programmes taking on regular cohorts into placements or supported hire positions. Programmes operating on a rolling or ad hoc basis followed a similar broad process, but in less defined stages. Similarly, as programmes expand and multiple cohorts are recruited, these stages will often be undertaken on an on-going, rolling basis. The stages of the process are illustrated in figure 3 below.

**Figure 3 - Stages of the returner programme recruitment process**



Each stage in the process is described in more detail below:

- **Pre-recruitment:** A stage of internal engagement and interaction with business units and departments. The demand for returners is established at this point, and those responsible for administering the returner programme work with managers with responsibilities for staff budgets to identify current and potential gaps in terms of general skills and/or specific roles.

The exact approach to this stage varies, depending on the management structure and role of programme managers/administrators within each organisation. The result of the pre-recruitment stage is a plan for the number of returners to be included in the next cohort and the specification required.

When programmes are run for the first (or sometimes second) time, this stage of the process also involves a degree of internal promotion and reassurance. Those with responsibility for the programme explained that they needed to provide evidence to some managers to overcome doubts and concerns about hiring people who have not been working in their chosen field for some time. In some cases, employers worked in partnership with a third-party returners networks (e.g. Women Returners) to help with this element of the process.

*“It is important to address the issue of the mindset of the managers as early as possible. You need to ensure they are open-minded from an unconscious bias perspective.”*

- **Marketing and promotion:** A stage of advertising to attract suitable applicants. The approach to marketing and promotion adopted by programmes varied to some extent, but all had adapted their approach in terms of channel and message to suit the returner audience. In addition to adverts, most employer-run programmes in the sample had also engaged with the Women Returners organisation and tapped into its network of potential candidates. Details of marketing channels and messages are set out in the next sections of this report.

- **Initial screening:** A stage of application assessment and filtering. This involved reading and assessing applications (CVs, letters) in order to shortlist applicants for interview. Some programmes also conducted initial telephone screening interviews at this point. This enabled them to better gauge the suitability of candidates in terms of their personality and life skills.
- **Pre-interview stage:** The majority of programmes carried out a stage of candidate coaching ahead of the interviews for those returners who felt they needed it. This stage was considered important as it enabled programme managers to prepare candidates (many of whom had not interviewed for a long time and were sometimes unsure how to structure responses and what to expect) and maximise their chances of promoting themselves effectively.

Pre-interview coaching was provided through telephone calls and face-to-face sessions with programme managers. External support organisations also provide pre-interview coaching to their members. Such programmes provide a suite of coaching, training and support both before members apply for placements and before the interview stage. They provide online and face-to-face training to help build confidence, help returners identify exactly what they want to do, and help returners develop the skills required for interviews and written applications.

*“The strength of this model is that we can support returners on an on-going basis, before they decide on a placement.”*

In addition to helping candidates prepare for the interview, programmes also supported those who would be interviewing and assessing them. Respondents explained the importance of ensuring that staff asked the right questions and approached the interview with a suitable tone in order to get the most out of the interview. A number of programme managers had spoken informally with staff, and a minority had provided written guidance.

- **Interview and assessment:** The final stage in the recruitment process is the interview itself and subsequent assessment. All respondents explained that interviews for returners required a different approach to those for other job applicants. Some programmes had designed bespoke interview processes for use specifically with returners. For most programmes, the focus was said to be on creating a more relaxed and friendly environment, asking questions which were designed to explore broader values and behaviours as much as technical knowledge and experience. The goal was to unearth transferable skills and experience from both the working and personal lives of candidates.



## Marketing and advertising channels

All programmes in the sample used multiple channels to advertise places and positions. Some channels were generally considered more effective than others when targeting returners. The channels used are summarised below:

- **Returners network:** A large majority of programmes in the sample had used the Women Returners network as either a primary or supporting channel for recruiting candidates. It is important to note that this is likely to be a reflection of the sampling method used for this study. Respondents described positive outcomes from recruiting through this channel compared with other traditional channels (although they had not used any equivalent service to compare Women Returners to). They explained that this approach works well because members of the network had usually received a degree of coaching or advice prior to reading the advert. This meant that they were less likely to be put-off by job descriptions which may not exactly match their previous experience.

In some cases, programmes engaged Women Returners to deal with all elements of recruiting candidates. Some of these employers had decided to outsource this element of the programme delivery because they were running the programme for the first time. Some of these explained that they wanted to phase out their use of Women Returners in the future, as their ambition was to build a strong independent reputation as an employer of choice for returners.

*“We worked with Women Returners to deal with the recruitment. They dealt with that side of things. We wanted to work with experts who understood how to communicate effectively with this audience.”*

- **Job boards and recruitment consultants:** Most programmes used these ‘traditional’ channels in addition to those more specifically designed to target returners. While they were a source of applications, respondents noted that they did not always deliver suitable candidates, hence the importance currently placed on working with specialist networks.
- **Company website:** The vast majority of programmes advertised their programmes on the employment opportunities sections of their own websites. Some larger employers with slightly longer established programmes had already developed specific returner pages. Employers reported mixed results from this channel, depending on their size. However, most anticipated this channel becoming more relevant in the future, as their reputation for employing returners increased.
- **Social media:** Most programmes used social media services to advertise positions. They described quite positive results from a channel which provides wide access to people in a personal, not necessarily work-related environment.

This was said to be appropriate for targeting returners. Specifically, most had used the LinkedIn business network to advertise opportunities for returners. However, some respondents noted that it was not the most relevant channel for people who had been on an extended career break because they were unlikely to have stayed engaged with the service. One employer had created what they described as a ‘family friendly’ LinkedIn page, with an emphasis on their flexible working practices and support to parents. They felt that this had helped increase relevance for returners.

*“It was important to use a range of different channels. People who have been on a break are probably not widely using LinkedIn.”*

- **Online forums:** Most programmes supplemented their regular recruitment channels with those more specifically targeting mothers, such as online forums. Respondents were aware that these forums are popular among women with children. However, respondents reported mixed results from the channel, with some describing more success with those social media channels that had a more established business focus.
- **Industry associations:** Programmes targeting specific professions advertised through industry bodies such as the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors or Women Into Science and Engineering. They reported that this approach generated some applicants with relevant past experience, but it was not described as the primary channel for attracting returners.
- **Internal communications:** Some employers advertised their programmes via their intranets and internal newsletters. One respondent explained that this channel had generated considerable interest from family or friends of existing employees. They regarded it as a valuable contribution to their programme.

## Marketing and advertising messages

Programmes had generally developed an approach to advertising opportunities for returners which they felt was suitable for the audience. They noted that a different approach was required than that used to recruit other types of candidate.

The content of adverts was said to be very important. Many programmes described a focus on encouraging returners to consider the breadth of life skills they had developed during a career break. They wanted to demonstrate that these would be valued and put to good use within their programmes and organisations as a whole.

Respondents consistently described the importance of striking the correct tone within their marketing and advertising aimed at returners. They explained the importance of balancing the need to encourage those with little recent experience to apply against the need to avoid attracting too many inappropriate candidates.

Some programmes explained that in their first years, they had not quite managed to get this balance right. Some reported receiving large numbers of applications from people with little relevant experience because their message had lent towards the programme being 'open to all'. Some explained that they had tightened their messaging in subsequent years with positive results.

*“We went out with a very broad message in 2015, aiming at people who had taken parental leave and suggesting that if you have worked in these areas before and been out for two years or more, why not apply. But we were swamped with candidates who we could not align with vacancies, so we refined it in 2016.”*

Conversely, other employers felt that their initial approach to advertising opportunities for returners had been too prescriptive and narrow. They had targeted particular roles and stipulated a need for direct previous experience, which they felt had limited their ability to attract returners with useful transferable skills.

Programmes also described the importance of demonstrating their company's overall approach to supporting returners. They stressed the fact that mentoring, coaching and training would be provided. They also outlined policies on flexible and part-time working hours offered for both placements and continuing employment opportunities.

Respondents explained the importance of showing that their business was able to accommodate the needs of returners and parents.

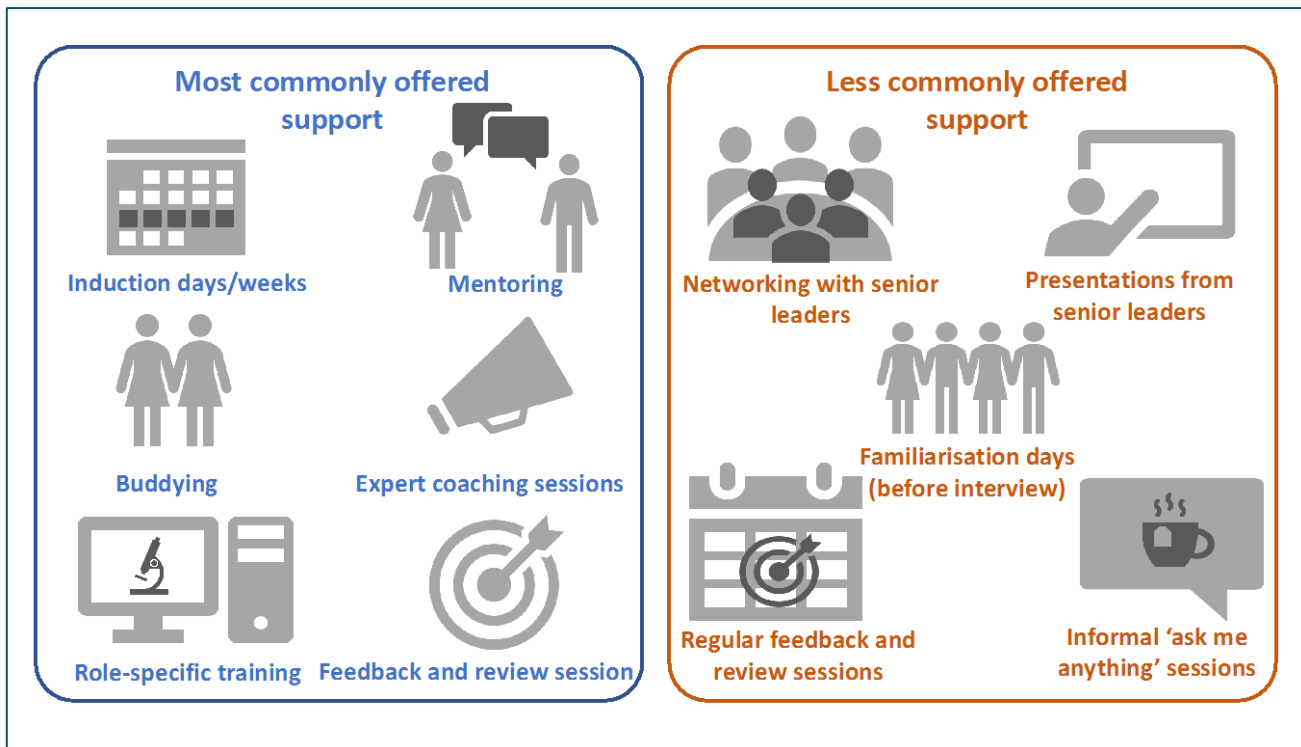
Respondents also noted the importance of demonstrating that returnship placements would involve 'real' work and responsibility. They wanted to communicate the value provided by their programme in terms of the likelihood of gaining on-going employment and the relevance of the experience gained.

### **3.6 Programme contents**

The different types of programmes covered in our sample reported slightly different approaches to the delivery of support and guidance to returners. For example, supported hire programmes generally described an intense period of 'on-boarding' followed by a much less structured approach to support moving forward. Similarly, programmes taking on cohorts of returners delivered group activities such as networking lunches and away days, while those taking on individuals on an ad-hoc basis did not always do so.

Despite these variations, all programmes offered broadly similar forms of coaching and mentoring within their own structures. The main types of support offered by programmes are summarised in figure 4 below.

**Figure 4 - Types of support offered by returner programmes**



The details of these support mechanisms are outlined below:

- **Induction sessions:** Usually 2 days, or sometimes a week. Some larger programmes offered a residential induction course. The purpose of these sessions was to introduce all new starters to the business. They were delivered at the beginning of both returnships and supported hire programmes.
- **Coaching sessions:** Often delivered by an external provider, the vast majority of programmes offered at least one session of coaching at the start of the placement/as part of the on-boarding process of supported hires. Many programmes also offered additional coaching sessions (usually 3 or 4) at regular intervals throughout the following weeks and months. The purpose of coaching sessions was to provide advice on coping with the move back into work, develop confidence and work on resilience techniques.
- **Mentoring:** All on-going programmes offered some form of mentoring from a senior member of staff. Respondents explained that they gave returners an opportunity to be mentored by (usually) women who could potentially provide guidance and inspiration through both regular formal meetings and informal interaction. Some programmes tapped into other programmes such as Women in Leadership as a source of suitable mentors. Some respondents explained that the value of mentoring depended on the rapport between the individuals involved. They therefore did not make mentoring sessions mandatory, but rather gave returners the option to choose how much they used the resource.

*“The take up and use of mentoring and buddying can be a bit hit and miss. Not everyone feels the need or can see the value. We don’t think they should have to access these if they don’t want to.”*

- **Buddying:** Programmes generally offered returners the opportunity to buddy up with other members of staff, either to shadow them, or simply as a source of less formal advice and support. For programmes running for a number of years, returners from previous cohorts were often chosen as buddies because they were best able to relate to the new returners’ situation and provide relevant advice and guidance.
- **Training:** Most programmes offered training of some kind during and beyond the placement period. This was most commonly to refresh returners’ knowledge of computer systems, software or other technical tools. Respondents explained that they tried to tailor training opportunities to fit the specific needs of each returner.

*“Just getting trained again on basic IT stuff and learning how things have moved on is what is most valuable to many people. Things move on fast, so they might be out of touch.”*

- **Feedback and review sessions:** All programmes included a stage of feedback and review for returners at the end of the supported period, at which point continued employment was offered (or not). In some cases, these were provided as one-to-one sessions, while other programmes combined individual feedback with group networking sessions, designed to bring returners and managers together and match them up. Some programmes also offered more regular (e.g. monthly) feedback during the supported period.
- **Networking lunches:** A minority of programmes offered returners regular networking lunches with managers and other senior staff from around their organisation. These provided an opportunity to make informal connections, learn about other parts of the business and consider options for further career development. Respondents explained that they also served as a means of demonstrating the high calibre of candidates associated with their programme.
- **Senior leadership presentations:** A minority of programmes scheduled presentations for returners from members of their senior leadership team. These demonstrated a level of commitment from the organisation to people returning after a break and/or people working flexible or part time hours. It was also an opportunity for returners to be inspired and motivated to accept on-going positions in the future.
- **Ask me anything sessions:** One programme offered a range of additional informal support and guidance sessions for returners on a more ad hoc basis during their placements. These sessions were designed to provide returners with

an opportunity to seek clarification on any topic they liked without concerns about appearing ill informed.

- **External coaching and development sessions:** One programme that placed returners with multiple employers offered additional off-site coaching before the placement commenced. These sessions were delivered by specialist career advisors in order to help returners develop their confidence, identify priorities and hone their skills ahead of joining the employer.
- **Webinars:** The same programme also provided regular webinar training and development sessions to returners. These sessions were not necessarily tied to the placement, but rather designed to provide additional information and guidance about returning to work in general.

In addition to these specific forms of support, respondents often stressed the importance of providing a 'floating' point of contact (usually a member of the HR team) for returners to turn to at any time, with any questions or concerns they may have. Respondents (i.e. those responsible for running the programmes) often provided this resource themselves. They felt it was important that returners always knew they had a trusted source to turn to.

Some larger programmes run by large employers explained that they had used their existing new recruit programmes as the basis for their returner programmes. They felt that many of the resources and materials developed for use with people coming back from maternity and paternity leave were relevant, and easily adapted. A minority added that resources designed for internships were also a good starting point for developing a returnship programme.

## 4. Motivations to launch a returner programme

Respondents described two main motivations for launching a returner programme:

- A desire within the employer or programme provider to act with social responsibility and encourage greater gender diversity within their organisation, sector and the economy at large;
- A means of addressing skills gaps, or attempting to enhance and widen the skill base within their organisation.

In many cases, employers were motivated by a combination of these two factors and saw a returner programme as one of a number of ways of addressing these issues. We will describe these motivations in more detail in the following sections of this chapter.

### 4.1 Social responsibility and diversity

In most cases, the primary motivation for launching a returner programme among employers was a desire or need to increase diversity within their organisation. Specifically, employers were often looking to increase the proportion of women in particular roles, departments or at particular (usually senior) levels of seniority.

In the majority of cases, employers (especially larger sized multinationals or public sector organisations) reported a wider equality and diversity policy or strategy. They were committed to increasing the number of women they employed and/or to reducing their gender pay gap. A returner programme was considered a potentially effective contribution to such strategies.

*“We have signed the Women in Finance Charter, so there is a strong drive to address issues of gender equality coming from senior management and the department heads.”*

While the underlying need for diversity was typically identified and prioritised at a board level, key individuals were often said to play a key role in getting returner programmes off the ground. These are often people in HR, talent acquisition or equality and diversity roles within the business. Many respondents in our sample described a personal ‘passion’ for addressing gender imbalance and/or providing people with an opportunity to fulfil their potential through re-entry into the jobs market. Many also mentioned that the set-up of their programme had been supported or encouraged by a very senior person within the business, often with a passion for increasing diversity and inclusion.

*“Our COO is heavily involved and really driven on this topic. It really means that it is taken seriously and getting noticed.”*

Most employers explained that there was a tangible, recognised need to address gender imbalance within (parts of) their organisation. As such, their strategies for doing so served a commercial purpose. Some wanted to meet avoid negative publicity associated with their gender pay gap or other equality and diversity measures. A small minority had signed-up to sector-wide commitments around the proportion of senior positions filled by women.

*“We know that some of our diversity statistics are not good enough. We are part of the ‘20/20 club’ [initiative committing to target of 20% women in the workforce by 2020] and are not hitting our targets.”*

While employers were often ‘pushed’ towards measures to address gender imbalance, many respondents also described a strong desire to ‘make programmes successful’ for the sake of society as a whole. They recognised what they considered to be a waste of talented people, and wanted to contribute to getting them back into work. They saw this as benefiting the individuals themselves, employers and the UK.

## 4.2 Addressing skills gaps

In addition to the motivation to address gender imbalance in their workforces, some of the employers in our sample saw employing returners as an opportunity to address skills gaps that had been difficult to fill using other approaches to recruitment. Respondents explained that while some roles were difficult to fill with female candidates, others were challenging to fill in general (irrespective of gender). They had therefore decided to look beyond their ‘regular’ recruitment strategies to what they considered to be an untapped pool of talent with either direct experience or transferable skills.

*“There are some areas that are traditionally hard to recruit into within the public sector. Lawyers, project managers, senior I.T. professionals. We are looking for ways to reduce our dependence on agency staff.”*

A minority of employers identified the need to fill long term vacancies and reduce reliance on agency staff as key drivers for launching a returner programme. However, most saw plugging skills gaps as a secondary motivation overall. Nevertheless, many of those looking to address a gender imbalance noted that increasing the proportion of female staff in their businesses would also have a positive impact on their business performance. Some had seen research which suggested a more diverse workforce was likely to be more profitable. Some pointed to a need to be more representative of their clients.



## 5. Evaluating returner programme success

This chapter looks at how those responsible for running returner programmes have evaluated their success. Specifically, it covers:

- The overall approach adopted by organisations to evaluating their returner programmes;
- The targets set by organisations in relation to their returner programmes;
- The perceived overall success of programmes.

### 5.1 Overall approach to evaluating returner programmes

Overall, programmes in our sample were not formally evaluated in terms of their success, nor were firm, quantitative targets usually set. The approach to evaluating and considering the success of programmes was usually said to be more informal.

*“We do not really formally evaluate it, we mainly just work with the managers and returners to understand how well things are working.”*

Many respondents explained that given how new their programmes were, it was too early to make a formal evaluation of their success. Furthermore, the majority of programmes in the sample were relatively small in terms of the number of returners involved. Therefore, formal measurement and reporting on outcomes was generally deemed unnecessary (although most anecdotally reported positive outcomes so far).

While employers generally did not conduct formal evaluations of their programmes as a whole, they all collected some quantitative and qualitative data about them through informal interaction and feedback forms/surveys at the end of the process. They collected qualitative feedback from both returners and their line managers about their experiences of the programme and what could be improved.

They also kept track of the progress of returners within the business, starting with whether they were offered permanent/contracted employment at the end of their placement/probation period, through to how (quickly) they were promoted.

In a minority of cases, respondents reported more formal assessments or reviews at the end of each cohort. Two employers conducted reviews, focusing on the impact of the programme on diversity in particular areas of the organisation and the outcomes for returners (i.e. whether they went on to find relevant work).

*“We have a programme steering group that will be used to evaluate the programme against our diversity goals.”*

Another had commissioned independent assessments of their programme. The programme, working with multiple employers who received some public funding, had commissioned an independent evaluation of its pilot cohort. The evaluation included interviews with both employers and returners, as well as analysis and interpretation on the impact of the programme on them.

*“We commissioned an independent evaluation of the pilot, looking in depth at lots of different measures.”*

## **5.2 Targets and ambitions**

Reflecting the inconsistency in approach to evaluating programmes, organisations did not report a consistent set of firm criteria to determine the success of their programmes. Rather, success (or otherwise) was dependent on the motivations and objectives of individual employers. However, in most cases, employers agreed that a successful programme would be characterised by receiving a good number of quality applications and converting these into permanent or contracted roles.

These measures were often accompanied by broader considerations relating to the impact of new staff on the business overall. The nuances and details of how organisations considered the success of programmes are discussed in more detail below.

### **Direct programme targets**

As outlined above, most programmes did not have firm targets in place to which the manager or programme provider were held accountable. However, most programmes had a (sometimes loose or informal) target for the number of people they wanted to recruit onto the programme. In the vast majority of cases, this figure had been consistently met. As outlined in chapter 3, the target (and actual) number of returners accepted onto programmes varied year on year, and the number of returners per cohort was determined by a range of factors relating to the needs of the business.

Most respondents described an ambition or loose target regarding the ‘conversion rate’ of programme participants to permanent (or contracted) members of staff. Programmes were keen to turn as many applicants as possible into successful, productive members of the workforce. In the case of small cohorts and one-off supported hire programmes, the ambition was often for all returners placed into the programme to become permanent (or contracted) members of staff. In many cases, this had been achieved. Table 3 below summarises the range of targets for converting placements into permanent or contracted roles.

**Table 3 - Targets for converting placements into permanent or contracted roles**

	Target				
	No fixed target / as high as possible	100%	80%	60%	50%
Number of programmes	7	6	2	2	2

Base: All programmes involving fixed term placements

Nearly three quarters of our sample reported that they had met or exceeded their ambitions for converting placements (or expected to do so). In the case of programmes seeking to achieve as many as possible, most had achieved a number they were content with. Of those who had not achieved their ambitions, this was in relation to small cohorts where failure to find permanent positions for one or two returners had a notable impact.

Some programmes also described ambitions for the retention of returners in their permanent roles. They wanted to not only recruit staff, but also allow them to grow and prosper within their organisations.

*“Our target was to have one hire in every division and as high a retention rate as possible.”*

A minority of respondents added that they measured the success of their programmes on whether participants went on to secure suitable employment, regardless of exactly where. While they wanted to be able to find suitable positions within their businesses (or in the case of the third-party programme, within the target business(es) for that cohort), they stressed that if a returner had benefited from the programme enough to find work somewhere else, this was a positive outcome for the UK workforce as a whole.

While the number of returners being offered a relevant contracted position was considered a relevant measure of success to some degree, most respondents explained that they paid closer attention to the qualitative impact of the programme. They noted that these qualitative factors often directly influenced whether or not returners are offered (and accept) a contracted position.

In many programmes, especially those with smaller cohorts of returners, respondents assessed programme success on a case-by-case basis. The following issues were considered important in determining overall success:

- **The ‘calibre’ and suitability of returners:** Perhaps the most important measure of success was said to be whether the programme attracted and recruited people who matched the needs of the business and/or brought useful skills and experience to it. The overall impact and contribution of returners was monitored through the formal and informal processes outlined above. The majority of

programmes reported very positive outcomes in this regard in most instances. Some examples of a lack of 'fit' were cited, but these were usually said to be no more common among returners than among other types of new starter.

- **The degree of 'buy-in' from business units and managers:** Related to the previous issue, programmes were considered successful if the appetite for recruiting returners was seen to increase (and spread) throughout the organisation over time. Programme managers and sponsors kept track of this in an informal manner.
- **The experience of the returners:** It was seen as very important that returners had a positive experience while participating in a placement, or in the early weeks or months of a supported hire situation. Programmes wanted to receive positive scores on experience measures relating to the support provided as well as positive qualitative feedback on the degree to which returners felt well supported and appropriately trained.

*"We don't have specific targets but will review the experience of both candidates and business areas to see how successful it has been from both perspectives."*

## Impact of programmes on wider targets

When discussing targets, over half of employers in the sample mentioned broad targets on diversity and inclusion measures. Some had set internal targets on gender pay gap reduction or the proportion of women in senior roles. Some had signed up to external schemes or made 'public' commitments to addressing a lack of diversity.

While returner programmes were not thought to be the only solution to meeting these targets, some were keeping track of the impact their programmes had in this regard. Some considered impact on diversity in their end of programme reviews, others were aware of this through informal monitoring.

In most cases, organisations had not yet made an assessment of the impact of their returner programmes on diversity measures. However, some reported a positive impact after one or two years operation. For example, one employer was able to attribute a shift in their gender balance within one business directorate to the same degree as would have taken two years without the programme.

*"We have seen a positive 2.5% shift in our diversity measures in one directorate. This might not sound like much, but that equates to what would take two years to achieve through attrition."*

### 5.3 The success of programmes

While often not measured formally, organisations in the sample generally reported positive outcomes from their returner programmes. Most had met targets on the number of programme participants retained in permanent or contracted positions. Furthermore, most had received positive feedback from both hiring managers (in terms of the calibre of recruits) and returners themselves (in terms of the support provided).

In the majority of cases, employers had repeated their programmes and were looking to continue to do so in the future. This was said to be a reflection of how successful they were considered to be.

*“Now we know how well it works for the business units, we are looking to expand things further.”*

However, respondents also often noted that their programmes were in their infancy, and often operating at a small scale, with dedicated staff working hard to ensure their success. As such, it was difficult to determine at this stage how successful they would be in the longer term, and as they increased in scale.

Furthermore, respondents also discussed certain barriers and pitfalls associated with setting up and running returner programmes, which in some cases had impeded their success to some extent. These are explored in the following chapter.

## 6. Returner programme success factors

This chapter describes what respondents saw as the key factors and issues influencing the success (or otherwise) of programmes. The factors are organised into themes, reflecting the different stages and aspects of programme set-up and delivery. For each stage, we describe the experiences of programme providers in terms of what made programmes a success and what impeded success. It covers the following areas:

- Setting up the programme;
- Recruiting returners;
- Preparing returners and employers;
- Delivering support;
- Placing applicants and on-going communication.

### 6.1 Setting up the programme

This section describes the factors associated with the initial stages of setting up a returner programme which have an impact on its success.

#### Engagement with partners

Reflecting the sampling method use for this study, the majority of organisations had engaged an external partner to assist with the setting up and implementation of their programme. They consistently reported that doing so had a positive impact on the success of their programme overall. In interpreting these findings, it is important to consider that as organisations in the sample only had experience of working with one partner organisation, they had a limited basis on which to compare its relative value or impact. It is also worth noting that as these organisations were willing to participate in this research, they might be expected to have had positive experiences, which they wished to share.

Use of a specialist returner organisation provided employers with access to knowledge and relevant expertise, planning consultancy, external support mechanisms and an established network of returners from which to recruit. These resources had been valuable in helping employers access suitable candidates and devise relevant programmes of support for them.

Some respondents noted that their businesses had been approached by an external provider, and the idea of a returner programme pitched to them. Some explained that the evidence provided during these conversations had helped make the case to senior managers for setting up a programme.

## Buy-in from the business

Programme success was said to depend to a large extent on the degree to which the business was willing to embrace the idea of recruiting returners. Some respondents described resistance from lower tier management and business units to the idea of recruiting people who had taken a long career break. This was often a key barrier to the success and future growth of programmes. Resistance from these potential employers of returners was either due to perceptions and culture or more concrete circumstantial factors:

- **Perceptions and attitudes:** Some respondents explained that managers had often not considered the idea of recruiting returners before. They were therefore somewhat suspicious about taking a risk on someone who did not have recent experience. They questioned their ability to keep up with other staff on the technical aspects of the role.

*“There haven’t been barriers at the senior level, but there are hurdles at the middle management level. They are very used to looking for like-for-like skills, not thinking about transferable skills.”*

- **Circumstantial factors:** Some respondents cited the length of the process associated with recruiting returners and putting them through the placement period as a sticking point for some business units and managers. They explained that when attempting to recruit returners into specific vacancies, business units were reluctant to keep those vacancies open for the length of time required.

*“We are hiring candidates into open vacancies, which brings certain challenges. You need to be talking to the manager in January about a vacancy that you are not going to fill until June.”*

Some respondents also explained that restructuring or contraction within their businesses had made it difficult to get their programmes off the ground. They noted that it was not possible for managers to guarantee permanent positions under these circumstances.

Respondents explained that they had adopted a number of approaches to address the issue of reticence among managers towards hiring returners.

- Firstly, programme managers had spent considerable time engaging with hiring managers in an effort to encourage a different way of thinking on the topic and challenge the status quo.
- This had been accompanied by the provision of data and evidence about the value of returners. Respondents reported that evidence about the potential impact of returner programmes on diversity within business units was often the most

persuasive. As such, it was sometimes said to be easier to ‘sell’ the idea of hiring returners to those business units with a recognised challenge on gender parity.

*“We have been able to easily demonstrate that returnships can have significant impact on their gender diversity, and that is compelling. It has been more difficult to get traction in departments where gender diversity isn’t an issue.”*

- Respondents had also shared evidence of the impact returners can have on productivity and performance with hiring managers, as a means of encouraging them to sign-up to hiring returners themselves. They noted that providing data on the productivity of returners and the years of experience they bring, along with case study examples of the impact individual returners have had in other departments, could be compelling.

*“We are able to quote evidence to managers that show that those that are working to a fixed working schedule and may need to leave at 5pm to pick up the kids, are more efficient and more loyal.”*

Respondents also noted the valuable role played by past returners in promoting the value of returners (and the programme) to the rest of the business. Returners had written blogs, attended events and spoken in senior management meetings in order to showcase their value and highlight their positive experiences.

Many also reported that after having run a returner programme once, the interest and enthusiasm within their businesses for hiring returners had increased. They explained that news of the success of returners had spread and often managers were approaching the programme administrators asking to be involved in the subsequent cohorts.

## **Funding and resourcing**

Respondents explained that returner programmes required funding (for the wages of returners during the supported period, for the recruitment process, for coaching, training and other support). This was not always easy to secure against other priorities within the business.

*“The main challenge has been securing the time and money to achieve the headcount we wanted. We needed to put forward a case outlining the long term gains we could achieve.”*

Furthermore, some respondents explained that the job of managing the programme was time consuming for them or others working with them. Most respondents noted that they hoped to scale up their programmes to increase the number of locations or business units included, or to increase the size of each cohort. They explained that this was



challenging to achieve without considerably increasing the HR resource dedicated to the programme.

A minority felt that they had taken on too many returners in their first cohort, and that this had made the job of managing the programme challenging. In some cases, this had resulted in a decision to reduce the size of cohorts in subsequent years and attempt to grow the programme more gradually.

*“The first cohort of 12 was quite difficult to manage. However, our most recent cohort of 2 was much easier and we were able to give the returners far more time and attention.”*

## Senior sponsorship and support

The vast majority of programmes described the importance of strong support from senior leaders. Most respondents explained that their programmes had enjoyed a good level of support from a specific board-level sponsor or from the board as a whole.

The main benefit of senior-level support was said to be its impact on lower tier management and business units. Respondents explained that senior sponsors were able to influence others and encourage (or insist) that they seriously consider participating in a returner placement programme. In addition, senior sponsorship was said to have enabled programmes to secure centralised funding or to ring-fence resources to assist with their day-to-day running.

## 6.2 Recruiting returners

The success or otherwise of programmes was often said to be highly dependent on ‘getting recruitment right’. The following specific factors were mentioned as influencing the success of this element of programmes:

### The recruitment process

As outlined in the previous chapter, respondents noted the importance of a recruitment process that reflects the specific needs and circumstances of many returners.

Respondents described how to optimise the process:

- The application process should be adapted, with applicants assessed in less typical ways (e.g. providing letters and statements rather than CVs, and adapting interview questions to be more focused on values and behaviour rather than highly technical in nature).
- A pre-interview stage of coaching and support (should returners feel they need it) will ensure candidates are not overwhelmed at the interview stage.

*“They have not been in a work environment so they often have no idea what they should and should not say, and are really lacking in confidence. We provided a coaching session up-front, and one of the candidates described this as the ‘lightbulb moment’.”*

- Provide suitable coaching or training to the recruiting managers or interviewing panel. Respondents explained that those responsible for assessing candidates needed to be coached about the appropriate way to approach the interactions so as to elicit the most useful information and not alienate the candidates. Potential line managers also needed to be prepared to offer a different type of (and often more) support than that provided for other new starters.
- Sufficient time should be allowed for the recruitment process. Some employers had learned through experience that recruiting returners can be a longer process than usual. It is therefore important not to be too ambitious in terms of programme start dates. Furthermore, the process of identifying skills gaps and engaging with managers to scope out the specification for recruitment can also take time and effort, and should not be underestimated.

*“It’s not been smooth, there is far more nurturing that needs to take place, and its far more time consuming than a normal piece of recruitment.”*

## **The balance between specific and general skills**

Respondents generally recognised the potential value in returners’ wider, often non-sector specific skills and experience. They explained that finding ways to utilise these within their organisations was important, and doing so was a driver of ‘success’ in terms of retention and positive impact to the business. It was said to be important that the candidate specification for returners was not too rigid, and that candidates were given an opportunity to demonstrate a range of skills during the supported period.

## **The type of roles and working conditions on offer**

Respondents noted that often returners valued flexible and/or part-time working. As such, many programmes were said to be set up with part-time hours as standard, or with flexible working as a key characteristic. However, some respondents noted the importance of not presuming that all returners will be seeking part time or flexible working hours. They may be put off by programmes which only offer this, and so a flexible approach was considered more suitable.

## 6.3 Delivering suitable support and work experience

In order to deliver a successful programme, it was said to be important to provide returners with a positive working life experience with suitable support. These factors are outlined in more detail in the following sections.

### The suitability of the role

Respondents described the importance of ensuring returners had 'meaty' enough roles to fulfil during a placement. They explained that without this, there was a risk that the returners would become disillusioned, potentially bored and ultimately less likely to perform well or want to stay on at the end of the period. Furthermore, without clear objectives, assessing the suitability of candidates to permanent roles was made more difficult. A minority of respondents described problems with returners becoming unengaged during their placements when their skills and experience were not being utilised to the full.

*"In the past, returners have not always had real project work to do on placements. They have ended up photocopying and things, which is not useful for anyone."*

Others noted that some returners underestimated their own ability, or lacked the confidence to take on a role at the same level of seniority they were at before taking a break. They felt that this had resulted in them being somewhat unfulfilled in their working lives during the first few months of employment. They stressed the importance of placing returners at a level which will not overwhelm them, but will suitably stretch their ability.

### The suitability of support

Respondents explained that the support provided to returners throughout their placement or the early stages of employment was an important factor affecting overall programme success. Based on their experiences, respondents described what they felt were important considerations for the provision of this support:

- Support should be provided in a flexible manner. Respondents noted that returners often had quite varied needs in terms of the support they required (e.g. coaching, training, mentoring, buddying etc.). They stressed the importance of adapting to these differences as much as possible by offering options and not forcing support where it is not needed. For example, one respondent explained that returners that have been out of work longer have different needs and are likely to be less confident in group or networking scenarios.
- A member of the HR team (or similar) needs to keep in close contact with returners on an on-going basis, in order to monitor their progress informally, and provide reassurance and guidance as required.

- Involve past returners in support if possible. Respondents often noted that returners who had joined in previous cohorts provided a highly valuable source of support to new returners. They were often asked to be buddies or mentors, or were encouraged to set up networks and groups within the organisation.
- Make use of existing or wider support mechanisms. Some programmes felt they had benefited in terms of efficiency and quality of delivery from tapping into existing programmes of support (e.g. Women in Leadership programmes etc.).

## 6.4 Placing applicants and on-going communications

Respondents explained that the success of programmes was ultimately measured by whether returners were placed in suitable on-going employment at the end of the process. They described the following factors which affected their programmes' delivery of this:

- Up-front planning to identify genuine skills gaps and firm vacancies was said to be one of the best ways of ensuring returners can be offered on-going employment. Some respondents felt that they had not succeeded in planning sufficiently well the first time they ran their programme, resulting in difficulties matching returners to jobs.
- Up-front planning to ensure that relevant staff are engaged with the process of assessing returners and considering them for roles is important when returners have not been taken on with a specific role in mind. In some cases, programmes struggled to get hiring managers to attend assessment days for their cohorts of returners. They had subsequently put changes in place to make these sessions more flexible, and to provide more options for managers and returners to attend.
- It is important to be flexible when considering roles for returners, and not limit this to the specific roles they were initially taken on for. This was said to maximise the proportion of returners appointed to permanent or ongoing roles.
- Detailed and constructive feedback should be provided to returners who are not offered an on-going position. Respondents stressed that returners can be sensitive and lack confidence. As such, it can be necessary to make multiple calls and remain in contact for a period after the placement is over in order to provide reassurance.

*“I was surprised at the strengths of emotion. You have to adapt how you communicate to deal with it.”*

## 7. The need for external support

Respondents were asked about the potential role of Government in providing support for employers setting up and running returner programmes. While all those in the sample had been able to set up their programmes without any support, most agreed that Government could help in some way.

The majority of respondents felt that the most valuable input from Government would be the setting up of a broad directory, or central access point, of returners from which they could recruit in the future. They felt that this would be a valuable resource that could become the recognised destination for returners. Respondents felt that such a directory should be open to men and women.

Some respondents added that the primary role of Government should be to raise the profile of returners as a source of potentially very useful skills and talent for businesses. They felt that a directory could help to do this, but believed that more communications and promotion were also required.

*“I would say their main role is really in raising the profile of this topic. I would also like to see a central talent pool managed by Government, this would be useful.”*

Most respondents also felt that best practice guidance for employers looking to set up a returner programme would be a useful tool. They suggested that this could encourage employers to take action by demonstrating the benefits experienced by employers already running such programmes, and by sharing advice on how to avoid the pitfalls associated with doing so.



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