



# Lost Connections

**Supporting returners into the workplace in 2021 and beyond**

A WPI Strategy report for Vodafone UK

May 2021

Together we can



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## About Vodafone

Vodafone UK is a technology communications company that connects people, businesses and devices to help our customers benefit from digital innovation. Our services span mobile, fixed line connections, home and office broadband, and the Internet of Things (IoT).

We have a strong track record as a tech pioneer, making the UK's first mobile phone call, sending the first text message, and making the UK's first live holographic call using 5G in 2018. We were also the first to start carrying live 5G traffic from a site in Salford, Greater Manchester. As of October 2020, we have 5G in 57 locations in the UK and 193 across Germany, Spain, Italy and Ireland.

In September 2020, leading mobile benchmarking company, umlaut, named Vodafone as London's best network for 5G. Our 4G network coverage currently reaches over 99% of the UK population. And in October 2020, Vodafone was named Network Provider of the Year by readers of leading technology advice website, Trusted Reviews.

Today, Vodafone serves more than 18 million mobile and fixed-line customers in the UK. To help deliver Gigabit UK, our full-fibre broadband roll-out programme now covers 15 UK towns and cities through partnerships with CityFibre and Openreach.

For more information about Vodafone UK, please visit: [www.vodafone.co.uk](http://www.vodafone.co.uk)

# Foreword

Working patterns, and people's expectations about what their working lives look like, are changing. More and more people take a break from work at some point in their careers and good employers increasingly recognise that and plan for it. They understand that career breaks for one reason or another are set to become more prevalent as our working lives lengthen.

And there is a clear business case for supporting 'returners' - people returning from a period away from work - when they feel ready to re-enter the workplace.

Supporting returners helps organisations bridge skills shortages and improve retention and diversity, while supporting those individuals and the wider economy. As the workplace continues to adapt and evolve, it is the responsibility of employers to support returners both while they are away and once they return.

COVID-19 has disrupted people's working lives more than anything most of us have experienced before. Work has radically changed for millions, with many shifting to working from home and balancing work with homeschooling, and others coping with reduced working hours or, in the case of 11.2 million people, being furloughed.<sup>1</sup> Some have been put out of work altogether. Many people will be able to return to their workplaces in the coming months - but this will not be easy for everyone, neither for employees nor employers. Nothing like COVID-19's impact on normal working patterns has ever been seen before, but we can learn something about how those affected are likely to feel about returning to work, and about the challenges they and their employers may face, by looking at the 1.2 million or so people a year who, in normal times, are taking a period away from the workplace and looking to return.<sup>2</sup>

Before the pandemic, the Government estimated that there were around 1.2 million 'potential returners' in the UK. Around 15 per cent of all economically inactive people were of working age.

This report includes new polling of people who returned to the workforce after an absence of a year or more, showing some of the challenges they may face. The barriers facing returners affect women in particular, as they are more likely to choose to take a prolonged break to start and raise a family and take on the role of unpaid carer in their household.

Over a third (37 per cent) of those returning to the workplace after a year or more away from work experience a loss of confidence in their own ability. And this loss of confidence is almost twice as prevalent for women as for men, with 42 per cent of women experiencing it compared to 24 per cent of men. Balancing work with caring responsibilities was also a concern for 41 per cent of returners, again felt far more keenly by women (45 per cent) than men (30 per cent).

These findings echo our previous research<sup>3</sup> which identified that of the 77 per cent of respondents who reported sharing caring responsibilities, women were more than twice as likely to do the larger share of caring. And of course, breaks taken in careers are thought to be part of what is behind untapped female talent which causes shortages of women at board level or equivalent seniority. Women are also disproportionately affected once they choose to return to work, with three in five women returning to lower-skilled or lower-paid jobs than they previously held.<sup>4</sup> Any failure to support returners therefore exacerbates pre-existing inequalities facing women surrounding pay and their seniority in the workplace.

Now more than ever employers must be mindful of the barriers that face returners and do their utmost to ensure that they are supported. One such example is Vodafone's ReConnect programme which is designed to attract talented and experienced individuals who have left the workplace for one to 10+ years, whatever the reason may be.

A lack of technological skills in particular is an obstacle for returners who have been out of work for a prolonged amount of time. This may be an even bigger challenge following the pandemic, where those who have remained in work have relied on technology more than ever before, potentially leaving those who have been out of work further behind.

We need to further consider how both the Government and employers can provide greater support to those returning to the workforce. This report makes recommendations for both, including on flexible working, skills training, parental leave policies - especially on policies that help to challenge the idea that caring is a 'woman's job' - and on the importance of

access to technology and training to use it.

The challenge of reintegrating returners into the workplace was already an important one, but the disruption caused by COVID-19 has only made it more important. As we look to the future, we must make sure that everyone who has spent time out of work, whether through choice or not, is fully supported to return when they are ready to.



**Helen Lamprell**  
General Counsel & External Affairs  
Director, Vodafone UK



**Clare Corkish**  
Human Resources Director,  
Vodafone UK



# Introduction

At any time, there are a significant number of potential 'returners' in society: people of working age who have previously worked but are taking an extended break. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were around 1.2 million potential returners in the UK,<sup>5</sup> a number that has to be approximated given how wide-ranging 'returners' as a term is.

Once the pandemic ends and large sectors of the economy reopen, those who have been furloughed for all or part of the past year will be 'returning' to work too, inflating the figure by a considerable amount given that 11.2 million people<sup>6</sup> have been furloughed since the start of the pandemic.

While those who have been furloughed will clearly have different backgrounds and experiences to those falling within the more traditional definition of 'returners', there has never been a better time to open the discussion on returners and the barriers they face as so many employees will be returning to work at the same time.

## Defining returners

**Returners are defined as people with existing work experience who have taken an extended career break for caring or other reasons and who are either economically inactive or now working in lower paid, temporary or part-time work or in home-businesses or freelance roles. Returners can be any gender, but are predominantly women.<sup>7</sup>**

Career breaks are likely to increase as life expectancy, and consequently career length, increases, as has been mirrored in the phased increase in the age that people qualify for the state pension.<sup>8</sup>

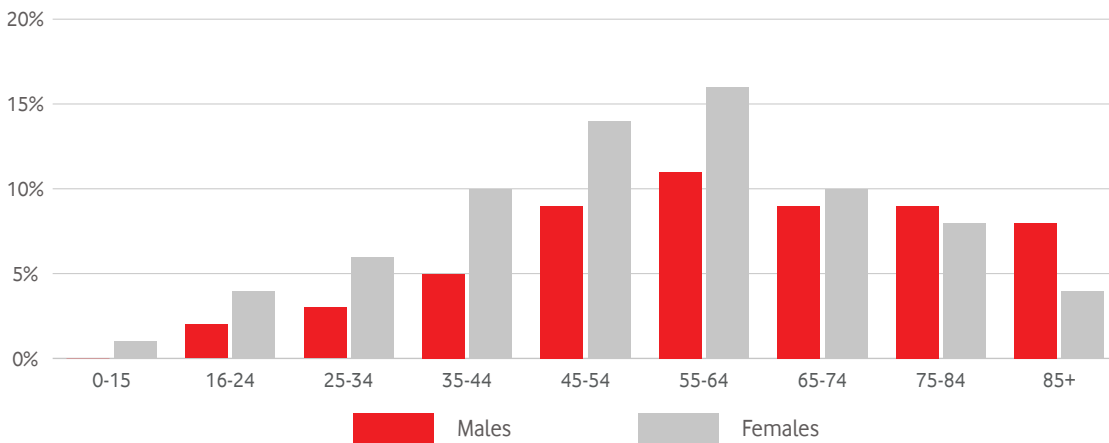
Loss of confidence, perceived loss of skills and feeling cut off from the world of work are all regularly cited as concerns by returners. A lack of technological skills in particular is an obstacle for returners who have been out of work for a prolonged amount of time. This may be an even bigger obstacle following the pandemic, as technology has been relied upon to keep businesses moving and connected and now has a greater footprint in the world of work than ever before.

The barriers facing returners affect women in particular, as they are more likely to choose to take a prolonged break to start and raise a family and take on the role of unpaid carer in their household. Our previous research found that women were more than twice as likely to have to leave their jobs due to unpaid caring responsibilities than men.<sup>9</sup>

Women are also disproportionately affected once they choose to return to work, with three in five women returning to lower-skilled or lower-paid jobs than they previously held.<sup>10</sup> Any failure to support returners therefore exacerbates pre-existing inequalities facing women surrounding pay and their seniority in the workplace.

There is a clear business case for supporting returners, especially female returners who have the potential to contribute over £1 billion to the UK economy.<sup>11</sup> Employers who have returner schemes can use them to help tackle skills shortages and returners can also help to improve the age and gender diversity of an organisation, bringing in people who are refreshed and keen, having taken a break away from work.

Support for returners needs to come from both Government and employers. The Government has several welcome policies in place to support returners and recognises the importance of this group in society and the economy. This report considers how the Government can go further and invest in better digital skills training and digital infrastructure more broadly to support flexible modes of working that could benefit returners, and how it can work with employers to bring a greater number of returners into the workplace once they are ready to.



Source: Family Resources Survey, 2018/19

Employers should also lead by example and be clearer about their leave policies and be more open-minded in the recruitment process about ‘gaps’ in people’s CVs, shifting the focus towards recognising the potential and relevant experience of those who have had time away from work, and away from insisting on continuous service. Support systems, where suitable, are also important in helping returners while they are away as well as training to support them once they return.

A poll of 1,084 UK residents aged 18+ who have returned to work following an absence of one year or more was carried out by Survation in October 2020 to support this report.



# Chapter 1: State of play for returners

With people now working an average of 30 - 50 years it is reasonable to expect the number of returners to increase, with periods out of work becoming a more regular part of a career. It is important to understand why individuals decide to both leave and return to the workplace, and what challenges they face. In particular, it is important to appreciate the gendered impact of policies around returners and how characteristically women have different concerns than their male counterparts, typically surrounding their caring responsibilities.

By enabling returners to re-enter the workplace there are significant benefits, both in addressing gender inequalities and to the economy more broadly, and for the employers that hire them. It is vital that we understand how challenges affect different groups of returners so that tailored support can be given.

## Why do people take breaks from their career?

People take breaks from their career for a range of reasons, sometimes with a stipulated or open return date. Time away from the workplace can be hugely beneficial to individuals and families, allowing people to reset or devote more time to caring for their children, for example. Other reasons for taking breaks include individuals wanting to return to full-time education or choosing to have a lifestyle change.

Time away from work is not always voluntary, however, and the impact of childcare costs and responsibilities can, in effect, force some individuals out of the workplace. Those who have been made redundant, or - as has been the case for many in the past year - furloughed, could face additional challenges. Helping these individuals to re-engage with the workplace will be crucial to the economic recovery and to ensuring that we keep talent in the workforce.

Breaks in careers are more common for women than men, as caring responsibilities typically fall to them. The pandemic has highlighted this: the number of unpaid carers increased by 4.5 million by June 2020, the majority of whom were women.<sup>12</sup> Women are also more likely to be caught in the so-called 'sandwich generation', fulfilling the responsibility of caring for elderly relatives as well as their children.

Though the proportion of mothers in work increases as their children grow older, it never reaches an employment level equal to that of fathers, showing how there are still fewer mothers in the workplace regardless of the age of their children. This is indicative of barriers that potential female returners with dependent children face, and shows that they need to be supported.

## Why do individuals return to the workplace?

Reasons for returning to work inevitably vary. A desire to be back in the workplace, changes in family circumstances or financial pressures are just some reasons. However, some factors affect women more than men.

Our polling found that reasons for returning to work vary by gender. Caring responsibilities were more likely to affect women for longer as they were less likely to receive additional support. This is evidenced by how men were nearly twice as likely to be able to return to work due to their caring responsibilities ending or them being the recipient of additional support.

## What are the challenges of returning to the workplace?

Returning to work can be a daunting prospect. The known 'career break penalty' often sees returners feeling the effects of their absence when they choose to re-enter the workforce, both in the recruitment phase and once back in employment.



What were the main challenges that you faced when returning to work?	Total	Male	Female
Concern over balancing caring responsibilities with work	41%	30%	45%
Cost of childcare	40%	23%	46%
Availability of childcare	32%	24%	35%
Hard to reacclimatise to working life following such a long break	29%	25%	31%
Lost knowledge / memory of aspects of work	27%	25%	28%
Former contemporaries or younger colleagues had been promoted to senior roles whilst you remained at the same level	20%	26%	18%
Technological change	17%	25%	15%
Other	1%	0%	1%
Retention	6%	5%	6%

Our polling found that concerns about returning to work differ by gender. Women were more likely to be concerned about the cost and availability of childcare and their ability to reacclimatise to work life, both factors that are indicative of their caring responsibilities. Concerns for the male returners we polled were instead around technological change and the fact that former contemporaries or younger colleagues may have been promoted.

Such disparity in priorities of male and female returners demonstrates how there are gendered challenges, and that without addressing the issues that female returners face and supporting their re-entry into the workforce, it will be women who will lose out more. It is also worth noting that even though, for couples with children, the financial burden of childcare is likely to be shared, women are substantially more likely than men to see it as a challenge which affects their decision about whether to return to work.



**Female returners were more likely to be concerned about childcare and their ability to reacclimatise to work life**

**Male returners were more concerned by technological change and the fact that former contemporaries or younger colleagues may have been promoted**



Moreover, given that more women than men were furloughed in the past year,<sup>13</sup> the gendered impact of returners will be further exacerbated as those who have been furloughed start to return to work. The TUC published data collected from over 50,000 parents which found that 71 per cent of working mothers have been refused furlough despite asking for it for childcare reasons, showing that many women were forced to choose between their caring responsibilities and their careers.<sup>14</sup>

The possible implications of the pandemic on women's careers can be seen in the US, where a quarter of women are considering scaling back their careers or quitting, according to the poll of 40,000 people at 317 American firms.<sup>15</sup> The survey suggests that stress caused by juggling work, children's online education and housework is likely to cause millions of women to leave the US workforce.

Our previous research discussed the need to support women who face a higher burden of caring responsibilities: of the 77 per cent of carers we polled who share caring responsibilities with another person, women were almost twice as likely as men to do the larger share of caring.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, when assessing how returning mothers can be supported when they return to work, employers should be mindful of how they carry the responsibility for caring.

Our polling revealed that concerns about returning to the workplace also differed by the length of time respondents had away from the workplace. Those away for only a year were more likely to be concerned about the availability of childcare and their ability to balance caring and work, concerns that particularly affect those taking time away from work to have children. For those out of work for longer than a year, they were more likely to be concerned about technological change and the fact that former contemporaries or younger colleagues may have been promoted. Such varied priorities demonstrate how returners face an array of challenges and that employers should tailor their support to returners depending on their circumstances.

Nearly half of women who have taken a career break say that it has damaged their career



Source: Working Mums Survey (2019)

Wages for women who return to paid work after a period of leave are on average

↓ **2%** lower

for each year that they have taken out of employment

Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies (2016) The Gender Wage Gap

### The benefits of supporting returners

There are key benefits in supporting returners in terms of the businesses and organisations hiring them, the economy and in addressing gender inequalities in the workplace. These benefits range from bridging skills shortages, greater retention and improving gender, age and cognitive diversity in an organisation.<sup>17</sup>

Breaks taken in careers are thought to be part of what is behind the shortage of women at board level or equivalent seniority. One recent study found that increasing female participation in the workforce in the UK to the same level as that in Sweden could add £170bn to the UK and boost GDP by nine per cent.<sup>18</sup> Despite this, female returners can face an uphill battle when re-entering the workplace. The Tech Pixie's Confidence Gap Report found that nearly half of women (45 per cent) who have taken a career break say that it has damaged their career in terms of pay and progression.<sup>19</sup> On average, wages for women who return to paid work after a period of leave are around two per cent lower for each year that they have taken out of employment.<sup>20</sup>

The case for supporting returners, and in particular female returners, is clear. Having more women coming back into the workforce will enable organisations to better understand a wider selection of their customers and stakeholders. Organisations such as Women Returners champion women returning to the workplace and help enable employers to realise the benefits returners can offer. Returners have both the expertise and potential to enrich an organisation and, with the correct support, their re-entry can have a wide range of positive effects for organisations and the wider economy.

## Women Returners

Women Returners is a purpose-led consulting, coaching and network organisation which works with employers and individuals to enable professionals to get back to fulfilling work after taking multi-year career breaks. Women Returners has partnered since 2014 with over 100 leading employers to create supported routes back to work for returners. They run the free Women Returners Professional Network providing advice, information and encouragement to 6,500+ women on career break.



## Chapter 2: Supporting returners – organisational change

It is clear that targeted support is required for returners and that their concerns, both when away from work and upon returning, should be appreciated and addressed so that returners do not feel cut off from the workplace.

An inclusive working environment is vital to support returners. Schemes such as enhanced parental leave, having a recruitment process that focuses on potential rather than experience, and being transparent as an organisation on the support available, are all measures that build a supportive, welcoming environment.

### Vodafone's ReConnect programme

Vodafone's award-winning ReConnect programme is designed to attract talented and experienced individuals who have left the workplace for one to 10+ years, whatever the reason may be. The programme is gender-neutral and inclusive to all.

Those on the programme are offered a permanent role, and in the first six months of joining will receive five days' pay for four days' work per week to support their transition back into work.

Those on the programme are offered support and regular meetings with their manager to review their progress. Coaching and mentorship are available, allowing those on the programme to learn from others and be equipped with the tools, knowledge, and opportunities to fully develop.

A blended approach of on-the-job and online learning allows employees on the ReConnect programme to thrive in their return to work. They have access to Vodafone's University platform, which hosts a variety of courses and online learning opportunities designed to upskill and develop the skills of their choice.

### Loss of confidence

Our polling shows that loss of confidence is a major barrier to returners. Almost two-fifths of respondents we polled (37 per cent) experienced a loss of confidence in their ability during their break. Though many returners work hard to maintain their skills and industry specific knowledge during a career break, there will inevitably be a shortfall that can cause a lack of self-confidence when they choose to return.<sup>21</sup>

Loss of confidence affected returners differently based on their circumstances. Of the 37 per cent who said they had experienced a loss of confidence, this was almost twice as prevalent in women (42 per cent) than men (24 per cent), showing again the gendered divide in returners' experiences. Additionally, we found that a loss of confidence was highest among those who had been away from work for a year, indicating that confidence can deteriorate rapidly and does not necessarily correlate with time away from the workplace.

These concerns may also be exacerbated by concerns for some potential returners over increased competition in the labour market as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Ali's Story

Returning to work after an extended period of leave can be daunting. Having taken a three year break from a successful career in the IT industry to refocus my time and energy on my family, I was unsure if employers would still see me the same way – if they would recognise the value and talent that I could still offer. I know many women just like me, struggling to find a balance between supporting their family and furthering their professional career in a way that supports their need for flexibility.

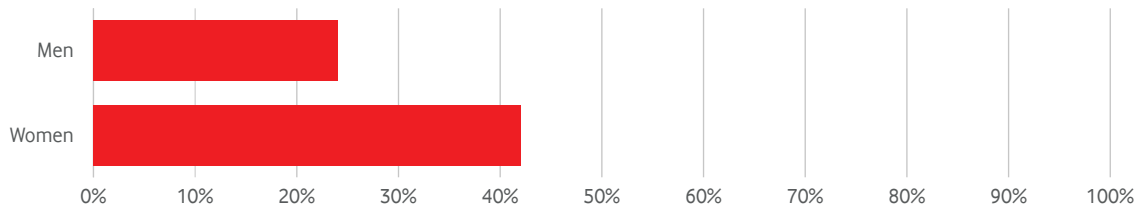
Getting this balance right is important to me, which is why I chose to join the Vodafone ReConnect programme. ReConnect's primary goal is to recruit and re-engage professional men and women into roles that reflect their experience and expertise. When I first heard about ReConnect, I thought: how refreshing to find a business that sees value in attracting talent back into the workplace. The recruitment process enabled me to engage with members of the existing Vodafone community to really gain an insight into the level of passion behind ReConnect. Vodafone has shown me just how committed they are to building a flexible, motivating environment where I can transition back into work in a supportive and structured manner.

ReConnect has helped rebuild my confidence. I feel empowered to achieve my goals and aspirations and relaunch my career. Getting to know Vodafone has been an engaging, inspiring process, and I'm excited to contribute to its future success.

Ali Davies, Senior Manager, Vodafone Technology

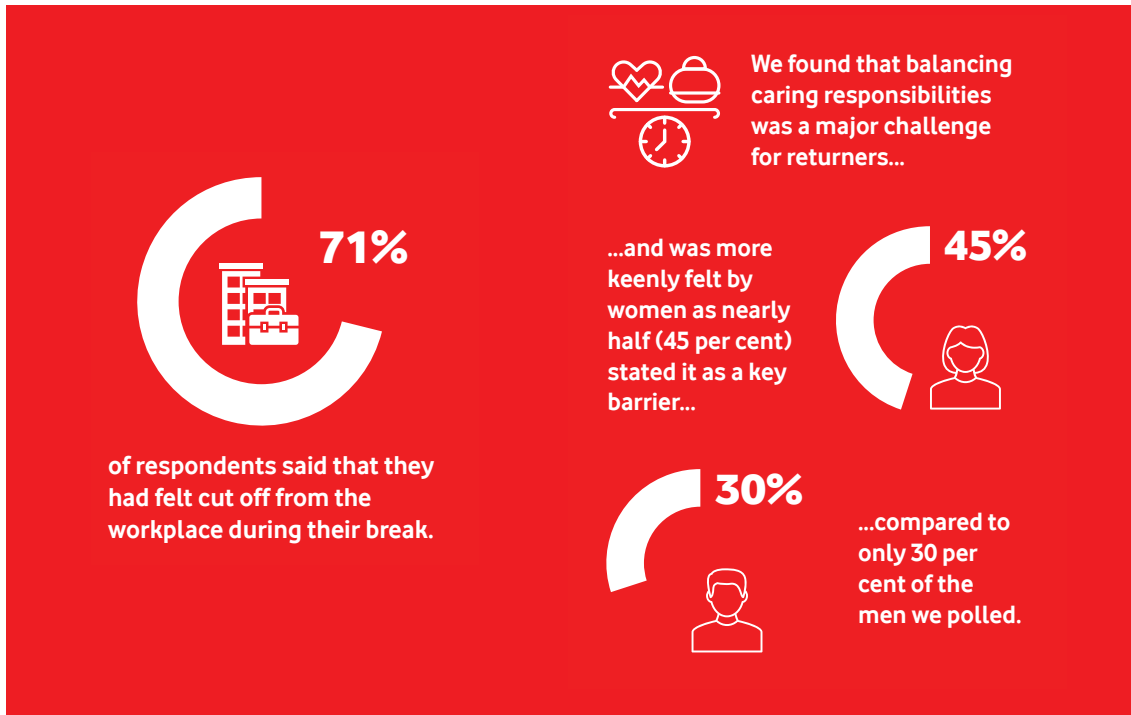
We can also expect a loss of confidence among the 11.2 million furloughed workers who have been away from the workplace for the past year. Indeed, this may also be felt by some of those who have worked at home since the start of the pandemic. While these groups will clearly differ from more traditional returners in terms of their experiences, employers should nonetheless be mindful of this as many organisations begin to re-open.

**Almost two-fifths of respondents experienced a loss of confidence in their ability during their break. This was twice as prevalent in women than men.**



### Support to reintegrate into the workplace

Support from employers can help returners re-integrate and help dispel any self-doubt they might have. Our polling found that 71 per cent of respondents said that they had felt cut off from the workplace during their break. Examples of methods to mitigate this include having tailored conversations with returners to see how their current skill set can help complement an organisation. Further, designating line managers who have specific training to support returners and having frequent catch-ups are all good employer practices that can make a considerable difference in boosting the confidence of returners.



We asked our 1,084 respondents if they have access to the following when returning to work and if not which ones they would like to have ('Desire' in the table below). The below table indicates that having the opportunity to work flexibly is important to returners when thinking about re-entering the workplace.

Returners Support Schemes	Access	Desire
Having the option to work from home regularly/part-time	13%	23%
'Keeping in Touch' days during leave as a way to prevent returners feeling 'out of the loop' when returning	28%	19%
Provision of a detailed return plan on how to build returners back up to their previous levels of responsibility	13%	19%
Catch ups with colleagues via technology before return, in a professional capacity	13%	17%
Catch ups with employers/managers and/or colleagues via technology before return	19%	16%
Employee support networks, such as a Parents and Carers Network	13%	16%
Having the option to work from home full-time	9%	16%
Training sessions on new workplace practices	15%	16%
Catch ups with colleagues via technology before return in a social capacity	15%	15%
Transparency of parental and care policies in the recruitment process	13%	14%
Wider provision of technology training for employees	10%	14%
Mentoring or buddying opportunities	10%	13%
Having the option to work from home occasionally/regularly	14%	5%
None of the above	15%	11%

## Supporting those with caring responsibilities

Alongside providing the necessary training, balancing caring responsibilities is a significant issue that returners, especially female returners, require support with. We found that balancing caring responsibilities was a major challenge for returners and was more keenly felt by women as nearly half (45 per cent) stated it as a key barrier compared to only 30 per cent of the men we polled. Additionally, more 18-34-year-olds who had spent time away from the workplace said that they had felt cut off from it (74 per cent) than any other age bracket. This age bracket contains those most likely to be starting a family and therefore taking on caring responsibilities, demonstrating how important it is to support returners to address this barrier in particular. It is important that talent is retained and that those who have chosen to take time away from the workplace are supported back in once they choose to return.

### Vodafone's Global Parental Leave policy

Vodafone has introduced a new parental leave policy which means that employees world-wide are offered 16 weeks of fully paid parental leave. The workplace policy is designed to support families by giving every parent the opportunity to have more time with children new to their family.

Any employee whose partner is having a baby, adopts a child or becomes a parent through surrogacy will have the flexibility to take up to 16 weeks paid leave at any time during the first 18 months. Vodafone employees will also be able to phase their return from parental leave by working the equivalent of a 30-hour week at full pay for a further six months.

### Vodafone's Ready Parents and Carers Network

The Ready Parents and Carers Network provides practical help and support for parents and carers, as well as guidance for leaders and line managers on creating a culture of compassion and inclusivity in their teams. Throughout the pandemic the network provided colleagues with practical and emotional peer-to-peer support, including tips on working from home and keeping the kids entertained.

## Flexible and remote working options

Our polling shows that of those who had returned to work after a break of a year or more, 44 per cent said they would have appreciated the ability to work from home at least some of the time.

This demonstrates the importance for employers, where possible, to reflect on the benefits of remote and flexible working during the pandemic and, where suitable, continue with these practices post-COVID-19. Clearly a one-size-fits-all approach will not work for all organisations and employers, and our polling shows that the same approach will inevitably not be right for all employees. However, where possible and where it works for both the employer and employee, it is clear that some form of flexibility would support returners.

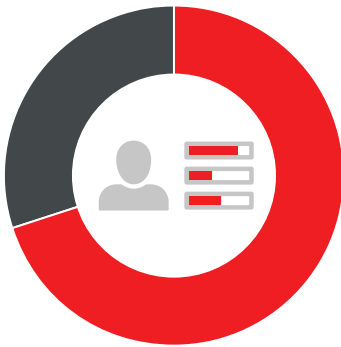
# Chapter 3: Supporting returners – skills and technology

## Skills

Providing training for returners can help encourage more returners to apply and get back into the workforce, once they wish to do so. Our polling found that almost a third of respondents explicitly stated that they were concerned about having the required skills to both re-enter the workplace at all (31 per cent) and re-enter at a similar level (30 per cent).

This affected those who were away from work for longer than a year in particular, further demonstrating the need to offer training, with the availability of that training being made clear in the recruitment process, so that those who have been out of the workforce for a significant period of time feel confident to re-enter work.

**A third of respondents were concerned about having the required skills to re-enter the workplace at a similar level...**



**...while a further third were concerned about having the required skills to re-enter the workplace at all**



## Resources

### Best Practice Guidance

The Government Equalities Office, Women Returners and Timewise have created best practice guidance for employers. This offers practical advice and information on every stage of designing and running a returner programme, from setting out the business case, to designing programmes with flexibility built in.

### Returners toolkit

The Women's Business Council and the Government Equalities Office, supported by Vodafone UK, produced a Toolkit for employers in supporting returners back to the workplace. It also includes case studies from organisations that run returner programmes, encouraging organisations to benefit from each other's experiences.

### Remote Working Solution

Vodafone UK's Remote Working Solution helps businesses adapt to their employees' remote working needs such as Vodafone Device Manager Cloud (VDM Cloud) and 5G-ready Vodafone Red tariffs. Vodafone also provides a flexible working e-book to help guide businesses into flexible working practices.



## Tackling digital exclusion

Technology can play a huge role in supporting returners, both in terms of keeping them in contact with employers while away and also through upskilling, which can give returners a confidence boost as they re-enter the workplace, and in enabling them to have greater flexibility once they have returned.

Technology is a frequently cited barrier for returners, but it can also be an enabler to help reintegrate them. The pace of technological change has exponentially increased in recent years, and more so in the past year as technology has been, during lockdown, crucial to keeping many businesses moving.

Our polling showed that one-quarter of respondents expressed concerns about falling behind their peers in terms of technology specifically. Perceived loss of digital skills is a significant barrier for returners and employers need to be mindful that time away from work does not necessarily equate to a loss of digital skills, and that this can be easily overcome through training. However, ONS research found that less than 15 per cent of firms provide technology training to employees who are not technology specialists.<sup>22</sup>

Both Government and employers should prioritise supporting returners in their digital skills especially as technology will be increasingly relied upon in the workplace. Employers should also consider the important role that technology can play in supporting a more flexible way of working, which could greatly support returners who have childcare responsibilities. High-quality digital connectivity across the UK must underpin this increased use of technology, with Government support to create the right policy and investment environment for digital rollout.



# Chapter 4: Policy recommendations

## Recommendations for employers

We believe that employers should set an example and encourage them to consider the following measures where possible:



- **Employers should adopt enhanced parental leave policies and be transparent about their care and parental policies, particularly in the recruitment process.** Adopting an open and enhanced approach to parental and caring leave helps to destigmatise requiring leave and reduce gender inequality in the workplace, allowing more women to stay in the workforce if they wish. Providing non-birthing parents with a larger amount of leave also encourages more men in particular to take on caring roles, while making those who already have caring responsibilities feel recognised.



- **Employers should reflect on the benefits of remote and flexible working during the pandemic and, where suitable, continue with these practices post-COVID-19.** While every organisation will have different needs, the home working seen by many employees during the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that not every role requires a physical presence in the workplace five days a week. Employers should reflect on the benefits that remote and flexible working have for many employees and consider how they can continue to incorporate such changes moving forward, including through the technologies that will help support this, in a way that works for both the employer and employees. One-size-fits-all will not work for all employees and organisations, however for some returners this greater flexibility would help support them back into the workplace.



- **Employers should be open-minded in the recruitment process.** Employers should be more flexible about 'gaps' in people's CVs and shift the focus of the recruitment process towards recognising the potential and relevant experience of those who have had time away from work, and away from insisting on continuous service. This will help prevent those returning from a career break from being overlooked.



- **Employers should create support systems for returners and, where applicable, those on a career break.** Employee networks can help bring together returners and allow them to share their experiences, while buddying and mentoring can provide returners with the support they need when rebuilding their confidence. Providing training to line managers to support returners will also help ease their transition back into the workplace.



- **Employers should provide training for returners on new workplace practices and technology.** Training sessions, either before return or upon return, on new workplace practices and technologies will help to make returners feel more confident and supported, as well as help to improve their performance.

## Recommendations for the Government

The Government should also consider the following:



- **Ring fence part of the National Skills Fund to help returners.** The £2.5bn National Skills Fund is aimed at supporting adults to train and gain skills to improve their job prospects specifically in sectors such as construction, healthcare and digital. The fund focuses on SMEs as one of three areas of particular focus. We would encourage the Government to ring fence part of this funding for those returning to work after a career break, with an emphasis on supporting SMEs to develop returner programmes in particular, as this group of employers might not have the capacity or means to provide such programmes, including training for returners and for hiring managers.



- **The Government should work with employers to introduce a help to return toolkit.** We recommend that the Government works with employers to crowd source ideas to determine what kind of support they and employers could provide in supporting employees return to work. This could include best practice from organisations that already offer returner programmes, information on training opportunities for returners and, for those seeking to hire returners, advice on recruitment processes to most effectively attract returners.



- Government support for SME technology adoption and digital infrastructure rollout.** Given the importance of technology in supporting flexible working, Government should support SMEs to access the latest technology. This should include both software and hardware, and could be implemented through a voucher scheme, tax incentive such as the salary sacrifice scheme, or grant to employers and/or carers. The Help to Grow: Digital programme announced at Budget 2021 is a good start and should be expanded to include incentives to encourage SMEs move to newer, more efficient mobile technology, including 5G, which would help support more flexible forms of working. Government support for the digital infrastructure to underpin this technology is also required, to complement the significant progress already made by the industry. The importance of connectivity has been accepted by the UK Government, as highlighted by the laudable 2025 Gigabit broadband commitment and support for the Shared Rural Network. There is more to be done, however, to take advantage of the technology available now and in the future. Existing government programmes to support gigabit-capable networks must continue apace and the Government also needs to commit to change the current investment and policy model to free up the resources that will be needed to drive technology rollout and adoption.



# Endnotes

- 1 HMRC (2021) Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme statistics: February 2021
- 2 Government Equalities Office (2018) Quantitative analysis of those returning to the labour market following a break to care for others
- 3 Lost Connections Supporting carers in the workplace in 2021 and beyond, March 2021
- 4 PWC (2016) Women returners: The £1 billion career break penalty for professional women
- 5 Government Equalities Office (2018) Quantitative analysis of those returning to the labour market following a break to care for others
- 6 HMRC (2021) Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme statistics: February 2021
- 7 Government Equalities Office, Women Returners and Timewise
- 8 IFS (2020) A State Pension Age of 66
- 9 Lost Connections Supporting carers in the workplace in 2021 and beyond, March 2021
- 10 PWC (2016) Women returners: The £1 billion career break penalty for professional women
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- 12 Carers UK (2020) Carers Week: 4.5 million become unpaid carers in a matter of weeks
- 13 HMRC (2021) Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme statistics: January 2021
- 14 TUC (2021) TUC poll: 7 in 10 requests for furlough turned down for working mums
- 15 McKinsey & Co (2020) Women in the Workplace 2020
- 16 Lost Connections Supporting carers in the workplace in 2021 and beyond, March 2021
- 17 Government Equalities Office (2018) Returner Programmes: Best Practice Guidance for Employers
- 18 PWC (2016) Women in Work Index
- 19 Tech Pixies (2019) The Confidence Gap Report
- 20 IFS (2016) The Gender Wage Gap
- 21 Government Equalities Office (2018) Returner Programmes: Best Practice Guidance for Employers
- 22 ONS (2020) Technology intensity and homeworking in the UK



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