Written evidence submitted by Women Returners Ltd.

The barriers & some solutions to women returning to work after an extended career break

Women Returners is a UK coaching, consulting and network organisation which specialises in the return to work of professional women after an extended career break. Women Returners advises companies on designing returnships and other returner programmes, delivers returner coaching and both supports individuals and provides access to the returner talent pool via their Professional Network. In our experience, women face multiple barriers when trying to return to work in the corporate world after an extended career break. These barriers in turn have an impact on the pay that women receive when they do return. We will set out these barriers, with evidence from women in our Network, together with some of the solutions we have created and promoted in the UK since 2014.

Part A. Barriers to re-entering the workforce following an extended career break

1. Unconscious bias from recruiters and hiring managers towards women who are older than average, who are typically mothers and who lack recent experience. http://www.theguardian.com/women-in-leadership/2015/mar/23/the-five-things-i-want-to-tell-employers-about-women-returning-to-work

2. Bias against people who have been out of the workforce, even for as little as six months: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/15/unemployment-discrimination_n_3085686.html

“The biggest challenge was justifying the long-term career break. Indeed, I was discouraged by one head hunter I had approached. In addition, so much is done online these days that a 7 year ‘career break’ can be easily disregarded. So I completely wrote off the option of going back to the financial sector, because I would not have ‘ticked’ the right boxes. Importantly, I think it is easy to assume people haven’t developed during their break, and I was concerned that I wouldn’t be able to qualify the different learning experiences I had during my career break. For example, I became a governor at a local primary school, which I feel helped me to hone my negotiation skills and deal with occasional difficult situations.” Carmen

3. There are no recognised routes to return, in contrast to graduate and experienced lateral hiring.
“Although there were times when I wondered if the endless meetings I was going to were a waste of time, I persevered and was ultimately successful in landing my ideal role at a blue chip company. I had also applied for numerous jobs online and via headhunters but got nowhere – networking really was the only useful route.” Rachel H

4. Standard recruitment processes don’t allow for gaps on a CV, especially if applications are screened by a computer.

"I began to approach companies and apply for project management roles but very soon realised that... my CV gap WAS an issue...Convinced (and reassured by my work experience) that if I could ‘get my foot in the door’ I would be able to demonstrate my career break wasn’t an issue and that I could be productive working flexibly, I had nevertheless hit a wall!” Rachel T

5. Recruitment agencies believe that employers won’t look at returners because of their CV gap.

“At first I began discussing a return to the banking sector with a headhunting firm. However, they claimed they couldn’t help me because of the gap in my CV. In their view, banks wouldn’t be interested in hiring me because I no longer had relevant contacts and was unfamiliar with the altered regulatory environment.” Adriana

“After 2.5 years at home with 2 children, I... unsuccesssfully applied for a few advertised roles – I found that... recruiters questioned my commitment to work.” Julia

6. There are only a few specialised agencies for candidates who are seeking flexible work. The first Timewise Index, published in June 2015 shows that jobs advertised with flexible options account for only 6.2% of all jobs with a salary over £20,000 (FTE). The demand for these flexible jobs far outweighs the supply. [http://timewise.co.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2015/05/Timewise_Flexible_Jobs_Index.pdf](http://timewise.co.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2015/05/Timewise_Flexible_Jobs_Index.pdf)

7. Lack of flexible working options in general make it hard for women to combine work with their other responsibilities.

“Working part-time is very common in the Netherlands and I was expecting this to be the same in the UK. However, it was much harder than I expected it to be to find suitable work.” Carolien

“The thought of returning to [architecture] practice, where hours are long and workload unpredictable, seemed impossible now that I had a whole
new life at home that had not existed before. Working late and on weekends had never been a problem before children but now with the school day ending at 3:15 it seemed, in my mind at least, impossible to make it work. So I gloomily resigned myself to fact that I would never work again in my profession and busied myself with local voluntary work.”

Judith

8. Cost of childcare can be prohibitive for some.

**The impact of these barriers on pay for returners**

There are severe impacts on the pay that returners can receive when they ultimately return to work after a career break because of these barriers.

1. After time out of the workforce, women are less aware of the value of their skills in the marketplace and so do not know what salary is appropriate. There is a lack of transparency about salary levels in many professional fields.
2. With the difficulty in finding a role, a sense of gratitude to an employer can result in an unwillingness to negotiate for an appropriate salary.
3. Returners may work for no salary, for a short period, in order to gain relevant experience that can help with finding paid work. This period of working for free contributes to the pay gap.
4. Many returners compromise on salary in order to work part-time, but then end up working the same hours as full-timers, just not being paid for these.

"I became very bored at home so after a year took a role as FD of a PR consultancy. It was supposedly 3 days a week but I ended up working 5 days & being paid for 3. I resigned and became a non-executive director, recruiting my replacement and working a few days a month.” Julia

**Part B. Solutions**

The work we have been doing at Women Returners to create supported routes back to paid positions at a suitable level provides a variety of models that corporate and other employers could adopt.

1. **Returnships**
   
   Concept
Returnships are higher-level internships for experienced professionals which create a supported bridge back to senior roles. The programmes typically run for 10-12 weeks, are paid at a professional level and have the possibility of an ongoing role on completion. Participants work on assignments relating to their professional skills, experience and interests. In most cases they receive support in the form of mentoring, networking, training/coaching and a supportive peer group (as most programmes have more than 1 participant).

Returnships were pioneered in the USA in 2008 in the banking sector, with the first UK programmes launched in 2014. We have championed the introduction of these programmes and their extension into new sectors. In 2014 there were 3 programmes, all in banking, with 37 participants; in 2015 there have been 9 programmes (5 in banking, and 1 in each of construction, tech, law and accounting) with 93 participants. Totals for 2014-15 are 12 programmes and 130 participants. Growth rates are increasing - for 2016 a further 6 returnships have already been announced. Alongside the larger organisations, there is also now some take-up among SMEs (ReturnPath and Cameron Barney). An up-to-date list of returnships, with related links to programme details, is provided here.

The benefits to participants and business are as follows:

- For participants, they provide a clear route back to suitable corporate roles, which overcomes the ‘CV gap’ barrier to recruitment. They can update their skills, knowledge & networks which helps to boosts the confidence and self-belief which typically is lower after a long career break. It also gives them a trial period to consider their return-to-work decision
- For businesses, they can target a relatively untapped group of highly-qualified & experienced professional women. This helps them to increase gender diversity at more senior levels and to address experienced hire talent gaps. Their recruitment risk is also reduced through the trial period and they obtain a skilled temporary resource. In the longer-term, demonstrating a commitment to more flexible career paths can increase the retention of their current female employees

In terms of addressing the gender pay gap, what is most important is that the participants on these programmes typically take post-returnship jobs at the same or a similar level to when they left the workforce, rather than being forced to take a lower role as a means of re-entry.

Participant profile
UK participants to date can have taken career breaks ranging from 18 months to 17 years, usually for childcare but occasionally for elder care, relocation or health. They all have prior professional experience. Ages
range from mid 30s to early 50s. All programmes have been open to men and women but there are far fewer male applicants and only one programme (Lloyds Bank) has hired men. 96% of participants have been female.

**Success evaluation**
Programmes can be evaluated on a number of dimensions:

- **Conversion rates.** Where data is available, UK returnships have a 50-100% conversion rate to permanent roles. The Tideway Programme had 100% roll-over into ongoing roles, Lloyds Bank reported 85% & Credit Suisse has had over 50% globally.
- **Level of re-entry role.** Most relevant for this evidence is that the women have returned at a suitable level of seniority, rather than having been forced to take a more junior role due to their lack of recent experience
  "I was appointed as a Managing Director, the same level as I was prior to my career break, so I have not had to take a step down in my career progression at all." Julia

"At the end of the program, I was offered an ongoing role as a Director in Public Policy.” Adriana

- **Positive experience of participants.** Participants have reported the benefits of being supported back into a permanent senior role.
  "It was an amazing experience for me and a real bridge to return into the financial sector, which otherwise would have proved a challenge.” Carmen
  "With an instant support network of fellow returners and Tideway and Women Returners providing sound advice and great mentoring and coaching support, the transition to back to full time work was made to feel almost seamless.” Rachel

- **Access to flexible/part-time roles.** The three month trial period puts participants in a stronger position to negotiate part-time or flexible roles than external job applicants. Many returnship participants are now working on part-time or other flexible schedules. Without this flexibility, these women might not have returned to paid employment.
  "I work 3 full days a week in the London office and school hours from home every Monday. For me this is the perfect balance: I can spend some time with my kids in their schools two days out of five and I like going into the London office where I’m able fully to focus on my work.” Carolien

- **Positive experience of businesses.** Two of the three companies who pioneered returnships in 2014 have now included them in their annual recruitment. Credit Suisse has just launched their third programme. The Head of HR at Tideway stated that response to the programme was ‘universally positive’, with managers learning to ‘look at the skills not the gap’ and seeing a ‘new source of great talent’.
2. Supported hiring

During 2015, Women Returners developed an innovative hiring concept, termed ‘supported hiring’, to enable organisations to bring returners directly back into open roles. The companies involved highlight that one or more of their experienced hire roles welcome applications from returners; if the successful candidate has taken an extended career break, then they will be provided with coaching through the transition period. For the companies involved this increases their available pool of talent; for the women returners, this creates a more level playing field when applying for corporate roles where previously their career gap would have been a major barrier, and also provides them with re-entry support.

We launched the initiative in July with two SMEs, one of which (MV Ventures) hired two experienced senior women. In September we launched a larger-scale programme with M&G Investments, M&G Career Returners: M&G Investments are evaluating all of their open roles for inclusion in this programme on an ongoing basis. Of the first two roles advertised, one was filled by a woman returner. This is both providing women with a level playing field in terms of applications for experienced hire roles, and giving them support with their return to work to increase the likelihood of success.

Summary

Both returnships and supported hiring are tools to address the gender pay gap for the over 40s because they provide a supported route back to suitable senior roles in large organisations and SMEs for highly-qualified women who have taken an extended career breaks. They address many of the barriers women currently face in resuming their careers after many years out of the corporate world and are mutually beneficial for returners and businesses.

4 December 2015