

HOW TO MAKE YOUR RETURN TO WORK A REWARDING ONE

Self-doubt and a sense of isolation can often affect 'returners' to the workplace. But there are ways around this



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Organisations are facing a talent crisis. This is most evident at the mid-senior level and is in large part a legacy from the recession and a shift in generational priorities.

Hiring people with experience, skills and potential has become a competitive, time-consuming practice that can, at times, force employers to compromise on hiring criteria.

What is really needed, however, is a change in mindset among those who hire to include those returning to a career after some time out of the workplace.

People take career breaks for many different reasons, such as redundancy, career change or a move to family care roles. A return to work is typically activated by a desire to reignite one's professional ambition and commit to a renewed career goal.

From a psychological perspective, regardless of the reason for them, such transitions can trigger self-

doubt, a sense of isolation and loss of professional identity.

How can individuals and organisations actively manage this transition and create environments in which returners and organisations can thrive?

As Business Psychologists, I've been privileged to work with many future-focused organisations that see real value in creating specific "return to work" induction & development programmes for this desired, yet often overlooked, talent pool.

So what are return-to-work programmes?

Typically, they involve:

- **Orientation:** detailing the roles available and the firm's organisational culture, and hearing from executives and prior returners.
- **Self-awareness:** Personality and strengths profiling.
- **Development workshops:** Resilience and confidence building, focusing on encouraging a 'growth mindset'.
- **Practical tips:** CV and interview preparation, presentation skills insight and advice on developing a support network.
- **Career development planning:** Articulating a clear personal purpose and galvanising your career goals.
- **Ongoing development support:** Tailored knowledge and skills development opportunities.
- **Coaching & mentoring:** Individual and group coaching/mentoring.
- **Job offers:** Organisations offering returner programmes want to hire experienced, skilled individuals ready to give their best to a new role or career.

We recommend that people considering a return to work focus on opportunities with organisations that

understand and support the unique challenges 'returners' face after a period out of the workplace.

Where there is no formal returners programme available, look for a well thought-through development support system with opportunities to upskill, regular manager interaction and mentoring by others within the team or organisation.

Preparing to return to work with confidence

There is no 'one size fits all' approach but these preparation pointers encourage a confident mindset:

1. **Name your motives:**
Write down the reasons why are you returning to work, your values, long-term career goals and the aspects of work that are most important to you. These should inspire and guide your transition.
2. **Name your concerns:**
Break down negative feelings into specific concerns so that you can prioritise and address them. These often relate to a fear of the unknown, a concern that your experience and skills are outdated, or a worry that things will have moved on so fast in your absence that you will never catch up. Every new job brings up skill and knowledge gaps, so redirect your attention on those areas you do have control over.
3. **Fill the gaps:**
In dealing with your top priority concerns, what we see again and again is that knowledge breeds confidence.
What practical steps can you take now to gain knowledge of the industry, company or skills required for a desired role?
This could involve meeting with people from the industry, attending networking events or

conferences, reading the latest thinking in the field, or taking courses to upskill in specific areas.

Making the most of opportunities

As part of an active job-hunt, preparing for interview isn't just about your CV or the role description. It can also include the following:

1. Reframe your experience:

Look at your CV or professional experience, as well as other aspects of activity in your personal life. How are these transferable? Identify experiences that demonstrate personal resilience, overcoming challenges and your ability to adapt or enable positive change within an organization. This will also give you confidence in your own ability to succeed in a new role.

2. Sell your signature strengths

Identify the signature strengths (e.g. commitment, passion, motivation) that you bring to an organization and practice how you articulate your experience in a way that highlights these strengths.

3. Consider culture carefully

Many people have a legitimate concern about how they might fit into the organisational culture. Our experience is that every workplace has its own unique climate. Before you interview or join look for insights to help you assess if it's a fit.

Ask current employees and industry contacts - but be aware that no one point of view is complete.

Most companies have published corporate values on their website. While these are often

aspirational, they will indicate areas of importance to the organisation's leadership. Think about how your experience or professional behavior align with these values.

4. Be clear about entry seniority

Our preparation pointers will help you make a strong case to retain seniority. However, sometimes people returning to work enter at a lower seniority level than they left in order to make a re-entry easier.

Before you interview for roles, be clear how much of a step back are you willing to accept and weigh up the possible development benefits. Ask at interview how can you regain that seniority with a clear career development path and about specific opportunities for development and training.

Making your return a success

Once you have secured a new role, it's vital to keep your inner critic at bay. There will be moments of self-doubt but there are practical things you can do to help drive your success:

1. Agree expectations

Set goals with your manager and establish regular connection and feedback meetings.

2. Confront gaps

Discuss development areas or skill gaps openly with your manager and create a plan for developing these areas. This transparency will build partnership in your career development.

3. Find mentors and build alliances

Seek out people who have returned to work or who know the organisation or industry well to help you navigate the transition and advise on

career development with your best interests in mind.

4. Leverage your strengths

Work to your strengths. Find your niche and believe in what you have to offer – experience, agility and resilience.

5. 'It's not me, it's you'

Your first role back in the workplace may not be the right one. The role itself, your development path or the culture may not be as expected. Talk to your manager and to HR. Agree a timeframe for resolution, and if things don't improve, allow yourself to move on. It does not mean you have failed. Learn from the experience and bring that knowledge, experience and resilience to the next opportunity!

There is huge untapped potential for both returners and for agile, inclusive hiring organisations willing to think and act differently in order to access, secure and retain scarce talent.

From our experience working with both returners and hiring organisations, formal returner programmes and similar inclusive development programmes are key to making these a success for both the individuals returning to work, and organisations hiring them.

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