
Workingmums.co.uk roundtable: **Returners**

The roundtable, held on 28th February and hosted by sponsor FDM Group, brought together diversity and recruitment specialists from 20 organisations to discuss the challenges relating to returner initiatives. The aim of the roundtable was to share best practices and influence policy and practice in an area which has attracted a lot of attention in recent years. The roundtable was introduced by Gillian Nissim, founder of workingmums.co.uk, who spoke about the organisation's commitment to sharing and promoting best practices in diversity and flexible working.

She introduced Jennifer Holmes, Head of the Getting Back to Business Programme at FDM, who said that the company is the market leader in the recruit, train and deploy sector and is currently listed as a FTSE 250 company. FDM trains business and IT consultants before placing them on client sites for a minimum of two years. Holmes said the company has an award-winning Careers Programme including: a graduate programme - the company says it is one of the UK's leading IT graduate employers; an ex-forces programme, which has launched the careers of over 600 former service men and women globally; and a returners programme for people who have taken a career break of more than a year. Moreover, Holmes stated, the company's Diversity and Inclusion team, headed by Madeleine Field, has made big inroads into social mobility and inclusivity.

The roundtable was chaired by Anna Meller, a work life balance consultant and author of #Upcycle your job.

Employer experiences: making the business case

UBS kicked off the conversation, saying its Career Comeback programme was fully embraced by senior management and its Diversity and Inclusion councils were promoting it. One aim is to get

Workingmums.co.uk roundtable: **Returners**

more women into senior roles and on the rung below senior management.

UBS spoke about the origins of the programme which involves returners being directly employed into roles and offered ongoing support. It started in Switzerland three years ago. Women who had been on career breaks were keen to come back to part-time jobs. The programme was a success and has since spread to three other locations - the UK, the US and India. This year UBS is doubling the number of cohorts it takes on. Returners have had a career break of at least two years. They have an extensive onboarding programme with internal and external facilitators, focused on giving returners all the tools they need to start in their new role. Onboarding includes meetings with senior heads of divisions, peer coaching and hands-on support in setting up IT systems. The onboarding is followed by a nine to 12-month programme (length depending on locations) with an external coach as well as senior lunches to give returners a chance to talk to senior managers and each gets a mentor in the organisation and a buddy in their team. UBS is broadly looking for people with at least five years' experience, ideally at managerial level, with some financial experience.

Other employers then spoke about their programmes. Skanska has run a 12-week return to work programme for the past four years. Most returners are women, though not all. It targets areas where there are specific skills shortages such as quantity surveying. The programme has brought in high quality candidates at middle management level which is helping build the pipeline to senior level. Some candidates have been promoted and all placements are for roles that need to be filled immediately. Its experience is that returners are quite quickly accepted and that returner programmes work out cheaper per candidate than using a recruitment agency. Skanska also sells it on a 'try before you buy' basis and emphasises that there are a lot of benefits compared to the typical way of hiring.

Workingmums.co.uk roundtable: **Returns**

Fidelity run a 20-week programme, but do not hire for specific roles. Their aim is to attract people who are leadership-ready and have transferable skills. They work with Women Returners and have had some success in getting returners into more senior roles.

Morgan Stanley has been running its returner programme for six years in nine locations and has a Return to Work alumni group, which is very supportive. To ensure they do not miss out on returner talent outside of the recruiting period for the programme, they will also hire returners directly into permanent vacancies. These supported hires get a coach and a mentor in recognition that they will benefit from having support and time to readjust. Morgan Stanley says it is important to ensure that the work culture normalises career breaks and presents returners as an experienced resource. Senior returners also presented good role models for younger women and sent out a powerful message on diversity.

FDM Group launched their returners programme initially in Hong Kong in 2015, followed by a Singapore programme in 2016 and has been running programmes in London, Glasgow, Leeds and Toronto over the past two years. FDM's seven-week training course aims to refresh the skills of returners and to increase their confidence. FDM regularly holds insight evenings to give returners the opportunity to find out more about the programme before they apply. FDM says it has launched the careers of over 130 returners and that most are expecting a permanent offer from their placement client once they complete the two-year programme.

Bank of America Merrill Lynch is one of the pioneers of returner initiatives in the UK. It has consciously chosen to move away from the returnship model. Instead it offers a three-day conference with coaching given by an external provider.

Workingmums.co.uk roundtable: **Returners**

This is preceded by a rigorous screening process. From around 400 applicants, 25 are invited to take part and they create a cv book of candidates and speak to hiring managers before the conference, doing advance matchmaking.

At the conference, candidates are given opportunities to network with managers. Hiring teams are briefed and if returners are hired, they are given a mentor and there is peer support from the returner cohort. They want to increase the support offered as part of the onboarding process. The returner team encourage and support candidates to apply for vacancies, promote them to managers in their weekly calls about new roles and put them in front of people who might have vacancies in the future. The conference is held in London in February, in Dublin in May, in Chester in September and in Paris in November. About 20% of the cohort is hired. The programme has two very senior sponsors who cascade the message down and there is a lot of internal promotion through the intranet as well as case studies highlighting success stories.

Other employers were running small-scale or pilot programmes or considering setting them up and were interested in the support other more experienced employers offered. Pepsico runs a small programme which it piloted last year with a robust induction process and mentors and this was helping to shift people's mentality around returners. It had hired more returners as a result. For smaller employers it was suggested returners could be supported in similar ways to those returning from maternity leave.

Attracting returners

Employers agreed finding returners could be difficult so sites like workingmums.co.uk were invaluable. The quality of returners was amazing and the supply of quality returners outstripped

Workingmums.co.uk roundtable: **Returners**

returner opportunities. Some employers worried about how they could attract the best returners.

Skanska put out generic adverts about their programme and match people up to roles. They get amazing cvs and have to fit them to business needs. The resourcing team is trained to find where people will fit best. It was important to be open to candidates and not to underestimate their quality.

UBS echoed this, saying when people inside the business see what the candidates can do it changes their mindset. Some of their candidates are international and are willing to relocate.

Given confidence can be an issue, Morgan Stanley said it was important to get across that the employer is genuine about wanting to attract returners, to really make an appeal to them and to make returners feel valued as soon as they start the programme. Showcasing previous returners was very powerful. Employers could use LinkedIn and other social media to attract candidates. Reaching out directly to people can make a difference as returners may be unconfident about applying. It was argued that employers need to go out to returners and facilitate conversations.

Some employers offer returner events or insight days to attract candidates. These tend to focus on soft skills such as cv writing and using social media and allow candidates to see the culture of the organisation. The events demystify the journey back to work and make it more of a smooth transition than a sudden shock.

RBS have engaged alumni to support participants during their programmes. They will be looking into how they could use testimonials from alumni at the advertising stage.

Workingmums.co.uk roundtable: **Returners**

FDM holds an insight day where candidates can assess the company and the work environment as well as determine whether they are ready to return to work after talking to other returners. Through this event, they are able to get a better idea of what going back to work actually means.

Employers also discussed the importance of using previous returners to address issues such as maternal guilt and other concerns candidates might have and put them at their ease. For those who don't have previous returner cohorts, maternity returners could be a source of support.

Fidelity uses social media to attract candidates. Most have previous experience in financial services, but Fidelity would like to see a wider cross sector pool since all the banks were fishing in the same pool and were not maybe getting the diversity of experience they wanted. However, they ran up against hiring managers who were concerned about head count and nervous about hiring someone who had not done the job before. It was important to make the case for diversity of thought. That was why Fidelity emphasises the 'try before you buy' 20-week returnship.

Getting hiring managers on side

Persuading HR managers about the value of hiring returners is not difficult, but getting hiring managers on board is harder. They often don't want to take risks. However, according to FDM many are now beginning to see the value of hiring returners. The way to persuade them is by showing the skills returners have and how they often overachieve by huge margins and by talking about how they can help close the skills gap through providing access to a new talent pool. That way, employers are not just poaching from competitors and moving the skills gap around and driving up wages to incentivise candidates. Employers also need returner champions

Workingmums.co.uk roundtable: **Returners**

who can change the way hiring managers view returners and appreciate their soft skills, resilience and loyalty.

Others spoke of the need to show the many reasons people might expect to take a career break in the course of their career, particularly as our working lives get longer. Talking more generally about breaks would help to get everyone on board and have wider appeal.

Head count restrictions were a big problem for several employers and made them cautious. Managers needed to be encouraged to be brave and take a leap of faith.

Morgan Stanley echoed that an open mind was essential and Pepsico cited a woman with retail experience who had got a permanent marketing role within just six weeks of returning. Such examples opened up minds. It was also important to let candidates know about different returner opportunities, not just their own programme in order to build their confidence. It was a good thing for all employers to encourage women back to work and to normalise career breaks.

There was also a general discussion about promoting returners to clients and the supply chain. Employers said they were talking to their clients and making the case for returners and that they were also speaking to organisations like workingmums.co.uk to spread the word about the benefits of hiring returners. Having someone who runs the programme and understands the issues returners face means they can make a strong case to clients, including smaller ones.

The assessment process

There was a discussion of the assessment process and how to marry up the need to assess

Workingmums.co.uk roundtable: **Returners**

candidates' ability to fit into a fast-paced business where they were expected to deliver quickly and the need for a softer approach that drew out the range of skills they had.

FDM has two sets of interviews. The first one focuses on the returners' soft skills and cultural fit as well as the skills they have acquired during their career break as well as their resilience to change. The second interview is more focused on their technical skills and how they react in a working environment.

Morgan Stanley focuses on competency-based questions and encourages returners to use problem-solving examples from outside work which may be more recent than ones they have acquired before their career break.

Employers said they had tweaked their assessment process to draw out the skills returners had from being on a break and the fact that their experience is different from other candidates. It was important to ensure interview panels were diverse and that there were women on them.

Supporting returners

Rebuilding confidence was an important issue. FDM said initial family support was important, as was celebrating all the skills returners have. A lot of the time returners are told to hide their career break, but FDM puts a lot of effort into rebuilding returners' confidence.

They mentioned that often those who have had the longest career breaks do the best on the programme as they have a broad range of experience. They tell returners to be proud of their career break, to put it front and centre on their CVs and to focus on their transferable skills. "We

Workingmums.co.uk roundtable: **Returners**

don't talk enough about what our returners can do," said Jennifer Holmes, Head of Getting Back to Business at FDM Group.

UBS uses coaches to build confidence by showing that the skills they have gained are useful and valued.

One of the participants from Morgan Stanley had been out of the workforce for nine years and was now in a senior global role. She said it was important to make the case that returners have all the skills they had before they took a career break in addition to skills they accrued during their break - such as emotional maturity and an ability to work with a diverse range of people. These were important management attributes.

Morgan Stanley says being honest and having conversations throughout the onboarding process is important so that employers can check candidates are reassured. Encouraging the cohort to stay close is also key as they will support each other, as is having a contact person for the programme who returners can talk to about any issues they may have.

In the UK and Switzerland, UBS does two-four hours of peer coaching for the returner cohort approximately every six weeks with an external coach. That lets returners know that they are not the only ones with anxieties and concerns. Letting returners know about any additional employee support networks was also important.

FDM's coaching is done in-house and the first week of training focuses on the individual, as often the reason for their career break has meant that they have been entirely focused around someone else. They are asked to do a presentation as well to build confidence and public

Workingmums.co.uk roundtable: **Returners**

speaking skills. The rest of the training period is tailored around the skills they need to succeed as a consultant on-site.

Participants said it was important to encourage people to be authentic as that helped to boost their confidence. They were split between those who used external providers to do coaching and those who did it in house or used both, for instance, external coaches for confidence and resilience building and internal resources for business skills and knowledge. UBS says interactive sessions with senior business leaders mean returners often have a better understanding of the bigger picture than their colleagues when they start in the team.

Everyone agreed that support was important through buddies, mentors, sponsors and coaches and that it was important to also support hiring managers so they understood the challenges returners faced.

The future: normalising recruitment and support of returners

To change attitudes to returners in the long term, employers said it was important to have great role models and champions and to get executive buy-in - Sheila Flavell, Chief Operating Officer of FDM Group, for instance, is a huge advocate for women in the workplace. It was not just about increasing numbers because even a small number of hires could change attitudes and show that a company has an emotional investment in getting people back to work and was open to different types of experiences and career paths. Companies who offer returner programmes can become diversity advocates. It was important, therefore, to use returners as ambassadors for the programmes and to change the conversation from being about getting mums back to work to being about professionals who have taken a career break.

Workingmums.co.uk roundtable: **Returners**

Participants also spoke of the need to reward or celebrate managers who were open to hiring those with different career pathways, for instance, by including it in management goals so managers were assessed on it and potentially financially rewarding it. Anna Meller said by rewarding different behaviour you encourage it to continue and that doing so shows an organisation is serious about it.

Conclusions and takeaways

Participants emphasised the quality of candidates and the need to reach out to them and to recognise their different career paths and the range of skills they had to offer. That meant not just getting senior buy-in, but also training hiring managers to understand the concerns they might have. Numbers on returner programmes may be small and some employers may only be able to offer supported returner posts rather than a whole programme, but by highlighting the quality of the candidates more widely this could help change the conversation about career breaks. Given career breaks for all sorts of reasons were likely to become more common and employers were facing severe skills shortages in many areas, it was important for them to be open to a wider talent pool than they have been traditionally.

Making the business case:

- > Helps to get more women into middle and senior management roles
- > Addresses skills shortages
- > Brings diversity of thought due to their different experiences
- > Returners are very loyal
- > You can 'try before you buy' so it is better than traditional recruitment
- > Returners are an experienced resource

Workingmums.co.uk roundtable: **Returners**

Attracting and hiring returners:

- > Use alumni from returner cohort groups as role models and ambassadors. They can also act as diversity advocates. Those with no returner programmes could consider using maternity returners as role models.
- > Be open-minded
- > Reach out via social media and insight events as confidence can be low
- > Try different types of interview techniques to drill down to the range of experience they have
- > Smaller employers could consider supported hiring where returners are hired and offered mentors and an onboarding process
- > Train hiring managers so they are aware of the challenges facing returners
- > Emphasise returners' wide range of experience and encourage them to use examples from outside the workplace if these are more recent and immediate
- > Provide coaching, mentors, buddies and sponsors as well as an alumni cohort group

Normalising returners:

- > Consider including supporting returners in management goals and financially rewarding these
- > Share best practice with supply chains and clients.

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