

# External Return-To-Work Programs Impact On Women Relaunching Their Careers

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**Abstract:** Women have higher drop-out rates during their professional careers, mainly due to family, child, or elderly care; furthermore, they have more difficulty returning to the workforce even if they are highly qualified, making the future of gender equality in the workplace a continuing challenge. Thus, encouraging women to re-enter the workforce after a career break makes sense from a gender perspective and, at the same time, can also add value to the economy by providing qualified and diversified resources to companies (large ones or small-medium-sized enterprises, or SMEs). Additionally, this encouragement can have short- to medium-term positive effects on career-break women who would like to return to the workforce, as well as long-term effects due to lower or no pension contributions during their career break. The aim of this study is to identify the push and pull factors affecting women's ability to return to the job market after a career break. Moreover, the purpose of this study is to understand what has been studied about the impact of return-to-work/returnship programs (RTW) and externally provided return-to-work programs (RTWE) in helping bring back women to the labor market. The research is qualitative and exploratory, based on a literature review. The findings of this research provide an overview of relevant factors related to women's return to the market and allow for new research avenues on RTWE's outcomes for both women and small and medium-sized enterprises. In terms of originality, the goal of this research is to encourage data-driven debates about the potential implications of women's return-to-work programs as a strategy to help women return to the workforce and whether this strategy can be adopted by different-sized companies.

**Keywords:** Women, Career Break, Return-to-Work, Returnship, re-Entry

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## 1. Introduction

The debate about gender diversity and equality is in vogue, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDG, 2023) highlighted it with Goal Number 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. This study focuses on this goal and addresses an emerging topic: returnship/return-to-work programs (RTW) and return-to-work programs externally provided (RTWE) and how they can help women go back to the workforce. Scientific evidence is limited, but its preliminary findings are promising and contribute to new insights on how to improve equality in the labor market and society at large.

In 2022, Portugal was ranked number two in global talent shortages (Manpower, 2022). This country was wasting a talent pool: qualified (high-level skills, education, and experience) women who, in most cases, chose to take some time off their careers to take care of their families (e.g., children, elderly, disabled, and/or support a partner's job). When these women decide to return to the job market, they have a hard time finding their way back into the workforce. The Portuguese Statistics National Institute's (INE) data from December 2022 shows that 53% of unemployed are women, compared with 48% in December 2011 (INE, 2023). Additionally, of the 78,2 thousand people unemployed with at least a bachelor's degree, 68% were women. Not encouraging numbers for women, which represented 59% of university graduates in 2021 (PORDATA, 2022), 40% of corporate middle managers, 16% of top management, and 6% of CEOs (McKinsey, 2023). These neglected, qualified resources have a negative economic impact when society loses the opportunity to put their talent to good use.

But why do women decide to take a career break? A study about women in Portugal (Sagnier & Morell, 2019) shows that women with children have six daily extra hours of work (apart from their labor working hours) when compared to only 3,5 for women without children. Furthermore, 31% of women mentioned that they adapted their professional lives to their personal lives. Within this group, 84% reduced their working hours and/or rejected new challenges, while 16% took the drastic measure of leaving their paid job. It is important to mention that this study was brought out right before the COVID-19 pandemic, which made the overall situation even more challenging.

And Portugal is not alone. McKinsey and Lean In's report demonstrates that in the USA, women represented 48% of entry-level career levels, 40% of middle-level positions, and 27% of C-level positions. Even though these

numbers have improved since 2016, it indicates that a large portion of women either do not get promoted to higher levels and/or leave the workforce. Moreover, managing both family and careers became a more difficult task as the COVID-19 pandemic increased pressure on women, with a higher percentage of women opting out of the workforce compared to men. Furthermore, ManPower Group's report (2020) indicates that millennials expect to take more breaks during their professional lives compared to their parents, and when asked about the reasons for that, women state their breaks will be for the birth of their child (61% compared to 32% of men), child care (33% vs. 20% of men), care for parents and aging relatives (30% vs. 25% of men), and return to education or gain new skills (23% vs. 21% of men). These data support the idea that gender equality inside companies will continue to be a challenge, with clear results for the economy.

To start balancing gender inside companies, Zimmerman and Clark (2016) suggest that two issues should be tackled. First, the number of women deciding to opt out must be reduced. Second, schemes to bring women back to work must be in place. Those schemes vary from career development and retraining workshops to placement schemes, postgraduate studying, mentoring, and reduced fees for society memberships and/or conferences (Panteli and Pen, 2010) and, more recently, tryouts (Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019). Tryouts for qualified career breaker are called return-to-work (RTW) or returnship (Cohen, 2012, 2021; Sterling and Merluzzi, 2019) or RTW externally provided (RTWE) (Cohen, 2012). The primary focus of this research is on the latter type of scheme as well as to understand what the push and pull factors are that affect women when opting back into the labor market.

## **2. Methodology**

This study was based on a literature review. The keywords used in the databases (Web of Science, b-on and Google Scholar) were "returnship, return-to-work program, career break, opt-in, and opt-out". Keywords "women/females" were not included since these programs are mostly focused on women, so the use of these words would be redundant. Initially, the first author looked into 56 research articles, books, and reports. As an emerging field, the authors wanted to have a broader perspective on what has been studied in this arena in different countries, even if it was not published in top journals. Subsequently, the author selected academic journals no less than Scimago Q3 to guarantee that, on the one hand, a broad scholar perspective was encompassed, and on the other hand, selected papers had quality peer-review process. After reading the first set of papers, additional 19 research papers were selected based on their citations in the Reference section of the first set of papers. This process led to a second round of papers being reviewed. Ultimately, the analysis included 48 documents (27 academic papers, eight reports, three books, and ten online articles), and 20 papers were discarded from the conclusions, mostly due to low relevance.

## **3. Theoretical Foundation Results**

### **3.1 Career and Career Break**

The traditional professional career concept was generally described as a series of hierarchical moves from an individual in general within a single organization. But as the world evolved, so did the career paths, and in the last 30 years, many career models have been described. Arthur et al. (1998) described the principles of a boundaryless career where men and women would not limit their career to a single company, field of expertise, or job but rather move across boundaries between employers and/or work units within employers, rejecting the traditional career opportunities for reasons related to work or nonwork. Baruch & Peiperl (1997) proposed the "post-corporate career," which represented a career as being dynamic, horizontal rather than vertical, and even multidirectional. Later, Hall (2004) described the "protean career" as an evolution of the traditional concept where not the organisation but the individual is responsible for their own path based on their personal values and subjective measures of success. Afterwards, Arthur, Khapova and Parker (2009) described the "intelligent career framework" as a career based on three mutually dependent "ways of knowing," indicating how, why, and with whom people work. Finally, Mainiero & Sullivan (2005) proposed the "kaleidoscope career model (KCM)," which stated that men and women make job decisions based on three career values: authenticity, balance, and challenge, which vary in significance over time.

Zimmerman & Clark (2016) have synthesized the three career values that women have during their professional careers (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). They proposed an integrative framework for women's off-ramps and on-ramps in the workforce, including the three phases of women's experience during a professional career break (opting out, career break, and opting-in). The term "opt-out" refers to the exodus of professional women from

the workplace (Belkin, 2003). In addition, this expression characterizes the worrying talent drain of highly educated women, often working moms, who choose not to pursue positions in corporate executive suites (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005).

A career break is a time when an employee is not working for specific reasons (Institute of Physics, 2004). It may be a voluntary or involuntary decision, and it can vary from a few weeks to years. The main reasons for these career gaps are maternity leave or time off to look after children, disabled and/or elderly relatives. Other reasons may include involuntary interruption of employment, returning to full-time education, military service, accompanying a partner on sabbatical leave, or on a foreign assignment. When women return to the workforce, the terms used are opting-in or re-entry (Cabrera, 2007). Most women opt to return to the workforce mostly when personal lives stabilize (e.g., children grow older and/or elderly family members do not require more assistance) or they need to receive payments.

In this case, is it simple for women to return to the workforce? The answer is clear: no. In Portugal, the USA or UK data show that it is not easy to return to the labor market (Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019; Gicheva & Keohane, 2018). Some women, but also men, who decide to return to the workforce are called returnees or relaunchers. These concepts refer to experienced workers who, in the past, were mid- to senior-level professionals, then had an extended career break (more than a year) and wanted to return to work (iRelaunch, Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019). Despite the fact that the impact of COVID has helped to normalize career breaks, professionals who took a longer break still struggle to reenter the workforce. Longer time away from the labor market, especially more than two years, reduces substantially the ability to reenter the workforce (McCrary-Ruiz-Esparza, 2023). The official launch of returnship programs in 2008 by Goldman Sachs started to bring some light at the end of the tunnel for this group of women (Cohen, 2012).

### **3.2 Returnship – Return-to-Work Programs**

A tryout is a hiring arrangement to select candidates for full-time positions (Sterling and Merluzzi, 2019). Tryouts in general run typically during weeks or months, and selected candidates are given the chance to do job-related tasks inside the organization and demonstrate their competencies and skills alongside other regular company employees before being selected as a regular full-time employee. Modern-day tryouts are also called alternative hiring arrangements and can be split among four different types: first, internships for early-career professionals (mainly college-educated workers); second, temp-to-perms for temporary workers (mid-to-low workers); third, returnships or return-to-work programs (RTW) for mid-career professionals or experienced workers who have taken a career break; and fourth, contract-to-hire for specialists and mid-to-high-wage workers. Sterling and Merluzzi (2019) suggested that tryouts have three dimensions: relational (tryout worker-regular employees and tryout worker-organization), psychological (outsider with potential to join the organization), and economic (compensation and legal protection according to the fixed contract).

RTW are short-term programs (three to six months) tryouts that are run mostly by large multinational corporations (Cohen, 2012, 2021) and some public agencies (e.g., Utah Return, 2022). Women from different backgrounds join these programs, but most of their education is linked to information technology, engineering, and management. RTW started in the USA with UBS and Lehman Brothers in 2005–2006 and spread to other companies and countries (Timewise and Women Returnees, 2018), as its conversion rate (50–80%) to full-time positions of RTW participants is extremely high. One of the main reasons is the talent pool shortage, and “returnships 'de-risk' the hiring decision to the extent managers consider engaging with people coming off a career break as a high-risk proposition” (O'Donnell, 2018). Returnship programs have a specific application process, on-boarding and introduction sessions, technical training, professional development and exposure to senior management, mentoring, and, in general, are paid with the potential for definitive hiring at the end. Work during this period in general relates to a specific project, but recently direct hires for normal job assignments are being done (Cohen, 2012, 2015, 2021). RTW gives some time for returnees to adapt to the workplace, and most programs run with cohorts of five to 25 people.

RTWE differs from RTW due to three characteristics: firstly, RTWE is run by an educational institution (Shaw, Taylor and Harris, 1999; Cohen, 2012) or by a non-profit organization that supports career breakers. This means that the short-term skill-building program involves an academic component (such as information technology, job search techniques, and confidence building) (Shaw et al., 1999) as well as real-world work experience in partner companies for participants' personal and professional development. Secondly, participants on RTWE are not necessarily paid (but participants don't pay to participate in the program). Thirdly, at the program's end, there is no option of being hired by the provider of the program, but potential partners where the project is

being done can hire and/or recommend the participants to be hired. Both RTW and RTWE allow companies (sponsors and/or partners) to know the professional on the job (leading to more informed decisions and higher motivation for hiring those candidates) when compared with only interview sets defined in the normal hiring process (where returnees in general lag behind other candidates).

Academic research has been conducted on RTW (Kaushiva and Joshi, 2020; Cohen, 2012, 2015, 2021), but not so much on RTWE. Still, there is some preliminary research exploring this program's results (Shaw, Taylor and Harris, 1999; Cohen, 2012), showing that RTWE helped women opt in and be happy with their new roles even though they were not necessarily at a level commensurate with their qualifications and experience, nor in their original professional area. Nevertheless, RTWE was the catalyst for their return to the labor market.

Most RTW are run by large corporations, but the backbone of the European economy are the small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are defined by the European Union as companies that employ less than 250 people and have an annual turnover of less than 50 million euros and/or a balance sheet total of less than 43 million euros" (EuroStat, 2022). These companies have more difficulty creating or running RTWs due to scale, but they can still benefit from hiring returnees from other RTWs or RTWEs (Timewise and Women Returnees, 2018). Additionally, since 2018, Women Returners (2021) has conducted cross-company initiatives in the legal, financial services, and professional services sectors. This new development makes it possible for SMEs to participate in a RTW program for smaller-scale recruiting requirements or to test the concept. Through this model, SMEs or large corporations can share learnings and expenses, as well as work together to broaden the diversity of hiring across the industry.

### **3.3 Push and Pull Factors of Returnees opt-in Decisions**

If a returnee wants to relaunch their career, what is needed? The definition of "ability to relaunch" is commonly used by companies working with RTW to define the skills and competences needed to relaunch their career, but no literature was found that combined in a single construct the factors that allow the ability to relaunch. Some of those factors include employability, self-esteem, and job search behavior (Cohen, 2016).

Employability is a psycho-social construct comprised of three dimensions: adaptability, career identity, and human and social capital (Fugate et al., 2004).

- Adaptability refers to the willingness and ability to change behaviors, feelings, and thoughts in response to environmental demands (Fugate et al., 2004).
- Career identity represents the way individuals define themselves in the career context and can be conceptualized as a 'cognitive compass' used to navigate career opportunities (Fugate et al., 2004), the "knowing why" (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994).
- Human capital encompasses the 'knowing-how' competencies (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994). 'Know-how' competences refer to career-related knowledge and abilities acquired via occupational learning and professional development activities.
- Social capital is the goodwill inherent in social networks (Fugate et al., 2004). In the context of work, information and influence provide individuals with access to career opportunities since they reflect the interpersonal aspect of employability, the "knowing-whom" (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994).

Mruk (2006) defines self-esteem as a certain attitude toward someone or something that has positive or negative cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions (i.e., the posture that a woman may have during an interview, which can be determinant of the success of obtaining employment). Job search behavior is described as a multidimensional construct composed of effort and intensity (i.e., the drive and regularity of a person's job hunt), quality of actions taken (such as writing résumés, networking, direct contacts, and interviewing), and persistence (i.e., how determined a person is in their job hunt along the way) (Manroop and Richardson, 2015).

If a returnee possesses these previous characteristics, is she able to opt back in? No, not necessarily since there are other factors that will push and pull these career-breaker women back into the workforce, but the overall message when someone decides to opt-out is clear: "Off-ramps are around every curve in the road, but once a woman has taken one, on-ramps are few and far between—and extremely costly." (Hewlett and Luce, 2005).

Returnees face six different push factors that will help them opt-in, namely corporate support, financial stability, personal fulfillment, personal life stability, and professional identity and growth. These factors are described in Table 1.

**Table 1: Push Factors**

Main PUSH Factors	Examples
<b>Corporate Support</b>	Corporate support from return-to-work agencies that offer a step-by-step guide to looking for a job, a job board of open positions on partner companies' returnship programs, and/or job fairs to present those career breakers to companies with this type of program. (Sterling and Merluzzi, 2019) ;
	Existence of role models that went successfully through the same process (Cohen, 2012);
<b>Financial stability</b>	Financial reasons (need to earn an income, become self-sufficient, and/or concern about a potential pension deficit impact) (e.g., Hewlett and Luce, 2005)
<b>Personal Fulfilment</b>	Desire for intellectual stimulation (Cabrera, 2007);
	Desire to increase self-worth and confidence through their profession and receive prestige and stature in the community. (Hewlett and Luce, 2005; Hewlett, Sherbin and Forster, 2010);
	Enjoy working (Hewlett and Luce, 2005; Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett, Sherbin and Forster, 2010).
	Give back to society and their community (Hewlett and Luce, 2005; Hewlett, Sherbin and Forster, 2010).
	Knowledge that they stayed up-to-date with developments in the industry and technology by working on projects, volunteering, attending conferences, staying involved in professional groups, or enrolling in classes during their career breaks (Cabrera, 2007);
<b>Personal life stability</b>	Caring for family members is no longer required or family-stabilized (i.e., children or elderly parents) (Cabrera, 2007);
	Return home after a spouse's job relocation (Cabrera, 2007);
	Support from family and friends to opt-in (Offermann <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Singh and Vanka, 2021)
<b>Professional Identity/ Growth</b>	An attractive offer that came up (Cabrera, 2007);
	Craving to reconnect with people they respect and work within a team (Hewlett and Luce, 2005; Hewlett, Sherbin and Forster, 2010);
	Willingness for career advancement, including training (most self-employed people don't take care of their own training and developing needs, even when they know what they need to train) (Cabrera, 2007).

At the same time, these women still face eight additional eight barriers (pull factors) to come back, namely confidence issues, corporate support, current economy, discrimination and bias, financial stability, networking challenges, personal life stability, and work-life balance concerns. These factors are described in Table 2.

**Table 2: Pull Factors**

Main Pull/ Barrier Factors	Examples
<b>Confidence Issues</b>	Lack of professional self-belief (PWC and Women Returners, 2016; Gicheva and Keohane, 2018);
<b>Corporate Support</b>	Lack of knowledge/ transparency of which company job vacancies have part-job opportunities (PWC and Women Returners, 2016; Gicheva and Keohane, 2018);
	A sense of not having enough opportunities for progress inside different organizations, mainly if working not in full-time working arrangements, and a top level that a woman can achieve a "glass ceiling" (Cabrera, 2007; Gicheva and Keohane, 2018);
	Lack of many role models in top positions (Cabrera, 2007);
<b>Current economy</b>	Potential currently difficult economic situation (Cabrera, 2007);

Main Pull/ Barrier Factors	Examples
<b>Discrimination and Bias</b>	Prejudice against older age (Cabrera, 2007);
	Bias against career breakers: they are less competent and technically obsolete than someone who is currently working (Cohen, 2016; Gicheva and Keohane, 2018; Sterling and Merluzzi, 2019). Stigma starts from the moment that a career gap is seen in the CV, mainly when periods out of the workforce are longer (Cabrera, 2007). "You get 100 applicants, and often those with a career break go to the bottom of the pile or off to the side. Either consciously or unconsciously, there are biases" (Agovino, 2019);
	Risk-averse mentality due to widespread perception that even for high-performance women, career breaks erode their skills, requiring an update of their skills and knowledge (including technological and industry trends) (Cabrera, 2007; PWC and Women Returners, 2016; Gicheva and Keohane, 2018; McCrary-Ruiz-Esparza, 2023);
	Previous experience with discrimination against women in the workplace (Cabrera, 2007);
	Disrespect for potential company culture (mostly masculinity organisational cultures, which involve high competitive levels, zero-sum views of power, and hierarchical relations) (Cabrera, 2007) ;
<b>Financial stability</b>	Quality, affordability, and convenience of childcare (Gicheva and Keohane, 2018) or other family care requirements (i.e., for the elderly);
<b>Networking Challenges</b>	Lack or reduced access to a professional network that will help to find a job and when starting a new position (Cabrera, 2007; PWC and Women Returners, 2016);
	The requirement of networking occurs when events for networking are in general later in the day, making it more challenging to balance work and family lives (Offermann et al., 2020);
<b>Personal life stability</b>	Need for continuing to care for family members, i.e., children and the elderly (Cabrera, 2007);
<b>Work-Life Balance Concerns</b>	Lack of companies' flexible working conditions (hybrid or online) or part-time or flexible roles in quality roles (Cabrera, 2007; PWC and Women Returners, 2016; Gicheva and Keohane, 2018; Offermann et al., 2020) resulted in women accepting under-skilled positions with lower salaries to have those working arrangements.

#### 4. Discussion

Tryouts for qualified career breaker are called RTW or Returnship (Cohen, 2012, 2021; Sterling and Merluzzi, 2019) or RTWE (Cohen, 2012). The primary focus of this research was to understand what has been studied about the impact of RTW and RTWE in helping to bring women back to the labour market. Companies are finding that these women career breakers can bring many advantages to their businesses. Returnees are workers who understand the culture and expectations of the workforce (O'Donnell, 2018) and have huge previous valuable experience. They bring gender and background diversity to companies' teams, which has already been proven to bring better business decisions, higher competitiveness, and shareholders' value. Government policies were created, for example, in the UK, but there is still not much research on the impact of those policies. In other countries, such as Portugal, no research was found, even though two RTWs were launched in the past two years and an RTWE was launched three years ago.

Moreover, the purpose of this study was to understand what the push and pull factors are that affect women when opting back into the labour market. From the analysis, six push factors were identified in the literature. Specifically, factors related to support and stability (e.g., stable personal life, family/friends support, and corporate support) and to psychological-motivational characteristics (e.g., need for personal fulfilment, professional identity/growth and need for financial stability). On the other hand, these women face eight barriers (pull factors). Individual barriers such as confidence issues, the need for personal life stability, work-life balance, and financial stability were identified as critical barriers. Furthermore, barriers can also be related to the current labour market, such as challenges to networking, discrimination and bias, a lack of corporate support, and the potential current economic situation.

## 5. Paths for Further Research

This study is relevant because it addresses an emerging topic for which there is little scientific literature. As suggested by Sterling & Merluzzi (2019, p.10) in their research agenda paper “Across the alternative hiring arrangements (AHA) typology, the least studied form of tryout is the returnship, with some industry reports suggesting career returnees may have more than a 50% chance of receiving a permanent offer. Yet, this has not been systematically studied by scholars.” Furthermore “We need to learn more about the experiences of returnees, both in the workplace and their home life”, and understand what are the results of returnships in women’s life even when they don’t get a direct offer from the returnship company that they have worked with. An enormous avenue for future research has opened. From a business perspective, returnees and RTW/ RTWE offer a strong business case to fulfill talent vacancies, but there is still a huge scholar potential to be explored to better understand the impacts of returnships and return-to-work externally provided on different types of companies (large corporation or SMEs) as well as different geographies that companies are located.

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