THE COMEBACK WORKFORCE: A STUDY OF RETURN TO WORK (RTW) PROGRAMS IN INDIA

AXIS BANK

HCLTech

Morgan Stanley

wipro

the UDAITI foundation

CEDA | Centre for Economic Data & Analysis

About

Through our Women in India Inc. project, in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Center for Economic Data and Analysis (CEDA), we are spotlighting organisations that have demonstrated excellence in gender representation. This series of case studies focuses on selected private-sector organisations that have recently emerged as positive outliers in their respective sectors. The goal is to document gender-inclusive practices in the workplace by unpacking their gender-inclusive hiring, retention, and advancement practices and policies, inspiring others to adopt similar systematic approaches to bridge the gender gap.

The Udaiti Foundation

The Udaiti Foundation (TUF) is building data-backed evidence to accelerate Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) in India. Udaiti focuses on improving the availability and accessibility of quality work for women, addressing barriers to women's work and entrepreneurship, and strengthening enablers that can create impact. We aim for every Indian woman to achieve her full economic potential as it will be a critical lever to help India become a $10 trillion economy in the next decade.

Centre for Economic Data and Analysis

The Centre for Economic Data and Analysis (CEDA) has been set up by the Economics Department of Ashoka University with the primary objective of facilitating informed and data-driven discussion about key socio-economic developments in India. CEDA's in-house data portal hosts data from various administrative and official surveys covering fields including demography, employment, public finance, food prices and high frequency macroeconomic indicators. The data is supplemented with deep-dive analysis covering various dimensions of critical issues relating to the Indian economy. In addition to these, CEDA is currently working on an ambitious project to understand and find ways to overcome the demand-side barriers that are keeping women out of the workforce.

Women in India Inc.

'Women In India Inc.' (WIIn) is a collaboration between CEDA and TUF as a part of a larger CEDA project on women's economic empowerment. With the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, CEDA has embarked on a wide-ranging project to understand and find ways to overcome the demand-side barriers that keep women out of the workforce. To achieve this, we at CEDA are taking a three-pronged approach – Inform, Investigate, Intervene – in order to enable women's entry, retention and progression in India's workforce. Visit https://ceda.ashoka.edu.in/womens-econ-empowerment/ for more details.

Inside this Story

Executive Summary

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> *"I am working in one of the Indian IT companies and just joined back after months of maternity leave. I've been on the bench, trying to find a project and it doesn't seem to be going well. Not a lot of openings in the tech I worked on, especially since I am looking for work-from-home opportunities for a few more months. I am not in a state to work in something entirely new, with a baby to take care of. I am contemplating quitting completely, maybe upskill/reskill in the meantime and search for a job when I am ready. Is this possible, will I get a job after a long break, in a technology I have no experience in, or should I hold on to my current job and manage somehow?"*
>
> *Source: Reddit r/developersindia*

Social media forums are full of such posts from women seeking advice and support on returning to work after a career break, most often for reasons related to maternity. The challenges they face are many: hesitation from recruiters wary of the employment gap, loss of professional networks due to the break, self-doubt, possible gaps in technical knowledge. India exhibits one of the widest gender disparities in employment, with female labor force participation (LFP) among the lowest globally for countries with comparable per capita incomes[1]. Among individuals aged 25-60, nearly 93% of men are active in the labor market, whereas only 27% of women are engaged in the workforce. The magnitude of this gap and the factors contributing to it—such as work-family laws, policies, labor market institutions, gender stereotypes, and societal expectations—vary across countries, reflecting the influence of cultural and structural frameworks on women's economic outcomes[2]. A recent report by Avtar estimates that approximately 7 million women in India are seeking employment after taking a career break[3]. There is a significant untapped talent pool of women eager to return to the workforce but lacking the necessary skillset. It is crucial not only to identify these 'second-career women'[4] but also to understand the myriad challenges that keep them out of the labor market and explore opportunities to facilitate their reintegration.

Return To Work (RTW) programs, also called returnship programs, come as a ray of hope—they play a pivotal role in reintegrating experienced professionals into the workforce, particularly women returning after a career break. In the past five years, there has been an increase in well-

1 Afridi, F., Bishnu, M., & Mahajan, K. 2019. What Determines Women's Labor Supply? The Role of Home Productivity and Social Norms. SSRN Electronic Journal
2 European Institute for Gender Equality. (2020). *The gender equality index 2020: Digitalisation and the future of work.* European Institute for Gender Equality. https://eige.europa.eu/resources/wcms_371804.pdf
3 Avtar. *Second Careers of Women Professionals.* 2023. https://www.avtarinc.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/second-careers-of-women-professionals.pdf
4 Ibid.

structured RTW programs across sectors in India. In this report, we examine the evolving landscape of these programs with a focus on the IT/software, banking, and financial services sectors.

This report identifies six key pillars of execution that Indian organisations have leveraged to develop effective RTW programs:

1 **Leadership Buy-In**
Securing leadership buy-in is essential for the success of any Return-to-Work (RTW) program. Senior leaders must champion these initiatives, acknowledging their strategic value in advancing diversity and inclusion. Companies like Wipro and Axis Bank set a strong example by integrating diversity hiring into their leadership frameworks. For instance, Wipro partners with leaders to establish connections with women returning to the workforce, fostering an environment that supports their transition and growth.

2 **Outreach and Recruitment Strategies**
Effective outreach ensures programs tap into the rich but often overlooked pool of experienced talent. Companies like HCLTech have implemented tailored messaging campaigns and dedicated microsites to attract returnees, focusing on both technical and non-technical roles.

3 **Refresher Training & Skill Development**
Addressing skills gaps is essential for returnees to reintegrate confidently into the workforce. Axis Bank, for instance, has a tailored training program that values transferable skills gained from caregiving.

4 **Role Mapping**
Strategically mapping roles for returnees ensures alignment with organisational needs as well as employees' career aspirations. Programs like Wipro's 'Begin Again' focus on increasing representation in technical roles, ensuring returnees contribute meaningfully to areas critical to organisational growth.

5 **Pathways to Progression**
Clear pathways to career progression motivate returnees and reinforce the

organisation's commitment to their long-term success. For example, Morgan Stanley provides structured internships with performance-based assessments, allowing participants to transition into permanent roles and advance within the company.

6 **Measuring Outcomes**
Defining and tracking key metrics is vital for evaluating program success and sustainability. Across organisations, metrics such as retention rates, promotion opportunities, and participant performance provide actionable insights to further refine and scale such RTW programs.

How do career breaks impact men and women differently? What specific challenges do women face when attempting to re-enter the workforce after a career break? Furthermore, given that many women express a desire to return, how can their reintegration be effectively facilitated to ensure both personal growth and professional success? What is the business case for hiring returnees? We answer these questions and examine the above six pillars of execution in greater detail in the following sections.

Methodology

This report has been developed using a combination of primary and secondary research methods over a six-month period, from March to October, 2024. It aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of a sample of RTW programs in the IT, finance, and banking sectors in India using both qualitative and quantitative data.

Preliminary research was conducted to identify organisations across sectors that have established successful structures and frameworks for RTW programs and were willing to contribute to this report with data and insights.

1 **Literature Review**
The team analysed publicly available materials such as annual reports, and industry articles. This secondary research helped contextualise the findings from primary data and offered a broader understanding of RTW programs within the industry.

2 **Document Analysis**
The team reviewed a range of internal documents provided by the eight participating organisations. These documents included diversity statistics, overviews of RTW programs, and organisational structure details, which provided valuable insights into the operational and strategic aspects of the programs.

3 **Semi-Structured Interviews**
The team worked to establish networks and conducted in-depth conversations with program heads from the participating organisations to understand the design and evolution of the RTW programs.

It must be noted that the sample, though representative of key sectors and organisations of different sizes, is small, and thus the findings may not be fully generalisable across all industries. Additionally, while efforts were made to ensure the accuracy of secondary data, the availability and accessibility of certain documents were restricted. All research was conducted under a non-disclosure agreement to protect sensitive company information. Worker names and personal identifiers have been anonymized to safeguard privacy.

Gender & Career Breaks

According to an analysis from LinkedIn's Economic Graph team,[5] nearly 43% more women, globally, have listed a career break on their profiles compared to men—with the most commonly cited reason being full-time parenting. For men, this is only the seventh cited reason, coming

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5 How career breaks differ for women

after retirement, career transitions and professional development. Women's work patterns are largely a result of their circumstances, available opportunities and constraints, as well as the decisions they make in response to these factors.[6] Women take multiple breaks in their professional trajectory due to various circumstances, with 44% citing childcare as the reason, followed by caring for elderly parents or other family members (reported by 24%) and personal health issues (9%).[7]

According to 2021 World Bank data, around 31% of women in India leave the workforce, particularly within the formal sector, for various reasons, with the majority engaged in informal jobs or burdened with unpaid domestic responsibilities.[8] The Time Use Survey (TUS) 2019 conducted by the National Statistics Office (NSO) of India highlighted how on average women dedicate 299 minutes per day to unpaid domestic services, while men spend only 97 minutes.[9] Many of these women face significant challenges in restarting their professional journeys. The impact of career breaks on women's lives and the wage penalty they face upon returning to work has been extensively studied. Shoba, Thankam, and Vani (2004)[10] explored how career interruptions affect women's earnings, while Avellar and Smock (2003)[11] and Petersen et al. (2011)[12] conducted comprehensive research on the wage penalties women incur when taking time off for motherhood. Men, by contrast, do not suffer a penalty when they become fathers. In fact, there's evidence of them getting a "fatherhood bonus" in which their earnings actually increase post-parenthood.[13]

While parental leave offers job protection, it does not shield employees from the negative effects that career breaks can have on advancement, pay and other aspects of working life.[14] Since women are three times more likely than men to take career breaks for caregiving duties, a clear gender and motherhood penalty emerges, contributing to the underrepresentation of women in hiring.[15] A 2023 survey of hiring managers[16] conducted as part of The Udaiti Foundation's (TUF) Women In India Inc (WIIn) initiative revealed that women with identical academic, professional, and personal backgrounds to male candidates are 24 percentage points less likely to be hired if they have taken a career break.

Despite these challenges, many women are eager to return to work, with 60% expressing a preference for balancing family and career, viewing any shift in priorities as temporary.[17] Globally, a study reveals that 93% of highly educated stay-at-home mothers eventually wish to reenter the

6   Damaske, Sarah, and Adrianne Frech. "Women'S Work Pathways Across the Life Course." Demography 53, no. 2 (2016): 365.. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-016-0464-z.
7   Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce, "Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success," Harvard Business Review, March 2005, https://hbr.org/2005/03/off-ramps-and-on-ramps-keeping-talented-women-on-the-road-to-success.
8 World Bank. (n.d.). Gender Data Portal: India. World Bank Group
9 Press Information Bureau. (2020, October 29). Time Use Survey 2019. Government of India.
10   Shobha, A, Thankum G.A., Vani B.K. (2004)'The effect of career breaks on the working lives of women', Feminist Economics, 2004, vol. 10, no. 1, pp, 65 – 84
11 Avellar, S., Smock, P, (2003), Has the Price of Motherhood Declined Over Time? A Cross-Cohort Comparison of the Motherhood Wage Penalty, Journal of Marriage and the Family, 65, pp 597-607
12 Petersen, T., Penner, A., Hosgnes, G. (2011), The Male Marital Wage Premium: Sorting Versus Differential Pay, ILR Review, 64, pp 285.
13   Williams, W., & Astone, N. M. (2021). Motherhood penalties and fatherhood premiums: The family-work nexus. Demography, 58(1), 247-267. https://doi.org/10.1215/00703370-8594966
14 Fitzenberger B, Steffes S, Strittmatter A (2016) Return-to-job during and after parental leave. Int J Hum Resource Manage 27(8):803–831
15 Applied, Research Study, March 2023
16 https://backend.udaiti.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/docs1-1.pdf
17 Catherine Hakim, 2000, Work Life-style choices in the 21st century: Preference Theory

workforce.[18] However, fewer than half succeed in securing roles that align with their prior experience, highlighting the difficulties many women face when rejoining their careers after a break.

Reasons for Re-entry

Women's motivations for rejoining the workforce after a career break vary widely, ranging from a desire for financial independence to the pursuit of personal fulfilment and self-actualization.

1

Financial necessity

The desire for financial independence and the pressures of dual-income households are major drivers for women returning to work. A 2019 study by Avatar on career aspirations of second-career women found that both financial security and the opportunity to apply their education were the primary motivators, each cited by 38% of respondents. The growing need for financial security is particularly relevant in the context of rising living costs, while 22% of women expressed a desire to return to work to make better use of their education. Only 2% cited financial independence as their sole reason for re-entering the workforce.[19]

2

Changes in family dynamics

As children grow older, they require less intensive care and supervision, which can alleviate the burden of caregiving that falls on women. Improved support systems, such as reliable childcare, family assistance, or community resources provide women with the help they need to balance work and family responsibilities

3

Personal fulfilment and career development

Many women place a high importance on work and have a strong sense of work centrality, which refers to the belief in the value and significance of work in their lives. This work centrality often manifests in feelings of emptiness or a sense of loss when they're not working, highlighting the deep identification with their professional roles.[20]

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18 Sylvia A. Hewlett, Carolyn B. Luce, 2005, Harvard Business Review, Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success
19 Avtar. Second Careers of Women Professionals. 2023. https://www.avtarinc.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/second-careers-of-women-professionals.pdf
20 Srinivasan, V., Murty, L. S., & Nakra, M. (2013). Career persistence of women software professionals in India. Gender in Management: An International Journal, 28(4), 210–227

Challenges to Re-Entry

A report from NASSCOM, India's industry association for the information technology and business process management sector, published survey data showing that employee referrals and on-campus recruitment are more gender-balanced modes of recruitment than, for instance, online job portals. Policies relating to parenthood also play an important role in promoting gender diversity. The survey found that the cost of maternity leave was not the key issue, but rather the low rate of return to work and managing changing work patterns after returning.[21]

A common challenge faced by returnees, especially those with a career gap of a few years, is the perception of outdated skills, particularly in fast-evolving industries like technology. The career gap stigma is especially prevalent in India where recruiters may view women with career breaks as less desirable candidates.[22]

India presents a unique context where both gendered social norms and limited organisational reskilling efforts exacerbate skills gaps for women. As companies often prioritise short-term hiring strategies over long-term skill development further limiting women's access to skill-building opportunities. Evidence concurs[23] that this gap is particularly evident among lower-skilled workers, as they are more likely to be replaced or sidelined during extended leave periods. High-skilled women, however, tend to retain their roles due to the firm-specific human capital they bring, which makes them more valuable to employers even post-childbirth. Additionally, firms facing a shortage of skilled labour may be more inclined to retain high-skilled women, whereas low-skilled positions are often easier to refill, making continuity for these workers less certain without protective policies like maternity leave.

Workplaces with traditional views on gender roles and lack of maternity support may cause women to feel isolated, undervalued and unsupported. Women in India, particularly those in urban settings, are more likely to leave the workplace due to a lack of sufficient support structures such as childcare facilities and a lack of flexible working hours. The issue is more prominent in sectors that are less likely to offer remote work or flexible hours.[24]

Women also face wage penalties and 'occupational downgrading',[25] leading them to reenter jobs for which they are overqualified or highly skilled. Studies show that pay gaps between the genders remain substantial in India, with women earning about 34% less than men in similar roles- a gap partially attributed to motherhood-related career interruptions.[26] An Aon study from 2024 highlights

21 Parvati Raghuram et al., Women and IT scorecard—India: A survey of 55 firms, NASSCOM and The Open University UK, spring 2017
22 LinkedIn reports that women quit their jobs for flexibility
23 Amin, M., & Islam, A. M. (2022). *The Impact of Paid Maternity Leave on Women's Employment: Evidence Using Firm-Level Survey Data from Developing Countries* (Policy Research Working Paper 10188). World Bank.
24 Thomas, Anil Jose and Sudhesh, N. T. (2023) "Travails of New Mothers Returning to Work in Corporate India: A Phenomenological Study," Journal of International Women's Studies: Vol. 25: Iss. 7, Article 11.
25 PwC. Women Returners: PwC Research (November 2016). PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP.
26 International Labour Organization. (2018). Global wage report 2018/19: What lies behind gender pay gaps. Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Office

that nearly 75% women reported career setbacks of up to two years following maternity leave and about 40% experienced pay cuts or role downgrades upon their return.[27]

This case study explores the progress and significance of returnship programs in India, informed by The Udaiti Foundation's discussions with eight private-sector companies. These programs, vital for skilled women re-entering the workforce, have evolved to address challenges like skill gaps and workplace reintegration. Once confined to specific industries, returnships are now available across diverse sectors, reflecting a broader movement toward workplace inclusion.This study examines the development, challenges, and successes of returnships in recent years and their role in promoting inclusive work environments.

The Case for RTW Programs

Organisations are motivated to introduce RTW programs for several reasons, all aimed at creating a more dynamic and inclusive workplace.

1

Access to Experienced Talent
Organisations often need experienced talent for various roles, and RTW programs tap into this valuable resource. Candidates with requisite experience, skills, and maturity offer a shorter lead-time to productivity due to their prior experience.

2

Cost Savings
A representative from HCLTech highlights the cost-saving benefits of hiring returnees over freshers, noting that RTW programs not only bring in skilled talent but also foster retention, creating a mutually beneficial situation for both the employee and the organisation. Additionally, many roles do not require full-time, on-site commitments and can be performed remotely. With more

27 Aon. (2024). Voice of Women 2024-2025: India. Aon. https://www.aon.com/apac/asia/voice-of-women-2024-25

organisations adopting flexible work arrangements, including remote work, these programs also offer further cost savings through reduced workspace and physical resource utilisation.

3 **Retention and Loyalty**
RTW programs can foster a sense of loyalty and commitment among participants, as they often feel grateful for the opportunity to re-establish their careers. This can lead to higher retention rates and a more dedicated workforce.

4 **Enhanced Organisational Diversity**
There is significant research[28] that establishes the organisational benefits of having a more diverse and gender-balanced workforce. Mid-career exits contribute to the leaky pipeline phenomenon, where the representation of women dwindles at higher levels. By facilitating re-entry, organisations can improve gender diversity and create a more inclusive workplace.

5 **Reduced Hiring Risks**
RTW programs offer a trial period for both the employer and the returnee, allowing the organisation to evaluate the returnee's fit within the team and role before making a permanent hiring decision. This can reduce the risks associated with traditional hiring processes.

Understanding RTW Programs

The history of return-to-work (RTW) programs is rooted in the growing recognition of workforce gaps created by societal norms, career interruptions, and shifting priorities—especially for women. These programs evolved as organizations began to acknowledge the untapped potential of professionals who left the workforce due to caregiving responsibilities, personal reasons, or systemic barriers, and sought to create pathways for their reintegration.

In the 1960s-80s, more women began joining the workforce, but many left due to societal

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28 CATALYST. 2020. 'Why Diversity and Inclusion Matter (Quick Take)'

expectations, limited maternity leave policies, and a lack of workplace flexibility. By the 1990s, awareness about diversity and inclusion began to grow and companies began to recognise and address workforce gaps, including the loss of women who had taken career breaks. In the 2000s, the tech and finance sectors were among the first to formalize RTW programs, driven by their need for skilled talent and increasing awareness of gender diversity as a competitive advantage. Two early examples are Goldman Sachs' 'Returnship' (2008) and IBM's 'Tech Re-entry' (2016), which set the tone for structured programs offering training, mentorship, and paid internships for returnees.

Returnship as a concept, though largely adopted from the West, takes on a unique dimension in regions like India and Asia, where cultural norms, societal expectations, and regulatory frameworks significantly influence the experiences of individuals returning to work.[29] Mothers in East and Southeast Asia with partners and young children have significantly lower workforce participation rates compared to their counterparts in Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Sub-Saharan Africa.[30]

Even as cultural values evolve and more Asian women join the workforce, childcare responsibilities largely continue to fall primarily on mothers.[31] Additionally, unlike many Western countries, where regulated daycare centres allow parents to drop off young babies, childcare in many Asian countries remains predominantly home-based, typically provided by an elderly family member or a domestic helper. This reliance on a single caregiver poses challenges; if the caregiver is unwell or unavailable, parents—most often mothers—are left with no choice but to take leave from work to care for their child.[32] These factors necessitate tailored approaches in corporate RTW programs to address the distinct challenges and opportunities in these contexts.

The Current landscape in India

India is witnessing a positive shift toward accommodating returning mothers in the workforce. With the Maternity Benefit Act (2017) granting up to 26 weeks of paid leave, a strong foundation has been established for supporting women's career continuity. RTW programs are also on the rise, providing a pathway for women to transition back to full-time roles not only at large corporations like Amazon, Infosys, Wipro, etc. but also at mid-sized organisations like Razorpay, Udaan and Yubi.

HerKey, a pioneering Indian organisation dedicated to enabling women's workforce participation, partners with organisations to design and implement strategies that support the re-entry of

29 Compass Offices (20223). *'Motherhood and the return to the workforce – the unique challenges in Asian societies'*
30 Over 2 million moms left the labour force in 2020 according to new global estimates https://ilostat.ilo.org/blog/over-2-million-moms-left-the-labour-force-in-2020-according-to-new-global-estimates/
31 Women in the Workplace 2023 [https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace]
32 Compass Offices. "Motherhood and Return to the Workforce: Unique Challenges in Asian Societies." https://www.compassoffices.com/en/about-us/blogs/motherhood-and-return-workforce-unique-challenges-asian-societies/.

women into the workforce. According to the HerKey Benchmarking Report 2023-24 that studied 300+ Indian organisations,[33] the creation of RTW programs is a relatively recent trend that started around 2018. Just over a decade ago, less than 5% of Indian companies had RTW programs while it's grown to 35% today.

Year of Incorporation of Returnee Program in Companies

Total   Large companies   SMEs/startups
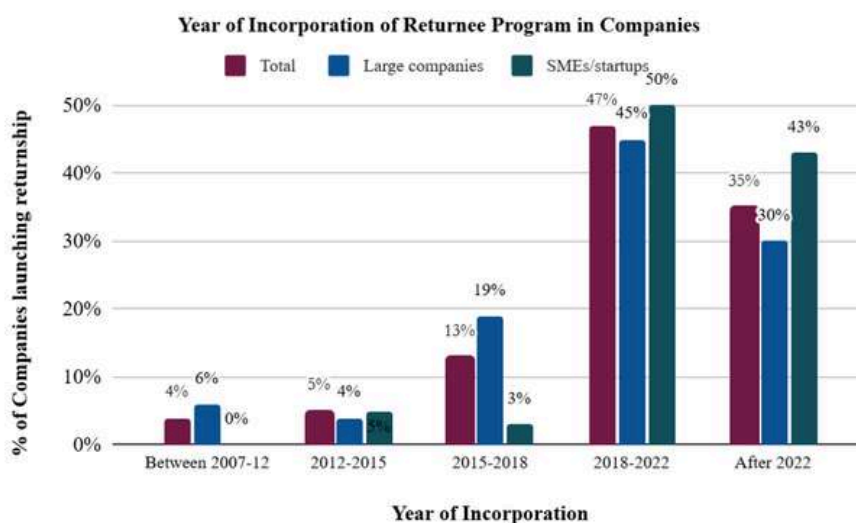
Source: HerKey Benchmarking Report 2023-24

The same report indicates that 61% of organisations see RTW programs not merely as a gender diversity initiative but as a key recruitment channel to source high quality talent for open job roles.

How Companies describe their Returnee Programs

All   Large Enteprises   SMEs/Startups
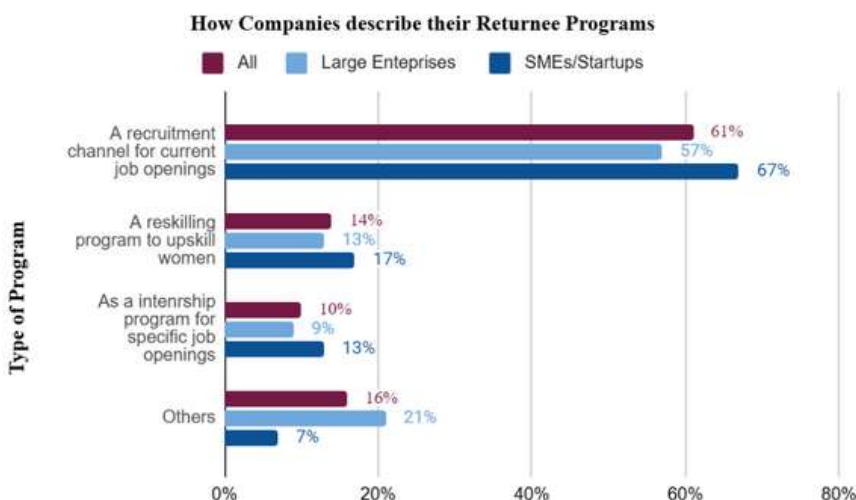
The structure of programs aimed at returning women professionals vary in terms of their length of engagement, scope and nature. Many of them begin with a paid or unpaid internship involving

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33 HerKey, 2024 | DivHERsity Benchmarking Report

training and hands-on work, with the opportunity to get placed in short-term projects or full-time roles afterwards. Sometimes, returnees are first placed in contractual roles or short-term projects to assess their skills while offering opportunities for training and career exploration. During this time, women can also evaluate whether they can balance the job with their personal responsibilities, such as raising children or caring for ageing parents.

Crafting an Effective RTW Program

Large and small organizations face distinct challenges in initiating RTW programs, largely due to differences in resources and structure. Large organizations, with more resources, can invest in comprehensive training and support for returnees but often face bureaucratic hurdles and inconsistent program implementation across locations. Small organizations, with limited funding and personnel, may struggle to sustain RTW programs and provide ongoing support. However, their agility allows for greater flexibility, enabling them to tailor programs to individual needs more easily than larger, more rigid organizations.

Based on our study of organisations running RTW programs, certain key elements consistently emerge as being crucial to success.

Leadership Buy-In

Securing leadership buy-in is the cornerstone of a successful return-to-work program. Senior leaders must champion the initiative, recognising its strategic importance to the organisation. When leaders actively endorse and participate in the program, it signals a commitment to diversity and inclusion from the top down. This support is crucial for allocating resources, setting objectives, and creating a culture that values returning professionals.

Wipro's 'Begin Again' program exemplifies how leadership alignment can drive the success of a return-to-work initiative. As a leading global IT company, Wipro launched the program to enrich its talent pool and perspectives by bringing women back into the workforce after a career break. The program enjoys active endorsement from all business unit heads, who are unified in their

commitment to diversity hiring. The Talent Acquisition team and the Chief Culture Officer act as key decision-makers, supported by the HR department that has undergone extensive preparation to evaluate and support returnship applicants effectively. Recognizing the importance of buy-in at all levels, Wipro sensitizes hiring managers and teams before each cohort's initiation. Leadership also champions cost analysis of the program, demonstrating that hiring returnees is as cost-effective as traditional recruitment channels. This discovery has further bolstered internal support for the program.

At **Axis Bank**, leadership buy-in for the 'Housework is Work' (HWIW) program is deeply integrated into the governance structure. Senior leadership, including the board, ESG committee, and Management Committee (MANCOM), collectively drive the program, ensuring that diversity remains a central focus within the organization's strategic framework. Regular presentations on the program's impact are shared with top executives, including the Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, reinforcing their accountability. This high-level engagement strengthens the bank's commitment to hiring returnship candidates, particularly in roles traditionally dominated by men.

For **Morgan Stanley**, leadership buy-in was pivotal to the success of its Return to Work program, which launched in New York before expanding to India in 2013. Introducing the program in India came with uncertainties about the readiness of the talent pool, but senior leadership's willingness to take a calculated risk highlighted their belief in the initiative's potential.

Outreach and Recruitment Strategies

Effective outreach and recruitment strategies are essential for the success of RTW programs. To tap into the vast pool of skilled professionals who have taken career breaks, organizations must create targeted messaging, accessible platforms, and streamlined processes that address the unique challenges faced by returnees. Tailored communication, brand campaigns, focused outreach and partnerships are some ways by which organisations can ensure their programs are visible and appealing to the right audience. Here's how some organizations have excelled in their outreach and recruitment efforts.

HCLTech launched its RTW program in 2021 with a clear focus on attracting experienced IT women professionals seeking to reenter the workforce. To reach this demographic, the company developed a dedicated website featuring FAQs on training, selection processes, program benefits, and qualifications. These qualifications were kept broad to ensure accessibility for

candidates requiring upskilling. The program emphasizes foundational technical and professional skills, alongside targeted training in emerging digital and development technologies to support career reintegration.

Since 2023, HCLTech has adopted a cohort-based hiring model, aligning cohorts with specific teams and skills, and gradually increasing hiring each quarter. To further enhance outreach, HCLTech created a dedicated application link supported by a strong branding campaign across various media platforms. The messaging was tailored to appeal to women returning from career breaks, highlighting the company's commitment to this talent pool. Initially, vendor partners were involved in recruitment, but their participation was paused to control costs. By focusing on direct applications and employee referrals, HCLTech generated sufficient interest while maintaining cost-efficiency.

Wipro's 'Begin Again' takes a similar approach, targeting women who have been out of the workforce for a minimum of six months. Recognizing the importance of accessible information, they too have developed a dedicated microsite for the program. This platform centralizes key details, manages candidate inquiries, and streamlines the application process, ensuring efficiency for both applicants and internal teams.

Morgan Stanley's RTW program has evolved significantly since its inception. Initially, the program relied on word-of-mouth referrals and generic recruitment websites to attract candidates, targeting women with career breaks who were eager to return to the workforce. As RTW programs gained traction and the marketplace matured, Morgan Stanley refined its approach. The organization now uses a global microsite integrated with its recruitment platform to streamline applications and provide detailed program information.

Beyond recruitment, Morgan Stanley fosters awareness and builds community through global cohort meetings, enabling RTW participants to connect with peers and feel part of a larger, supportive network. This sense of community reinforces the program's appeal and helps participants rebuild their confidence as they reenter the workforce.

A leading SaaS solutions company's RTW program, initiated around 2019–2020, was designed to address the "leaky pipeline" in female workforce representation. In its early stages, the program relied on WhatsApp campaigns and informal channels to recruit participants. Over time, the company expanded its outreach through digital and social media campaigns, referrals, and partnerships with external organizations. This multipronged strategy resulted in over 12,200 applications for the first cohort.

The program's recruitment process follows a three-phase approach:
1. **Preparation Phase:** Workshops focused on imposter syndrome, strength identification, and interview skills.
2. **Interview Phase:** Sensitized panels evaluated candidates with an understanding of return-to-work contexts.
3. **Internship Phase:** A 120-day internship provided practical training and mentorship in areas such as coding, testing, and customer service.

The program also partnered with SP Jain Institute to facilitate skill-building workshops, including leadership and analytical abilities. Its impactful design, which combines structured mentorship with robust outreach, has led to minimal attrition, high loyalty, and a stronger, more diverse workforce.

Refresher Training & Skill Development

These programs are built on the understanding that upskilling not only improves re-entry success but also enhances long-term retention and career progression. Research supports this focus: a recent survey revealed that 60% of women believe upskilling improves job prospects,[34] and the 2024 report 'The Changing Landscape of Skills'[35] found that 75% of upskilled women found it easier to rejoin the workforce. Here's how organizations are incorporating targeted training into their returnship initiatives.

Axis Bank's HWIW program, emphasizes the transferable skills gained from caregiving and household responsibilities and reframes these as professional assets. Training programs are customized to align with each participant's skill set and career aspirations, ensuring their successful transition into the workforce. This philosophy reflects a broader shift in recognizing and valuing non-traditional work experiences. The program has driven a 40% increase in hiring from alternative talent pools, with plans to reach 80% in three years.

The SaaS solutions company cited earlier prioritizes candidate confidence and preparedness through a comprehensive 7-hour pre-interview boot camp. The boot camp addresses common challenges faced by returnees, such as self-doubt, imposter syndrome, and anxiety about workplace relevance. Beyond technical readiness, participants benefit from counselling services, peer support groups, and stress management workshops.

The training framework extends into the program itself, with participants attending leadership,

34 60% Women Say Upskilling Gives Them Better Job Opportunities after a Career Break: Survey." *The Economic Times - HRWorld*, October 27, 2020. https://hr.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/trends/60-women-say-upskilling-gives-them-better-job-opportunities-after-a-career-break-survey/79044750?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
35 The changing landscape of skills

interpersonal skills, communication, and analytical workshops in partnership with SP Jain Institute of Management and Research, one of India's top B-schools. These workshops focus on project-based deliverables with measurable goals, equipping participants with practical skills while rebuilding their confidence. Additionally, interview panels are sensitized to the unique challenges faced by returning professionals, fostering a supportive and fair selection process.

Morgan Stanley's RTW program integrates on-the-job training with real-world projects, allowing participants to refresh their technical expertise while gaining practical experience. Workshops focusing on professional identity, mindset shifts, and confidence-building complement the technical training. Weekly check-ins and midpoint reviews provide continuous feedback and personalized support. The program's flexibility, including options to extend internships for both virtual and in-person roles, ensures that participants have adequate preparation for full-time opportunities.

The flagship RTW program for returning mothers at a **leading fintech company** adopts a structured two-phase approach:
1. **Five Weeks of Reskilling:** A boot camp to refresh technical and soft skills while preparing participants for workplace reintegration.
2. **Six Weeks of Paid Internship:** Hands-on experience complemented by mentorship and networking opportunities.

The program begins with a screening process that includes a coding challenge and panel discussions to evaluate technical and cultural fit. Following the reskilling boot camp, participants transition into live projects, applying their skills in real-world scenarios. A final assessment determines readiness for full-time employment, offering successful candidates a pathway to permanent roles.

Role Mapping

Effective role mapping is a critical component of RTW programs, determining the levels and departments where returning candidates are placed. It is not just about filling vacancies but about strategically placing returnees where their skills and perspectives can have the most impact.

Such decisions must align with the organization's diversity goals and the business functions or areas where experienced talent is most needed. Often, mid-management roles are prioritized to

address the leaky pipeline and ensure a stronger representation of women in leadership and technical positions. Here's how some organizations have implemented thoughtful role mapping strategies.

The **fintech** cited earlier tailors its role mapping and hiring strategies to improve gender diversity across departments. The company identified that women were well-represented in functions like People & Culture, Legal and Compliance, Marketing, Customer Acquisition, and Data Science; however, there were far fewer women in core technical teams such as Engineering, Product, Business, Information Security, and IT. To address this imbalance, the company employs several inclusive practices such as crafting inclusive job descriptions, ensuring diverse interview panels, conducting mandatory bias sensitisation training for recruiters and hiring managers, using structured interview guides to standardize evaluations, and documenting interview feedback to maintain fairness.

The same trend of fewer women in technical roles is observed across industries. At **Wipro**, women are strongly represented in non-technical roles but not equally well in technical functions. Which is why their RTW program 'Begin Again' earmarks specific technical roles for returnship participants in an effort to bridge the gender gap in key business areas. Wipro stakeholders share that training candidates with varied experience levels, including those who have been out of the workforce, is not a challenge. On the contrary, returnees often display high enthusiasm and eagerness to learn, making them valuable contributors in technical roles.

HCLTech adopts a supply-led role mapping approach instead of a demand-based one, ensuring a broad talent pool without narrowing the search to specific positions. The program primarily focused on digital skills, inviting applications for both foundational and advanced roles. This strategy led to an overwhelming response, with over 25,000 applications within two to three weeks of the program's launch.

Pathways to Progression

It is one thing to hire candidates returning to work after a career gap—it is another to retain them in the workplace and build a fulfilling career in the long-term. Providing a clear pathway for progression is essential to the success of an RTW program. It motivates participants by showing them clear opportunities for career growth and signals the organization's commitment to the long-term success of returnship candidates. In return, it fosters loyalty, engagement, and retention.

At **Wipro**, progression pathways within the 'Begin Again' program are reinforced by a supportive ecosystem. The program's success is reflected in its higher retention rates—80% for 'Begin Again' hires compared to 70% for women recruited through traditional channels as of FY24. To enhance retention and progression, Wipro offers hybrid work options, onsite or near-home childcare facilities, and an informal community network for participants. This network fosters peer support, shared experiences, and regular interactions, creating a sense of belonging.

Axis Bank's RTW program also provides a structured progression pathway designed to support returning women employees.
- **Year 1:** A transition-focused year that allows employees to adapt to the organization without immediate performance pressures.
- **Year 2:** Introduction of performance evaluations, with key performance indicators (KPIs) such as retention, promotion rates, and performance monitored to ensure fairness.

Axis Bank has also implemented safeguards to prevent discrimination, including protections for women on maternity leave and mechanisms to flag any gender-based discrepancies in promotion rates. By addressing these potential biases and enhancing work-life balance through supportive systems, the program creates a sustainable environment for progression. The 75–80% retention rate of the 2022 cohort underscores the bank's commitment to fostering long-term growth for returnees.

Morgan Stanley's RTW program offers a comprehensive progression pathway that extends beyond the internship, with candidates being supported through hands-on training and mentorship. The program's results speak to its efficacy: alumni from the inaugural 2015 India cohort went on to secure full-time offers with some progressing to senior roles like Executive Director in the nine years since.

Measuring Outcomes

Defining clear outcomes and measuring their impact is essential for the success of RTW programs. Without a structured approach to evaluation, it's difficult to assess whether these initiatives truly support participants in reintegrating into the workforce or meet organizational goals such as improving diversity and retention. Important metrics include:
- **Retention and Attrition Rates:** Tracking retention rates provides insight into whether the program supports long-term career re-entry while addressing early attrition, which is often linked to external challenges like balancing work and family responsibilities.

- **Performance Evaluations:** Monitoring participants' performance on specific projects or roles helps identify skill gaps and ensure workplace integration.
- **Promotion Opportunities and Career Progression:** Metrics on advancement highlight the program's effectiveness in enabling long-term growth and breaking barriers to leadership for returnees.
- **Diversity Impact:** Measuring how RTW programs contribute to broader organizational diversity goals offers a lens into cultural and strategic success.

Measurement also enables organizations to refine their strategies, address challenges proactively, and demonstrate the value of RTW programs to leadership and stakeholders. In doing so, they create a blueprint for continuous improvement and long-term success, benefiting both the returnees and the organization.

Wipro takes a comprehensive approach to measuring outcomes of 'Begin Again'. Central to its strategy is the collection of ongoing feedback through regular monthly and quarterly check-ins with HR Business Partners (HRBPs) and group sessions known as 'Batch Connects'. These interactions provide participants with a platform to share their experiences, highlight challenges, and offer suggestions.

The company closely monitors the long-term outcomes for women hired through the program. This data helps identify patterns and challenges that could impact retention, enabling the organization to make targeted adjustments to enhance the experience for returnees. Performance reviews conducted by supervisors complement this effort, offering objective insights into participants' job performance and identifying areas where additional support may be needed.

At **Axis Bank**, gender-disaggregated data for retention rates and promotions are tracked and integrated into the organisation's diversity performance with full visibility at the leadership level. Actively monitoring progress helps them to take timely action to address potential barriers to growth.

Short-term measurement can also yield long-term impact. For instance, when **Morgan Stanley** was introducing its RTW program in India, the team conducted a pilot with a small cohort of 10 participants: most of them received full-time offers. This tangible outcome helped them showcase the RTW program as a strategic recruitment initiative rather than a symbolic effort, and secure leadership support. This backing enabled the program to grow, identifying and reintegrating untapped talent into the workforce.

In Conclusion

According to HerKey's 2023–2024 Benchmarking Report,[36] RTW programs are driving positive outcomes across industries:

- 81% of large enterprises and 67% of SMEs report increased applications from women returnees.
- 75% of companies confirm that returnees perform well in their roles.
- Leadership satisfaction is high, with 87% of large enterprises and 90% of SMEs expressing approval of their returnship initiatives.

These metrics underline how well-designed RTW programs can enhance talent acquisition, organizational culture, and leadership diversity. In spite of their positive impact, RTW programs still face challenges. For instance, financial sustainability. Companies like Morgan Stanley have demonstrated that the initial investment in RTW programs yields high returns. Retention rates for returnees match those of lateral hires, and the programs create a committed, diverse workforce that enhances long-term organizational stability. However, smaller organizations will need to balance program costs with the benefits of reintegrating experienced talent.

Even with re-hiring women after a career break, gender representation is concentrated at relatively junior levels. A goal for maturing RTW programs can be to increase the representation of women at middle and senior management, in spite of career breaks. With continued efforts, RTW programs have the potential to not only address this gap but also redefine the workforce landscape, unlocking untapped potential and driving long-term success for both returnees and the organizations that champion them.

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