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Return

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Real REAL ISSUES Returners

September 2006

A report by
The Daphne
Jackson Trust
in collaboration with the
UK Resource Centre
for Women in SET

Stop the
skills
shortage

Culture
change
needed

SET Returners:

the Barriers, the Business Case
and the Benefits



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With falling numbers of graduates entering science, engineering and technology careers, employers in both academia and industry can no longer afford to ignore the fact that women who take a career break often do not return to their old jobs. This has serious implications for the cost of recruiting and training staff and, overall, is affecting the United Kingdom's (UK) competitiveness and productivity.

Women often feel unable to return for a wide variety of reasons: lack of part-time or flexible posts, difficulties with childcare, lower earning capacity, unpleasant and outdated working environments, issues with gaining academic funding for part-time posts, lack of information on career progression, loss of contact with networks, lack of external advertisements for many posts and lack of transparency and openness in recruitment and promotion procedures.

However, women returners have much to offer their employers. Not only are they fully qualified for the role in the first place, their career breaks have often heightened the skills required by top class employers: time management, flexibility and adaptability, conflict resolution and working under pressure.

This report presents the discussions and conclusions of a series of three seminars organised by the Daphne Jackson Trust and the UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology. The seminars, which were held in Edinburgh in May 2005, Bristol in November 2005 and Manchester in April 2006, invited those interested, particularly women, to discuss the barriers, the benefits and the business case for employing returners.

Drawing on the personal experiences and knowledge of attendees, the report presents a series of recommendations to learned societies and professional bodies, the Research Councils, employers in academia and industry, the Government and to returners themselves, that will help to reverse this process and encourage more women to return to their chosen careers.

Real Returners

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According to the UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology (UKRC), overall the UK workforce comprises 51.3% women. The science, engineering and technology (SET) industries have traditionally been male-dominated fields with women under-represented. As women constitute only 18% of the SET workforce and find it very difficult to return to SET fields after a career break, this situation is now reaching critical proportions.

To make matters worse, the UK is facing a severe shortage of SET professionals, which is seriously affecting the productivity and prospects of the country. If women are not able to remain in the careers for which they have trained, they are a very expensive waste of UK tax payers' and academic funding money. The UK cannot allow the current attrition rates to continue.

As a country we are faced with the fact that not only will women require a career break if they are to raise a family, more and more people across the board are addressing their work / life balance and considering part-time work. The largest single group seeking to work part-time tends to be women who care for children. However, there are many other reasons - caring for elderly relatives, illness (themselves or others in the family) or simply withdrawing from the 'long hours culture'.

This report has been written to bring together the results of a series of seminars organised by the Daphne Jackson Trust in collaboration with the UKRC. The aim was to discuss these issues in-depth and draw practical conclusions, which will make an immediate difference to those women looking to return to SET careers.

The seminars, chaired by Dr Katie Perry, Press and Public Relations Manager of the Daphne Jackson Trust, provoked lively debate amongst the audience and identified the real issues facing women returning to SET careers. This report shows the views and opinions of women who have returned, or are trying to return, to careers in these fields - it is not hearsay or speculation but the views and recommendations of those at the coalface.

The three seminars took place in Edinburgh, Bristol and Manchester in 2005 / 6 with speakers drawn from a cross section of academic institutions, companies, professional and associated bodies. The audience was drawn from academia, industry and other interested parties.

Grateful thanks to the speakers:

Dr Avril Allman,
Natural Environment Research Council

Jane Butcher,
UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology

Dr Toni Fleming,
Daphne Jackson Fellow at the University of Edinburgh

Clem Herman,
The Open University

Professor Peter Main,
Institute of Physics

Dr Gill Samuels,
formerly of Pfizer Ltd

Dr Jill Stocks,
Daphne Jackson Fellow at the University of Manchester

Dr Carin Tattershall,
Past Daphne Jackson Fellow at the University of Manchester

Milada Williams,
JIVE (Joint Interventions) Partners

Jennifer Woolley,
Daphne Jackson Trust

A special note of thanks to the Institute of Physics for its sponsorship of the reception at the November 2005 event.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Various recommendations arose as a consequence of the discussions at the three seminars. These recommendations are the activities and actions which women, who are either trying to return to a SET career or have recently returned, feel would make the greatest difference to their situation.

LEARNED SOCIETIES AND PROFESSIONAL BODIES

Attendees at the seminars indicated that they were most likely to turn to these organisations for information on jobs, opportunities and support, when looking to return to their careers. However those who had sought help had in some cases been disappointed by the lack of advice available. There are various different sources from which returners can get information, advice and funding for returning to a SET career. Learned societies and professional bodies must highlight these on their websites and in their literature.

There is also a role for these bodies in helping those on career breaks to keep their skills and knowledge up-to-date, whether via the Internet or regular publications specifically targeted at their needs.

Learned societies and professional bodies can also take direct action to tackle the old-fashioned and outdated attitudes prevalent within many academic departments and industrial organisations by establishing schemes similar to the Institute of Physics' diversity survey of Physics Departments across the country. UKRC is currently working with

the Institute of Physics to take this work forward.

RESEARCH COUNCILS

The Research Councils must make their policies for funding applications absolutely transparent and must also actively welcome funding applications which include part-time workers. This process is already underway, but it is vital that the Research Councils do more to publicise these policies to academic departments.

The Research Councils should also work with higher education institutions, through the process of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), to make sure the equality and diversity guidance is actively implemented. This will ensure an applicant's career breaks are taken into account, when applying for either funding, a new job or a promotion.

INDUSTRY

Presentations by returners currently working in large companies should be organised to tackle the misconceptions that exist about part-time workers in industry and to showcase the success of part-time work. Many returners,

especially Daphne Jackson Fellows, feel that they are ambassadors and, as such, would be happy to participate in these presentations as well as in awareness raising visits to smaller organisations.

An opportunity also exists for employers to put a business case to the Recruitment Employers' Confederation regarding returners filling positions within SET. Many recruitment agencies do not operate in the SET sector because they have difficulty finding candidates to propose. If they could use the pool of returners, this would open new areas of business for many of their agency members and would encourage companies to consider women returners seriously.

ACADEMIA

According to the seminar attendees, academia is one of the last strongholds of negative and outdated attitudes towards women returners. In many cases, Heads of Departments and senior managers persist in fostering an atmosphere that is not conducive to the needs of female staff or returners. Academic institutions must look closely not just at their attitudes towards returners but also at their policies for funding applications, recruitment, promotion and diversity in general. The work of the Athena Project, ASSET survey and Swan Charter is essential to support progress in this area.

GOVERNMENT

One of the biggest factors for many women in deciding whether to return to a SET career is the provision of good quality, affordable childcare. In many places, suitable childcare is not available near the place of work and does not match the hours that the woman works. Where such facilities exist, the places are often over-subscribed or prohibitively expensive. The Government must do more through the National Childcare Strategy to provide suitable childcare for all.

There is also a role for the Government to encourage companies and academia to tackle the prejudices that many of these organisations have against part-time working, highlighting the benefits that employing women returners can bring.

WOMEN RETURNERS

Returners must be motivated and consistent in their approach to finding suitable opportunities to enable them to return to their careers. Individuals need to see their break as a positive experience that has enhanced their skills and reflect this on their curriculum vitae. They must sell their skills at interview and use the existing part-time structures within both industry and academia (which allow employees to develop spin-out companies, for example) to their own advantage.

There are many immediate hurdles that women face on returning to a SET career. Many women choose not to return because these hurdles seem insurmountable, leading to a great loss of talent for the SET community.

Emotional issues, outdated employer attitudes, unpleasant working environments and the problems of trying to find appropriate support and encouragement all combine to make it very difficult for women to return to their careers.

The barriers

IN-BUILT BARRIERS

Attendees at the seminars agreed that many of the barriers are inherent within the make-up of women looking to return and are not so prevalent for men in similar situations. For example, women returners overwhelmingly lack confidence after a career break. A lack of contacts within the sector in which they wish to work makes it hard to find a suitable post, especially when many roles are not advertised. Lack of up-to-date knowledge and a necessarily shorter publications record add to the lack of self-esteem and confidence.

In academia particularly, attendees agreed Heads of Departments must recognise that women in general are reluctant to apply for a job unless they meet all the required criteria, whereas men will apply if they only have some. Furthermore, women tend to be more reticent at putting themselves forward, noticeably after a career break when they have no current references or if they have had a part-time job.

Once they have found a suitable role, many women returners struggle to find the right work / life balance. They feel that they are inadequate employees and mothers,

“Producing faster switches is one thing, but for many mothers, when they realise that these switches are going to be used in bombs, it suddenly becomes a whole different question.”

An attendee

“When I wanted to go back to work, I knew that I wanted to do something worthwhile that would have a positive impact on society. But I had no confidence, no recent training and felt completely unemployable. In the end I applied for a junior research post full time, for which I was completely over-qualified, because it was the only thing I could get.”

An attendee

performing neither role to the best of their abilities. Many women also find that their attitude towards the end result of their work changes having had children.

It is easy for many employers, academic and industrial, to brush aside these emotional issues as irrelevant yet their impact must not be underestimated. At all three seminars, discussions about the barriers to returning started from this point.

However, amongst attendees there was also a consensus that women returners need to ‘toughen up’ their act. Some attendees felt that many women returners seemed to be very apologetic about being ‘allowed’ to work part-time and, instead of pointing out the benefits and advantages for employers, go about it in a half-hearted fashion. This does nothing to challenge the status quo.

CHILDCARE

Many women returners are faced with the difficulty of balancing work with childcare. Although the Government is starting to realise that childcare is a big issue, most attendees felt that childcare provision in academia and industry is still woefully inadequate.

Families need affordable, reliable and local childcare which covers working hours plus travelling time. Further support is needed to cover holiday periods and provide extra support when the child is ill. The best working environments provide childcare facilities on-site or nearby, but often, when facilities are good, this leads to problems of over-subscription and then lack of spaces. In most situations, women are left to make their own arrangements, juggling work and home responsibilities.

SALARIES

Salaries are also an issue. Many women are faced with the situation that their earning capacity decreases after having a child. As one attendee put it, “I just have to accept that the salary I had before I took my career break is not going to come back”.

This has several implications. Not only are salaries a good indicator of how much the employee is valued and appreciated, but for many returners, low pay has serious implications for childcare. Many women need to decide whether it is worth returning given the cost of childcare, particularly if specialist childcare is needed.

Although working tax credits can be a great help for some women, there are still serious barriers in terms of the practicalities. The steps

that have been taken by the Government so far are welcome, but do not go far enough to support the actual needs of women returners. All employers, particularly universities and industry, must realise that this is a practical issue that must be overcome if women are to return to SET in significant numbers.



ACADEMIC FUNDING

There are particular issues that apply to women wanting to return to a career in academia. These relate to gaining funding, not just for those returning but also for those looking for part-time posts. Considerable work needs to be done to tackle the attitudes of Heads of Departments and senior management in relation to returners and part-time workers to ensure that SET departments are fully inclusive and making the most of the talent available to them.

The overall impression amongst the attendees at all three seminars was that the Research Councils do not welcome applications for funding from someone who is returning or wishing to work part-time. On reflection, it was agreed that most of the problems lay with the referees, who seem to consider proposals including part-time working as less competitive and who are therefore unlikely

the barriers

to review them favourably. This situation is further compounded by the fact that many referees are also academics responsible for writing and submitting funding applications in the first place. These points were raised time and time again.

One attendee commented that, within her department, there is huge pressure to exclude young women, because they might start a family at some point, from active research projects. She commented that one university said it would not employ young women because it messes up their research statistics.

Furthermore, attendees were generally under the impression that because the Research Councils require a report after three years, it is hard for people to take a break in the middle of a research project.

In reality, however, there is nothing in the Research Council grant conditions that prevents applications for part-time projects and indeed the Research Councils actively encourage such proposals.

It is the culture in the universities that is the problem rather than the Research Councils' rules. Universities tend to want to employ one person full time to complete a project but it is entirely possible to use the money on a more flexible basis. It is also possible that, if the university has postdoctoral researchers who want to go part-time during a project, then the funding can be extended.

It was generally agreed amongst attendees that the Research Councils need to step up their efforts to make departments more aware of the rules regarding part-time applications. This could perhaps be achieved by organising visits to discuss how to deal with flexible working

arrangements or by writing up case studies of successful projects or funding applications involving part-time workers.

Although many funding organisations and bodies will assess an applicant on their academic age rather than their actual age, many academic departments do not appoint using this criterion. This is vital since it can be very difficult for a woman who has had some time out to be as competitive as someone who has been working continuously in the laboratory or doing research and has a high publication rate.

Dr Jill Stocks is a current Daphne Jackson Fellow, who decided to return to work after her third child had started school. In looking around to find help, she approached the Royal Society which said that it welcomed returners. However, in reality the Royal Society's form asked for experience gained over the past 10 years, which meant that when she returned the form, it was basically blank. It was only once she approached the Daphne Jackson Trust that she found the support and advice needed to help her return to a suitable position.

Although funding organisations are recognising the need for more flexibility, many attendees felt that their guidance was not as clear as it could be and was certainly not getting through to the right people within the departments themselves. Indeed, guidance for the RAE does cover this area in detail, showing the lower outputs required for part-time workers. It was suggested that returners should write on their application or curriculum vitae that they have rated themselves using this guidance, as academics will respect the RAE rules. A further suggestion from attendees was that the RAE should take account of the number of women in the department when determining its grading.

NEGATIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS RETURNERS

One attendee went back to work full time in a five year academic post as this was the only position she could get. She negotiated that she could leave work at 4pm and took work home with her. She then asked to go part-time and the response was, if that was what she wanted to do, they would find someone else to do the job full time.

Returners to SET careers in both academia and industry face generalised negative attitudes towards their return. Stereotypical views of the sort of roles that women should (and should not) do within SET, especially after having a career break, still need to be overcome. Women who have succeeded in returning have often had to overcome discrimination and make serious compromises throughout their careers to remain in a field they love.

Milada Williams came to Britain in 1968 as an engineer from Czechoslovakia. On her arrival in the UK, she was told that there was no such thing as a female engineer! When her husband was posted with the Army to Germany, she worked as an air conditioning designer in a German company where half the staff in the engineering design office were female.

However on her subsequent return to the UK, she was again told that as a woman she would not be employed as an engineer. Her Czech engineering qualification was not recognised, so she taught for a while and then became a research assistant in industry.

In order to remain in her chosen field of engineering, she took a teaching post in an engineering department where, for 16 years, she was the only female lecturer. Milada is now an Employer Liaison Officer with JIVE, working for the Welsh Resource Centre for Women in SET.

In many instances, particularly in smaller companies, there is still a general attitude that working part-time is somehow 'slacking-off' or not getting the job done properly. Attendees reported that very few part-time posts, flexible working posts or job share posts are advertised.

Until the Government works with employers to encourage this situation to change, attitudes are unlikely to shift rapidly.

"Where I work, it's generally seen as more acceptable if a man says that he can't make a meeting because of the school run than if a woman says it."

An attendee

"In my experience of working in industry, part-timers are seen as not taking their careers seriously and so find it harder to advance within the organisation. Many times they are effectively expected to do a full time job in fewer hours. There is no action being taken to deal with either of these issues."

An attendee

When offering part-time contracts, employers need to take into account that many part-time workers cannot easily swap their working days because of childcare commitments. Many attendees had found themselves tackling situations such as needing to come home midway through a conference, wanting to persuade colleagues that part-time workers should get less papers to mark or asking the department not to organise meetings on the days that they do not work.

PERCEPTIONS ABOUT ACADEMIC CAREERS

It was generally agreed during the seminars that even successful female research assistants and postgraduates had been concerned about embarking upon an academic career in the first place. Many felt that it was not consistent with starting a family, with multiple short-term contracts preventing a well-defined career structure. The lack of good careers' advice and role models, the 'long hours culture', very few part-time contracts, inadequate childcare facilities and a distinct lack of policies for those taking career breaks means that many promising graduates are not even considering an academic career, with potentially damaging consequences for SET and the UK economy.

overcoming. the barriers

OVERCOMING 'IN-BUILT' BARRIERS

Central to the services of the RETURN Campaign funded by the UKRC is the Open University's online T160 course 'Science, Engineering and Technology: A Course for Women Returners'. Working with women on a personal level to help them on their journey back into work, the course aims to build up returners' self-esteem, tackle issues around lack of confidence and current knowledge and help women to get back in touch with contacts needed to return to the workplace.

Many women returners seem to be afraid to ask to move to a part-time position. One attendee, who was able to go part-time, admitted that if her Head of Department had been less enlightened, then she would not have dared to ask for a change in hours. So, although all attendees were readily able to list numerous benefits of employing a returner, overall most were unwilling to present a strong case to their employer for employing them on flexible or part-time contracts.

Some attendees pointed out that opportunities for working flexibly do exist in academia when it comes to the cross-over with the business world and that women should toughen up, stop being apologetic about asking for part-

time work and start taking advantage of the opportunities on offer. The increasing emphasis on enterprise is giving rise to part-time academic posts, which allow staff to start spin-out companies. For instance, it is believed that many of the researchers in the University of Manchester Computing Department are effectively part-time because of their work for spin-out or other related companies. Similarly, at Cranfield University, many of the postdoctoral researchers appear to work part-time because they are involved in more than one project.

In many universities the structures that allow this to happen are already in place. The key lies in convincing the Heads of Departments of the benefits that part-time working can bring to the team as a whole. Therefore women returners need to think carefully about how to request a part-time or flexible working arrangement.

RETRAINING

Most women returning to careers in SET need to update their knowledge or, if moving to a new or different field, need to retrain. Companies and academia are often unwilling to take on employees in this situation due to fears that whilst they are updating their knowledge, they are not productive. This is where organisations

like the Daphne Jackson Trust come in. By offering returners Fellowships, which can be held in an academic institution or within industry, the Trust is helping women to update their knowledge whilst on the job.

"I worked in industry and had a seven year career break. But in that time, I fell way behind in terms of skills and knowledge. Now I am looking to return to industry but employers don't want to take me on because in the time while I am updating my skills, I am not productive."

An attendee

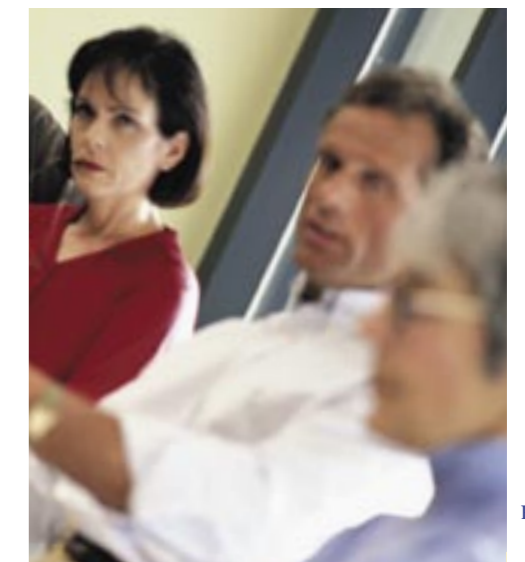
Enlightened employers, with the aid of organisations like the Daphne Jackson Trust, recognise that this is part of the territory of returning and that it need not be a lengthy process. Learned societies and professional bodies can play an important role in providing up-to-date information and news to members on a career break.

MENTORING AND NETWORKING

During the seminars, conversation returned frequently to the subject of mentoring as a method of encouraging and supporting women returners. The experience of attendees shows that the concept of mentoring itself elicits

different responses from different women. Although some women are keen to take advantage of the support that can be gained from a mentor / mentee relationship, there are others who feel that if they do, they will be somehow marked out as needing extra help. Indeed one attendee stated that in her opinion more than 50% of women do not want to take part in 'women only' mentoring schemes for this very reason. Furthermore, some women in both academia and industry feel very angry at being separated out in this way.

With initial reactions like these, it is easy to see why mentoring schemes are not currently more successful or well-used. However, it was generally agreed amongst attendees that mentors can give people the courage to apply for roles or seek opportunities whilst a discouraging boss would put them off.



overcoming. the barriers

Milada Williams moved to Cardiff in 2003 but had no job. Through MentorSET, Sally, a chartered civil engineer, was appointed as her mentor. With Sally's help and support, Milada applied for and was offered a role at JIVE and is now working for the Welsh Resource Centre for Women in SET.

Milada then became mentor to Vicky, a mechanical design engineer who was experiencing harassment in an old-fashioned and unpleasant working atmosphere. The problems that she had faced there had made Vicky feel that the only option was to leave engineering completely. Yet, talking through her experiences with Milada, she realised that she wasn't alone in facing such discrimination and through Milada's support she found a new role in engineering.

Networking and mentoring can be vital. It is estimated that 70% of SET jobs are never advertised. In order to take advantage of these opportunities, it is vital that women build on their networks. The Open University and the UKRC have recognised this through the T160 course, where individuals are matched with a mentor via MentorSET. The UKRC is also working with companies to help them make their mentoring schemes more gender inclusive and is looking at higher level, glass ceiling mentorship.

Some attendees felt that networking is difficult unless you can get to events and you work 9-5 (and "you are a man!"). However the experiences of others demonstrated that these difficulties can be overcome. Through the Daphne Jackson Trust, for example, some Fellows have started their own network, meeting in Oxford

every two to three months. It is true for many attendees that breakfast meetings and staying late for events can be hard. At companies such as Pfizer, networking and informal discussions play an important part in developing creative ideas. In their new research building, they have put in areas with comfortable chairs to drive networking and communication within and amongst teams.

CHANGING ATTITUDES WITHIN ACADEMIA

Attendees felt very strongly that there needs to be a complete change in attitude within the scientific community regarding the contribution that part-time workers can bring. While academics remain reticent about putting in funding proposals where the main worker is part-time, there will be very few opportunities in academia to work part-time.

In order to try to tackle this issue, the Institute of Physics (IOP) recently undertook a survey of Physics Departments in the UK. It had been a matter of concern to the IOP for some time that the numbers of women continuing their careers in Physics Departments fell dramatically after postgraduate level. In order to review the issues affecting women in these departments, the IOP Visiting Panel invited Heads of Physics Departments to participate in the survey, hosting a visit from the team. A copy of the invitation was sent to the Vice Chancellor of each university in order to encourage participation.

The IOP found that, in general, there were wide variations in the numbers of female students across different academic institutions. The vast majority of Physics Departments visited were not monitoring gender statistics and, in many cases, the visit prompted a discussion about gender issues, often for the first time.



Results from the survey showed that departments with few or no women suffer in many ways (such as admissions and a lack of female role models) but, although male staff are generally aware of this, they are reluctant to do anything about it.

The best departments had sympathetic Heads of Departments, who understood the pressures of trying to mix family and academic life. Male participation in family friendly policies, combined with a high proportion of younger staff and a mix of people from different backgrounds, generally led to a supportive working environment.

It was discovered that women were generally disinclined to get involved at management level because they found the prevailing attitudes so unpleasant. Again, the best departments had strong, informal social networks for women, whereas in the 'worst' departments, the men had unconsciously created an uncomfortable atmosphere by being so friendly amongst themselves.

The Visiting Panel constantly remarked on the need for transparent policies. During the recruitment process in many departments for example, there was often no requirement for women on interview panels and no explicit policies on how to deal with applicants who might want or had taken a career break. Existing staff were frequently allowed to air views in secret to the Head of Department about candidates, leading to unfair influence and lack of transparency in the recruitment process.

Similarly, when looking at the promotion process, there was a lack of career break policies, appraisals and career guidance across the board. Although the IOP survey did not uncover any overt examples of discrimination, the method of identifying candidates for promotion in many departments seemed to involve the Head of Department telling the particular individual that they were ready to apply. As they were more likely to say this to men rather than women, this led to a culture of unintentional discrimination.

overcoming. the barriers

There is an opportunity for other learned societies and professional bodies to expand this type of activity to their own fields. These surveys do a great deal to highlight the problems within academic departments and bring gender and diversity issues to the attention of not just the Head of Department but also, in many cases, the Vice Chancellor.



CHANGING ATTITUDES IN INDUSTRY

It was generally agreed that it is often the smaller companies that have difficulty establishing family friendly policies (or even recognising why they are needed in the first place). Larger organisations, which employ large numbers of women, need to explain the benefits to other smaller companies. High profile men who are either working part-time or have personal experience of the issues involved, perhaps

because their wives or daughters have been in that situation, can help by encouraging and supporting companies to make use of the pool of talent that returners offer.

Attendees who had been involved with company diversity schemes or training programmes reported that men are often surprised by some of the issues that arise - for example, some women find male 'joshing' before meetings upsetting but men do not realise. It is also important to remember that diversity is not just a male / female issue. In some fields, it is not only a problem that there are very few women, but also that the team contains only a particular type of man. For example, one attendee once worked in a department where "the geeks ruled" - not only did the women in the department feel sidelined, but so did the Chinese men. If people feel uncomfortable in an organisation, they will often resign without giving real reasons for leaving. This means it is difficult to resolve the underlying problem satisfactorily.

As finding talented and skilled employees becomes harder and harder, companies must recognise that returners offer an untapped pool of talent. Enlightened companies embed career break policies into the organisational culture so that when these situations do arise, it is not seen as a crisis management situation. Developing baton-passing schemes for succession planning, discussing career options with those about to go on maternity leave, welcoming applications from returners and offering part-time positions not only protect the company's business interests but also help to retain high quality staff.



the business case

It was generally agreed amongst attendees that a strong business case could be built for employing returners. Across the UK, in both industry and academia, an ageing workforce is leading to skills shortages.

According to UKRC, the UK will be suffering an estimated shortfall of 300,000 SET graduates and postgraduates over the next 10 years. Bearing in mind this underlying picture, employers cannot afford to lose the staff that they have.

High staff leakage rates lead to very low return on initial investment and high recruitment and training costs. Yet by employing returners, employers gain a person with enhanced skills and better company and industry knowledge than a newly recruited member of staff. More importantly, but perhaps less easy to measure, are the intangibles: boosted morale and performance amongst staff overall, increased competitiveness and diverse thinking reflecting a varied customer base. Furthermore, many attendees agreed that they were grateful to employers who had allowed them to return part-time or on a flexible contract and that this would make them less likely to move on quickly to another organisation.

the business case

BUSINESS BENEFITS OF PART-TIME WORKERS

Dr Carin Tattershall: After a 7 year long career break, I was offered a Daphne Jackson Fellowship at the University of Manchester working in the polymer chemistry team. After the Fellowship, I was offered a couple of short-term contracts, a longer (three year) postdoc contract and am now a part-time project leader with the Organic Materials Innovation Centre.

Before my career break, my manager told me that it wasn't possible to do chemistry research part-time. Yet my experience shows that research can not only be done on a part-time basis, but that working part-time can actually be an advantage. Part-time research tends to be more focussed simply because the researcher is always aware of the limited amount of time available. Projects are rarely held up waiting for the experiment to complete or for results to be analysed.

Although projects will take longer, they may not necessarily take twice as long. An insidious disadvantage of working part-time is also that you miss out on a great deal of networking – when you feel pushed for time, it's hard to waste half an hour chatting with colleagues, but most people recognise that informal networking contributes greatly to career progression.

I have found that 'seeing is believing' – now that my colleagues have seen that part-time working is possible in that environment, they are happy for me to carry on. If you are working part-time, you are an ambassador not just for yourself but also for others in the future. If you are an asset to your research group, you stand a better chance of being able to continue.

Although most returners immediately consider part-time working, some attendees highlighted other options which might be more agreeable to employers, such as flexible and home working. Although part-time working can be

expensive for employers, it can also lead to many benefits for them, not least that part-time workers often work considerably more than their prescribed hours in order to complete the job to their own satisfaction. One attendee's supervisor described her part-time role as 'full-time commitment on half the pay'. Another attendee's part-time role was supposed to be 50% but she felt that it was actually closer to 75%. Furthermore, in a job share situation, the employer benefits from two sets of experiences and two opinions on a particular problem.

Some companies have recognised that developing diversity and family friendly policies makes good financial sense. In 1992, Pfizer decided to look at why there were so few senior women on its Sandwich site and asked Dr Gill Samuels to look into the issues. When Gill reported the results, she was reporting to men all 20 years older than herself, who were not empathetic to the problems that she had identified. Pfizer repeated the survey in 2000, hoping that the recommendations that they had put in place might have made a difference, but sadly the picture looked very similar. In 2006, however, Pfizer is an excellent example of how family friendly policies can work very well.

Pfizer believes that when a scientist is trained in drug discovery, this person becomes very valuable. When recruiting at first degree level, more than 50% of the company's intake is female, so it is in the best interests of the company to retain as much of this talent and knowledge as possible. In order to tackle some of the practical barriers, Pfizer is now refurbishing a building to provide childcare for staff and has instituted diversity training, which is having a big impact. Managers are being encouraged to try to work with women early in their pregnancy, so that both sides are investing in the woman's future. Women are encouraged to think about their career direction before going on maternity leave to take control of what they would like to do and how they would like to work on their return.

the benefits

Employers need to realise that the skills and experience of women can be enhanced by their career break.

Pfizer, for example, looks at career breaks with a positive attitude. Managers are being taught that the skills mothers learn when they are on maternity leave are of enormous benefit to the company: project management, conflict resolution, multi-tasking, prioritising, organisational skills and the ability to work under pressure. In order to encourage those who have taken a career break to return to work, the company has now introduced part-time working, reduced working hours, flexi-working and job sharing policies.

The skills and benefits of employing returners can therefore be summarised as:

- Relevant experience
- Time management / organisational skills
- Less likely to relocate
- Work harder / more committed
- More life experience / mature commitment
- Tolerance and flexibility
- Understanding of the work environment and its requirements / team players
- Flexibility of approach / problem solving
- More balanced approach
- Loyalty / returners are highly committed once given a job



By using part-time workers, employers are able to draw from a much wider employment pool, gathering together teams with a wide range of skills and knowledge. In many attendees' experiences, the best teams in terms of productivity and creativity have included both men and women and a different range of ages where pre-conceptions can be challenged and new ideas generated.

APPENDIX

Some useful organisations

ATHENA

A UK wide initiative to advance women within SET in higher education.

www.athenaproject.org.uk

THE DAPHNE JACKSON TRUST

The ‘foremost returners scheme in the country’ offering Fellowships and Industrial placements to help women and men return to work.

www.daphnejackson.org

ENGINEERING AND PHYSICAL SCIENCES RESEARCH COUNCIL (EPSRC)

www.epsrc.ac.uk

EQUALITEC: ADVANCING WOMEN IN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY, ELECTRONICS AND COMMUNICATION

A number of schemes covering training and career development focused on Information Technology, Electronics and Communications areas; developed in partnership with the European Social Fund and key player organisations from industry, education and policy making, as well as trade associations, professional institutions and women’s groups. It also provides a mentoring scheme for personal development.

www.equalitec.org.uk

JIVE (JOINT INTERVENTIONS) PARTNERS/JIVE PROJECT

A partnership across England and Wales to tackle gender stereotyping in the engineering, construction and technology sectors, sharing equality best practice and supporting women in these fields.

www.jivepartners.org.uk

www.setwomenresource.org.uk

MENTORSET

The national mentoring scheme for women in SET.

www.mentorset.org.uk

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT RESEARCH COUNCIL (NERC)

www.nerc.ac.uk

OPEN UNIVERSITY

Through the UKRC RETURN Campaign, the Open University offers the T160 course for women wanting support in returning to SET careers.

www.open.ac.uk

PARTICLE PHYSICS AND ASTRONOMY RESEARCH COUNCIL (PPARC)

www.pparc.ac.uk

PORTIAWEB

A website for women in SET careers acting as a portal to all aspects of education and employment in SET.

www.portiaweb.org

UK RESOURCE CENTRE FOR WOMEN IN SCIENCE, ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY

Funded by the Department of Trade and Industry and the European Social Fund to increase the participation and position of women in SET, UKRC runs a specific programme of services for women returners to SET through its RETURN Campaign.

www.setwomenresource.org.uk

WOMEN INTO SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING CAMPAIGN (WISE)

Helps women and girls to explore the many different options that a SET career can offer.

www.wisecampaign.org.uk

WOMEN’S ENGINEERING SOCIETY (WES)

Promotes education, training and practice of engineering amongst women.

www.wes.org.uk