

THE STEM RETURNERS INDEX — 2021



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STEM Returners is an award-winning solution to an industry wide problem. Our unique Returners Programmes help highly qualified STEM professionals to return to industry after a career break, enabling STEM leaders to access the best available talent, and in doing so, improve diversity and inclusion within their organisation.



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Why do we exist?

We're on a mission to make it easier for highly qualified STEM professionals to return to work, creating the fairer, more diverse industry we all deserve.

Our story

STEM Returners was founded in 2017 in response to a growing skills gap in UK STEM industries. We discovered a recruitment system that is broken, contributing to a shocking lack of diversity in STEM organisations.

A broken recruitment system

Highly skilled STEM professionals get overlooked when attempting to return from a career break, struggling to make progress via traditional recruitment channels.

Why? Unconscious bias at shortlisting stage, hiring pressures leading to assumptions made on limited information, and the common misconception that a 'CV gap' equates to a deterioration of skills.

These hidden barriers mean talented professionals are being left behind, and this needs to change.

A shocking lack of diversity in STEM

92% male & 94% white

The current UK engineering workforce is 92% male and 94% white.

This lack of progress stems from a lack of action.

1 in 10

In the UK fewer than 1 in 10 engineering companies are taking any steps to attract minority ethnic groups or address the gender imbalance in their organisation.

In a market suffering from a desperate skills shortage this problem is magnified. The skills gap is growing, and the UK needs a diverse, agile and innovative STEM workforce more than ever.



How do we help?

The STEM Returners Programme

We provide STEM Professionals with a supported route back into the career they worked hard to build. Plus advice, career coaching, networking opportunities and mentoring to ensure they are ready and confident to return.

We do this through partnering with STEM organisations to run paid, short-term returner programmes, enabling them to access a new and overlooked talent pool, and in doing so, improve diversity within their organisation.



It really works

We've now helped over 180 engineers return to work across the UK

96%

have now secured a permanent position within their host organisation

46%

of STEM Returners are women vs 8% of professional engineers

34%

are from minority ethnic groups vs 6% of engineers

100%

of all companies who have taken part in a programme have successfully recruited returners as a result

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The STEM Returners Index

What is the STEM Returners Index?

We know that talented STEM professionals on career breaks often get left behind by flawed recruitment processes - there are hidden barriers when attempting to return to work, and this needs to change.

This is why we've launched an annual piece of research - The STEM Returners Index - to further understand these barriers, to track the progress STEM industries are making with solving these issues, and campaign for change.

In May 2021 we surveyed a nationally representative group of over 750 STEM professionals who are on a career break and attempting to return to work or recently returned, asking a range of questions in order to understand their experiences of trying to re-enter a sector that desperately needs their skills.



Our findings

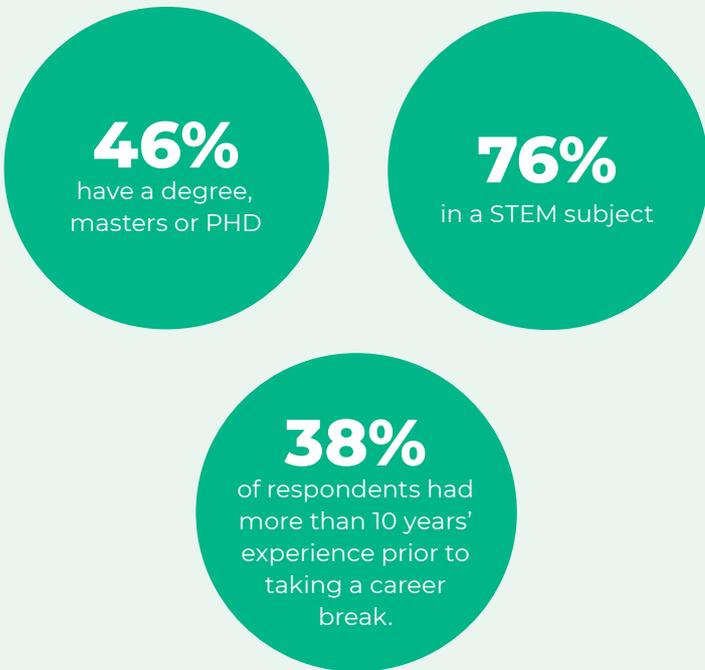
What did we find?

The pool of STEM Professionals attempting to return to industry is significantly more diverse than the average STEM organisation.

Those attempting to return to work are **51%** female and **38%** from black and minority ethnic groups, compared to 8% female and 6% BME working in industry.



These are highly educated, highly experienced professionals.



Only 12%

of UK STEM professionals on a career break are doing so out of personal choice.

We learned that STEM professionals take career breaks for a variety of reasons, however most have paused their career for reasons outside of their control, from childcare responsibilities to Covid driven redundancies.

Female respondents were significantly more likely to have had a career break due to childcare responsibilities (51%) than male respondents (10%). Conversely, male respondents were significantly more likely to have had a career break due to redundancy (29%) than female respondents (10%). Health reasons were also a factor for 19% of respondents.

40%

of STEM females say they want to return to work following their children reaching school age.

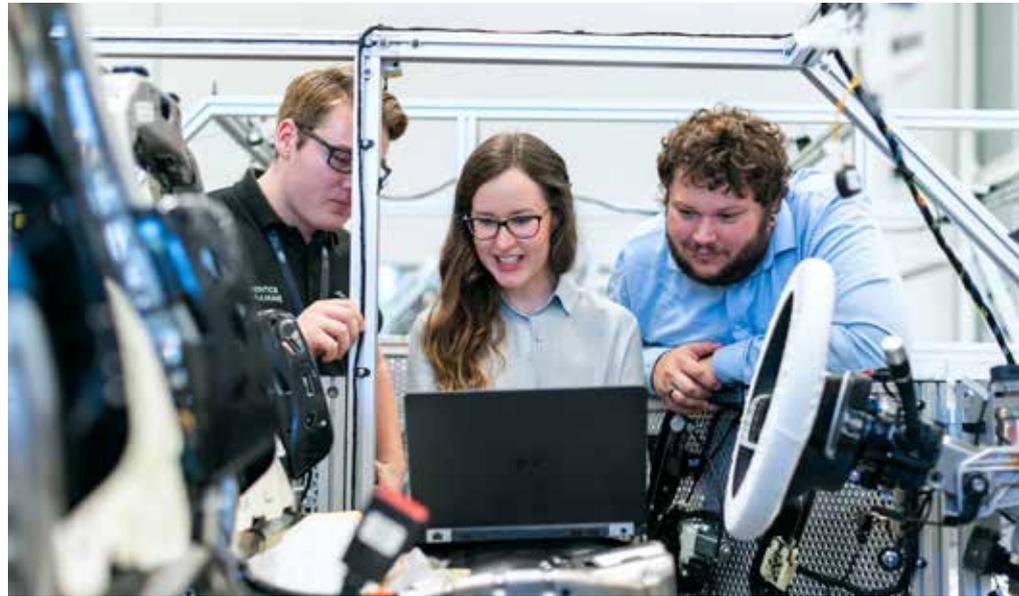
Beyond the need to earn money, the most cited reason for wanting to return to work was reduced childcare responsibilities due to children reaching school age.

Female respondents were four times more likely than male respondents to state this reason and more than three times as likely to be driven by being a role model to their children. Across the board, STEM professionals are looking to return to industry because they miss the challenge (37%), want to return to their passion (34%) and achieve their long-term career goals (30%).

The struggle with standard channels



The ongoing challenge is not just a lack of progress, but a severe absence of feedback



73%

of STEM professionals on a career break have applied for more than 6 jobs in the last 12 months, with over 20% applying for more than 70 jobs through standard recruitment channels such as jobs boards or company websites.

The ongoing challenge is not just a lack of progress, but a severe absence of feedback, with 51% of applicants receiving feedback never or hardly at all.

Unfortunately, this is also where a disturbing level of bias kicks in. It would appear that if you are female or over 45, the chances of you receiving a response to a job application, regardless of your skill level, is a lot slimmer.

Females are 76%

more likely than males to never receive feedback at all.

This lack of feedback unquestionably damages confidence throughout application processes. As a result women are twice as likely to state that low confidence is a barrier, which in turn, impacts interview performance if and when they happen.

60% of over 45s

never or rarely get feedback, compared to 44% of those in younger age groups.

Therefore it's no surprise to also see that respondents aged 45 and above are up to four times more likely than younger age groups to have been on a career break for more than 10 years. Older age groups are far more likely to get left behind due to an apparent bias from recruiters or hiring managers.

With such a high rejection rate for females and over 45s, it is easy to see how these groups could quickly become disengaged, lose confidence, and stop trying to re-enter an industry that doesn't appear to value their skills.

Bias in the recruitment system

Female respondents were significantly more likely than males to feel that they have personally experienced bias because of their gender and due to childcare responsibilities, while 40% of both male and female returners felt their lack of recent experience was a barrier.

Survey respondents commented they regularly experience an incorrect perception that their CV gap has automatically led to a deterioration of skills, with hiring managers undervaluing their experience before they have a chance to prove themselves.

The reality, from our experience, is that returners pick up many new and transferable skills whilst on their career break, have generally kept themselves up to date with their industry throughout their break, and are able to quickly refresh their skills when back in a work environment.

We also found through this research that more than half of STEM professionals looking for a return to work have been on a career break for less than 2 years. The argument that their skills will have become significantly out of date during this time is simply flawed.

36%
of returners have felt that bias in the recruitment process has been a barrier to them personally returning to their career.



Why so difficult?

In 2020 The Royal Academy of Engineering estimated that UK engineering employers will need to recruit 182,000 engineers annually and suggested that the UK would need to double its recruitment of graduates and apprentices to meet the shortfall.

Meanwhile, The IET's most recent Skills & Demand in Industry survey reported that 61% of employers said attracting the right skills was their biggest challenge in hitting their business objectives over the next 3 years.



Despite the very clear and desperate skills shortage in the UK, 61% of STEM professionals on a career break are finding the process of attempting to return to work either difficult or very difficult, compared to just 6% of respondents finding the process easy.

Respondents who are finding the process of attempting to return to work difficult are doing so for numerous reasons, but the most common of these include a feeling that employers are dissuaded by their gap in employment. Returners have also found difficulty in finding jobs that either allow flexibility in hours or are part-time to cater for childcare responsibilities, while others have felt that job adverts ask for too specific skills and do not consider transferable skills when employing someone.



Recruitment processes appear to be working against women & minority ethnic groups.

Worryingly, STEM professionals from black and ethnic minority groups find it more difficult to return to work - **67% of BME respondents said they are finding it difficult or very difficult compared to 57% of White British respondents.**

What's more, **women are 6x more likely to state that a lack of flexibility in working hours to allow for childcare responsibilities is a barrier to return.**

STEM organisations are clearly missing a major opportunity to get highly skilled, talented females back into the industry after having children, and it should be seen as no surprise that recent WES research found that **70% of women in STEM are anxious about taking a career break.**

Among the minority who are able to successfully return to their industry after a career break, the transition is often not an easy one.

While 94% of returners are glad that they made the decision to return to employment, 29% of those who have returned to work in the last 12 months have found the transition difficult or very difficult, compared to 16% of respondents who have found it easy or very easy.

Juggling long work hours with finding appropriate childcare while managing their lack of confidence when returning to work are the main reasons.

They also commented on being overqualified for their new position and being in a position that was lower than prior to their career break.

And worryingly, returners also commented on experiencing feelings of resentment, judgement and hostility from their colleagues, particularly male colleagues.



Summary

We've seen that in the UK today there is a highly educated, highly experienced, highly diverse group of STEM professionals looking to return to work.

Their industries are suffering from significant skills shortages however 'returners' still find it incredibly difficult to break back into the industries they've previously contributed to.

Commonly these professionals took a career break for reasons outside of their control, but now, due to changing circumstances, are ready to get back to work. They are motivated to return to their passion and in many cases become a role model for their children, yet typically get limited success through traditional recruitment channels.

Women, black & ethnic minority groups appear to have the most difficult task, taking on recruitment processes that seem to disproportionately work against them, from organisations that aren't yet ready to give returning mums the flexibility they need or proactively tackle the bias that exists throughout the process.

What's more, there is growing evidence to suggest the misconception that a CV gap automatically equates to a deterioration of skills plays out loudly in these recruitment processes. And those who are lucky enough to be successful, often have to take roles below their skill level, while having to tolerate unfair resentment, judgement and hostility from their peers. Talent is being wasted, and these issues have long-term implications for employee engagement, motivation and retention.

It's clear to see that the recruitment system is flawed, making it almost impossible for a STEM professional to pick up their career where they left it before taking a career break. The industry is failing the returners community, but organisations are also failing themselves, with many of these dynamics working directly against their ambitions to create a diverse, innovative and agile workforce.

Change is happening, slowly, with more and more UK companies taking on this challenge and succeeding. As shown by the case study below, the evidence is clear from leading UK engineering companies that returners programmes do result in high quality hires to fulfil existing and future contracts. However, the UK needs more STEM organisations, industry leaders and hiring managers to take note and think more broadly about how they access this hidden talent pool, giving talented professionals a fair chance. Collectively we should not stop until we've created a level playing field for returners, put an end to unconscious bias in recruitment processes, and removed the hidden barriers returners face today.

Case study

Haley Story & BAE Systems

Returning to engineering after a 17 year career break



I was surprised to receive a phone call as quickly as I did, and I was invited to visit the naval base to meet my potential manager and members of the team.

Careers aren't always perfectly mapped out journeys from one job or role to the next, often for the millions of STEM professionals in the UK, changes that affect career paths have a detrimental effect on our 'employability' when screened against outdated recruitment methods.

For Haley Storey from Hampshire, she believed that her decision to take a career-break and start a family would stop her STEM career in its tracks.

"I left my role as a production manager in 2003 when I started my family. I then started up a small online business and ran that for the next 15 years."

"I thought this meant that I had left my engineering days behind."

"Without any recent experience, I didn't think I would ever return to a technical job as my recent self-employed work was not relevant."

However, Haley found herself returning to her dream career as quick as a flash when she discovered the STEM Returners Programme.

"I was temping as an administrator in the aerospace industry when, one lunchtime, I read about the STEM Returner scheme at BAE Systems. I'd started the temporary job as a way to earn more money for Christmas but had stayed on for more than a year."

"The STEM Returner scheme seemed to be directed at people just like me – someone who had previously been in a technical job but who lacked the confidence and recent experience to apply for engineering roles now. It was a chance to work alongside an experienced engineer to see if I was suitable for the job. In a

normal situation, my CV would probably not have made the first round."

With things moving quickly, Haley was given the opportunity to integrate with her potential team, and experience the surroundings of the iconic dockyard in Portsmouth.

"I was surprised to receive a phone call as quickly as I did, and I was invited to visit the naval base to meet my potential manager and members of the team."

"I also had a personalised tour of the Queen Elizabeth carrier. This was a definite highlight and generated the excitement to give me that push to say yes when I was accepted onto the scheme to work on a Type 45 Destroyer. It was a big step though – I was almost 50 and there wasn't a guaranteed job at the end of it." She said.

Coming from the historic naval city of Portsmouth, Haley secured a placement on the STEM Returners Programme at BAE Systems, working at the dockyard that makes the city famous. However, due to the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, Haley's start to life at BAE wasn't a simple one.

"I joined in an unusual time. The pandemic had started, and I was unable to go on site at first. I spent a few weeks reading about subjects recommended to me by my managers."

In hindsight, Haley was thankful to have an understanding host company in BAE Systems who made her return to engineering an inclusive one.

“Looking back, it was good to have this time as I wasn’t familiar with even some of the basic terms.

“Gradually I started to come on site more often until I was in every day. I took whatever opportunity there was to go on board and learn as much as I could while also trying to get to grips with the workings of a large organisation. I admit I found it overwhelming, but I carried on learning whatever I could, picking up new information every day.

Haley was even offered a mentor for her when she was finally permitted on site full-time, something she found extremely helpful as a returner.

“Straight away I was allocated a ‘buddy’, someone who I could speak to on a regular basis about my experience and any issues. I still talk to her now and value the fact that there is somebody looking out for me.”

On the eve of her birthday celebrations, Hayley was given the opportunity to become a permanent member of the team at the defence and security giants.

“The day before my 50th birthday, I was offered a permanent position as a Project Engineer on HMS Duncan’s upkeep working with the Project Engineering Manager resolving engineering queries.

“I accepted the job, and I am now following a twelve-month development plan. Everything has been new to me, but my manager and team have been extremely supportive.”

With a newfound self-assurance, Haley has even been nominated for engineering awards during her first few months at BAE Systems.

“I was really surprised recently to have won a Team Portsmouth Engineering Award for Trainee Engineer of the Year. This has given me the confidence in knowing I made the right decision and that it’s never too late to start again!”

Looking back at her extended break from STEM, Haley didn’t expect to be given the chance to return, despite her previous experience and technical ability.

“Even though my career was important in my twenties and early thirties, it became less important when I started my family and I thought I would be stuck in average jobs until I retired. I never envisaged starting a new career at the age of 50.” She said.

“STEM Returners enabled my CV to be seen when otherwise it would have been left at the bottom of the pile.”

When asked whether she would recommend a STEM Returners Programme to those looking to return to the industry:

“Absolutely. I was scared to take the opportunity because I was lacking confidence, but I am glad I did.”



STEM Returners enabled my CV to be seen when otherwise it would have been left at the bottom of the pile.



Author biography



Natalie Desty is the Founder and Director of STEM Returners. After building a progressive career in recruitment, where she was Director of Maritime at a large recruitment company, Natalie was struck by the apparent lack of progress in diversity and inclusion within STEM, and particularly concerned by the insurmountable barriers that returners faced when looking to restart their career after a break.

Natalie created a small pilot returners programme for a group of employers and has now built this into an organisation that supports hundreds of returners in restarting their careers.

Natalie has a BA Honours degree in International Relations and Politics and has been working within the engineering sector for her whole career, particularly focused on improving the sector's diversity and inclusion. Natalie has been awarded the Royal Institution of Naval Architecture's Eily Keily Award and an honorary Engineering Doctorate from Southampton Solent University for her role in increasing diversity and inclusion within STEM.

To find out more please visit stemreturners.com

**The Arches
Coopers Yard
Lyndhurst
Southampton
SO43 7EW**

hello@stemreturners.com



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