

# THE STEM RETURNERS INDEX — 2022

stemreturners.com

$$\frac{\partial \rho}{\partial t} + \frac{\partial}{\partial x} (\rho u) = 0$$

$$\frac{\partial u}{\partial t} + u \frac{\partial u}{\partial x} = -\frac{1}{\rho} \frac{\partial p}{\partial x}$$

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial t} \left( \frac{p}{\rho} \right) + u \frac{\partial}{\partial x} \left( \frac{p}{\rho} \right)$$



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**STEM Returners is a multi award-winning solution to an industry wide problem. Our unique Returners Programmes help highly qualified STEM professionals to return to an equitable and inclusive STEM sector after a career break, enabling STEM leaders to access a new and overlooked talent pool, 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.

Today, most STEM professionals get overlooked when attempting to return from a career break, contributing to a concerning lack of diversity in STEM organisations.

This is what we're here to change.

## 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 the 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

# 86% male & 91% white

The current UK engineering workforce is 86% male and 91% white, yet few engineering companies are taking meaningful 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 professionals to return to an equitable and inclusive STEM sector.



## It really works

**We've now helped over 270 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 14% of professional engineers

### 34%

are from minority ethnic groups vs 9% 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?

The STEM Returners Index is an annual survey with UK STEM professionals who are on a career break, attempting to return to work or recently returned.

We know that STEM professionals on career breaks face hidden barriers when attempting to return to work. The STEM Returners Index aims to further understand these barriers, track the progress UK STEM industries are making with solving them, and shine a light on the change needed to create fair opportunities for all.

This year we are pleased to launch the 2nd annual STEM Returners Index, based on a survey completed by over 1000 STEM professionals in April 2022.



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# 2021 Recap

# A reminder of last year's results

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.

Each year we ask the same questions in order to understand the critical trends impacting returners in the UK. Before we share 2022's results, here is a recap of what we found this time last year.

**36%**

of returners felt they had experienced bias in a recruitment process

**76%**

Females were 76% more likely than males to never receive feedback at all

**61%**

were finding the process of attempting to return to work either difficult or very difficult

**6x**

Women were 6x more likely to state that a lack of flexibility in working hours to allow for childcare responsibilities was a barrier to return

**60%**

of over 45s never or rarely got feedback, compared to 44% of those in younger age groups

**88%**

of UK STEM professionals on a career break were **not** doing so out of personal choice

**20%**

had applied for more than 70 jobs through standard recruitment channels

**73%**

had applied for more than 6 jobs in the previous 12 months

**94%**

of successful returners were glad that they had made the decision to return to employment

**67%**

of respondents from ethnic minority groups said they were finding it difficult or very difficult to return to work compared to 57% of White British respondents



# 2022 Findings

# What did we find?

## Missed opportunities

As we found last year, the pool of STEM Professionals attempting to return to industry remains significantly more diverse than the average STEM organisation.

Those attempting to return to work are 46% female and 44% from ethnic minority groups, compared to 14% female and 9% from ethnic minority groups working in industry.

Despite many STEM organisations working tirelessly to create a more diverse workforce, it seems one of their major diversity opportunities (to engage with the returners community) is still largely being overlooked.

And those being overlooked are highly educated, experienced professionals. 72% have a degree, masters or doctorate, 64% were previously a manager or in a professional role, and 58% had more than 5 years of experience in their field before taking a career break.

## Misconceptions remain

Across the board, many face the industry misconception that a career break means a significant deterioration of skills, despite the majority of career breaks being remarkably short. In fact, 59% of those attempting to return have been on a career break for less than 2 years, 80% for less than 5 years.

Most returners are 'career ambitious'. 38% want to return to industry because they miss the challenge, 41% want to return to their passion, and 37% want

to get back to making progress with their long-term career goals. Very few consider their skills have deteriorated or become out of date, although sadly 35% of returners say their personal confidence has been affected by the recruitment challenges they face, and their low confidence has now become a barrier of its own.

## Bias in the system

As was true in 2021, the biggest challenge returners face is still a lack of feedback from employers once they've applied for a role, with 50% of applicants receiving feedback never or hardly at all.

Regretfully, quantifying this lack of feedback highlights the bias that still exists in the recruitment system. For no comprehensible reason, females are less likely to get feedback on a job application than males (52% of females vs 46% of males get feedback never or hardly at all). Of equal concern is the apparent bias against those with a disability. 57% of those

with a disability never (or hardly ever) get feedback, compared to 47% of those without a disability, suggesting there are still significant barriers for disabled candidates to overcome.

With 38% of returners feeling that bias in the recruitment process has been a barrier to them personally, it is fair to say that the process of returning to a career that has already been built is still far more difficult than it should be.

## The Primary Carer dilemma

Sadly it would appear that becoming a parent still often comes with a career compromise. As we also found in last year's STEM Returners Index, only 14% of UK STEM professionals are on a career break out of personal choice, with the largest reason for the break being childcare responsibilities. In fact, women are 5x more likely to take a career break for childcare reasons than their male colleagues.



Despite 39% of females wanting to return to work due to kids now being of school age (vs 8% of males), 40% of females still feel childcare responsibilities are a barrier to returning due to lack of flexibility offered by employers.



## Sadly it would appear that becoming a parent still often comes with a career compromise.



### The impact of Covid-19

Compared to last year, 'career breakers' are finding it more difficult to return to work; 72% of those attempting to return in 2022 are finding it difficult or very difficult, compared to 69% last year. And within this group, 34% say the Covid 19 pandemic has made their challenge even more difficult than it would have been already.

It would also appear that for many people Covid was the catalyst for a career break that they might not have taken otherwise, as 36% say Covid was a factor in their decision to take a career break. Redundancy is on the rise year on year as a reason for career breaks (20% in 2022 vs 17% in 2021), and relocation is a more prominent reason this year versus last year (18% in 2022 vs 13% in 2021) as the shift to remote

working in other industries has led to families re-evaluating where they want to live.

It also seems that the rising cost of living in the UK, coupled with uncertainty regarding the economy, has meant more returners want to rejoin the workforce for financial reasons than last year (54% in 2022 vs 44% in 2021). This trend is particularly pronounced among female returners, which is potentially indicative that the second person in a two adult household is increasingly needing to return to work due to financial pressures.

What's more, more redundancies leading to a wider pool of potential returners available, means STEM professionals are now having to apply for more jobs than ever. 74% of STEM professionals on a career

break have applied for more than 6 jobs in the last 12 months, with 27% applying for more than 70 jobs through standard recruitment channels. This is 7% higher than last year and potentially explained by the rise in automated CV screening technology, making it harder for returners to be fairly considered when the computer simply 'says no'.

### Bias against non-diverse candidates

There are unquestionably positive signs across the industry that STEM organisations are working to engage with returner communities differently to solve their workforce challenges. However, it would appear that returning to work has become more difficult for men, and older generations, in the last 12 months.

Men are finding it more difficult to return in 2022 than they did this time last year, with 70% of males in 2022 saying they are finding it difficult or very difficult to return, compared with 64% in 2021. What's more, men are more likely than women to say they are finding it difficult or very difficult to return to work in 2022 (70% of males vs 61% of females) and are 10% more likely to say Covid has had a negative impact on their attempts (38% of men vs 28% of women).

Men are also more than twice as likely to have been forced to take a career break due to redundancy (29% vs 12%), more likely to have applied for 70+ roles compared to last year (34% in 2022 vs 28% in 2021) and more likely than females (43% of men vs 33% of women) to say they have experienced personal bias in a recruitment process.

Bias also appears to become more prevalent with age, with

more than half of over 55's saying they have experienced personal bias, compared to as low as 23% in younger age groups. Over 55's are most likely to apply for over 70 applications (35%) and get no feedback at all (56%), which makes it no surprise that they are finding it more difficult to return to work than any other age group. Covid also seems to have had a stronger impact on older professionals' decision to take a career break in the first place, with 54% of over 65's citing Covid as a major factor in taking a break compared to an average of 36% across other age groups.

We seem to have reached a point where age has a larger impact on someone's ability to return to work than any other factor. In fact, female STEM professionals who have experienced personal bias are more likely to cite age (38%) than gender (29%) as the nature of the bias they've seen.

Are we starting to see a new form of bias against non-diverse candidates? Has the white middle aged man become less desirable as organisations strive to hit diversity targets? We hope not, because genuinely inclusive businesses are built through removing gender, age and ethnicity from recruitment processes altogether.



# Summary

**The 2022 STEM Returners Index showed that many of last year's challenges remain. The pool of professionals attempting to return to industry in 2022 are diverse (46% female and 44% BME compared with 14% female and 9% BME in the average STEM organisation), and experienced (64% were previously a manager or in a professional role, and 58% had more than 5 years of experience in their field before taking a career break).**

Despite representing a clear solution to an industry wide lack of diversity and shortage of skills, UK career returners are finding it more difficult to return to work than they did this time last year. In 2022, 72% of returners are finding their attempt to rejoin industry difficult or very difficult compared with 61% last year.

For 34% of respondents, COVID-19 has made getting back to work more difficult than it would have been already, however we also found that the impact of the pandemic has been felt by returners in more ways than one. For 36% of returners, COVID-19 was the catalyst for a career break that they might not have taken otherwise; while there has also been a year on year rise in related reasons such as redundancy (20% in 2022 vs 17% in 2021) and relocation (18% in 2022 vs 13% in 2021).

The rising cost of living has also played a role in 2022, with more STEM professionals attempting to return to work due to financial reasons than this time last year (54% in 2022 vs 44% in 2021). This, combined with an increase in the rate of redundancy, has led to a wider pool of potential returners

available, and as a result, a greater proportion of STEM professionals are now having to apply for more than 70 roles through standard recruitment channels than did last year (27% in 2022 vs 20% in 2021).

While we often hear that engineering organisations are doing more to engage female candidates, nearly a third (29%) of women in 2022 feel they have personally experienced bias in recruitment processes due to their gender compared to 7% of men, and despite 39% of females wanting to return to work due to children now being of school age (vs 8% of males), 40% of females still feel childcare responsibilities is a barrier to returning due to lack of flexibility offered by employers.

It also appears, however, that older white men are facing new challenges returning to work as some STEM organisations seem to be letting new forms of bias creep into their recruitment processes. This year we found that men (46%) were more likely to be victim of bias because of their age compared to women (38%). Bias also appears to become more prevalent with age, with more than half of over 55's saying they have experienced personal bias,

compared to as low as 23% in younger age groups, according to the survey.

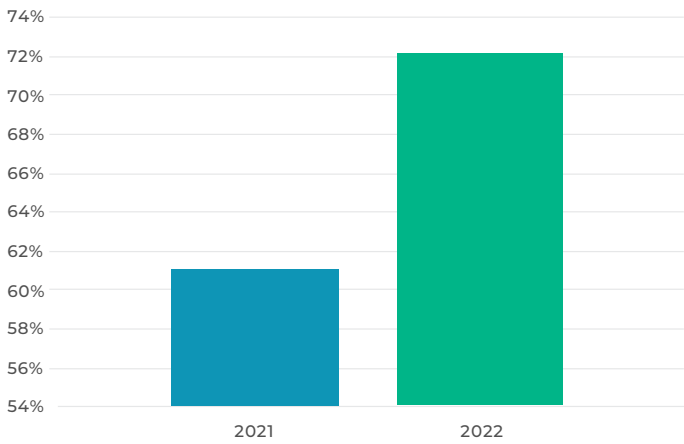
Despite their consistent success, structured returner programmes remain the exception and not the norm. Our results show that although 94% of those who have managed to return to work this year are feeling positive about their decision, 54% would have preferred to return via a supported returner programme. Only 13% actually did.

Without doubt, positive progress is being made, however there is clearly still a huge opportunity for STEM organisations to benefit further from engaging with the returners community - a group of talented, educated and dedicated people, who are still finding it incredibly difficult to return to work. UK STEM industries need more companies and hiring managers to think differently when it comes to recruitment. We hope that this year's STEM Returners Index inspires them to do just that.

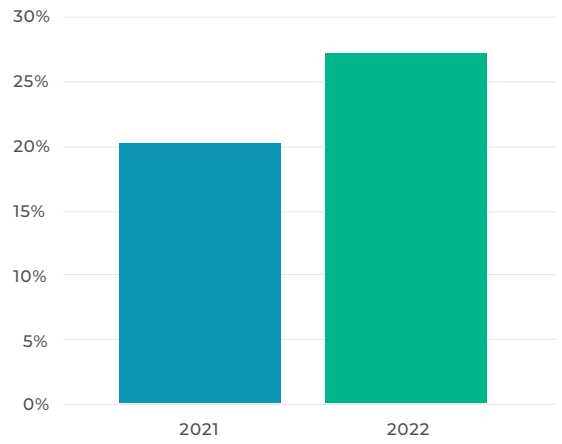
# 2021 vs 2022

## Difficulty to return 2021 vs 2022

**% FINDING THE PROCESS OF ATTEMPTING TO RETURN TO WORK EITHER DIFFICULT OR VERY DIFFICULT**



**% WHO HAVE APPLIED FOR MORE THAN 70 JOBS THROUGH STANDARD RECRUITMENT CHANNELS**

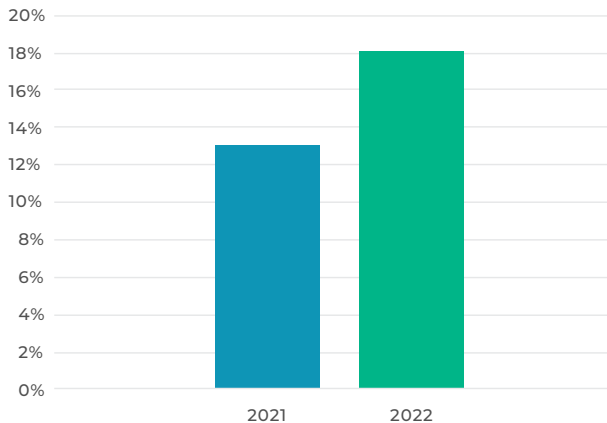


## Impact of COVID

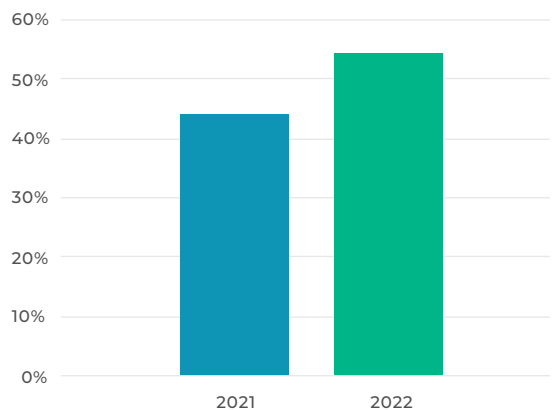
**IMPACT OF COVID ON DIFFICULTY TO RETURN**



**% WHO SAY RELOCATION IS THE MAIN REASON FOR THEIR CAREER BREAK**

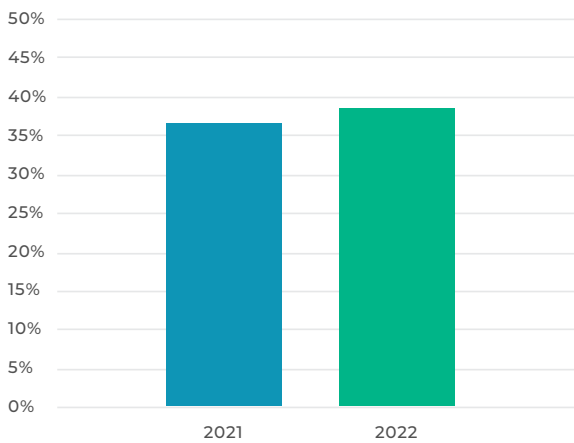


**% WHO SAY THEY WANT TO RETURN TO WORK FOR FINANCIAL REASONS**

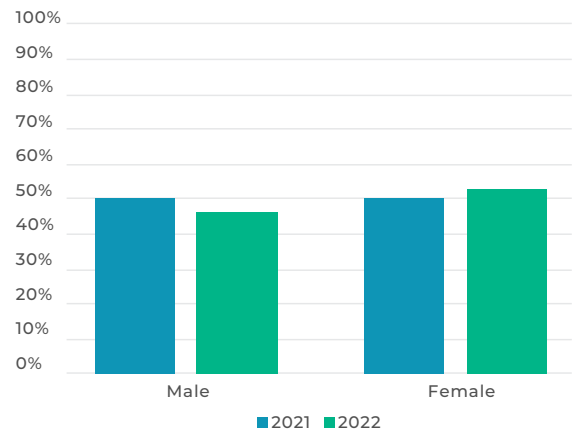


**Bias in the system**

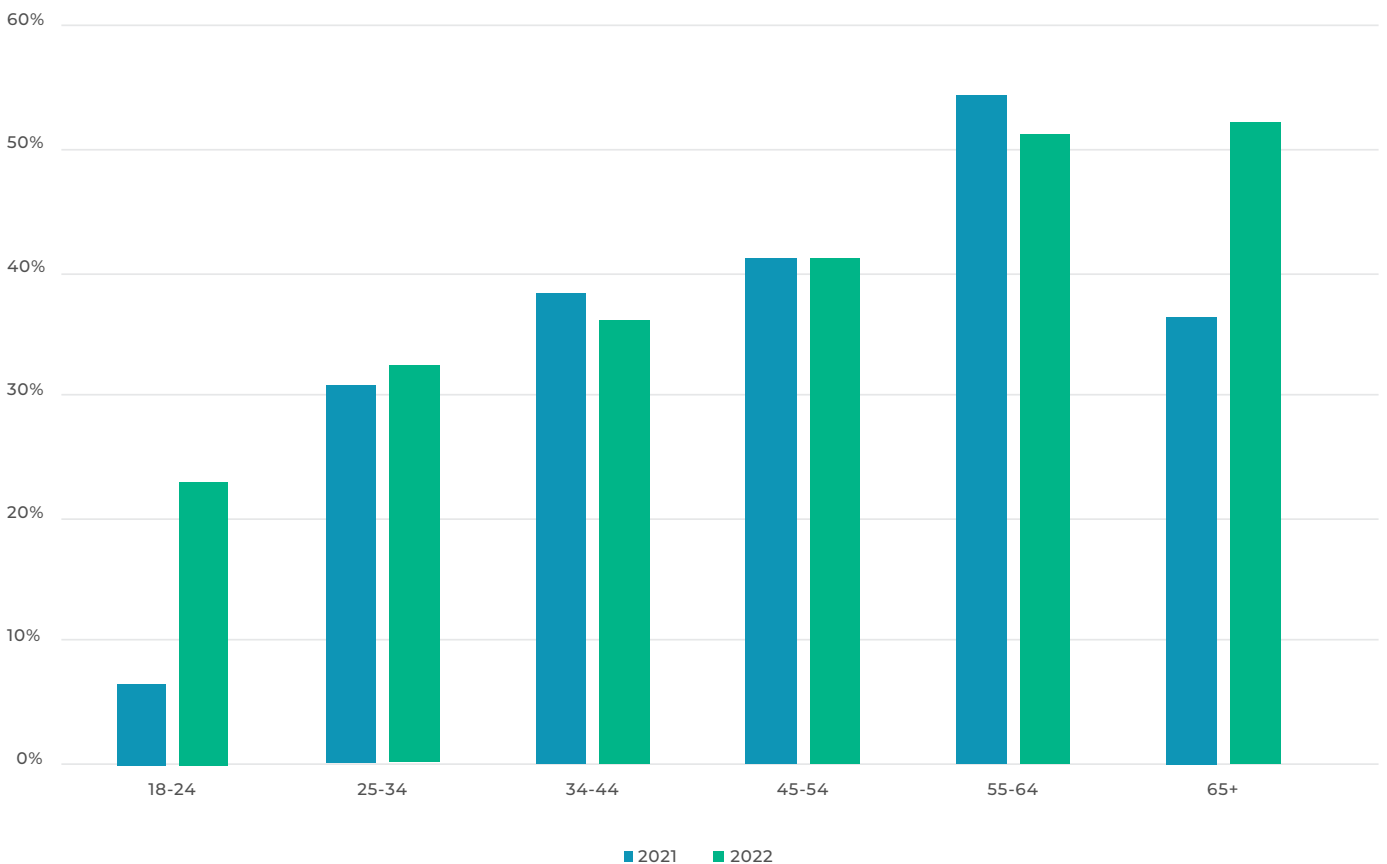
**% WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED BIAS IN A RECRUITMENT PROCESS**



**% WHO NEVER OR RARELY GET FEEDBACK ON THEIR JOB APPLICATIONS**



**% EXPERIENCED BIAS IN A RECRUITMENT PROCESS IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS, BY AGE**



# Case study

## Karen McCormack And Jacobs

Overcoming internal  
and external barriers



**I have had the opportunity to take part in several training courses designed to reskill/upskill returners and the collective talent and wisdom of my peers has been on each occasion really inspiring”**

Karen McCormack is an experienced engineer who returned to STEM with the Jacobs programme.

My first job after university was as a cementing field engineer trainee with Schlumberger (an oilfield service company). My first posting was in Pescara in Italy.

I got to go travelling mainly in Asia, working on land rigs in the south of Italy. The oil price fell dramatically, and I was placed on suspended employment, so I took the opportunity to go to Latin America. When the oil price climbed again, I returned to work and was transferred to the UK.

I worked on offshore rigs and I even once worked on a boat in Norwegian waters where at 23 I led a team of 9 on a plug and abandonment campaign, it took me three days to get my sea legs and to be able to stand upright and actually do any work.

My next adventure was to work as a statistical research assistant for the Oil Industry and Markets Division of the International Energy Agency in Paris. The office was really close to the Eiffel Tower and I was absolutely delighted but after a while, the novelty wore off and the throngs of tourists got annoying.

Next, I moved to London and Imperial College to do my MSc. After my MSc, I found work with Mott MacDonald (an engineering consultancy) in Aberdeen. Prior to having my first son, I was seconded into the client process team working as a process design engineer on wastewater treatment projects.

I absolutely loved this work and my team. I was involved in the entire lifecycle of the project and I loved the creative and

collaborative nature of working in multidisciplinary project teams to deliver the best solution. When I went back to work after my maternity leave, I returned to my employer's office and I was to transition into a project management role.

I had a small baby who did not sleep, and I was frequently on my own as my husband travelled a lot for work. It really was not the moment to transition into managing others. I did not enjoy this period of my career.

I felt that my son belonged more to the nursery than to me and after almost two years I decided to resign to become a full-time stay at home mum and that was more than 12 years ago. I had another son a year into my career break and I had never planned to take such a long career break.

### What barriers have you faced when applying for roles?

Actually, the most difficult to overcome barriers were the internal barriers. I felt a disconnection from my former professional self, when I thought of the things I had done and achieved in my career prior to my career break I could not connect with that part of myself and it felt like another person did those things. I also felt very deskilled and lacking in self-confidence. I could not see that I possessed any skills or talents to offer a prospective employer.

It took time and conscious effort to rebuild my confidence and to reintegrate my professional self. It was not something that happened overnight.



### Why did you approach STEM Returners?

I was finally applying for jobs and each job application takes so much time to complete and you imbue it with a little piece of yourself.

Then I would hear absolutely nothing back, not even a rejection, just nothing at all. To say it was disheartening is an understatement. It was also chipping away at my fragile newly re-crafted self-confidence. It was at this point that I contacted STEM Returners. I was getting nowhere with my applications and with no feedback I could not change what I was doing wrong as I did not know what I was doing wrong. STEM Returners were advertised as being for career returners with STEM qualifications and I absolutely fitted the criteria, I saw in STEM Returners the possibility of a lifeline.

### How did STEM Returners help?

I registered and uploaded my CV on the STEM Returners site. A while later STEM Returners contacted me about a possible returnship with Jacobs that they believed matched my profile. I filled in the proforma and they submitted it on my behalf. I was selected for a screening call shortly after which I had a panel interview and was successful in being offered a returnship with Jacobs.

A key element for me in the entire process was that STEM Returners advocated for me, kept me informed and gave me feedback at each stage. The team at STEM Returners were hugely supportive and helpful and this human touch makes a difference.

### What was the result?

I am on day 5 of my 12-week returnship with Jacobs and so far,

every person I have met has lived and exceeded the company values. The level of care and support has been beyond exceptional.

### How has this changed your career?

I now have an opportunity, a chance to prove myself and thus I have control back in my hands. I am so excited about the possibilities to learn and grow, they seem limitless.

### What would you say about the programme overall?

Returners in general are a largely untapped talent pool, and thus represent a significant opportunity for employers looking for candidates who not only have STEM qualifications but also possess an incredible array of other valuable life skills. I have had the opportunity to take part in several training courses designed to reskill/upskill returners and the collective talent and wisdom of my peers has been on each occasion really inspiring.

### Do you have any advice for returners like yourself?

After a long career break, I accepted that there will be a journey involved in getting back to work. I had to do a lot of work to build my confidence and inner resilience. I was quietly terrified the entire time. I was equally terrified that I would never return to work but paradoxically at the same time, I was perhaps even more terrified that I would find a job and that I would be a total flop.

Despite this ever-present fear, I have continued to move forward one small step at a time. I found doing training courses really helpful particularly those that targeted returners. I found that

looking around the virtual room at my peers they formed a mirror in which I could see my own value and talent reflected. The knowledge and skills building were of course useful in preparation for returning to work but the confidence building was for me even more important.

At the outset of this journey, I decided to take the advice that I give my kids. I am going to do my best; it is all anyone can do. Even if I do fail to secure a permanent role from this returnship I will have been brave, I will have tried, I will have learnt a lot and I will have new skills for when I try again. My advice is thus to keep plugging away in spite of your fears and insecurities.

I do feel in life that we regret so much more the things that we don't do. Finally, feel proud of yourself during the entire journey back to work, you are taking action, you are persevering and you are doing your best.



**A key element for me in the entire process was that STEM Returners advocated for me, kept me informed and gave me feedback at each stage. The team at STEM Returners were hugely supportive and helpful and this human touch makes a difference.**

## Author biography

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Natalie Desty is the Founder and Director of STEM Returners, an award-winning solution to an industry wide problem. After building a progressive career in recruitment, where she was Director of Maritime Engineering at a large recruitment company, Natalie was struck by the apparent lack of progress in diversity and inclusion within STEM industries. She was particularly concerned by the insurmountable barriers that people who have had a career break face, when wanting to return to STEM roles.

Natalie created a small pilot returners programme for a group of employers, which was a resounding success. Natalie has developed this programme into STEM Returners, which has supported hundreds of people to restart their careers in internationally renowned organisations such as BAE Systems, SSE and Leonardo UK. Returners take part in 12-week paid placements, enabling STEM leaders to access the best available talent, and in doing so, improve diversity and inclusion within their organisation. Ninety-six percent of returners secure a permanent position within the host organisation following the placement.

Natalie has a BA Honours degree in International Relations and Politics from the University of Portsmouth and was given the Eily Keary Award by the Royal Institute of Naval Architects for increasing equality, diversity and inclusion in the maritime industry. STEM Returners was awarded the Maritime UK Diversity Award in 2020, the Diversity in Engineering Award by Enginuity in March 2021, and Best Returnship Programme by the Women in Tech Employer Awards in May 2022. In September 2021, Natalie was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Engineering by Southampton Solent University to recognise her work in increasing diversity in STEM.

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**To find out more please visit [stemreturners.com](https://stemreturners.com)**

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