

# The Woman Returner – Getting Back to Work Checklist 094



## Introduction

Patterns of women's employment have been undergoing rapid change. The latest figures available in September 2008 show that more than two thirds of women with dependent children and 57 percent of women with children under five years old are now in employment. Parents with children under the age of five have the right to request flexible working and from April 2008 this was extended to those caring for adults. On average, women are waiting longer before having children and this means they may have a longer period of prior work experience. It has been estimated that around 250,000 women return to the labour force each year and that there is the potential for this number to increase.

Women who take even a relatively short time away from paid employment, usually to carry out family or caring responsibilities, may find that their confidence has been eroded or that their skills are now out of date. Research indicates that many women returners suffer downgrading, and take jobs for which they are over-qualified, that underutilise their skills and experience and (especially in the case of part-time positions), are less well paid. This checklist aims to help women returners address these problems and provide a step-by-step guide for returning to employment.

## Definition

"Woman returner" describes any woman returning to paid employment, whether full- or part-time, after a period away, usually taken to care for children or elderly relatives. Women returning to work after maternity leave are not normally considered to be returners, but now that maternity leave is longer and women may return to work up to a year after the birth of their children, they may face some of the same challenges as returners.

## Action checklist

### 1. List your skills

If you are returning to work after a long absence, be realistic in identifying the skills you have already acquired: define the tasks you perform on a daily basis and the skills involved. Running a home, for example, demands good time, project and financial management skills and the ability to organise and negotiate. Consider how far these will realistically equate to the skills required in a business environment. Take into account any voluntary or unpaid work, for example with schools or local charities or committees.

## 2. Translate your skills into areas of strength

Classify the skills you have identified into groups - for example, people management or financial planning. This can be used to demonstrate your strengths to potential employers. Think about which skills you most enjoy applying: this will give you pointers to possible areas of work.

## 3. Look at skills for further development

You need to consider any areas that you feel may need some development. Be honest but positive. For every weakness you identify, think about ways of remedying it - through practice or training.

## 4. Consider the options

Do you want to return to the same or similar work as before, or would you like to change career direction? Do you have fresh ideas about what you would like to do or are new opportunities opening up? Do you want a full-time position or would you prefer to work part-time? Would you consider a job sharing arrangement? What kind of flexible working arrangement would suit you best? Are you interested in term-time or school-hours working? Could you consider working from home or starting your own business? Bear in mind that your answers to these questions may limit the possibilities.

## 5. Identify opportunities

Relate your strengths to possible job opportunities. Be creative in identifying options. Have new companies moved into the area or are they likely to? Use local sources of information such as libraries, directories, websites, job centres, chambers of commerce or the local Business Link.

## 6. Face up to any potential difficulties

Once you are clear about the opportunities, be honest with yourself about any potential barriers or difficulties. These could include practical issues such as travel, childcare and finance, a lack of qualifications, or human factors such as family resistance. Work through the list and think creatively about how each could be addressed. Enlist the help of family and friends at this stage and be prepared to acknowledge that some difficulties may be insuperable. Consider also how you will maintain a healthy work-life balance.

## 7. Set goals and priorities that are right for you

Set clear goals for what you want to achieve from returning to work, and take account of your own priorities rather than those of others. These could relate to finances, hours of work or type of employment. Be realistic: set goals that are achievable in the short- to medium-term rather than aiming too high initially.

## 8. Draw up an action plan which identifies simple steps

List the actions you need to take to achieve each goal. Set yourself a sensible timetable with completion dates for each action. Estimate the costs involved. Work out your overall timetable and budget and make any necessary adjustments.

## 9. Consider whether training is needed

Will you need, or benefit from training? Consider all options, including:

- **'a return to work course'** to develop your job hunting skills including CV writing and interview techniques and rebuild your confidence
- **an updating course** to help you update skills such as word processing and computer use
- **further education or training leading to a qualification** to enable you to apply for a wider range of jobs
- **a training course** to help you acquire new skills, especially if you are changing career direction
- **a business start-up course** to acquire information on how to set up your own business.

You can seek guidance on these options from:

**Learndirect** who provide a free telephone helpline and web-based advice and information to help adults with learning and career queries.

Tel: 0800 101 901 [www.learndirect.co.uk](http://www.learndirect.co.uk)

**A local Job Centre**, which will provide advice on government training schemes and retraining schemes in areas of skill shortages.

Details at: [www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk](http://www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk)

**A local branch of nextstep**, which provides career advice for adults.

Details at: <http://nextstep.direct.gov.uk>

**Business Link**, which provides information and advice on starting a business.

Tel: 0845 600 9006 [www.businesslink.gov.uk](http://www.businesslink.gov.uk).

## **10. Prepare yourself**

If you have been away from work for some time, consider preparing yourself to return by doing voluntary or committee work. Treat this as you would paid employment - learn from mistakes and experiences, and get used to working with other people and within time constraints.

## **11. Build your own network**

Consider joining one of the many web- and meeting-based networks for women. These include groups for women returners, women in employment and female entrepreneurs. This will enable you to share experiences and develop new contacts - particularly useful if you are setting up your own business.

## **12. Draw up a CV**

Draft a CV listing your education and qualifications, employment history and relevant skills and experience. Seek help from family, friends or a careers adviser in refining the draft. Pay careful attention to presentation and layout.

## **13. Begin searching for a job**

Begin exploring at advertised and non-advertised sources of employment: the local job centre, newspapers and free magazines and Internet job sites. Sending your CV and a covering letter to appropriate employers is one approach that can be used to find openings that have not been advertised.

## **14. Draw up a list of questions to ask employers**

Focus on what is important to you, for example:

- childcare facilities
- flexible leave arrangements to care for elderly or disabled relatives
- training to help you develop
- opportunities for promotion.

## **Managers should avoid**

- underestimating the skills and experience you have gained
- undertaking expensive or time-consuming training without first exploring the local job market and the prospects for future employment
- trying to run before you can walk – take small steps to start with, if necessary.

## **National Occupational Standards for Management and Leadership**

This checklist has relevance to the following standards:

A: Managing self and personal skills, units 1, 2, 3

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## Additional resources

### Books

**Reconciling work and family life: central issues for women returners in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**, Jennifer Tomlinson  
Chelmsford: Women Returners Network, [2005]

**Examining the potential for women returners to work in areas of high occupational gender segregation**, J Tomlinson and others

University of Manchester Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research and Discipline of Sociology  
Manchester, 2005

**Back to work: a guide for women returners**, Diana Wolfin & Susan Foreman  
London: Robson Books, 2004

**Girlfriends in high places: how women's networks are changing the workplace**, Helen McCarthy  
London: Demos, 2004

This is a selection of books available for loan to members from the Institute's library. More information at: [www.managers.org.uk/library](http://www.managers.org.uk/library)

### Related checklists

Writing your CV (055)  
Starting a small business (116)  
Networking management (118)  
Work-life balance (193)

### Internet resources

#### **BERR Employment Matters Work and Families**

[www.berr.gov.uk/whatwedo/employment/workandfamilies](http://www.berr.gov.uk/whatwedo/employment/workandfamilies)

Provides information on employment law and regulations relating to flexible working, work-life balance, time off for dependents and related areas.

#### **Learndirect** [www.learndirect.co.uk](http://www.learndirect.co.uk)

Advice on a range of issues including job hunting, CVs, interviews and finding and paying for childcare.

#### **UK resource centre for women in science, engineering and technology**

<http://www.ukrc4setwomen.org/html/women-and-girls>

Includes information on sources of support and finance plus a 'Return case study guide' available to download.

#### **Working Families** [www.workingfamilies.org.uk](http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk)

Has fact sheets on flexible working, parental rights, benefits and finance and childcare.

### Organisations

#### **Women in Management**

Chartered Management Institute,  
Management House, Cottingham Road,  
Corby, Northants. NN17 1TT  
Tel: 01536 207303 [www.managers.org.uk/wim](http://www.managers.org.uk/wim)

**Employers for Carers**

Carers UK, 20, Great Dover St. London SE1 4LX

Tel: 020 7378 4999

**CarersLine:** 0808 808 7777 [www.carersuk.org/Employersforcarers](http://www.carersuk.org/Employersforcarers)

**This is one of many checklists available to all CMI members. For more information please contact**

**t:** 01536 204222

**e:** [enquiries@managers.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@managers.org.uk)

[www.managers.org.uk](http://www.managers.org.uk)

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