

# **WHAT DO WOMEN RETURNERS WANT?**

**RESULTS OF A SURVEY BY TIMEWISE  
PUBLISHED OCTOBER 2015**

Against a backdrop of concern about diversity and the skills drain, many employers are beginning to offer ‘women returner programmes’. Their aim is to entice back those women who have left successful careers in order to take a break to raise their family.

But what will persuade these women to return to work?

Timewise has surveyed over a thousand potential ‘women returners’, drawn from a pool of candidates seeking flexible work. We asked them what has happened to their careers after taking a career break, and what they want now.

## KEY FINDINGS

- 71% of the women surveyed took a break of at least one year; 42% took 2+ years.
- Of the women who took a break of longer than a year, only 26% returned to work with the same employer.
- 45% are interested in returner programmes (a further 36% say ‘maybe’).
- 70% want the returner programme to result in a flexible job, compared to 13% wanting a full time job.
- When women say they want a ‘flexible’ job, they mostly mean ‘part time’. When they are asked what types of jobs they will consider, part time jobs score 93% while all other forms of flexibility score less than 50%. Only 6% of women would consider a full time job that has no flexibility.

### METHODOLOGY

An online research survey was sent to candidates registered with Timewise Jobs to seek flexible work, receiving 1968 responses from women who had taken a career break.

For most of this report, we focus on the responses of a sub-set of 1396 women who had taken a career break of at least one year, as this is the group most likely to qualify for returner programmes for women.

### CONTENTS

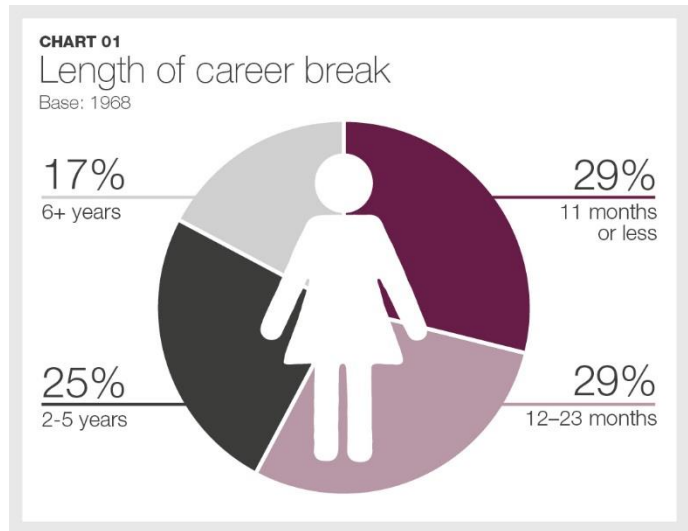
How long a career break do women take?	3
What women do when they return to work, following a career break of more than one year	
• What working pattern do they choose?	3
• Do they return to their old employer?	4
• The financial penalty of choosing flexibility	4
• How do women feel about their career progression?	5
The intentions of women who are still on their career breaks	6
Interest in Returner programmes	6
Recommendations to businesses	8

## 1) HOW LONG A CAREER BREAK DO WOMEN TAKE?

A minority (29%) of the women we surveyed had taken a break of less than one year.

The remainder of this report deals with responses from the 71% majority, who had taken a break of longer than one year. This is because these women are most likely to qualify for a returner programme.

Of the women who took a career break of longer than a year, two thirds (923 women) had returned to work at the time of the survey, while one third (467 women) were still on their career break.

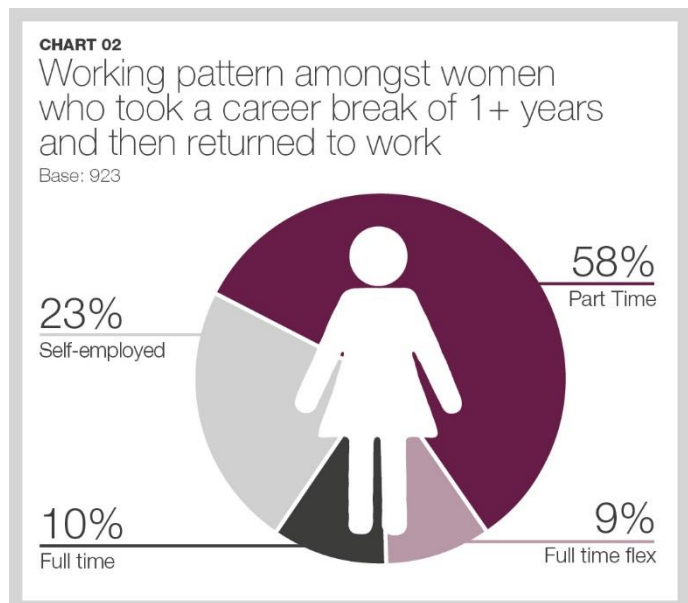


## 2) WHAT WOMEN DO WHEN THEY RETURN TO WORK, FOLLOWING A CAREER BREAK OF MORE THAN ONE YEAR

### WHAT WORKING PATTERN DO THEY CHOOSE?

58% of women who had returned to work after a career break of longer than one year had chosen to return to a part time job (4 days per week or less), with a further 23% choosing to become self-employed. Only 19% of women returned to work on a full time basis, of whom approximately half had some flexibility in their role. So, it's a small minority of 10% who were willing to return to work in a conventional full time role.

The number of women who chose to become self-employed is striking. At Timewise we have seen, in our conversations with many thousands of women, that the choice to become

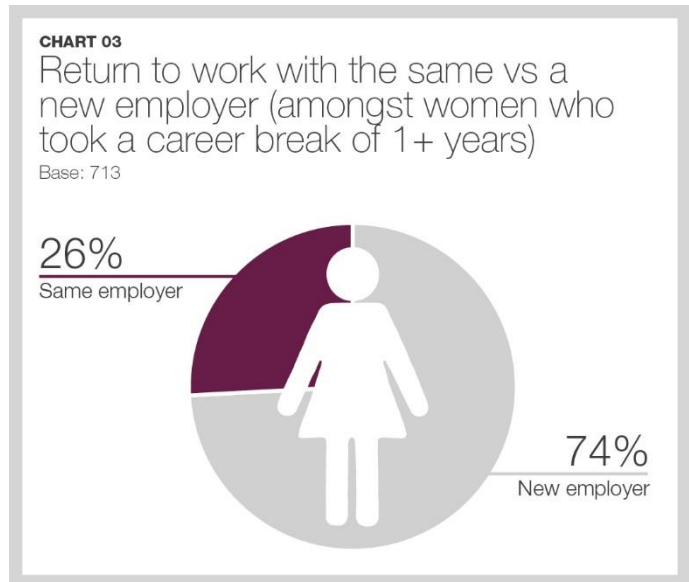


self-employed often follows a period of frustration with the job market. Vacancies offering flexible options are few and far between, especially for professional and managerial jobs. In order to keep working, whilst also having control over when and where they work, women turn to self-employment.

## DO THEY RETURN TO THEIR OLD EMPLOYER?

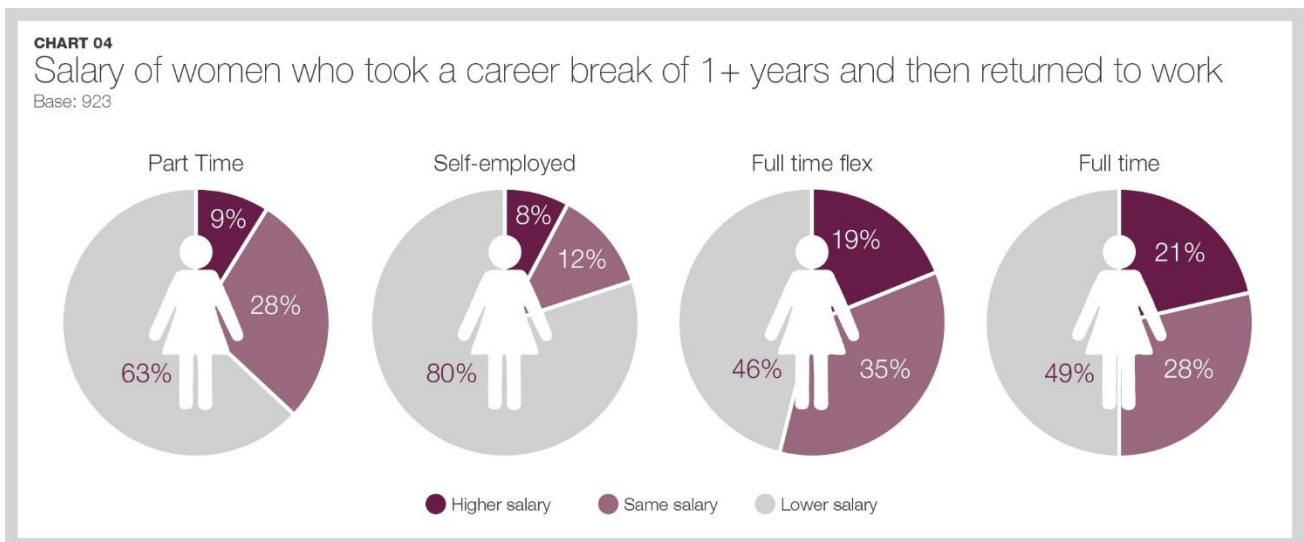
A minority of 26% of women returned to work with their old employer. The low proportion is probably due to the fact that these women had all taken an extended career break of more than one year, and so many would have formally left their previous employer.

This finding suggests that companies could perhaps do more to keep in touch with female staff who take a long career break, and consider enticing them back by offering part time or flexible working patterns.



## THE FINANCIAL PENALTY OF CHOOSING FLEXIBILITY

Financially, there is a significant penalty when women return to work after a career break of over a year:



The financial penalty is at its greatest for those who choose self-employment (80% earn less), followed by those who choose to work part time (63% take a drop). Note that the question asked women to answer using their full time equivalent salary, so the fact that they work fewer hours is not the reason for their drop in salary.

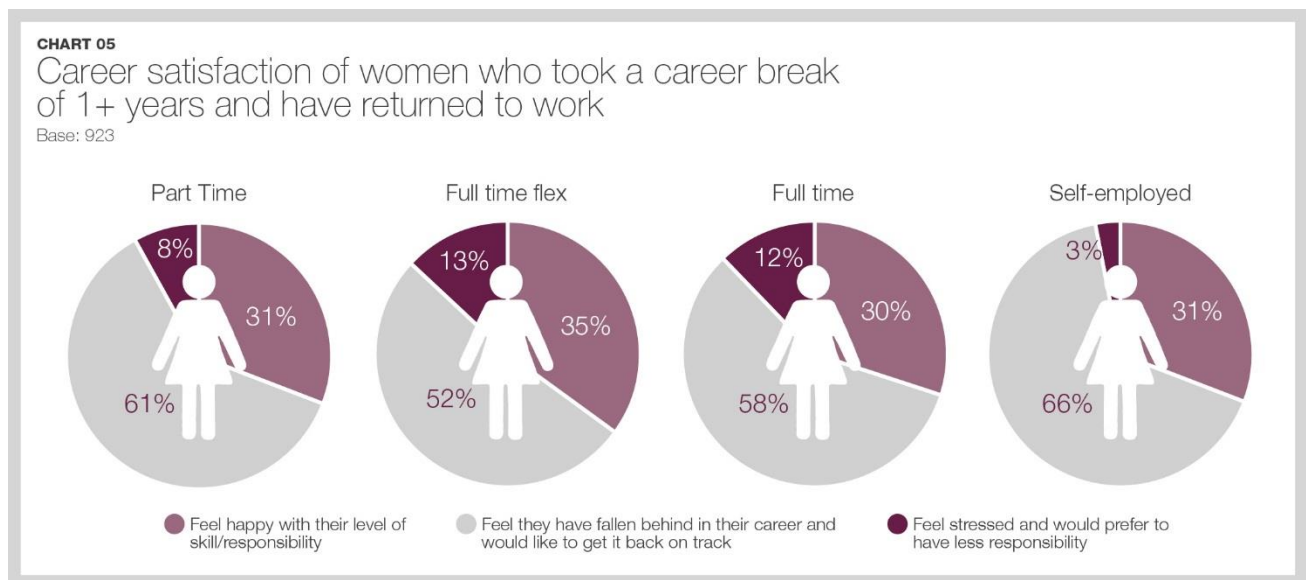
Even amongst the small minority of women who are willing to take a full time job, nearly half take a pay cut. This is probably because most of the women found new jobs with new employers from a position of unemployment and with a big gap in their CV (because the length of their career break means they had left their previous employer).

So, the interruption to their career costs women dearly – it’s not just their quest for flexibility. Companies which run returner programmes should consider reaching out to women in full time employment, as well as to those who are unemployed or who have down-skilled to get a part time role.

Finally, it’s worth noting that the proportion of women who return to work on the ‘same salary’ roughly correlates to the proportion of women who were able to return to work with the same employer.

## HOW DO WOMEN FEEL ABOUT THEIR CAREER PROGRESSION?

Although women vote with their feet to take extended career breaks and then return to work flexibly, they are nevertheless clearly concerned about their careers.



Over 60% of part time or self-employed women, and over half of those who work full time, say they feel they have ‘fallen behind with their careers and would like to get it back on track’.

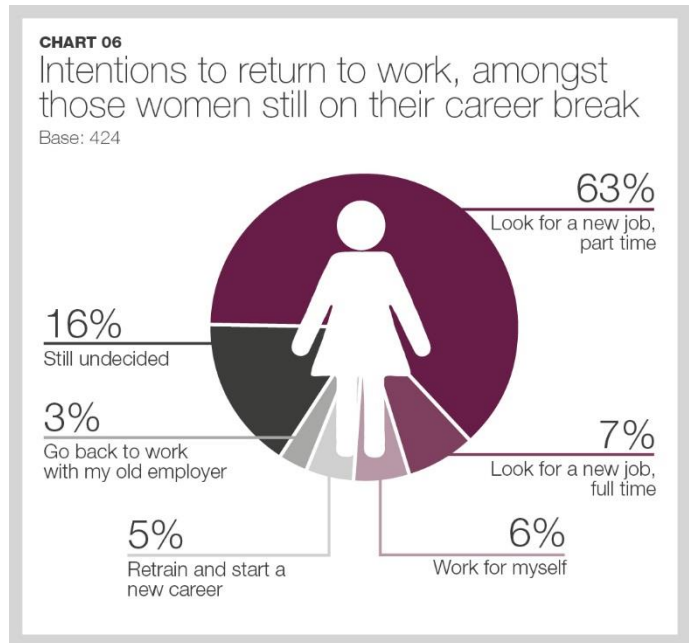
Clearly, there is no shortage of candidates for returner programmes.

### 3) THE INTENTIONS OF WOMEN WHO ARE STILL ON THEIR CAREER BREAKS

Women who had taken more than a year away from work and were still on their career break were asked about their intentions to return to work.

The desire to find part time work dominates again – 63% of women still on their career break sought this outcome.

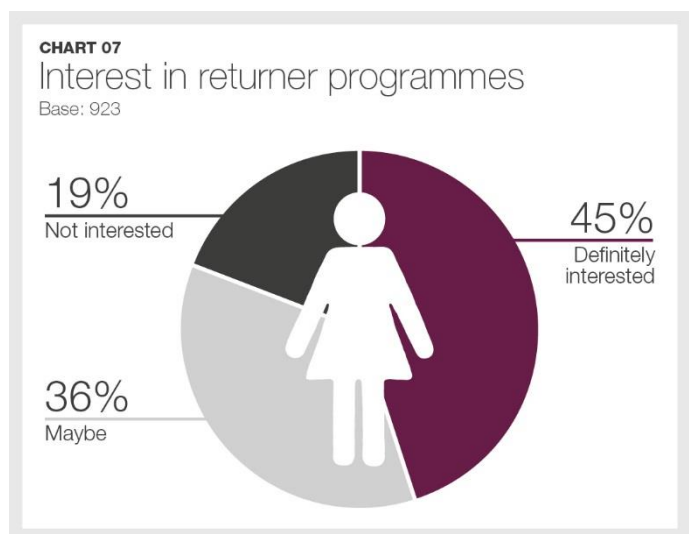
The fact that relatively few of these women (6%) were considering self-employment supports the earlier interpretation of the high self-employment figure (23%) for women who had already returned to work - that ‘career break women’ become self-employed once they have exhausted all other attempts to find a flexible job.



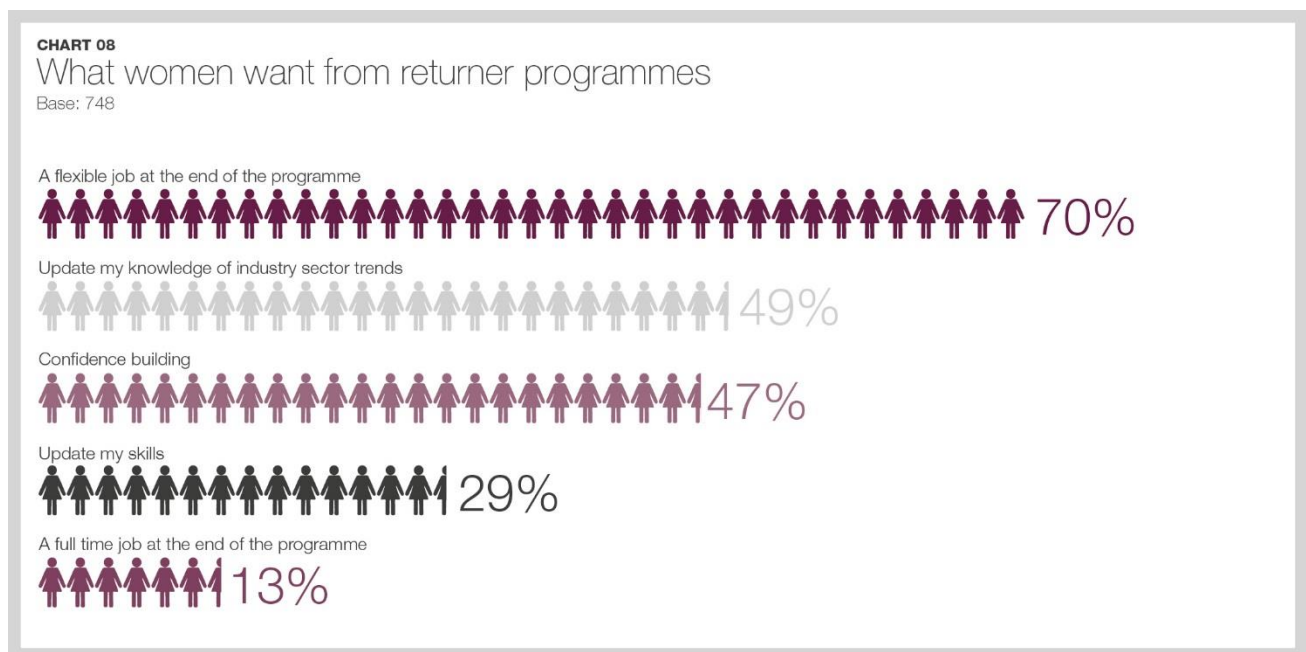
Very few of this group of women were intending to return to work with their old employer – this will almost certainly be because a very large proportion were on extended career breaks, and had presumably already formally left their employer.

### 4) INTEREST IN RETURNER PROGRAMMES

Not surprisingly given the findings so far, there is considerable interest in returner programmes: 45% of the sample were definitely interested, with a further 35% saying ‘maybe’.

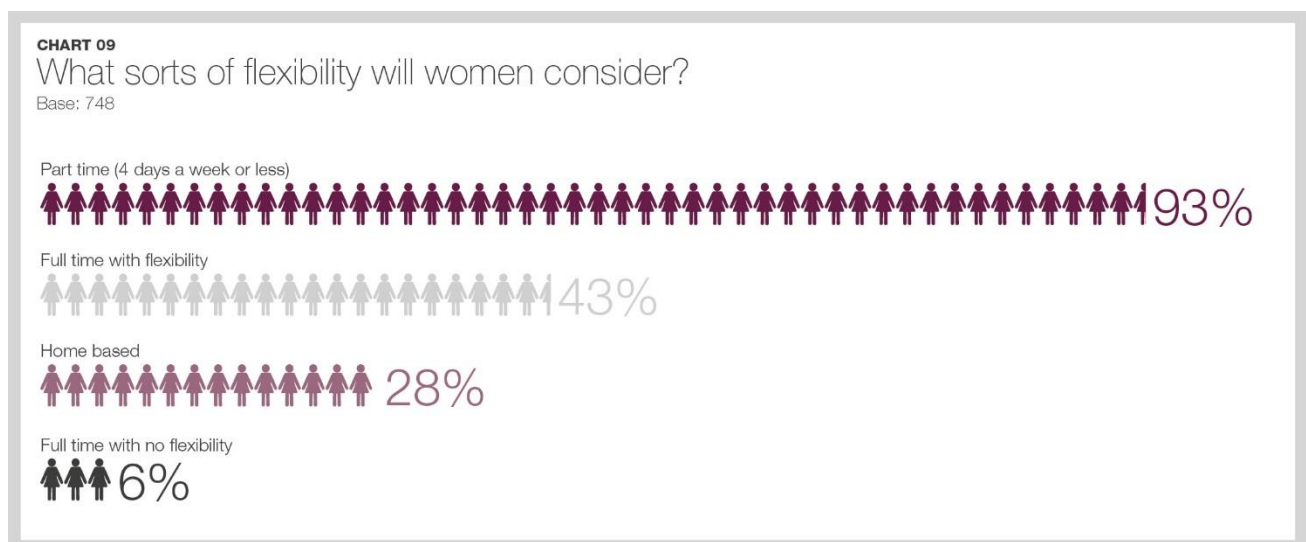


Those women who were interested in returner programmes were asked about their expectations. Unsurprisingly, the most important factor (scoring 70%) was ‘a flexible job at the end of the programme’:



Employers running returner programmes need to accept that their success will depend on their ability to help women back into flexible careers. There is very little mileage in trying to attract women back to full time work, as only 13% of women seek that working pattern.

Finally, when women say they want a ‘flexible job’, they really mean they are looking for a part time arrangement:



93% of career break women who have taken a break of more than one year want a part time job, while only 6% of women will consider a full time job with no flexibility. 43% of women will consider a full time job that offers some form of flexibility (a day or more per week working from home; flexibility on the start and finish times; or a condensed week).



## 5) RECOMMENDATIONS TO BUSINESSES

The results of this survey are very clear: women who have taken long career breaks tend to be very interested in returner programmes; however, overwhelmingly, they are looking for part time or flexible work. It's important to acknowledge that our sample may be skewed in favour of those seeking flexibility (because the source was a database of candidates for flexible jobs). However, all the women had taken an extended career break of longer than a year; in our wider experience of dealing with women with children, taking an extended career break goes hand in hand with opting out of work because it doesn't fit with raising a family.

Timewise believes that businesses which are considering running returner programmes will benefit by:

- Opening up to flexible hiring, so they can offer flexible working arrangements to women returners. There is very little mileage in trying to attract women back to full time work - only 13% of the women sampled seek that working pattern.
- Considering whether a 4 day working week can be accommodated, as this is the maximum sought by most women returners.
- Keeping in touch with female staff who have left, following long career breaks, and enticing them back by offering part time or flexible working patterns. It is worth reaching out to female alumni who are now employed elsewhere, or who have become self-employed, as well as to those who have not returned to work. This is because many women have to down-skill following a long career break, and wish to get back to where they once were.



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