



Developing Accessible Career Break Information and Resources

CASE STUDY

Author: Nell Osborne

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Sellafield: Developing Accessible Career Break Information and Resources

SUMMARY

Lots of STEM organisations have the bare minimum when it comes to support for maternity leave and career breaks, both in terms of the policy provisions in place, and in terms of accessing those policies and making sense of them. What this often looks like in practice is dense, difficult-to-read or outdated policy that isn't easily accessed or well-signposted for either employees or line managers.

Staff at Sellafield Ltd., a large multi-function nuclear site in Cumbria, decided to take this common problem into their own hands. Over the course of one year, they worked together to develop a simple but hugely effective set of resources, case studies, guidance documents and trainings, as well as an improved communications plan, to better inform, educate and support employees navigating career breaks. This low cost, high impact project was energised and led by the volunteers that make up Sellafield's gender working group and the lived experiences of employees.

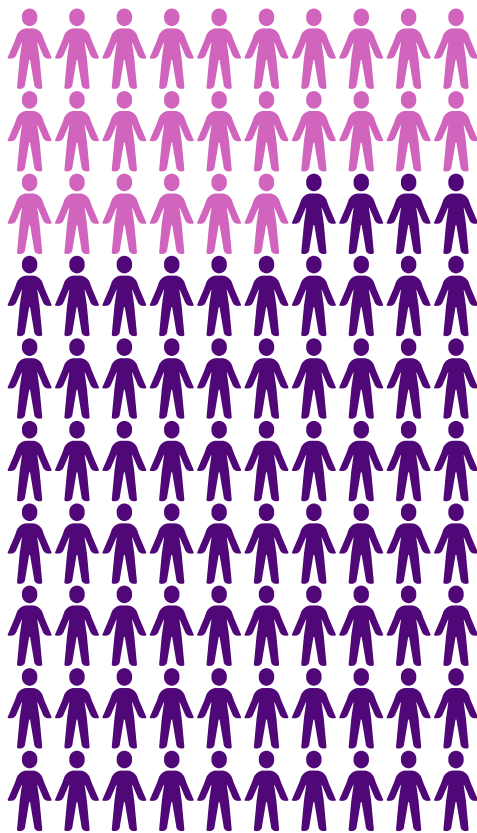
This case study will:

- provide you with an understanding of why it's especially important to support women returners in the STEM industries
- give you an understanding of how Sellafield's women's network planned and completed this project
- outline the impact of the initiative
- give you with guidance and tips to recreate this initiative within your own organisation

Why Support Returners?

Returning to work after a career break can be a daunting prospect. Those returning from maternity leave, paternity leave or a period of ill health must navigate multiple factors: rediscovering the right Work/Life balance; childcare; imposter syndrome; anxiety; managing change. After childbirth, many women find that their priorities and concerns have shifted.

What's worse, lots of STEM organisations have the bare minimum when it comes to support for maternity and paternity leave, both in terms of policy provisions and in terms of accessing the policies themselves and then making sense of them. What this often looks like in practice is dense, difficult-to-read or outdated policy that isn't easily accessed or well-signposted, for either employees or line managers. This compounds the stress and barriers associated with taking or returning from a career break even further. This issue is particularly relevant for women, who are already under-represented in the STEM sector.



In 2023, female employees only accounted for 26% of the total workforce of Core-STEM employees.¹

1. [Workforce Data release](#), March 2023.

The Impact at a Glance



What this research shows is how important it is to create family friendly environments at work, and to support adequately staff when they need to take career breaks, in order to retain women in STEM.

Women returners are a highly skilled demographic that want to return to work. But companies must take the time to understand what will allow returners to flourish. This means embracing family friendly working practices for both men and women – in the longer term, this will make your company stand out among the crowd.

2. Statistics from Careers After Babies report, "Careers After Babies: the uncomfortable truth" (2023). [Download the full report here.](#)

3. Statistics from Fawcett report, "Paths to parenthood: Uplifting new mothers at work" (2013). [Download report here.](#)

About Sellafield Ltd.

Sellafield is a large-scale nuclear site in Cumbria. It works on behalf of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority to retrieve and manage spent nuclear fuel and nuclear waste safely and effectively. It employs over 11,500 people and, currently, 30% of staff are women. Sellafield have been WISE members since 2020.

The D&I Journey 2016–2023

Since 2017, Sellafield has been on its D&I journey. This has included implementing a range of initiatives, working around the challenges posed by Sellafield's history and tradition; demographics and geography; complexity and bureaucracy.

Employee-led Support Networks

One of the main ways in which Sellafield has successfully pursued its EDI agenda is through the development of Employee-led support networks. There are currently over 1, 200 active network group members, falling into four categories: Mental Health, Equalities, Colleague health and well-being; neurodiversity.

These are:

- HR Supported
- Executive/Senior Leader Sponsored
- Employee Led

Sellafield's Gender Balance Network

One of the networks making the biggest impact is the Gender Balance Network. This is open to both men and women who want to positively impact issues related to gender justice at Sellafield. Unlike other employee networks at Sellafield, the Gender Balance Network is not a support network, but a group of volunteers who act to influence change in the business and make improvements.

The Maternity Journey and Career Breaks

Project duration: 1 year.

In April 2022, the Gender Balance Network embarked on a volunteer-led project designed to better support Sellafield staff to navigate career breaks. In one year, they achieved:

- A series of tailored, accessible resources designed a support returners and managers to navigate key information related the maternity journey and career breaks
- Case studies. A diverse collation of staff “success stories” about their experience of reintegration into work after a career break – to promote visible role models
- Improvements to the intranet webpage. Better accessibility of maternity, paternity and career break information on all relevant online hubs; improved usability and signposting of maternity and career break policy
- Improved internal recognition of, and engagement with, the work of the Gender Balance Network

The Context

Some Sellafield employees were unhappy with the lack of support available when leaving for, and returning from a career break - especially maternity leave. Their experiences were very much dependent on the line manager they worked for, rather than there being clear guidance and best practice available.

Returning to work after a significant break is always going to be challenging for anyone. However, for some staff at Sellafield Ltd, the difficulty was compounded by a lack of easily accessible guidance or policy documents. People reported that, on returning to work, they sometimes found their work computers and email accounts had mistakenly been deleted. Others found that colleagues and line managers were not alerted to, or prepared for, their return. This resulted in some employees being left for periods of time, unable to operate fully in their roles. In other cases, some employees were expected to hit the ground running as if they hadn't been from work off at all.

Anecdotally, a number of women reported feeling “forgotten” while away on maternity leave. Whilst Sellafield has Keep-In-Touch days, they were poorly utilised. Meanwhile, the policies surrounding maternity and paternity leave were difficult to access.

How did it Begin?

The Gender Balance Network was the key forum where firsthand experiences were widely shared between employees. This led to a collective sense that something needed to be done. Employee Survey Data and diagnostic results from the WISE Ten Steps programme further backed up these negative experiences, by identifying the maternity journey a widespread issue and barrier for women at Sellafield.

Previously, the Gender Balance Network worked by focusing on several smaller topics and themes simultaneously. In 2022, this changed. The entire network decided to focus on the same topic. Working collaboratively towards a shared aim, it meant that they were able to have a bigger and more focused overall impact.

Network members elected to focus on the experiences of women returners at Sellafield as their theme for 2022-2023. Whilst Sellafield is a male-dominated working environment, career breaks is an issue that disproportionately affects women and their career progression. A number of the women who had themselves been through career breaks were able to lead on group discussions about what most needed to happen to improve the experiences of women who choose to have families. Importantly, this lived experience shaped the project, as members of the network advised on where and when support would have been most useful to them and why.



Planning

Step 1: What does success look like?

During the initial planning stage, the Gender Balance network's members held breakout sessions in which they broke down the topic into 4 key areas. They used those topic areas to brainstorm improvement ideas. For each stage they asked, members asked each other 'what does success look like?'

- **Before taking a career break**
What things need to be discussed and put in place?
- **During the career break**
How do we improve communications and accessing information?
- **After a career break**
What can we do to support a smoother transition back into work?
- **Communicating afterwards**
How do we share the improvements we've made with the workforce?

By breaking down the topic into multiple separate elements, responsibility for the work was also distributed evenly among network members.



Step 2: What already exists?

Volunteers reviewed the current maternity arrangements: the documents and advice that were available to staff as well as the line managers who support and oversee this process.

Step 3: What are others doing already?

Members of the Gender Balance network approached their WISE relationship manager for examples of other innovative Career Break initiatives. They saw some particularly good examples produced by Jacobs as part of their “Bridge the Gap” initiative – a programme that actively supports parents returning to work after parental leave through structured workshops, manager toolkits, coaching and awareness campaigns.

This research process influenced their decision to make a simple yet highly effective visual resource that works by “mapping” the key action and contact points along the maternity journey timeline.

Although this initiative started as a maternity initiative, members later chose to expand the remit of the project, from being purely a maternity career break into any sort of career break. The Gender Balance Network saw this as an opportunity to be more inclusive and to promote paternity leave as a viable option for men. Many of the problems faced by parents on returning to work are shared by people who take career breaks to care for elderly family members, or who need to take sick leave.

From this research and planning phases, a concrete plan of action emerged with four defined stages. The tasks were divided up between members of the Gender Balance Network.

Stage 1: Preparing for a career break

Aim: To provide the employer and employee with easily accessible information to allow an effective transition into their career break.

Stage 2: During a career break

Aim: To apply learning to empower line managers and enable focus on inclusivity and value of team members during career breaks.

Stage 3: Transitioning back from a career break

Aim: To support the employee returning to work to ensure they have a smooth reintegration into their role and team.

Stage 4: Creating a supportive and inclusive work culture

Aim: To enable the Gender Balance Network to communicate effectively to line managers and the workforce about career break and improving lines to information accessibility.

The Outcome

Career-break Roadmap Guidance Documents

Highly visual guides were created to collate information and advice to help line managers and individuals at different points in the career break journey. These made it clear who was accountable for what and signposted where people can get information – most of this information already existed, but it was not stored together, and it was difficult to find.

The Maternity Leave Journey

An infographic that clearly shows the key points of the pregnancy journey which demand an action, with clear advice for staff about where, when and how to do so. See resource in Appendix.

Returning to Work Guidance

A concise informative document, aimed at employees, that supports them to plan how they can best ensure that their first weeks and months back at work are as smooth as possible. See resource in Appendix.

During a Career Break

An helpful document, aimed at employees, which supports them to prepare for their career break in the way that will work best for them. For example, it asks them to think about logistics related to “touch points” with their line manager whilst they are away from work.

Improving Online Access to Information

Network members worked closely with HR to improve the usability of the internal Sellafield website. This “update” involved removing old broken links, updating language to make it warm and inclusive, improving online signposting and uploading the newly developed online resources to EDI areas, so people can easily find the relevant information when they need it.

Internal Communication Plan

Network members collaborated with the internal communications team to deliver a company-wide publicity push about our new outputs, and using daily line manager briefs.

Creating Case-studies

Sellafield created a series of new Case Studies - these are career histories of staff who had taken maternity and paternity leave. These provided a range of visible role models that allow staff preparing for a career break to see how others overcame logistics, preparations and problems related to career breaks. They created more individual case studies of people who had taken career breaks and uploaded those to the case studies page on the intranet.



An extract from Internal Auditor at Sellafield, Rebecca Redfern's Case Study

What advice would you give others who are considering taking a career break?

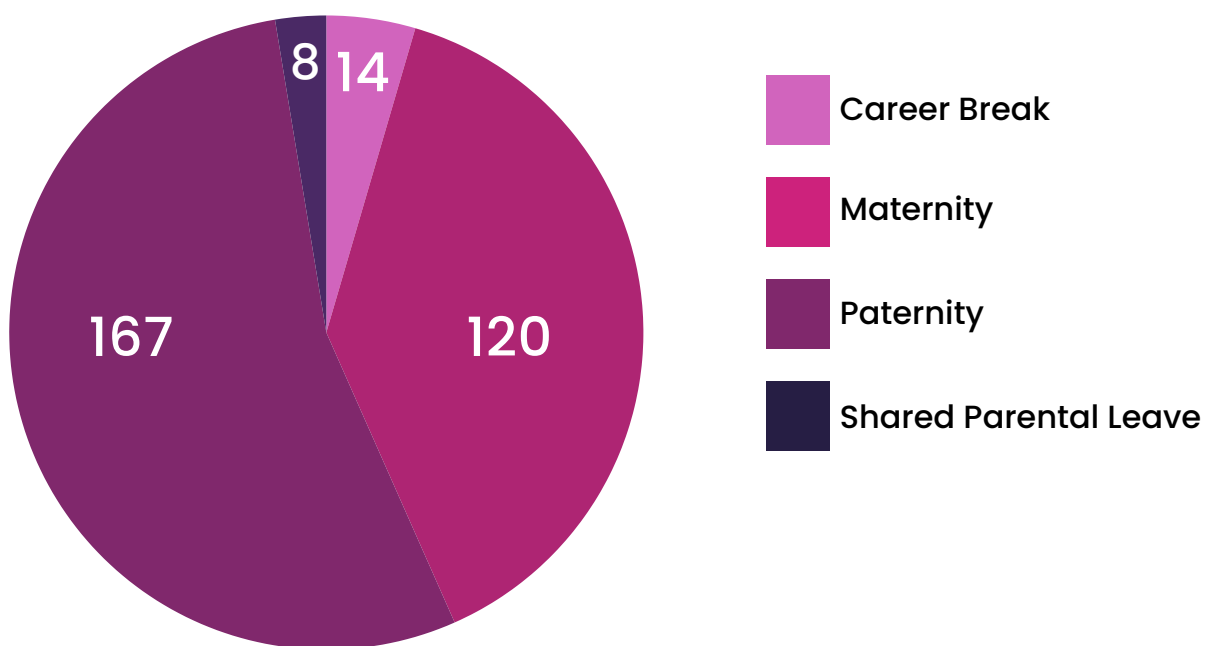
Don't be afraid to do it. There are plenty of reasons to talk yourself out of doing it, but if you get an opportunity, jump on it. I did have an element of fear. I was worried "What if I go back and I'm out of the loop" ... being the new starter again... having to go somewhere I didn't want to. I had nothing to worry about at all as the business was very supportive.



The Impact

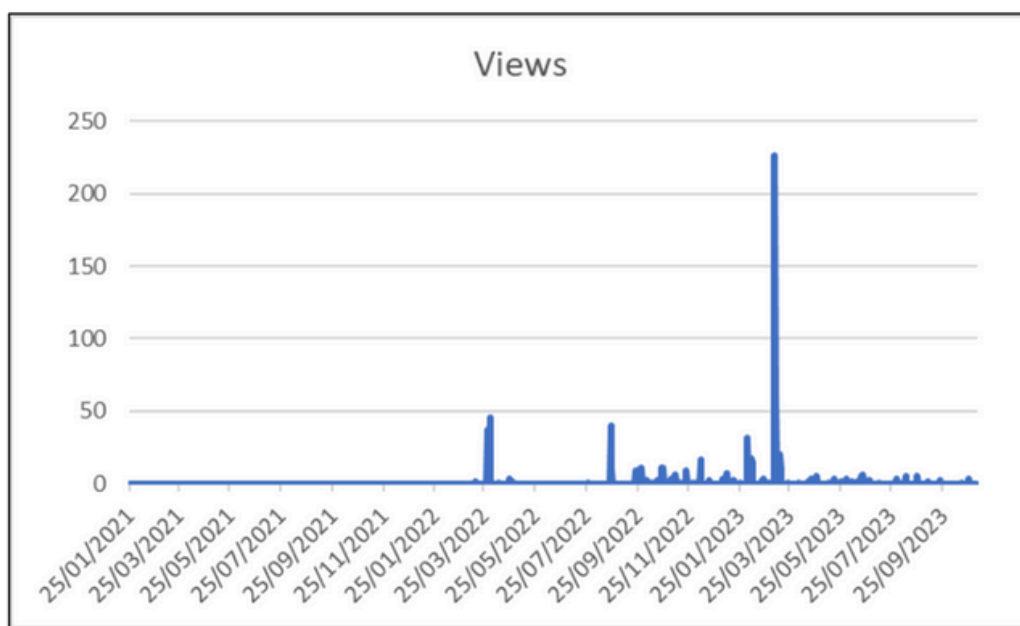
Sellafield Ltd. employs over 11,500 people. Of these, 30% (and rising each year) are women, many of whom may decide to take maternity leave at some point in their careers. **In 2022, 309 staff members took a career break.**

Reasons for Leave of Absence



The initiative has received a very positive response from employees. These are from individuals, who feel that their journey has been smoother, and from line managers, commenting that they now have the right support and information to hand, at the right time, and importantly, that they know where to go for advice and guidance if needed.

By tracking the number of people clicking on the new webpage, Sellafield can assess how many people are accessing the information and resources.



After an initial surge of traction after launch, with several hundred people clicking on it, the page continues to be steady and regular traffic, demonstrating its widespread relevance.

- 10 employees per week click on the new webpage.

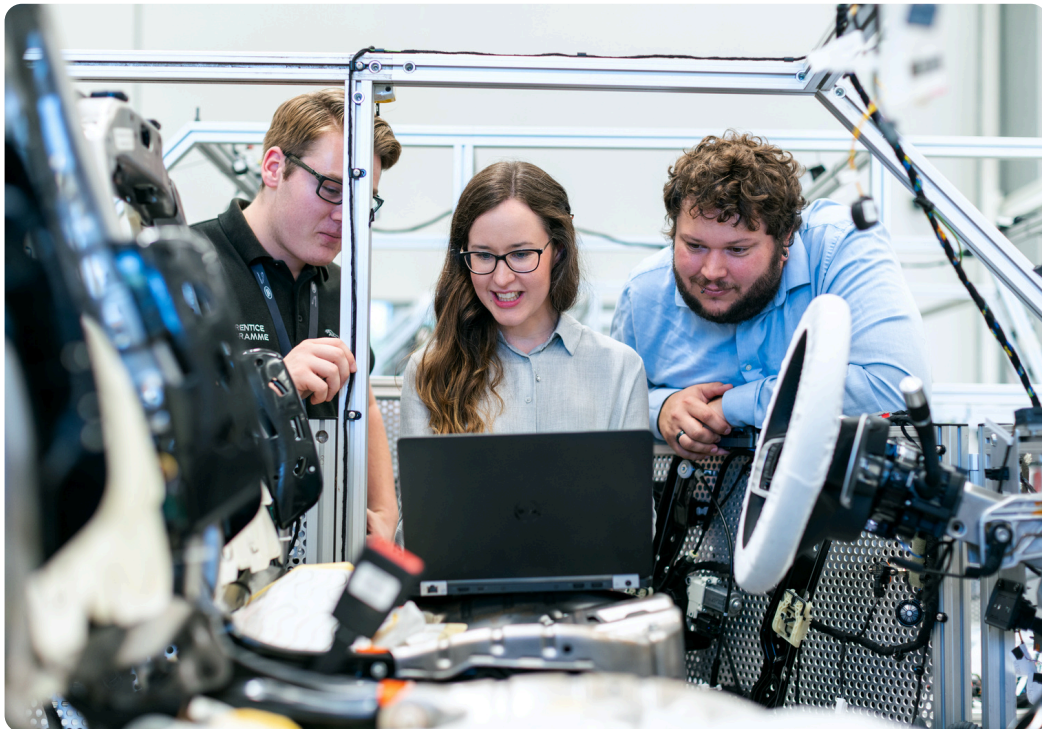
Challenges

For Sellafield, the biggest ongoing challenge has been how to make sure that all staff are fully aware of the new resources. The success of the project depends upon people having easy access to the information that they need – when they need it. For this reason, Sellafield staff still use any Gender Balance network communications as an opportunity to promote the resources.

Conclusion

Sellafield has made really impressive progress in a short amount of time – even more impressive as the project was primarily driven by volunteers working in their spare time. This case study provides an easily replicable model for other companies to follow. Remember, you don't need to reinvent the wheel. Look at what other WISE members like Sellafield have done to improve the experiences of returners.

Ultimately, this was more than just an “HR Process”, it's about providing a supportive experience at a potentially stressful time in anyone's careers: people need the right advice, from the right people, at the right time.



Top Tips For Replicating This Initiative

1

Listen to the people who have firsthand experience and learn from this: how to make things better. Then test it with them. This will help make sure that any improvements you make do work and are embedded within the existing system.

2

Our advice to organisations running similar initiatives without a big budget is to bring as many people in as you can and split up the task into smaller components - many hands make light work!

"Most people were very happy to participate and just wanted to be heard. Giving them a voice added value and making them feel valued is something we are all passionate about in the network". – Hilary Royston-Bishop.

3

The use of visuals and infographics help with creating successful and impactful messaging.

4

Having vocal advocates who are willing to tell their personal stories is important!

Appendix



For further information on anything covered here,
please contact:

Katherine Watson

Head of Products and Services Delivery – Projects
k.watson@wisecampaign.org.uk
07885 864 839



Jack Painter

Head of Products and Services Delivery – D&I Lead
j.painter@wisecampaign.org.uk
07762 275 316



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IET London: Savoy Place
2 Savoy Place London WC2R 0BL

info@wisecampaign.org.uk | wisecampaign.org.uk

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