



Conference
2023



21 March
IET London

Conference Report

WISE Conference 2023 IET London, Savoy Place



Empower Your Workforce

Recruit, retain and retrain women in
STEM in a changing world



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“Ensuring we attract and retain more women in STEM is an economic imperative, not a nice-to-have...”

– Kay Hussain, WISE



WHY

In 2023, employers are having to work harder than ever to recruit and retain female talent – with STEM businesses already facing a chronic skills shortage. STEM employers are beginning to recognise that women on a career break are often talented, with many transferable skills, and yet they remain a largely untapped pool of talent. With support and encouragement, such women can become invaluable members of the STEM workforce.

A discussion forum to share ideas between companies

— Attendee feedback

WHO

The WISE 2023 Conference was tailored to STEM business professionals looking to recruit and retain female talent. With the inclusion of over 18 exhibition stands and a practical CV workshop, we also facilitated a unique opportunity for inclusive recruitment and networking.



WHAT

The WISE Conference 2023 brought together hundreds of people seeking to explore how employers can empower their female STEM employees – with a view to improving gender balance in the sector. With over 10 thought-leading presentations, panel discussions and workshops throughout the day, WISE provided a distinguished public forum for industry-leaders committed to the participation, contribution and success of women in the UK STEM workforce.

Very good topics that we otherwise wouldn't think of.

— Attendee feedback



IMPACT AT A GLANCE

226 people attended the 2023 WISE conference

"I enjoyed delivering the session and was really pleased with the amount of engagement from the audience. Well done to the WISE team too for putting on such a great event, I really enjoyed it and picked up several interesting points for us to consider from the other talks."

— Vicent Hale, BASF

18

Exhibitors

19

Speakers

83

**Organisations
Represented**

6

Education Partners

44

WISE Members

39

**Non-member
Organisations**

It was a brilliant event and I was honoured to be a part of it. I was so impressed with how smoothly everything ran."

— Nina Lawrence, Government Equalities Office



THE 2023 PROGRAMME

KAY HUSSAIN
Chief Executive Officer
WISE



Kay kicked off the WISE conference with some sobering figures. The UK economy is experiencing one of the toughest labour markets in recent history. Within this landscape, the STEM skills deficit is acute, and it risks undermining our future prosperity. Reports estimate:

- a shortfall of 173,000 STEM workers, an average of 10 unfilled roles per business.
- this lack of skilled staff is costing UK STEM businesses £1.5bn a year.

At the same time, there is a lack of women in our STEM workforce; only 13.6% of engineers, 19.9% of IT professionals and 26.9% of the overall Core-STEM workforce are women.

Any efforts to redress the gender imbalance in the current talent pool are hampered by the fact that not enough girls and young women study STEM subjects at GCSE and A-Level. Only 35% of students taking STEM degrees in 2022 were women, whilst even fewer went on to pursue STEM careers.

Kay's speech urged attendees to consider how these two critical problems share a common solution. 'To fulfil its potential and secure the future, the UK must turn the page and emerge as a STEM skills leader. We know that excelling in performance and innovation requires an engaged, diverse, and inclusive workforce'.

Kay's powerful message that set the agenda for the entire day: getting more women and girls into STEM business, finding new ways to remove barriers and challenge inconsistencies, and supporting their talent pipeline from classroom to boardroom, is 'not a nice-to-have, but an economic imperative'.

Ensuring we attract and retain more women in STEM is an economic imperative, not a nice-to-have
— Kay Hussain, CEO, WISE





RETURNERS EXPERIENCE, WOMEN RETURNERS



JAMILA BHAIJI
Project Consultant
Atkins Global

Jamila gave an inspiring first-hand story of being a returner. A geological engineer by trade, Jamila returned to work after a 7.5-year career break, after leaving her previous job to have children. As Jamila explained, after such a long career break and the responsibilities of her new family life, returning to work felt like a daunting prospect.

She had to navigate challenges such as:

- Work Life Balance
- Child Care
- Managing Change
- Imposter Syndrome

In 2021, Jamila secured a place on the Atkins Global Returners programme.

What did the Atkins Returner programme include?

- The program was based on learnings and insights from previous returners, as well as Industry Standards
- Line Manager Buy-in & Training (e.g. Interviewer Masterclass)
- Flexible working from the very beginning
- 6-week booking to overhead (this provides the returners with much-needed time to settle in)
- Women Returners are provided with External Coaching
- Psychosocial Support from the current and incoming returner cohort

Jamila's story is now a testament to the success of returner projects. She highly recommends them to other women who are considering a return to work. And, as her presentation demonstrated, many highly skilled women will be actively searching for companies with returner programmes.





RETURNERS EXPERIENCE, WOMEN RETURNERS

NINA LAWRENCE

Head of Return to Work Policy
Government Equalities Office



MORNING KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Nina made a powerful argument for the need for businesses to recognise and appeal to the huge untapped potential of the Returner STEM labour force. 75,000 returners have a STEM background but currently struggle to re-enter the workforce, owing to a lack of flexible job opportunities, discrimination from employers and low confidence. As this keynote demonstrated, the “business case” for employing returners is urgent and clear.

Nina then shared practical advice for companies seeking to recruit women Returners, gleaned from recent GEO research.

Top tips from GEO for successful Returner recruitment

- Advertise specific flexible working options in all vacancies
- Make part-time and flexible working the default
- Use targeted referrals inviting women to apply
- Make it possible to list experience in years
- Only include requirements if they are actually required





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PANEL DISCUSSION: HOW TO RECRUIT FROM THE RETURNERS POOL

BETH CLARKE, WISE Young Professionals Board (session chair)
NINA LAWRENCE, Government Equalities
LILY KITCHEN, Network Rail
JILLY CALDER, Atkins Global



In this lively discussion, panellists explored the challenges of establishing programmes for returners, based on their own personal and professional experiences.

The panel agreed that coaching, mentoring, contact during leave, and flexibility were the key initiatives that companies need to embrace. These measures will help to ensure the conditions that are most likely to attract and retain returners.

Whilst our panellists were talking, our audience were asked the same question by interactive Audience Poll: What are the most successful elements of Returners schemes and why were they successful?

Here are the results they gave:

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| Guidance for line managers | 63% |
| Family friendly policies | 50% |
| Flexible working provision | 48% |
| Inclusive and supportive recruitment | 35% |
| Training programmes for returners | 33% |
| Buddy or mentoring schemes | 30% |
| Digital accessibility | 10% |



Key Takeaway for employers

Employers that recognise the characteristics and motivations of this group will have access to a new talent pool, as they also improve the gender, age and cognitive diversity of their workforce.





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RETURNERS EXPERIENCE, WOMEN RETURNERS

DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE RETURNERS PROGRAMME

DEBBIE KEMPTON

Group Engineering Director
BAE Systems



Debbie described how BAE systems have worked with the STEM Returners programme to increase diversity of thought within the organisation. What started as a pilot has blossomed into a highly successful stream of recruitment that works alongside their more standard recruitment practices to recruit for more niche or scarce skills in the organisation. By broadening the talent pool to those who have had a career break, BAE systems have been able to bring valuable fresh perspectives to bear on engineering challenges. This approach is helping to change the traditional perception of a career gap as a weakness to one where it can be a valuable opportunity.

Debbie stressed that the way that companies write job adverts is key for attracting Returners. Adverts need to be written in an open way that doesn't inadvertently put someone off or unnecessarily narrow the field.



ANOUSKA CARLING

EDI Lead
STEM Returners

Anouska provided useful insights from the STEM Returners Index which surveyed over 1,000 returners ([The STEM Returners Index 2022](#)).

During her session, Anouska demonstrated that returners are an undervalued but highly educated, skilled and experienced labour force:

- 72% of the returners pool have an undergraduate degree or above.
- 64% had been in a managerial or professional role before their break.
- 58% had more than five years of experience before their break.





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RETURNERS EXPERIENCE, WOMEN RETURNERS

VINCENT HALE
Head of Sales
BASF



DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE RECRUITMENT

In a practical session, Vincent broke down BASF's successful Inclusive Recruitment initiative into 5 discrete stages, with the aim of supporting other STEM businesses in the room to embrace and learn from their inclusive recruitment process. This was a unique example to learn directly from BASF's recent experience.

Key BASF Takeaways for companies looking to implement inclusive recruitment:

- By monitoring ethnicity and gender data you can assess your progress – BASF have already seen positive impacts reflected in the data.
- Employee-led activities drive D&I strategy – 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast!'
- No 'one size fits all' – the best approach will be different for each organisation.
- Before taking action consider the balance between impact, cost and difficulty to implement.
- Those involved in recruitment need to remain engaged – but empowerment goes hand in hand with accountability.
- Focus on achieving incremental gains and continuing to improve





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RETURNS EXPERIENCE, WOMEN RETURNERS

SARA BRESLER

Client Director – Digital and Data
Corndel



USING THE APPRENTICESHIP LEVY TO FUND COACHING-LED RETURNERS PROGRAMMES

Drawing on personal experience, Sara shared insights into how to navigate and access government funding, available through the Apprenticeship Levy, to provide employees with development and coaching opportunities throughout their careers. STEM employers can take advantage of the Apprenticeship Levy to support women's professional development and to address the skills gap.

Did you know?

- The Apprenticeship Levy can fund training and development from Early Careers to Executive Leadership Development.
- It provides practical on-the-job training to embed newly acquired skills.
- The employer formally allocates protected time for the returner to learn new skills and integrate them in a comfortable, controlled way.

What is the business impact of a Returners programmes?

- Greater diversity across your organisation
- Access to a new pool of talent to fill critical skills gaps
- Change the ratio of female representation in Senior Leadership roles
- Develop and demonstrate an inclusive culture
- Positive impact on employer brand image
- Improved recruitment and retention of talented employees





RETURNERS EXPERIENCE, WOMEN RETURNERS

JESSICA HEAGREN
Chief Executive Officer
That Works for Me



HOW TO CREATE A FAMILY-FRIENDLY WORKPLACE

With a presentation on work after motherhood, Jessica Heagren provided research information on the type of flexible working that mothers want. As she argued, employees that understand the concerns, motivations and needs of this demographic will be better placed to recruit them as a key part of the returner workforce.

Jessica began by sharing some research:

- 98% of women want to continue working after having children
- 85% of women leave the full-time workforce within 3 years of having children
- It takes 10 years for women's careers to recover, in terms of pay, after they have children
- 84% of mothers would choose to work 3 days or more per week, if given a choice

These shocking statistics highlighted, not only the negative impact that having children currently has on women's career progression and pay, but it shows that most women want to continue working after having kids. Their decision not to work is often influenced by the difficulty of managing their working conditions alongside traditional, non-family friendly workplace demands.

However, as Jessica showed us, this data can help us to make workplaces more family-friendly for women who have children, in order to retain a vital and highly skilled part of our workforce.

Key Takeaway for employers: Family friendly workplace policies and initiatives are a vital part of the wider response to the STEM skills deficit.





HOW TRANSFERABLE SKILLS CAN HELP YOUR CAREER

MERRITT MOORE

Quantum Physicist &
Professional Ballerina



AFTERNOON KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Merritt's inspiring keynote relayed her unique career journey, as both a professional ballerina and Quantum Physicist. She challenged the audience to think of these two disciplines, not as mutually exclusive and battling for her finite time and attention, but as usefully informing and developing one another.

The keynote also reflected upon the importance of creativity when it comes to the future of work and job design. Merritt's presentation made a powerful case for the power of innovation and persistence in the face of resistance and difficulty – whether in the competitive world of ballet or the emerging world of AI and robotics.

Being “perfect” is replaceable, being unique and different is irreplaceable.





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HOW TRANSFERABLE SKILLS CAN HELP YOUR CAREER



BEN SUTCLIFFE

Workforce Planning Manager
Network Rail

LYNN CHAMBERLAIN-CLARK

Culture Lead
Great British Railway's Transition Team

BEHAVIOUR-LED RESKILLING

In this eye-opening session, the presenters focused on how technical requirements can be replaced (in most cases) with behavioural requirements such as communication, listening, understanding, and organisation to significantly expand and diversify the recruitment talent pool.

Ben Sutcliffe then described how Behaviour-led Reskilling had worked in practice for Network Rail, for the "difficult-to-fill" role of Operations Manager.

This involved:

- Operations Managers was identified as a key area of skill shortage in UK. This job post also has a high attrition rate – it's known for throwing new starters into the job unprepared and then losing them quickly.
- Instead of waiting for this shortage to become a critical problem, Network Rail acted.
- All roles were given supernumerary status, in order to allow for a full 18-month training period, by which time trainees were fully prepared to take the role on full-time.
- All "technical requirements" were removed from the job advert (e.g. Experience in Signalling, Operations, Management).
- Instead, Network Rail worked with current post holders and management to understand what behaviours drove success in real terms.
- Network Rail undertook a re-design of their job assessment criteria to identify those behaviours in candidates.

What was the impact of behaviour-led reskilling on recruitment?

- 42% Increase in overall applicants compared to standard internal advert.
- 34% of all applicants are female, up by almost 90% compared to similar vacancies.
- 4 of the 5 posts filled via Non-Operational Reskilling applicants.
- 3 of the 5 posts filled by women.

This presentation showed a real-life example of how, not only can Behaviour-led Reskilling help with recruitment problems, but it also leads to, and facilitates, more diverse recruitment – leading to a more fulfilled and successful workforce long-term.





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HOW TRANSFERABLE SKILLS CAN HELP YOUR CAREER

ISHREEN BRADLEY
Chief Executive Officer
Belonging Pioneers



ARE YOU AN IMPOSTER?

Ishreen hosted a lively session on the importance of recognising the prevalence of Imposter Syndrome in STEM business – especially for women and other marginalised identities who are more likely to feel that they don't "belong" in some environments.

Ishreen introduced the audience to a range of 'imposter archetypes' from the 'perfectionist' to the 'soloist' to the 'natural genius'.

Everyone in the room was then invited to reflect on which archetype most resonated with them and how this 'imposter' played out in a work scenario. For example:

What is it about this archetype that has enabled you to move forward – motivated you and caused you to perform?

How has this archetype prevented your progress – caused you constant anxiety and paralysis?

Key Takeaway: Knowing your imposter, and what activates them, is the first step to moving beyond the limitations that they often impose on our behavior and thinking.





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PANEL DISCUSSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF RECOGNISING TRANSFERABLE SKILLS



STEPHEN FOX, WISE Board (Session Chair)
MERRITT MOORE, Quantum Physicist & Professional Ballerina
JULIE DENIS, ACAS
LYDIA FAIRMAN, Network Rail
JACQUI KENDALL, Rail Delivery Group

The afternoon panel session focused on the importance of Transferable Skills, and how employers can widen their recruitment net by embracing the importance of soft skills.

Employers must recognise the value that people from other sectors will bring. They should create good mechanisms to help people see how they can transfer their skills, and support them to make that shift. This is how we create innovative and high performing workplaces, evolving with the pace of the outside world. —Lydia Fairman, Network Rail

The audience were highly engaged and made good use of our real-time audience interaction tool. When asked which key transferable skills employers were currently looking for the audience cited communication, resilience, problem solving, creativity and adaptability. The audience was also asked: How can the emphasis on transferable skills help increase the number of women in STEM?

Recruiting based on transferable skills will promote diversity in tech and digital roles. Employment is changing. Emphasising transferable skills will mean that as technology changes and new roles develop, we don't have to continually recruit, or make redundancies

When transferable skills are more of a focus, it stops women thinking they don't have the required years of experience or technical capabilities for a role.

- Generally, women will only apply for roles if they hit 90% of the skills required on the job advert. By including transferable skills, it will encourage women to apply.
- Women may not have had the same support for, or access to, formal STEM education – transferable skills can help address this!
- Life experience can be more valuable than education.





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HOW TRANSFERABLE SKILLS CAN HELP YOUR CAREER

URSULA TAVENDAR

Joint Chief Executive Officer
Flexpo Returners Programmes



HOW TO TALK CONFIDENTLY ABOUT YOUR ACHIEVEMENTS IN A FACTUAL WAY

In a practical session largely attended by STEM students, Ursula explained how moving away from the traditional chronological CV, and instead focusing on transferable skills, capabilities, metrics, achievements and stakeholder engagement will help many applicants to be more successful in securing job interviews for high-calibre roles.

Ursula began the session by highlighting that self-advocacy is an essential tool for career progression, especially for women and people of colour who face systemic barriers and are typically less comfortable talking about themselves and their achievements publicly. Learn how to make yourself stand out from the crowd.

Top Tip: When applying for a job where you want to highlight your soft skills, especially where you are lacking in relevant experience or training, use a Skills-based CV rather than a Chronological CV.

How To Identify The Transferable Skills Your Future Employer Wants

- List all your achievements
- Identify the transferable skills needed for each achievement
- Match your transferable skills to the job description





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HOW TRANSFERABLE SKILLS CAN HELP YOUR CAREER

KATHERINE WATSON

Head of Products & Services (Projects)
WISE



HOW CAN YOU INSPIRE THE NEXT GENERATION OF GIRLS INTO STEM

In this lively session, Katherine introduced the My Skills My Life resource, and described how the audience could engage with WISE's successful outreach programme.

How does it work?

My Skills My Life uses a personality test to show girls and young women the type of STEM career that might suit them best, and then with STEM role models in these careers. Katherine used this presentation to highlight the importance of role models for helping to counteract the unconscious bias and stigma that disadvantages girls from excelling in STEM subjects at school level.

The power of the STEM role model

- The number of girls interested in STEM across Europe, on average, almost doubles when they have a role model to inspire them.
- 41% of girls with role models report an interest in STEM subjects, compared to 26% of girls without a role model.
- 51% of girls with role models can imagine a future career in STEM.

As Katherine illustrated, this role model can be YOU.

More information about this programme can be found [here](https://www.wisecampaign.org.uk).





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AWE-SPONSORED PANEL DISCUSSION: INNOVATION IN EDI

ANDREA MACFARLANE EDI Senior Manager, AWE
LESLEY HOILE Head of Leadership and Talent, AWE
HAYLEIGH WARD Learning and Development Specialist, AWE
MARA TAFADZWA MAKONI Consultant, PA Consulting



At the AWE sponsored drinks reception, a panel of EDI experts participated in an uplifting and honest conversation about the importance of innovation – of striving to do better and learning from each other.

This was an intimate note on which to end the conference. Importantly, the best way to futureproof Equity, Diversity and Inclusion work is by being and staying open to change and innovation in ED&I.





WISE ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2023 SUMMARY

It was great to meet and connect with
the other women
— Jacqui Kendall, Rail Delivery Group



It's clear that the STEM sector is embracing change.

The Conference proved how many STEM businesses are actively investing in the importance of gender diversity and gender inclusion.

It was a fantastic day of knowledge sharing, and new opportunities for networking, learning and sharing – we've only been able to capture a snapshot of that here.

Many thanks to our speakers and delegates for contributing to an insightful and informative conference day.





WISE ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2023 KEY TAKEAWAYS



FOR COMPANIES...

Companies need to make a commitment to change how things have historically been done. To be truly transformative, this often means securing Leadership support and accountability.

- Be creative with job design to attract diverse female talent – the “business case” for doing so is now clear and convincing.
- Women returners are a highly skilled demographic who want to return to work. But to engage this talent pool, companies must take time to understand what will allow returners to flourish. This means embracing flexible and family friendly working practices for both men and women – in the longer term, this will make your company stand out among the crowd.
- Employers should recognise the value that people from other sectors bring. A diverse workforce is an innovative, agile and sustainable workforce.
- Implement and advertise schemes designed to support women back into work after they have children. Provide clear career break guidance and training for managers, as they will be key players in ensuring that returners feel supported in practice.
- Consider a Behaviour-led Reskilling programme in areas. This will organically lead to more diverse and sustainable recruitment.
- You don’t need to reinvent the wheel. Look at what other WISE members have done to make their recruitment more inclusive or to support women into Leadership positions.





WISE ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2023 KEY TAKEAWAYS



FOR INDIVIDUALS

Women are still facing significant barriers to their career progression. However, even in male-dominated STEM landscapes, there are still actions that individuals can take to ensure that their voices are heard.

- Women often tend to “undersell” themselves at work. For women, it can be helpful to develop strategies to counteract this. For example, learn how to talk about your professional achievements using metrics.
- Everyone can make a difference. Male allyship is integral to achieving gender parity in the STEM sector.
- Ask your employer about leadership and mentorship schemes.
- If you are looking to re-enter the workforce after a career break, consider formatting your CV using years of experience. Highlight your transferable skills. Many STEM industries urgently employ employees with transferable soft skills!

WORKING TOGETHER

To return to WISE CEO Kay Hussain’s opening remark to all conference delegates, continue to be part of the change that you want to see. To address some of the biggest challenges that we currently face, we will need to work together to support the talent pipe from the classroom to the boardroom.





WISE Campaign

WISE Campaign is a not-for-profit CIC which exists to deliver women-centred equity, diversity and inclusion solutions for the STEM sectors. We support our partners to achieve gender parity and benefit from better productivity, innovation and business performance.

We work with major UK organisations to improve their gender balance and are open about the economic and business benefits of doing so. WISE offer exclusive membership support to over 100 organisations through events, webinars, workshops and training.

[For more information, please visit us at:
www.wisecampaign.org.uk](https://www.wisecampaign.org.uk)

Please follow, share and tag





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