Return

Getting back to work in science, engineering, technology and the built environment: the experience of women and employers

www.ukrc4setwomen.org
UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology

Established in 2004 to support the government’s ten-year strategy for science and innovation, the UKRC works to improve the participation and position of women in SET across industry, academia and public services in the UK. Funded by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, it provides advice and consultancy on gender equality to employers in industry and academia, professional institutes, education and research councils.

The UKRC also helps women entering into and progressing within SET careers, through advice and support at all career stages, training, mentoring and networking opportunities.

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“Providing many role models of women succeeding in SET is important to demonstrate what is achievable.”

Hilary Leevers, neuroscientist, returner to work, and now Assistant Director, Campaign for Science and Engineering
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About this booklet</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returning to the work place</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen Benson - Process Engineer</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AstraZeneca International</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie Jones - Synthetic Organic Chemist</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peakdale Molecular Ltd</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilary Leivers - Assistant Director at CaSE</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia McCalla - Trainee Building Control Surveyor</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLM Building Control</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolyn Holland - Demand Management Analyst</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sian Griffiths - Project Manager</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMS Health</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel Stanley - Associate Electrical Engineer</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons learned</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next steps</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open University T161 course</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
About this booklet

This booklet carries the stories of women who worked in science, engineering, technology or the built environment and then took time out. Like thousands of other women in the UK, when they wanted to return to their career, they found it was far from easy. Through commitment, creativity and getting the right support, the women in these case studies found ways back in: you can read what they have to say here, and hear from some of the employers as well.

Science, engineering, technology and the built environment are key to our economic and social future, and women are a vital and under-represented part of the workforce. So why is it so hard to get back into work in these areas? Technology is fast-moving. The knowledge required can be complex and subject to change. Work cultures are frequently inflexible, focused on high speed projects and long hours. It is easy to lose confidence, to feel out of the loop and uncertain how to find help and get ahead.

At the UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology (UKRC) we work to address the gender imbalance at all stages. We work with employers, universities, professional organisations and societies to enable them attract and retain women as managers and staff. We offer support to women who want to progress in their careers and take on positions of responsibility. We work to influence policy and raise the profile of women in the media and elsewhere.

And, very importantly, we help women who have had time out of work to return to this crucial area of employment.

These stories show how much can be achieved by determined women and aware employers, with the guidance and advice of UKRC and other organisations.

We hope you find them helpful and inspiring.

Annette Williams
Director
UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology
Returning to the workplace
A note for women returners

“UKRC was great at telling me where I could go for help and constantly updated me on what was happening next.”

Patricia McCalla, Trainee Building Control Surveyor

When you have been away from the workplace – even for a short time – it is only natural to feel isolated and less confident. The longer your break, the more you can lose self-esteem, and the more removed you can feel from your goal of once again being a professional in a career you love. Factor in that you may have had to take on new responsibilities during your break – such as being a mum or carer, living in another country, or recovering from an illness – and it can sometimes feel that you are never going to get back to the work that you enjoyed so much before.

The world of work may have changed considerably during your break. At the UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology (UKRC), we recognise how difficult returning to a science, engineering, technology or built environment (SET) career after a break can be.

We know that it is often more difficult to return to a SET career because of additional barriers, such as a lack of flexible working opportunities within SET; a fear of being out of touch with the sector, and losing touch with professional networks. In addition, many returners may not have an up to date CV, may have lost their interview skills and do not have clear goals for their return to work.

How UKRC can help

Our Services for Women Team can help with all these challenges and more. We can help you develop a back to work strategy.

- Information, advice and practical support is available from our regional centres;
- There is a programme of networking opportunities and professional development workshops across the UK;
- We offer help in finding a work shadowing or work placement opportunity;
- We run peer mentoring circles, where women returners can support each other and develop return to work action plans;
- We support the Open University on-line course: T161: Return to science, engineering and technology. This offers a supportive environment to help you realise your ambitions. Bursaries are available from the UKRC for a limited number of women.

If you are considering a return to work in SET, phone 01274 436485 or email info@ukrc4setwomen.org.
Helen Benson
Process Engineer, AstraZeneca, Macclesfield, since March 2007

“I really enjoy working with people of various backgrounds and disciplines on projects and playing detective – looking at data to find out what on earth is going on!”

Chemical engineer Helen Benson found the UKRC’s RETURN work placement scheme an ideal bridge back to industry after six years in academia and a brief period of unemployment.

Helen graduated with a degree in Chemical Engineering and went to work for Dow Corning, a global leader in silicon-based technology. Following her marriage, she moved to Manchester and worked as a research associate in the Chemical Engineering Department at UMIST (now the University of Manchester), where she obtained her M Phil degree. “Following this, I became a project/technology officer with the same employer during which I took a year’s maternity leave. I returned to this job on a part-time basis but was made redundant in 2006 during the University of Manchester merger.”

She spent six months unemployed, during which time she began to make efforts to return to employment, though not in a university. She explains:

“I felt that in order to better use my skills and experience and to move on in my career, I needed to get back into industry. Academia and industry are very different environments to work in and I felt that the longer I remained out of industry, the harder it would be for me to return to a job within it.”

Working arrangements >

“At the interview for the work placement, AstraZeneca were very clear in what they were able to offer in terms of part-time working. I now work three days a week, which I can fit around my family life. Although I work set days each week, if given enough notice and if I can make suitable arrangements, I can attend certain events such as conferences or courses on the days that I would not normally work. There are several engineers and scientists in my group who work part-time or flexibly: AstraZeneca does place an emphasis on a good work/life balance.”

In December 2006, during her brief period of unemployment, Helen attended a conference organised by the University of Salford’s Women in North West Engineering (WEWIN) Research Team. She says that she met lots of useful contacts, including “Year in Industry” Project Manager Diane Mee, who was working with the UKRC on the RETURN work placement scheme, where prospective returners were matched with potential employers.
After sending her CV to UKRC’s RETURN campaign, she was put in touch with AstraZeneca. “The interview and recruitment process went through Diane Mee, who gave me valuable advice on the style and content of the interview. The support I got from UKRC was brilliant in making sure I had all the relevant information I needed to make the application successful.”

The company invited her to apply for a flexible six-month work placement in Process Research and Development in its Process Engineering Department. “The placement met my wish to return to industry and because it was on a part-time basis, fitted well with my family life. It gave me the opportunity to be involved in real project work and enabled me to refresh my skills as well as gain valuable experience to prepare for returning to work in industry.”

At the end of the six-month placement, Helen was offered a permanent position as a senior process engineer in the Process Research and Development department at AstraZeneca. “The placement gave me a great opportunity to check out how it fits with family life, so I could be absolutely sure that this was the right role for me.”

“Now I’m back in industry, I am making the most of training opportunities and I am enjoying my work. My previous experiences of working in an academic research environment and, prior to that, an industrial environment have definitely helped me in undertaking my current role.”

“I was facing a bit of a black hole when I was made redundant. The work placement was a great stepping stone, and a timely route back into industry.”
Helen’s advice for other returners >

> Returning to the workplace is a personal choice to be made in your own time frame; be sure that it is what you want to do.

> You need to know your priorities – at the moment my priority is my family and I’ve been very lucky to have found a role where that can still be my main focus, as I work part-time and my work location is not too far from where I live.

> There has to be give and take on both sides. AstraZeneca were clear in what they could offer regarding part-time working arrangements based on the commitment required to fulfil the job role. In return, AstraZeneca know where I stand, and are willing to be flexible when something happens like my child being ill.

> Consider the longer-term view. For most people, flexible working is time dependent as personal circumstances change – it may be that you want to work flexibly for only 5 to 10 years out of a possible 35-year career. You’re also much more likely to stay with that employer if they have been willing to accommodate your needs.
AstraZeneca International

Nature of business: Pharmaceutical process development and scale-up

David Gray, Principal Process Engineer, Process Research and Development and Helen Benson’s line manager

What do you feel that you have gained by recruiting a woman who has had time away from the sector?

By recruiting a “returner” we have benefited from a wealth of experience - both technical and in the way work is approached - that Helen has brought with her from a range of previous roles. As a returner with previous industrial experience, Helen was able to integrate into the department smoothly, quickly getting to grips with the role she is performing.

What do you see as the business benefits of flexible working?

Employees are likely to be more productive if they are able to balance their work and personal lives effectively, which in turn helps to deliver personal and organisational objectives. In addition, offering flexible working options makes AstraZeneca a more attractive employer and enhances our ability to recruit, motivate and retain quality staff.

Flexible work arrangements at AstraZeneca >

There are many good examples of flexible working practices around AstraZeneca.

How did you recruit to this particular role?

We recruited Helen through the UKRC returner scheme. After looking at her CV, which UKRC sent directly to us, we invited Helen to come along for interview. We then offered her a six-month placement, working three days a week in Process Research and Development in its Process Engineering Department. During the placement we were able to see how well Helen fitted in with the rest of the team, and she was able to see how working three days a week fitted in with her family commitments. After six months, therefore, we could offer Helen a permanent position as Senior Process Engineer, already confident that she could do the job.

Andrew’s advice for other employers >

Flexible working is an increasingly important factor when it comes to choosing employers - offering flexible working options enables you to access a larger pool of high quality people and attract and retain the best.
From start to finish, it only took six months of seriously looking to get back to chemistry before being offered the job at Peakdale. I know that’s largely down to the Open University course I did and the support I got from the UKRC’s Peer Mentoring Circle.

You don’t have to spend a lot of time talking to Julie Jones to appreciate that she is a determined woman. After spending four years working in the States, and then dealing with a health problem, Julie managed to not only set up her own successful business but then also to return to a job that she loves.

Whilst in the States, and after several misdiagnoses, Julie was eventually diagnosed with costochondritis: “I can tell you all about it, but it’s horrifically boring!” she laughs. With symptoms similar to Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (or ME), Julie eventually had to take time off to recover. It was during this time that Julie decided to turn her hobby - dressmaking – into a business, as she could easily be based at home. “I set up an interior design website, where I sold throws and cushions, started doing craft shows and before I knew it, I was running a successful business!”

“But after two years, doing the same old thing got boring, especially between September and December, when I’d be working non-stop for the Christmas rush. I came to realise that the things I wanted from work were the things I used to get from my old job as a synthetic organic chemist, so it made sense to go back to that.”

Julie had tried to keep up to date as much as she could during her career break, reading science books and articles when she could. The biggest problem she faced, though, was the lack of an up-to-date professional network. After six years away, she found that most of her referees had moved on to other things. Even her boss in the States, who was generally very positive, told her that she was going to have trouble returning to chemistry.

Working arrangements >

“I work full-time, and can be flexible with my hours. The building is open from 7am to 7pm so that flexi-time is available to everyone on site. I sometimes come in for an early start so that I can be home early.”

On top of this, Julie found it difficult to decide whether to tell employers about her illness or not. “But if I didn’t say anything, then it looked weird that I’d left chemistry for soft furnishings!” She’d also been told she was eligible for a Daphne Jackson Fellowship to return to research, but realised that it would take too long for her to get back. Once she’d made the decision to return, Julie just wanted to be back in the lab right away.
The turning point came when she saw an advert for the Open University Course for Returners to Science, Engineering and Technology in Marie Claire magazine. She joined the course in January 2006. “My confidence was in the toilet, not to put too fine a point on it. Even after starting the course, I still felt like I was getting nowhere, but the final assessment was to apply for a job that you had seen advertised and that’s when I saw the Peakdale ad in Chemistry World.

The week before the interview, Julie attended a peer mentoring circle in Leeds, organised by UKRC’s Regional Coordinator Tamsin Spain. “It was a bit embarrassing really, as the whole session turned out to be about me. I was so scared, and kept saying ‘I can’t do this; I’m not ready’, but the other women were so helpful. They all supported me through my pre-interview wobbles, re-assuring me that I was ready and that I really could do it. If I hadn’t gone along to that mentoring session, I don’t think I would have turned up for my interview – I so very nearly didn’t go.”

After a full day’s intense technical interview, Julie was “completely floored” when she was offered the job. “Looking back, though, I think the fact that I had run my own business, even though it was nothing at all to do with chemistry, did help me get this job. My role now has a strong customer service element to it and having run my own business, I’d been used to both dealing with customers and suppliers. I suppose it’s quite rare to have those skills combined with the technical knowledge and experience you also need.”

Although Julie worried about returning to work full-time, and struggled with exhaustion for the first few weeks, now says that she has never been happier. “I feel so lucky that I’m in a job where I get to use my brain but I’m not stuck at a desk. I love lab work and being able to work with my hands - I’m having a great time!”

“I’m really pleased to be involved as a case study. I know that when I was looking to get back to work, I found it a big help seeing other people who had successfully returned to their careers.”

Julie’s advice for other returners >

> Sometimes it can feel like you are not getting anywhere, but even when you’re knocked back, you should still see it as an opportunity to learn.
> Don’t give up, whatever happens. Peakdale has hired three ‘returners’ in recent years; one woman returning after a career break to raise children, and two men returning to chemistry from alternative careers such as teaching. So there are opportunities out there.
> Don’t sell yourself short. You’ve probably got loads of transferable skills that employers are desperate for.
> In the end, it is definitely worth it – I’m so much happier now doing what I love again.
Peakdale Molecular Limited, Derbyshire

**Nature of business:** Fine organic chemistry

**Dr Andrew Norbury**  
Technical Manager, Custom Synthesis and line manager of Julie Jones

What do you feel that you have gained by recruiting a woman who has had time away from the sector?

The advantage of recruiting a returner is that you are taking on somebody who has tried several employment options and has now settled on the career path that they really wish to follow. You’re employing somebody who, I guess, is grateful to have been given a ‘second bite of the cherry’ and is repaying the company by working extremely hard.

What do you think returners can offer employers?

Returners can offer valuable life experience as well as appropriate (if somewhat dormant) technical skills and knowledge. As returners tend to be slightly older, they also have a more mature outlook on life, which will be reflected in their attitude towards work.

Flexible work arrangements at Peakdale >

“Flexi time is available to all staff – it’s fairly informal. Basically the site is open from 7am till 7pm. For the more senior people, there are core hours which need to be covered, so that if the senior managers need information to update customers on the state of their projects, we’re there to provide it. For other staff, there is flexibility in terms of start time and finish time - some people work classic hours, others come in earlier and then leave earlier. On top of that, we have a couple of members of staff who fit their work around their childcare arrangements, working, for example, two long days and three shorter ones.”
What do you see as the business benefits of flexible working?

Happy staff means happy customers!

Offering flexible working offers staff the chance to achieve a better work-life balance, which tends to make the employee feel recognised as a person rather than just another resource. This can reduce stress and conflict between work and family commitments resulting in not only higher morale but also greater productivity. This helps the company retain skilled staff and reduce recruitment costs.

There are many benefits to Peakdale, ranging from improving the company’s reputation and image, to placing a greater emphasis on employee outcome above pure attendance. A recent survey of the FTSE top 100 companies found that those assessed as ‘very good’ in terms of family friendly working practices far outperformed other companies in share performance.

Certain pieces of expensive equipment are used very intensively and the extended working day allows for greater usage than a 9-5 day would. Another factor is the way that chemistry doesn’t respect the clock! By this I mean that a particular process might take several hours to undertake and might not be safe to leave dead on 5 o’clock. Safety in the company is paramount; as such, lone working is not permitted and thus flexitime enables a longer day to be covered.

How did you recruit to this particular role?

As part of a long-term recruitment drive which accompanied a major expansion of the company. Advertisements were placed on the company’s website and also with various specialist trade publications such as Chemistry World and New Scientist.

Andrew’s advice for other employers >

Keep looking! There are good people out there who will repay you richly if you give them a chance.

A Department of Trade and Industry study showed that if just 10% of non-working mothers returned to work after maternity leave, employers could save up to £39 million each year in recruitment costs alone (“Flexible Working: the Business Case”).
Hilary Leevers  
Assistant Director, Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE)  
since February 2007

“I think it is really important that CaSE have chosen to appoint a part-time Assistant Director. It shows that such an important job can be done on a part-time basis. People who work part-time tend to work in a more compressed way than full-time colleagues.”

With a degree in natural sciences from Cambridge University and a doctorate in developmental psychology from Oxford, Hilary was a well-established scientist with extensive experience in neuroscience research and child development. This included four years at the Center for Molecular and Behavioral Neuroscience at Rutgers University, Newark, USA, running a variety of research projects looking at cognitive and language development in different groups of children.

During her six-year career break to have her three children, Hilary was determined to continue some part-time work as a developmental research consultant working from home. Despite missing the networking and the buzz of being part of a team, the role meant that she could practise dipping into a different – more professional – way of being and keep in touch with developments in her area. For Hilary it was crucial that she not lose a very defining
characteristic of who she was, and she now thinks that continuing this work – if only to a limited extent – definitely helped her to have a successful return to work.

Hilary’s longer-term career goal was always to return to work in a position that was commensurate with her extensive experience and skills, but crucially, on a part time basis: “Although my career is a huge part of who I am, I was determined to make sure that it was still only a part of me”.

### Working arrangements >

I work two and a half days a week on set days, although I am able to be flexible if I want to attend a meeting or conference. Your skills and how you fit with the organisation are much more important than how many hours you can work. I am also very fortunate in having a flexible and reliable childminder, and a partner who is supportive enough of my career that he is also willing to take time off from his own work, which enables me to be more flexible. When bringing up a family, it is important that it is not always the same parent that takes time off for doctor’s appointments or emergencies.

Participating in the the Open University returner’s course (Return to Science, Engineering and Technology - now T161) was a turning point in her quest to find a position to suit both her abilities and her desired work/life balance. She explains:

“Without a doubt the Open University course made me create time to work out what sort of job I wanted. It made me review my skills and put together a much more impressive CV.”

Having concluded that returning to research might not be her first choice, Hilary started to cast her net for other career opportunities. With support from the course, Hilary’s thorough preparation gave her the impetus to go for her goal when she saw the position advertised for Assistant Director/Research Officer for the Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE), a pressure group working to improve the health of science and engineering in the UK. Hilary wasn’t intending to go back for another nine months, but she knew that this job would be perfect for her, so did not waste the opportunity.

“No way would I have got this job or been in a position to get it without the things that were covered on the Open University course. It gave me the confidence to promote myself appropriately in a covering letter, without which I wouldn’t have got the interview. I did a lot of guided interview preparation, including practising out loud until I was fluent talking about work matters. Without the course, I just wouldn’t have achieved the level of confidence that I needed.”
Despite not having a policy background, Hilary was successful in communicating how her skills could transfer to a new arena of parliamentary campaigning. “I went through the website, persuaded myself that I could do the job; that all the doubts were in my mind.”

Hilary was offered the job on the very day that she handed in her final Open University assignment: “I am so pleased that I tried for a job at this level part time. CaSE was pleased to be able to appoint at my level in a part time position. These jobs are out there!”

Hilary’s advice for other returners >

> If you get the opportunity to plan ahead, then grasp it!
> If I had not worked part time at home – even though it was on a very small-scale basis – whilst starting a family, I would have found things much more difficult.
> Think very carefully about what you want, and then have the faith that you will be able to find it.
> You do have to put the work in. That was the most important thing about the OU course: it enabled me to put time aside to focus on my career and explore alternative career options.
> If you want a job that ticks certain boxes (for example, working three days a week, or no commute) don’t take any job that offers these – you need to feel inspired and challenged too.
> Be willing to apply for full-time roles and negotiate working arrangements after the job offer - the skill set and experience you have should be much more important to an employer than the hours that you want to work.

“I get great satisfaction in feeling that I can help improve science and engineering in the UK. Although I loved research work, I don’t miss doing the science, so long as I feel that I am enabling more science to be done. I find the job carries through many of the skills I previously enjoyed using, such as evaluating a broad range of sometimes-conflicting evidence and communicating conclusions to others. And being still relatively new to the job, I would be lying if I said that I did not get a thrill out of meetings at the House of Commons and Lords, or bashing out a press release to meet the deadlines!”

Hilary concludes: “I feel much more whole again. I was so ready for it. When I was not working, I had a big identity issue, partly because I felt that other people perceived me as ‘just a housewife’. Transition back to professional life was relatively easy and I am particularly happy to have accomplished what I have at work whilst bringing up three children at home. Sometimes as women, we expect more difficulties or discrimination than we actually will encounter. Providing many role models of women succeeding in SET is important to demonstrate what is achievable.”

“I love feeling inspired in my professional life. To be working once more in an intellectually fulfilling environment has enabled me to feel whole again.”
Don’t think you can do it all by yourself – ask for help! Get as many people on board as you can – family, friends and colleagues as well as support networks such as the UKRC. They were great at telling me where I could go for help and constantly updated me on what was happening next.

Patricia McCalla got much more than she bargained for when she bought an old Victorian house twelve years ago. The property needed gutting and refurbishing, and Patricia enjoyed knocking down the walls, plastering and laying floor boards so much that she decided to change career completely and return to university to study construction management.

Patricia was brave: not only did she leave a secure 13-year role with the Department of Work and Pensions, but also she chose to study full-time with a six-year-old son. She says that sheer grim determination helped her get through the next seven years, where she combined working part-time with raising her son and studying construction management at university.

“Graduating from the course was the proudest moment of my life. Actually finishing the course, with everything I had to juggle, was amazing. There were even times when I couldn’t get childcare and had to take my son to lectures with me. But it was all worth it.”

After five years of hard work, however, armed with her BSc in Construction Management and optimism for the future, she was frustrated to find that most employers had very specific entry requirements, with the majority looking to recruit a younger person. “At interviews I felt my age was a big issue.”

In March 2007, Patricia spotted an advert for a UKRC short course at Sheffield Hallam University. The course for women returners to the built environment was run by Pat Morton. “This was the turning point for me, and Pat was so encouraging” she says. As well as the opportunity to increase her knowledge through practical site experience and advice on career options for the future, all the women on the course were offered a week’s work placement in their area of interest. Pat went to MLM Building Control.

Patricia was doubly lucky as at the end of her week with MLM Building Control, she was offered an interview for a permanent position. “I didn’t even know that they were looking for trainees, so was really surprised to be offered the role.”

“I used to work from 9am to 5.30pm but I now usually work 8.30am – 5.00pm as I can miss the rush hour traffic and it fits in much better with my childcare arrangements. MLM allows you to be pretty flexible as long as you do your core hours.”
Patricia’s advice for other returners >

> You need sheer determination to succeed in returning to work, especially if you have children.

> You need to be really clear about what you want to do and work towards that goal.

> Work experience is absolutely essential. Try and get on a short course with a work placement, speak to the UKRC about one or even arrange one yourself.

“I love my work; there is so much to learn every day. As a trainee, I work with a chartered surveyor, Ian Cropper, and shadow him in his role. I regularly go on site visits to do building inspections and then write reports on my findings.”

Patricia would like to encourage more women into looking at construction as a career option, especially if, like her, they have discovered a love of knocking down walls or laying floorboards! “Don’t be frightened off by the ratio of men to women in the industry: the more women who come into construction, the less it will seem unusual to see women in these positions. We need to change people’s attitudes!” Equally, she would encourage other women with children to really go for what they want in life. “If my story can inspire even one person to pursue their ambitions, I’d be thrilled!”

She already has her next career goals within her sights: “I’m starting an RICS (Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors) graduate diploma in October this year. After that, I want to do my remaining RICS exams, which will give me chartered status. It’s important to keep learning and growing.”

“ I love the challenges each day brings. With surveying you really are learning something new every day.”
MLM Building Control, London

Nature of business: Building Control Approved Inspector

Ian Cropper, Technical Director

What do you feel that you have gained by recruiting a woman who has had time away from the sector?

The advantage of recruiting a woman returner is that you are taking on somebody who is committed to her work. They have thought through what they want to do and are prepared to work for it.

What do you think returners can offer employers?

The main thing returners can offer is experience. Unlike straight graduates they have experience in a number of different situations - both work and life related - which can help them perform their role better.

How did you recruit to this particular role?

We had had a number of work placement students in the past, but found that some of them did not really want to be here. We thought that a returner would be more committed and so offered a placement to a student on the Return to the Built Environment course at Sheffield Hallam University. In our work, we deal with a lot of different types of people and, unlike in an interview, during the placement we were able to see how Patricia interacted with them. After both a successful placement and a formal interview, we decided to offer Patricia a permanent position with us, already confident that she could do the job.
Carolyn Holland
Demand Management Analyst, Infrastructure and Application Services, Marks and Spencer PLC, since autumn 2007

Carolyn Holland has pulled off a truly amazing feat: returning to work at the same level with the same employer after a 16-year career break. No wonder she says that she is on a high at being back at work!

The lengthy career break left Carolyn feeling apprehensive about how much the technology sector might have changed in her absence as well as lacking the confidence to take those all-important first steps towards her return to work.

However, she tapped into a range of support at UKRC which restored Carolyn’s self-belief and helped equip her with the skills she needed to secure a new role as a Demand Analyst working for Marks and Spencer in London.

Working arrangements >

“All employees who have worked continuously at M&S for more than six months, have the right to make a request for flexible working. The rest of my team do take advantage of further flexible working on top of this. One team member works 8-2pm with Fridays off for example, and the team leader works from home on Wednesdays and also has Fridays off. The provision of laptops and remote access makes working from home much easier and more productive.”

Carolyn had previously worked in Marks and Spencer’s Information Technology Group for ten years joining the company as a graduate trainee after graduating with an MSc in Pure Mathematics. By the time she left the company after the birth of her third child in 1992, she had progressed to the role of Senior Systems Analyst. Carolyn and her family then spent the next 13 years abroad. Carolyn was excited by the opportunity to travel with her partner’s work. On the family’s return to the UK in 2005, she fully intended to return to work. However, she struggled to find roles that she felt were achievable as she no longer had the confidence to network after being away from the workplace and all her contacts in the UK for so long.

As Carolyn explained, this all changed when she came into contact with the UKRC: “I responded to an advertisement in the New Scientist for the Open University course aimed at encouraging women back into the technology sector and it all started from there.”

“The course forced me to review my past and gave me ideas about where to look for work. On top of that, I also attended CV-writing and interview skills workshops led by the UKRC that helped restore my confidence and encouraged me to take a pragmatic look at how I might best return to work.”

“The one-to-one careers advice I received from the Open University was fantastic and the key message seemed to be the need to network. I was also cautioned against being too ambitious
The proudest moment of my life was completing the Macclehose 100km charity walk over the main peaks in Hong Kong in just 30 hours. But managing to return to work after 16 years at around the same level comes a pretty close second!

Carolyn’s perseverance certainly paid off. She was interviewed for, offered and accepted the job within the space of a week and hasn’t looked back since. She admits that, whilst she is on a steep learning curve and still adapting to changes in the work environment, such as the move towards a paperless office, she is “really happy and motivated to be back at work. I also love the fact that I can have adult conversations and know that I am using my talents once again.”

Carolyn’s advice for other returners >

➢ Stay in contact with people, even if it’s only Christmas cards, and network like mad!

➢ Go for it, what’s the worst that can happen?

➢ Don’t always take “no” for an answer: I had to really persevere to get this job.

➢ If it’s at all possible, cut down your hours and continue working part-time rather than giving up work completely.

“The proudest moment of my life was completing the Macclehose 100km charity walk over the main peaks in Hong Kong in just 30 hours. But managing to return to work after 16 years at around the same level comes a pretty close second!”
Sian Griffiths  
Project Manager, IMS Health since July 2007

“ I am immensely proud that I manage to make this work… well most of the time! ”

Despite not having any formal IT or project management qualifications, Sian Griffiths recognised she had the right transferable skills to do her current role when she saw it advertised. She feels fortunate that her manager thought the same way.

Sian had been working at the BBC as a science programme producer/director before she had her career break to have her second child. She believes that television is a young person’s game and that it would have been difficult to fit in with her new family role. Prior to this she was a teacher of English as a foreign language, so she had successfully changed career once already.

Working arrangements >

“Usually 9am - 5pm, Monday to Friday, with one day a week working from home. IMS Health is flexible – as long as I deliver and make sure I am in the office or available when needed.” Her manager, Lisa Jerrard, suggested that when she first started the role, she could work just two days a week for the first two months and then work full-time when her eldest started school. “I’m really grateful for that – I would have found it too much of a leap to jump straight back into a full-time role just as my first born started school!”

Having left the BBC whilst pregnant, Sian had been half-heartedly job searching for a while. She had secured a place to retrain as a maths teacher which she had postponed twice as she was not sure she had the stamina to be a teacher. The change of focus came when she signed up for the Open University Returners Course (T160 – now available as T161).

“During the course, I updated my CV, researched the market and options, and got myself into a realistic and positive frame of mind. But the single most constructive thing I did was have a one to one session with an Open University Careers Advisor, Connie Colli. I’ve seen a lot of careers advisors, and Connie Colli was one of the best. As well as seeing the strength of your experience, she was also not afraid to challenge you – when she first saw me she immediately picked up that I was not ready to go back to work yet, and we were able to have a sensible discussion because of that.”

With Connie’s support, and having decided what she wanted and, importantly, what she was willing to compromise on, Sian saw an opportunity in the UKRC returners’ newsletter with IMS Health. “I read the job spec and it made no sense to me but the accompanying e-mail from Veronica Benson, the UKRC South East Manager, did. Because Veronica had translated the jargon, I knew I had the skills to do the job.”
“Lisa hired me on soft skills and I took the job because I thought I could work for her – and it is working! It’s great to know there are employers like Lisa around. I feel very grateful to Veronica and Connie Colli for getting me back into work at a similar level to where I left - which considering my lack of formal skills for the job is a miracle! ”

Although Sian was not recruited for that particular role, Lisa Jerrard, (now her manager) got back to her after the interview. “After two discussions on the phone, we finally had a meeting to discuss possibilities. Lisa spoke the same language as me and at the interview we talked about how we could make it work. She’s a working mum with two children herself so understands what is important and was full of practical suggestions.”

“Before I started work at IMS Health, I would have definitely said that I did not want to work full-time with an hour’s commute on top. Yet I feel like I have found the perfect job for me.
It is a job where I can be challenged but I am also confident that I can do it without my children suffering. I love the way I’m learning all the time, and working in a small team means every day is different. I can see future potential too – when I’m ready there will be opportunities to grow and do different things. IMS is also contributing to my career development with a formal project management PRINCE 2 qualification as well as setting aside time for me to learn from the other project managers.”

“Lots of women are tempted back into dead-end jobs purely because of the hours, but I didn’t see the point of being away from my kids and barely covering their childcare costs. By going back full time I have been able to change careers and found challenge and fulfilment. I have also found a company and a person I can work for, and that is really important. Although I loved being at home, I relish the ‘me’ time that being at work offers me.”

Sian’s advice for other returners >

> I tell everyone who asks me (and a lot of people working in TV are looking to change careers) to sign up for the Returner’s or another course at the Open University.

> Getting careers advice is very useful: the Open University help for students on the Returner’s course is very good.

> In every company there is a role which requires a non-standard skills mix (e.g. IT and good communication skills). These roles are often difficult to fill in by standard recruitment processes, and so they can be tailor-made for women with transferable skills

> Have the confidence to recognise your transferable skills and be able to talk about them. I had no obvious IT or project management experience or qualifications, but I was a science graduate and being a filmmaker meant I was using organising and project management skills all the time. I was also used to dealing with people from all walks of life and I told Lisa I picked things up really quickly as I regularly used to change subject area at the BBC. There has been a lot of knowledge transfer in this role, but IMS Health recognised that my maturity and people skills couldn’t be picked up on a training course and outweighed my lack of formal skills.

> Finally, if you get offered a number of roles – choose the one with the boss you can work for – a working mum should understand the pressures. Lisa says “as long you work the hours, are in the office for meetings and get the job done, you can do it in a way that suits your childcare”.

Please note: Only current Open University students are eligible for Open University careers advice. You would be allocated to your regional Open University careers co-ordinator, which would not necessarily be Connie Colli.
Lisa Jerrard has seen the challenges and potential opportunities of recruiting a returner from both sides: as well as recently recruiting Sian as a project manager, she herself struggled to find the right role after the birth of her second child back in 1999.

Lisa is happy to admit that she was never going to be content being a stay-at-home Mum. “I’m a much better mother doing both, although it took me a long time to admit it.” She’s also really keen to encourage other working mums who may feel guilty that their career is important to them. “Don’t beat yourself up about it. Looking at my kids objectively, they’re no better or worse than any others: they’re doing well at school and developing independence and other social skills. Stay-at-home mums can be just as frazzled as working mums; they can end up juggling ballet, swimming and tennis lessons with all their household tasks and the pressure to be perfect all the time.”

Because she had such a good relationship with her client base, Lisa was lucky enough to negotiate a return to work at NCR after her first period of maternity leave on her terms: as a contractor covering mornings only. After her second pregnancy, however, she stopped work, and then when she wanted to return, discovered that part-time senior level work was thin on the ground. To make matters worse, “Technology is a really difficult sector to get back into with no contacts”.

Lisa believes that it is usually the IT recruitment agencies that put up the barriers - not employers, who can often be more flexible. “The fact that the client is looking for the right person can pass agencies by. Skills and value should be much more important than what hours a person can work. An employer may well get more from six hours a day from one person than they would from eight hours from someone else. The way recruitment works at the moment, though, it’s always going to be the easy fit that wins – and that usually means full-time. It’s a pity; many employers would find that employing someone part-time would fit in with their budget plans much better and you get a full skill-set for less pay!”

She is keen to stress, however, that as a returner, you also have to be flexible. As a programme manager, she has to attend a lot of meetings, and has to be willing to change her own arrangements for urgent meetings or work crises. She feels that it is all worth it, however. Because IMS knows how committed she is to her work, they are willing to be more flexible with her too: “It’s got to work both ways”.

IMS Health, London

**Nature of business:** Pharmaceutical market intelligence

**Lisa Jerrard,** Programme Manager and line manager of Sian Griffiths
Lisa’s advice for returners >

> Be persistent.

> Remember that sometimes recruitment agencies dismiss returners with gaps in their CV or who want to work flexibly. Instead, write letters directly to the IT directors, who may be more open-minded. “If I got a letter from a returner, I would keep it on file, in case something did come up, partly because I know that a returner might still be available in 2/3 months’ time.”

> Ask yourself if you are prepared to work full-time, at least to start with. Once you are in an organisation and performing well, it’s sometimes possible to adapt your role for flexible working, or change roles to one that is not dependent on a conventional 9-5.

> Build up a support network – if you are a parent, it might be through meeting other working mothers through local nursery or school.

> Use the internet, not just for job searching! “I cannot recommend online shopping enough - I save two hours a week doing my food shopping online and even bought my daughter’s school uniform over the internet.”

How did you recruit to this particular role?

IMS Health initially advertised the post through the Women in Technology website. Programme Manager Lisa Jerrard then became aware of the work of the UKRC.

“We had a project manager’s post that we couldn’t fill, as we needed someone experienced and mature, but could not necessarily afford the senior level project manager salary. I knew that this role would be ideal for a returner, as although the functional and technical level of the role is more junior, it needs senior-level people and organisation skills. I felt that a recent graduate just would not have the soft skills necessary to deal with the sorts of people we’re dealing with; someone young might struggle dealing with such senior managers within the NHS and pharmaceutical companies. We can’t afford to make mistakes on that scale. I would definitely recruit through the UKRC again, and would recommend it to other employers.”

What do you feel that you have gained by recruiting a woman who has had time away from the sector?

IMS Health was able to identify Sian’s range of skills, and help her to make use of them in a new context, through supervision and support, and through some training.

“Sian was good at producing films, and it is exactly the same defined, clear plan of activity needed in project management – only the methodology is different, and that’s fine-tuning at the end of the day. It’s much easier to train someone in Microsoft Project or PRINCE2 than it is to train someone how to manage conflicting priorities, or how to cope with pressure and change. These are the things that someone with five or ten years’ experience – in whatever sector – can bring.”
Flexible work arrangements at IMS Health

Lisa Jerrard has herself benefitted from the flexible work arrangements at IMS Health, and has been able to adapt her working hours according to changes in personal circumstances.

“I’ve been really lucky to have a sensible, practical and understanding director/mentor who’s happy to support a reasonable amount of flexibility as long as the work gets done and done well. When the children were small, I worked 8am - 3pm as I shared the childcare with my partner, but found that I was still often doing work in the evening to catch up. So I negotiated a full-time salary, and split my 35-hour week to cover 8 am - 3pm with an additional hour in the evening. Because school finishes early on a Friday, I also sometimes work from home on Fridays. I’ve also worked a four-day week in my time.

“IMS have been very understanding throughout, letting me take leave or work from home when an urgent crisis or emergency happens. This flexibility has enabled me to stay at work through different childcare glitches, but it does have to work both ways. Now I don’t have the pressures, I want to repay the company, consequently I’m happy to work the extra hours required to meet business priorities so, for an employer, building up that loyalty does pay!”

Lisa’s advice for other employers

> Technology now means that you do not have to be based at your desk all the time but can be just as effective at home. In fact, most people agree that you can be more productive out of the office every now and then, without the interruptions of a typical open-plan environment.

> For employers, there are many benefits and opportunities: a really highly skilled and experienced individual, working part-time, may help you meet a functional and business need whilst remaining within a restricted budget.

> By investing in a flexible working arrangement during a period of transformation and cost containment, or even growth and expansion, you are developing a valuable, flexible and loyal employee who will evolve with your business and help it meet future challenges.

> Get in touch with UKRC if you want to reach a range of possible applicants, and you want to make sure women are encouraged to apply.
Rachel Stanley
Associate Electrical Engineer, E.ON Engineering since April 2006

“I like the challenge my work gives me. I’m doing engineering research, where there’s always something new to discover.”

One sentence spotted in an advert in the Daily Telegraph was enough to change Rachel Stanley’s life. The advert was for full-time roles in the Power Technology team at E.ON. The sentence: “If you require more flexibility in your career, we also have freelance opportunities.”

Now Rachel has an enviable role as associate electrical engineer, working from home and choosing her own hours to fit around childcare. No wonder she thinks she has found the perfect job!

The seed that part-time engineering work was not an impossible dream had been planted a few months earlier when she enrolled on the very first Open University Returners’ Course.

“It was good to hear from lots of other people in the same situation. The tutor helped me a lot with re-writing my CV and with brushing up my job-hunting skills. At the end of the course I had the confidence that, yes, I could get back into the workplace, even after a ten year gap. I also understood what I needed at the end of the course - my focus now was to find a part-time role, which did narrow down the opportunities available, but was a non-negotiable for me.”

Working arrangements >

“I work from home, but go into the office as required for meetings (usually only once every four weeks) and visit other places from time to time. E.ON provided me with a laptop and router and I’m networked from home – I know that other associates work very flexibly too. I can also choose my own hours – up to 20 per week – and can reduce them over the school holidays.”
Once Rachel had decided on looking for a part-time engineering role, developments happened quickly. “I finished my Open University course in December 2005, got the results in January, saw the advert in March and was interviewed in April. By the end of April 2006, I had already started my role!”

Rachel was very open with E.ON about her preferred working hours from the very beginning. After making an initial phone call she was contacted by the Head of Electrical Engineering - Chris Horne, now Rachel’s manager - to discuss possibilities. “We talked things through from there,” says Rachel. “Previously, I’d applied for full-time roles, with the aim of negotiating hours further down the line. I’d get to the second interview stage, but felt that my lack of enthusiasm always showed.”

In contrast, she says that Chris has children of his own and immediately understood her wanting to take time off during school holidays and fitting working commitments around her family. “Homeworking was on the table right at the start. Chris has been supportive and helpful all the way.”

Rachel’s advice for other returners:

> Definitely do the Open University Returners Course (now the T161).
> Get your support network together. You need people there who can understand where you are coming from and help you to see what you need.
> Have a clear view of what you need and where you want to go. And the Open University course can help you with both of these.

Rachel’s intention had always been to stay at home until both children were at school, so when her second child was at pre-school, she started job-hunting. In fact, three and a half years of her 10-year career break were actually spent looking for jobs. At the time, Rachel felt that she was doing everything she could to return – she got advice about her CV from the Institute of Electrical Engineers and previous colleagues. In hindsight, however, she realises that too much of her focus was targeted on internet job-hunting rather than looking to improve her networks and contacts. After her son started pre-school, she took a part-time role at a local special school as a dinner lady/classroom assistant. Although she desperately wanted to get back into engineering, Rachel saw this as a positive step in terms of getting back to the workplace and she enjoyed the role for two years. It was during this time that she saw the advert for the first Open University (now T161) course and the rest as she says is history!
“I feel so lucky. Even though I’m working from home, I work very closely with my colleagues in the office in Nottingham and get a real buzz from the teamwork. The area I’m working in is low carbon energy, so the role I’m doing has a real potential to make a difference to the world.”

And Rachel’s future? Now she’s settled into her role, Rachel thinks that the time could be right to think about chartered engineering status. “Having a mentor to support me through the process would be very helpful. I was put in touch with a mentor through the UKRC previously and although we met and exchanged emails a few times, it clashed with starting my new job and I just didn’t have the time to pursue the relationship. Now, however, I feel ready to take the next step.”

“I am so proud that I was able to take the time I needed with my two children when they were young, and then actually manage to get back to my engineering career and into a job I love.”
Lessons learned

For women wanting to return
> Consider all options: work opportunities can be very varied,
> Get advice and help on job searching, interviews and related skills,
> Remember that you have skills and experience from other parts of your life that are of value to potential employers,
> If you can, talk to other women returners, offer (and get) mutual support,
> Look at training and volunteering options that can strengthen your cv,
> Go on the Open University on-line course T161 for people returning to careers in science, engineering, technology and the built environment,
> Find out about grants and funding opportunities,
> Find out about work placements and job shadowing opportunities,
> Join a professional network or organisation,
> If you can, be flexible about location, hours, roles, pay,
> Accept that you may have to start on a lower level and work your way back up,
> Be realistic – but positive, there are ways back into satisfying and rewarding work in science, engineering, technology and the built environment,
> Read about women who have got back into work on UKRC’s website,
> For help with all the above, get in touch with UKRC, and join our GetSET Women database.

For employers
> A flexible and open approach to recruitment will broaden you pool of potential employees and make you an attractive employer: it benefits your business and all employees.
> Trained staff in technical sectors can be hard to find and expensive to train, so it is worth also finding ways of encouraging women to return if they have to stop working for a while value the experience, skills and commitment of women returning to work including non-technical skills (such as time management and dealing with people),
> Offer flexibility with regard to work hours, including part-time options,
> Consider offering work placements, work experience and short term opportunities,
> For some organisations, working in this way involves a shift in culture and recruitment practice: if this is the case for you, contact UKRC – we can help you assess the implications of change and find ways forward,
> Outside organisations, such as UKRC, can help you get in touch with women seeking work,
> Success in this area is worth sharing with others: UKRC can help you raise your profile as a ‘good practice’ employer,
> There are Quality Marks available to employers who can demonstrate their commitment to gender equality in science, engineering, technology and the built environment – contact UKRC to find out more.
For advisers

- Women returners benefit greatly from advice on all aspects of job searching and preparing to go back to work.
- Low confidence and dealing with gaps in their CV are among the major hurdles women face.
- Some of the skills and support women need are the same whatever the field of employment.
- If, however, you are not familiar with work patterns and opportunities in science, engineering, technology or the built environment, you can contact UKRC for specialist advice.
- Be aware of the specialist training on offer at the Open University (T161) – women may be entitled to receive a bursary from UKRC.
- Visit the UKRC website (www.ukrc4setwomen.org) or contact us direct to find lots of information useful to helping women return to work.

“By investing in a flexible working arrangement during a period of transformation and cost containment, or even growth and expansion, you are developing a valuable, flexible and loyal employee who will evolve with your business and help it meet future challenges.”

Lisa Jerrard, Programme Manager, IMS Health
**Next steps**

**Women wanting to return**

> Contact UKRC’s Services for Women Team for advice, information and support: phone 01274 436485 or email info@ukrc4setwomen.org

> Visit the ‘Women and girls’ section of our website, where there is lots of information about looking for work, and where you can read about other women returners: www.ukrc4setwomen.org/html/women-and-girls

> Join UKRC’s GetSETWomen database. This will give you an online profile on our website, and more opportunities to get information and network.

> Consider the Open University course T161: Return to science, engineering and technology (see the box on page 33). The UKRC can offer a number of bursaries to women returners who have degree-level experience and/or experience in SET (eligibility requirements apply).

**Employers**

> A range of advice and support is available to employers: contact UKRC’s Services for Businesses and Organisations Team to find out more. Phone 01274 436485 or email info@ukrc4setwomen.org

> Visit the ‘Employers’ section of our website, where there is lots of information about the work we do with employers: www.ukrc4setwomen.org/html/employers.

**Advisers**

> If you are offering advice and support to a woman hoping to return to work in SET, visit the Women and Girls section of the UKRC website where there is a lot of information about opportunities, job-seeking skills and other forms of help.

> UKRC sometimes runs training and events for careers advisers and others who support women seeking work in science, engineering, technology and the built environment. Visit our website to find out what is on offer.

> For more information, contact UKRC on 01274 436485 or email info@ukrc4setwomen.org. We look forward to hearing from you.
**Return to science, engineering and technology**

A 10-week short course with The Open University

This on-line course is for anyone who has previously worked or studied in the fields of science, engineering and technology, and who wants to return to work (employed or self employed). It will help you:

- Look at what you really want from work
- Evaluate your skills and experience
- Blow the dust off your CV
- Make new contacts and revive existing ones
- Find out who is offering the kind of work you want to do
- Achieve that all-important work-life balance

The course has been developed by The Open University with support from UKRC and funding from the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) and ESF Equal. **A number of bursaries are available from UKRC.**

For further information visit www.open.ac.uk. The T161 Return to SET course is delivered by the Engineering and Technology department.
“Without a doubt the Open University course made me create time to work out what sort of job I wanted. It made me review my skills and put together a much more impressive CV. It gave me the confidence to promote myself.”

Hilary Leevers, neuroscientist and now Assistant Director, Campaign for Science and Engineering
“Offering flexible working options enables you to access a larger pool of high quality people and attract and retain the best.”
David Gray, Principal Process Engineer, AstraZeneca International

“In the end, its definitely worth it – I’m so much happier now doing what I love again.”
Julie Jones, Synthetic Organic Chemist

Contact us:
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