CAREER RETURNERS

# Mini-Guide: The **10 Biggest Mistakes Employers Make in Returner Hiring .. and How to Avoid Them**

At Career Returners, we know that hiring returning professionals can bring incredible value to your organisation: a wealth of skills and experience, fresh perspectives, and a high level of motivation and commitment. However, we also know that it isn't always easy to successfully hire and integrate candidates with a long career break.

In this mini guide, we share some of the biggest avoidable mistakes that we've seen employers making over the last decade, which discourage returners and prevent organisations from fully reaping the full rewards from this talent pool.

Read on to find out the 10 biggest pitfalls to avoid at each stage of hiring returners:

- Design
- Recruitment
- Onboarding
- Sustainability

… and - most importantly - how you can avoid these mistakes in your career returner hiring activity!

# Mistakes at the Design Stage

## 1. Not Getting Senior Leadership Buy-In

**The Mistake:** Initiating returner hiring programmes without securing support from senior business leadership from the outset. If top management don't make returners a strategic priority, their hiring managers tend to be less enthusiastic to participate and ringfence headcount for returners (see 3).

**The Solution:** Find one or two senior leaders early on to be returner champions. Highlight the strategic value of hiring returning professionals and identify those who are willing to promote the initiative within their teams and across the organisation.

## 2. Not Considering the Line Manager

**The Mistake:** Bringing a returner into a team with an over-stretched and/or unempathetic line manager, who just wants new hires who can 'hit the ground running'.

**The Solution:** Be mindful of the environment the returner will be joining. The line manager should be available and willing to support the returner, particularly in the early weeks, and needs to recognise the benefits of hiring a diverse team.

## 3. Failing to Ring-Fence Headcount

**The Mistake:** Not allocating dedicated headcount for a returner programme/role and interviewing candidates in the open market alongside returners. Due to proven recruitment biases against candidates without recent experience, this usually results in the returner not being successful.

**The Solution:** Secure approval to ring-fence headcount from the outset, interviewing returners against other returners rather than other internal/external candidates.

## 4. Allocating Hard-to-Fill Roles

**The Mistake:** Allowing hiring managers to allocate their difficult-to-fill roles to a returner programme: roles which have been open for a long time and which often have a niche skillset requirement. This is setting your programme up to fail and risks positioning returners as a last resort rather than valuable contributors.

**The Solution:** Select opportunities which are less niche, requiring more widely available (and ideally also transferable) skills, to increase the likelihood of attracting suitable returner candidates. If a role is challenging to fill in the open job market, it's going to be harder to fill from the subset of returners.

## Mistakes at the Recruitment Stage

### 5. Providing over-detailed job specs

**The Mistake:** Falling into the trap of approaching returner recruitment in the same way as open market hiring, listing lengthy job requirements and lots of 'must-haves'. This substantially reduces the likelihood of returners applying. Most returners experience a loss of professional confidence during their career break - if they don't tick every box on the job description, they are unlikely to apply.

**The Solution**: Find the right balance between providing enough information to allow returning candidates to opt in, but not being overly prescriptive on critical requirements which may filter out great candidates.

### 6. Using Unsuitable Application Practices

**The Mistake:** Relying on application processes that inadvertently filter out returners, such as automated or manual screening systems that reject CVs with employment gaps.

**The Solution**: Review the screening process to remove any requirement to have recent relevant employment. This will move all your hiring towards being returner friendly.

### 7. Not Adapting Interview Processes

**The Mistake:** Applying generic interview questions asking for recent work examples or technical knowledge, so unintentionally introducing bias against returners into the process. Not training interviewers to be inclusive of returners.

**The Solution**: Tailor any competency questions to allow returner candidates to provide examples from previous work experience or during their career break. Recognise that older examples may be light on detail and don't confuse this with capability. Train interviewers to understand career breaks and avoid related unconscious bias.

## Mistakes at the Onboarding Stage

### 8. Failing to Provide Tailored Onboarding

**The Mistake:** Treating returners like any other hire, without recognising they may need and benefit from a tailored re-entry process. Often there is a lack of professional confidence when returning to work, plus a major readjustment process, particularly if the returner has ongoing caring responsibilities or health issues. If support is not provided this can derail the transition, resulting in a disappointed line manager and disillusioned returner.

**The Solution**: Develop a structured onboarding programme specifically for returners, offering training, mentoring, specialised returner coaching, and resources to help them reintegrate smoothly. Where possible, introduce returners to previous returners for wider peer support.

### 9. Neglecting Internal Communication

**The Mistake:** Failing to prepare teams for the arrival of a returner, leading to misconceptions or bias.

**The Solution**: Ensure the team knows about the experience and skills of the returner, as well as the fact they may need extra support due to their career break in the early months. With a returnship, avoid language such a 'temp' or 'intern' which don't position the returner as a long-term, experienced colleague.

# Mistakes in Sustainability & Final Thoughts

## 10. Failing to Build a Sustainable Programme

**The Mistake:** Treating the hiring of returners as a one-off initiative, rather than setting the goal of embedding it in the company's talent strategy.

**The Solution**: Create a structured pathway for returner hiring. Pilot, evaluate, evolve and scale based on feedback, and communicate the programme's successes to build internal demand for returners.

## Final Thoughts

Avoiding these mistakes will help you to build fairer and more inclusive hiring practices. By creating a clear and supportive process for hiring career returners, you will also unlock the full potential of a highly capable, typically overlooked talent pool.

For more detailed advice and tailored support, contact employers@careerreturners.com

CAREER RETURNERS

We're on a mission to build a fairer and more inclusive working world, by making career breaks a valued part of a lifetime career

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