BCS

MAKING THE MOST OF A LOST TALENT POOL

A good practice guide for IT employers

Jan Peters, consultant, asserts her moral right to be identified as the
author of this booklet.

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F O R E W O R D

Some of the biggest challenges for returners and re-entrants that compound low confidence are not being taken seriously because of CV gaps, negative perceptions about commitment and willingness to learn and be flexible, and ageism. As the war for talent hots up, some employers have recognised an untapped pool waiting to be accessed. BCS and Intellect are working with organisations and agencies to encourage the IT sector to wake up to the potential of both male and female returners and re-entrants.

This booklet, aimed at HR directors and their teams, has been produced as a partner to our *Taking a Break* guide for IT professionals. Containing examples and tips on innovative policies and programmes, we hope that it will help boost the opportunities for more IT professionals to manage

their careers effectively in dialogue with employers.

IT professionals find it is easy to stay in touch through BCS membership, newsletters, contact meetings, home visits, and for those taking a sabbatical to travel, visiting overseas clients. Offering your IT professionals the BCS *Taking a Break* guide that is full of tips on keeping in touch and staying up to date with technology is an ideal way of getting employees in the right frame of mind for their break.

In encouraging your employees to return after a break, look at the policies that might be appropriate to your business and its size. If you are looking at attracting re-entrants, read on further about the support and training schemes. And of course attracting re-entrants might be an easy way to boost the diversity of your technical team, which is proven to benefit your bottomline performance.

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Chief executive, BCS

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THE LOST TALENT

'It's so easy to do, giving these women a chance – there's a huge untapped talent pool out there'

Jackie Kinsey, ThoughtWorks

'If you want women, modify your processes and legitimise it internally'

Participant at workshop

Numbers of women computing professionals peaked at 100,900 in 1999 (Eurostat data from Platman and Taylor (2004)) representing 21 per cent of the UK's computing professional workforce at that time. By 2003 this had fallen to 53,700, with new figures due in 2009 from analysis that BCS, Intellect and e-skills are undertaking. This means that there is a potential pool of some 50,000 female IT professionals who are currently not in the profession.

The IT industry predicts that the current skills shortage will intensify.

The realisation of the benefits of diverse teams in winning public sector contracts such as improved innovation and company performance, the impending retirement of 1/3 of the UK IT workforce, and the falling numbers of computing graduates means that the war for talent is heating up.

The 'lost' IT professionals are an increasingly attractive proposition for employers struggling to hire the right people. At a round table of HR and IT directors, BCS and Intellect drew together the challenges and ways in which employers are working to do this. In the process they are building a new workplace which is more flexible and responsive to both employees and clients' needs. This booklet shares experiences and innovations from employers and consultancies.

Research for the Equalitec project, Advancing Women (published in the report *Equalitec: career prospects after career breaks*, Niki Panteli, University of Bath, 2004, www.equalitec.org.uk), found that 2 years was a critical length of break from work. After this, there was a perception of there being a major technical skills and knowledge gap by both the employer and a returner/re-entrant, as well as a confidence gap. None of this is insurmountable when coupled with a supportive environment. This can be achieved by providing support to both the team and line manager, as well as the member of staff returning, by:

- coaching both the line manager and the returner;

- offering a mentor to both the line manager and returner;

- enabling flexibility options;

- suitably tailored training / skills refresher courses

at the right level;

- recruitment processes that attract and enable diverse candidates to apply for posts.

As an employer fishing in this pool, you need to be aware of subtle differences between the types of returner. While some companies feature in the media for achieving high return rates from maternity leave, their policies and programmes don't impact on those who have had longer career breaks or are looking to return to a different employer. This wider community needs IT directors, managers, team leaders, hiring managers and recruitment agencies to champion their cause and be open to their potential. The lost professionals fit into three broad categories: returners, re-entrants and late starters.

RETURNERS

These IT professionals are returning to a former employer and, while their confidence may be down, it is often buoyed by a sense of having made the positive choice of returning. Some employers have extensive programmes to help employees plan their break and manage their reintegration. Knowing an organisation and familiarity with its culture and people lowers the re-entry barriers. Those with continuing caring responsibilities will face challenges of organising child or elder care and will need flexibility as they re-adjust to their new regime.

RE-ENTRANTS

These women and men have had a break (time-out, family caring or ill health) and are returning to a new employer. They have few contacts within the industry. They may have left work after a bad experience, maybe had time out from work, travelled or downshifted, or are reluctant to return to a high pressure culture with their last employer. But they need to return and their IT skills are the best chance they have. This group may also include people made redundant repeatedly and facing age discrimination at every turn as they get rejected from interview after interview. They face confidence issues, CV gaps and skills gaps. They may require flexibility but will be afraid to ask.

Their confidence is dented, but their passion for their profession is not, and even if their skills may be out of date they have the desire to get back. Confidence and self belief, training needs and adjusting to work all need understanding; as well as the re-entrant's concerns for how they explain their break and attempt to justify how it will impact on their ability to work.

LATE STARTERS

These are early family formers who qualified but never gained any work experience. This group aren't as young as the most recent graduates with whom they compete. Their knowledge may be out of date and they are likely to have a poor CV, but they have life skills and experience. They can face age discrimination as they compete with new graduates.

This is also an increasing pool of women who are embarking on an IT career after perhaps pursuing a more stereotypical career path before identifying IT as a potential career. These women often have higher non IT qualifications, and are easily rejected or not considered for graduate level programmes. They may also have underperformed in exams because of part-time study or caring responsibilities.

CASE STUDY

Extract from Opportunity Now *Exemplar Employers: helping women returners reintegrate into the workplace*:

Finding IT professionals who may be interested in returning can be achieved through internal policies and practices and internal communications. Opportunity Now through its Exemplar Employers Project provides a wide range of policy ideas, programmes and case studies.

Tips:

- Review the Opportunity Now Exemplar Employers case studies.

- Develop robust policies and practices.

- Introduce training and awareness programmes.

- Help your staff to plan before a break and give them the BCS *Taking a Break* guide.

- Offer mentoring, coaching and networking for employees and returners / re-entrants.

- Budget for and schedule catch-up skills training, as technology moves on rapidly, and can leave those with even a short break behind.

- Recognise that previous skills and corporate knowledge might be an advantage in other less technical roles.

www.opportunitynow.org.uk

TAPPING THE TALENT

'I was recruited after my second maternity leave... that was a time when there was the most upheaval: you go to work and your child is always sick... I think they showed a lot of faith... I was promoted after being there 8 months...'

Christina Scott, head of software development, BBC News Interactive

'It takes less than 6 months for them [returners] to get back into the stream'

Elizabeth Pollitzer, Portia

Attracting and retaining diverse technical staff demands that the HR and senior management teams work with employees to support their own staff returning from a break and for when a late starter or re-entrant applies for a post.

All have common issues of:

● low confidence;

● perceived and real skills gaps;

● continuing demands on their time outside of work such as children, relatives or themselves who need care;

● access to flexibility, support from colleagues, managers and HR help these professionals to fit back into the workplace;

● facing ageism.

Employers face tangible cost benefits, a fresh talent supply and benefits to clients and customers with extended peak cover, more diverse teams and more brains on problem solving.

Golden handshakes were used in the past to encourage staff back, but without a supportive environment they were of short lived benefit.

RECRUITMENT PROCESSES

IT professionals who have had a break often don't fare well with recruitment agencies. Their gender may (or may not) get them on a shortlist but a lack of recent relevant work experience on a CV, or evidence of older than the 'normal' age group, will often mean rejection irrespective of latent talent or competence.

Tips:

● Explain to recruitment partners that you are interested in returners to work.

● Work with recruitment teams and outsource providers to identify ways to measure competence related to historical performance and not current employment activity.

● Develop innovative recruitment programmes to attract diverse and skilled candidates.

● Be innovative in the tools you use to assess competence, and benchmark internally to get company buy-in to the process.

● Read the UK Resource Centre for Women in SET *Recruitment and Selection: competing in the war for talent good practice* booklet and the Equalitec *Effective Recruitment Strategies*. www.ukrc4setwomen.org.uk www.equalitec.org.uk

● Jobs are rarely advertised as part-time so include a statement about flexibility in the job specification, e.g. we will consider part-time / job share candidates for this role. Use Flexworks UK.

● Attract and recruit from this pool by investing – by either providing training, or a phased approach back into work.

● Keep a list of potential career break staff.

CASE STUDY

Flexworks UK is the leading organisation for premier part-time and flexible working solutions. The online part-time jobs register provides for senior jobs seekers searching for flexible options. Flexworks also offers help and support to employers in making job sharing work.
www.flexecutive.co.uk

FINDING THE LOST PROFESSIONALS

People who have disconnected from the IT profession don't read / cannot get IT trade papers and are not aware of skills gaps and the diversity agenda. It is as likely to be friends and partners who point the potential returner at you. Advertise in the free morning papers (see the ThoughtWorks case study). Advertise in school newsletters, encourage current staff to introduce their partners and friends to open days and recruitment fairs. Local councils are often a source of recruitment fairs Use your local high street clerical recruitment agency, which is where you will find the lacking-in-confidence returner, who believes that they cannot get back into IT.

Tips

● Invest time more than money in attracting and recruiting.

● Plan and communicate well internally; educate your workforce and managers before you, in particular, bring in any re-entrants.

● Advertise generic return roles (see Merrill Lynch case study).

● Use multiple avenues to communicate your programme.

● Ensure the experience for both successful and unsuccessful applicants is a positive and enabling one.

- Advertise in the new universities, further education colleges and to tutors of part-time and remote working courses for mature candidates – many returners have taken the time and trouble to refresh their skills, but without recent experience are still not getting offers.

- Advertise with BCSWomen – free of charge.

CASE STUDY

Generic return roles. The Merrill Lynch generic job advert aims to encourage people on a career break to register their interest in working for them.

JOB DESCRIPTION

We are looking for people with a broad range of skills and experience across both infrastructure support and applications development. If you have had a career break but are keen to get back into the technology workplace and are interested in working in Camberley or London, please click 'apply for this job' below, where you can register your details and upload your CV. We will then get in touch if a suitable position becomes available.

www15.workflowhr.com/ml/microsite/jobDetails.asp?vacref=243

ATTRACTING BACK THE RE-ENTRANTS

Re-entrants and late starters have very low confidence. Preferring to believe that they aren't needed or wanted and are too far out of touch, they are surprised to find a demand for their skills and expertise. They are wary of asking for part-time positions. Their CVs may be poor, but employers can help.

Tips:

- Include information in your materials about your flexibility options.

- Run open days to showcase your offices and role models.

- Consider self development / confidence boosting workshops before and after interview.

- Run CV clinics.

- Make allowance for the fact that many valuable women are of an age group where IT degrees were of the engineering variety, and also women were not encouraged to go on to university, and that twenty-five years of IT experience may be just as good as a 25-year old degree.

The UBS Career Comeback programme is aimed at professionals with a minimum of 5 years' experience (preferably in financial services) and a graduate degree who, after an eighteen-month to seven-year career break, would like help in transitioning back into the workforce. This selective programme is offered free of charge to participants. Enrolment is limited to ensure individual attention.

The programme includes important business updates from leading professors in finance, marketing, technology and strategy; professional one-on-one coaching; an overview of current work / family issues; and development of a personal action plan for re-entering the workforce.

UBS Career Comeback Programme: www.ubs.com

CONFIDENCE GAP

Returners and re-entrants face a confidence gap. They don't believe they are wanted, that they have any useful skills, have forgotten how to 'sell' themselves and can't see how they can return to being a capable, effective and competent employee again. They don't appreciate the skills and knowledge they have gained whilst out of work and they have forgotten what they are capable of, especially if they have been doing a job they have been over-qualified for. When ThoughtWorks subjected women returners to their usual recruitment psychometric tests the scores were better on a number of tests such as logical thinking and communication than those of their existing staff.

Tips:

● Ensure re-entrants' / late starters' low confidence is accounted for in your recruitment process – women (more than men) tend to deselect themselves and so need more encouragement to apply — think about the wording of your job adverts.

● When transitioning re-entrants into your organisation, take specific steps such as providing a mentor, offering training courses and working with both them and their line manager to review progress and have regular conversations about how they are settling in.

● Promote their inclusion in decision making, especially if they are part-time – vary the times of management meetings so they can attend.

● Work with a specialist training provider, focusing on building confidence before and after they return to work.

MENTORS, COACHING AND BUDDIES

Maintaining contact with colleagues, receiving newsletters and updates from the office help to reduce the barrier for returners by keeping a level of familiarity and reducing the fear factor. Inviting the career breaker back into work for keep-in-touch sessions and to key meetings is one method. Other employers go further and provide coaching before, during and after a break with a professional consultancy such as Talking Talent, Brave New World or Maternity Matters. Others, such as IBM, offer a buddy to a returner. The Opportunity Now 'Exemplar Employers' section offers a wealth of inspiration and case studies to help you develop your own internal policies and practices.

Equalitec continues to offer one-to-one support for returners, as well as mentoring circles, delivered through the Inova consultancy. The UK Resource Centre for Women in SET (UKRC) return programme offers mentoring as well as other online support through the Open University T161 course.

CASE STUDY

Talking Talent has coached over 500 women through maternity and partner with companies in *The Times Top 50 Places Women Want to Work in Europe*. Talking Talent helps women maintain career momentum after starting families. Consultants work with the line manager to make sure they are managing the transition effectively for the individual, extended team, clients and the broader business – their approach is both commercial and practical.

www.talking-talent.com

CASE STUDY

One of Sopra Group's specialist IT services is software testing. Its Testing Academy recruits individuals with limited, out-of-date or no IT experience and qualifications such as returners or late starters, and develops them into fully effective testing professionals. The initial 7-week training programme combines modules on all aspects of testing with exposure to soft skills and is followed by further development as they move into testing roles on client projects.

www.sopragroup.co.uk

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS GAP

A career break of over 2 years can seem long, 5 or 8 years, forever. Knowledge and skills will be rusty or out of date, particularly in the IT arena where development languages and innovation moves quickly. The general perception of employers and the men and women themselves of people who have taken a long period of time away from the IT profession is that it will take years to get back up to speed.

But employers (e.g. Fujitsu and ThoughtWorks) who worked with the Equalitec project found the women became useful members of a technical team within a few months. Self learning technical courses can help point returners in the right direction.

Tips:

- Invest in training and upgrading skills as part of your return to work or recruitment strategy.

- Partner with a training provider in areas where you have skills gaps for both returners and re-entrants prior to returning to work and in the first few months back on the job.

- Open up spaces on in-house courses to boost your

potential recruitment pool, advertise opportunities through the UKRC return programme, local papers and among your employees, for example.

● Ensure your recruitment process is competence based and identifies potential and ensure technical skills are upgraded once on board.

CASE STUDY

ThoughtWorks ran a four week free Java training pilot programme either side of the Christmas break. Participants learnt core Java skills, were introduced to the agile development methodology and gained confidence and focus in their job hunt. Participants were recruited through adverts in the Metro newspaper, through employees' contacts, Equalitec and womenintechnology.co.uk. Sixty applicants (including 5 men) attended a half day assessment centre.

This used SHL tests to assess competence as well as the existing personality and numerical and verbal reasoning tests that all ThoughtWorkers go through. The design of the half day was to be informal but also to give all candidates feedback whether they were successful or not – building on their confidence, rather than knocking it.

Three of the 12 women participants were recruited by ThoughtWorks and others went on successfully to secure a job using the skills obtained on the Java course.

ThoughtWorks partnered with Equalitec who provided personal one-to-one career coaching and job hunting skills. Six months after the programme, half of the attendees had returned to the IT industry. The women also formed a supportive network for each other and are still in touch.

FLEXIBILITY ISN'T JUST FOR WOMEN

'You don't need to have an IT degree to be good at IT'

Participant at a workshop

Flexible job structures and part-time hours can be a must for career break IT professionals. Flexibility is likely to be important and yet hard to enquire about. Offering a package of flexible working options can be an attraction. See the Equality and Human Rights Commission 'Timelords' case study for some ideas.

Another option currently gathering favour is the concept of annualised hours whereby a worker has a contract to deliver so many hours of work over a year enabling them to take longer periods off, for example for school holidays.

If flexibility at work, returners and re-entrants are to become commonplace in the IT profession it will be crucial to legitimise flexibility and career breaks, making them accessible to all and making staff who 'take a break' and return feel valued. This is a role for HR to take a lead in and for senior and middle managers to communicate and make work.

One of the options of a flexibility programme is part-time roles / job shares. In some organisations 'head count' can make part-time workers look and feel more expensive on the company books. The overhead of part-time workers is higher than full-time workers but as some companies claim, you get double the value reaping the reward of two brains working on one problem.

There is also the added bonus of improved service for customers and overseas colleagues through flexibility and a wide range of job roles.

Tips:

● Make sure that work flexibility is for all employees.

● Regularly review how flexibility is working.

● Break the link between promotion and full-time working, recognise that part-time and job share can be accommodated in more senior roles (24/7 organisations).

● Provide realistic work pattern options that are defined when the job specification is done.

● Educate the rest of your team to avoid resentment about the impact and benefit.

● Get the right performance management system in place and train managers to deliver them.

● Ensure that part-timers / returners / re-entrants are considered for promotion and senior roles based on their competence.

● Ensure that there is a stress free, flexible environment for all staff; not only will career breakers want to return, they may actually do this more quickly, or not take a break at all. Companies that have provided home and remote working have found a greater loyalty from staff, and improved productivity.

From Personnel Today, 6 May 2008

CASE STUDY

The Equality and Human Right's Commission *Enter the Timelords* publication offers an interesting perspective and examples of different flexibility options.

● Timelords choose when and where to work.

● Remote controllers work away from the office.

● Shift shapers work in blocks of time agreed by the worker and employer.

- Time stretchers work traditional hours spread over a longer day.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (2007), Enter the Timelords, ISBN 978 1 84206 036 0.

CHANGING HOW JOBS ARE DESCRIBED – JOB CHUNKING

Chunking is a way of describing the functions required in a team and can help managers and colleagues come to terms with defining smaller job roles than those that would fit into a standard thirty seven-hour week.

CASE STUDY

Booz Allen Hamilton created a reserve register for employees and alumni by unbundling the standard management consultancy work into 'chunks' and offering them as pieces as they became available to the register.

SUPPORT FOR MANAGERS AND COLLEAGUES

Some staff feel resentful of colleagues with families or other caring responsibilities who can seemingly come and go at a whim leaving them behind to provide cover to clients.

- Dispel myths about the commitment of returners, re-entrants, new parents and flexible workers.

- Clarify part-time / flexible roles and communicate that these are clearly valued by the organisation, appropriate manager and team lead.

- Senior managers need to ensure that returners, re-entrants and flexible and part-time workers are an organisational priority and not a burden. Visible top down commitment is essential.

- Educate clients to your flexible, caring arrangements and where possible organise the work plans around

that culture. Limit planning meetings etc to core hours and advertise this as a positive feature of your company.

CASE STUDY

A Brave New World works with employers to support both returners and managers. Research undertaken to support its work suggests returners face a '6-month wobble' of uncertainty and need support to navigate through this. One woman, valuing the access to an external professional said: 'it's hard to have that [lack of confidence based] conversation with my boss.'

www.abravenewworld.co.uk

AGEISM

Many IT professionals face ageism following redundancy, illness or a career break. The profession still feels young and the perception that it is the young who bring the innovation and dynamism to IT persists. The reality is a maturing profession with a history among its professionals for continual self improvement, skills updating and personal development as technology changes and businesses continually evolve.

Tips:

● Ensure that your recruiter is not filtering out older candidates, or that your specification does not preclude them (e.g. 'minimum 5 years', say 'over 5 years' instead).

● Specifically mention that mature candidates are welcome, to counterbalance the offers of career path and upward progression that can put off the mature candidate from applying.

● Ensure that candidates are not discounted before interview because they have been made redundant, and / or are applying for a lower grade job than their

last position.

- Offer the opportunity to upgrade or refresh skills.

- Understand that enthusiasm and 'can-do' attitude is not just for the physically young.

CHILDCARE

Returning after a break for a family means childcare is a big issue. Pre-school childcare, when in place, can provide consistent care for a 12-hour period. However, once a child starts school, outside school hours childcare can be a challenge.

Tips:
- Offer a work place nursery, childcare vouchers, salary sacrifice schemes.

- Have 'personal days' to cover last minute school events.

- Facilitate creative flexibility options that mix early

home starts with later arrivals in the office or extended days to enable employees to collect children from school, attend to children or other family members with special needs.

- Sponsor holiday clubs, and form working relationships with local providers – not all of your staff may live in the area, and would benefit from access to this local knowledge – with advancements in 'wrap-around' care, schools can accommodate children who do not actually attend that school.

- HR departments should be familiar with childcare tax credits / vouchers and free place schemes available.

- Ensure that your recruiter is not filtering on school qualifications, and / or on current employment.

- Allow home working on days when caring responsibilities mean travel to an office is impossible.

SUMMARY

BCS and Intellect are keen to ensure the IT industry benefits from this largely untapped pool of women and men and that employers and training providers offer support to IT professionals in the widest sense over their whole career. We hope that coupled with our career break planning guide *Taking a Break* these tips and case studies will extend further help and support to retrain and attract back more returners, re-entrants and late starters as one strategy tackling the predicted skills gap.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

USEFUL LINKS

BCS *Taking a Break* career break planning guide

www.bcs.org.uk/careerbreak

Center for Work Life Policy

www.worklifepolicy.org

The Complete Guide to Flexible Working

www.flexibility.co.uk/Guide/index.htm

UK Resource Centre for Women in SET

www.ukrc4setwomen.org

***Recruitment and Selection: Competing in the War for Talent Good Practice* booklet**

www.ukrc4setwomen.org/html/resources/ukrc-publications

Equalitec Effective Recruitment Strategies

www.equalitec.org.uk

Intellect

Intellect is the UK trade association for the IT, telecoms and electronics industries. Its members account for over 80 per cent of these markets and include blue-chip multinationals as well as early stage technology companies. These industries together generate around 10 per cent of UK GDP and 15 per cent of UK trade. Recruiting and retaining experienced women in our industry is fundamental to the future competitiveness of the UK's economy and the IT industry. Intellect's Women in IT Forum seeks to collaborate, inspire, lead and influence all stakeholders to increase the number of women and maintain the UK's global position.

www.intellectuk.org

THE BRITISH COMPUTER SOCIETY

BCS is the leading professional body for the IT industry. With members in over 100 countries, BCS is the professional and learned Society in the field of computers and information systems.

BCS is responsible for setting standards for the IT profession. It is also leading the change in public perception and appreciation of the economic and social importance of professionally managed IT projects and programmes. In this capacity, the Society advises, informs and persuades industry and government on successful IT implementation.

IT is affecting every part of our lives and that is why BCS is determined to promote IT as the profession of the 21st century.

JOINING BCS

BCS qualifications, products and services are designed with your career plans in mind. We not only provide essential recognition through professional qualifications but also offer many other useful benefits to our members at every level.

BCS membership demonstrates your commitment to professional development. It helps to set you apart from other IT practitioners and provides industry recognition of your skills and experience. Employers and customers increasingly require proof of professional qualifications and competence. Professional membership confirms your competence and integrity and sets an independent standard that people can trust. Professional membership (MBCS) is the pathway to Chartered IT Professional (CITP) status.

www.bcs.org/membership
www.bcs.org/groupmembership

Building a profession that is good for women and better for all

BCS