



Generating Routes for Women's Leadership Project (GROWL)

GROWL Enquiry Tool 5/6

Returning and Recharging: Creating Non-Linear Leadership Pathways For Women



GROWL is Manchester Metropolitan University's Toolkit of Enquiry Tools, an Ideas Bank and a Network that supports organisations to engage with research evidence to Generate Routes for Women's Leadership.

We are taking research evidence out to organisations to create a dialogue about how they can Generate Routes for Women's Leadership (GROWL). Our approach involves supporting you to draw on six GROWL Enquiry Tools, a GROWL Ideas Bank of 'better practice' and a GROWL Network to reflect on your context and Generate Routes for Women's Leadership that fit with your organisation. We are learning about engagement as we go and invite you to learn with us and our network.





Returning and Recharging: Creating Non-Linear Leadership Pathways For Women

Summary

- Returning is a term used to capture the experience of re-entering paid work after an absence. There are different types of returning, including returning to the same role in the same organisation, or returning to a different role, organisation or sector. Many women take career breaks during the course of their professional working lives. This may be for various reasons, most commonly to care for family.
- It has been proven that career breaks have negative long-term consequences for women across many dimensions (for example in terms of progression and remuneration) but this struggle is not inevitable or caused by women, it is an outcome of how organisations recruit and develop people to favour unbroken and linear career pathways. Supporting women who have taken a career break to re-enter the workforce is beneficial for society and the economy. This can also help to reduce gender pay gaps.

Creative Leadership Pathways or Career Full Stops

- Returning to (paid) work after a break of any type is a career challenge that affects women more than men and this creates inequality in careers and organisations. Typically, the literature conceptualises exiting and returning to work (or not) as a choice. But for many women, a career break occurs due to demanding circumstances, not pure choice.
- Organisations need to critically evaluate their own motives and standards around how they manage the exit and re-entry pathways of women who temporarily break from their career trajectory. Women returners often face bias from recruiters and employers that gaps in work relate to deficits in skills and experience, rather than recognising and valuing the continuous learning and development that occurs outside the workplace.
- Returner Programmes are targeted at people (predominantly women) who want to return to paid work after a career break and can provide organisations with opportunities to generate innovative leadership pathways for women. But their design and implementation needs to be carefully managed.

Recharging – Safe Career Pauses

- Creative leadership pathways can enable women who may otherwise feel they have little choice but to leave their role, or retreat from the workforce entirely, to remain in work.
- Retaining talented women who are loyal and have future potential, and flexibly recharging their careers at the right time, is an innovative approach to talent management.

Returning And Recharging – Taking An Overview

Many women take career breaks during the course of their professional working lives. This may be for various reasons, most commonly to care for family.

Enabling Women To Rejoin Leadership Pathways

Returning can mean different things from returning after maternity leave to returning to a career pathway after a much longer career break or having had a period of short-term jobs. We know that many mothers also work under their potential after having children due to the scarcity of quality part-time work and may want to recharge their careers as children grow up. So, while fewer women are taking long career breaks, many still need to return to work or recharge careers. To capture their talent, organisations need to support non-linear career pathways.

According to the Office of National Statistics (2017), there are 1.9 million women in the UK who are economically inactive due to caring commitments.

Many of these women want to return to work at some stage but are prevented from doing so due to structural barriers within organisations and outdated institutional practices.

- **Enquire: What does ‘returning’ to work mean in your organisation? What percentage of women return to your organisation after a break from work? Could your organisation track the leadership pathways of women who return to your organisation?**

Even when women return from shorter career breaks it is a difficult process and women seem to pay an ongoing career penalty.

There are many reasons why women face obstacles in returning to work. Women returners often face bias from recruiters and employers that gaps in work relate to deficits in skills and experience, rather than recognising and valuing the continuous learning and development that occurs outside the workplace.

Time away from employment may, for many women, be an extremely positive experience that significantly extends their leadership and project management skills as they manage a young family.

A career break also enables time to re-evaluate career direction and women may return to work with new energy and verve.

‘While fewer women are taking long career breaks, many still need to return to work or recharge careers.’

Women who have been out of the workforce for a considerable period of time may face more barriers when attempting to return to work. For example, women who have been out of the workforce for many years may find reshaping their leadership pathways particularly daunting and may require additional support to regain professional confidence. Organisations can be more reluctant to facilitate moves back into work for women who have taken extended career breaks, not recognising the invaluable transferable skills and knowledge acquired by women during their non (paid) working lives.

- **Enquire: What work could your organisation do to ensure that women who return to work have not been unduly disadvantaged by their temporary disconnection from your organisation?**

Some organisations have created opportunities by investing in returner programmes (discussed later in this Enquiry Tool) which can create an effective route back into paid work for some (primarily professional) women. In 2018, the UK Government launched a £1.5m ‘Returners Fund’ fund for private sector companies to support people (particularly women) back into work after time out caring for families.

Many women who return to work feel that they have little choice but to accept roles whereby they work well below their leadership potential.

Research has also highlighted the lack of opportunity to work part-time or flexibly in more senior leadership roles. But flexible and adaptive organisations can provide opportunities for women returners to return to work in ways that enable them to fulfil their leadership capabilities.

When women return to work, it is not always to the same organization they left before taking a career break, or indeed to the same industry. It may also be to a different role, be it a downwards, sideways or upwards move. Creative and innovative organisations can recognize the transferable skills that women from different industries and roles can bring to new leadership challenges, particularly if effective transitional support is provided.

- **Enquire: What review could you conduct of your recruitment and selection procedures to ensure that women returners looking for work are not unfairly disadvantaged? ‘Don’t Mind the Gap’ can be a good message that wards off unconscious bias in interpreting career breaks. Are you properly valuing the skills women gather in home as well from different areas of their working lives before taking a career break?**
- **Enquire: Can you identify and promote female role models in your organisation who have restarted on leadership pathways after a career break?**

Addressing the career break penalty experienced by professional women could deliver an annual earnings boost of £1.1 billion and additional economic output of £1.7 billion.

Research by PwC (2017) in conjunction with the 30% Club and Women Returners.

Returning And Recharging – Taking An Overview (continued)

Motherhood: Exiting/Re-entering Paid Work

Many women find that they can work within organisational structures and institutional practices that are less favourable to them than their male counterparts if they adopt a number of strategies (either positive or negative) but this is compromised the minute they ‘privilege’ decisions that amplify, or, can supposedly be explained by, their gender (i.e. such as the decision to take maternity leave). Before becoming mothers, ambitious women may adopt the ‘ideal worker’ mode – someone who is available whenever and wherever the organisation wants and always prioritises their work role. Researchers argue this behaviour lives up to old fashioned ideas of masculinity but, nonetheless, it is possible for women to perform this way without having children.

However, organisations founded on a mythical, outdated idea of an ‘ideal worker’ are out of sync with the reality of family

commitments and are often incompatible with motherhood, and, indeed, modern fatherhood. This is compounded when an exit from work and re-entry into paid work is required.

Organisations founded on the ‘ideal worker’ myth create rigid, linear, hierarchical career pathways that exclude many women from returning to leadership pathways, especially if these must synchronise with a woman’s new family context. This is not just a cultural issue. It can be translated into organisational policies and routines that conflate leadership with long hours and being free of contamination from domestic responsibilities. Even where policies exist that make some headway towards valuing flexible working or non-linear career pathways, women feel career detriment if line managers inherently right them off or resent them for not practising traditionally masculine ways of being an ever-available leader.

➤ **Enquire: Is it easier for a woman and/or Mum, or a man and/or Dad, to resume leadership pathways in your organisation? How would you treat men in your organisation if your ideal worker was a full-time working Mum?**

It’s Not All About Motherhood

It is important to ensure that we don’t silo the issue of women returners to the domain of motherhood and we don’t forget that men may also be ‘returners’. Also, our practices should not be exclusively based on an idea of ‘family’ that excludes lesbian, transgender, inter-sex, or bisexual women. The reality is women and men may opt-out of organisations for many reasons that have nothing to do with their ability or inability to have children, or caring responsibilities. These workers, too, may learn a great deal during their break and have great capability to bring back to work. It may be that men’s CV’s are read more positively after a career break, perhaps seen as adventurous or innovative, while women are considered unreliable, uncommitted or as less capable.

➤ **Enquire: Can you train staff involved in recruitment to ‘Don’t Mind the Gap’ so you drive out unconscious bias when interpreting women’s career breaks and what they say about commitment, reliability and capability? Can you challenge presumptions that all career breaks signal ongoing family responsibilities?**

Creative Leadership Pathways or Career Full Stops?

We are traditionally led to believe that careers should be (and naturally are) linear, progressive and based on merit.

Yet literature tells us that successful women’s leadership pathways are more likely to be non-linear and more ‘fractured’ than the leadership pathways of their male counterparts - that is, disjointed by taking career breaks or working flexibly.

We believe the word ‘fractured’ is overly-negative – women are learning all the time and what is more stretching of organisational and leadership skills than managing a young family? Also, caring as well as working can bring an array of interesting lifetime experience to leadership roles that promote intelligent and resilient leadership.

Challenging the Notion of ‘Choice’

When women depart from and return to an organisation it is almost always portrayed as a choice; something that reflects personal will that is both empowering and a privilege. However, academic discourse has challenged this notion of ‘choice’. The reality is that many women opt out of paid work because organisations do not provide the flexibility they need to synchronise work and family.

Career breaks are also not always a woman’s preference, nor are the social expectations and partner behaviours that create her domestic responsibilities. Multigenerational care responsibilities are also often a matter of social obligation and arise due to a scarcity of

public care services. Many women want to do some care work but not as much as they end up doing. They also want work that is flexible enough to enable creative synchronising of organisational and family needs.

Departing from and returning to an organisation is too often set up and legitimised as being nothing to do with being squeezed out, forced out or managed out (when a woman’s reality might suggest otherwise).

To depart from and/or return to an organisation has consequences for women that may translate into long-term career penalties from which their leadership trajectory, satisfaction and salary may never recover. Yet, we need to acknowledge that these are organisational and not just individual outcomes.

Pathways based on a linear, hierarchical leadership model are outdated and exclude many women. The notion of opting in (to work) and opting out (of work) is a construct that legitimises the ‘ideal worker’ norm which is, in fact, atypical.

It makes non-linear career pathways deviant when in fact they are more normal than cultural norms lead us to believe and would be even more common if some women were not driven off career pathways, never to return.

➤ **Enquire: When women exit leadership pathways in your organisation do you know why? Does your organisation have exit data you can analyse? If so, what can you learn from this?**

Creative Leadership Pathways or Career Full Stops? (continued)

Alternative Career Models

New career models have been developed to explain the female career experience despite not being devised specifically with gender in mind. They include:

- **Boundaryless** – implies a break from traditional assumptions about career progression based on linear leadership pathways (and which excludes many women). Career opportunities and movement extend beyond one employer and are sustained by external networks.
- **Protean** – symbolises a career driven by an individual (rather than an organisation) and one which is characterised by a desire for psychological fulfilment rather than economic goals.
- **Kaleidoscope** – careers driven by being authentic, finding balance and continuing to learn and grow through challenge, thereby implying it is the most holistic of the three career models outlined and the most sensitive to needs and drivers across the leadership life course.

➤ **Enquire: What steps can you take to value women's prior learning, learning that occurs outside of the workplace and learning that's taken place in different roles/industries? Could you quantify the cost of embedding or re-embedding a woman returner within your organisation to overcome over-inflated presumptions that her value is too low or costs of developing her are too high?**

➤ **Enquire: Ask your management team to think about the way it talks about careers. Does the language you use tend to mean the kind of unbroken and linear upward pathways that are the stereotypically successful masculine career or can careers mean jobs and roles that sometimes include breaks or pauses but nonetheless represent a pathway to leadership?**

The Language of Careers – Talk Can Be a Signifier of Action

The words we use to talk about careers are charged with meaning – both positive and negative. They can disguise realities and create messages that are not what the speaker intended. Equally, they can challenge outmoded ideas and help new norms take hold and become normal or aspirational. Questioning how we use words and why is an important first step to changing behaviour.

The very word 'career' implies many things:

- That it is something bigger and better than a job.
- That it provides you with security.
- That you are in control of it.
- And that it is a word equally applicable to women as it is to men.

To a certain extent, all those things are true. However, do they reflect the reality of all careers? And, especially, the careers of women?

Returner Programmes – Leading the Way?

Returner Programmes are targeted at people, predominantly women, who want to return to paid work after a career break, typically of 2 years or more.

Returner programmes can take different forms, including return to practice and retraining programmes usually offered in the public sector, whereby regaining professional registration is a pre-requisite of obtaining a job following a break from work, for example, in nursing. The majority are:

- **Returnships** – a fixed term contract for candidates with relevant experience with a strong possibility (but no guarantee) of being offered an ongoing role at the end of the programme (if the contract period is regarded as a success by the employer and candidate).
- **Supported hiring** – involves hiring returners directly into permanent roles.

Best practice guidelines produced by the Government Equalities Office (2017) suggest that returners participating in returnships or supported hiring programmes are paid competitively and supported by organisational interventions including training, mentoring and coaching.

Caution: Although investment in returner programmes to facilitate better routes for women's leadership is welcome, we need to exercise some caution in relation to their design and implementation. For example, many returner programmes specify that candidates are only eligible if they have been out of (paid) work for an arbitrary number of years (e.g. 2–10 years). Missing from this is a clear rationale for these restrictions. What about women who have been away

➤ **Enquire: Do your returning programmes focus on recruiting women who have had prior experience of the role? Are you missing out on women with valuable transferable knowledge, skills and experience? How can you widen your talent pool? What can your organisation do to ensure women returning to work are supported effectively and can shake-off the 'returner' identity as soon as they are embedded?**

from the workforce for some considerable years? Are they less able to make meaningful contributions to organisations – after all, they may have been running voluntary organisations or acting as school governors and so have considerable organisational experience as well as the skills of managing family life. Does their lifetime experience warrant less value?

Similarly, many returner programmes require potential returners to have had prior experience, either of the role or sector to which they are applying. Whilst there may be good reasons for this (e.g. if a role requires a particular technical skill), organisations are in danger of missing out on highly capable women with transferable knowledge, skills and experience.

Equally, returners engaging in returnships may feel overly scrutinised during a returnship, especially as 'successful' performance during that time determines whether returners are offered a job at the end. This pressure may be particularly acute for mothers and/or women with caring responsibilities who can feel under pressure to signal that they are excelling, despite requiring time and space to adjust to synchronising their renewed leadership pathway with family life.

Organisations should commit to providing a safe environment in which women feel able to engage in open and honest discussion about their experiences of returning without fear of future career penalty. Care is also required to ensure that 'returners' can shake-off this status once they are fully embedded at work; ironically, there is a danger that being officially termed 'a returner' may mean the detriment of having had a break continues to stick!

Returner Programmes: Better Practice to Support Women Re-join Leadership Pathways

The **Government Equalities Office** (2017) in collaboration with **Women Returners** (consulting, coaching and networking organisation) and **Timewise** (social consultancy) have recently produced best practice guidance for returner programmes – primarily those targeted at professional and mid-to-senior managerial level roles. These include:

- **Set out the benefits of investing in a returner programme** (including the business case) and communicate these benefits to the rest of the organisation.
- **Decide what programme to offer and how it will be delivered** – e.g. will it be a ‘returnship’ or a ‘supported hiring’ programme? How long will the programme last? Who will the programme aim to recruit and why? Where will returners fit in your organisation, at what level and how much will you pay them?
- **Make flexibility an integral part of the programme** – given that returners (predominantly women) are coming back after a career break it is likely that they will want a job which is flexible in some way.
- **Think about how you attract and recruit candidates** – e.g. are your current practices fit for purpose? Are they open and transparent and likely to attract the women leaders you’re looking for? How can you ensure candidates have the opportunity to showcase the skills and experience that they bring to the role?
- **Support returners** – ensure returners are supported by line managers and have access to other forms of internal support including mentors and coaches.
- **SMEs may need to consider specific issues** – e.g. SMEs may be successful in attracting candidates to senior leadership roles who might otherwise work in a large organisation, maybe even at a higher salary, if they harness their more informal culture to offer flexible working.
- **Evaluate the programme** – to identify what’s working well and areas for improvement.
- **Develop and embed the programme in your organisation** – build on learning to generate better and more diverse leadership routes.

For further details, please visit:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/set-up-a-returner-programme>

Recharging – Safe Career Pauses

The (limited) literature concerning returning to work tends to focus on the experiences of women who exited paid work due to family events and/or other life contexts and returned (or not) after a certain period of time.

Yet creative leadership pathways can enable women who may otherwise feel they have little choice but to leave their role, or retreat from the workforce entirely, to remain in work. For many women this is about making more senior roles flexible. Some women may not want the same responsibility while they manage heavy family responsibilities, however. In these cases, organisations can benefit from giving talented women as much responsibility as they want while also keeping in dialogue with them about taking more on when they feel able.

For most women, synchronising work and family life is about staying on a leadership pathway that is flexible. Including women on those pathways should be an organisation’s number one role. We know that many women work under their potential (i.e. under these pathways) primarily because the pathways themselves are too linear and rigid. However, in some instances, there may also be capable women in your organisation who choose a more junior role, or avoid promotion, for a while. This may be about lifestyle or really difficult circumstances, such as having a child with a disability, a health problem or being in the ‘squeezed generation’ managing childcare and elder care.

They may have ambition to pursue more senior positions when the time is right but find their capability is taken for granted or overlooked.

Retaining talented women who are loyal and have future potential, and flexibly recharging their careers at the right time, is an innovative approach to talent management. This can be a brave strategy because it takes a longer-term view. Yet, it may also have short-term benefits as you retain a talented member of staff who does an excellent job in a role well within their capability and stays with you because you believe in them and will support them to progress when they are ready.

It is vital to resist damaging and false assumptions about women performing roles they are currently ‘comfortable’ in – and/or roles that facilitate flexible working (and part-time working). Organisations must resist under-paying them for the capable work they do or presuming they lack the commitment, capability or ambition to progress further. Training for inexperienced line managers may help to counteract this ‘counting out’ of some of the best talent hiding in clear view in your organisation.

➤ **Enquire: Identify the talented women working under their potential in your organisation. Make sure you talk to them regularly about their capability to progress and how you can support flexible working to help them get ahead or keep them in mind when opportunities arise. Build their confidence and belief in their future selves so you build your talent for the future.**

➤ **Enquire: What work can your organisation do to stop women being stigmatised or stereotyped as disinterested in ‘a career’ because they avoid promotion for a period of time? How can you make sure they are valued for what they are doing now and recognised for their potential even when they hold back from advancing for a while?**

Rebooting, Rerouting or Retreating (Herman, 2015)

An interesting study by Herman (2015) looked at the experiences of women who have attempted to return to science, engineering and technology (SET) professions in the UK and Republic of Ireland after taking a career break. The study found that women faced difficulties in returning to SET careers and identified three ways in which participants talked about their return (or not) to (paid) work:

Rebooting – sees a woman return to her original career and exhibit a trajectory that is based on achieving continuity in terms of a long-held career or occupational identity.

Rerouting – is used to describe women who either choose or are forced to take their career in a new direction after a spell away from organisational life.

Retreating – captures the experiences of women who no longer choose to work or can no longer do so in a way that is tenable for them. Typically, it is a decision borne out of an inability to make the logistics of work compatible with life priorities and a formal (and possibly permanent) departure from the labour market evidences this unsustainability.

The author of the study suggests that there is overlap between these three ‘types’ and that women may move between them when telling their career stories.

➤ **Enquire: Which of these three ‘types’ is the most common in your organisation? Why is this the case?**

PLEASE HELP US BUILD THE GROWL IDEAS BANK

Do you have a ‘better practice’ idea that relates to one of our GROWL themes?

Please get in touch so we can add it to the GROWL Ideas Bank and share it with the GROWL Network!

Just drop an email to Dr Helen Woolnough at h.woolnough@mmu.ac.uk to get started.

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References to research are published on our website at www.mmu.ac.uk/growl.

GROWL is led by Professor Julia Rouse, Dr Helen Woolnough and the Sylvia Pankhurst Gender and Diversity Research Centre at Manchester Metropolitan University. It is sponsored by Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellor, Professor Julia Clarke, and the Governing Body.

GROWL is passionately supported by Northern Power Women and advised by academics and practitioners.



(From left to right) GROWL project leaders Dr Helen Woolnough and Professor Julia Rouse are joined by Lindsey Watkin, Faculty Director of Global Programmes at Manchester Metropolitan Business School, at the Northern Power Women Conference 2017.

We are interested in researching all issues covered by GROWL and the process of engagement. Get in touch to talk about commissioning research or consultancy in your organisation by emailing Dr Helen Woolnough at h.woolnough@mmu.ac.uk.

To join the Network, find out more about the rest of the Enquiry Tools, and contribute to the Ideas Bank, please email Dr Helen Woolnough at h.woolnough@mmu.ac.uk

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