



Are you looking to jump back into work after a career gap but don't know where to begin? If so, opting to apply via a 'returners programme' could be for you. ([extract](#))

Your reasons for a career gap might be due to care-giving/family reasons, travel overseas or study. You may even have attempted a return but have met with less than enthusiastic employers. Times are changing however, and driven by a number of factors, companies are now seeing the huge value of returners.

They are seeing the significant benefits you bring and welcome you as part of their focus on diversity and inclusion. Companies with returner programmes are now more likely to attract top talent.

1. Perceptions

Typically, applicants have been away from the workforce for upwards of two years. People returning to work often find it difficult to secure relevant work. Many experience being perceived as 'being out of touch' due to their gap period.

"Applicants to our programme will have previously worked in a technical or engineering role," said Mairéad Cummins, senior talent acquisition partner at [PM Group](#). "We value the benefit of hiring an individual who has previous relevant experience. In some instances, a returner can be up to speed in the time it can take to find the 'perfect candidate'.

"As [our programme](#) developed, we learnt not to assume that we know what a returner is looking for. An employer might assume it's all about part-time but interestingly, 50% of our applicants wanted to work a five-day week. What's important is having the flexibility to decide what works for you to balance personal and work commitments."

2. More about 'the Gap'

Don't underestimate the value of any volunteering you may have done while away from the workforce, advises Mairéad. Time and skills developed on school boards, local committees and sports clubs include influencing, team building, negotiating and time management. These skills are essential in the workplace for successful team building and collaboration.

"The length of time our hires have been out of the workforce varies greatly – the longest gap was 17 years and we have joiners who came back to work after two years. PM Group's Returners Programme is open to everybody with a career gap. However, a high proportion of its returners are female – many have taken time out to have children or care for family members," says Mairéad.

3. Benefits of a returners programme

Returners add significant levels of diversity to the company. Different viewpoints create more robust conversations and ideas – reducing 'groupthink'. "Our programme helps to relaunch their career in a job that makes full use of their skills and experience. Some of our new hires have successfully started at a senior level. This level of hire is key to addressing the gap at middle management that exists across all industries.

"Our returners bring skills and experience to roles that are hard to fill. Departments such as quantity surveying; process engineering; mechanical engineering; projects controls; and digital transformation are reaping the rewards of the programme, at both our Cork and Dublin offices. When it comes to finding the right person, referrals have been a great source of candidates, while others applied directly. We have been very pleased with the uptake to date.

"When developing our programme, we saw that people looking to return lacked confidence and felt daunted by the recruitment process. That really helped us to shape our approach, which focuses on the individual, understanding their needs and making the process less daunting," says Mairéad.

4. Flexibility is key

When considering a returners programme, don't always expect quick results. It is often a longer process than recruiting experienced hires who are currently

working. Naturally, more support is needed and more in-depth discussions to identify a suitable role.

Some returners programmes have specific six-month placements similar to internships or graduate placements but PM Group's programme overlaps with ongoing hiring activity. "We have a flexible approach meeting the needs of each person who joins the company – it is not a one-size fits all," says Mairéad. "When any job opportunity opens within the company, we discuss with the hiring manager if there is capacity to hire a returner."

A key characteristic of a returner placement is the amount of support provided to ease the transition back into work. Once started at PM Group, returners receive a high level of support, including confidential one-to-one coaching to assist with their integration back into the workforce.

5. Looking to the future

Government support is vital to set the policies for organisations to follow. In October 2019, the employment minister announced the intention to provide funding for returner programmes. Whilst these measures may have been paused due to the pandemic, it shows the intent to address the imbalance of women in the workplace. Elsewhere, the UK, has provided £5m towards returners programmes since 2017. More needs to be done, here!" says Mairéad.

Click [here](#) for more information on PM Group's Returners Programme

Mairéad Cummins is a senior talent acquisition partner and has more than 20 years' experience in talent acquisition. In [PM Group](#), she is responsible for recruitment across a broad range of disciplines and levels. She is also responsible for the returners programme.