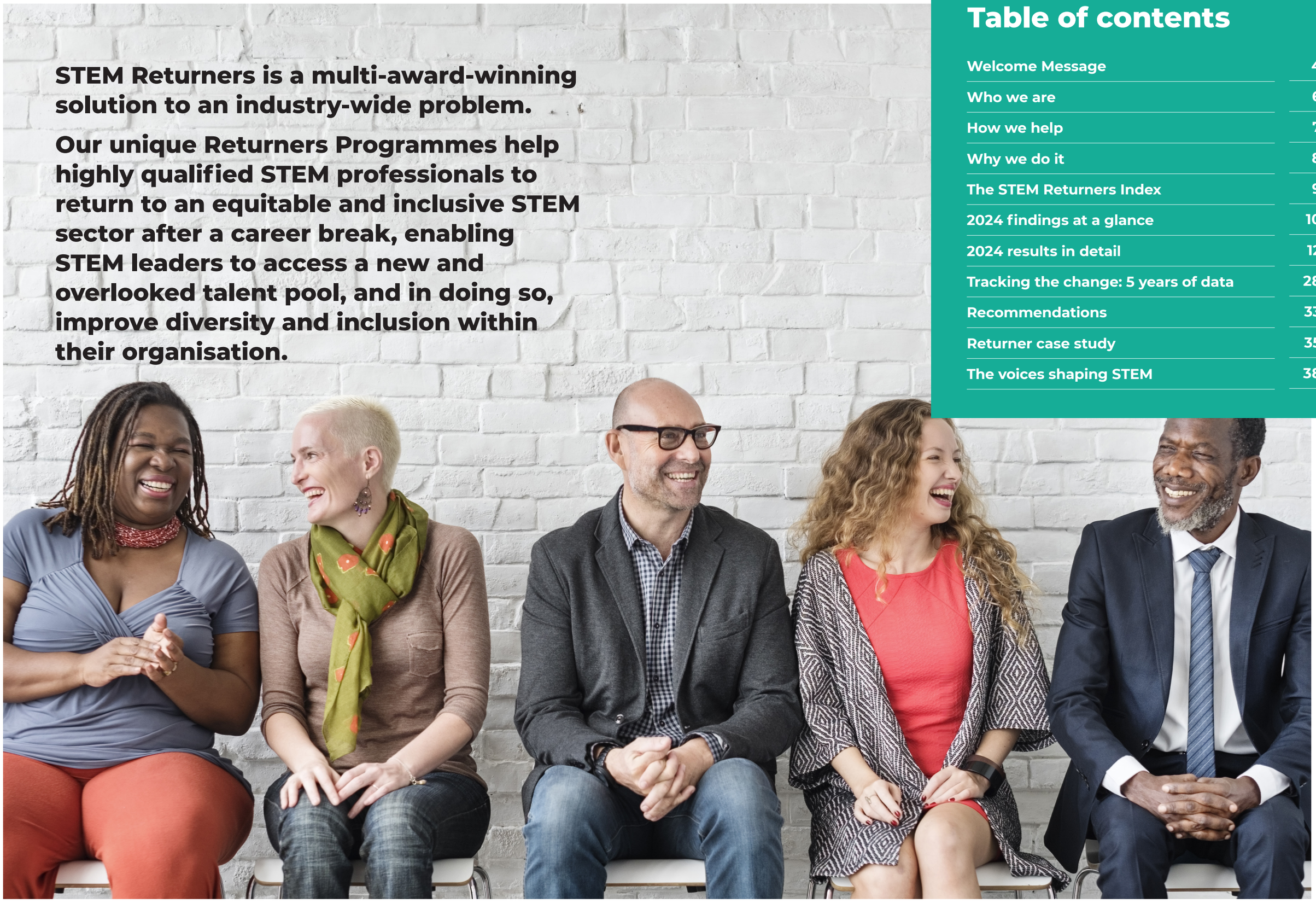
THE STEM RETURNERS INDEX _ 2024

STEM RETURNERS

stemreturners.com

STEM Returners is a multi-award-winning solution to an industry-wide problem.

Our unique Returners Programmes help highly qualified STEM professionals to return to an equitable and inclusive STEM sector after a career break, enabling STEM leaders to access a new and overlooked talent pool, and in doing so, improve diversity and inclusion within their organisation.



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Welcome message from STEM Returners' Founder & Director

Welcome to the 2024 STEM Returners Index.

At STEM Returners, our mission has always been to create a fair and inclusive pathway for talented STEM professionals to return to the careers they have worked so hard to build. Since 2017, we have been dedicated to dismantling the barriers that many face after taking a career break – whether for family, caring duties, health, or other personal reasons.

We are immensely proud to have reached a significant milestone since the release of our 2023 STEM Returners Index. **This year, we successfully supported our 500th professional back into the STEM industry.** This achievement is not just a number; it's a powerful testament to the collaboration and dedication of our forward-thinking partners and the unrivalled resilience of returners.

Over the last 12 months, we expanded our impact with the launch of two new sector-specific returner programmes. The Underwater Sector Programme, in partnership with the Global Underwater Hub and the ECITB, was created to address skills gaps and increase Diversity & Inclusion in the underwater sectors. The programme also provided proof of concept and impact across significant numbers to encourage others within the industry to adopt similar initiatives. Additionally, the Aerospace and Automotive Project – a collaboration with the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT), ADS Group, and Enginuity – was specifically designed to support SMEs, helping them overcome the unique challenges smaller businesses face when implementing ED&I strategies

Yet, alongside the successes, we must also acknowledge the issues that persist within the industry. Despite the progress we've made, it's impossible to ignore the growing concern over the disparity between companies' proclaimed commitments to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I) and the tangible actions taken to support these goals.

While many businesses in the STEM industry have made public declarations to prioritise diversity and inclusion, the reality is that some have missed the mark in turning these promises into meaningful change. This pullback, or in some cases, inaction, not only stalls progress but also risks heightening the very barriers that ED&I initiatives aim to dismantle. It's important that the industry holds itself accountable, ensuring that such initiatives are more than just words but are followed through with genuine, sustained efforts.

The past year has reinforced the importance of our work and the critical role our programmes, partnerships, and annual research play in creating pathways for talented professionals to re-enter their careers. Together, we are not only helping individuals resume their professional journeys but also enriching the STEM industry with diverse perspectives and experiences.

We launched our annual Index to address a critical need: understanding the challenges returners face when re-entering the STEM sector. As we engaged with professionals who had taken career breaks, it became clear that their value was often discounted, and their challenges were not fully understood by the industry.

The Index was created to fill this gap by collecting and analysing the real experiences of returners. This initiative allows us to uncover the specific barriers these individuals encounter, such as lack of recent experience, bias, and scarcity of flexible working opportunities. By highlighting these issues, we not only gain invaluable insights into the personal and professional hurdles faced by returners but also track how the industry is progressing, or in some cases, where it still falls short.

However, it goes beyond just reporting statistics; it serves as the collective voice of a population who have often been overlooked. Through this Index, we amplify that voice ensuring that the experiences and challenges of returners are heard by industry leaders, policymakers, and the wider STEM community.

Through our returner programmes, we're not only transforming individual careers but also helping organisations fill critical talent gaps with experienced and diverse STEM professionals.

The Index highlights both the obstacles that continue to exist and the strides made by organisations that are committed to supporting returners.

As we look ahead, we are eager to see how the new government will approach the challenges and opportunities within the STEM sector. With the skills gap continuing to be a critical issue, it is our hope that the government will prioritise initiatives that support returners and address this gap. We look forward to collaborating with policymakers and industry leaders to ensure that the UK's STEM workforce is robust, inclusive, and equitable, benefiting from the rich diversity of talent that returners bring.

I'd like to extend a huge 'thank you' to everyone who contributed to this year's Index by sharing your experiences. Your input is vital to our ongoing efforts to transform the STEM sector into one where all talent is acknowledged, supported, and given the opportunity to thrive.

We hope you find the STEM Returners Index 2024 insightful and that it inspires you to join us in building a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable future for STEM.

If you have any comments, feedback, or questions, we'd love to hear from you. Please feel free to reach out to us at **hello@stemreturners.com**. Your input is invaluable in helping us improve and continue supporting STEM professionals on their return-to-work journey.

Thank you for being part of this important conversation.

Warm regards,

Natalie Desty
Founder and Director, STEM Returners

Who we are

Since 2017, STEM Returners has been at the forefront of promoting equity, inclusivity, and diversity within the STEM sector. Recognising that numerous highly skilled and experienced professionals had paused their careers due to various life circumstances; we identified an opportunity to support this overlooked talent.

Too often, these individuals with valuable skills and experiences are sidelined due to unconscious biases, outdated recruitment practices, and a systemic lack of inclusion—this needs to change.

We believe that career breaks are a normal part of someone's professional journey, and in an industry as dynamic and fast-evolving as STEM, the perspectives and experiences of those who are returning are invaluable to a market suffering from a skills shortage.

STEM Returners champions a future where the industry thrives on diversity. Our mission is to dismantle the stigma surrounding career breaks and provide a solution that helps create a workforce as diverse and innovative as the challenges it seeks to solve.

The STEM Returners programme offers returners a pathway back into the career they worked so hard to build, whilst helping organisations overcome the industry's skills gap and tap into a broader talent pool–one that brings fresh perspectives, diverse life experiences, and a wealth of knowledge. We're committed to driving the change needed to create a more forward-thinking and equitable industry.

How we help

The STEM Returners Programme

Operating at the crossroads of diversity advocacy and practical career support, at STEM Returners we're committed to helping professionals either re-enter the STEM industry after a career break or transition from other fields into fulfilling STEM roles.

Through partnerships with leading employers across engineering, technology, science, and other UK STEM sectors, our programmes offer structured, paid placements that provide the opportunity for returners to refresh their skills, gain hands-on experience, and build professional networks in real work environments. Beyond just placements, we provide career coaching, mentoring platforms, and guidance throughout the process to ensure returners have the support they need to restart their careers.

It really works

We've now helped **over 500** STEM professionals return to work across the UK

96%

have now secured a permanent position within their host organisation

46%

of STEM Returners are women vs 10.9% of professional engineers (source: WISE)

34%

are from minority ethnic groups vs 9% of engineers (source: Association for Black & Minority Ethnic Engineers UK (AFBE-UK)

100%

of all companies who have taken part in a programme have successfully recruited returners as a result

Beyond individual support, we collaborate with employers to challenge outdated recruitment practices and promote more inclusive hiring processes. By working closely with organisations, we give returners the opportunities they deserve and advocate for the immense value that they bring—offering not only technical expertise but also diverse perspectives, problem-solving skills, and resilience gained from their unique experiences.

We challenge employers to reshape their hiring strategies to be more inclusive and to better recognise the potential of those returning to work after a break. This includes offering guidance on how to reduce unconscious bias, improve interview processes, and create a workplace culture that values diverse career paths. By fostering these changes, we help create workplaces where returners can thrive, and industries can benefit from broader, richer talent.

Why we do it

Breaking barriers, eliminating bias, and building a diverse, inclusive, and equitable STEM industry

At STEM Returners, our mission goes beyond simply helping skilled professionals return to the workforce. We are committed to transforming the STEM industry into a space where diversity, inclusion, and equity are not just ideals, but realities.

Barriers and bias in STEM

The STEM industry is a dynamic and rapidly evolving field, but it is also one that has long struggled with diversity and inclusion. Many talented returners, particularly women, people from minority ethnic backgrounds, older professionals, and those with non-linear career paths, face significant barriers when trying to re-enter the industry after a career break.

At the same time, the STEM sector is facing a growing skills gap, with organisations struggling to find the talent they need to remain competitive and innovative. The potential solution lies in returners. The Government Equality Hub estimates there are currently 75,000 highly skilled STEM professionals who are ready to re-enter the workforce (source: Gov.uk), stressing the continued need for initiatives like ours that provide a structured, supportive route back into STEM.

Often overlooked due to stereotypes and biases, we aim to dismantle the barriers that prevent returners from rejoining the industry, whilst addressing the industry's skills shortage by providing organisations with the talent they desperately need.

Some of these barriers include:

Career break stigma: Employers may unfairly view career breaks as a sign of unreliability or lack of ambition, and unfair assumptions about knowledge, skills and commitment. There is a common misconception that gaps in a CV automatically equate to a deterioration of skills, often leading to returners being discounted.

Unconscious bias: Decisions are often unconsciously made related to age, gender, or ethnic background, making it harder to get a fair chance. Affinity bias can also come into play, where hiring managers favour candidates who they think will fit within their team or who share similar interests or backgrounds. Decisions based on these unconscious biases exclude rather than include, creating a further lack of diversity in the workplace.

Isolation: A lack of support and networks for returners erodes confidence and hinders job search and performance in interviews.

STEM Returners exists to dismantle these systemic barriers. We believe career breaks should not define a person's professional worth. By challenging the stigma surrounding employment gaps, advocating for more inclusive recruitment, and creating equitable pathways for professionals to return to STEM, we aim to build a more diverse, inclusive, and innovative industry—one that benefits from the full spectrum of available talent while directly addressing the STEM skills gap.

Building an equitable STEM sector

By breaking down barriers and eliminating biases, we are helping to build a STEM industry that is not only more inclusive and diverse but also more innovative and resilient. A diverse, inclusive, and equitable STEM industry leads to:

- **Outperformance:** Companies that are more diverse and inclusive are 35% more likely to outperform their competitors. (source: McKinsey)
- **Decision making:** Diverse teams are 87% better at making decisions. (source: People Management)
- **Higher innovation:** Inclusive companies are 1.7 times more likely to be innovation leaders. (source: Josh Bersin)
- **Increased market share:** Diverse companies are 70% more likely to capture new markets. (source: Harvard Business Review)
- **More revenue:** Diverse management teams lead to 19% higher revenue. (source: Boston Consulting Group)

The STEM Returners Index

What is it?

The STEM Returners Index is our annual STEM industry research publication that provides a comprehensive analysis of the experiences and challenges faced by individuals returning to STEM careers after a break.

Now in its fifth year, our STEM Returners Index gathers insights from professionals across various STEM sectors, examining trends in diversity, employment barriers, and the impact of career breaks on re-entry into the workforce. The Index is built on survey data collected from over 1000 STEM professionals between January and September 2024 who are either on or have taken a career break in the past.

The data we present offers a detailed snapshot of the ongoing issues related to returner experiences, hiring practices, and inclusion in STEM industries.

> **We believe career breaks should not define a person's professional worth.**

Its purpose

We created the **STEM Returners Index** to address a critical gap in understanding the experiences of professionals returning to the STEM workforce. While much focus is placed on attracting new talent to STEM industries, there has been far less attention given to those who are trying to return after a career break.

The Index was developed to give a voice to returners and bring attention to the challenges they face. We believe that by highlighting these barriers and sharing returners' experiences, we can inspire industry-wide change. Our goal is to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for returners, ensuring that their skills and experience are recognised and that they can continue to contribute to the growth and innovation of the STEM industry. By publishing the Index each year, we aim to promote dialogue, drive policy change, and support companies in creating fairer, more effective recruitment and retention strategies.

We want our STEM Returners Index to serve as a vital resource for industry leaders and policymakers, uncovering the realities faced by returners and highlighting the systemic barriers that often prevent them from restarting their careers. By analysing key data, the Index helps identify areas for improvement in recruitment practices and offers recommendations for creating more inclusive and equitable hiring processes in STEM fields.

2024 findings at a glance

2024 findings at a glance

This 2024 STEM Returners Index has provided valuable insights into the ongoing challenges and progress faced by returners re-entering the workforce. The 2024 data highlights key trends, including the growing impact of supportive programmes, shifts in job application strategies, and the persistent barriers many returners still encounter. Below are the key takeaways from this year's results.

1. **STEM professionals attempting to return to work in 2024 are much more diverse than the current state of the industry.** 42% of those attempting to return are female, 58% are male, and 40% are from minority ethnic backgrounds.

2. Returning individuals are **experienced** and **highly qualified**, with 75% holding a degree, master's, or doctorate.

3. Desire to return to work for **passion** also saw a notable increase in 2024 (44% vs. 33% in 2023), and 40% of returners reported **missing the challenge** (up from 30% last year).

4. **Caring responsibilities** (both children and other) is the most common reason for a career break, with only 15% taking one out of personal choice (vs. 13% in 2023).

5. **Financial reasons** remain the number one motivator for returners (49%).

6. Professionals from **minority ethnic groups** were twice as likely as White British candidates to apply for more than 70 jobs.

7. 46% of candidates reported that they 'hardly ever' or 'never' received feedback on their applications (vs. 44% in 2023).

8. 40% of returners reported feeling that they had personally experienced bias in the recruitment process, up from 33% in 2023.

   a. 38% from minority ethnic backgrounds felt they experienced bias based on race or ethnicity, (compared to an average of 18% across other surveyed groups).

   b. 42% of returners who identified with a limiting health condition or disability reported experiencing bias due to their health circumstances, a sharp increase from 12% last year.

9. 65% of returners report finding the **process of re-entering** the STEM industry either "difficult" or "very difficult".

10. 54% of successful **returners favoured returner programmes over traditional recruitment channels** as a route back to employment (up from 40% in 2023). Additionally, 35% of returners found employment through these programmes, more than double the 16% reported in 2023.

2024 results in detail

Setting the scene

Foreword

The STEM industry, while innovative and essential to the future of our world, is flawed by significant recruitment challenges, including a consistent lack of diversity and unconscious bias.

In the UK, only **26% of the core STEM workforce are women** (source: Gov.uk), and in **professional engineering positions, it is a much lower 10.9%** (source: WISE). Whilst the most recent 2021 Census reported that **Black, Asian, mixed and other ethnic groups make up 19.3% of the working-age population** in England and Wales, only **8% of STEM roles are filled by these groups** (source: Office for National Statistics (ONS)).

According to data from the 2021 UK census, 17.8% of people in England and Wales have some form of disability. But there is a stark contrast when compared to the actual numbers of those with a disability working in STEM, for example, 7.7% of those working in the physical sciences have a disability – almost half the 14% reported in 2020. The ONS data also indicate that 8.4% of those working in the chemical sciences field and 9.7% in the biological sciences have a disability. This disparity clearly shows the ongoing need to address inclusion and accessibility in STEM, ensuring that opportunities are available to all, regardless of disability (source: Office for National Statistics (ONS)).

Barriers to entry remain a significant challenge for many looking to pursue a career in STEM. The Association for Black & Minority Ethnic Engineers UK (AFBE-UK) reported a clear disparity between black and minority ethnic groups studying engineering, and those successfully entering professional engineering roles. Despite **29.9%** of engineering university graduates coming from BME backgrounds, only **9%** of the UK's engineers are from these communities (source: AFBE). This highlights the significant underutilisation of highly qualified minority ethnic professionals in the UK engineering sector, whilst also suggesting there may be additional barriers that hinder the transition from education to employment.

Highly skilled STEM professionals get overlooked when attempting to return from a career break and often struggle to make progress via traditional recruitment channels. Unconscious bias, perceived deterioration of skills, the 'career break penalty', and other hidden barriers mean talented professionals are being left behind, and this needs to change.

We are proud to present the **2024 STEM Returners Index**, our fifth annual publication, which delves into the experiences of STEM professionals returning to the workforce after a career break. As our findings show, returners remain a highly skilled and motivated group, with a wealth of experience ready to be reintegrated into STEM industries. Despite their qualifications, returners still face significant hurdles—ranging from unconscious bias to a lack of suitable re-entry pathways.

This year's results further reinforce the importance of engaging with returners as a key solution to both the talent shortage and the diversity gap in STEM. By understanding the motivations, challenges, and experiences of returners, we can better address the systemic issues that limit re-entry pathways.

> **We hope this report sparks meaningful conversations and leads to actionable change across the industry.**

Respondent demographics

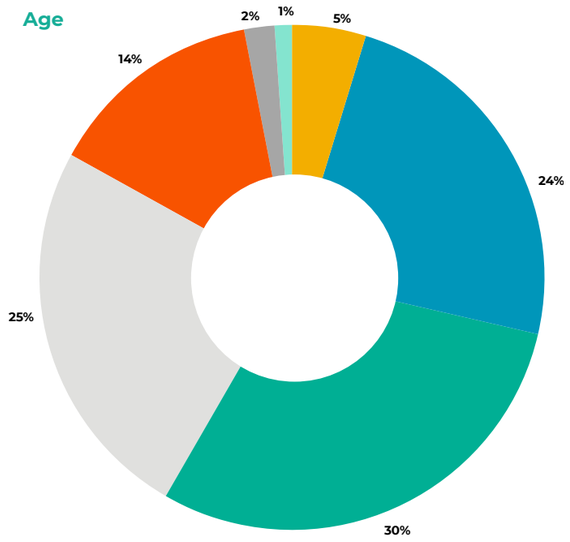
Understanding the diversity and background of our respondents is key to interpreting the results of the 2024 STEM Returners survey. The following infographic highlights the key demographical information of the 1,115 responding STEM professionals, aiming to provide context to our findings and offers a snapshot of the diverse group seeking to return to STEM careers in 2024.

Gender

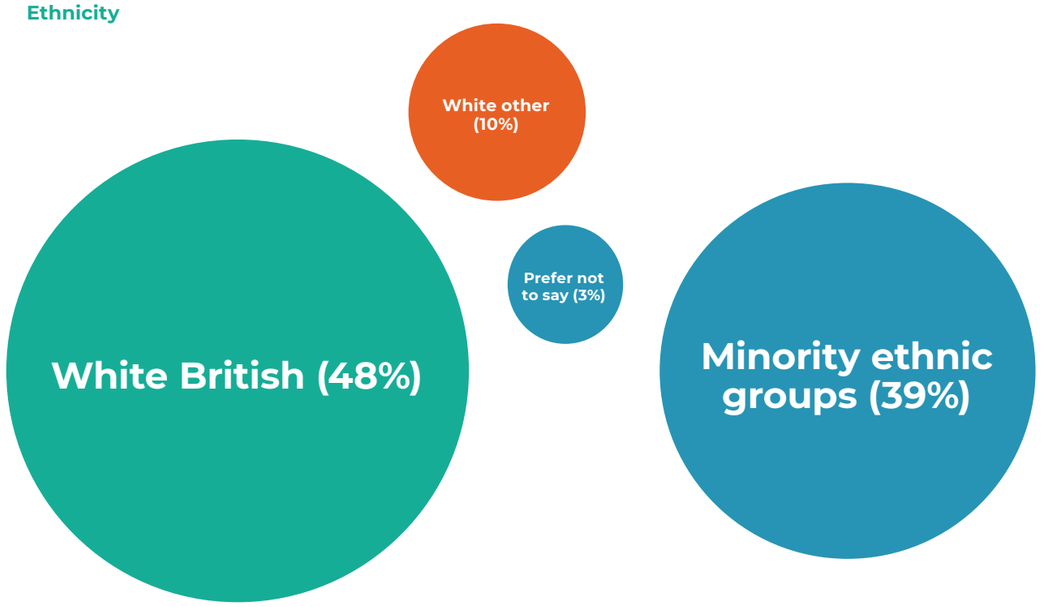
54% male

45% female

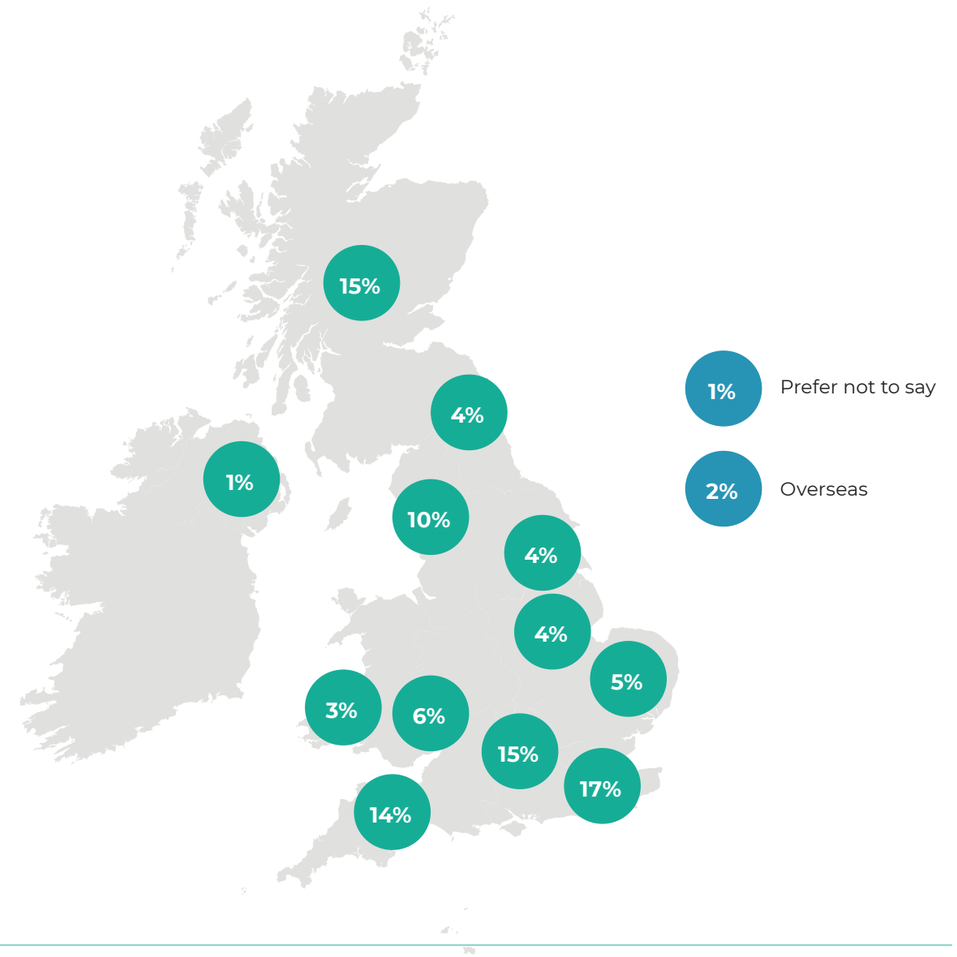
Age



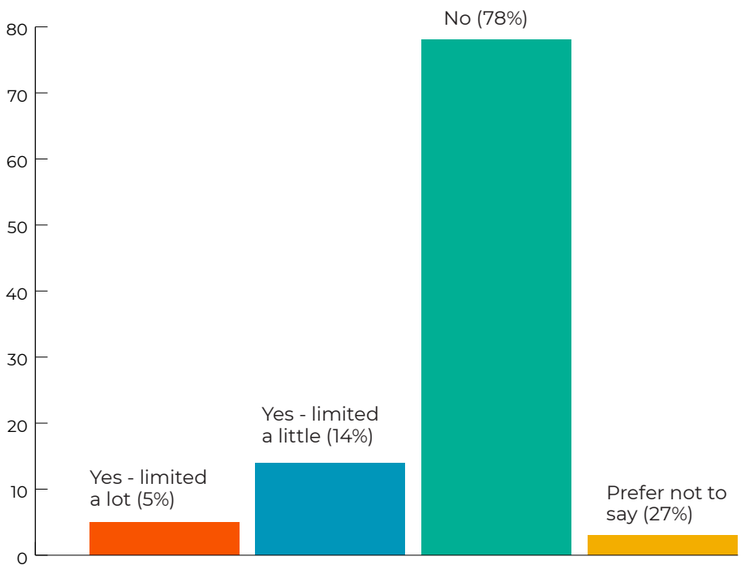
Ethnicity



Location



Health problem/disability



Returners: the often-forgotten talent

Demographics and diversity

Of the surveyed STEM professionals in 2024, **42% of those attempting to return are female, and 40% are from minority ethnic backgrounds**, highlighting a substantial opportunity for organisations to improve the diversity within their workforce.

Additionally, **19%** of those surveyed identified as having some form of limiting **disability or health condition**, emphasising the importance of addressing accessibility and inclusion in recruitment practices.

Highly qualified and experienced

Like last year's findings it is evident that those who have taken a career break are not only experienced but also highly qualified. In 2024, **75% of those surveyed held a degree, master's, or doctorate**, with **89% having their highest qualification in a STEM-related discipline (up from 70% in 2023)**.

60% had more than 5 years of experience in their field before their break, with **38% having over a decade of experience**. These statistics demonstrate that those returning to work possess the knowledge and skills to make an immediate impact upon re-entry.

Professional backgrounds

A significant number of respondents held senior roles before their break, with **67%** having worked in '**Professional' or 'Managerial' positions**, and **84%** leaving a role within the STEM industry. This shows that returners are not only technically proficient but also have leadership experience, positioning them as strong candidates for roles requiring both expertise and management skills. Additionally, their prior experience within STEM ensures they bring a solid foundation of industry knowledge, strengthening their ability to swiftly reintegrate when returning to their profession.

Despite their qualifications and experience, returners remain an overlooked talent pool. By recognising the unique value returners bring to the workforce —diverse perspectives, extensive experience, and leadership capabilities—organisations can fill critical talent gaps and foster a more inclusive and innovative workforce.

Reasons behind the breaks

Career breaks often occur unexpectedly, driven by personal or professional challenges beyond an individual's control. For the vast majority of STEM professionals, taking a break from their career is not a matter of personal choice—**only 15% of those surveyed in 2024 reported that their break was voluntary**. Yet, despite this reality, returners often find themselves penalised for a gap in their CV, facing unnecessary barriers when they try to re-enter the workforce.

Accepting that career breaks are a completely normal part of working life and understanding the reasons behind them are key to breaking down the stigma and creating a more supportive environment.

Caregiving responsibilities continue to be the most common reason STEM professionals take career breaks, with **28% citing childcare as their primary factor**. This burden falls disproportionately on women, with 51% of female respondents stepping away for childcare, compared to just 9% of men. This continued disproportion highlights the persistent gender inequalities within caregiving, where women are more likely to pause their careers to care for children.

Beyond childcare, other caring responsibilities also play a significant role. Across all respondents, **12% were forced to step away from their careers to provide caring responsibilities (other than for children)**. This reflects the growing demands on professionals to balance their careers with caregiving duties outside of childcare responsibilities.

Relocation was the second leading factor for a career break **(21% vs. 18% in 2023**). More often than not, relocation happens out of necessity, whether due to a partner's job move, family needs, or other factors, making it a challenging and unexpected interruption in a professional's career.

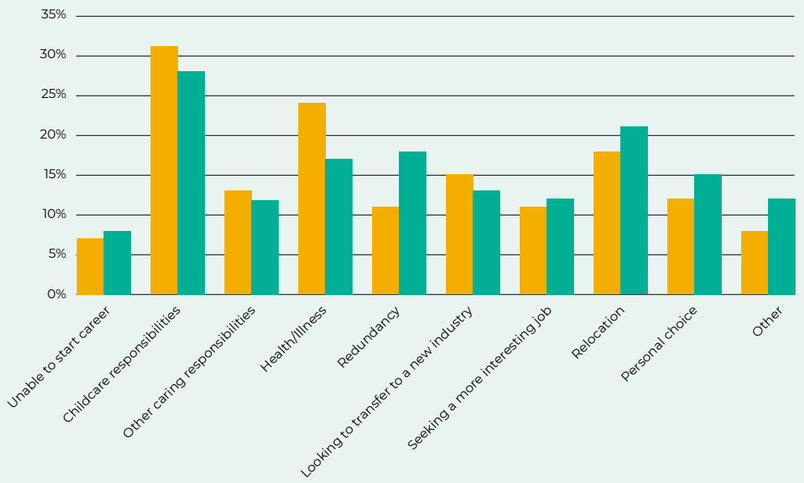
Like last year's findings, **redundancy** remains the most common cause of career break amongst male respondents, however, the percentage has **dropped from 30% in 2023 to 25% in 2024** which seems to indicate a slight rise in job security over the last 12 months.

Another key trend in 2024 is the **8%** of professionals who reported their **inability to start their chosen career**. This group faces barriers even before they can establish themselves in the industry, highlighting how structural issues in the job market prevent many aspiring STEM professionals from getting a foothold in their field.

Regardless of whether career breaks are taken out of choice or not, the reasons behind them are most certainly diverse. Professionals are often driven to step away due to caregiving, relocation, health, or other factors outside of their control. Yet, despite the involuntary nature of most career gaps, returners frequently find themselves penalised for these breaks when they try to re-enter the workforce.

It should be now widely recognised that career breaks are normal, and by better understanding the reasons behind them, we can work towards eliminating the bias and creating a more supportive and equitable path for returners to resume their careers.

Reasons for a career break



Only 15% of career breaks were taken out of personal choice.

Career gaps and re-entry

Despite their skills and qualifications, returners often face a “career break penalty,” where employers undervalue or overlook them simply because of gaps in their CVs.

In a competitive job market, the comparison between CVs with gaps and those without is rarely equitable, putting returners at a disadvantage. This penalty can hinder their ability to return to work, especially after extended absences. However, as we analyse these trends, we also see positive shifts, indicating that returners are beginning to find more opportunities to re-enter the workforce sooner.

No one is considering my CV as I have a long career break and a lot of negative feedback from recruiters.”

— Returner, 2024

Encouraging trends for shorter breaks

In 2024, **59%** of respondents had been out of the workforce for **less than two years**, a slight increase from **56%** in 2023. This is an encouraging trend, as it demonstrates that many returners are finding opportunities to re-enter the workforce sooner. This also suggests that employers are beginning to see the value returners bring to the workplace and are more open to giving them the opportunity to restart their careers.

Decrease in mid-length breaks

The percentage of STEM professionals who took a **3-5 year** break decreased in 2024 to **22%,** down from **30%** in 2023. Paired with the rise in the number of returners who have successfully re-entered employment (**37% in 2024** compared to **29% in 2023**), this suggests that professionals on mid-length breaks are finding quicker paths to return to work. This decline in mid-length breaks indicates potential improvements in the pathways available for returners, such as enhanced employer engagement and tailored returner programmes that help professionals transition back into their careers sooner.

Challenges faced by those on longer breaks

There is a growing proportion of individuals who have been out of the workforce for longer periods. The percentage of those on a **6-10** year break **rose to 11% in 2024**, compared to **9% in 2023.** This suggests that while more returners are re-entering the workforce sooner, those who have taken extended breaks still face greater difficulties, likely due to the stronger impact of the career break penalty on their perceived value in the job market.

Similarly, the percentage who have been on a career break for **more than 10 years increased from 5% in 2023 to 9% in 2024**. This rise highlights the ongoing challenges faced by those who have taken extended breaks, reinforcing the need for more targeted support. Long career breaks require more flexible re-entry pathways, focused retraining, and employer initiatives that embrace the wealth of experience returners bring, regardless of the length of their break.

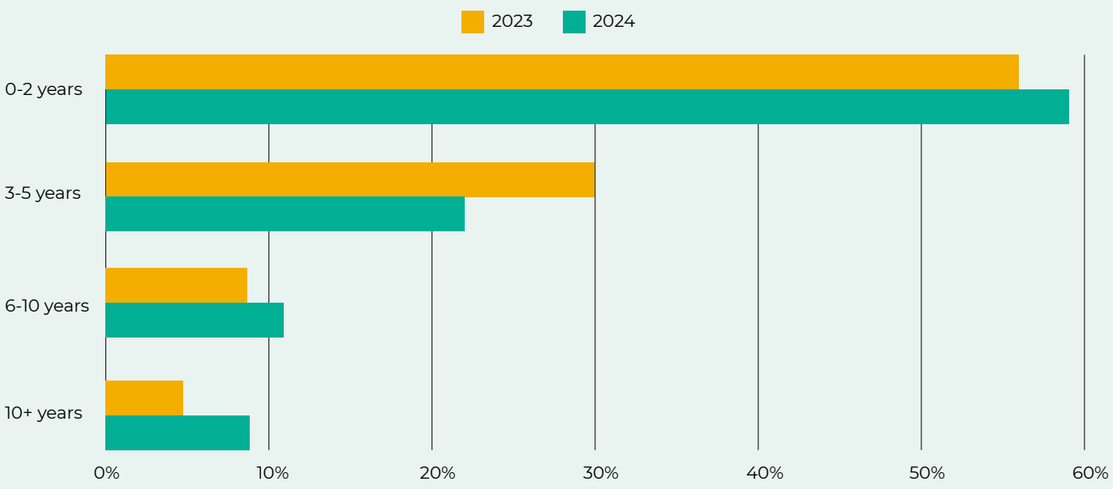
The 2024 data shows positive shifts for returners who have taken shorter breaks, but the stigma continues to weigh heavily on those with extended absences.

While more returners are re-entering the workforce sooner, those on longer breaks—particularly beyond five years—still face considerable barriers. To reduce the impact of the career break penalty, organisations must continue improving re-entry programmes and creating more inclusive hiring practices that value returners for their skills, not penalise them for taking time away from the industry.

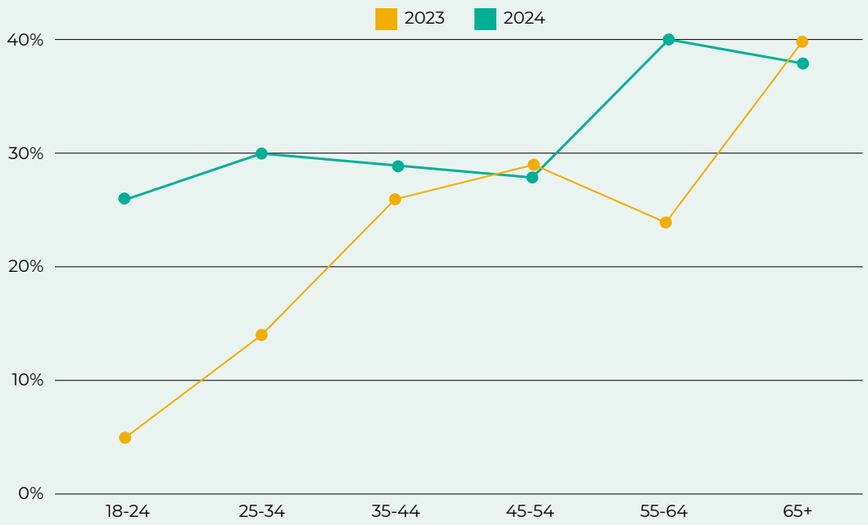
I have applied to many jobs and in most of the cases I don’t hear back. I think the career break in my CV plays an important role in this situation.”

— Returner, 2024

Length of career break



% of candidates applying for 50+ jobs, by age



The drivers to return

The findings from the 2024 STEM Returners Index clearly demonstrate that returners are not just eager to get back to work—they are highly motivated and driven by a variety of reasons. Whether it's a financial necessity, a desire to reignite their passion or a commitment to achieving long-term career goals, returners are ready to contribute meaningfully to the workforce. These insights highlight the energy and ambition that returners bring, making them a valuable talent pool for organisations willing to embrace them.

Financial reasons remain the number one motivator for returners with 49% of respondents overall citing it as a key reason for returning to work, up 3% on the previous year. This significant number continues to highlight the growing economic pressures on returners across all age groups.

The **desire to return to work for passion** also saw a notable increase, with **44% of returners in 2024 driven by this factor, compared to 33% in 2023**. This trend was evident across all age groups and suggests that returners are increasingly motivated by a desire to engage in meaningful work, pursue personal fulfilment, and reconnect with their professional interests, rather than solely focusing on financial necessity.

Achieving long-term career goals was another key motivator that saw substantial growth in 2024, with **42%** of returners overall citing it as a reason to return, **compared to 31% in 2023**. This indicates that more returners, particularly those aged 18-44, are focused on advancing their careers and achieving long-term aspirations.

Additionally, **40%** of returners in 2024 reported **missing the challenge** as a reason for re-entering the workforce, **up from 30% in 2023.** This increase reflects a growing desire among professionals to engage with challenging work and continue pushing themselves in their careers.

In 2024, returners are more motivated than ever, with a growing desire to face new challenges, fulfil their passions, and achieve long-term successes. Their drive to return to the workforce, paired with their valuable experience, makes them a key asset for the STEM industry. Employers who recognise and engage with this motivated group stand to benefit not only from their skills but also from their strong determination to contribute and succeed.

More applications, greeted with silence

The journey back into the workforce for STEM returners often involves an extensive job search, and the number of applications submitted varies greatly by demographic and personal circumstances. This section explores how many jobs returners apply for and the frequency of the feedback they received—or often did not receive—during the process.

Application patterns and challenges

In 2024, job application patterns differed notably across age groups, ethnicities, and abilities. **18-24 years** were the most likely to apply for a moderate number of jobs, with the majority submitting **6 to 20 applications.** This proactive approach shows their eagerness to re-enter the workforce and gain experience. On the other hand, those aged **55-64** were the most likely to apply for **more than 70 jobs**, reflecting a potential increase in the level of bias associated with age. It is apparent that this struggle to overcome the first hurdle in a hiring process leads to an incredibly high volume of applications required to achieve success for those in the older age groups.

Returners from minority ethnic backgrounds faced additional barriers in their job search. **Professionals from minority ethnic groups were twice as likely as White British candidates to apply for more than 70 jobs (28% vs. 14% respectively)**. This alarming difference indicates that candidates from minority ethnic backgrounds may feel they need to work harder to gain the same opportunities—possibly due to systemic biases in outdated recruitment processes?

The challenges faced by returners with a limiting health problem or disability are also evident in the data. The percentage of these individuals applying for **more than 70 jobs** increased significantly, **rising from 5% in 2023 to 12% in 2024**. This increase suggests that returners with a health problem/disability face additional barriers when trying to re-enter the workforce, prompting them to apply for a much higher number of jobs to increase their chances of securing employment.

An apparent lack of feedback

One of the most significant barriers faced by returners is the lack of feedback following job applications. In **2024**, a concerning **46% of candidates** reported that they **‘hardly ever’ or ‘never’ received feedback on their applications**—up slightly from 44% in 2023. This lack of communication leaves returners in a difficult position, making it harder for them to improve their applications or interview skills for future opportunities. For many, this can lead to frustration and a sense of exclusion from the hiring process, further compounding the challenges they already face in re-entering the STEM workforce.

The data from 2024 highlights the varied approaches returners take in their job search, influenced by factors such as age, ethnicity, and disability. While younger age groups are on average applying to fewer jobs, those in older age groups, minority ethnic groups, and returners with a health problem or disability are often applying to a far greater number of roles, reflecting the additional barriers they face. Coupled with the growing issue of a lack of feedback from employers, returners are encountering numerous obstacles in their attempts to resume their STEM careers. To address these issues, organisations must foster more inclusive recruitment practices and offer constructive feedback to help returners improve and succeed in their job search.

Professionals from minority ethnic groups were twice as likely as White British candidates to apply for more than 70 jobs

46% of candidates reported that they ‘hardly ever’ or ‘never’ received feedback on their applications

> **Constant rejection, together with lack of response to applications and lack of feedback following interview was soul destroying.”**
>
> — Returner, 2024

A step in the wrong direction

Despite growing recognition of the value returners bring to the workforce, it's disappointing to see that many are still penalised due to a gap in their CV. For the vast majority, career breaks aren't a matter of choice; **85% of those in this year's survey reported that their break was out of necessity**. Yet, recruitment practices in STEM continue to punish these gaps, making the return journey into the industry more difficult than it should be. The reality is clear: industry leaders need to think differently, update their recruitment practices, and actively challenge unconscious biases to give returners an equitable opportunity.

The difficulty of returning

A concerning **65%** of returners report finding the process of re-entering the STEM industry either **"difficult" or "very difficult",** a sharp rise from **51% in 2023**. Women, in particular, may face even greater challenges, with **69%** reporting difficulty, compared to **61%** of men. The increase highlights not only the persistent barriers returners face but also the gender disparities that continue to exacerbate these difficulties. This growing challenge reflects a step backwards in the STEM recruitment landscape, leaving returners discouraged and facing unnecessary obstacles.

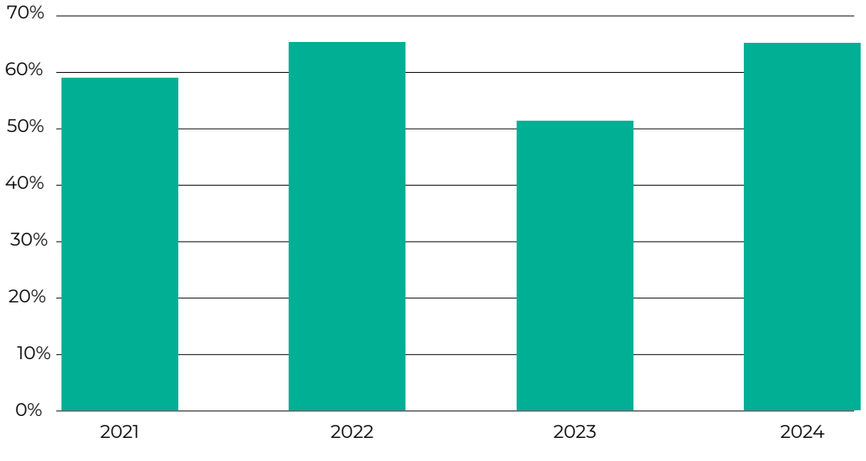
Personal biases in the recruitment process

The presence of bias in recruitment remains a significant barrier. In 2024, **40% of returners reported feeling that they had personally experienced bias** in the recruitment process, **up from 33% in 2023**. The most common form of bias stated by respondents was a perceived "lack of recent experience," with 51% of returners identifying this as a barrier, compared to 38% the previous year. This implies that career gaps continue to overshadow the wealth of experience and skills returners possess.

38% from minority ethnic backgrounds felt they experienced bias based on race or ethnicity, compared to an average of 18% across other surveyed groups. This startling disparity suggests deep-rooted systemic issues in recruitment practices that disproportionately affect underrepresented groups in the STEM industry.

> **I believe my ethnicity is a barrier, I am a minority"**
>
> — Returner, 2024

% finding process 'difficult' / 'very difficult'



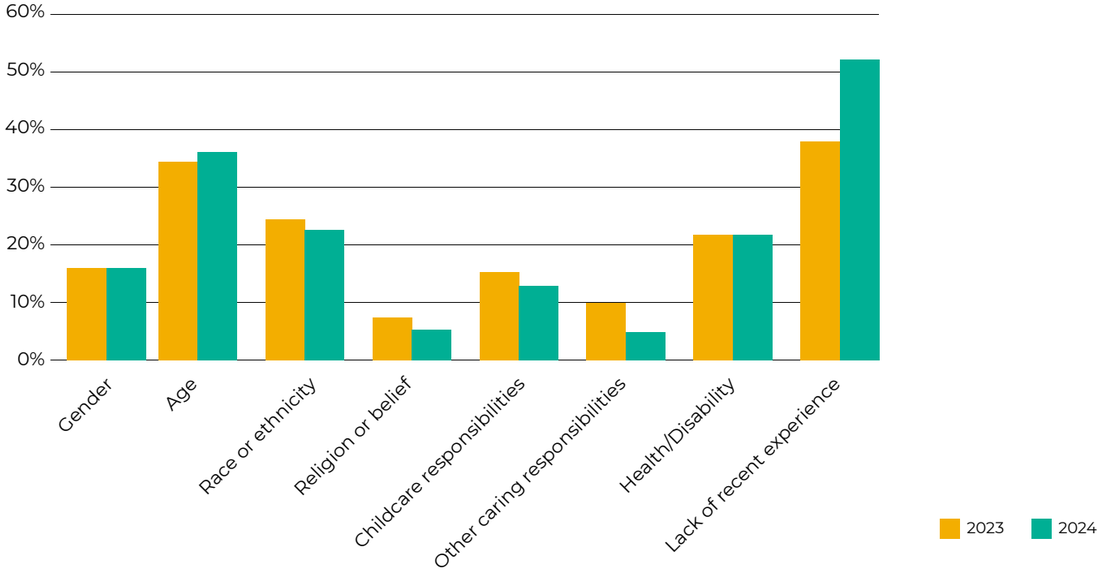
Age-related bias is another growing issue, particularly for **returners aged 45+.** In 2024, there was an increase in those from older age groups (45-54, 55-64, and 65+) who expressed experiencing **bias due to their age (average of 67%)**. The most alarming trend is among those aged 65+, where perceived age bias was reported by **81%** of 2024 respondents in this age category. The data indicates age-related bias remains a considerable barrier for those in older age groups when trying to re-enter the STEM workforce, despite their extensive experience and knowledge.

42% of returners who identified with a limiting health condition or disability reported experiencing bias due to their health circumstances, a sharp increase from 12% in 2023. This stark rise suggests that systemic discrimination against individuals with a disability or health condition persists in outdated recruitment processes, further complicating their return to the STEM workforce.

Forms of bias against those with limiting disabilities or health conditions can manifest in various ways, such as assumptions about their ability to perform certain tasks or concerns about workplace accommodations. These barriers not only hinder their chances of finding work but also reinforce outdated stereotypes that ignore qualifications and experience.

The data highlights an urgent need for STEM organisations to address disability bias by fostering more inclusive recruitment practices and creating accessible work environments that support and value all professionals equally.

Perceived personal bias experienced by Returners



Confidence erosion: a personal toll

The ongoing recruitment challenges and biases are not only affecting returners' chances of re-entering the workforce but are also taking a toll on their confidence.

The survey provided us with anecdotal evidence, suggesting that a large number of individuals felt their confidence had been negatively impacted when trying to restart their careers. This erosion of confidence reflects the emotional strain placed on individuals who are consistently met with obstacles, despite their skills, experience, and enthusiasm to contribute to the industry.

Whilst last year's STEM Returners Index reported some uplifting progress in the UK STEM industries, our 2024 findings are painting a rather troubling picture. Despite the undeniable talent and motivation of returners, the STEM industry continues to present them with unnecessary hurdles.

Biases—whether related to demographics or professional status—are restricting the opportunity for highly qualified professionals to re-enter the industry they are passionate about. Now more than ever, it is crucial for industry leaders to actively work towards dismantling these biases and create an environment where returners are valued for their skills, not penalised for their break.

"I was getting nowhere, I was applying into 'the black hole'. [ ] It was immensely demoralising and chipped away at my already low confidence reserves. I wasn't even worth the trouble of a one line email."

— Returner, 2024

"I experienced a clear bias around ageism a gap in my CV and considered to be overqualified. With this in mind regardless of an application or job interview I received very little feedback. I felt alone and found it difficult to keep myself motivated which I believed affected my mental well-being. I had almost given up. I was full of resilience and confidence when started thinking about returning to work but facing rejection and unable to start a career that aligns with my family life has left me with huge insecurities and anxiety."

— Returner, 2024

"Being rejected by many employers can be demoralising over time."

— Returner, 2024

"Returning to work after a career break has been challenging due to feedback citing a lack of UK experience and specific qualifications. Rejections have affected my confidence, especially in transitioning to new career paths. Despite these hurdles, I am determined to overcome them with programs like STEM Returners."

— Returner, 2024

"My lack of confidence, and having been unsuccessful at even getting an interview, make me reluctant to apply. Employers don't recognise the skills I have!"

— Returner, 2024

"After experiencing numerous rejections, I have found the process of attempting to return to work challenging primarily due to a loss of confidence..."

— Returner, 2024

"Because after facing many rejections, I lost confidence that I had to regain in order to continue."

— Returner, 2024

Tracking the change:
5 years of data

The path back to employment

As this report has highlighted so far, the journey of returning to work after a career break is often filled with an array of hurdles and challenges, but thankfully for many STEM professionals, the transition has been a positive and fulfilling one.

In fact, an overwhelming **97%** of those who have successfully returned to employment are glad they decided to do so. This satisfaction speaks to the resilience and determination of returners as well as the evolving opportunities that are now available to support their transition.

STEM Returners made it very easy and straightforward providing me support throughout the process."

(Returner, 2024)

One of the key changes in recent years is the growing recognition and availability of **supportive return-to-work programmes**, which offer tailored pathways for individuals seeking to reintegrate into their fields. In 2024, **54%** of successful returners expressed a preference for these programmes, a significant increase from **40%** in 2023. This shift indicates that more professionals are benefiting from structured support in easing their return. Additionally, **35%** of returners gained employment through these programmes, more than double the **16%** in 2023.

As supportive returner programmes gain traction, there has been a noticeable decline in the use of traditional recruitment channels by those returning to work. This year our survey data found that only **15%** of returners found work through recruitment agencies, down from **20%** in 2023. Similarly, the use of job search websites dropped from **27% to 15%,** and direct applications to employers fell from **14% to 11%**. This suggests that return-to-work programmes are becoming a more recognised and trusted route for professionals looking to transition back into employment after a break.

A remarkable **87%** of those surveyed who have returned to employment have reintegrated into **STEM roles**, with **69%** holding **professional or managerial** positions. This demonstrates that not only are returners re-entering their desired fields, but they are also advancing into leadership roles and making significant contributions.

While the journey back to work can be daunting, returners in 2024 reported an easier transition compared to previous years. **26%** found the transition "easy" or "very easy," a notable increase from **18%** in 2023. This improvement reflects the growing support available to returners and the increasing number of employers recognising the value they bring.

The return-to-work journey for STEM professionals has seen significant progress, with more individuals benefiting from structured programmes that support their re-entry. These initiatives, combined with the determination and resilience of returners, have led to positive outcomes, both for the individuals and the wider STEM industry. Returners are now reintegrating successfully, bringing valuable skills and experience back into the workforce, while also contributing to a more diverse and inclusive STEM sector.

The company I now work for are very accommodating and work hard to make new starters welcome, the initial "probation" period gave a 'no pressure' environment for me to decide if this was the right choice."

— Returner, 2024

Half a decade of research: STEM Returners Index 2020 - 2024

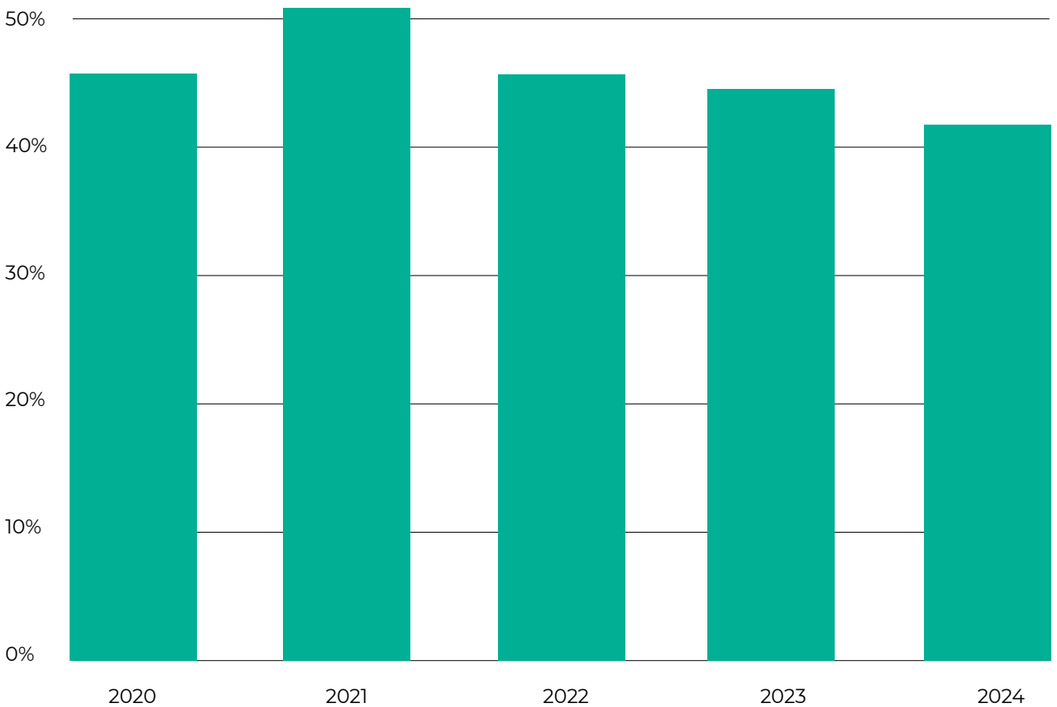
As we celebrate the five-year anniversary of the first STEM Returners Index, it's a perfect time to look back on the journey of returners in the STEM industry.

Since 2020, we've gathered data on the challenges faced by returners and the support needed to help them re-enter the workforce. This review allows us to explore the shifts that have taken place—and where change has been slower—offering a picture of how the landscape for returners has evolved, and what still needs to be done to ensure that everyone has an equitable opportunity to return to STEM.

Women are still struggling to return

Our data shows that since 2021, there has been a consistent percentage of women attempting to return to STEM roles, with a steady consistent decrease over recent years. However, there remains a glaring disparity between the number of women seeking to re-enter the STEM workforce and their current representation in the industry, which stands at just 26% (source: Gov.uk). The high percentage of women looking to return poses a significant opportunity for STEM organisations to improve the diversity of their workforce and wider industry.

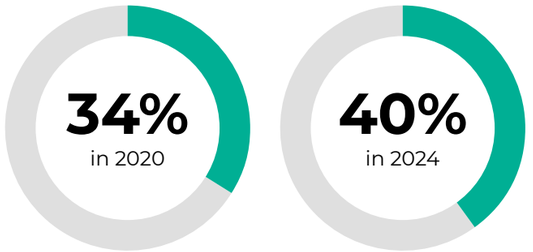
% of females attempting to return



Minority Ethnic Groups remain underrepresented

From 2020 to 2024, our index results have reported a year-on-year increase in the disparity between minority ethnic groups attempting to return and their representation in STEM, pointing to an urgent need for industry-wide action.

% of minority ethnic returners



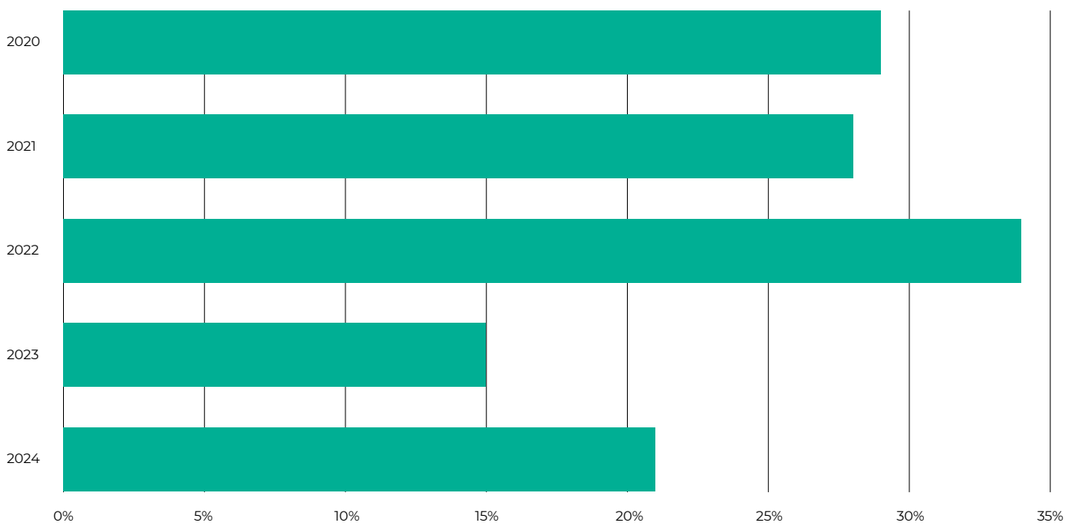
More applications needed for returner success

Over the last five years, the percentage of returners applying for 70+ jobs has been in decline. However, the hurdles are still ever-present, with 1 in every 5 returners submitting over 70 applications in order to restart their career. This not only places an unnecessary burden on returners, but also means the industry risks missing out on valuable talent.

Bias continues to be a barrier to re-entry

Since our first STEM Returners Index there has been an overall positive reduction in the percentage of returners who felt that bias in the recruitment process was a barrier to their return, dropping from 63% in 2020 to 40% in 2024. However, 2 in every 5 returners believe these biases are hindering their re-entry into the workforce, highlighting the need for the STEM industry to rethink its recruitment practices to ensure that all candidates have equitable opportunities, regardless of their background or career break.

% applying for 70+ jobs



A consistent desire for supported routes back to STEM

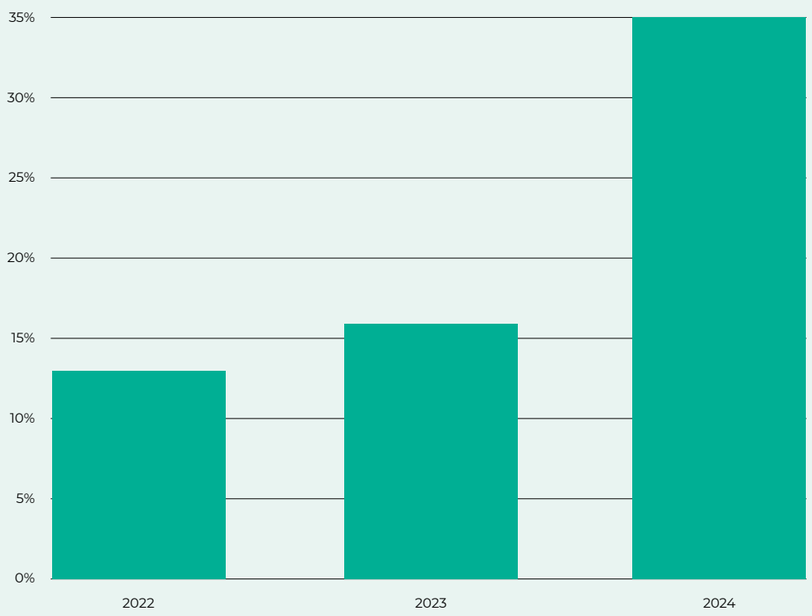
Returners have consistently shown a strong desire for supported returner programmes, underlining the importance of these initiatives in facilitating successful reintegration into STEM roles. In 2022, 54% of returners expressed a preference for re-entering the workforce through a supported programme, followed by a slight decrease to 40% in 2023. This demand returned to 54% in 2024, reflecting a sustained appreciation for the structured support these programmes offer, even as the landscape evolves.

Year-on-year increase in returning via supported returner programmes

In our first STEM Returners Index, data found that that 92% of respondents had not seen or applied for any other returner-specific opportunities within STEM. This highlighted a critical gap in the availability and visibility of programmes tailored to support those returning to the industry after a career break.

Four years on, we have seen a consistent year-on-year increase in the percentage of returners gaining employment via supported returner programmes. This growth shows a positive shift in how returners are re-entering the workforce, turning towards more structured, supportive initiatives rather than relying solely on traditional recruitment processes.

% of returners that gained employment via supported returner programmes



Getting back on track

After five years of reporting, while progress has been made, the STEM industry must continue to drive meaningful change. Organisations need to expand their commitment to creating inclusive, accessible environments and increase the availability of programmes or initiatives that support returners in their journey back to work. Only through concentrated effort can the industry ensure that all returners, no matter their circumstances, are welcomed back into STEM and empowered to contribute to its future success.

It is also important to recognise the organisations that are already stepping up to make a difference. These forward-thinking companies are leading by example and embracing the value that returners bring to their teams. By fostering inclusive cultures and supporting returners with the tools and opportunities they need, these organisations are helping to reshape the STEM landscape for the better. Their commitment is a testament to the progress that's possible when the industry comes together to champion returners.

Recommendations

Here we offer practical recommendations for employers looking to champion returners, drawing from our insights and experience.

Recognition. Recognise the value that returners bring in experience, behaviours and diversity of thought.

Equitable opportunity. Comparing returners to those without a career break through your standard recruitment channels isn't an equitable opportunity. Consider creating a returner-specific opportunity or structured returners programme.

Training. Equip hiring managers to understand the value of returners and how they can help set them up for success, whilst recognising competing demands.

Understand your internal culture. How inclusive is your organisation? Supporting returners requires a shift in hiring practices. Challenge the bias that leads to returners being unsuccessful in rejoining the industry.

Returner-appropriate adverts and interviews. Review your adverts and interview process to ensure that they are inclusive. Avoid lengthy personal requirements and language that might put returners off from applying. Consider whether panel interviews, presentations or more than a 1 stage process is really necessary or going to get the best out of your returner interview.

Network. Build a returner network within your organisation and facilitate the connection between returners and those who can encourage and support their development.

Enable flexible working. Flexible working isn't just for returners. Offering flexibility will make your organisation more appealing and accessible to a diverse range of candidates.

Role models. Showcase and celebrate successful returners and forward-thinking decision-makers. Returner stories spread a powerful message internally and externally to demonstrate your supportive and inclusive culture. It's just as important to spotlight the impactful work that hiring managers are doing to make a difference.

Support and nurture. Provide returners with the resources they need to thrive including coaching, mentors and buddies. By offering ongoing support you will ensure returners are fully integrated and set up for long-term success.

> **To create a truly inclusive and supportive environment, organisations must commit to proactive changes that foster equitable opportunities for all.**

Final thoughts

To truly improve inclusion, we need to look within our own cultures and processes and ask if we are consistently doing the right things, for the right reasons.

Inclusion is an overarching culture encompassing diversity, equality, and many other aspects of our working lives. Trying to promote a certain demographic over and above another, isn't inclusion.

When we genuinely embrace inclusion, we are much more likely to see greater diversity in our workforces, bringing together differing thoughts and experiences, providing equitable treatment, and offering greater equality of opportunities and outcomes.

However, this requires difficult conversations at all levels within an organisation and a re-evaluation of internal ED&I targets and actions. Inclusion is a responsibility we all share—it requires us to recognise our positions of advantage, and with that, our ability to challenge decision-makers and the wider STEM industry to create an equitable sector where everyone can contribute.

If your organisation is ready to make a tangible difference by supporting returners and building a more inclusive workforce, now is the time to take action. A structured returner programme can be a key part of driving positive change.

Contact us at hello@stemreturners.com to find out how we can help your business implement a successful STEM Returners Programme and make a lasting impact.

STEM Returner case study

To truly understand the impact that supported returner programmes can have, it's important to hear directly from those who have successfully navigated the journey back into STEM.

Throughout this index, we've discussed the challenges returners face and the actions the industry must take to support them. Now, we'd like to share a real-life example of how one of our returners, Emma, with the right guidance and opportunity, was able to successfully re-enter the STEM workforce.

The following case study highlights not only the personal experience of one returner but also the tangible benefits that structured support can bring to both individuals and organisations alike.

STEM Returner case study

Meet Emma

My manager is extremely supportive, she placed me on training, offered support and listened to me when I needed it.

orano

Emma dedicated 19 years of loyal service to the Royal Navy before being medically discharged.

After taking a 16-month career break, Emma attempted to return to work, however, similar to many returning professionals, she faced challenges in securing technical roles through conventional hiring methods. As a result, Emma feared her engineering career was over.

Emma was fortunate to come across STEM Returners and was promptly connected with one of our programme partners, Orano. Following a 12-week placement with Orano in the UK, Emma became a permanent member of Orano Limited, working within their Decommissioning and Dismantling team.

Here's what Emma had to say about her journey:

"After finishing school, I wasn't sure on what or where I wanted to go in life. I tried different jobs, and nothing seemed to fit. So, I decided to join the armed forces and see where that would take me.

I always had a strong curiosity about how things worked so it felt natural to train as a marine engineer. Throughout my military career, I completed various apprenticeships with a combination of classroom-based learning and hands-on skills. I eventually went on to complete my foundation degree, management qualifications and several others.

In November 2021, after serving almost 19 years, I was medically discharged. This gave me an opportunity to have a career break and take time out of work to concentrate on being a mum and adjust to civilian life, whilst adapting to a new home. During this time, I had further surgeries, and due to my worsening condition, I believed this to be the end of my engineering.

After 16 months I decided to return to work. My applications were often overlooked for the more technical positions I applied for. The few who responded to my applications would offer me interviews or determine I was "over" qualified, so I started applying for anything that became available. Over 12 months I was fortunate enough to have had various positions within different industries from charity work to office-based roles and nothing seemed to fit around my physical needs, my family life or spark my interest.

When I saw the STEM Returners programme on the Women in Engineering website (WES), I decided I had nothing to lose and submitted an application. From the start, the team at STEM Returners where fantastic, and after several conversations on what the programme entailed, the process, the expectations/limitations, and what I would like to achieve in the long term, I felt more confident about the process and decided to proceed.

I submitted my application, and I was offered an interview with Orano Ltd.. I immediately became nervous as it was a new industry that I had not worked in before, but the Returner Support Specialist and a Career Coach put me at ease and guided me through the process, with regular check-ins and a chat before the interview to ensure I was prepared. My interview was on Teams, a general discussion about my previous career, the skills I have, and why I wanted to be a part of the STEM Returners programme. I took the opportunity to gain knowledge about the company and ask questions. Five days after my interview I was offered a position with Orano in the Dismantling and Decommissioning department as an engineer on the STEM Returners programme.

In the first few weeks, the company put together a schedule which included all initial inductions so we could meet the key personnel within the company. I met the team that I would be working alongside, and they were incredibly supportive and seemed genuinely excited about the programme and the opportunity this could bring to the company. My manager is extremely supportive, she placed me on training, offered support and listened to me when I needed it.

My work-life balance is excellent. Having the freedom to work around my children's schooling and general everyday life has allowed me to work more efficiently, plan more effectively and produce work to a higher standard.

I now have a permanent position with Orano, and I am proud of everything I have managed to achieve so far. I have learned a lot from this experience and would fully encourage anyone who wants to return to STEM to do it. This opportunity has opened so many doors for me and I am excited about my new career and the opportunities that will come along."

If you are looking to register your interest in joining a STEM Returners programme please visit stemreturners.com

The voices shaping STEM

Industry

"This summer Engineering UK confirmed that the engineering industry is losing women leaders, with consequential effects on the engineering workforce at earlier career stages. This is a clear incentive to make re-entering engineering more straightforward.

Identifying sources of pipeline leakage is the starting point to be able to put into play changes that enable access to the highly valuable talent needed to support the sector's goals for innovation and growth.

At the Women's Engineering Society, our vision is for an engineering industry that reflects the diversity of the society it serves. Working to support women fulfil their potential at every stage of their career, and to support organisations to be inclusive in order to attract and retain the talent necessary to meet their business and growth goals means together we can effect change in the engineering industry that will enable us to solve the biggest societal challenges of our time." **— Interim CEO, Women's Engineering Society**

"The findings from STEM Returners are invaluable in understanding the current reality of the landscape in our STEM industries. The fact that this diverse talent pool exists but faces so many barriers back into STEM workplaces poses huge opportunities for the future if we are intentional about breaking these barriers and creating a more diverse and inclusive STEM ecosystem.

Our work in STEMAZING aligns with the values of STEM Returners—supporting and empowering STEM talent whilst inspiring future generations in STEM. We are passionate about continuing to see opportunities open for a wider talent pool in STEM as this is the only way we will plug the STEM skills gap." **— Founder and CEO, STEMAZING**

"There's still a lot of work to do within STEM to ensure that it is a truly inclusive sector. Data is essential in helping us to understand what needs to be done. To effect real change, we must be able to monitor and measure our progress. Reports such as this give us better insight and clear goals to work towards ensuring that organisations are held accountable along the way.

At WISE, we want to see STEM become a leading industry for EDI. Ensuring that there are opportunities for everyone, in particular championing more women to pursue and progress their careers within the sector." **— Managing Director, Women into Science and Engineering (WISE)**

"As the Chair of the Women Pivoting to Digital Taskforce, I am delighted to see the publication of the STEM Returners Index. All businesses need a talented workforce but many are struggling to fill their skills gaps in tech roles. We concur from our experience that many talented people with transferable skills are still facing barriers when entering or returning to digital roles. Providing robust, data-driven insights helps organisations better understand these barriers, enables them to take targeted action, such as implementing upskilling & reskilling programmes and developing inclusive recruitment practices.

In the Women Pivoting to Digital Taskforce, we are working, through our four workstreams, to invite more decisive action and enhanced attention to mechanisms that support women from non-technical backgrounds to pivot to digital roles. Data driven insights like the ones in this report offer invaluable signposting to the nature of the beneficial solutions we may recommend." **— Chair of the Women Pivoting to Digital Taskforce and Vice-Chair of Policy and Resources at City of London Corporation**

Client

Leonardo UK recognises the importance of bringing diverse talent into the organisation and is collaborating with external partners like STEM Returners to help us achieve this. We don't underestimate how hard it is to return to the workplace after a career break, and our programme with STEM Returners has ensured we've built an established programme, which to date has now successfully gone on to give permanent employment to 35 returners.

Leonardo UK is committed to embedding diversity and inclusion into our hiring processes. Using insight from STEM Returners, we have shaped our job descriptions and role profiles to reach as broad an audience as possible, and this is now reflected in the diversity of our recent successful applicants. Our partnership with STEM Returners provides hiring managers and senior leaders with the right tools so that we can be more effective at hiring, retaining, and developing our talented people." **— Head of Inclusion & Diversity, Leonardo UK**

"At AWE Nuclear Security Technologies, we are always working hard to attract and retain the best STEM talent. But we know how small the community is and we are always looking out for experienced people who want to come back to STEM but try something new!

Reports like the STEM Returners Index give us those valuable insights and first-hand experiences about the barriers people have faced when rejoining the industry. That vital information helps us shape our talent and inclusion strategies and makes us think about what we can do better to encourage and support more STEM returners to consider a job with us." **— AWE Nuclear Security Technologies**

Government

"Data provided by research like the STEM Returners Index is vital in highlighting the current state of equality, diversity and inclusion within UK STEM; it's fantastic to see the significant contribution which STEM Returners are making to diversity across the industry as a whole.

Where individuals have the desire and skills to do so, enabling them to make a supported transition back to work is key, increasing diversity within the sector and in turn, turbocharging growth across the UK economy.

However, with an increasing number of STEM returners reporting experiences of bias in recruiting processes, it's clear that there is ongoing work to be done in creating inclusive return to work pathways. Looking forwards, returner programmes have an important role to play in supporting professionals throughout recruitment processes and I hope to see programmes such as these adopted across UK S&T more broadly." **— Baggy Shanker, MP for Derby South**

To find out more please visit stemreturners.com

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STEM RETURNERS