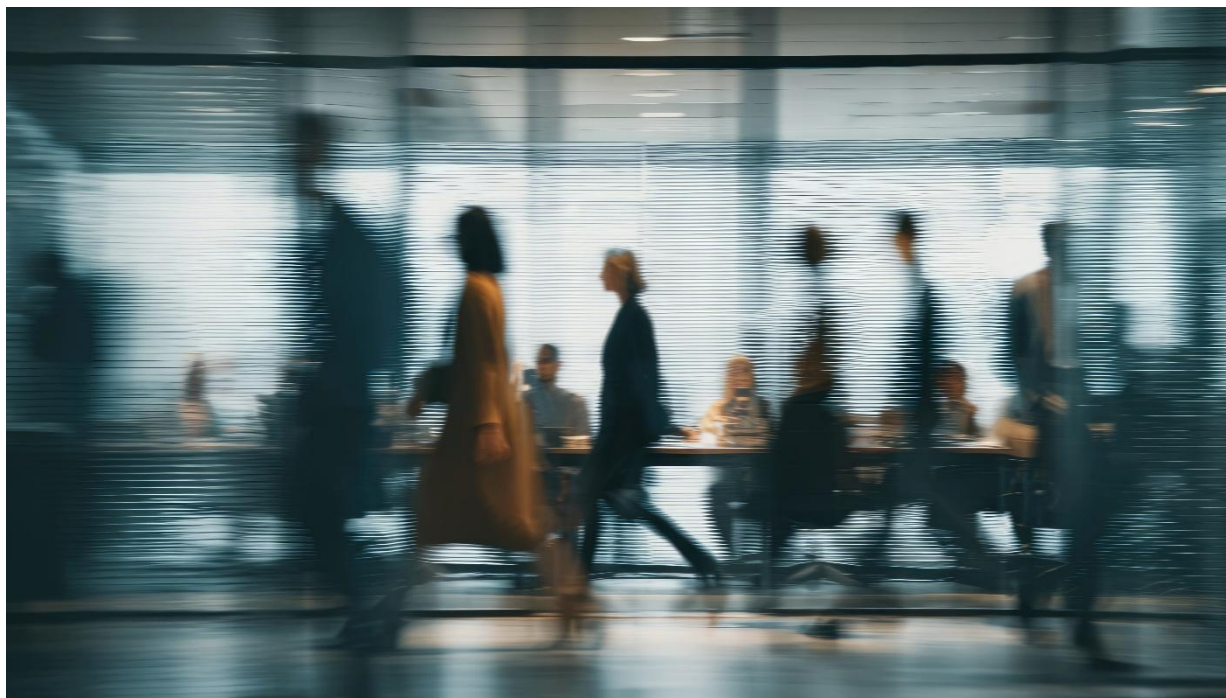


A DISCUSSION PAPER



# RECOVERING NATIONAL CAPABILITY

THE MISSING WORKFORCE STRATEGY FOR  
DELIVERING THE UK'S INDUSTRIAL AMBITIONS

*Delivering the UK's Industrial Strategy, Defence  
Investment Plan and National Growth Ambitions*

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## Foreword

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The challenge to attract, develop and retain a workforce with the right skills is universally felt across all sectors, particularly so when numerous technological transformations are outpacing the ability for most companies to adapt. While I was serving in the Royal Navy as the Second Sea Lord in the aftermath of the pandemic, I knew that for the RN to move from a shrinking workforce back into net growth, we had to do three things simultaneously: attract the right talent; retain our best people for longer; and finally, gain access to a much wider pool of willing talent available. It was this last category which chimes so well with Natalie's well-argued paper.

Politicians and the media often focus on recruitment, understandably so perhaps, but with the demand for STEM skills in the workplace outpacing the ability of schools and higher education to produce such young people, we need to widen the aperture. I argued for 'zig-zag' careers while I was serving, by which I mean the ability for an individual to move seamlessly from full-time working to part-time working and back again, between regular, reserve or civil service or between public and private sectors across the length of a career in Defence. But too many cultural, legal and policy barriers existed for there to be a genuine 'spectrum of service' which Rick Haythornthwaite argued for so compellingly in his June 2023 review into UK Armed Forces Incentivisation.

Technology continues to transform the workplace. Much has been made of the benefits and risks of AI, robotics and autonomy for example, but this pace shows no sign of slowing. The skills needed to exploit these technologies mean people will expect a culture of continuous technological enablement and education in the workplace, upskilling as a standard, and more flexible workforce policies. For those choosing to return to the workplace after a break for any of the reasons Natalie describes, there should be a structure and policies in place to actively encourage and enable this, such that those STEM returners are made to feel valued, that a structure and network is in place to support them, and they are able to quickly become productive and valued members of their new workplace. Natalie's proposals and practical recommendations are a great starting point for businesses, because companies and organisations which get this right are likely to reap the benefits.

### **Vice Admiral (Retd) Sir Martin Connell KCB CBE**



## Executive summary

### *325 years of engineering capability retained.*

One structured returnership partnership has recovered more than 325 years of engineering, technical and leadership capability within a single UK defence company. The significance of this finding extends far beyond a single employer. It demonstrates that career breaks need not result in permanent capability loss and that recovering experienced professionals can make a measurable contribution to national industrial capability.

The United Kingdom stands at a time of profound industrial change. Government has committed unprecedented investment to strengthening national Defence, accelerating clean energy, advancing manufacturing capability and positioning the UK as a global leader in critical technologies. Together, the Modern Industrial Strategy, the Strategic Defence Review, the Defence Industrial Strategy and the Defence Investment Plan set out an ambitious vision for economic growth, national resilience and sovereign capability. Yet while the UK has developed increasingly sophisticated systems for creating capability through apprenticeships, graduate recruitment and technical education, it has no equivalent national mechanism for recovering experienced capability once professionals temporarily leave strategically important sectors.

Skills England and the Ministry of Defence now project that Defence will require approximately 82,000 workers across 14 priority occupations between 2025 and 2035: 53,000 to support employment growth and a further 29,000 to replace those expected to leave. With 87% of the additional demand requiring qualifications at Level 4 or above, and 12 of the 14 occupations also in demand across other strategic sectors, Defence cannot meet this requirement through entry-level pipelines or competition for the existing workforce alone.

Every year, thousands of experienced engineers and STEM professionals temporarily leave employment due to caring responsibilities, family commitments, redundancy, relocation, ill health or other life circumstances, while others move into non-STEM roles by choice. Many intend to return. Too many never do. This represents a growing loss of capability at precisely the moment the UK can least afford it.

### *This is skills and talent hiding in plain sight.*

The challenge facing the UK is therefore not merely a shortage of skills. It is a shortage of experienced capability.

This is not a claim that returning professionals require no further investment. Experience, professional judgement, leadership maturity and professional networks are largely retained across a career break, but technical currency is not always the same. Standards, tools, regulations and ways of working continue to evolve. Returnerships succeed because they close this currency gap quickly through targeted upskilling, supported re-entry and recertification, while drawing upon judgement that would otherwise take a decade or more to rebuild from scratch. Understood this way, returnerships are not simply about recovering capability. They are about recovering and refreshing it.

The evidence for this argument is now substantial. Since 2017, structured returnership programmes have supported more than 660 experienced professionals back into careers across Defence, Nuclear, Energy, Infrastructure and Advanced Manufacturing, with 96% securing permanent employment and 100% of participating employers going on to recruit further returners. Within Defence specifically, more than 400 returners have joined, or are joining, a programme, with 81% securing permanent roles (Sections 7–8). The strongest evidence comes from the decade-long partnership between a major Defence Prime and STEM Returners, where 98 returners have collectively retained more than 325 years of engineering, project, technical and leadership capability within a single organisation, with 90% converting to permanent employment (Section 10).

***The UK cannot meet today's experience gap through training alone. It must also recover the capability it has already built.***

This paper argues that recovering experienced capability should become a strategic objective of UK workforce policy and that structured returnerships should be recognised as the UK's fourth strategic workforce pathway, alongside apprenticeships, graduate recruitment and reskilling. It sets out that case in four parts: the strategic challenge facing UK workforce policy; the evidence that structured returnerships address it; a new way of understanding returnerships as national capability recovery rather than simply recruitment; and a set of practical recommendations for Government, industry bodies and the wider Defence and STEM industrial base.

### **Natalie Desty**

Founder & Director, STEM Returners



## Why this matters now

**Figure 1. Why capability recovery matters now**

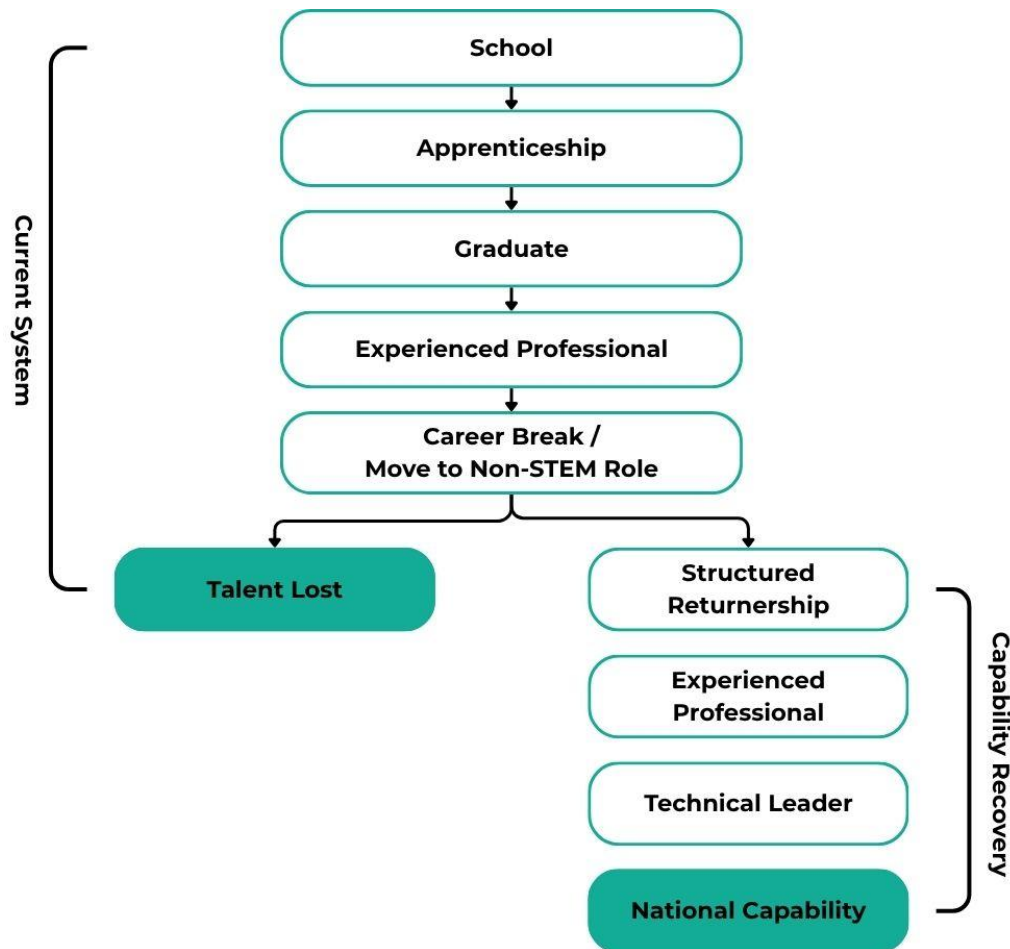


Every major Government growth strategy depends upon experienced STEM professionals. Yet the UK has no national strategy for recovering them.

The case for action is particularly urgent now because several workforce pressures are converging at the same time. Investment in Defence, nuclear and clean energy is accelerating just as the supply of experienced engineering and technical professionals is becoming more constrained. Traditional workforce pipelines such as apprenticeships and graduate recruitment remain essential and central to delivery, but take years to produce experienced capability, while career breaks and caring responsibilities continue to restrict workforce participation. At the same time, AI and automation are reshaping roles but not replacing the need for experienced judgement. Together, these pressures mean existing workforce pathways alone are unlikely to meet demand at the pace required.

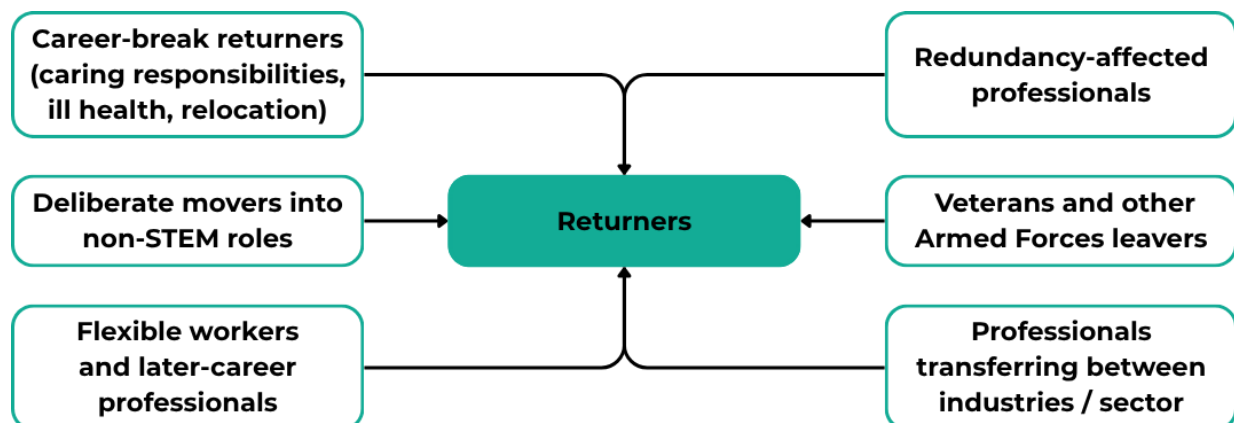
## The UK's missing workforce pathway

Figure 2. The UK's missing workforce pathway



The UK has developed three workforce pathways for creating talent, but no national pathway for recovering experienced capability.

Figure 3. Who is a returner?



## PART ONE: THE CHALLENGE

### 1. The missing workforce strategy

The Government's Modern Industrial Strategy rightly identifies people as one of the fundamental drivers of economic growth. Similarly, the Strategic Defence Review and Defence Industrial Strategy recognise that expanding industrial capability depends not only on investment in equipment and infrastructure, but on expanding the workforce capable of delivering it.

Across Government, significant attention is rightly being given to apprenticeships, graduate recruitment, technical education, adult reskilling and Local Skills Improvement Plans. Collectively, these initiatives seek to increase the future supply of skilled workers.

However, they share a common characteristic. They are almost entirely focused on creating new capability. Very little national workforce policy is designed to recover capability that already exists and is immediately available. This is the missing element within the UK's workforce strategy.

At a time when employers consistently report shortages of experienced professionals, decades of skills remain outside the sectors that urgently need them, their experience going to waste. This is not only an employment issue. It is an issue of national capability.

***The UK does not simply need to build capability. It needs to recover capability.***

Recovering experienced capability should therefore become a strategic objective of UK workforce policy, not a secondary benefit of diversity or inclusion initiatives, but a distinct national priority alongside the creation of new talent.

#### CAPABILITY RECOVERY

*Capability recovery is the process of reconnecting and refreshing experienced professionals whose knowledge, skills and leadership have become temporarily disconnected from strategically important sectors, closing any gap in technical currency along the way, and enabling previous investment in human capital to continue delivering economic and national value.*

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "CAPABILITY"?

*Capability is more than the number of people in the workforce. It comprises the knowledge, judgement and experience that enable organisations to deliver complex programmes safely and effectively. Capability includes:*

- *Technical expertise*
- *Professional judgement*
- *Leadership and decision-making*
- *Systems understanding*
- *Safety and assurance*
- *Organisational memory*
- *Design authority*
- *Professional networks*
- *Mentoring and knowledge transfer*

### 1.1 Experience, capability and currency

Experience, professional judgement, leadership maturity and professional networks are largely retained across a career break. Technical currency is different. Specific software versions, regulatory frameworks, safety standards and ways of working continue to evolve even where the underlying discipline does not.

This distinction matters for how returnerships are designed and understood. A returnership is not built on the claim that a professional's skills are frozen in time and simply waiting to be redeployed unchanged. It is a structured mechanism for closing the currency gap quickly, through targeted upskilling, recertification and supported reintegration, while drawing on experience and judgement that would otherwise take a decade or more to rebuild.

Independent experimental evidence supports this distinction. A 2026 study published in *Labour Economics* asked 163 professional recruiters to evaluate fictitious candidates who were formally identical in qualifications and experience, differing only in the reason for their career break. Training-related breaks were the only category where a longer absence did not reduce hiring interest. For every other form of non-employment, including unemployment, the hiring penalty increased as the length of the break grew (D'hert, Lippens and Baert, 2026).

The implication is significant. Recruiters already regard visible, structured evidence of continued learning as a credible signal that technical currency has been maintained, even after an extended career break. Structured returnerships provide precisely that signal, combining targeted upskilling with a supported route back into employment.

***Returnerships are not about recovering capability alone.  
They are about recovering and refreshing it.***

## **1.2 Whole Force: The system this fourth pathway serves**

National capability is produced by a workforce system. Defence expresses this through the Whole Force concept, but the same systems' thinking applies equally to nuclear, energy, digital and advanced manufacturing. In Defence, Whole Force recognises that people, skills, experience, industry and Government combine to produce military capability rather than simply filling vacancies. This paper argues that the same systems approach should be applied across the UK's wider strategic workforce.

Like any complex system, the workforce is defined not only by who is within it, but by how capability flows into, through and back into it over time. Understood this way, apprenticeships, graduate recruitment and reskilling are not three separate initiatives, they are mechanisms by which the workforce system creates and replenishes capability. Capability recovery is the missing function within that system, and structured returnerships are one proven mechanism for delivering it.

Recent evidence from the UK shipbuilding workforce reinforces this systems view. Workforce Mobility and Skills in UK Shipbuilding: Evidence from Industry Voices (Lorefully, 2026), commissioned through the National Shipbuilding Office and Connected Places Catapult's Maritime Accelerator Programme, found substantial movement of experienced workers between shipbuilding, Defence, offshore energy, oil and gas, rail and construction. Engineering judgement, technical expertise, planning, safety awareness, leadership and project delivery were widely regarded as transferable capabilities, yet movement between employers and sectors can be constrained by inconsistent recognition of prior experience, qualifications and certification requirements. The evidence demonstrates an important distinction, capability can exist within the wider labour market without being readily accessible to the sectors that need it. A resilient workforce system must therefore be capable not only of creating skills, but of recognising, reconnecting and redeploying existing capability.

Seen as a system, the UK's industrial ambitions depend upon a capability chain running from Government investment, through the workforce, into engineering capacity, programme delivery, operational capability and, ultimately, national resilience.

The system is not constrained by overall workforce numbers alone. It is constrained by capability bottlenecks, where relatively small numbers of experienced professionals determine the effectiveness of much larger teams. These bottlenecks are found in systems engineering, safety and assurance, software engineering, systems integration, technical authority roles and programme leadership. They represent some of the hardest capabilities to recreate because they depend not

simply on technical knowledge, but on professional judgement, organisational memory and experience accumulated over many years. Recovering one experienced engineer at one of these critical points does not simply add one full-time equivalent back into the workforce. It restores judgement, assurance, mentoring, design authority and technical leadership that enable the productivity of many others. In systems terms, the value of recovered capability is often multiplicative rather than additive.

Capability recovery also creates a reinforcing feedback loop. Successful returners become technical leaders, mentors and hiring managers themselves. As organisational confidence in returnerships grows, more returners are recruited, recruitment bias reduces and progressively more capability is recovered. Over time, the workforce system becomes more resilient, more productive and better able to respond to changing national demand.

*Source: Workforce Mobility and Skills in UK Shipbuilding: Evidence from Industry Voices (Lorefully, 2026).*

## 2. The UK has a skills and experience gap

The UK frequently describes its workforce challenge as a skills shortage. This is only partially true. The more immediate challenge is a shortage of experienced professionals capable of contributing to strategically important programmes today.

The scale of future demand is already quantified by Government. The Department for Education estimates that 9.4 million people were in UK STEM employment in 2023, with growth projected to reach 10.3 million by 2030 under its high-growth scenario, close to a million additional roles in under a decade, concentrated in engineering, computing, technology and nuclear, sectors already experiencing critical skills shortages.

The challenge is particularly acute in Defence. Skills England and the Ministry of Defence project that employment demand across 14 Defence priority occupations will grow by approximately 53,000 workers, or 58%, between 2025 and 2035. A further 29,000 workers will be required to replace those expected to leave these occupations, bringing total demand to approximately 82,000 people over the decade. This is not a general aspiration for sector growth, it is demand concentrated in occupations considered important to current and future Defence capability.

Crucially, 87% of the projected additional employment will require qualifications at Level 4 or above. Twelve of the 14 priority occupations are also required by other strategic sectors, including advanced manufacturing, clean energy and digital technologies. Defence therefore cannot meet its needs simply by drawing experienced people away from adjacent industries. It must increase total workforce participation by creating new capability, retaining existing capability, and recovering experienced capability that is currently disconnected from the sector.

Across Defence, Nuclear, Advanced Manufacturing, Clean Energy and Infrastructure, employers consistently identify shortages in occupations such as systems engineering, mechanical and electrical engineering, safety and assurance, software engineering, cyber security, programme management, manufacturing engineering and project controls.

Recent evidence from Enginuity reinforces that this is not simply an early-careers pipeline problem. Its 2026 *Mind the Gap* research found that skills gaps and shortages across UK engineering and manufacturing SMEs extend across a wide range of pay grades, including mid-career and senior roles. The implication is important: increasing the flow of new entrants remains essential, but cannot by itself resolve shortages that already exist at experienced level.

No apprenticeship reform, however successful, can immediately solve today's shortage of experienced professionals. Apprentices and graduates entering industry today will become tomorrow's technical leaders. The UK's industrial ambitions, however, cannot wait ten years. Alongside developing future talent, the UK must therefore consider how it can reconnect experienced professionals who already possess the skills industry urgently requires now.

*Sources: Department for Education, Explore Education Statistics: Supply of Skills for Jobs in Science and Technology (2023 release), Unit for Future Skills; Enginuity (2026), Mind the Gap: The £5bn Cost of Missing Skills. Research commissioned by Enginuity and undertaken by SQW in collaboration with Oxford Innovation Advice and Qa Research; Skills England and Ministry of Defence (2026), Sector Skills Needs Assessment – Defence.*

### 3. The cost of lost capability

Every workforce system contains points where capability leaks from productive use. Career breaks are one such leakage point. The strategic objective is not to eliminate career breaks, but to minimise permanent capability loss arising from them. Capability recovery provides a structured mechanism for reconnecting that capability before it is lost to strategically important sectors.

The same pattern of capability leakage is visible in recent UK shipbuilding workforce research. Workforce Mobility and Skills in UK Shipbuilding found that workers generally viewed mobility between employers and adjacent sectors positively, as a source of career opportunity and security, while senior industry leaders viewed the same movement as a potential system-level loss of experienced capability, particularly where workers move towards sectors offering greater pay, stability or progression. These perspectives are not contradictory. What represents rational career mobility for an individual can simultaneously create a capability risk for a strategically important industry. The policy challenge is therefore not to restrict mobility, but to build workforce systems capable of retaining, reconnecting and redeploying experience as people move through different stages of their working lives.

Every engineer or STEM professional represents decades of investment, by schools, universities, employers, professional institutions and Government. When

experienced professionals temporarily leave STEM careers, that investment does not disappear. It becomes disconnected.

The UK has become highly effective at creating STEM and engineering capability. It has become far less effective at retaining and recovering that capability once careers become non-linear.

For many, the intention is always to return. The reality is often very different. Proprietary primary research data from the STEM Returners Index 2025, based on responses from over 1,000 STEM professionals collected between February and October 2025, demonstrates that returning to STEM after a career break remains significantly more difficult than many employers realise, often due to limited and obscure access routes.

**85%**

have questioned whether to continue pursuing a career in STEM at all

**65%**

say the return-to-work process has damaged their self-confidence

**63%**

of those who do return end up back in a STEM role — down from 80% in 2024

**85% question remaining in STEM**

**So what?** The UK is not merely struggling to recruit engineers. It is actively losing experienced engineers from strategically important sectors, at the same time Government is investing billions to develop new capability, and wasting strategic resource for national competitiveness in the process.

**Movement from STEM to non-STEM employment nearly doubled: 16% in 2025, up from 9% in 2024**

**So what?** This is not a soft attitudinal finding. It is a measurable, worsening outflow of returners choosing, or feeling pushed, to rebuild their careers outside the sector altogether.

These barriers are not solely structural. Repeated rejection and prolonged absence from the labour market can fundamentally change how experienced professionals perceive their own value. Over time, confidence becomes as significant a barrier as recruitment itself, discouraging many capable engineers and scientists from continuing to pursue a return to STEM, regardless of how any individual employer may subsequently assess their application.

This is not simply anecdotal. The same 2026 *Labour Economics* study found that discouraged jobseekers attracted the strongest employer stigma of any non-employment category, particularly in relation to perceived motivation and self-discipline, despite discouragement itself typically arising from repeated rejection rather than any underlying deficiency (D'hert et al., 2026). Importantly, the study

also found that once these individuals secured employment, their motivation recovered to levels comparable with other workers, directly challenging the assumption that discouragement reflects diminished commitment or capability.

The consequence is that highly experienced engineers and scientists increasingly build successful careers elsewhere, not because they have lost their capability, but because existing recruitment systems struggle to recognise it. At precisely the moment Government is investing billions to expand strategically important sectors, valuable engineering capability is quietly leaking from the economy.

The challenge facing the UK is therefore not simply to create more engineers. It is to ensure the engineers in whom it has already invested remain connected to the industries where their expertise delivers the greatest strategic value.

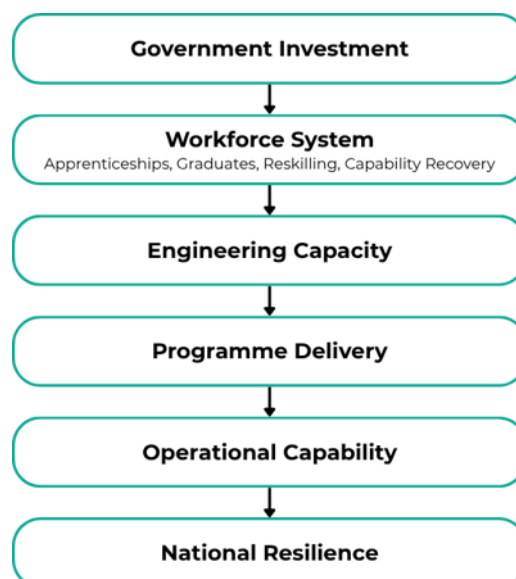
***Talent lost through recruitment barriers is capability the economy can no longer afford to waste.***

*Source: The STEM Returners Index 2025, based on responses from over 1,000 STEM professionals on a career break or recently returned to work; Workforce Mobility and Skills in UK Shipbuilding: Evidence from Industry Voices (Lorefully, 2026).*

## 4. Why this matters for Defence and industrial growth

The scale of this challenge is magnified by the pace of current investment. The Defence Investment Plan, published in June 2026, is backed by £298 billion of investment over four years and is projected to generate almost 60,000 additional jobs. Government's own framing of the Plan acknowledges that capability depends on people, not just equipment: 'AI and autonomy are force multipliers, but they do not eliminate the need for skilled people.'

**Figure 4. How capability recovery strengthens the Defence capability chain**



The Defence Investment Plan rightly focuses on investment in platforms, infrastructure and industrial capacity. However, each stage ultimately depends on experienced people. Returnerships strengthen this part of the capability chain by recovering experienced professionals whose expertise already exists but has become temporarily disconnected from strategically important sectors.

The Plan also sets out a broader 'One Defence' workforce model that 'brings together Regular personnel, Reservists, civil servants, industry specialists and veterans to deliver military capability.' This is a wider definition of the Defence workforce than has previously been used in policy, and it is one that experienced returners, including veterans and industry specialists stepping back in after a break, sit squarely within.

This directly answers a gap Government has identified but not yet resourced, traditional talent pipelines, including the Armed Forces, continue to shrink even as Defence investment accelerates, and a workforce model that names veterans and industry specialists as core to delivery needs a route to bring them back in. Veterans are a regular and valued part of the wider STEM returner community, bringing technical, project and leadership experience that transfers directly into civilian Defence and engineering roles, and they make up many of those returning to the UK Defence sector.

As discussed in Section 1.1, the Whole Force concept already provides a systems framework for understanding capability recovery. The fourth workforce pathway complements existing routes by reconnecting experienced professionals whose expertise has become temporarily disconnected.

The same pattern is visible in the UK's civil nuclear sector, which shares much of Defence's industrial base, its security clearance requirements and its skills shortage. The Nuclear Skills Plan identifies a need to fill 40,000 new jobs by 2030, and programmes including Sizewell C, Hinkley Point C, Bradwell B and small modular reactor development are set to create tens of thousands of further roles across engineering, construction, operations and safety. As in Defence, the workforce is not growing at the pace the investment requires, and returners from neighbouring sectors are already stepping into nuclear roles, valued for their stability, experience and transferable skills.

*"In the UK nuclear industry, the Nuclear Skills Plan identifies the need to fill 40,000 new jobs by 2030. To achieve this, we must prioritise inclusive pathways for returners, bringing fresh perspectives, innovative ideas, and transferable skills that strengthen the sector."*

— **Founder and Managing Director, Inclusion and Diversity in Nuclear**

*Source: The STEM Returners Index 2025, Perspectives shaping progress in STEM.*

The Defence Investment Plan is the funding vehicle for the 2025 Defence Industrial Strategy, which prioritises strengthening the UK's Defence industrial base, and the Modern Industrial Strategy identifies Defence as one of eight priority sectors (IS-8)

for national growth, alongside advanced manufacturing, clean energy and digital technology, all sectors in which experienced engineering capability is in short supply.

Independent commentary on the Modern Industrial Strategy has already identified the risk of relying solely on new-supply investment. The CIPD has warned that concentrating investment on these sectors alone will not be enough to boost productivity and living standards across the UK, and that a broader skills and workforce strategy is needed, cautioning against a two-tier approach that leaves people behind. In the Commons debate on the Defence Investment Plan, Government acknowledged the same gap: 'we will need more investment in skills, especially for 16 to 19-year-olds, graduates and, an area that is talked about less, those retraining in mid-career.' We would go one step further to outline that the opportunity is not just those pivoting, but also the thousands of skilled and experienced mid-career returners who can immediately contribute without the need for re-training.

This paper addresses that explicitly under-resourced category directly.

If substantive and meaningful action is not taken to address these wider issues, the UK is likely to see significant delays in the delivery of Defence and nuclear programmes, an increased reliance on overseas recruitment, further escalation in salary competition between sectors chasing the same limited pool of experienced professionals, missed productivity gains, and regional economic disruption in the areas where major programmes are concentrated and their demand for the same skills overlaps. This is expanded upon in Section 5.1.

*Sources: The STEM Returners Index 2025; Nuclear Skills Plan; Office for Nuclear Regulation; The Defence Investment Plan 2026 (HM Government); Hansard, Defence Investment Plan debate, 15 June 2026; The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy 2025 (GOV.UK); FE News, 2025's Modern Industrial Strategy.*

## PART TWO: THE EVIDENCE

### 5. Why existing recruitment cannot solve this problem

Standard recruitment infrastructure is built to filter out non-linear CV's, at every stage, often before a human reviewer is involved:

- Applicant tracking systems (ATS) and automated screening tools are typically configured to rank candidates by continuity of employment and recency of experience, criteria that structurally penalise anyone with a career break, regardless of the underlying skill.
- A career gap on a CV is routinely read as a risk signal, triggering assumptions about diminished capability or reduced commitment that evidence shows are not supported by outcomes.
- Bias linked to a perceived lack of recent experience, reported by 53% of returners, persists even where the underlying discipline has not meaningfully changed.
- Confidence and network loss compound the structural barrier. Professionals who have been out of a sector for several years often lack internal referrals, up to date professional contacts and interview practice that make standard recruitment processes navigable.
- Hiring manager confidence is also a barrier. Managers accustomed to assessing continuous CVs have nothing to benchmark a returner's transferable capability against, and often assume, without evidence, that a returner will need significant additional support to get up to speed. That assumption is frequently enough to tip the decision toward the 'safer', continuously employed candidate, especially when reviewed as a direct comparator.

None of these mechanisms are designed to test whether a returner can do the job. They are designed to process high application volumes efficiently, and a career break is treated as a convenient filter, not an assessment of merit. This is why research shows returners submitting far higher volumes of applications than other candidates for equivalent success rates, and why 58% report receiving little or no feedback even after rejection.

Structured returnerships exist precisely because standard recruitment cannot correct for its own filtering mechanisms from within. A paid placement bypasses the CV screening stage entirely, replacing CV based assumptions with direct evidence of current capability. In doing so, it addresses a structural market failure rather than simply creating an alternative recruitment pathway.

Recruitment reform is necessary but insufficient because standard recruitment is designed to compare applicants for existing vacancies, whereas returnerships are

designed to restore labour market participation through structured reintegration. They solve different problems.

This is not simply anecdotal. A 2026 vignette experiment published in *Labour Economics* tested the issue directly. A total of 163 professional recruiters evaluated fictitious candidates whose qualifications and experience were identical, differing only in the stated reason for their career break. Despite candidates being otherwise indistinguishable, recruiters consistently ranked them according to the reason for their absence. Training-related breaks were viewed most favourably, followed by caregiving, then illness and unemployment, while discouraged jobseekers were consistently rated least favourably (D'hert, Lippens and Baert, 2026).

Because the candidates' qualifications never changed, these differences cannot be explained by capability. They reflect employer perceptions alone. The study therefore provides direct experimental evidence that non-linear career histories continue to influence hiring decisions independently of an individual's ability to perform the role.

The authors draw an important policy conclusion. Labour market activation measures that focus solely on increasing labour supply are unlikely to succeed while employer screening practices continue to penalise career breaks. This reinforces the argument made throughout this paper that improving recruitment processes, while important, is not sufficient. Structured returnerships address the employer-side barriers that conventional recruitment cannot overcome.

*Source: D'hert, L., Lippens, L. & Baert, S. (2026). Not a lucky break? Why and when a career hiatus hijacks hiring chances. Labour Economics, 100, 102881: STEM Returners Index, 2025*

A related study published by the Institute of Labor Economics (IZA) in November 2025 examined one of the most common reasons for career breaks; caregiving. Using the same experimental approach, 260 professional recruiters evaluated candidates who differed only in the reason for their caregiving related absence, including childcare, eldercare, partner care, foster care and full-time parenting. Across every category, candidates experienced a hiring penalty of 7–8 percentage points in interview and hiring likelihood, around half the size of the penalty associated with unemployment. Crucially, recruiters made little distinction between different forms of caregiving, suggesting that the penalty stems from the career break itself rather than the reason for it.

The study also tested a simple intervention. Candidates whose profiles included a brief statement highlighting qualities such as flexibility or adaptability were rated significantly more favourably by the same recruiters, despite no change to their qualifications or experience. This provides direct experimental evidence that how a returner's experience is framed can materially influence hiring decisions.

The findings reinforce the argument developed in Section 12 and Appendix C: improving outcomes for returners is not simply a matter of identifying capable candidates, but of providing employers with a structured mechanism that

demonstrates current capability and reframes non-linear careers as a source of resilience and transferable value.

*Source: D'hert, L., El Haj, M. & Baert, S. (2025). Couldn't care less? Understanding and reducing the hiring penalty of care-related career breaks (IZA Discussion Paper, No. 18292).*

The challenge therefore cannot be solved through recruitment reform alone. It requires a distinct workforce mechanism designed to recover experienced capability rather than simply recruit it.

*“Too many people still face barriers when returning to the sector or progressing within it, and we will not unlock the full potential of STEM until those barriers are removed.*

*At Mott MacDonald, we are focused on practical steps, such as fair recruitment, widening pathways, supporting returners, and creating environments where people feel they belong and can grow.*

— **Talent Acquisition Lead, Mott MacDonald**

*Source: The STEM Returners Index 2025, Perspectives shaping progress in STEM.*

## 5.1 The cost of failing to recover capability

If capability recovery is not recognised as part of the UK's workforce strategy, the consequences will extend far beyond recruitment.

### Programme delivery slows

Major Defence programmes compete for an increasingly limited pool of experienced people both within Defence and with other sectors, such as nuclear, increasing recruitment costs and delaying delivery.

### Wider economic costs accumulate

Left unaddressed, these pressures compound. An increased reliance on overseas recruitment to fill gaps domestic pipelines cannot close quickly enough, escalating salary competition between sectors chasing the same limited pool of experienced professionals, missed productivity gains across the wider economy, and regional economic disruption in the areas where major Defence, nuclear and energy programmes are concentrated and their demand for the same skills overlaps.

The wider economic cost of skills mismatch is already substantial. Enginuity's 2026 *Mind the Gap* research estimates that skills gaps and shortages cost the UK engineering and manufacturing sector approximately £5.2 billion each year, equivalent to around 2% of annual sector output, with around three quarters of that cost attributable to skills shortages. For affected SMEs, the impact may be as much as 10% of annual Gross Value Added. While this figure cannot be attributed specifically to career breaks or returners, it demonstrates the scale of the economic value at stake when engineering capability is unavailable to the organisations that need it.

*Source: Enginuity (2026), Mind the Gap: The £5bn Cost of Missing Skills. Research commissioned by Enginuity and undertaken by SQW in collaboration with Oxford Innovation Advice and Qa Research.*

### **Public investment delivers lower returns**

Government continues investing heavily in apprenticeships, graduates and technical education while allowing previously developed capability to leave strategically important sectors permanently.

### **Fiscal pressures increase**

Every experienced engineer who remains outside the workforce represents both lost economic output and foregone tax revenue. Delayed labour market participation reduces income tax and National Insurance receipts while requiring Government to invest further in creating new capability to compensate for expertise that already exists. Recovering experienced professionals therefore improves the return on previous public investment in education and skills while strengthening the fiscal sustainability of the UK's wider industrial strategy.

### **Supply chain resilience weakens**

Large primes may be better placed to absorb recruitment pressures, but SMEs within the Defence supply chain are particularly exposed to shortages of experienced specialists. Enginuity's 2026 *Mind the Gap* research found that around half of engineering and manufacturing SMEs surveyed had experienced a skills-related challenge in the previous year, with 36% reporting skills gaps within their existing workforce and 35% experiencing skills shortages when recruiting. The research identifies lost productivity as the most significant consequence and warns that persistent skills pressures risk weakening the resilience of UK industrial supply chains.

Smaller employers also have less capacity to resolve these challenges independently. They may lack dedicated early-careers, training or ED&I resource and can struggle to compete with larger organisations for experienced technical labour. Shared returner models, of the kind proposed in Recommendation 6, would allow SMEs to access experienced talent collectively rather than requiring every business to develop its own standalone programme.

*Source: Enginuity (2026), Mind the Gap: The £5bn Cost of Missing Skills. Research commissioned by Enginuity and undertaken by SQW in collaboration with Oxford Innovation Advice and Qa Research.*

### **Leadership capability erodes**

Career breaks disproportionately affect mid-career professionals, the very people who would otherwise become technical authorities, engineering managers and programme leaders over the next decade.

### **Safety case capability is put at risk**

Rigorous safety case development is a UK Defence and nuclear strength built on decades of accumulated engineering judgement, not simply paperwork. Sector workforce data has previously shown a dip in the 35–45 age cohort, the group that

typically chairs or contributes to safety cases, at exactly the point industry needs that capability most. Returners bring precisely this kind of deep, hard-won experience back into the sector at a moment when few other levers can replace it.

*Source: UKNEST People and Skills Report*

## **National resilience is reduced**

As global competition for experienced talent intensifies, nations that fail to recover their own capability become increasingly dependent on a shrinking international labour market. The UK currently has no mechanism for preventing capability leakage. Every engineer represents decades of investment through education, employer training, security clearance, technical development and workplace experience. Capability recovery protects that investment.

The question is no longer whether the UK can afford to invest in capability recovery. It is whether the UK can afford not to.

***Every year an experienced engineer remains outside the workforce represents not only lost capability, but lost productivity, lost tax revenue and a diminishing return on decades of public investment.***

*Source: The STEM Returners Index 2025.*

## **5.2 Sizing the fourth pathway**

Three different figures are referenced throughout this paper. They describe different aspects of the workforce challenge and should not be conflated.

The first is the Government's estimate that the UK will require 1 million additional STEM workers by 2030 (see Section 2). This represents the total workforce requirement across all strategic workforce pathways, including apprenticeships, graduate recruitment, reskilling and returnerships. It is not a target or estimate for returnerships alone.

The second and third figures relate specifically to the potential size of the returner population. In February 2023, the then Minister for Women and Equalities announced that 75,000 STEM professionals wanted to return to work when launching the STEM ReCharge pilot. Subsequently, in November 2024, the Office for Equality and Opportunity published a more robust estimate of 58,100 STEM returners, derived from the Annual Population Survey as part of its independent evaluation of the same programme. Because this later figure is methodologically transparent and independently documented, it is used as the primary estimate throughout. The earlier figure remains useful as the original, widely referenced policy estimate.

An important limitation should also be recognised. The Government's definition of a STEM returner is intentionally narrow, covering only individuals who left a STEM

occupation due to caring responsibilities and remained economically inactive for at least twelve months. This paper adopts a broader definition of the UK's "missing workforce", encompassing experienced STEM professionals whose careers have been interrupted by redundancy, ill health, relocation, discouragement or a transition into non-STEM employment. No equivalent national estimate currently exists for these additional groups.

The Government's estimate of 58,100 returners should therefore be regarded as a conservative baseline rather than the upper limit of the opportunity. Even on this restricted definition, the fourth workforce pathway represents a significant contribution towards addressing the UK's projected STEM workforce shortfall. When the wider population of experienced professionals outside the Government's current definition is considered, the potential contribution is likely to be substantially greater.

*Sources: HM Government, 'More women to be supported back into STEM jobs in Government-backed training' (gov.uk, 11 February 2023); Office for Equality and Opportunity, STEM ReCharge Programme Evaluation, Appendix 1: Estimating the UK STEM Returner Population (gov.uk, 28 November 2024).*

## 6. The evidence base: The STEM Returners Index 2025

Each year, STEM Returners surveys over 1,000 STEM professionals who are on a career break or have recently returned to work, to understand what is really happening in the return-to-work process.

Year 6 of this annual research shows that the barriers facing returners are not easing, they are intensifying. 75% of respondents found the return-to-work process difficult or very difficult in 2025, up from 65% in 2024, and 58% received little or no meaningful feedback from employers, up from 46% in 2024. Bias against age (41%, up from 36%), lack of recent experience (53%), and ethnicity continue to penalise highly qualified professionals. Among minority ethnic respondents, 32% reported experiencing ethnicity-related bias — more than six times the 5% reported by White British respondents.

*Source: The STEM Returners Index 2025.*

## 7. National programme outcomes

Since launching in 2017, structured returnership programmes have supported more than 660 experienced professionals back into careers across Defence, Nuclear, Energy, Infrastructure and Advanced Manufacturing. Across all programmes, the outcomes are consistent and substantial:

**660+**

professionals returned to work via STEM Returners programmes

**96%**

secure a permanent position after their programme

**100%**

of participating employers have gone on to recruit further returners

**46%**

of returners are female

**34%**

of returners are from a minority ethnic background

**64%**

report feeling fully capable within three months of returning to work

### 7.1 Independent Government validation: STEM ReCharge

In 2023–2024, the Office for Equality and Opportunity (formerly the Equality Hub) commissioned STEM Returners and Career Returners to deliver STEM ReCharge, a pilot programme designed to support experienced professionals back into technology and engineering careers across the Midlands and North of England. An independent Government evaluation, published in November 2024, found that the programme exceeded both of its delivery targets; 90 returners completed the programme against a target of 80, while 41 employers participated against a target of 30. The programme also attracted more than twice the anticipated number of applications from both employers and returners.

The evaluation reported encouraging outcomes for both participants and employers. Among returners, 76% said the programme had supported their return-to-work journey, while confidence in performing well at interview increased from 36% before participation to 63% afterwards. Employers also reported significant improvements, with confidence in recruiting and supporting returners rising from 22% before training to 66% afterwards. By the end of the programme, 88% had either implemented or planned changes to make their recruitment processes more supportive of returners.

The evaluation appropriately acknowledges its own limitations. It measured self-reported outcomes shortly after programme completion, did not include a comparison group, and was not designed to assess long-term employment outcomes. Those caveats are important. However, they do not diminish the wider significance of the programme. This represents independent Government

validation that structured returnerships are capable of improving both employer readiness and returner confidence, two of the principal barriers identified throughout this paper.

More importantly, the evaluation demonstrates that returnerships are already recognised within Government as a legitimate workforce intervention. The policy challenge is therefore no longer whether the model has merit, but how it can be implemented at the scale, continuity and level of investment required to support the UK's industrial and Defence ambitions.

Source: STEM ReCharge: Evaluation Report, Office for Equality and Opportunity (November 2024).

## 8. Defence sector outcomes

Many of the UK's major Defence primes have run structured returnership programmes already including both tier-one suppliers and Defence-adjacent engineering organisations, including BAE Systems, Thales, Leonardo, Babcock, MBDA, Rolls-Royce, AWE, the UK Atomic Energy Authority, Dstl, Cubic, Cavendish Nuclear, Ricardo, BMT, Frazer-Nash Consultancy, GE Vernova, Meggitt, AECOM, RBSL and the Royal Navy.

**400+**

returners have joined, or are joining, a programme in the defence sector

**81%**

of defence-sector participants have been made permanent

**36%**

of defence-sector returners are female, vs 16.9% of the wider workforce

**36% female vs  
16.9% sector  
average**

**So what?** The UK cannot solve its engineering shortages by continuing to recruit from the same talent pools alone. Returnerships open access to a wider pool of experienced professionals, including many women and people from minority ethnic backgrounds, who are already qualified but currently locked out by conventional recruitment, directly addressing skills shortages as a matter of workforce capacity, not as a separate objective.

*"The 2025 Index highlights persistent barriers for talented people seeking to return to STEM, including limited feedback, age bias, and a difficult hiring landscape. Yet, it also reinforces something we see every day in the Royal Navy: STEM is fundamentally about people solving complex problems with the skills, experience, and perspectives they bring — regardless of how, when, or where they were trained... we are committed to opening doors to diverse returners whose real-world experience strengthens our capability and innovation."*

— **Deputy Director People Change, The Royal Navy**

Source: The STEM Returners Index 2025, Perspectives shaping progress in STEM.

## 9. Beyond Defence: Capability recovery in practice

The same pattern recurs wherever workforce demand depends upon retaining, recognising and redeploying experience rather than simply replacing it. Recent evidence from UK shipbuilding provides a further example. Workforce Mobility and Skills in UK Shipbuilding: Evidence from Industry Voices (Lorefully, 2026), commissioned through the National Shipbuilding Office and Connected Places Catapult's Maritime Accelerator Programme, found that experienced workers move extensively between shipbuilding and adjacent sectors including Defence, offshore energy, oil and gas, rail, construction and wider manufacturing. The research found that technical and professional capabilities are highly transferable across these sectors, but that mobility can be constrained by inconsistent recognition of prior experience, qualifications, standards and employer practices. In other words, experienced capability may already exist within the UK labour market while remaining difficult for strategically important sectors to access.

Scotland's offshore wind sector provides another clear parallel.

Independent analysis for the Scottish Government's *Draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan* estimates that up to 30,000 people in North-East Scotland will need to enter, or transition into, offshore energy roles by 2030, including around 14,000 workers moving from oil and gas, a workforce of which more than 90% already hold skills with medium to high transferability into offshore wind. The parallel with Defence is direct, the same underlying challenge, retaining, refreshing and redeploying experienced capability rather than losing it, is described in Scotland as a "just transition" and in this paper as capability recovery.

*"Scotland, and particularly North East Scotland, has a significant pool of transferable offshore energy expertise, but the pace of transition now demands targeted intervention to prevent critical skills being lost to the sector. Employer-embedded returner and transition pathways offer a practical and urgent solution."*

— **Professor Paul de Leeuw, Director, Energy Transition Institute, Robert Gordon University**

Returnerships have already proven the model works outside Defence. In partnership with the Global Underwater Hub and the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board, STEM Returners delivered the Underwater Sector Returner Programme, recovering professionals with an average of 13 years' prior industry experience into offshore energy roles, working alongside DWP's Strategic Relationship Team and Forces Champions to refer both civilian and veteran talent directly into structured programmes. Different governments and sectors have independently reached the same conclusion. Traditional recruitment and training pathways alone cannot meet demand for experienced professionals, whichever industry is asking the question.

***Capability recovery is not a Defence-specific idea. It is a workforce phenomenon visible across Defence, shipbuilding, nuclear and offshore energy, where different sectors have independently encountered the same challenge: how to retain, recognise, refresh and redeploy experienced capability rather than allow it to become permanently disconnected.***

*Sources: Offshore Wind STEM Returners Programme Business Justification Case (Scottish Government Offshore Wind Skills Programme, 2026); Robert Gordon University Energy Transition Institute; Global Underwater Hub; Engineering Construction Industry Training Board; Workforce Mobility and Skills in UK Shipbuilding: Evidence from Industry Voices (Lorefully, 2026).*

## 10. A decade of capability recovery: Evidence

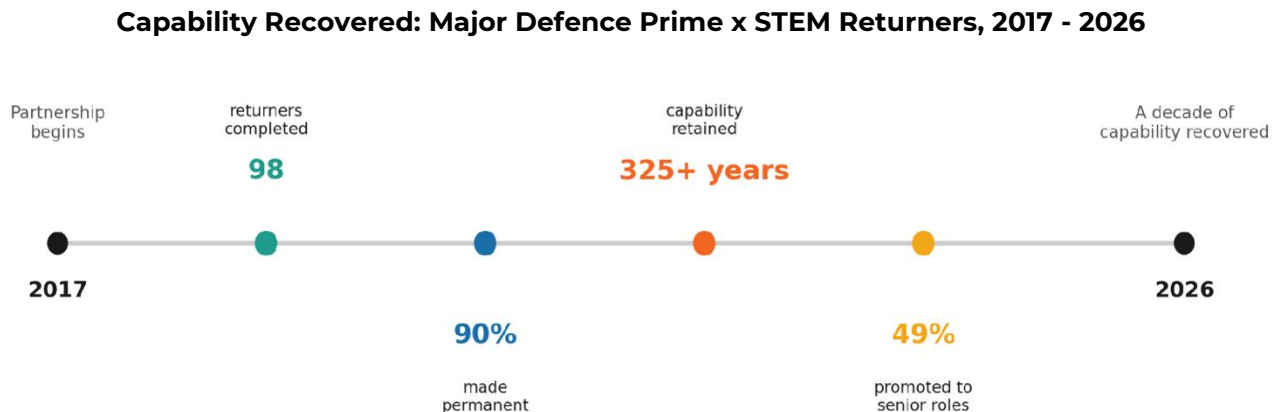
Returnerships should not be judged solely by the number of people who return to work. Their true value lies in the capability they continue to create long after the programme itself has ended. Do returners remain with their employer? Do they progress into technical leadership? Do they strengthen organisational capability and contribute to the next generation of engineers? Most importantly, do they preserve engineering capability that might otherwise have been permanently lost to the UK?

Evidence from the decade-long partnership between a major Defence Prime and STEM Returners provides a clear answer. Yes.

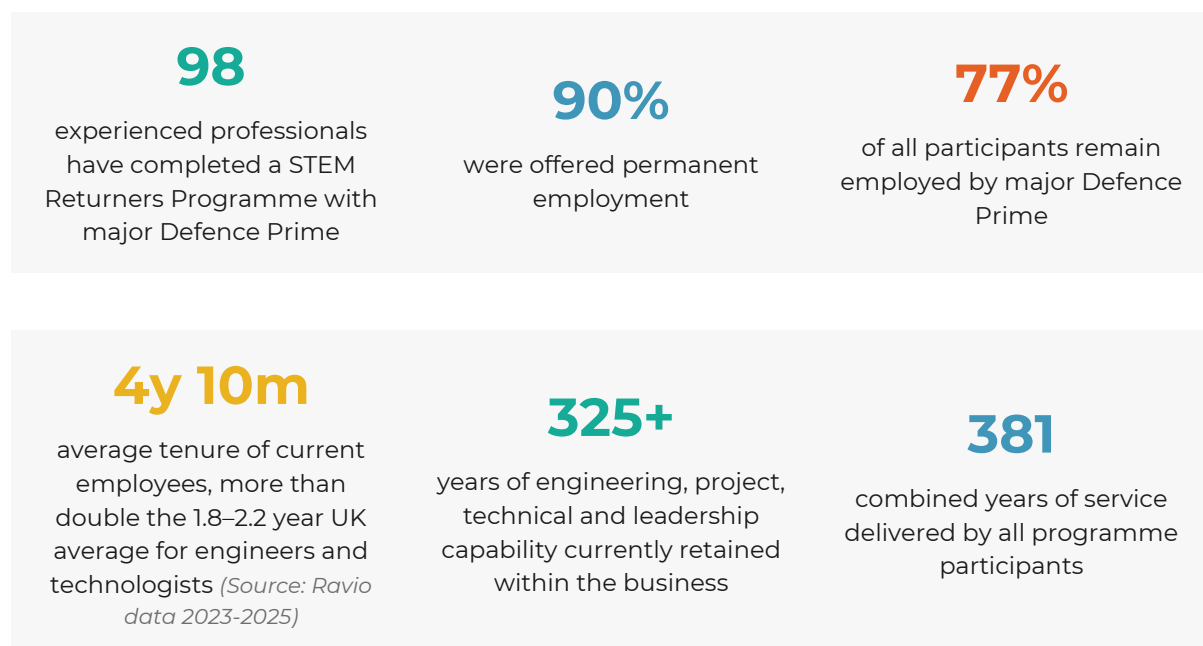
Since 2017, a major Defence Prime and STEM Returners have built one of the UK's longest-running and most established engineering returnership programmes, creating a unique longitudinal evidence base on the value of recovering experienced capability. The results demonstrate that structured returnerships do far more than fill vacancies. They retain critical engineering expertise, accelerate succession planning, strengthen leadership pipelines and recover decades of accumulated knowledge that continues contributing to Defence capability year after year.

Rather than measuring success by recruitment alone, this evidence demonstrates the importance of measuring capability retained. Over time, the programme has delivered not simply employees, but long-term engineering, technical and leadership capability that remains embedded within one of the UK's most strategically important Defence organisations.

**Figure 5. A decade of capability recovered through a single Defence-sector partnership**



## 10.1 Conversion and retention



### 325 years of capability retained

**So what?** The success of workforce interventions is frequently measured by the number of people entering employment, but this evidence demonstrates that the most important measure is the capability retained, hundreds of years of engineering expertise that may otherwise have been permanently lost to the sector

# 325

**years of engineering, technical, project and leadership capability currently retained within major Defence Prime through one returnership partnership.**

## 10.2 Sustained workforce value

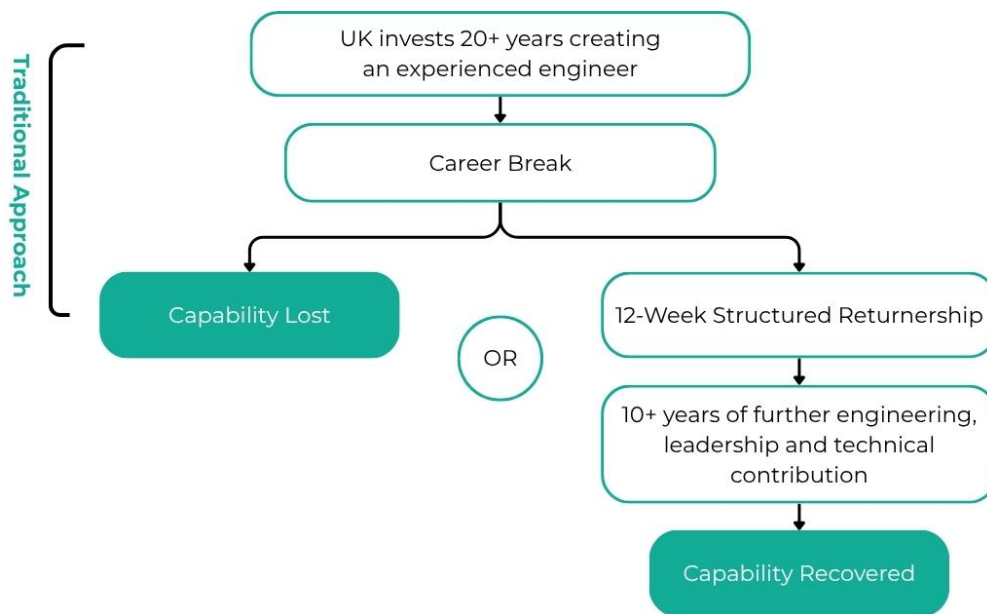
The programme also demonstrates exceptional long-term retention. Of those who joined between 2018 and 2021, 73% remain employed five to eight years later, with many now reaching five and six years of service. This is not simply evidence of successful recruitment. It is evidence of successful capability recovery. The value of returnerships lies not only in bringing experienced professionals back into employment, but in retaining that capability where it continues to strengthen the organisation for years afterwards.

*Source: STEM Returners: 10 Years of Impact and Retention data, 2025.*

## 11. Measuring capability recovery

Traditional recruitment measures vacancies filled and time to hire. These measures are necessary, but they capture only the starting point of a returner's contribution, not its long-term value. Evidence suggests a fuller and more complete set of measures, one focused on capability recovered rather than posts filled:

| Traditional recruitment measures | Capability recovery measures                                  |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Vacancies filled                 | Years of relevant engineering capability recovered            |
| Time to hire                     | Years of leadership capability retained                       |
| Starting salary                  | Ready-to-go technical expertise returned to strategic sectors |
| Offer-acceptance rate            | Promotion and progression rates                               |
| Headcount                        | Long-term retention relative to the wider workforce           |

**Figure 6. Recovering decades of investment through returnerships**

*The value of a returnership is not the 12 week programme itself, but the decade or more of capability it unlocks after.*

Measured in this way, the major Defence Prime partnership has already recovered more than 325 years of engineering, technical and leadership capability currently retained within the business. The success of a returnership should therefore be measured not by vacancies filled, but by capability recovered. That is the true value of the fourth workforce pathway.

### 11.1 The investment case: Reactivating capability versus recreating it

The investment case for returnerships is fundamentally different from that of conventional recruitment. It is not an investment in creating new capability, but in reactivating capability that already exists.

Too often, returnerships are evaluated by comparing a returner with a continuously employed engineer of similar seniority. That is the wrong comparison. It invites precisely the assumptions discussed in Section 5, that a returner is simply a less current version of someone whose career has remained uninterrupted.

The more meaningful comparison is between the investment required to reactivate existing capability and the investment required to recreate equivalent capability through apprenticeships, graduate recruitment or reskilling. Creating twenty years of engineering judgement requires twenty years of practical experience. No amount of additional funding can meaningfully compress that timescale. By contrast, reactivating twenty years of accumulated judgement, leadership and technical expertise in someone who already possesses it requires

targeted upskilling, recertification and supported reintegration measured in weeks rather than decades.

This is the investment question Government and employers should be asking. Not "How does a returner compare with someone who never left?" but "What is the most effective way to recover twenty years of capability?"

***A returner may need their technical currency refreshed. They do not need twenty years of experience rebuilt underneath it.***

When viewed through this lens, returnerships cease to be a recruitment intervention. They become a mechanism for protecting previous investment in human capital and accelerating access to experienced capability that would otherwise take decades to recreate.

### **Case study: capability recovered in practice**

Francesca spent 19 years in scientific software, working on physics simulations, parallel computing and CAD software development, before shifting into educational publishing to gain the flexibility a caring role required. When that role ended two decades later, she tried to return to scientific software and found the door repeatedly closed, employers saw her as overqualified or underqualified, with perceived age bias a constant undercurrent.

Through a returnership programme, Francesca secured a 12-week placement with the UK Atomic Energy Authority. She was offered a permanent position on completion and now contributes to fusion software simulations, technical capability that had been disconnected from the sector for two decades, recovered in twelve weeks.

*"The programme helped me reclaim a career I once feared was out of reach."*  
— **Francesca, STEM Returner, UK Atomic Energy Authority**

*Source: The STEM Returners Index 2025, Our Returner Stories.*

## **11.2 The economic case for capability recovery**

The UK has already made a substantial investment in developing its engineering and technical workforce, an investment that in Defence and Nuclear specifically extends to security clearance and safety-critical competence built through complex national programmes. When experienced professionals temporarily leave, that investment does not disappear; it becomes economically underutilised. The question for Government is therefore not whether to continue investing in future talent, but how to maximise the return on the investment already made.

Reactivating experienced capability increases labour market participation, restores tax revenue through earlier return to employment, reduces dependence on

overseas recruitment, and gives employers faster access to experienced capability than traditional pipelines can provide. The return is cumulative rather than one-off, a single returnership is the reactivation of many years of future economic contribution, and, as Section 10 shows, that contribution compounds over a career rather than ending when the placement does.

Viewed this way, capability recovery is not an employment initiative but an investment strategy, one that protects previous public expenditure and maximises the return on human capital the UK has already developed. In an economy where demand for experienced STEM professionals increasingly exceeds supply, it is likely to be one of the highest-value complementary workforce investments available to Government.

## PART THREE: A NEW WORKFORCE STRATEGY

### 12. Returnerships: The delivery mechanism for capability recovery

A common question asked of this model is: why don't employers recruit returners directly through standard channels? The answer is that a returnership is not recruitment. It is workforce re-engagement.

Traditional recruitment assumes capability already exists and only needs to be matched to a vacancy. Returnerships recognise that confidence, familiarity, professional networks and organisational integration also require rebuilding after a career break. They also focus on changing the environment returners are re-entering by working with employers to challenge bias, improve hiring practices and create equitable opportunities that support returners' success. Structured coaching and mentoring reduce this re-engagement period and accelerate productivity. In effect, they function as productivity infrastructure, not candidate support.

Each returnership placement includes a paid, 12-week returnership with CV-worthy assignments, a dedicated Programme Career Coach, and access to an industry mentoring platform. Coaching focuses on professional alignment, skills and confidence building and future development, including professional accreditation. Mentoring accelerates the return-to-work process by boosting confidence, helping returners identify and articulate transferable skills and expand their professional networks within the new organisation and wider sector.

Together, these mechanisms explain why structured returnerships consistently outperform standard recruitment routes for returners. They treat the return to work as a transition to be actively managed, not an event to be judged pass or fail at interview.

*"We all share a responsibility to reassure individuals across the sector that STEM is a place for everyone, provide meaningful mentoring and uphold the highest standards of inclusive leadership."*

— **Chief Executive Officer, UKNEST**

*Source: The STEM Returners Index 2025, Perspectives shaping progress in STEM.*

## 12.1 Flexible engagement and the transfer of legacy knowledge

The model set out in this paper, and the evidence presented in Part Two, focuses primarily on returners securing permanent employment. That should remain the principal objective. However, permanent full-time employment is not the only way to recover strategically important capability.

For many highly experienced professionals, particularly those with twenty or thirty years of specialist expertise, flexible engagement may represent a more effective means of reconnecting their knowledge with the sectors that need it most. A senior engineer may contribute greater value to a complex safety case, design review or technical investigation through a few hours of specialist input each week than a larger team without equivalent experience. This is particularly relevant in Defence, where critical knowledge often resides not in digital systems, but in individual expertise, accumulated through decades of work on legacy platforms, classified programmes and engineering decisions that were never fully documented.

Capability recovery should therefore extend beyond permanent recruitment. Flexible and fractional appointments, part-time returnerships, trusted expert arrangements and short-term advisory roles should sit alongside full-time returnerships as recognised mechanisms for reconnecting experienced professionals with strategically important work. Judging contribution solely by hours worked risks excluding precisely the expertise that is hardest to replace.

The strategic value extends beyond the immediate contribution an individual makes. Experienced returners often hold tacit knowledge that cannot easily be codified or recreated through documentation alone. As the UK modernises Defence capability while sustaining legacy platforms and re-establishing sovereign industrial capability, structured returnerships provide a mechanism not only for recovering expertise, but for transferring it to the next generation of engineers before it is permanently lost.

Knowledge should not be measured by the number of hours worked. It should be measured by the capability it preserves and the value it continues to create.

## 12.2 Culture change: Challenging hiring manager bias

A structured returnership can only achieve its full potential if the organisation around it evolves as well. As Section 5 demonstrated, conventional recruitment processes often leave hiring managers with no meaningful benchmark against which to assess a returner's current capability. Faced with uncertainty, many understandably default to the candidate whose career appears more conventional. The result is not necessarily deliberate discrimination, but a systematic tendency to undervalue experienced professionals with non-linear careers.

A returnership programme addresses part of this challenge by giving employers direct evidence of a returner's capability in practice. However, long-term success depends on changing the organisational assumptions that sit behind recruitment

decisions. Hiring managers must recognise that a career break is not evidence of diminished capability, but simply a different career trajectory that may require technical currency to be refreshed, not decades of experience to be rebuilt.

This is why the RETURNERS Framework (Appendix C) places understanding organisational culture alongside recognition, training and equitable opportunity. Structured onboarding, mentoring and coaching support the individual returner, creating a culture in which non-linear careers are recognised as a source of resilience, adaptability and experience is what enables capability recovery to become sustainable at scale.

Ultimately, the success of a returnership should not depend on one enlightened hiring manager. It should be supported by an organisational culture that recognises experienced capability wherever it is found.

### 13. Returners become leaders: Succession planning in action

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Perhaps the most compelling finding from the major Defence Prime partnership is not retention. It is progression. Among returners who remain employed, 82% have changed role or job title, and 49% have progressed into more senior positions. Participants have advanced into roles including Lead Mission Systems Engineer, Principal Engineer, Senior Systems Engineer, Engineering Manager, Head of Function, Lead Project Professional and Senior Consultant.

This is not only progression. It is succession planning. This fundamentally challenges the assumption that career breaks reduce long-term potential. Instead, the evidence suggests the opposite, given the opportunity and appropriate support, experienced professionals returning after a career break develop into technical specialists, project leaders and senior managers who contribute directly to the future capability of the organisation.

- Career breaks do not predict poor performance
- Career breaks do not predict low commitment
- Career breaks do not predict limited progression

***Returnerships are helping build the next generation of technical leadership.***

## 14. Talent resilience and the fourth workforce pathway

**Figure 7. The four workforce pathways**



The UK's current workforce strategy is built on three recognised pathways that create new capability; apprenticeships, graduate recruitment and reskilling. These remain essential and should continue to be at the heart of workforce policy.

However, they address only one half of the challenge. They create the workforce of the future. They do not systematically recover the experienced capability that already exists within the labour market.

A complete workforce strategy therefore requires four complementary pathways. Three that create new capability and one that recovers existing capability; Apprenticeships, Graduate recruitment, Reskilling, Returnerships.

***The UK's workforce challenge has two dimensions:***

***1. Creating future capability***

***2. Recovering existing capability***

***A resilient workforce strategy requires both.***

This direction is increasingly reflected in wider skills-policy evidence. Enginuity's *Mind the Gap* report recommends that Government rebalance skills policy towards upskilling and reskilling the existing workforce, alongside greater support for cross-sector mobility and recognition of prior learning. Capability recovery extends that principle one step further.

Alongside developing new entrants and reskilling those already in employment, workforce policy should create a deliberate route for reconnecting experienced

professionals whose capability has become temporarily disconnected from the labour market or from strategically important sectors.

Alongside these traditional pathways sits a fourth source of capability; experienced professionals whose skills, judgement and leadership already exist but have become temporarily disconnected from strategically important sectors. Structured returnerships provide the mechanism for reconnecting that capability through supported reintegration, targeted upskilling and employer partnership.

Their contribution extends well beyond recruitment. As evidenced throughout this paper, returnerships strengthen retention, accelerate productivity and support succession planning. They do not compete with apprenticeships, graduate recruitment or reskilling; they complement them by addressing a workforce challenge those pathways were never designed to solve.

This paper therefore proposes that structured returnerships be formally recognised as the UK's fourth strategic workforce pathway, a distinct, funded and measurable mechanism for recovering experienced capability alongside apprenticeships, graduate recruitment and reskilling. Together, these four pathways create a more resilient workforce strategy, one capable of meeting both today's experience gap and tomorrow's skills needs.

*Source: Engenuity (2026), Mind the Gap: The £5bn Cost of Missing Skills. Research commissioned by Engenuity and undertaken by SQW in collaboration with Oxford Innovation Advice and Qa Research.*

## 14.1 A broader resilience dimension

The case for capability recovery extends far beyond meeting today's workforce demand. The UK faces converging demographic, economic and geopolitical pressures; an ageing engineering workforce, intensifying global competition for STEM talent, and rapidly increasing demand across Defence, Nuclear, Clean Energy and Advanced Manufacturing. In this environment, the ability to recover, refresh and redeploy experienced capability already within the UK labour market becomes a strategic advantage in its own right.

Skills England's 2026 assessment provides further evidence of this structural imbalance. Defence has lower proportions of workers aged 30–39 and 40–49 than the UK workforce overall, while its largest age group is 50–59, accounting for 24.1% of the workforce. This creates a dual exposure, experienced capability is approaching retirement while the mid-career population available to succeed it is comparatively thin. Capability recovery offers a direct means of rebuilding that experienced middle.

A workforce strategy that focuses solely on creating new talent, without an equivalent mechanism for recovering experienced capability, leaves the nation unnecessarily exposed to these pressures. Apprenticeships, graduate recruitment and reskilling remain indispensable, but they cannot immediately replace decades of accumulated engineering judgement, technical leadership and operational experience. Capability recovery fills that gap by reconnecting expertise that already exists with sectors where it is strategically needed.

Resilience is therefore not simply the capacity to train future workers. It is the capacity to retain, recover and redeploy experienced capability throughout a working life. Nations that can do both will be better placed to deliver major programmes, respond to industrial change and maintain sovereign capability in an increasingly competitive global economy.

Capability recovery should therefore be recognised not simply as a workforce intervention, but as an integral component of the UK's national resilience.

***National resilience depends not only on creating future capability, but on recovering existing capability.***

*Source: Skills England and Ministry of Defence (2026), Sector Skills Needs Assessment – Defence.*

## **14.2 The feedback loop: Why capability recovery compounds**

Section 1.1 sets out why this compounds at a system level. Section 13 shows it playing out directly, returners who progress into technical leadership become the mentors and role models who make the next cohort of returners a safer, more familiar hiring decision, reinforcing the loop already described.

This is also why capability recovery should be measured as a system outcome rather than a simple headcount. The right questions are not only how many returners were placed, but how much programme risk was reduced, how many years of expertise were recovered, how much knowledge was transferred to less experienced colleagues, and how much of the leakage identified in Section 5.1 was prevented before it happened. A workforce strategy that tracks only placements will consistently understate what capability recovery delivers.

## PART FOUR: RECOMMENDATIONS

### 15. A national capability recovery framework

This paper recommends that Government and the wider Defence and industrial base take the following steps to formally recognise and scale structured returnerships as national workforce infrastructure. Recommendation 1 is the strategic decision from which everything else follows. Recommendations 2 to 6 are the operational steps that make it real.

#### **Recommendation 1: Establish capability recovery as a strategic workforce objective.**

Government should explicitly adopt capability recovery, recovering experienced professionals whose skills have become temporarily disconnected from the workforce, as a strategic objective of UK workforce policy, sitting alongside the creation of new talent within the Modern Industrial Strategy, the Defence Industrial Strategy and Skills England's remit. Every recommendation below is a mechanism for delivering this objective, none of them function in isolation from it.

Government has already begun to test this shift in practice. The STEM ReCharge pilot, evaluated independently for the Office for Equality and Opportunity in 2024 (see Section 7.1), shows that a government-commissioned returner programme can exceed its own delivery targets and shift employer confidence measurably within a single funding cycle. The task now is to move from a single pilot to a national framework.

#### **Recommendation 2: Recognise capability recovery as the fourth national workforce pathway, delivered through structured returnerships and other recognised capability recovery mechanisms.**

Recognise capability recovery as the UK's fourth strategic workforce pathway, complementing apprenticeships, graduate recruitment and lifelong learning. Deliver this through structured returnerships as a proven mechanism for reconnecting experienced capability to strategically important sectors.

This would complement the emerging policy emphasis on upskilling, reskilling, cross-sector mobility and recognition of prior learning, while addressing the additional cohort of experienced professionals currently outside employment or strategically important sectors.

*Source: Engenuity (2026), Mind the Gap: The £5bn Cost of Missing Skills. Research commissioned by Engenuity and undertaken by SQW in collaboration with Oxford Innovation Advice and Qa Research.*

**Recommendation 3: Introduce capability recovery targets.**

Set a returner target within Defence Growth Deals and sector workforce plans, so that primes and SMEs bidding into Defence growth programmes report on returner recruitment alongside apprenticeship and graduate intake.

**Recommendation 4: Extend funding parity.**

Extend funding parity to returnership programmes on comparable terms to apprenticeships and graduate schemes, recognising that a 12-week paid returnership delivers a deployable, experienced engineer at a fraction of the time and public cost of a new-build training pipeline. This funding should explicitly cover the targeted upskilling and recertification often needed to refresh technical currency, not the placement alone.

**Recommendation 5: Adopt a capability recovery measurement standard.**

Introduce the capability recovery metrics set out in Part Two within future iterations of Skills England's Sector Skills Needs Assessments and the MOD's annual delivery reporting on the Defence Investment Plan. Alongside projected employment demand, vacancies and education supply, reporting should measure the experienced capability already available for recovery, the number of returners reconnected to priority occupations and the years of relevant capability recovered.

**Recommendation 6: Extend the model to the defence supply chain.**

Extend the model to SMEs in the Defence supply chain, using the Defence Office for Small Business Growth as a channel to help smaller suppliers, who typically cannot run their own graduate or returner schemes, access a shared pool of returner talent. Returnership programmes are also a practical route to widen the talent pool available to the sector, drawing in experienced professionals, including a higher proportion of women than the wider engineering and technology workforce, who would otherwise remain outside it.

## 16. Implementing a national capability recovery framework

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Recognising capability recovery as a strategic workforce objective does not require the creation of a new institution. Much of the infrastructure already exists through Skills England, the Ministry of Defence, Defence Growth Deals, Local Skills Improvement Plans and existing employer-led workforce programmes. The opportunity is to connect these initiatives through a shared capability recovery framework.

### Phase 1 (Next 12 months)

- Formally recognise returnerships within the Defence Industrial Strategy workforce plan
- Develop a common definition of capability recovery
- Agree national reporting metrics
- Launch pilot programme across Defence and nuclear

### Phase 2 (Years 2-3)

- Recognise returnerships as the fourth workforce pathway
- Expand programmes through Defence Growth Deals
- Create regional returnership partnerships supporting SMEs
- Integrate returnerships into Skills England workforce planning
- Publish annual capability recovery data

### Phase 3 (Years 4-10)

- Extend programmes across all IS-8 sectors
- Measure capability recovered alongside apprenticeships and graduates
- Embed capability recovery within future Industrial Strategy reviews

The recommendations in this paper are deliberately evolutionary rather than revolutionary. They build upon existing policy, existing institutions and proven delivery models. The challenge is not creating an entirely new workforce system but ensuring that the UK's existing investment in people continues to deliver value throughout a professional's working life.

## 16.1 Who does what

| Who actions:                            | Leads on:                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Government / Modern Industrial Strategy | Recommendation 1: adopt capability recovery as a strategic workforce objective.                                                                               |
| Skills England                          | Recommendations 2 & 5: recognise the fourth pathway within Lifelong Learning Entitlement planning; own the national capability recovery measurement standard. |
| MOD / Defence Growth Deals              | Recommendations 3 & 5: set returner targets within Growth Deal reporting; co-own annual delivery reporting against the Defence Investment Plan.               |
| Industry bodies                         | Recommendation 6: convene primes and SMEs across the Defence supply chain; champion shared returner models.                                                   |
| Employers (primes and SMEs)             | Recommendation 4 (delivery): operate structured returnerships, report returner intake alongside apprentice and graduate intake.                               |

## 17. International precedent: How other employers and nations recover experience.

A substantial body of research from Harvard Business School's Project on Managing the Future of Work has examined "hidden workers" (candidates screened out by conventional hiring processes) and shaped how employers internationally think about this overlooked pool of talent. Its most recent research, focused specifically on caregivers, found that the great majority of employers surveyed do not prioritise hiring this group, despite most caregivers having already re-entered work successfully once given the chance. This pattern is consistent with the UK-specific evidence presented in Part Two of this paper.

The UK is not alone in recognising that experienced talent temporarily outside the workforce is worth recovering. The concept of a structured, paid return to work placement, a 'returnship', was pioneered by Goldman Sachs in 2008, and the term is now trademarked and used across its global operations. The Goldman Sachs Returnship remains a 12-week paid programme aimed at professionals who have been out of the full-time workforce for two years or more, and the firm describes it as the preeminent programme of its kind.

Other employers have adapted the model for engineering and technical sectors specifically, including General Motors' Take 2 and Cummins' RePower programmes. Most directly relevant to this paper, Lockheed Martin operates Chapter Next, a paid 12-to-16-week returnship for professionals re-entering technical and programme roles within a major Defence prime, a close US parallel to the pathway described in Part Two.

Structured recognition of career breaks also appears within Defence personnel policy. The Australian Defence Force maintains formal 'Previously Served' and 'Mid-Career Entry' pathways alongside break-in-service rules that preserve accrued entitlements for members who return within a defined window, a recognition, at policy level, that a break in service should not automatically mean starting afresh.

None of these examples is identical to the UK's challenge, and none is offered as a template to copy directly. What they demonstrate is that the underlying insight, that experienced capability temporarily outside a sector remains recoverable and worth designing formal pathways for, is not unique to the UK. It already operates at scale among some of the world's most competitive employers, including within an allied nation's own Defence workforce policy. The UK's opportunity is to be the first nation to recognise it as a component of national industrial strategy, rather than an employer-by-employer initiative.

*Sources: Fuller, J. B., Raman, M. & Hintermann, F. (2024). Hidden Workers: The Case for Caregivers. Harvard Business School, Managing the Future of Work; Goldman Sachs Careers; iRelaunch; General Motors, Cummins and Lockheed Martin returnship programme pages; Australian Government Defence Home Ownership Assistance Scheme (DHOAS) and ADF Careers.*

## 18. What success looks like by 2035

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If the framework proposed in this paper is adopted, by 2035:

- Returnerships are formally recognised within UK workforce policy as the fourth strategic pathway, alongside apprenticeships, graduate recruitment and reskilling.
- Every major Defence prime operates a structured returnership programme.
- SMEs across the Defence and nuclear supply chain can access shared, cross-employer returnership programmes.
- Capability recovery is measured and reported annually by Skills England and the MOD.
- 5,000 or more experienced professionals have returned to strategically important sectors through structured returnerships.
- Thousands of years of engineering, technical and leadership capability have been recovered and retained within the UK's industrial and Defence base as a result.

None of this requires invention. It requires the UK to formally value a mechanism that already works at a scale that matches the ambition of the Defence Investment Plan and the Modern Industrial Strategy themselves.

## 19. Conclusion: Recovering national capability

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Throughout its history, the UK has invested in developing experienced STEM professionals. The challenge now is not simply to produce more of them. It is to ensure that the experienced capability the nation has already developed remains connected to the sectors that depend upon it.

The evidence presented throughout this paper demonstrates that career breaks do not represent the permanent loss of capability. When supported through structured returnerships, experienced professionals return as long-term contributors, technical specialists, leaders and mentors, strengthening organisational resilience and preserving expertise that would otherwise be lost.

The UK's existing workforce pathways remain essential. Apprenticeships, graduate recruitment and reskilling will continue to create the workforce of tomorrow. But a complete workforce strategy must also recover the experienced capability the UK already possesses. Together, these four pathways provide a more resilient approach to delivering the nation's industrial, economic and Defence ambitions.

With Defence facing demand for approximately 82,000 workers across priority occupations by 2035, the question is no longer whether additional workforce pathways are desirable, but whether Defence can deliver its ambitions without them.

Capability recovery is therefore not simply an employment intervention. It is a strategic investment in national capability. It protects decades of public and private investment in education, training and professional development while enabling experienced professionals to continue contributing throughout their working lives. As Section 1.1 sets out, this is best understood as national workforce infrastructure. Capability recovery is how the wider Whole Force system keeps experienced people moving back into delivery, not a one-off fix at its edges.

The UK has built sophisticated systems for creating capability. It now needs an equally deliberate system for recovering it.

### Immediate priorities

While the recommendations in Part Four set out a long-term framework, meaningful progress could begin immediately through three practical actions.

#### Within the next six months:

- **Recognise** capability recovery as a strategic workforce objective in the next update to UK workforce policy.
- **Pilot** a common returnership reporting framework across Defence and Nuclear, working with the MOD, Skills England and industry partners.
- **Convene** a national Returnership Taskforce, bringing together Government, industry, professional institutions and delivery partners to develop a roadmap for implementation.

*The UK's industrial future will be determined not only by the talent it creates. It will also be determined by the capability it chooses to recover.*

## Appendix A: major Defence Prime case study summary



Source: STEM Returners, 10 Years of Impact and Retention data, 2025.

## Appendix B: Defence and Defence-adjacent employer partners

STEM Returners has partnered with the following organisations across the UK Defence and Defence-adjacent sector to deliver returnership programmes:

BAE Systems • Thales • Leonardo • Babcock • MBDA • Rolls-Royce • AWE  
Nuclear Security Technologies • UK Atomic Energy Authority • Dstl • Cubic •  
Cavendish Nuclear • Ricardo • BMT • Frazer-Nash Consultancy • GE Vernova •  
Meggitt • AECOM • RBSL • Royal Navy • KBS Maritime • Sixworks (an IBM  
Company) • AtkinsRéalis • Jacobs • Mott MacDonald • Safran • Inductura •  
Drumgrange

## Appendix C: The RETURNERS framework for employers

STEM Returners guidance to employers recommends nine practical steps for building an effective returnership, forming the acronym **RETURNERS**:

- **R**ecognition — recognise the value returners bring in experience, behaviours and diversity of thought.
- **E**quitable opportunity — a returner-specific route or structured programme, not comparison against candidates without a career break through standard channels.
- **T**raining — equip hiring managers to understand the value of returners and how to set them up for success.
- **U**nderstand your internal culture — challenge the bias that leads to returners being unsuccessful in rejoining the industry.
- **R**eturner-appropriate adverts and interviews — inclusive language, and interview processes that don't over-test for recent experience.
- **N**etwork — build a returner network within the organisation to support connection and development.
- **E**nable flexible working — flexibility benefits returners and widens the wider candidate pool.
- **R**ole models — showcase successful returners and the hiring managers who support them.
- **S**upport and nurture — coaching, mentors and buddies that ensure returners are fully integrated for long-term success.

This framework is offered as a practical companion to the policy recommendations in Part Four: government can set the conditions for a national returnership pathway, but employers still need a concrete operating model to deliver it.

## Appendix C.1: Towards a minimum returner requirement standard

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Recommendation 5 proposes a capability recovery measurement standard at national level. Government has already set out the building blocks for this at programme level: the Office for Equality and Opportunity's own employer guidance on supporting people back into work, building on best practice originally developed with Career Returners (formally Women Returners) and Timewise, sets out much of the practical groundwork a Minimum Returner Requirement Standard would formalise and extend.

At programme level, a complementary Minimum Returner Requirement Standard would give employers a common, formalised outline for what a structured returnership should contain, reducing recruitment risk, accelerating time to competence, and ensuring returners receive the structured support needed to redeploy into the workforce.

Drawing on the RETURNERS framework above, such a standard would specify:

- A structured onboarding programme tailored to returning professionals.
- A competency and training needs assessment linked to the role.
- Targeted technical, safety and regulatory refresher training where required.
- An agreed individual development plan with clear objectives.
- Regular line manager reviews and access to mentoring throughout the reintegration period.
- Formal competency sign-off at the end of the programme.
- Measurement of outcomes, including time to competence, retention, and participant and employer feedback.

A standard along these lines would sit well alongside Recommendation 5's national measurement standard: one measures capability recovered at the level of Government and Skills England, the other ensures every individual returnership meets a consistent bar at the level of the employer.

*Source: Office for Equality and Opportunity, Employer guidance: helping people return to work (gov.uk), building on Returner Programmes: Best Practice Guidance for Employers, co-authored by Career Returners (previously Women Returners) and Timewise (2018).*

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