

HR RESEARCH SERIES 2026 - REPORT R27 OF 10 (EXTENDED)

Return to Work and Career Gap Hiring 2026

How progressive employers are accessing a huge untapped talent pool by rethinking career gaps and career returners.

Career gaps are one of the most irrational discrimination points in hiring. Candidates with gaps for caregiving, health, redundancy, travel or voluntary work receive 35% fewer callbacks than identical CVs without gaps, despite no systematic performance difference once supported back into work.

2.8M

Europeans who want to work but have career gaps of 2+ years

-35%

lower callback rate for equivalent CVs with a 12-month career gap

91%

12-month retention from structured returner programme hires

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The business case for returnship programmes is compelling: a largely untapped talent pool with significant experience, very high retention and strong performance. This report provides the evidence and the design framework.

The case against gap discrimination

Career gap discrimination is both legally risky (correlates with protected characteristics) and economically irrational. A blanket policy that screens out gap candidates likely constitutes indirect sex discrimination in most EU jurisdictions, given the 2:1 gender distribution of caregiving gaps.

Gap cause	Gender distribution	Legal risk	Performance data
Childcare / parental leave extension	73% female	High, indirect sex discrimination risk	No performance difference at 12 months
Elder care / family caring	68% female	High, similar indirect discrimination risk	Strong performance, high motivation
Mental health / illness	Roughly even	Disability discrimination risk	Varies by condition, most perform at par
Redundancy / restructuring	Roughly even	Lower risk	No performance difference
Travel / personal development	Younger skew	Low	Performance advantage in some soft skills
Voluntary / social sector work	Female skew	Low	Strong transferable skills often undervalued

Designing a returnship programme

The structure that achieves 91% 12-month retention: 2 weeks orientation, 8 weeks substantive project with peer buddy and regular check-ins, end-of-programme review with genuine conversion offer.

- **Paid from day one** so unpaid programmes do not exclude the most disadvantaged returners.
- **Real work**, returnees leave if patronised by make-work, substantive deliverables produce best outcomes.
- **Buddy system**, peer (not manager) buddy for first 4 weeks for psychologically safe questions.
- **Skills refresh**, 2-5 hours structured refresher in week 1-2, focuses confidence not capability.
- **Conversion expectation** baked in from the start, ambiguity is the main reason returners drop out.

Removing gap bias from screening

The simplest action to reduce gap discrimination: instruct your ATS not to filter on employment-gap length, brief all recruiters that gaps are not a screening criterion, and add to your job ads: 'We welcome applications from candidates with career gaps.' Costs nothing, immediately widens your pool.

Gap candidate assessment

Approach	Standard version	Gap-adapted version
Opening question	Tell me about your most recent role	Tell me about the work or experience you are most proud of
Skills assessment	CV-based skills screening	Work sample test, blind to employment history
Reference check	Most recent employer	Most recent relevant reference, any time period
Technical currency	Current knowledge assumed	Skills refresh plan discussed at offer stage
Cultural fit	How have you worked in teams recently?	How do you prefer to work with colleagues?

Making the business case internally

Metric	Direct hire	Returnship hire	Saving / advantage
Cost per hire	EUR 8,400	EUR 2,400	EUR 6,000 saving per hire
12-month retention	71%	91%	Saves EUR 8,400 per retained hire
Time to productivity	4.6 months	4.8 months	Minimal difference with support
18-month performance	6.8 / 10	7.1 / 10	Slight performance advantage
Diversity contribution	Variable	High, 68-73% female	Significant D&I benefit

Beyond returnships, normalising gap-positive hiring

Culture change action	Effort	Impact	Timeline
Remove ATS gap filter	Low	Immediate widening of pool	Immediate
Brief recruiters on gap neutrality	Low	Reduces recruiter screening bias	1 week
Update job ads to welcome gaps	Low	Increases gap candidate applications 18%	Immediate
Interviewer gap training	Medium	Reduces assessment bias	2-4 weeks
Track gap hire outcomes	Medium	Evidence for culture change	6-12 months data
Launch formal returnship	High	Structured programme, high ROI	3-6 months to design and launch

Forward outlook 2026-2030

EU pay transparency and anti-discrimination enforcement scrutinise gap-related screening from 2026. Returnship programmes become standard at FTSE 100, CAC 40 and DAX companies by 2027. By 2028 skills-verification platforms reduce reliance on continuous employment as a proxy for current capability.

Built for what's next.

tenperzent.com is the AI-native ATS designed for European hiring in 2026 - GDPR by default, EU AI Act compliant, free to start, €79/month to scale.

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