



Supporting women in mid- and late-careers who are seeking to return to the workforce after an absence

The National Careers Institute (NCI) partnered with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) to obtain a better understanding of the career information and support needs of women in their mid- to late-careers (aged 30 and above), who are seeking to return to the workforce after an absence. These individuals are referred to as 'women returners' in this report.

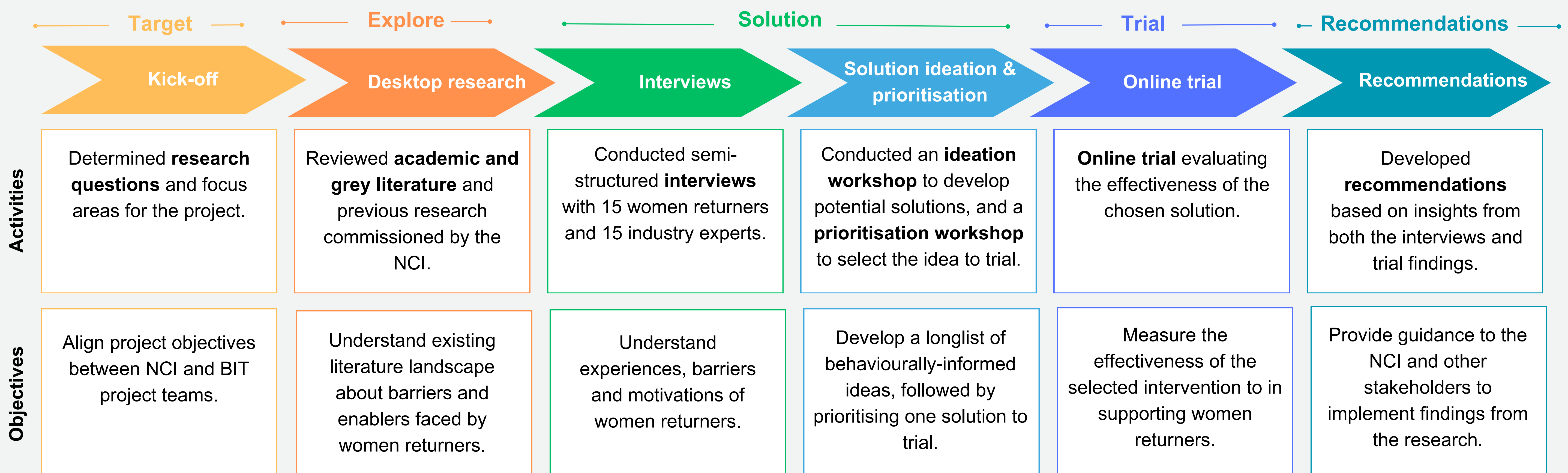
What is behavioural insights?

'Behavioural insights' (BI) refers to the practical application of concepts from behavioural science. Underpinned by the recognition that people's decisions are influenced by cognitive biases, emotions and environmental factors, BI offers a framework for designing policies, programs and interventions that better align with how individuals naturally think and act.

How was BI applied in this research?

- **Understanding real-world behaviour:** 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with women returners to gain insights into the attitudes, motivations and behaviours of women returners in real world contexts. Barriers and enablers that women returners encounter when returning to the workforce were identified, as well as the cognitive shortcuts that may shape their decisions when engaging with career information and support.
- **Designing solutions based on evidence:** This included synthesising findings from interviews into the behavioural barriers and enablers faced by women returners, then drawing on the interventions from the behavioural science literature, which were used to address similar challenges.
- **Measuring potential impact of solutions:** To ensure that the proposed intervention (different flexible work framings in job ad summaries) was effective in changing behaviour, an online trial was conducted to measure the difference in choices made by women returners depending on the information they received. This gives greater confidence in the potential effectiveness of this solution when implemented in the real world and allowed us to contribute to the existing evidence base about effective interventions.

Research methodology



Interview findings

Women returners value career breaks, but some wish they had planned more for their absence and return.

Women returners often have different requirements after their career absence, and have a renewed sense of what meaningful work means.

Women face many structural challenges when returning to the workforce, which can prolong their career absence.

Confidence, skills and professional networks can atrophy during a career absence, impacting women's return to work.

Women returners want more personalised and tailored information and support.

Women returners want job ads with details about flexibility and required skills, as well as feedback on job applications.

Women returners use online job boards for careers information, and value information spread via networks

Alignment with desktop research

Nearly one third of women returners feel their skills, knowledge and experiences were not up to date following an absence. Planning, studying or training during career breaks show promise in mitigating such feelings (UK Government Equalities Office, 2018).

Employers note that women returning to the workforce have a new eagerness to take on challenges and are highly engaged. A 2015 showed that an overwhelming majority of women (93%) wanted the flexibility of part-time work, while almost half (43%) wanted the flexibility of full-time work with the flexible working patterns (Timewise, 2015).

Lack of flexible work opportunities and the cost/availability of childcare services can significantly prolong women's career absence. The longer a woman is out of work, the more significant the negative impacts of a career absence. 70% of women returners stated that taking a career break for child-related reasons was detrimental to their career. 21.3% of women stated they were side-lined for a promotion or role because of their career absence (STEM Returners, 2021).

Approximately 30% of women returners believe they have lost skills, knowledge and experience during their career absence. This can lead to women applying for less senior roles when returning to work, compared to the role they were previously in (UK Government Equalities Office, 2018). Women often find their return to work intentions are hindered by underdeveloped professional networks resulting from a career absence, where maintaining ties to professional communities becomes challenging.

Programs that involve upskilling women in particular skills while they seek a return to work have proven effective in assisting women back into the workplace. Mentorship programs have also proven effective at getting women back into work.

79% of returners consider flexibility in work roles important, demonstrating the importance of flexible working offerings in job ads (Robert Walters Group, n.d.). Despite the demand for flexible work, women returners frequently report that employers are unwilling to support and accommodate flexible and part-time working patterns.

Women returners prefer online job boards or word-of-mouth to government sources. Only 3% of women use government sites to find work. Working part-time, which is common amongst women returning to work following an absence, makes attending networking events particularly challenging and exacerbates the impacts of professional isolation. This reinforces the need for networking events to be flexible (UK Government Equalities Office (2018).

Insights from desk research and interviews

Women returning to work often seek part-time or flexible roles to balance caring responsibilities, or because of illness or injury.

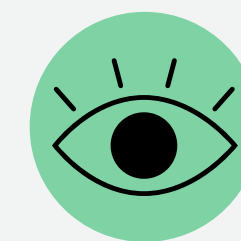
Previous research conducted by the BIT has shown that making flexible work available in job ads can increase the total number of applications and the proportion of women who apply.

Flexible work is linked with improved wellbeing and reduced exhaustion and burnout among working parents.

Women returners reported that flexible and secure positions are relatively uncommon. This could lead to delays or apprehensions about returning to work, or force women to compromise on security, seniority or job satisfaction.

Women returners also reported that job ads often lack clarity on the specifics of flexible work available. Some also felt uneasy about requesting flexible arrangements due to concerns about negative employer reactions to their caregiving roles or the need/desire to work flexibly.

Behaviourally-informed ideas to support women returners



Make flexibility visible
Ensure that flexible work arrangements are visible in job summaries.



Provide detail
Clearly specify the types of flexible work options that are possible, such as remote work, part-time schedules, and flexible hours.



Normalise flexibility
Emphasise that the organisation has a culture of flexible work.



Signal inclusivity
Indicate when a role is particularly suitable for working parents and/or signal explicit support for those with caregiving responsibilities.

Intervention tested

We tested the effect of changing the presentation of the availability of flexible work in job ads on women returners' preference for the role.

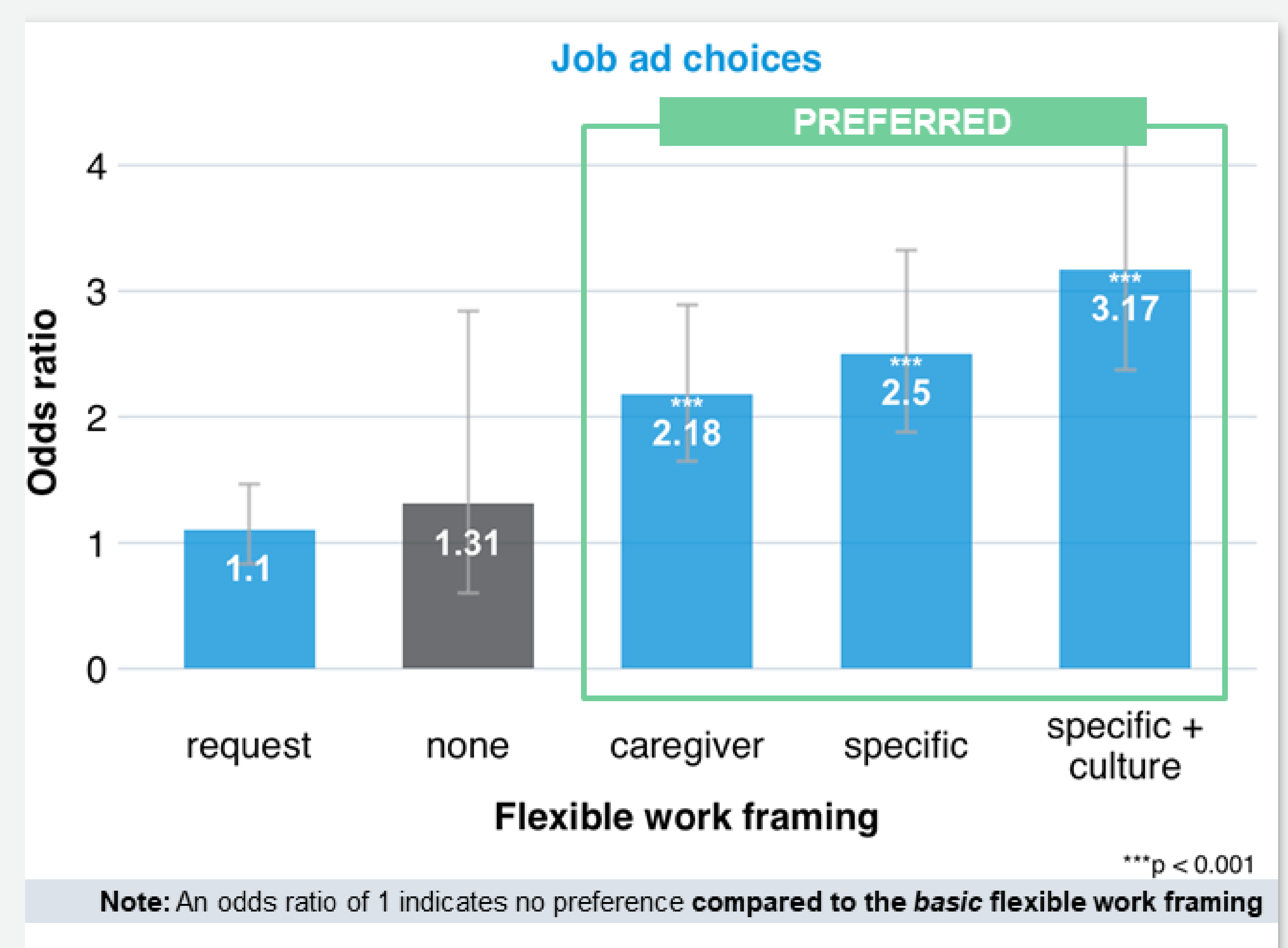
Six different descriptions about flexible work in job ad summaries were tested within a simulated online environment.

The conditions were:

- **None** - a statement unrelated to flexible work was included to serve as baseline.
- **Basic** - "We offer flexible work", a statement that reflects how many employers currently advertise flexible work in job ads, was included.
- **Request** - "Flexible work available on request", a statement that places the onus on the employee to request flexible work, was included.
- **Caregiver** - "We support parents and caregivers with flexible work options", a statement that aims to be more inclusive by explicitly signalling that the company supports flexible work for caregivers, was included.
- **Specific** - "This is a flexible position – you choose your days, hours and location (office, remote, hybrid)", a statement that provides explicit details about the flexible work options that are available, was included.
- **Specific + culture** - "We offer our staff the freedom to decide their own work/life balance – set your own work days, hours and location (office, remote, hybrid)", a statement that not only provides explicit details, but also signals a workplace culture that supports work-life balance, was included.

460 women in their mid- to late-careers who were currently on a career break or had recently returned from one participated in the trial. Participants were shown a series of pairs of job ad summaries that included the above phrases and asked to choose the job ad they preferred.

Results



Results showed that job ads that included tailored support ("Caregiver"), detail ("Specific") or endorsement of work/life balance ("Specific + culture") were preferred over less informative statements ("None", "Basic" or "Request").

Recommendations

Support women returners to build confidence, reflect on their skills, and create goals

- Women returners often have different requirements after their career absence, and have renewed sense of what meaningful work means.
- Confidence, skills and professional networks can atrophy during a career absence, impacting women's return to work

For example:

- Support women returners to build confidence and prompt them to reflect on their career goals, including what meaningful work looks like to them.
- Help women returners assess and develop their skills and improve job applications.

Provide tailored information and support for women before and after a career absence

- Women returners value career breaks, but some wish that they had planned more for their absence and return.
- Women returners want more personalised and tailored information and support.

For example:

- Support women to plan their career absence.
- Support women during or when they return from a career absence.

Provide information on best practice in attracting and retaining women returners

- Women face many structural challenges when returning to the workforce, which can prolong their career absence.
- Women returners use online job boards for careers information and value information spread via networks.

For example:

- Encourage industry to support women returning to work.
- Advise industry on how to support and retain women returners

Encourage industry to identify and advertise flexible work effectively

- Job ads that included tailored support, detail or endorsement of work/life balance were preferred over less informative statements.
- Women returners want job ads with information about flexibility and required skills, as well as feedback on job applications.

For example:

- Encourage industry to identify roles that could be made more flexible.
- Encourage industry to improve the way flexibility is described in job ads.

References

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