

# THE STEM RETURNERS INDEX — 2023



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In partnership with



**STEM Returners is a multi award-winning solution to an industry wide problem. Our unique Returners Programmes help highly qualified STEM professionals to return to an equitable and inclusive STEM sector after a career break, enabling STEM leaders to access a new and overlooked talent pool, and in doing so, improve diversity and inclusion within their organisation.**

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# Why do we exist?

We're on a mission to make it easier for highly qualified STEM professionals to return to work, creating the fairer, more diverse industry we all deserve.

Today, most STEM professionals get overlooked when attempting to return from a career break, contributing to a concerning lack of diversity in STEM organisations. This is what we're here to change.

### Our story

STEM Returners was founded in 2017 in response to a growing skills gap in UK STEM industries. We discovered a recruitment system that is broken, contributing to a shocking lack of diversity in STEM organisations.

### A broken recruitment system

Highly skilled STEM professionals get overlooked when attempting to return from a career break, struggling to make progress via traditional recruitment channels.

**Why?** Unconscious bias at the shortlisting stage, hiring pressures leading to assumptions made on limited information, and the common misconception that a 'CV gap' equates to a deterioration of skills.

These hidden barriers mean talented professionals are being left behind, and this needs to change.

### A shocking lack of diversity in STEM

# 88% male & 91% white

The current UK engineering workforce is 88% male and 91% white, yet few engineering companies are taking meaningful steps to attract minority ethnic groups or address the gender imbalance in their organisation.

In a market suffering from a desperate skills shortage this problem is magnified. The skills gap is growing, and the UK needs a diverse, agile and innovative STEM workforce more than ever.



# How do we help?

### The STEM Returners Programme

We provide STEM professionals with a supported route back into the career they worked hard to build. Plus advice, career coaching, networking opportunities and mentoring to ensure they are ready and confident to return.

We help returners to thrive through:

1. Partnering with STEM organisations to run paid, short-term returner programmes
2. Providing dedicated career coaching and mentoring programme
3. Partnering with the Government Equality Hub to deliver free of charge return to work career coaching, job skills training and sector specific upskilling and mentoring designed to increase workplace equality and boost local economies

### It really works

**We've now helped over 400 STEM professionals return to work across the UK**



## The STEM Returners Index

### What is the STEM Returners Index?

The STEM Returners Index is an annual survey with UK STEM professionals who are on a career break, attempting to return to work or recently returned.

We know that STEM professionals on career breaks face hidden barriers when attempting to return to work. The STEM Returners Index aims to further understand these barriers, track the progress UK STEM industries are making with solving them, and shine a light on the change needed to create fair opportunities for all.

This year we are pleased to **launch the 3rd annual STEM Returners Index**, based on a survey completed by over 1000 STEM professionals between March and July 2023.



# 2022 Recap

## A reminder of last year's results

In April 2022 we surveyed a nationally representative group of over 1000 STEM professionals who were on a career break, attempting to return to work or recently returned.

Each year we ask the same questions in order to understand the critical trends impacting returners in the UK. Before we share 2023's results, here is a recap of what we found this time last year.

**27%**

had applied for more than 70 jobs through standard recruitment channels

**86%**

of UK STEM professionals on a career break were **not** doing so out of personal choice

**65%**

were finding the process of attempting to return to work either difficult or very difficult

**74%**

had applied for more than 6 jobs in the previous 12 months

**97%**

of successful returners were glad that they had made the decision to return to employment

**53%**

of over 45s never or rarely got feedback on their job applications

**38%**

of returners felt they had experienced bias in a recruitment process

**35%**

of returners said their personal confidence had been affected by the recruitment challenges they faced

**Females were 2x**

more likely than males to never receive feedback at all

# 2023 Results

# What did we find?

## Foreword

2023 is the 3rd annual STEM Returners Index, but the first year that we are delighted to report genuine progress in the sector.

Thanks to employers and industry bodies working together to tackle the hidden barriers STEM professionals face when finishing a career break, and the softening impact of Covid over time, our 2023 data shows significant improvement compared to the previous two years in terms of how easy or difficult they are finding it to return to work, while also showing signs that levels of bias in the recruitment system are in decline.

Our data proves once again that those attempting to rejoin STEM industries represent a highly experienced, qualified

group of professionals, often with very recent experience, who are ambitious and motivated to return to work. Despite this, many of last year's challenges remain. In particular, a severe lack of application feedback, absence of structured returner programmes, while candidates from minority ethnic backgrounds and older age groups are having to work harder than ever to get a fair opportunity.

UK STEM employers continue to miss out on opportunities to enhance their workforce and need hiring managers to think differently when it comes to recruitment. We hope that this year's STEM Returners Index inspires them to build a diverse, inclusive and equitable STEM sector for all.



**This is a highly experienced, qualified group of professionals, often with very recent experience, who are ambitious and motivated to return to work.**

## A hidden opportunity

STEM professionals attempting to return to work in 2023 are 45% female and 39% from minority ethnic groups, representing a significant opportunity for STEM organisations to improve the diversity of their workforce.

Our research has shown year after year that returners are highly experienced and qualified. In 2023, the story is no different. 65% have a degree, masters or doctorate, with over 70% holding their highest academic qualification in a STEM field, and 44% having

more than 5 years of experience in their field before taking a career break. 52% were in a manager or professional role prior to their career break.

Over half of those attempting to return have been on a career break for less than two years, crushing the common misconception that all career breaks lead to a significant deterioration in skills.

What's more, returners are motivated by all of the right reasons. 30% miss the challenge,

33% want to return to their passion, and 31% want to get back to making progress with their long-term career goals.

This is a highly experienced, qualified group of professionals, often with very recent experience, who are ambitious and motivated to return to work. Organisations who aren't engaging with this group are missing a clear opportunity to enhance not only the diversity but the quality of their workforce.

## Why a career break

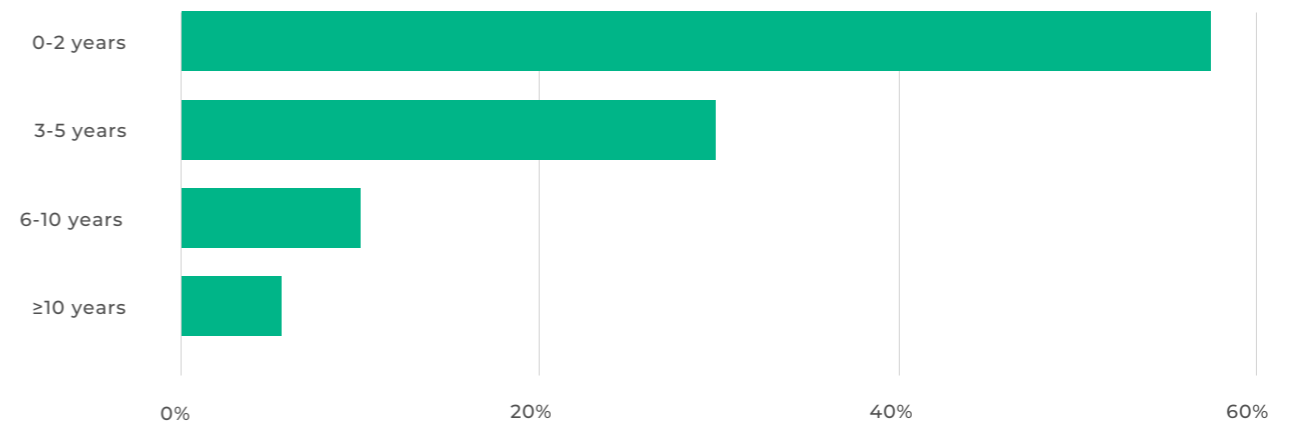
As we found last year, only a small proportion (12%) of career breakers stop working out of personal choice. In fact, caring for others (both children and other family members) is the primary reason for a career break for 44% of all STEM professionals on a career break.

There also remains a gender divide when it comes to primary reasons for taking the leap. Women are most likely to take a career break to fulfil childcare responsibilities, with 47% of female survey

respondents citing this as their primary reason, compared to 17% of men. In contrast, men are significantly more likely to take a career break for health or illness related reasons (30% of men vs 18% of women).

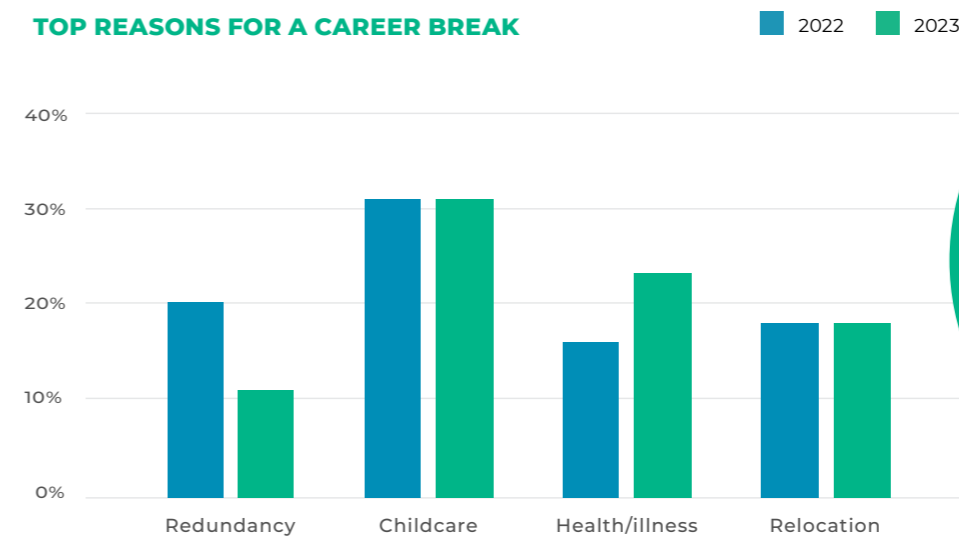
For all returners, relocation remains a significant driver with 18% of all respondents citing this as their main reason, however thankfully, redundancy is in decline year on year from 20% in 2022 to 11% in 2023 as we start to see industries stabilise post-covid.

### HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN/WERE ON A CAREER BREAK?



[Sample: 1,000 UK STEM returners, 2023]

### TOP REASONS FOR A CAREER BREAK



[Sample: 1,000 UK STEM returners, 2022 & 2023]

**Only a small proportion (12%) of career breakers stop working out of personal choice.**

## Hurdles to overcome

Whether it be for financial reasons (46%), or due to children reaching school age (23%), when STEM professionals decide to return to work, it remains harder than it should be, with 51% of returners saying the process is difficult or very difficult.

Why is this? As was the case in both 2021 and 2022, the single biggest barrier to returning to work is lack of feedback at application stage. A staggering 44% of candidates in 2023 say they receive feedback never or hardly at all from hiring organisations following their initial application.

This struggle to overcome the first hurdle in a hiring process leads to an incredibly high volume of applications required to achieve success, with 66% of returners applying for more than 6 jobs and 17% applying for more than 70!

Once in a recruitment process, 33% of returners feel that bias has been a barrier to them personally, with older age groups sadly feeling



**There was clear age bias. And the longer I was out of the workplace the worse this became. Mentally it is very difficult to handle so much rejection”**

(Returner, 2023)

the sharp end of this. Over 45s are almost twice as likely than under 45s to apply for 70+ jobs (21% vs 13%) and perceptions of bias in the recruitment process rise to 49% among 55-64 year olds.

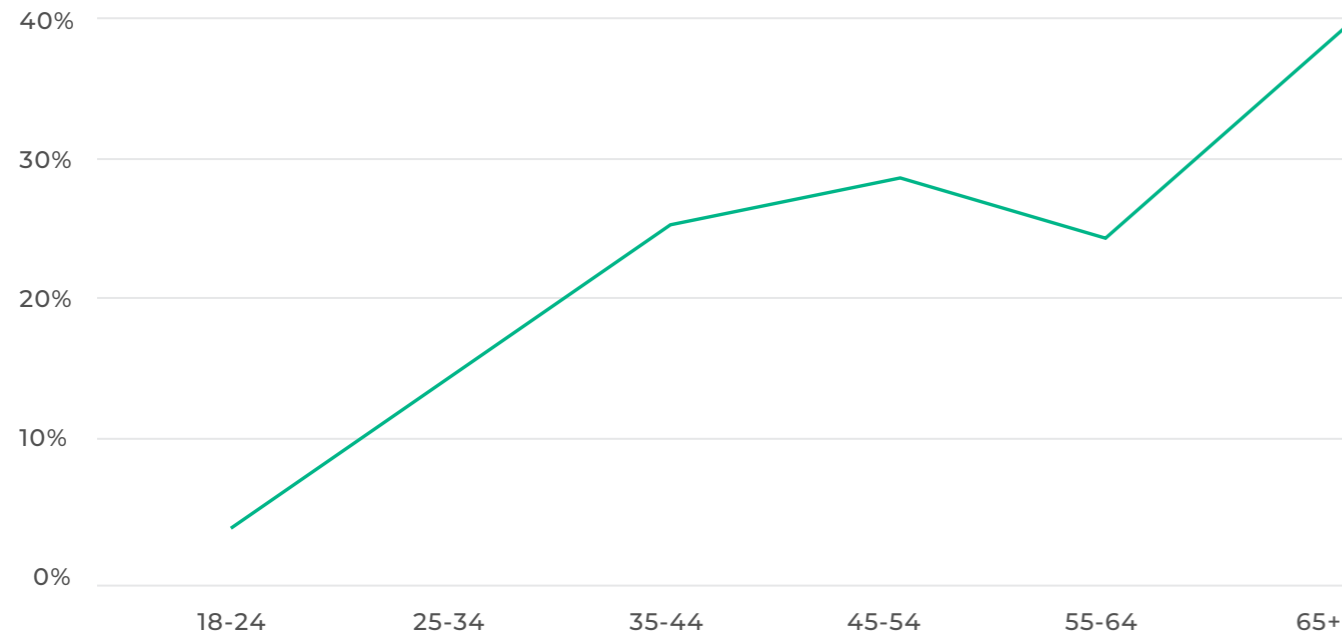
It also appears that some misconceptions remain barriers to return. For example, despite 86% of career breaks lasting less than

**Over 45s are almost twice as likely than under 45s to apply for 70+ jobs.**

5 years, 38% of candidates feel they have received bias related to lack of recent experience. Once again, signalling there is still a significant perception issue to overcome regarding deterioration of skills.

The result? 30% of returners say their personal confidence has been affected by the recruitment challenges they face, and their low confidence remains a barrier of its own.

% OF CANDIDATES APPLYING FOR 50+ JOBS, BY AGE (2023)



[Sample: 1,000 UK STEM returners, 2023]



**One of the greatest challenges I have is my work experience overseas not being recognised by the UK labour market”**

(Returner, 2023)

Our 2023 data shows that STEM professionals from minority ethnic backgrounds still face a significant disadvantage when attempting to return, and are 50% more likely than White British candidates to say they are finding the process of returning ‘very difficult’.

Professionals from minority ethnic backgrounds represent a huge proportion (39%) of candidates attempting to return to work in 2023. They are half as likely than White British candidates to be on a career break out of personal choice (7% vs 15%) and almost twice as likely (44% vs 25%) to be primarily motivated by wanting to ‘return to their passion’.

This clearly represents a large and motivated group of returners for employers to consider, however sadly, they are twice as likely as

all other ethnic groups (34% vs average of 17%) to feel they have experienced bias in a recruitment process related to race or ethnicity, and are almost twice as likely as White British candidates to need to apply for more than 70 jobs (20% vs 9%). Delving further into the comments made by our survey respondents, it would also seem that qualified candidates moving to the UK from overseas face additional barriers in transferring their international skills, regardless of their transferability.

**44% of candidates in 2023 say they receive feedback never or hardly at all.**



**I’ve applied for numerous positions but hardly ever get a response”**

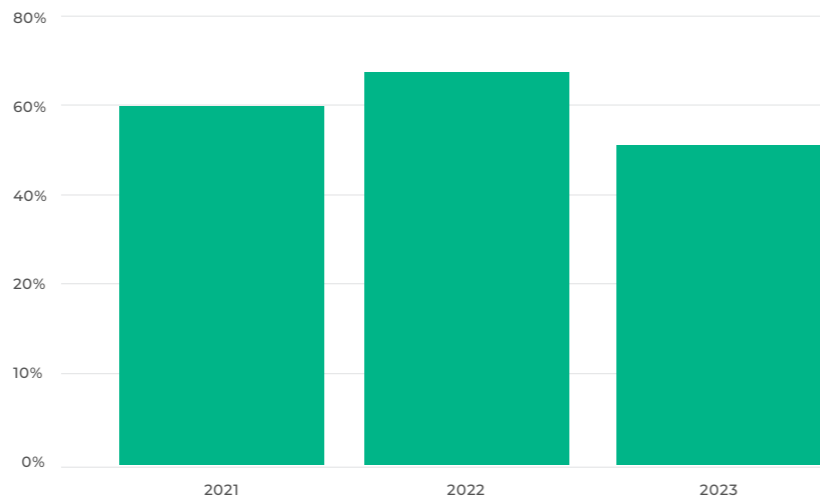
(Returner, 2023)

## Signs of progress

The underlying challenges clearly remain, however it is not all doom and gloom for STEM professionals rejoining industry. For the first year since we launched the STEM Returners Index, we have seen that candidates are finding it easier to return to work than they were this time last year.

In 2022, 65% of those attempting to return in 2022 are finding the process difficult or very difficult. In 2023, this has reduced to 51%. While this year's number is still higher than it should be, we believe that such a significant improvement is still something to celebrate and a sign of real progress in STEM industries.

### % FINDING PROCESS DIFFICULT/VERY DIFFICULT



[Sample: 1,000 UK STEM returners, 2021, 2022, 2023]



“The pandemic gave me a lot of time to learn new technologies and it also helped me to build my confidence and communication”

(Returner, 2023)

## What is driving the improvement?

Firstly, we seem to be recovering from the negative impact of Covid, as only 16% of returners this year say that Covid has made attempting to return to work more difficult, versus 34% last year.

And crucially, there appears to be less bias in the system. This year, 33% of returners felt they had experienced bias in a recruitment process, compared to 38% last year.

Bias can appear in many ways, and we can see improvement in a number of areas. For example, last year, men were significantly more likely (43%) than women (33%) to say they have experienced personal bias (for any reason) in a recruitment process, and we had reason to be concerned that we were starting to see men become less desirable to organisations as they strive to hit gender diversity targets. This year, the gap has closed to 34% of men and 31% of women.

Last year, men were almost twice as likely to need to apply for 70+ roles (34% vs 18% of women). This year, the gap has closed to 15% of men vs 14% of women.

Among those experiencing bias, women are 5% less likely in 2023 than in 2022 to say they have experienced bias related to their gender (24% in 2023 from 29% in 2022).

Last year, for no comprehensible reason, females were less likely to get feedback on a job application than males (52% of females vs 46% of males received feedback never or hardly at all). This year, that percentage of females has dropped from 52% to 40%.

Of equal concern last year was the apparent bias against those with a disability. 57% of those with a disability never (or hardly ever) received feedback, compared to 47% of those without a disability. This year, the gap has closed entirely, with

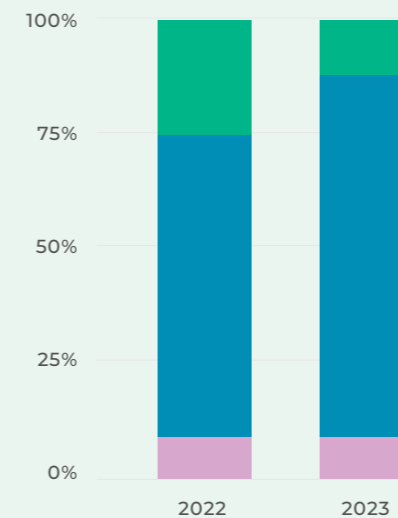
disability seemingly having no influence on likelihood to receive application feedback in 2023.

These are small improvements to big problems, but for the first time these trends are heading in the right direction and would suggest that hiring managers are becoming more aware of how to eradicate bias from recruitment processes.

**16% of returners this year say that Covid has made attempting to return to work more difficult, versus 34% last year.**

### IMPACT OF COVID ON RETURN TO WORK

Legend: Negative impact (green), Positive impact (purple), No impact (blue)

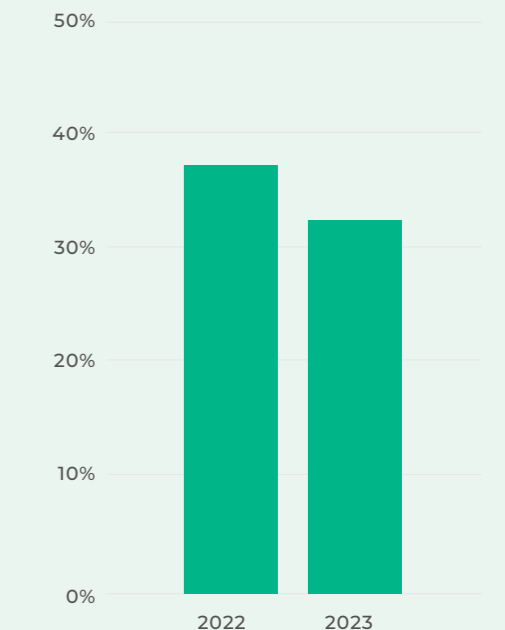


“Hybrid working has made my return to work while having childcare responsibilities more achievable”

(Returner, 2023)

[Sample: 1,000 UK STEM returners, 2022 & 2023]

### % EXPERIENCED BIAS IN RECRUITMENT PROCESS



[Sample: 1,000 UK STEM returners, 2023]



## Managing the transition

While 92% of those who have successfully returned to work in 2023 are glad they have done so, 28% found the transition to be difficult or very difficult, with many survey respondents commenting on how their employers were not adequately equipped with sufficient understanding of how to enable or integrate a returner into its current workforce.

When asked if they would have preferred to return to work through a supported returners programme, 40% of returners said yes. Despite the clear need

for structured return to work programmes, only 21% had seen one, and only 16% had returned to work via this route - underlining the need for more STEM employers to think seriously about diversifying their approach to recruitment.

Positively, 74% of those who have successfully completed a return to work are now in a STEM field of employment and 59% into manager or professional positions, with countless success stories of fulfilment and reward.



**It had been years since I'd been in an office environment so it took some time to adjust"**

(Returner, 2023)



**It's nice to be back at a job I love. I really missed being at work and I was highly motivated when I returned. I was promoted twice in less than a year once I restarted!"**

(Returner, 2023)

## 2023 Summary

To conclude and as a helpful summary, here are the **top 10** findings from our research this year:

- 1 STEM professionals attempting to return to work in 2023 are as **diverse, experienced and qualified as ever** - 45% are female, 39% are from a minority ethnic background, 65% have a degree, masters or doctorate and 44% have more than 5 years of experience in their field before taking a career break.
- 2 They are a highly **motivated** group too - 30% miss the challenge, 33% want to return to their passion, and 31% want to get back to making progress with their long-term career goals.
- 3 **Caring responsibilities** (both children and other family members) is the most common reason for a career break, with only 12% taking one out of personal choice.
- 4 Gaining **feedback** on applications remains the single biggest barrier to returning to work. As was the case in both 2021 and 2022, a huge 44% of candidates in 2023 say they receive feedback never or hardly at all.
- 5 **Over 45s** are most likely to experience bias in a recruitment process and almost twice as likely than under 45s to apply for 70+ jobs.
- 6 STEM professionals from **minority ethnic** backgrounds are 50% more likely than White British candidates to say they are finding the process of returning 'very difficult' and twice as likely as all other ethnic groups to feel they have experienced bias in a recruitment process related to race or ethnicity.
- 7 Despite clear challenges remaining, we found for the first time in three years that candidates are finding it **easier to return** to work than they were 12 months ago. In 2022, 65% of those attempting to return in 2022 are finding the process difficult or very difficult. In 2023, this reduced to 51%.
- 8 The negative impact of **Covid** is in decline, as only 16% of returners this year said that Covid has made attempting to return to work more difficult, versus 34% last year.
- 9 Encouragingly, there appears to be less **personal bias** in the STEM recruitment system than there was 12 months ago. This year, 33% of returners felt they had experienced bias in a recruitment process, compared to 38% last year.
- 10 Despite 40% of successful returners saying they would have preferred to enrol in a supporter returners programme, only 16% had the chance to take this route, highlighting the opportunity to further reduce the proportion (currently 28%) of returners who find the **transition** to be difficult or very difficult.

## Case study

### Liyana and Amey Consulting



**Things are going really well for me now. I've had the chance to work on exciting projects and learn from incredibly talented colleagues.**

During a career break, Liyana decided to pursue a master's degree and switch careers to transition into a different industry.

Unfortunately, her previous experience didn't align with the roles she was interested in. Joining the STEM Returners programme with Amey Consulting allowed Liyana to transfer her skills to become a Civil Engineer.

#### **Please could you tell us a little about your career break?**

During my career break, I pursued a master's degree and decided to switch careers and transition into a different industry. I have eight years of experience as a Structural Engineer in the oil and gas industry, but my background didn't align with the roles I was applying for. Consequently, I encountered many obstacles and needed help finding suitable employment. However, I was fortunate to learn about the STEM Returners programme, which provided me with the opportunity to transfer my skills and expertise to a new career as a Civil Engineer with Amey Consulting in Scotland. Overall, my career break was a challenging time, but it ultimately led me to this new and exciting opportunity with Amey Consulting.

#### **How was your initial experience with STEM Returners?**

I had a great experience being contacted by STEM Returners. They were prompt in responding to my application and always very kind and supportive throughout the process. I felt like the people at STEM Returners truly cared about my career goals and were always looking out for my best interests.

They provided me with helpful information and guidance to help me prepare for the interview. They made sure that I felt comfortable and confident throughout the entire process.

#### **How was your interview at Amey Consulting?**

My interview experience with Amey Consulting was very positive. I found that both Amey Consulting and STEM Returners provided clear and effective communication throughout the interview process, which helped me to prepare and feel confident on the day. Overall, I felt like the interview was a great opportunity to learn more about the company and the role and demonstrate my qualifications for the position.

#### **Please could you tell us about your first 12 weeks on the STEM Returners Programme?**

It's quite overwhelming initially to adapt and integrate into an entirely new working environment. I must learn and get used to the new lingo, technical terms, code and standards, contract requirements, legislation, different software skills, and the list go on. My first 12 weeks on the Returners Programme with Amey Consulting were a really positive experience. As someone who was transitioning into a new industry and a new country, I found the support and guidance provided by Amey Consulting and STEM Returners programme to be invaluable. I also received attentive support from my people manager and my team, who were very helpful in developing my technical capabilities. Through these experiences, I was able to build a solid foundation of knowledge and skills, which helped me to make a smooth transition into my role at Amey Consulting. Overall, the first

12 weeks of the programme were a great success, and I'm grateful for the support and opportunities I've had during this time.

#### **How are things going now? Do you have any advice for STEM Returners looking to return to work? Would you recommend the programme?**

Things are going really well for me now. I've had the chance to work on exciting projects and learn from incredibly talented colleagues. As someone who took a break from work and a career change, I know how challenging it can be to enter the workforce, especially in a fast-moving field like STEM. That's why I highly recommend the STEM Returners programme to anyone looking to return to work in this field. The programme provides valuable support and training to help individuals build their skills

and confidence and access exciting job opportunities. For me, the programme has been a great way to jump-start my career.

#### **Now that you have a permanent role, what's next for you and your career?**

In the short term, I am focused on gaining experience in my current role and developing my technical and project management skills. However, I am also interested in pursuing getting myself registered as a Chartered Engineer as the next step in my career. Obtaining this certification will enhance my professional credentials and allow me to take on greater responsibilities and contribute more to the company's success. Amey Consulting is the perfect place for me to do so. I am impressed by the company's commitment to employee

development and its emphasis on delivering high-quality projects that positively impact communities. I am excited about the prospect of working with the talented team at Amey Consulting and continuing to grow and develop as a civil engineer.

**If you are looking to register your interest in joining a STEM Returners programme please visit [stemreturners.com](https://stemreturners.com)**



## Author's note



Thank you for reading our 2023 STEM Returners Index. I hope it motivates you to do what you can to enable more STEM professionals to rejoin the industry they love.

The report was a motivating one for us to write, given such clear signs of positive momentum in tackling industry wide problems. It comes at an exciting time for many other reasons too.

Earlier this year the UK Government announced funding to support parents and carers in

the Midlands and the North of England back into engineering and tech careers, tackling the huge challenges returners face in these regions.

In partnership with Women Returners and funded by the Government Equality Hub, we are delighted to be supporting the delivery of the STEM ReCharge project over the next 18 months. The initiative will provide free-of-charge return to work career coaching, job skills training and sector-specific upskilling and mentoring to 100 returners with tech or engineering experience who have taken career breaks over a year or more.

This is just one example of our government starting to invest in returners so we can plug the STEM gap, increase workplace equality,

and boost our economy - and it will play a big part in continuing our mission to help create a diverse, inclusive and equitable STEM sector.

STEM professionals continue to face an uphill battle when trying to return to professional-level work, however we have seen the progress that can be made when government, industry bodies and employers work together to achieve more.

We'd love to hear what you think about our latest research. Email us at [hello@stemreturners.com](mailto:hello@stemreturners.com) or visit our website to find out how we can collaborate.

Best wishes,

**Natalie Desty**  
**Founder & Director**  
**STEM Returners**

## Author biography

Natalie Desty is the Founder and Director of STEM Returners, an award-winning solution to an industry wide problem. After building a progressive career in recruitment, where she was Director of Maritime Engineering at a large recruitment company, Natalie was struck by the apparent lack of progress in diversity and inclusion within STEM industries. She was particularly concerned by the insurmountable barriers that people who have had a career break face, when wanting to return to STEM roles.

Natalie created a small pilot returners programme for a group of employers, which was a resounding success. Natalie

has developed this programme into STEM Returners, which has supported hundreds of people to restart their careers in internationally renowned organisations such as BAE Systems, SSE and Leonardo UK. Returners take part in 12-week paid placements, enabling STEM leaders to access the best available talent, and in doing so, improve diversity and inclusion within their organisation. Ninety-six percent of returners secure a permanent position within the host organisation following the placement.

Natalie has a BA Honours degree in International Relations and Politics from the University of

Portsmouth and was given the Eily Keary Award by the Royal Institute of Naval Architects for increasing equality, diversity and inclusion in the maritime industry. STEM Returners was awarded the Maritime UK Diversity Award in 2020, the Diversity in Engineering Award by Egnuity in March 2021, and Best Returnship Programme by the Women in Tech Employer Awards in May 2022. In September 2021, Natalie was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Engineering by Southampton Solent University to recognise her work in increasing diversity in STEM.

To find out more please visit [stemreturners.com](https://stemreturners.com)



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