

# FROM CAREER BREAK TO BREAKTHROUGH

RETURNSHIP GUIDE

NAVIGATING RETURNSHIP  
PROGRAMS IN SWITZERLAND



# Foreword

**This Returnship Guide offers the first overview of returnship programs in Switzerland. It is informed by a survey conducted through a combination of interviews (in person and via emails) with Advance member companies that have implemented returnship programs, using standardized questionnaires.**

The survey, analysis and writing of this guide were conducted by the Advance A-Team, comprising selected professionals of Advance Member Companies (cf. acknowledgements on [p. 16](#)). Not positioned as research itself, this guide effectively draws on research done by others and consolidates insights that are helpful to understand the purpose and promising impact that returnship programs can have.

The authors of the Advance Returnship Guide conclude that returnship programs are a great way to tap into the current pool of skilled but economically inactive people. According to the Federal Statistical Office (FSO), there were 137,000 Swiss women with caring responsibilities not working in 2021 – many of whom would like to return to their careers but are held back by a lack of flexible working hours and an employer preference for candidates without career gaps on their CV.

«In times of demographic change and shortages of specialists, this can have disastrous effects not just for the women affected, but also for employers and the entire Swiss economy», a 2020 report by ETH Zürich on professional reintegration into the workplace states. The report maintains: «Supporting and successfully shaping the professional reintegration of mothers following childbirth is, therefore, a key challenge for society as a whole.»

In times when Swiss companies are desperate for skilled employees due to the talent shortage, it seems the right moment to explore the impact that returnship programs can have based on existing practices by well-known Swiss companies.

Wishing you an insightful read!



# Flavors of returnship programs in Switzerland

**From classic programs supporting individuals with career breaks to business partnership models and initiatives exclusively for employees, returnship programs offer diverse opportunities for career re-entry.**

## **Classic returnship programs**

Classic returnship programs are designed to support individuals with longer career breaks who are seeking to re-enter the labor market. These programs provide opportunities for returnees, who may come from different industries, to benefit from flexible working arrangements, training, and coaching programs. Some notable examples of companies offering such returnship programs include Accenture, Credit Suisse, Johnson & Johnson, SBB, and UBS.

## **Business partnership returnship programs**

In addition to individual company programs, there are also business partnership returnship programs that involve multiple companies collaborating together. Partner companies provide financial support or offer free training, while gaining access to a talent pool of returnees. One example of such a program is Salesforce.

## **Returnship programs for employees**

Some companies offer returnship programs exclusively for their current employees, with no external candidates involved. These programs often include extended maternity leave, coaching sessions for returning mothers, flexible work schedules, and talent pool databases to actively fill vacancies with former employees. Prominent examples of companies offering returnship programs for employees include McKinsey & Company, PWC, and Zürcher Kantonalbank.

### **RETURNSHIP PROGRAMS: PAID, SUPPORTIVE, FLEXIBLE, AND PROMISING**

- Programs typically run for an average of 3–6 months and are paid.
- They provide special support for returnees, including coaching and mentoring.
- They offer flexible working hours and/or hybrid working arrangements.
- Programs mostly involve permanent positions, with some offering temporary contracts convertible upon successful program completion.

## Insights from the recruiters – still a long way to go

Although the survey sample of companies indicates that some welcome seeds have been sown for returners, Switzerland, like many other countries, still has a long way to go. According to one executive search firm that participated in the survey, most companies still have a clear preference for candidates who have not taken a career break. In addition, many companies are not flexible enough to accommodate the needs of mothers/parents returning to work. Few companies offer part-time positions, especially in senior management roles. Even if they advertise roles with 80%-100% working hours, they still prefer candidates who work full-time.

The recruiter mentioned that they have to actively seek out women because female applicants often only apply for jobs if they meet at least 80% of the advertised requirements. On the other hand, men will apply even if they meet only some of the requirements. A career break exacerbates this situation, as women are even less likely to apply for a job that does not specifically target returners. The recruiter recommends that returners actively address and highlight their career break, emphasizing what they achieved during that time, including personal development and job-related experiences.



# Bridging the gap to success: the purpose and impact of returnships



**Returnship programs provide a structured path for individuals who have taken an extended career break – typically two years or more for caring responsibilities or other reasons.**

Traditionally, they offer elements of re-training, upskilling, mentoring, and flexible work time. Returners can be men or women but are predominantly women. Return-to-work programs have been around since the early 2000s when particularly US technology companies used them to attract more diverse talent into the sector. Returnship programs, often described as internships for individuals returning after an extended break, are relatively new and still relatively rare in Switzerland. The longest-established returnship program among the eight Advance member companies that participated in this survey is at Credit Suisse, founded in 2015.

## **Far more than a DE&I tick-box item**

The key driver behind returnships is to increase the representation of women – often at senior levels. Those interviewed were using these programs to advance their companies' diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) agenda. That said, most of those interviewed – i.e., those executives who championed the introduction of such programs in their companies – said returnships should not be pigeonholed as a DE&I tick-box item. According to the interviewees, the schemes owe their success to the support from the company leadership, where DE&I commitments, and by extension, returnships, are firmly embedded in the overall corporate strategy and culture.

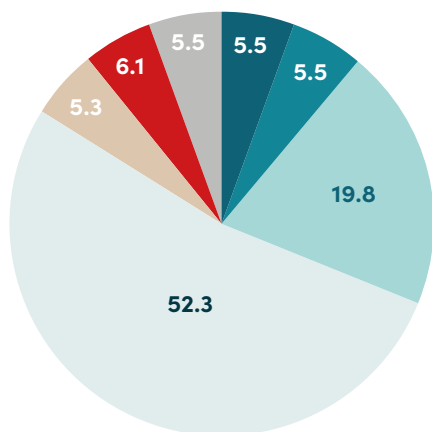
The majority of the Swiss programs are still small. So far, they are offered by large multinationals, focused on selected countries and/or divisions, and have not yet been extended to the entire company. They usually run for three to six months and are paid. Most companies offer permanent contracts. Those who offer temporary contracts usually convert them into permanent roles after successful completion of the program. All the programs in the survey offer flexible working hours (working part-time at a minimum of 60%) and/or hybrid working.

## **Career interrupted: exploring challenges faced by Swiss mothers returning to work**

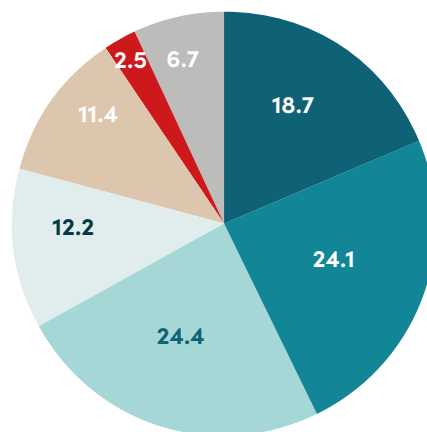
So, why are Swiss mothers finding it so difficult to return to their careers even though so many of them would like to? The short answer is that there's still a lack of flexible working hours (particularly at more senior levels) and an employer preference for a linear, uninterrupted career path. Much of this is rooted in heteronormative and traditional societal views and models, with the man as the full-time breadwinner and the woman working part-time, as stated in the [Gender Intelligence Report 2022 Executive Version](#). This also means that fathers are not encouraged to take on more family responsibilities or to take up flexible and/or hybrid work models. A 2021 [study](#), conducted by the Companies & Returnships Network (CRN) and the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, found that couples with children who are both working part-time accounted for less than 12% of cases. Around half of the couples followed the more traditional model of fathers working full-time and mothers working part-time. Data by the Federal Office for Statistics offer a granular view of employment models in couples (cf. [p. 6](#)).

## Employment models in couples with or without children in the household, in 2020

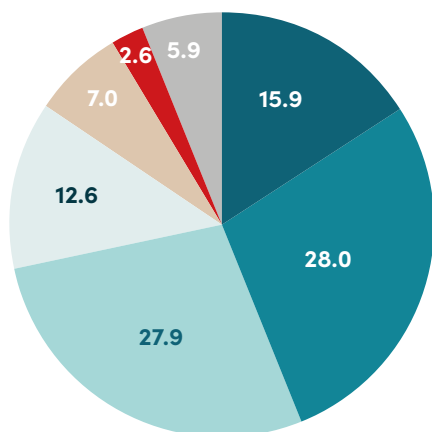
Couples without children in the household



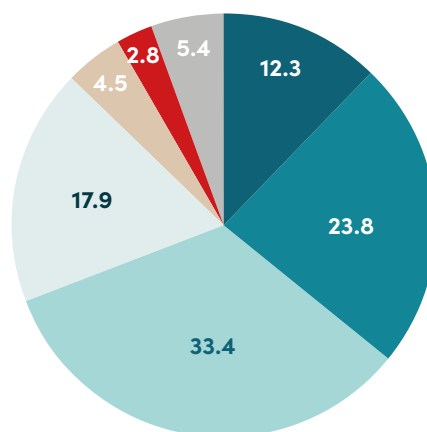
Couples with youngest child 0-3 years



Couples with youngest child 4-12 years



Couples with youngest child 13-24 years



- Man full-time/woman economically inactive
- Man full-time/woman part-time 1-49%
- Man full-time/woman part-time 50%-89%
- Both partners full-time

- Both partners part-time 1-89%
- Man part-time or economically inactive/women full-time
- Other models or unknown model

Source: Federal Office for Statistics

This means the majority of caring responsibilities in Switzerland still fall on women, and this may be one of the reasons why only 5% of mothers want a full-time job after their maternity leave, according to the [ETH Zürich](#) report. Mothers spend an average of five years outside the workplace, even though 55% of them would be willing to rejoin the workforce sooner if an interesting opportunity presented itself, according to a [FSO](#) report. 91.5% of returning mothers work part-time, and their average employment rate is 36%, yet few companies traditionally offer that model at a more senior level.

## Excluded and undervalued: the challenges for returning mothers

Career breaks come at a price. According to the Advance and McKinsey whitepaper [Kids or Career? Switzerland's Unnecessary Dilemma](#), 23% of returners express the need for shorter working hours, 19% for a better work-life balance. Women often find themselves unable to secure a return on the same level, facing a loss of responsibility and a lack of a sponsor or mentor. Employer preference for full-time senior staff without a career interruption means that mothers often don't even get a chance to be interviewed for positions as they are screened out at the application stage. This is often based on the assumption that skills have deteriorated during the break and the skills gained are not valued to the same degree - an attitude which is not unique to Switzerland.

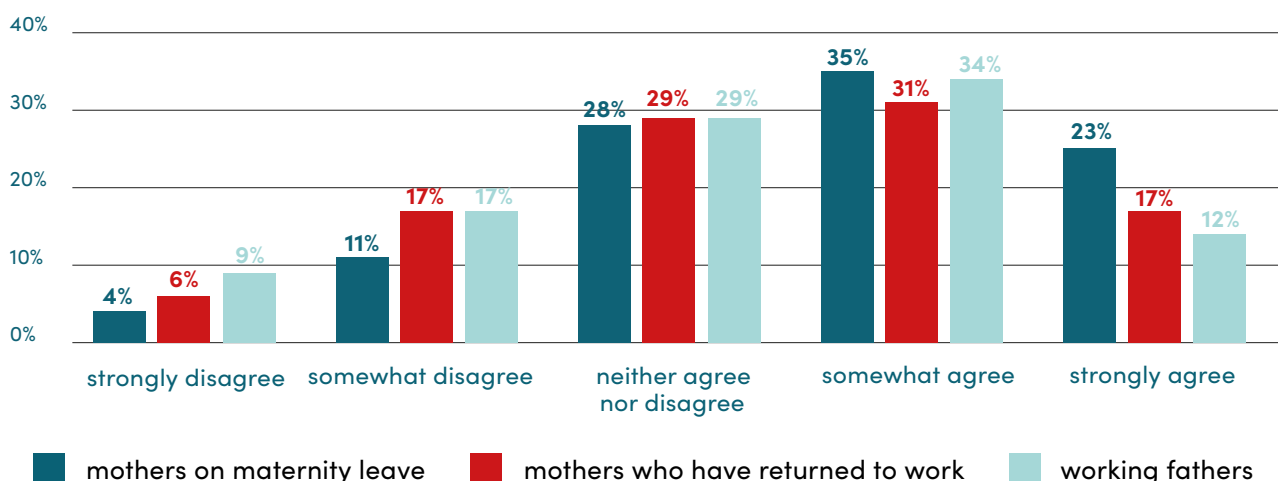
## Overcoming biases and stereotypes

«Once you get past the two-year mark in the gap, you're about half as likely to get a first-round screen for your application», said Christine Winston, interim Executive Director at Path Forward, a US non-profit organization that helps companies create returnship programs. «If you specify on your resume that your career gap was to be home with children, you are another 50% less likely to get that first-round phone screen», she stated at the [World Economic Forum](#). The business and employment social media platform [LinkedIn](#) started offering a career break spotlight on profiles to «have open conversations around the skills and experiences professionals amass away from the traditional workplace». Even so, the network also found that one in five hiring managers still outright reject candidates with work pauses.

That's where well-designed returnship programs can help to bring the concept of career breaks into the mainstream. They offer retraining and re-entry opportunities even at a senior level and the flexibility that many returners want and need. And, once they are set up well, they work. Interviews with the companies taking part in the survey highlighted that the quality and number of applicants were outstanding. In addition, returners are usually highly motivated and loyal to the companies, as found in the [ETH Zürich](#) survey, limiting staff turnover.

## Advantages of professional reintegration - for employees

«I go to work with greater motivation than before childbirth / the break.»



Source: ETH Zurich study: Value of professional reintegration for the economy

According to the findings of the ETH Zurich survey, a significant number of participants expressed increased motivation to return to work after childbirth or maternity leave. Among mothers currently on maternity leave, nearly 60% agreed that they would be more motivated to go to work after the break. However, this percentage was lower among mothers who had already returned to work (48%) and among working fathers (46%).

## Classic returnship programs: attracting new talents and challenging career stereotypes

According to Marine Poylo, Strategy & Consulting Manager at Accenture Switzerland, returnship programs offer «a way to attract new talent. We were amazed by the number and quality of applications we received – over 150 highly-qualified professionals for one advertised position.» These programs help instill the idea within a company’s culture that a career break and more flexible working arrangements are not detrimental to one’s career. Having role models encourages others to pursue non-traditional paths and motivates applicants who may feel that their career break hinders them from seeking senior positions. «For the first time, applicants were not afraid to talk about their career break in an interview», said Accenture’s Poylo. «They felt at ease, confident and inspired by the company. And thanks to this approach, we managed to speak to a lot of talent that we normally would not have been able to reach.»

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**Thanks to this [returnship] approach, we managed to speak to a lot of talent that we normally would not have been able to reach.**

Marine Poylo, Strategy & Consulting Manager,  
EMBARC Program Co-Lead at Accenture Switzerland



## Business partnership returnship programs: hiring for attitude and empowering returners

According to Vanessa Gentile, Head of Marketing at Salesforce Switzerland, they «hire for attitude and train for skills» in their returnship program.

Vanessa founded the company’s [Bring Women Back to Work](#), a business partnership program where companies in the Salesforce ecosystem collaborate both in terms of funding, running and benefiting from the scheme. Their program aims to attract applicants who may not necessarily have a technology background, have been out of the workforce for a minimum of one year, and can work 60% to 80% of a standard working week.

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**We hire for attitude and train for skills.**

Vanessa Gentile, Head of Marketing at Salesforce Switzerland



Returnship programs offer valuable insights and benefits for companies. The Advance survey, along with supporting studies, has demonstrated the high return on investment of such programs.



## UNLEASHING HIDDEN TALENT: KEY BENEFITS OF RETURNSHIP PROGRAMS

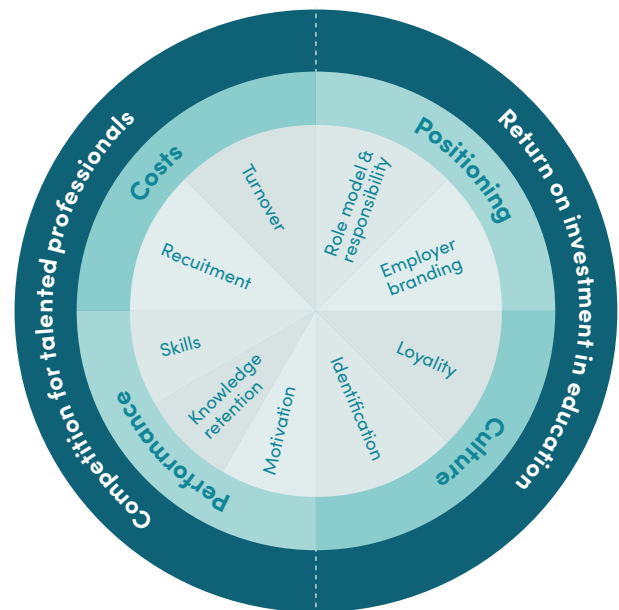
- Access to a new talent pool of highly qualified professionals who are loyal and committed to the company
- Reduction in staff turnover and associated recruitment costs
- Enhanced employer attractiveness and strengthened employer branding efforts
- High success rate of offering permanent positions to returners at the end of the program

## High return on investment

Professional reintegration programs offer several benefits for companies. These advantages also have broader societal implications, including addressing talent competition and emphasizing the value of education. Overall, professional reintegration programs create a supportive work environment that values work-life balance and drives success.

### Advantages of professional reintegration - for companies

- Enhancing social responsibility and employer attractiveness
- Fostering a positive company culture and increasing staff loyalty
- Tapping into the motivation and valuable skills of returning parents
- Reducing costs associated with turnover and recruitment






Source: ETH Zurich study: Value of professional reintegration for the economy

While not all Swiss firms struggling to attract staff may have the resources to establish formalized returnship programs, the key takeaway is that there is an untapped talent pool of highly qualified professionals in Switzerland. To tap into this pool, companies can employ creative thinking and flexibility. This can be done through strategic partnerships with companies like Salesforce or by focusing on retention strategies for individuals before and during maternity leave or career breaks.

# Best practices for bringing back talent into your company

If your company has made the decision to establish a returnship program, it is important to follow best practices to ensure its success. Here is a quick guide outlining some key recommendations:

<b>Pre-leave</b>  	<b>Engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Proactive engagement, taking the needs of potential returners into account</li> <li>Ensure an understanding of the value of reintegration at all levels of the organization</li> </ul>
	<b>Talent Management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Combine your returner program with the talent pool of internal returners</li> <li>Offer flexible work options and cater for extended breaks, e.g. sabbaticals, unpaid leave etc.</li> </ul>
	<b>Supportive culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase the understanding of the situation of mothers, fathers and all other returners through educational initiatives</li> <li>Remove the stigma related to returnships, for instance by sharing success stories of returners</li> </ul>
<b>Leave</b>  	<b>Returner network</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintain a network of potential returners to share available positions and relevant information such as e.g. financial implications on retirement savings etc.</li> </ul>
	<b>Hiring back to work</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Utilize third parties who have access to potential returners (e.g. CRN, Salesforce)</li> <li>Be explicit on returnship opportunities and share them with internal and external recruiters</li> <li>Communicate available opportunities for returners internally and externally, e.g. through a dedicated social media campaign</li> </ul>
<b>Return back to work</b>  	<b>Flexible work options</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Make jobs available starting at a 40%-70% basis, including leadership roles, e.g. with the option for job-sharing and top-sharing, hybrid work etc.</li> </ul>
	<b>Re-skilling</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide comprehensive onboarding and upskilling, e.g. through coaching circles, mentors or a buddy system</li> </ul>
	<b>Employability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider temporary contracts for the duration of the program; offer the opportunity to convert to a permanent position, e.g. part-time, after successful completion</li> </ul>
	<b>Supportive culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider building up a returners' network or utilizing an existing one such as e.g. parents@work</li> <li>Consider offering extended parental leave and affordable childcare</li> </ul>

# Case Study

## On the right track: SBB's journey with the Back to Business returnship program

When thinking of returnship programs, a traditional railway company may not be the first business that comes to mind. However, SBB, the Swiss national railway company, has been a major champion of returnships because they work. SBB launched its [Back to Business](#) program in 2020 and received approximately 1,200 applications for the four programs it launched. SBB took innovative approaches to recruitment by posting jobs and promoting them on platforms like Pinterest rather than traditional platforms like LinkedIn. The goal was to reach a target market of mothers on maternity leave and those who hadn't returned after maternity leave.

SBB's programs allow parents to bring their children to job interviews, eliminating childcare concerns. The overall goal of each program is for participants to secure permanent roles. «It was a huge project and it took us more than a year to get it off the ground», says Nicole Pongracz-Schüpbach, Marketing Manager Employer Branding. «The most essential aspect is to get buy-in from the top management.» In 2020, SBB commissioned ETH Zurich to conduct a study on the [Value of professional reintegration for the economy](#), which concluded that reintegration «offers numerous advantages for mothers, fathers and companies in Switzerland».

Although the SBB program is open to both men and women, its primary goal is to increase female representation in the company by 5 percentage points within three years (from 18% at the program's inception). While the concept of the program was generally accepted internally, there was resistance to the fact that returnship roles are offered part-time from 60% to 80%. «Part-time still carries a negative image [in Switzerland]», says Pongracz-Schüpbach.

At SBB, part-time work requires a robust level of organization as many roles encompass jobs that require 24-hour shift work. Most Back to Business roles are in customer service, HR, finance, and IT positions. However, according to Pongracz-Schüpbach, «60% is the new 80%», emphasizing that flexibility is no longer merely a family-friendly perk. Work-life balance is the primary criterion for the majority of younger individuals when choosing an employer. «So, if you want to attract talent in the future, you need to adapt to the market's need.»



**If you want to attract talent in the future,  
you need to adapt to the market's need.**

Nicole Pongracz-Schüpbach  
Marketing Manager Employer Branding SBB

# The pioneers: overview of surveyed companies shaping returnship programs

## ▶ Credit Suisse

Credit Suisse was the first out of the traps (among those surveyed), launching its [Real Returns](#) scheme in Switzerland in 2015. Since its inception, more than 180 returners have joined the bank, successfully increasing diversity within the organization. At the end of their returnship program, 81% of participants were offered a permanent contract. The scheme was aimed at women and men with a minimum of eight years of professional experience and was open across all divisions.

## ▶ Johnson & Johnson

[Re-Ignite](#) is a paid returnship program for experienced professionals who have taken a break from a STEM or STEM-D (science, technology, engineering, mathematics, manufacturing and design) career. Launched in 2017, the program runs for a minimum of four months and is open to both women and men who have been on a career break of two years or more.

## ▶ Zürcher Kantonalbank

Zürcher Kantonalbank is running an internal program specifically designed for existing employees. Women can confirm their planned return to work in their current position before embarking on their career break. Currently, the program is only open to mothers, but the bank is considering expanding it to include fathers. Over 90% of participating women tend to return to the bank after their leaves.

## ▶ UBS

UBS launched [Career Comeback](#) in 2016, and the program continues to be instrumental in helping UBS hire and retain more female leaders and subject-matter experts as well as in contributing to an increased pipeline of diverse talent. Since inception, more than 235 individuals (91% women and 9% men) have joined the program in a permanent role from day one. UBS Career Comeback is open to experienced professionals who want to (re)start their career after a career break of approximately two years or more or intend a career shift. The program provides individual and needs-based transition support as well as coaching during the first weeks and months at UBS. Especially designed sessions with peers also help participants get acclimated, connected and up to speed quickly.

## ▶ SBB

The Swiss railway company introduced its [Back to Business](#) scheme in 2020 to support parents to return to the workplace and to attract more women to the company. Depending on the specific program, the duration varies between 9-15 months and the content is tailored to meet candidates' needs. For the launch of the first four programs, SBB received 1,200 applications. The ultimate goal is to offer permanent positions at the end of the program.

## PwC

Since 2021, PwC has been offering mothers and fathers a flexible return to work after their parental leave. Parents can choose between two flexibility options: returning to work at either 60% of a usual full-time equivalent (FTE) for four weeks or at 80% for eight weeks, both at full pay. This flexibility deal is part of a broader [parental onboarding process](#) designed to support parents and team leaders in creating a positive experience. Both mothers and fathers are making full use of this flexibility benefit, and the overall feedback has been very positive.

## Accenture

Accenture's [Embark](#) is a three-month program aimed at women with a minimum of five years' working experience and a career break of two years or more. Exclusive to Switzerland and the consumer goods and services division, it started in 2022 and received over 150 applications for the first two positions. The pilot phase hosted three positions. Accenture plans to scale the program across all services and extend it to other countries, beginning with Germany in 2023.

## McKinsey & Company

McKinsey launched a part-time work opportunity for mothers in 2022. Women at McKinsey now have the option to work part-time after 26 weeks of maternity leave (compared to the 14 weeks required by law). Previously, part-time work was not possible. Women can voluntarily return after just 22 weeks and gradually increase their workload over time. Returning mothers can benefit from 10 coaching sessions with a professional coach. The initiative has been well received internally. So far, four women have taken advantage of the offer at McKinsey in Switzerland.

## RESOURCES AND SUPPORT FOR IMPLEMENTING RETURNSHIP PROGRAMS

- The Companies & Returnship Network (CRN) offers support and consulting to companies interested in developing a returnship program: [crn-verein.ch](https://crn-verein.ch)
- ReturnersWork supports employers in creating re-entry programs and finding suitable candidates: [returnerswork.ch](https://returnerswork.ch)
- The University of St. Gallen's Women Back to Business program offers a talent acquisition opportunity to a pool of qualified and motivated female leaders: [es.unisg.ch/en/executive-programme/women-back-to-business](https://es.unisg.ch/en/executive-programme/women-back-to-business)
- iRelaunch helps employers with events, business cases, and other resources to develop returnship programs: [irelaunch.com/return-to-work-programs](https://irelaunch.com/return-to-work-programs)
- Advance regularly hosts Best Practice Exchange sessions that cover return to work topics and more. Upcoming events can be found here: [weadvance.ch/programs/best-practice-exchange/](https://weadvance.ch/programs/best-practice-exchange/)

# Returnship programs unleash hidden talent and drive growth

**In conclusion, it is safe to say that returnship programs have the potential to unlock hidden talent and bridge the gap for individuals who have taken an extended career break, particularly mothers returning to work in Switzerland. Let's summarize the main features and benefits:**

## **Bridging the gap and empowering returners**

Returnship programs offer a structured path for re-entry, providing retraining, upskilling, mentoring, and flexible work options. While still relatively new in Switzerland, returnship programs have already shown promising results for companies, with high-quality applicants and a high rate of permanent job placements at the end of the programs.

## **Embracing a new talent pool: fostering inclusion and enhancing company success**

By embracing returnship programs, companies can tap into a new talent pool of highly qualified professionals who are committed and loyal to the organization. These programs challenge the notion that career breaks are detrimental to one's career and promote a more inclusive and flexible work culture. Returnships not only benefit individual returners but also contribute to reducing staff turnover, enhancing employer attractiveness, and supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. While not all companies will have the resources to establish formalized returnship programs, the key takeaway is that there is untapped potential in the talent pool of highly qualified professionals in Switzerland. Employers can explore creative strategies such as partnerships or retention strategies to bring individuals back into the workforce and capitalize on their skills and experiences.

## **Building up supportive infrastructure: navigating the path to successful returnship programs**

In order to implement successful returnship programs, it is crucial for companies to have the support and resources necessary for designing and executing these programs effectively. Organizations can seek guidance from networks like the Companies & Returnships Network (CRN) and leverage the expertise of consulting firms that specialize in returnship programs. Additionally, platforms like [Advance – Gender Equality in Business](#) provide opportunities for knowledge exchange and best practice sharing among companies.

## **From break to breakthrough: empowering individuals and driving Swiss economic growth through returnship programs**

Through returnship programs and by creating an environment that supports individuals returning to work, Swiss companies can not only address skills shortages but also foster a more inclusive and diverse workforce. The success stories of companies which have implemented returnship programs demonstrate the potential impact of these initiatives. With the right mindset, strategies, and support, returnship programs can be a catalyst for change, enabling individuals to transition from a career break to a breakthrough and contributing to the overall growth of the Swiss economy.

## Tips for returnees

- ▶ Monitor company websites that offer returnship programs, particularly the organizations covered in this Returnship Guide. Many of these companies have dedicated websites providing information about their returnship programs. Examples include:  
[www.ubs.com/global/en/careers/career-comeback](http://www.ubs.com/global/en/careers/career-comeback)  
[www.credit-suisse.com/careers/en/apply/career-restart.html](http://www.credit-suisse.com/careers/en/apply/career-restart.html)  
[www.accenture.com/us-en/careers/local/return-work-program](http://www.accenture.com/us-en/careers/local/return-work-program)
- ▶ Participate in the University of St. Gallen's Women Back to Business program:  
[es.unisg.ch/en/executive-programme/women-back-to-business](http://es.unisg.ch/en/executive-programme/women-back-to-business)
- ▶ Attend Companies & Returnship Network events, where interested companies and returnees can meet and exchange information: [crn-verein.ch/anlaesse](http://crn-verein.ch/anlaesse)
- ▶ Sign up to ReturnersWork and receive updates on returnship programs and networking opportunities: [returnerswork.ch](http://returnerswork.ch)

**Interested in company best practices focusing on gender equality? Look no further!**

**[www.advance-hsg-report.ch/en/best-practices](http://www.advance-hsg-report.ch/en/best-practices)**



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## About Advance

Advance is the leading business association for gender equality in Switzerland, a network of 150 Swiss-based companies committed to increasing the share of women in management.

It's a proven fact that gender-mixed teams perform better, are more innovative and likely to generate more profit.

With a concrete program, Advance supports companies to turn diversity into a competitive advantage. Because a gender-equal and inclusive workplace is a win-win for all genders, business and society.

Find out more here [weadvance.ch](http://weadvance.ch)



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