Dear Sir/Madam,

## Association of Accounting Technicians response to Government Equalities Office consultation, *Returning to work after time out for caring*



The Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT) is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the latest Government Equalities Office (GEO) consultation on *Returning to work after time out for caring*.

AAT welcomes the Government commitment to promote returnships to the public and private sector, helping people back into employment after a career break.

This is a key area of focus for AAT given 70% of our 140,000 members are women. AAT has many inspirational stories to tell where women have returned to work as a direct result of the successful completion of their AAT qualifications.

Diana Mikolajewska, a single mother in her early 30s is one such recent example. Diana started her studies with AAT just ten days after the birth of her second child. Within a couple of years Diana had changed jobs and was working as an accounts assistant and shortly afterwards she established her own accounting practice. She’s currently studying to become a Chartered Accountant.

As an employer, AAT is always keen to put leading initiatives into action rather than merely recommending them to others. AAT recently signed up to the Women in Finance Charter, we are a signatory to the Prompt Payment Code, received accreditation from the Living Wage Foundation and remain keen to put our employees first whilst recognising the impact we can have on various other stakeholders. As a result, we are currently exploring the possibility of introducing returnships at AAT.

**Benefits of returnships**

There are numerous international examples of women successfully returning to work in significant numbers following time off to raise their children or care for relatives. A very good example being Denmark where 85% of mothers return to work after having children.

In contrast, the 2017 PwC Women in Work report, suggested that female employment levels in the UK stand at just 69%[[1]](#footnote-1).

Increasing the percentage of women in work to match Danish levels would add tens of £billions to the country’s GDP. Likewise, if men who have taken career breaks for caring purposes were to return in significant numbers, this would provide a much needed boost to GDP. The social value of returning to work is clearly important too.

Returnships mean employers can hold onto skilled and experienced people. It’s usually worth the extra HR, administration and associated costs for the longer-term benefits of ensuring the company concerned keeps its competitive edge – adding real value whilst also meeting the needs of employees.

Returnships represent a great opportunity for the individuals concerned (increased confidence, income and opportunities to progress), their employers (increased productivity, innovation and competitive edge) and the wider economy (increased GDP and tax revenue).

**Company size**

Larger employers, those with 250 or more employees, are increasingly seeing the value of returnships with a significant number now offering these. From banks, such as Barclays, NatWest and Goldman Sachs (who initiated the concept in 2008) to public sector organisations including the Home Office, TfL and Enfield Council. The Accountancy sector is doing much in this area too, with KPMG, PwC, EY and Deloitte all offering returnships.

In contrast, returnships at SMEs are virtually non-existent. The UK SME population accounts for over 99% of all private British businesses and employs well over 15 million people. However, 76% of the SME sector does not employ anyone aside from the owner[[2]](#footnote-2). As a result, the majority are highly unlikely to ever be able to offer successful returnship programmes. This does not mean that the SME sector should be ignored. The 1.3m employing businesses are worthy of attention, especially those SMEs employing between 50-250 employees for whom a returnship programme may well be practical, offer them clear business benefits and potentially assist thousands of returners. The provision of information and advice and guidance to this sector is arguably of greater importance given they are less likely to be aware of such possibilities than their larger counterparts.

**Information and advice**

There is a wealth of information and advice to those wishing to return to work after an extended break, whether from professional bodies such as the CIPD to specialist online recruitment agencies who specialise in nothing but returnships such as The Return Hub (www.thereturnhub.com) which finds candidates returnships in the financial services sector.

The Government’s recent focus on this issue, not least the creation of returnships in the Civil Service, for teachers, social workers and health care professionals (August 2017) and subsequent media coverage, all help to raise the profile of the concept. Ministers and the GEO must continue to regularly highlight existing success stories as well as new schemes.

Internal publicity at companies offering the schemes is likely to be beneficial too given the newness of the concept, the need to raise awareness and to ensure returners feel welcomed by colleagues.

As stated above, raising awareness amongst the SME community should be a key focus. Utilisation of independent, credible third parties to communicate that message would be an effective and efficient means of doing so, for example via the Federation of Small Businesses and AAT (60% of our 140,000 members either work for or run their own SME) the Institute of Directors, Chambers of Commerce and so on.

**Other Challenges**

If wages are the same or less than the cost of childcare, for all but the most committed or those with strong family financial support, the incentive to return to work is extremely limited. This also makes the importance of initiatives like Living Wage accreditation, something that AAT along with an increasing number of UK companies have secured, all the more important.

Returners should be paid at professional levels to reflect their value to the organisation rather than mirroring internships or graduate training programmes. At the very least, they must be paid the national minimum wage but clearly Living Wage Foundation pay levels would represent a more positive minimum wage rate.

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Women and Work produced a report on this subject earlier this year[[3]](#footnote-3) which suggested employers should promote best practice through a kite mark with official accreditation and assessment to increase visibility and actively encourage the uptake of flexible working, returnships etc.

The intention behind this idea is sound but such an approach is likely to be adopted by good employers who do this sort of thing anyway rather than changing the behaviour of those that need encouragement to do so. As a result, this should remain voluntary.

**Carers**

It is important not to base returnships solely on the needs of mothers. Those with caring responsibilities require equal assistance. There are over 6 million carers in the UK today with CarersUK predicting that number will increase to 9 million within the next 20 years. 42% of carers are men.

Companies with over 250 employees should have a carers’ policy detailing the support they make available for those with caring responsibilities. This could be utilised as part of any returnship to demonstrate employer commitment and reassure returners that their needs will be taken seriously.

I hope the above proves useful and trust you will not hesitate to contact me should you have any queries or require any further information.

Yours sincerely,

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1. [www.pwc.com/hu/hu/kiadvanyok/assets/pdf/PwC\_Women\_in\_Work\_2017\_20170208\_v2.pdf](http://www.pwc.com/hu/hu/kiadvanyok/assets/pdf/PwC_Women_in_Work_2017_20170208_v2.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/559219/bpe\_2016\_statistical\_release.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/559219/bpe_2016_statistical_release.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://connectpa.co.uk/women-work-appg-launches-first-annual-report-women-returners/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)