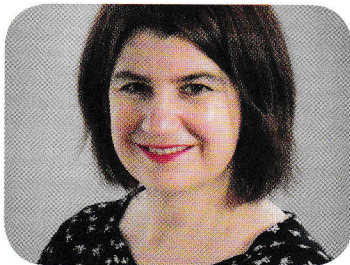




Back to work

Going back to work can be a daunting prospect if you've taken a few years out to have children. But there's a wealth of resources out there to ease the return, as Siobhan Mason discovers



Writer profile

As a writer and mum of teens, **Siobhan Mason** is lucky to have chosen a naturally flexible career before she had children. The flexibility is less crucial now her children are older but still handy, especially when it comes to sorting their orthodontist appointments!

Whether you've been out of employment for six months or six years, it's easy to start worrying that your skills no longer fit today's workplace. However, parents and carers who've taken a career break to look after children have a lot to offer employers. We've spoken to the experts to find out how you can increase the chances of a successful return-to-work.

Treat it like a project

"Take a structured approach and set weekly goals that can be broken down into small, achievable tasks," says Hazel Little, Coaching and Programme Manager at Women Returners, an organisation that specialises in helping experienced professionals return to work after an extended career break. "That

way, you're more likely to be successful than if you have this big overwhelming goal of 'I must get back into work'."

Your first goal could be to explore why you want, or need, to return to work. Write them down, Hazel suggests, and have them to hand when your motivation wanes: "Understanding what your drivers are is important, whether it's financial needs, a craving for mental challenge or a desire to be a positive role model for your children."

It can be frustrating to find that the financial rewards are minimal once you've deducted the cost of childcare, but Hazel encourages people to think about the longer-term view. "Statistics show that for every year a woman takes out of employment, the rate of pay falls by four percent," she explains. "As children get older, childcare costs reduce meaning you'll be financially better off in the long term."

Your second task is to discover what your ideal job might be, whether that's going back to a previous career or using your break as a chance to change direction. "What type of role will give you

most satisfaction?" asks Hazel. "Think about your strengths and remember what you enjoyed most in previous roles. If you find something fulfilling that you enjoy, you'll feel more incentivised to manage the juggle between home and work."

Other goals might include researching local upskilling opportunities, investigating childcare options, updating your CV or searching for jobs.

The Government Equalities Office, Women Returners and Timewise have launched a new toolkit for returners, a 49-page document that takes you through every stage of the return-to-work process. Download at wrpn.womenreturners.com/returner-toolkit

Update your skills

Refreshing your skills is a great way to boost your confidence. And there's plenty of ways to do that via online courses, attending seminars or taking part in some targeted volunteering.

"Whatever the reason, when you're out of work for a while, your confidence can be damaged," explains Rosaleen Courtney, Distance Learning Manager at Bath College. "A recent nationally-recognised qualification looks great on your CV, shows you're keen to learn and can help you step up or make a lateral move. A lot of our qualifications, like team leading or counselling, are valid in whatever field you work."

Currently on her second maternity leave, Apprentice Training Co-ordinator Sharon Love says it's important for her to keep her brain active and show her employer that she's committed to her own professional development while away from work. She's already completed Bath College's distance learning courses in mental health and business administration, and is currently taking the Team Leading course while her six-month-old daughter sleeps.

"Knowing I will return at some point, I want to have the confidence to do my role and do it well," she explains. "And, if a progression role comes up in future, I can say



Going back to college or university to learn new skills is a great way to boost your confidence, change career path or stay up-to-date with your industry

I've been keeping my skills and knowledge up-to-date."

Bath College run short, tutor-led Adult Community Learning courses in various venues around BANES, as Anna Wheeler, the college's Community Engagement Manager, explains. "Our half-day workshops cover things like confidence building, applying for a job and

interview preparation. If you're unsure which course best suits you, we're happy to discuss options and find the right thing for you."

As well as introductory vocational courses and core skills in English, maths and ICT, the college runs a variety of workshops ideal for parents looking to return to work, including 'Working around the Family' for parents and carers looking at the implications of returning to or beginning work, 'Inspire Me', aimed at evaluating existing skills and identifying pathways into work, and the 'Be Your Own Boss' course that examines self-employment options. If you're currently unemployed or on a low income, you won't have to pay for these courses and childcare is covered too.

Retrain locally

Bath College distance learning courses: www.bathcollege.ac.uk/distance-learning/free-cpd-courses

Bath College Adult Community Learning: www.bathcollege.ac.uk/study-with-us/adult-community-learning or call 01225 328 822 to discuss options.

Wiltshire College run professional development courses: www.wiltshire.ac.uk/training/professionaldevelopment

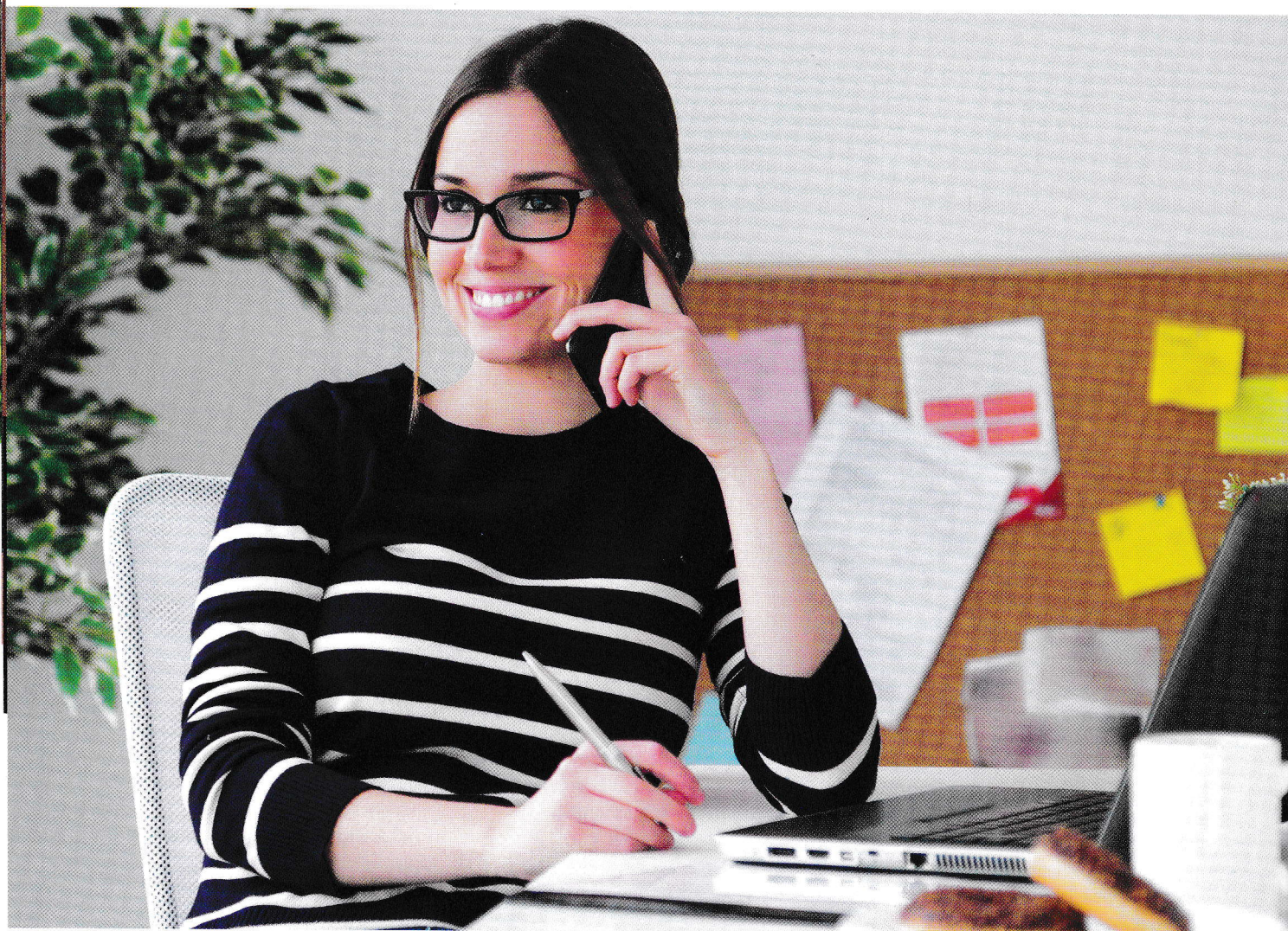
Women's Work Lab run a course in Bristol for women on benefits that combines training and coaching with work experience: www.womensworklab.co.uk

Digital skills for free

Microsoft digital skills
www.microsoft.com/en-gb/athome/digitalskills/improve

Google online marketing training
<https://learndigital.withgoogle.com/digitalgarage>

Alison: online IT training
www.alison.com/courses/it



Find volunteering work

Do it:

www.do-it.org

Time Bank:

www.timebank.org.uk

Network, network, network

"It's easy as a returner to hide behind your computer and do research without actually getting out there and speaking to people," says Hazel Little. "Instead, go and meet your ex-colleagues for coffee, let people know that you want to get back into work and sign up for those professional seminars or industry events: they're great for refreshing your network and helping you work out how to position yourself professionally."

You can find local return-to-work events through the Women Returner's Professional Network, your local authority or Jobcentre Plus. Following relevant companies and industry experts on Twitter and Facebook or joining professional groups on LinkedIn are another way to discover relevant networking opportunities.

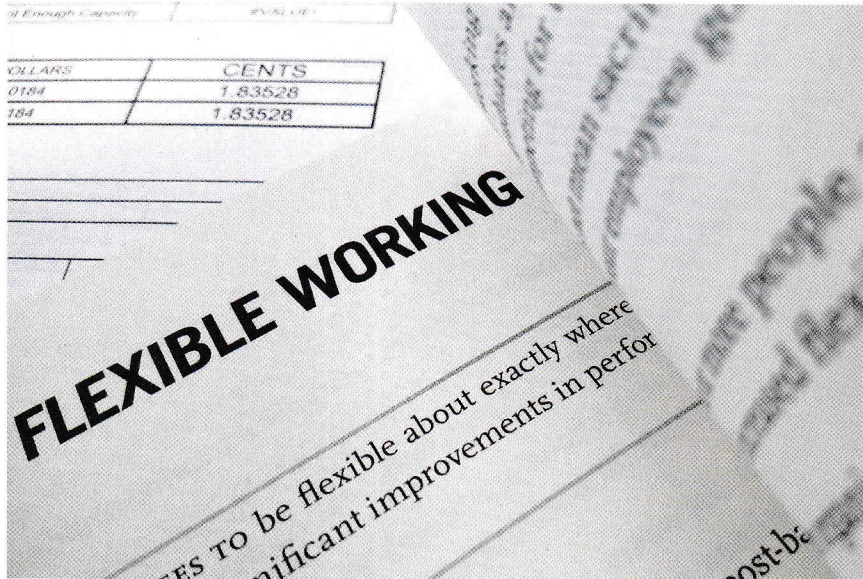
If you're out of practice, networking can be a little scary at

first, so building your confidence in advance is key. One way to do this, according to The Women Returner's Toolkit, is to rehearse a short introduction to yourself and your career. Start with a few sentences about your background, experience and clients, sandwich your career break briefly in the middle but don't make it the focus of your story, and then finish with the role you're looking for now.

Get LinkedIn

"When an employer gets your CV and sees something they like the look of, they'll probably type your name into Google. When something comes up, it's quite reassuring," says career consultant Frank Hutton. "LinkedIn is great, because it ranks high in a Google

search and you can present yourself exactly how you want to. You've got a chance to tell a little bit more of a story about yourself, showing that you're a real human being instead of a list of experiences on a flat piece of paper."



Be flexible about flexibility

If you're returning to a previous role and you've been in that role over six months, you have, since 2014, the right to request flexible working. The reality is that not everyone who asks, gets. Anna Whitehouse, aka Mother Pukka, and flexible working consultancy Timewise, campaign for flexible working and meet with employers to help make flexible hours more acceptable and available in the workplace.

If you feel your employer isn't open to flexible working, there are resources out there, such as template flexible working requests, to help you make your

case. PregnantThenScrewed offers free advice on making a flexible working request and has a free legal advice line if you've been the victim of maternity or pregnancy discrimination.

Finding a flexible role when you're not already in a job can be a challenge. "The culture of flexible working is changing," says Hazel, "More companies are embracing a flexible working culture and recognising that they need to trust people to choose when and where they work in order to retain talent. But what we are still seeing is that it's less likely to be offered at the point of recruitment.

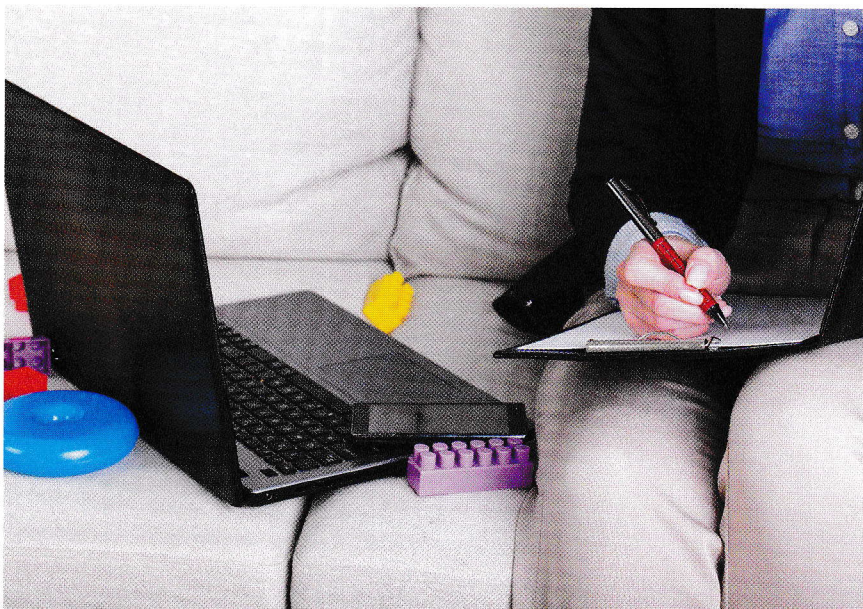
"My advice is to apply for the role even if it doesn't say flexible working, go along for an interview and ask about the flexible work culture. Once you have a job offer, you are in a stronger position to negotiate hours that work for you.

"Be flexible about flexibility though," she adds. "We always hear about this ideal three-day week but working from home, doing a compressed week or agreeing an earlier finish time to accommodate the school pick-up is becoming more commonplace within organisations."

Remember that not all flexible work is advertised as such, so don't let the way jobs are advertised limit your search. Sign up to all the local recruitment agencies, but also check out those that specialise in part-time and flexible work, such as Flexology in the South West.

You can also sign up to get updates about new returner opportunities from The Women Returners Professional Network which partners with leading organisations to create supported routes back to work. A returnship is a higher-level, fixed-term contract with an employer, usually for three to six months, with the likelihood of a more permanent role at the end.

Whether it's starting afresh and retraining, finding a flexible, part-



Juggling life and work as a parent can be tricky, but flexible working is becoming the norm

Campaigning for flexibility

Follow [@mother-pukka](#) on Instagram to find out more about the Flex Appeal campaign.

Timewise: www.timewise.co.uk

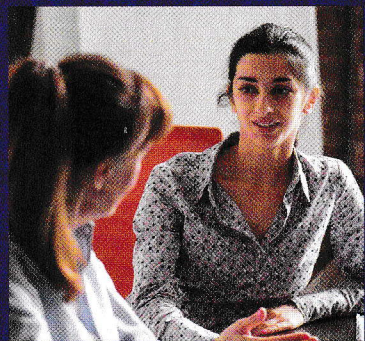
Working Mums flexible working request letter can be downloaded at www.workingmums.co.uk/flexible-working-request-letter/

PregnantThenScrewed flexible working advice line: 0161 222 9879; and legal advice line: 0161 930 5300.

time job that suits you and your family, or returning to a previous role following a break, the key is to be confident and patient with your approach.

Once you've found a job to return to, recognise that you can't do everything at home like before. "Delegate, take time to look after yourself, especially in those first couple of months when you're likely to be quite tired," says Hazel. Be kind to yourself while adapting to the new routine and congratulate yourself on a project successfully completed. ■

How to find a job share

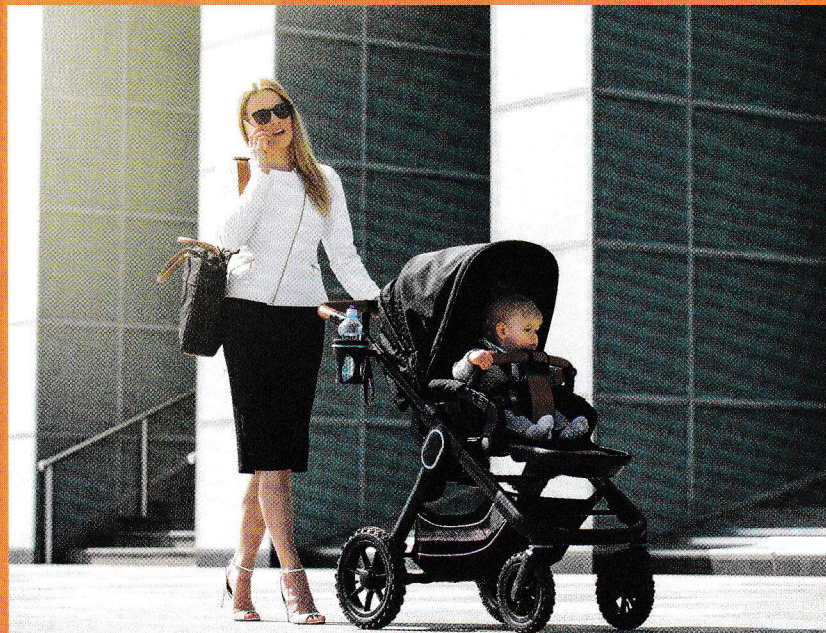


A job share or split is a great way for a business to offer part-time working for full-time roles.

Timewise's Power Part Time list includes a number of job shares from a diverse range of industries not typically open to job share arrangements. The 2020 list will be announced in February: showing this to any potential employers reluctant to the idea may help persuade them to think again about their flexible arrangements.

To find potential job share partners compatible with your skills, register with www.shareyourjob.com, www.duome.co and www.ginibee.com or search for a job share on www.workingmums.co.uk. You could also put a shout out on your industry social media pages.

Can you transfer parent skills to a CV?



Dealing with children is hard: negotiation, time management and multi-tasking is part of the job. But how easy is it to turn parenting skills into CV must-haves?

If you can weave them into the professional skills you've got, then do it. For example, being involved with your school's PTA can provide invaluable experience in dealing with lots of different people, influencing others and organising complex events and situations. Using these examples can bring your CV more up-to-date and show how you've kept your skills alive outside of paid-for employment.

"If you're running the PTA, employers can see how that translates," agrees Hazel, although she admits you should leave out those negotiation skills that you've honed through many a fraught tea-time. "If you can put it into a work context, then that's great – include it," she says. "If you can't, don't."

Job boards specialising in flexible and family-friendly roles and project work

Find out about **Women Returner** returnships at

wrpn.womenreturners.com/returnships

Timewise Jobs www.timewise.co.uk

Flexology specialists in part-time and flexible working roles in the South West: www.flexology.co.uk

Ten2Two: www.ten2two.org

923 Jobs: www.923jobs.com

2 to 3 Days: www.2to3days.com

Capability Jane: www.capabilityjane.com

Mum and working: www.mumandworking.co.uk