

A GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS

# UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN RETURNING TO WORK



ROBERT WALTERS



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### ONE OF THE WORLD'S LEADING SPECIALIST RECRUITMENT CONSULTANCIES

Robert Walters is one of the world's leading specialist professional recruitment consultancies and focuses on placing high calibre professionals into permanent, contract and temporary positions at all levels of seniority.

As an international business, we recruit across the accounting & finance, banking and financial services, engineering, human resources, information technology, legal, sales, marketing, supply chain & procurement.

Whilst these are our core recruitment disciplines, we also cater for our clients' local recruitment market needs by specialising in new as well as emerging areas.

We aim to add value to our clients through market-leading intelligence. Our research consists of insights and surveys into key employment issues, recruitment trends and pay and bonus information.

# FOREWORD

From raising children to pursuing higher education, there are various reasons why women take a career break today.

But how do employers view women who wish to re-join the workforce after a career hiatus?

There are many advantages of employing or re-employing such professionals. Returning women represent a rich talent pool that can help to overcome critical skill shortages, boosting an organisation's diversity and consequently providing measurable benefits such as decreased turnover rates and higher business gains.

We set out to examine how organisations in Asia view and treat returning women to aid employers enhance the recruitment and retention of these professionals.

By surveying and drawing insights from our client and candidate database across nine countries in Asia, as well as information from our related research, we also aim to shed light on the challenges that women returning to work encounter and provide recommendations on what employers can do to overcome them.

# SUMMARY

Our whitepaper has been created to assist hiring managers and employers in identifying and addressing any possible biases in recruitment and inclusion to ensure women are given the opportunity to re-gain entry into the workforce after a career gap.

It draws on the perspectives of white-collar professionals working across Asia and provides recommendations on what organisations can do to change current attitudes of how returning women are perceived and treated in the workplace today.

This whitepaper explores:

- Understanding how returning women are perceived
- The benefits of hiring returning women
- Effectively recruiting returning women
- Inducting and integrating returning women in the workforce

This whitepaper is based on a survey conducted in December 2016 to better understand existing perceptions of returning women across key markets in Asia. The survey gathered the views of over 2,200 clients and female professionals across China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam. Additional interviews and research were collated to complement survey findings.

# KEY FINDINGS



65%

65% of women in Asia have taken a career break at some point in their lives.



35%

35% of all women professionals polled in our survey stated financial reasons were the top reason why they decided to re-join the workforce. This was followed by a desire to learn new skills (28%) and lack of fulfilment by staying at home (18%).



46%

46% of hiring managers in Asia did not employ any returning women in the past year.

## Unequal salaries were identified as the most common type of discrimination facing

48%

of returning women in the region

## This was followed by lack of career advancement opportunities facing

38%

of returning women in the region

37%

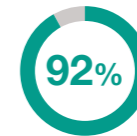
Recruitment firms were found to be the most popular medium of re-gaining entry into the workforce



According to 55% of hiring managers, specific job experience is the biggest benefit returning women bring to the workplace.



35% of employers in Asia say less than 5% of returning women have been offered a more senior or even similar role in their company in comparison to their previous role.



92% of employers in Asia don't have a recruitment policy in place targeted at returning women.



54%

54% of women were not inducted on their return back to work, despite the same number thinking it is very important for them to do so.



51%

51% of women returning to the workforce regarded the freedom to manage their own working schedule as very important in keeping them engaged at work.

# 1 UNDERSTANDING HOW RETURNING WOMEN ARE PERCEIVED

New attitudes towards work, technological advances and uncertain economic environments have changed the way professionals approach their careers. Today's typical career model is often far from linear, and is often accompanied by gaps in professional journeys.

## WOMEN AND CAREER BREAKS

It has been established that a majority of women have stepped off the career ladder at some point in their professional careers.

In our survey, we found 65% of women in Asia have taken a career break.

## PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN WHO HAVE TAKEN A CAREER BREAK BY COUNTRY:

| China | Singapore | Taiwan | Vietnam | Philippines | Hong Kong | Indonesia | Thailand | Malaysia |
|-------|-----------|--------|---------|-------------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|
| 72%   | 72%       | 72%    | 69%     | 68%         | 67%       | 66%       | 60%      | 56%      |

Multiple reasons exist for taking a career break. Women often step off the career ladder for maternity leave, to take care of children or ageing parents, or even study breaks.

Monetary concerns, however, often compel such women to return to work. 35% of all women professionals polled in our survey stated financial reasons were the top reason in deciding to re-join the workforce. This was followed by a desire to learn new skills (28%) and lack of fulfilment in staying at home (18%).

**Financial reasons are the top factors motivating women professionals in Asia to return to work after a career break.**

## IS THERE A BIAS AGAINST HIRING RETURNING WOMEN?

### But what impact do career breaks have on women's professional journeys?

As our survey results show, women who have taken a career break face difficulties returning to the job market. We found that almost half of hiring managers in Asia (46%) have, in fact, not employed any returning women in the past year. The figure was highest in Malaysia, coming in at 52%, followed by Singapore (49%), and Hong Kong (48%).

One in five employers in Asia stated they were unsure whether hiring returning women will benefit the workplace, while 24% stated the workforce will benefit 'maybe a little' from such professionals.

Several reports, such as the 2016 study by PricewaterhouseCoopers<sup>1</sup>, have suggested this is partly due<sup>2</sup> to the perception among recruiters and employers that a career gap is symptomatic of a deterioration of skills.

Such women are perceived as not being up-to-date with latest industry trends and knowledge and are therefore incapable of being key contributors when they return.

This perception is intensified if such career breaks involve, specifically, maternity leave. In fact, a survey of 500 managers by law firm Slater & Gordon<sup>3</sup> revealed that a third of managers thought that women were not as good at their jobs when they returned from maternity leave. A similar number would rather employ a man in his 20s or 30s than a woman of the same age for fear of maternity leave.

Reasons for this concern included the belief that returning women wouldn't be as committed, would be unwilling to stay late, or would request additional time off.



**Joanne Chua**  
Account Director, Southeast Asia & Greater China  
Robert Walters Singapore

"The capability of women professionals is often questioned once they take maternity leave, or have significant lapses in their career trajectories. When recruiting this group of talent, we would strongly encourage HR and hiring managers to remain objective and provide them with a level-playing field in order to unlock their full potential."

<sup>1</sup> Study: Women Returners (November 2016). PricewaterhouseCoopers. Retrieved 17th January 2017, from <https://www.pwc.co.uk/economic-services/women-returners/pwc-research-women-returners-nov-2016.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> While the low numbers of returning women being hired in the past year can be attributed to other reasons, such as poor volume of applications, our whitepaper is centered around the perspectives companies employ when hiring and retaining these women. As such, we focus solely on addressing employer-driven attitudes to returning women.

<sup>3</sup> No Mother's Day Celebration for Women Returning from Maternity Leave (March 2013). Slater and Gordon. Retrieved 20th January 2017, from <http://www.slatergordon.co.uk/media-centre/press-releases/2013/03/no-mothers-day-celebration-for-women-returning-from-maternity-leave/>



# 48%

of women in Asia grapple with unequal salaries upon returning to the workforce after a career gap

## THE RE-EMPLOYMENT PENALTY

Our survey found returning women in Asia continue to face barriers to professional success after being re-employed - mainly in terms of wages and career advancement opportunities.

Unequal salaries were identified as the most common type of discrimination facing 48% returning women in the region, followed by lack of career advancement opportunities (38%).

## THE MOST COMMON FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION FACED BY RETURNING WOMEN IN ASIA:



Little wonder that - according to 2014 research by the London Business School<sup>4</sup> - 70% of women fear taking a career break. And those who do are often discouraged from attempting to return to the workplace at all – impacting talent pipelines and increasing skill shortages.

These very real concerns make it imperative for company leaders and policy makers to address how women taking career breaks are viewed and treated in the workplace. Instead of being seen as continuums of self-development, career breaks are acting as barriers for professional women.

### KEY LEARNING #1:

#### View career breaks as opportunities, not obstacles

A shift in perception is required towards hiring women who take career breaks. Rather than seeing career breaks as drawbacks, hiring managers should view them as opportunities that enable women to learn and enhance their skills, such as time-management and multi-tasking, and broaden their perspectives.

<sup>4</sup> Study: Women in Business (March 2014). London Business School. Retrieved 17th January 2017, from <https://www.london.edu/news-and-events/news/women-expect-4-plus-career-switches-in-a-working-lifetime#.WH3HGtJ97bg>

# 2 THE BENEFITS OF HIRING RETURNING WOMEN

Combating the negative bias that exists against women with career gaps is therefore critical in ensuring women are fully empowered when and after they re-enter the workforce. This can be done by encouraging employers to be aware of and fully utilise the potential of this unique pool of talent.

## ADDRESSING SKILL SHORTAGES

Our survey found that according to 55% of hiring managers, specific job experience or skills are the biggest benefits returning women bring to the workplace. This was specifically highlighted by those in the human resources (56%), information technology (53%) and finance sectors (40%).

With significant skills shortages being experienced across Southeast Asia, and 88% of Southeast Asia employers facing talent shortages<sup>5</sup>, successfully attracting and retaining returning women represents a significant competitive advantage to organisations.



**Sally Raj**  
Managing Director, Robert Walters Malaysia

“Returning women often have vast experience and bring with them a certain maturity about their role. This talent pool can serve as a viable solution to the skills and gender gap prevalent in the workplace today. This is especially relevant for the technology sector, which faces severe skill shortages, but is under represented by women professionals.”

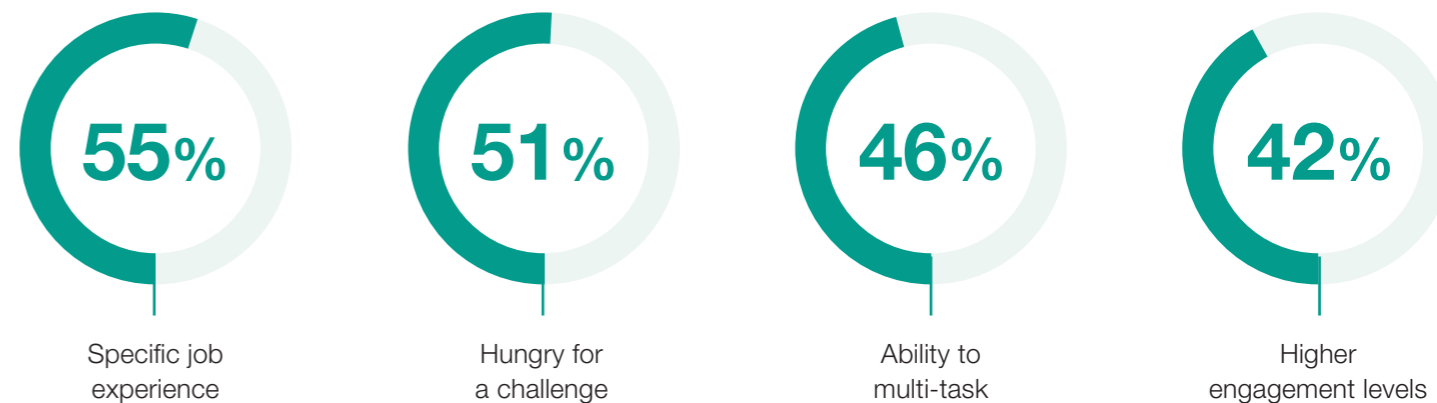
## A RENEWED DESIRE TO SUCCEED

Besides being able to provide unique yet relevant perspectives, we found women returning back to the workforce after a sabbatical also have a renewed energy and a commitment to succeed.

More than half (51%) of employers stated such women demonstrated an eagerness to take on challenges, while 46% said they were able to multi-task well.

More than two out of five (42%) of employers stated such women were highly engaged in their jobs.

## TOP BENEFITS RETURNING WOMEN BRING TO THE WORKPLACE:



## KEY LEARNING #2:

### Recognising and drawing on strengths of returning women

Women returning back to the workforce often have significant work experience, a desire to prove themselves, and are highly engaged. Hiring managers should effectively recognise and leverage on these benefits.

<sup>5</sup> Whitepaper: Return of the Asian Talent. Robert Walters. Retrieved 14th February 2017.

# 3 EFFECTIVELY RECRUITING RETURNING WOMEN

By placing returning women in lower skilled roles than the ones they held prior to their career break, employers are missing the opportunity to benefit from their expertise. To counter this, employers should dismiss any preconceived notions about part-time women wanting and being capable of less challenging responsibilities, and instead, objectively evaluate their talent via a variety of recruitment methods.

## OBJECTIVELY EVALUATING TALENT

The study from Pricewaterhouse Coopers<sup>6</sup> found two-thirds of women who are employed after a career hiatus could be working below their potential. This is due mainly to recruitment biases against career gaps, and also lack of flexible and part-time roles available for higher-skilled jobs.

Unsurprisingly, a 2014 Harvard Business School<sup>7</sup> paper on the characteristics of high-potential women found the vast majority of such women who return to work in unfulfilling roles with low prospects for advancement ultimately end up quitting their jobs.

According to 35% of all hiring managers polled in our survey, less than 5% of returning women have been offered a more senior or even similar role in their company.



**Cheryl-Ann Szetoh**  
Associate Director, Commerce, Robert Walters Singapore

“Women can ultimately end up feeling that they are no longer considered as important members of the workforce. This message is communicated directly or indirectly through various modes – they may get overlooked for promotion or given less responsibility for key projects, or even stigmatised for utilising flexi-work options.”

# 35%

of employers in Asia say less than 5% of returning women have been offered a more senior or even similar role in their company in comparison to their previous role



<sup>6</sup> Study: Women Returners (November 2016). PricewaterhouseCoopers. Retrieved 17th January 2017, from <https://www.pwc.co.uk/economic-services/women-returners/pwc-research-women-returners-nov-2016.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Ely, J. Robin, & Stone, Pamela, & Ammerman Colleen. Rethink What You “Know” About High-Achieving Women (December 2014). Harvard Business Review. Retrieved 20th January 2017, from <https://hbr.org/2014/12/rethink-what-you-know-about-high-achieving-women>



92%

of employers in Asia don't have a recruitment policy in place targeted at returning women.

### ADOPTING A MULTI-FACETED RECRUITMENT APPROACH

To fully leverage the experience and skills of this invaluable group of talent, our survey resoundingly found that more can be done in the workplace to effectively support the hiring of returning women.

Interestingly, when asked whether employers had a specific recruitment policy that targeted returning women, an overwhelming 92% said no. As a consequence, it was of little surprise that it took more than four months for 44% of returning women in Asia to find a new role.

Recruitment agencies were identified as the top method for gaining re-entry to the workforce, with almost 40% of professionals saying a recruitment firm had helped them.

#### KEY LEARNING #3:

##### Developing a customised recruitment strategy

An opportunity exists for firms to develop a recruitment strategy tailored towards hiring returning women. Employers can develop more proactive and ongoing outreach programmes that help connect with employees who are on a career break, and/or work closely with recruitment agencies to leverage their relationships, market knowledge and extensive reach. They can also consider training hiring managers to help them better identify the potential of women who wish to return after a career break.



**John Winter**  
General Manager, Robert Walters Taiwan

"Recruitment consultancies have a larger network of passive and active job seekers to offer hiring managers – including strong relationships with female professionals currently taking a career break but open to shortly returning. It's these long-term relationships and knowledge of the market that offer unique access to this talent pool."



# 4 INDUCTING AND INTEGRATING RETURNING WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE

Whilst some women re-enter the workforce with the same organisation, others may take a much longer career break and come back to the job market to work with a new employer. Regardless of personal circumstances, returning to work after any extended period can be challenging.

## GETTING UP TO SPEED

This is a challenge that employers must support their employees through.

Induction programmes that can enable easier integration into organisations, teams and help provide training and support are paramount to ensuring a smooth transition back to the workforce.

54% of women and 64% of hiring managers stated they think induction plays a very important role in ensuring returning women are successful upon their return to the workforce. The figures aren't surprising, considering effective induction shortens the time it takes to get a recruit up to speed and in ensuring returning women are successful upon their return to the workforce.

Despite this, our survey found 54% of women were not inducted upon re-entering the workforce. This was regardless of whether they had joined a new firm or continued working at a previous one.

## PERCENTAGE OF RETURNING WOMEN WHO WERE NOT INDUCTED BY COUNTRY

| Taiwan | Singapore | Hong Kong | Philippines | Indonesia | Vietnam | Thailand | Malaysia | China |
|--------|-----------|-----------|-------------|-----------|---------|----------|----------|-------|
| 65%    | 61%       | 59%       | 58%         | 53%       | 51%     | 50%      | 48%      | 38%   |

Those women who did receive a company induction upon their return to the workforce felt such critical programmes needed improvement.

39% of returning women stated they wanted personal interaction with mentors and senior management upon their return. This was followed by more details on latest industry trends (22%).

# 64%

of hiring managers think induction plays a very important role in ensuring returning women are equipped to re-join the workforce.



**Rob Bryson**  
Director, Robert Walters Indonesia

“An onboarding program for returning employees can help them get up-to-date on the latest trends and industry updates, including how to use any new technology, processes and more. The goal here is to differentiate from the standard new starter induction and provide professionals with the information and tools they need to quickly re-integrate into work environments.”

# 51%

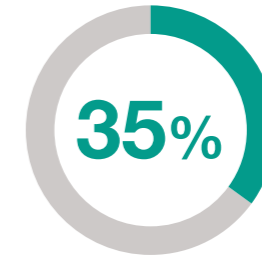
of women returning to the workforce regarded the freedom to manage their own working schedule as very important in keeping them engaged at work.

## CREATING AN OPEN ENVIRONMENT

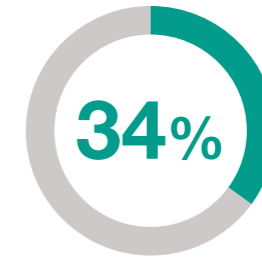
To fully leverage the benefits that returning women bring to the workplace, and to ensure they are not discriminated or overlooked, hiring managers can also launch initiatives that help make corporate culture more inclusive.

Customising engagement and retention policies to suit the needs of returning women is also key in honing the message that this group of talent are key members of the workforce and highly valued.

51% of women returning to the workforce regarded the freedom to manage their own working schedule as very important in keeping them engaged at work. This was followed by a clear career progression path (50%), and a role with high salary/benefits (44%).



of hiring managers stated offering senior managers training on how to handle and lead returning women is very important to help make a more inclusive corporate culture.



also stated offering initiatives such as 'Bring Your Child To Work Day' is somewhat important in helping returning women feel more included.

### KEY LEARNING #4:

#### Tailoring engagement policies to support needs

To attract high-calibre women who wish to resume working after a career break, employers are advised to create engagement strategies that specifically cater to the needs of such women, including flexi-work hours and opportunities for growth.



**Carol Cheung**  
Associate Director, Financial Services, Robert Walters Hong Kong

“To ensure a successful transition to the workforce, companies can form support groups and committees which are led by other returning women to talk about their challenges, successes and concerns about being back in the workplace. Doing so creates a source of support within the workplace, allowing women to feel more engaged at work and easily focus on their professional responsibilities and development.”



## CONCLUSION

There is a clear opportunity for hiring managers to improve or change perceptions surrounding women returning to the workforce after a career gap. The perspectives and skills these women bring are many and varied in nature, and companies in Asia are set to earn tremendous benefits if they continue to leverage on them. However, this can only be done if firms remain vigilant about unspoken but powerful perceptions that constrain returning women's opportunities. This will also help them in crafting solid engagement strategies which seek to serve, include and position such women as valuable members of the workforce.

Based on our findings, we have identified the following key recommendations on what employers can do to enhance the attraction and retention of women who wish to re-join the workforce after a career break.

1. Career breaks should be viewed as opportunities, instead of drawbacks. They can serve as continuums of self-development and allow women to learn new skills and enhance old ones.
2. Not only do returning women serve as viable solutions to the skill shortages, they are also highly engaged and are generally hungry for a challenge.
3. Organisations are encouraged to develop recruitment strategies that are tailored towards hiring returning women. This involves training hiring managers to help them better identify the potential of women who wish to re-join the workforce.
4. Firms can also launch initiatives that help make corporate cultures more inclusive for returning women, such as mentorship sessions headed by senior women leaders.

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