

Would you try a RETURNSHIP? Britain's biggest companies are launching schemes to get women who quit to have families back onto the career ladder (and top execs swear it works)

- **Corporations from big banks to O2 are launching 'returnships' for women**
- **Initially pioneered in America, the schemes aim to help mothers back to work**
- **They are paid programmes of three to six months with possible jobs at the end**
- **Adriana Ennab, 55, tried a returnship at Credit Suisse, and is now a leading figure**
- **And Julia Holmes, 52, who lives in Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex, created her own**

By [Sally Williams For The Daily Mail](#)

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The day Adriana Ennab returned to banking, aged 52, after a 16-year break, she very nearly turned around and went home again.

'When I last worked in an office you had people who did things for you,' she explains — secretaries and people from IT to help you with your computer. 'But they were no longer there. I was thinking, "How do I log into this computer?" "How do I set up my desk?" And I was told you have you do it yourself.'

Not only did Adriana have to get her head around the industry and the company, but the fact that post-recession cuts meant the support staff she'd relied on in the past had simply disappeared.

'That first day, I was going to run. I was not coming back.' But she stuck it out and now, at 55, is director of public policy with Credit Suisse, the global financial services company.



'People said to me: "You are crazy. Banking has changed so much. You don't know enough." But I love being in this world again,' she says. Adriana is one of a growing number of older women who, against the odds, are returning to high-flying jobs after an extended career break to bring up children or look after their ageing parents.

According to Government figures, women account for around 90 per cent of people on extended career breaks for caring reasons. But these women pay a price. Once you've stepped out of work, it's hard to get back in.

'Clients never say: "What I want this week is someone who hasn't worked for ten years," ' says Jane, who recently retired from 25 years running a recruitment company in London and asked to remain anonymous as she knows that her views are controversial.

'Because after ten years of looking after kids, what do you have that a company needs? I'm not critical,' she continues, 'I think it's the greatest gift you can give your child, to be there, but it does have consequences.'

In Jane's view, the optimum time that you can spend out of work is . . . no time at all. (Maternity leave excepted.)

'I don't know that any break is really ideal,' she says. 'A company has got everyone to choose from. Why, then, would they choose a question mark?'

But increasingly companies are realising that far from being a question mark, these women have a huge amount to offer and things are changing.

Pioneered in the U.S in 2008, 'returnships' are a paid programme of three to six months (with the possibility of a permanent job at the end of the period if all works out) intended to ease the transition back to work.

'The programmes are funded by the company, and it's creating a supported bridge back into these experienced roles,' says Julianne Miles, 52.



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Julianne is co-founder of Women Returners, a consultancy, coaching and networking organisation, whose approach is to convince companies of the financial value in hiring older women.

They are experienced and highly qualified, she says; they also have skills developed on their career break — ‘looking after children, taking on voluntary work, setting up a small business from home.’ And, what’s more, they are not jaded.

‘They have a fresh perspective, fresh eyes,’ Julianne says. ‘They are motivated.’

Most of the big banks now have returners programmes, as do construction companies such as Skanska and Balfour Beatty and telecoms giants Vodafone and O2.

The Government has even pledged £5 million for returnships, with Prime Minister Theresa May recently stating: ‘More often than not, it is women who give up their careers to devote themselves to motherhood, only to find the route back into employment closed off — the doors shut to them.

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Indeed, until recently a legion of well-educated, highly-trained women has found it near impossible to return to jobs they once excelled in. Instead they’re at the school gates — lawyers, accountants, advertising executives, bankers — ‘high potentials’ now sidelined to the mummy track: voluntary work; a role on the PTA — all worthy work but well below their professional abilities. But — slowly — programmes like returnships are capitalising on what these women have to offer, and their unique skillsets.

Adriana has three boys aged 20, 17 and nine, and two stepdaughters, aged 20 and 18. When her oldest son, Max, was born in 1997, she had clocked up nearly 17 years in banking and was a global product manager with Merrill Lynch.

‘Before Max was born I’d taken 13 flights in two weeks,’ she says. ‘I took a month’s maternity leave, but within a few weeks I was working from home. Nobody made me do it. I had the relationships with my clients. And I didn’t feel like an invalid.’

But a year later she left banking — ‘I wanted a break’ — and spent time in Asia doing various jobs, including running a headhunting firm.



Julia Holmes, 52, (pictured, right) who lives in Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex, created her own returnship by taking a garden design course

In 2004, when the family moved back to London, she decided to become a stay-at-home mum. 'I knew my marriage was coming to an end. I thought the kids will need me, they were just five and seven.' Not that she slowed down. She had a third child, Leander, with her second husband, launched two start-ups, and did an art degree at Christie's. 'I am driven,' she says, 'I like to question, I love to learn.'

She enjoyed life, but with three boys at private school she was running out of money, and in 2013, while browsing through iRelaunch, a U.S.-based website for woman returning to work, she read about Credit Suisse starting up a returnship programme in New York.

'I wrote to them and said that I am not in New York, I am in London, but if you plan to do anything over here just let me know.'

By return email they explained they were launching the programme in London the following year.

According to Credit Suisse, around 12 to 15 women are accepted onto each ten-week programme and between 50 to 80 per cent are taken on at the end. Adriana was one of them.

In need of a work wardrobe, she borrowed clothes from friends and dug out her old suits. 'I had to take the shoulder pads out of a couple of things!'

She now works ten to 12 hours a day; and every other week works a day from home. 'So I can go the hairdresser if I need to, get my nails done.'

Although I could always hold my own at a conversation at the dinner table, if there were women in full-time jobs, you did feel they'd look down on you because you were a stay-at-home mum - Adriana

At 55 she feels 'energised and invigorated.'

'Although I could always hold my own at a conversation at the dinner table, if there were women in full-time jobs, you did feel they'd look down on you because you were a stay-at-home mum.'

But of course the situation for older women is still far from perfect. With the rise in the pension age to 67 and a static economy more and more older women need to continue working.

The number of women working past the age of 70 has doubled in four years, according to the investment firm Hargreaves Lansdown, which analysed figures from the Office for National Statistics.

But finding jobs isn't easy.

'I have three university degrees — one bachelors and two masters, and work on the tills in a supermarket.

'My children are grown up so I have no childcare issues. I am six months off my 50th birthday and feeling defeated,' wrote Phyllis in reply to a post that I put on skilledpeople.com, an online company for job seekers over 50, asking for older women to get in touch with their experiences.

My frustration with companies that love to bang on about them is that for every five women they take back on a returnship programme, they are probably losing 50 because they are refusing their requests for flexible working - Lisa Unwin, founder of She's Back

And there were many similar stories.

'It is hard,' admits Lisa Unwin, founder of She's Back, a campaigning recruitment and support organisation for women returning to work.

'There is a lot of trumpeting of returnship programmes,' she says, but numbers are still small and focused on mid- to senior-level roles.

'My frustration with companies that love to bang on about them is that for every five women they take back on a returnship programme, they are probably losing 50 because they are refusing their requests for flexible working.'

She advises women to improve their 'digital fluency' — Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn — 'it's not hard, there are YouTube videos'; bypass recruitment agencies — 'anyone who has a gap on their CV is going to get nowhere with most recruitment agencies'; bone-up on office culture — 'if you are going to get a job in Canary Wharf, go and sit and have a coffee and watch what people wear'; and use your contacts and networks.'



Julia, who lives in Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex, and has two children, Tom, 23 and Eloise, 24, was 'knocked for six' after she was made redundant from her job as a director of a furniture shop six years ago

Julia Holmes, 52, who lives in Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex, and has two children, Tom, 23 and Eloise, 24, was 'knocked for six' after she was made redundant from her job as a director of a furniture shop six years ago.

She had joined the company as a part-time sales assistant when her children were small after her divorce in 2000. Within three years she had risen through the ranks to director.

'I was good at buying, organising, running the shop, managing staff and budgets,' she says. 'I was just really good at running a small business, basically.'

Her success felt all the greater as she had married young, moved with her husband overseas and never really worked before. 'There was a lot of self worth gained as a single parent and having that independence,' she says.

But Julia's vulnerability at unexpectedly losing her job was heightened as the redundancy coincided with the menopause.

'It's a very confusing time. The menopause makes you feel you are approaching the end of your life,' she says, 'You've reached the pinnacle and it's all downhill from now on.'

At the beginning of this year with both her children now at university she decided to downsize and move to a cheaper part of town.

'The garden had been untouched for 20 years and when I moved in I cleared it.' In February, she was on Facebook and saw the local community centre was running a garden design course. 'I thought: "I could do that."'

She went one evening a week for eight weeks. 'I absolutely loved it. I threw myself into the course. I did all the homework and more.'

At the end of the eight weeks, Julia's tutor offered her a job as a project manager for the garden design company that she runs.

'I really couldn't believe it. It was my dream job,' says Julia, now two months into the role.

'I find it really hard sometimes,' she admits, 'I have to write things down, whereas if I was ten years younger I would just be able to remember it, so I do have lists and notebooks and folders and files.'

'And at the start, for every hour I did in the office I would have to do another hour at home just checking and double-checking until I had the confidence to know that what I was doing was right.'

'But it has changed every aspect of my life,' she says, 'It has taken off a layer of misery that I didn't even know was to do with me not being fulfilled at this age.'

'My mood is now brighter. I've lost a bit of weight. I've got new friends. I am obviously exuding something different to what I have been for the past few years.'

'What is exciting is this is completely different for me. So maybe instead of trying to get into the same career, try something else because you can't feel old at something that's new to you.'