Abstract

After a career break: the challenges facing women returning to ICT

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The past 10 years has seen a decline in numbers of women in the UK both working in the IT industry and also in ICT occupations in other sectors. More women leave the IT industry than join it and of those who leave ICT, only a small number return. However, the traditional view of a single exit and re-entry to the labour market is perhaps outdated – returning might better be viewed as a revolving door with women transitioning in and out at different stages in the life course. Returners to ICT can be broadly categorised into three distinct groups – those who are coming back after a break to the same employer, those who have left employment for a period of time and are now seeking to return to a different employer, and finally those who are coming into ICT work for the first time having perhaps worked in a different sector prior to their break.

There are a range of reasons that women leave, but one of the key points when women’s careers in ICT can be disrupted is when they become mothers – even for those who continue with the same employer, the twin effects of taking a career break and subsequently working part time can often result in careers being stalled and progression being hampered. For those who take extended breaks and leave employment for a period of time, there are challenges, some of which are common to all returners to the labour market – these include lack of confidence, out-dated skills, loss of contacts and networks as well as the practical and emotional issues related to balancing their career with caring commitments.

There are further factors that are specific to returning to employment in ICT. Cultures within the ICT sector are often not conducive to returners: the ideal worker is still modelled on the male breadwinner who is young, full time, totally committed to his career, and internationally mobile. A career break can often be viewed as evidence of lack of commitment, with employers making assumptions about motherhood and its implications for availability and reliability. Recruitment processes may inadvertently discriminate against returners, for example jobs are rarely advertised as part time and recruitment agencies often bias against those without recent work experience. As a result, many returners seek and find ICT employment opportunities within other sectors such as health or education, where the working norms are more easily combined with family care. However this is often lower skilled and lower paid than the work they did before their career break.

This paper will explore some of these difficulties and barriers for women coming back into ICT, drawing on the experiences of women returners who have attended the Open University’s online course - Return to Science, Engineering and Technology.