

Diversity & Inclusion Toolkit

Part Five: Retain and Thrive

Welcome to the MCA's Diversity & Inclusion Toolkit

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Welcome to Part B of the Retain & Thrive MCA Diversity & Inclusion Toolkit. This edition focuses on two crucial aspects: retaining consultants

from diverse backgrounds; and enabling them to thrive through flexible working, an inclusive culture, and support for extended periods of leave. Flexible working has become increasingly important among consultants, with the 2025 MCA Member Survey revealing that it has overtaken a competitive salary as the top driver of job satisfaction for the first time in six years. Flexible working is vital for many to achieve work-life balance.

Our collective work in this area remains critically important, as a greater percentage of female employees and employees from ethnic minority backgrounds are actively seeking new roles outside of the industry compared to their male and white counterparts, as confirmed by our recent research. Additionally, the 2024 MCA Annual Report highlighted significant gender and ethnic disparities at partner level.

The reasons behind these trends are manifold, but consultants from diverse backgrounds choosing to leave their firms or the sector at crucial stages of their careers is a key factor. Our industry is committed to improving the inclusivity of firms and ensuring that our profession reflects the society

and communities we serve. We hope that the best practices and guidance contained in this Toolkit will contribute to achieving these goals.

Part of the challenge for this toolkit is recognising that the consulting environment is complex. There are tens of thousands of clients, consulting work can be of critical operational importance, consultants work to tight deadlines, and there may be high-level safety and security considerations and strict on-site requirements. Embedding diversity and inclusion is imperative but it requires time, thought, energy and considered discussion on all sides.

This publication follows 2024's Part A of the Retain & Thrive Toolkit, which focused on career pathways and client working. We recommend reading both sections of the Retain & Thrive Toolkit together, as they contain best practices and real-world case studies from MCA member firms of all sizes that can be applied to benefit firms, consultants, and ultimately the sector.

We would like to extend our thanks to the MCA members who contributed to the Retain & Thrive Toolkit. We hope that it will be useful for all teams across the industry.

If you have any feedback on the Toolkit, please contact communications@mca.org.uk



MCA Diversity & Inclusion Toolkit

Attract



Recruit



Onboard



Retain



Develop

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KEY TOPICS COVERED IN THIS TOOLKIT

CREATING AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE

- 1. Clearly define what a good inclusive culture looks like and measure progress.
- 2. Apply an inclusive lens to everyday workplace policies.
- 3. Create internal communications and events that reflect the diversity of your firm.
- 4. Embed a culture that supports flexible working.
- 5. Ensure that your inclusive culture extends to your work with clients, including flexible working.

SUPPORTING THOSE GOING ON OR RETURNING FROM LEAVE

- 1. Consider enhanced leave offers for different types of leave.
- 2. Introduce tailored buddy schemes for those about to go on leave or returning to work.
- 3. Provide return to work coaching programmes.
- 4. Enable flexible working and provide a clear approach to considering requests for different working arrangements.

PART ONE: Creating an inclusive culture

OVERVIEW

The creation and maintenance of an inclusive culture in the workplace underpins the retention of consultants from diverse backgrounds and enables them to thrive, contributing to better business outcomes. Building an environment where employees feel welcome and supported can significantly contribute to their desire to stay with the company and their success.

Creating an inclusive culture involves integrating inclusivity into how an organisation designs and communicates policies affecting staff, ensuring that inclusive behaviours are embedded at all levels of the workforce, and shifting

mindsets towards a positive view of difference. It is crucial to establish and apply equitable and transparent policies within your firm. Clearly define the boundaries of what can and cannot easily be supported and engage employees in discussions to explore potential solutions together. This collaborative approach ensures that everyone feels valued. For example, enabling both introverts and extroverts to contribute is key to ensuring all voices are heard. Various measures can aid in this, including providing agendas in advance of meetings, using the 'hands up' button before speaking on video calls, and recording meetings.

EXTENDING INCLUSIVE CULTURE TO CLIENTS AND THE SUPPLY CHAIN

Inclusivity should also extend to all our interactions with clients and how we work together, including when working at client sites. Firms must take responsibility for setting expectations with clients regarding inclusive solutions, such as working patterns and disabled access. As an industry, we should lead by example, acting as a positive force to encourage our clients to adopt more inclusive working practices, as outlined in our Chartered Management Consultant accreditation. On-site inclusivity should encompass how we operate in client environments, including who speaks in meetings and how we address client behaviours and comments.

PART ONE: Creating an inclusive culture

CLEARLY DEFINE WHAT A GOOD INCLUSIVE CULTURE LOOKS LIKE AND MEASURE PROGRESS

The first step in creating an inclusive culture is clearly stating what a firm means by inclusivity and what it looks like from the leadership down. It is essential to articulate the behaviours leaders expect in a truly inclusive workplace. Without outlining goals, milestones and expected behaviours, it is challenging to drive change and ensure a firm's culture supports improved inclusivity. This can be achieved through the articulation of core values or a company mission and reinforced through internal communications and effective management, including calling

out behaviours that do not meet expectations. Leadership must set the tone and example for inclusivity expectations.

After defining what good looks like in terms of inclusive culture, it is equally important to implement mechanisms to measure and monitor progress – and track whether a truly inclusive culture has been created and is being maintained in practice.

The most common way of monitoring progress in this area is through regular internal staff surveys. The frequency of these surveys will depend on several factors, including the overall size of the firm and capacity among relevant teams. SME Sysdoc, an MCA member firm, conducts a monthly pulse survey that delves into the

core workplace requirements for nurturing an inclusive and thriving culture.

In line with collecting feedback and data on the extent to which your firm has an inclusive culture, you should consider what actions to take if evidence of discriminatory or exclusionary behaviours is found. Firms should also monitor how diverse they are at all levels and their diversity trends. Actions firms could consider include introducing training for employees to address shortcomings, such as the prevalence of microaggressions in the workplace. It could also involve managers and leaders being prepared to intervene to take corrective action – either with the individuals concerned or more widely – to alter company culture.



CASE STUDY



Employees anonymously grade their

sentiments against carefully crafted statements (based upon the Gallup Q12 survey) designed to capture their perceptions of being valued ('My line manager, or someone at work, genuinely cares about me as a person'), receiving recognition ('In the past week, I've been recognised or praised for doing great work'), and fostering workplace

cohesion and wellbeing ('I have a friend at work'). Scores for all statements are shared with line managers to inform conversations, and specific actions are created based on the lowest scoring statements. The survey results also form part of our organisational KPIs, which supports our overall people and culture framework. Through candid feedback and targeted follow-up actions, the survey results help us uncover areas where diverse voices might feel overlooked or undervalued, ensuring that all employee experiences are heard and considered at the highest level.



APPLY AN INCLUSIVE LENS TO EVERYDAY WORKPLACE POLICIES

An important element of creating an inclusive culture is applying an inclusive lens to all aspects of an organisation's workplace policies, including areas that may not be obviously linked to diversity and inclusion. Creating an environment where employees from diverse backgrounds feel welcome and thrive can mean addressing everyday issues that may not be immediately apparent. This could include technology for neurodiverse employees and those with a disability, such as noise reduction headphones, visual aids, larger screens and text to speech software.

By approaching corporate policymaking with an inclusive lens, organisations can help eliminate instances where employees feel inadvertently excluded due to particular rules, policies or systems. This approach can significantly reduce the likelihood of employees leaving the firm.

CASE STUDY



We work with our employee networks and external experts to ensure our policies are inclusive of all colleagues. Alongside our anti-bullying, harassment and victimisation policy and our inclusion, diversity and equity policy, we have many specific policies to support our people. Our menopause and menstruation policy provides comprehensive support for

colleagues and managers, including a conversation guide. It actively encourages colleagues to talk to their leaders or HR and to request flexibility if needed, for example through glide time to avoid peak travel periods. Our women's network hosts monthly menopause support group meetings. Employees can access the Bupa menopause plan which provides a consultation with a specialist GP, a personalised care plan, and 24/7 access to a specialist nurse. Colleagues can also access occupational health, our 24/7 health helpline, a remote GP service, free period products and desk fans.



Creating an inclusive culture involves carefully considering how colleagues behave towards one another, as well as how decisions within a firm are made and their impact on people from different backgrounds and experiences. Cultivating inclusive behaviours at all levels of the organisation

often requires changing mindsets and learning to embrace differences – a process typically driven by managers and leaders. Some of our case studies demonstrate how key policies or new activities are actively sponsored and championed by senior leaders in the firm.

ARUP



As a disabled consultant, I recognise the need for policy and the built environment to work seamlessly to promote the recruitment, retention and development of disabled people who have suffered historical exclusion within recruitment, development

and promotion. Designing inclusively within the built environment provides the foundation for all building users to have an equitable experience within the workplace and fosters a culture where everyone feels valued and inspired. Advocating for the ethical, sustainable, commercial

and reputational benefits of inclusive design to our clients, we not only create exemplar projects but deliver an inclusive culture. To support a barrier free workplace, organisations should have the platform to review and embed person centred policies where diversity is celebrated and retained.



Dean Cavanagh, Consultant and Co-Chair of Connect Ability (Arup's Disabled Staff Network)

PART ONE: Creating an inclusive culture

CONSIDERING SOCIAL EVENTS

One important area that can inadvertently lead to exclusion is the design and arrangement of social events and activities. Consulting is a highly interpersonal profession and can involve various types of socialising, both internal and external. However, differing norms, preferences and observances among employees based on religion, socioeconomic background or culture mean that there are multiple considerations when creating events or activities that everyone can participate in equally.

Many consulting firms, such as MCA member firm Forvis Mazars, have designed guidance policies for those

CASE STUDY



“ Our Forvis Mazars Guide to Inclusive Social Events resource outlines key factors to consider when planning activities and events, along with recommendations on how to accommodate different needs accordingly. Such considerations include location and environment, accessibility, timing, lighting and sound, food and drink, and price (if applicable), some

of which the planners may not otherwise have given due attention to. We recognise that failure to keep such key factors in mind in the planning stage may hinder some individuals from being able or feeling comfortable to take part, inadvertently causing exclusion. The e-resource also signposts users to the internal calendar which details upcoming dates such as cultural and religious festivals, so planners can steer clear of these days and avoid sidelining colleagues who observe them.”

planning social events, covering factors including food and drink, costs and

location, to ensure that such activities are successful and inclusive for all.

ANNUAL AND UNPAID LEAVE

A core example of applying an inclusive lens to everyday policies is holidays and unpaid leave. Some consultancy firms, such as MCA member firm AtkinsRéalis, have introduced flexible bank holiday policies that allow

consultants to swap days worked in order to take leave at a time more suitable for them personally.

For instance, in the UK, many bank holidays are tied to Christian religious festivals that may not be relevant to all team members. Conversely, several festivals or days of

observance for other religions are not recognised as public holidays. Under a flexible policy, an employee from a religion that does not observe Christmas, for example, could swap the associated bank holidays for a different religious festival that is significant to them.

CASE STUDY



“ AtkinsRéalis has a flexible bank holiday policy in place. Those wishing to work

on a typically recognised bank holiday and take leave at a different time will need to discuss and agree this in advance with their line manager or project manager. There will need to be sufficient work to keep them busy and

fully productive, and there may need to be a discussion as to whether they will work from the office (subject to availability), from home or somewhere else (for example, a client office/site). ”

PART ONE: Creating an inclusive culture

Meanwhile, MCA member firm EY offers the option for people to take unpaid leave for 3-6 months and an official career break for 6-12 months.

An EY employee has recently taken a three-month break to go travelling and provided the below detail about their experience:

CASE STUDY



I have always wanted to go travelling and see some more of the world during an extended period away. Since I am a very organised person, I have always had the next thing lined up though, and I have not wanted to take a risk by opting to go travelling

instead. For example, when I finished school, I had a university place lined up, when I finished university, I had a graduate job lined up, and when I left my first company, I had another job lined up. I was aware that EY offered people the option to take unpaid leave for up to 6 months and kept your job open for you to return to. This seemed like a great, low-risk option. After working for the company for 8 years, I decided I wanted to take advantage of it to realise my dream. I spoke to my

line manager (who is also my counsellor) and she was supportive, and 6 months later, off I went. I travelled to Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands, Colombia, Mexico, Costa Rica and Panama. The experience was amazing – everything I had hoped it would be. I met so many people on my travels who commented what a great policy it was – I felt really lucky to be able to do it. I would recommend others take advantage of it too.



CREATE INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS AND EVENTS THAT REFLECT THE DIVERSITY OF YOUR FIRM

An inclusive culture rests on a corporate environment that embraces the differences and diversity found within your firm. This can be reflected in internal and external communications as well as in events and activities.

For instance, MCA member firm Deloitte has created its Flourish programme to ensure that there is a regular calendar of events that celebrate the diversity of its people while also addressing employee wellbeing.

CASE STUDY



Deloitte's Flourish programme champions a workplace where everyone can thrive authentically. Through a monthly cadence of engaging, inclusive events, Flourish fosters a culture of belonging and provides tools for personal and professional growth. Flourish inclusion events recognise the richness of diverse perspectives. They celebrate

key observances like Black History Month, International Women's Day, South Asian Heritage Month and International Day of People with Disabilities. These events build and engage communities – sparking dialogue, understanding and allyship. Beyond celebration, Flourish tackles a key driver of retention – wellbeing. The Flourish programme aims to address critical topics like stress management, financial wellbeing and healthy boundaries. Thousands of colleagues attend Flourish events during the year.



PART ONE: Creating an inclusive culture

In our MCA Onboarding Toolkit, we discuss the importance of employee resource groups and networks in helping new joiners quickly settle into a firm and connect with like-minded people from similar backgrounds.

Employee resource groups and networks can also play

a crucial role in driving retention and enabling consultants to thrive. For instance, many firms' employee resource groups organise events and activities similar to those run by Deloitte, tailored to their colleagues' needs.

Some organisations, such

as MCA member firm Sopra Steria, create programmes and networks specifically aimed at groups relevant to this Toolkit, such as parents. These initiatives provide support and resources that can help employees manage new life changes and alleviate pressures on their time.

CASE STUDY

sopra  steria



Sopra Steria's Parenting Out Loud initiative

aims to support working parents by fostering

an environment where parenting challenges and triumphs can be openly discussed. This programme provides a platform for employees to share their parenting experiences, seek advice and offer support to one another. Through regular webinars, support groups and resource sharing,

Parenting Out Loud has created a strong community that helps parents navigate the complexities of balancing work and family life. The initiative has led to improved work-life balance and increased job satisfaction among participating employees.



RESPONDING TO EXTERNAL EVENTS

CASE STUDY

Atos



In Atos we are guided by individual colleagues, as well as our Employee Resource Groups, to ensure that we respond appropriately and in a swift, sensitive manner when distressing external events occur in the UK and globally. Our senior leadership team communicates thoughtfully to all staff, acknowledging the situation and stressing

that the impact and methods of coping may vary depending on our lived experiences, background and geographical location. We offer flexibility of work location to ensure physical and physiological safety and signpost colleagues to a range of internal and external sources of wellbeing support, including links to self-help resources. Our aim is to reinforce the message that we are a supportive consulting community who look after each other when challenges arise.



PART ONE: Creating an inclusive culture

EMBED A CULTURE THAT SUPPORTS FLEXIBLE WORKING

It's clear that having an environment that supports flexible working can be beneficial to retaining a diverse workforce. Flexible working arrangements can significantly enhance employee satisfaction and aid retention and attract staff who require or benefit from non-standard working patterns. This has become increasingly important among consultants, with the 2025 MCA Member Survey finding that flexible working has overtaken a competitive salary as the top driver of job satisfaction for the first time in six years.

Beyond written policies and rules, a key factor in successfully introducing or increasing flexible working is creating a culture that normalises and supports it as a practice. This can help shape an environment where employees who want or need to utilise flexible working can thrive.

Implementing flexible working requires managing expectations on both sides of the employer-employee relationship. One helpful perspective is to think of it that employees need to be flexible for their firms and firms need to be flexible for their employees, a situation which can lead to mutual benefits and mutual challenges.

CASE STUDY

4C



At 4C we think having strong senior role models is vital in humanising the fact that people are more than their professional selves, with additional pulls on their time. It's common for the 4C MD for example to reference that he's not available because he's spending time with his family on his out of office, to share messages about what's happening with his family or hobbies

in his weekly note, or to rearrange a Senior Leadership Team meeting to make sure no-one misses a nativity. It's recognised practice that you'll often see School Run as protected time in a calendar and that we know we have some working parents who will flex their hours around childcare needs – at all levels of the organisation and in both client and non-client facing areas. We also believe that children and caring responsibilities aren't the only reasons someone might need flexible working. Everyone should be able to be flexible, whatever the reason.



It's clear that flexible working can benefit individuals in terms of managing competing work and personal demands and improving wellbeing. However, it is a reality that certain opportunities may not always be available to those who work different or fewer hours within a week. This is due to a number of factors including particular client needs, capacity and resource planning, or practical considerations such as security requirements necessitating employee presence on client sites. Successful flexible

working requires firms and employees to agree clear, outcome-based objectives and to set expectations on both sides in advance.

Flexible working can take many forms: part-time working, shared job roles, flexible hours during the day, flexible weeks, flexible location, options for extended periods away. MCA member firm PwC has introduced its Empowered Flexibility policy, which aims to normalise flexible working and recognise the different factors that might lead a consultant to pursue it as an option.

CASE STUDY



PwC has implemented an Empowered Flexibility policy which enables all employees across the UK firm to decide

on their most effective working pattern, enabling them to work in a way that works best for them. Empowered Flexibility is a growing focus for our consulting business and an important concept for how we recognise the varying expectations of what meaningful work-life balance looks like across our consulting population,

providing optionality through a multitude of initiatives. We have seen that this approach not only normalises conversations around personalised working patterns but also fosters an inclusive environment where employees feel empowered to work in a way that suits them.



This approach not only highlights the options available to employees but also emphasises the culture that supports the adoption

of these options and how colleagues interact with those who utilise flexible working. Another MCA member firm North Highland also

prioritises a culture of care, consistently accommodating flexible working requests into onboarding and role allocation processes.

CASE STUDY



In the post-COVID world almost all of our workforce operate under some form of flexible work pattern, and 3% of them operate on formal reduced working arrangements for a

variety of personal reasons. Our refreshed and extended parental and adoption leave policy has resulted in almost 100% of parents returning to North Highland, and many taking advantage of formal flexible working arrangements of some type both on their return and prior to taking leave. Our dedicated Talent Operations team actively engage with Consultants, their People

Managers, HR, Client Leads and Hiring Managers to promote employees with flexible work patterns, with the People Managers playing a key role in representing and advocating for their team member's needs. We maintain open dialogues with clients, who appreciate this transparency and recognize the benefits and challenges of flexible working.



PART ONE: Creating an inclusive culture

MCA member firm KPMG has introduced an Agile Working Hub across the organisation

CASE STUDY



“The hub explains different types of agile working, as well as case studies from colleagues on flexible working contracts. We have established an Agile Working Steering Group, made up of senior leaders who meet monthly to discuss implementation strategies and promote a culture of agile working.

In February 2025 we launched a job share pilot in our Advisory business with Job Share Revolution. This will include upskilling sessions for service-line leaders; candidate matching; role suitability assessment; job share bootcamp for pilot pairs including training for managers; and ongoing coaching for both job share partners and managers. This initiative is being sponsored by our head of Advisory and is intended to address the challenges associated with flexible working alongside client expectations of consistent support.

Over the past two years the percentage of colleagues who sit in Advisory on part-time contracts has continued to grow, from 3.5% to 4.5%. One in 10 Directors and 8% of Senior Managers work part time. Our 2024 People Survey found that firmwide, part-time colleagues scored six percentage points above average on wellbeing, and two percentage points above average on career growth, with an above average intention to stay.”

CASE STUDY



“Based on EY’s own experience with hybrid working, EY Connected Working Framework was developed to enable itself and clients to be ‘brilliant at connecting in a hybrid world’. It is based on the 4Cs principle that has been thoroughly tested and embedded across the employee lifecycle at EY.

CLIENTS: Plan out your client or project lifecycle from end-to-end with the ambition to elevate client experiences.

CONNECTION: Keep checking in with your team and look for ways the team can support each other and connect in the right way.

COACHING: Prioritise learning opportunities by being intentional about where, when and how you and the team will learn from each other.

CARBON: Make conscious travel decisions that contribute toward our net-zero ambition.

IN A FIVE-YEAR PERIOD (2018-2022) THE FOLLOWING BENEFITS WERE NOTED:

1. **Improvement in overall engagement (67% in 2019 to 72% in 2022)**
2. **Improvement in development experiences of junior employees (71%, a 4% increase, say they have access to experiences to build their career)**
3. **Increase in understanding of EY’s net-zero ambition (94%, a 30% increase)**
4. **Reduction in energy consumption (24% reduction)**



Flexible working is a top priority for young consultants and a crucial factor in fostering engagement, productivity

and retention. Flexible working is not just about remote working. It also means shaping an in-office environment that enhances collaboration and professional growth. Many young consultants, having entered the workforce in the post-COVID era, recognise the benefits of in-person

interactions – such as increased visibility of senior leaders, stronger mentorship opportunities, and more organic knowledge-sharing. By embracing a balanced approach to flexibility, firms can empower their people while building a resilient and high-performing workforce.



Ted Eastaugh, AtkinsRéalis and Young MCA Chair

Ensure that your inclusive culture extends to your work with clients, including flexible working.

A unique aspect of consulting is the client relationship. Consultants often work directly within client teams, on client sites, or may even be embedded within client organisations for extended periods.

The client-facing nature of the consulting industry can present challenges in ensuring a consistent application of a firm's inclusive culture. The approach and policies of your client can matter as much as those of your firm. If a consultant's experience of their organisation's inclusive culture is not matched by their experiences with a client, it can negatively affect retention.

This challenge also applies to managing the realities of flexible working. Consulting is a demanding sector where implementing flexible working arrangements can be difficult, limiting uptake across the sector. Consultants often

work on time-critical projects, manage multiple projects simultaneously, and need to be available to clients at various times. These business needs can lead to requests for flexible working being turned down.

In Part A of the MCA Retain & Thrive Toolkit, we discussed various ways to approach client working to support inclusivity and retain staff from diverse backgrounds. Some of these best practices apply here.

One effective way to manage flexible working and gain client understanding and buy-in is through the use of project and team charters, such as those used by MCA member firm EY.

These charters can outline ways of working, including flexible working arrangements and team members' preferences for hours of contact and working patterns. Supported by managers and leaders where appropriate, these charters and statements of ways of working can create transparency and help manage expectations between clients and teams.

CASE STUDY



The important factor in a client environment is the influence of senior leadership in normalising flexibility and inclusion with clients, as much as within the organisation. Setting that expectation as a reality of how you will work as a firm is key to supporting employees but also building a firm foundation of trust and living your values with your clients. Needing to work flexibly doesn't detract from productivity, and often that ability to be flexible drives much higher levels of engagement and employees willing to do more for the organisation – as well as to stay.



PART TWO: Supporting those going on & returning

Consulting is an exciting career offering abundant prospects for growth and personal development. It attracts ambitious professionals who thrive on solving complex problems and delivering impactful solutions for clients across various industries. However, life's journey can present a range of challenges and opportunities that can involve stepping away from work for extended periods.

Whether it's welcoming a new family member, caring for a relative, attending to personal health matters, embarking on a sabbatical, or taking a career break for another reason, these moments can place demands on individuals while also requiring thoughtful and comprehensive support from their employers. In return, supporting employees with career breaks can result in more rounded, experienced and happy employees returning to the firm.



CASE STUDY

Deloitte.

“ Deloitte UK has implemented a new standard for family-friendly workplaces with the introduction of 26 weeks fully paid leave for all new parents. The new policy is part of a wider enhanced family and carers leave package for all employees, including paid time off for neonatal care, caring responsibilities and fertility treatment. The changes support the findings of Deloitte-commissioned YouGov research, which revealed that 87% of working parents prioritise family leave when choosing an employer. The research also highlighted the negative impact of unequal leave policies on working mothers, with over half (57%) forced to reduce their working hours due to their co-parent's workplace inflexibility. Deloitte's new policy aims to promote greater gender balance, enabling both parents to equally share childcare responsibilities and advance their careers. ”

CASE STUDY

GATEONE

A Havas Company

“ Gate One offers three months family leave at full pay to all employees who have been with the firm for more than a year and a half, whatever their gender. In addition, primary caregivers get an additional three months full pay (six months full pay in total), followed by statutory pay for a further three months and statutory leave of up to 52 weeks in total. ”

Consider enhanced leave offers for different types of leave

Designing and offering enhanced leave packages that go beyond statutory requirements can play a key role in driving retention through increased loyalty among those who need extended leave. This demonstrates that a company values and supports its employees during significant life events or, in the case of sabbatical leave, as a reward for long service. In return, employees can gain new skills and experience clear benefits to their wellbeing. They value the company's support and are more likely to remain at the firm.

Introduce tailored buddy schemes for those about to go on leave or return to work.

Returning to work after an extended period of leave, such as parental leave or carer's leave, can be challenging for employees.

MEMBER ADVICE



Charlotte Sweeney Associates



It's important to have open and proactive career planning conversations. Normalise discussions about career breaks by integrating them into performance and career development conversations. Equip managers with the skills to support employees planning career breaks without bias. Create a 'leave roadmap' to clarify transition plans, client communication strategies and reintegration steps.

It's important to manage client expectations and project transitions. This could be through assigning consultants to team-based rather than individual-dependent client models to reduce disruption. Use job sharing or rotation models, allowing another consultant to step in while maintaining continuity. Communicate proactively with clients, positioning leave as part of the organisation's broader talent and inclusion strategy rather than a disruption.



Industry data shows that this is a critical point at which individuals, particularly women, may exit their company or the workforce entirely if proper support is not in place. Ensuring a smooth return to work and providing support can help employees reintegrate, reducing stress and anxiety. Employees who feel supported are more likely to stay with the company.

Equally important is easing anxiety and helping employees feel positive about their career prior to starting a period of leave. They will have inner questions such as "How will I retain my client relationships?" and "Will my peers get a step ahead of me while I'm off?", and employers need to address this. Supporting those individuals who are about to go on leave with coaching can be highly beneficial.

Many MCA member firms have implemented buddy schemes to support inclusivity across various areas, including providing career support and guidance to people from particular ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds. Firms including Arcadis and BAE Systems Digital Intelligence have designed schemes specifically aimed at those returning from extended leave.

Providing returners with a tailored buddy scheme, matched to their experience and needs as far as possible, can give employees an important resource to draw on

at a time when they may be adapting to a new way of life and work-life balance. Being able to exchange ideas and experiences with a buddy who has been through a similar experience can be incredibly useful to support employee wellbeing – and ultimately retention.

Provide return to work

CASE STUDY



ARCADIS



Arcadis has a Returner Buddy programme. The

purpose is to support the returner from maternity, shared parental and adoption leave on an informal basis, providing a safe space for them to ask questions and discuss any concerns or issues with a buddy who has been through a similar transition back to work. When the returner receives confirmation of their return to work (typically around one month before returning) they will be asked if they wish to join the programme. If so, they will be matched with a buddy who has previously been on long-term Family Friendly Leave. The assigned buddy will reach out to the returner via email to agree a suitable time for their first engagement.



coaching programmes.

One of the most effective ways to support employees returning from parental leave or other extended absences is by providing structured return to work coaching programmes that go beyond

buddy schemes.

These initiatives are critical in ensuring that returning individuals feel welcomed, supported and integrated back into the workforce, and can be designed to meet common needs for employees

returning from similar types of leave. By implementing tailored programmes, companies can foster a more inclusive and accommodating work environment, ultimately enhancing employee retention and satisfaction.

CASE STUDY**BAE SYSTEMS**

Buddies at BAE Systems Digital Intelligence

offer assistance in applying for flexible working and provide a friendly face for pastoral support as people settle back into work and get to grips with any business updates. We match buddies and those returning from parental leave based on location and where they work within the business, but also on the type of support they might require or relate to, such as those who have experience of being a single parent, adoption, IVF, postnatal depression or pregnancy after loss.

**CASE STUDY****NORTH HIGHLAND**

North Highland implemented a comprehensive

Return to Work programme to support employees returning from parental leave. We have seen a 70% improvement in the retention rate of working mothers since launching the programme. Key elements include having a dedicated HR contact throughout the leave process, offering flexible return-to-work options, and providing access to the parent and carer community. Employees have praised the dedicated HR contact for helping them understand company policies and stay informed during their leave. Additionally,

the programme includes accrued leave planning, new joiner induction access, and ongoing support and goal setting. It also features pre-return planning, where people managers check in with employees before their return to discuss communication and scheduling preferences. On their first day back, a welcome meeting covers key business updates, role expectations and support networks. Flexible reintegration options, such as phased returns and flexible days for training, help ease the transition. These initiatives have fostered a more inclusive workplace, addressed past feedback, and ensured returning employees feel supported and fully integrated back into the organisation.





CASE STUDY

**forvis
mazars**



At Forvis Mazars
we run a Parental
Transition

Coaching programme for colleagues taking 12 or more weeks of any form of parental leave. This comprises of three one-to-one sessions which are completely confidential, and beneficiaries can determine the content according to their personal needs and priorities whatever their gender.

Generally, the pre-leave session aims to support the colleague in planning ahead of their departure, discussing matters such as delegation of duties, handover and preferred level of communication from the firm during leave.

The in-leave session focuses on making the prospective return to the workplace as seamless as possible and helping them manage the logistics of dual responsibilities. The post-leave session is held a few weeks after returning to work, providing a safe space for the colleague to reflect on their time back, raise any challenges they have encountered, and establish plans to overcome them.



CASE STUDY



“To support a smooth return, we offer external one-to-one coaching, which can begin before the employee’s return date. We have seen almost 100% take-up of this, with positive feedback on its usefulness. In the first six months of their return, we remove the expectation to contribute to internal activities with no financial impact. We also ensure that returners have at least one week of protected time on the bench before being placed on a project. To support their re-connection to fellow employees, we celebrate their return by announcing it on company forums along with a re-introduction of who they are and their specialism. We also have a working parents employee resource group to ensure there is a safe space and source of support and information.”

ENABLE FLEXIBLE WORKING AND PROVIDE A CLEAR APPROACH TO CONSIDERING REQUESTS FOR DIFFERENT WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

Flexible working is closely linked to supporting those returning to work after extended leave. Parents might benefit from flexibility to manage school drop-offs, while employees with caring responsibilities may benefit from different hours or locations.

In England, Scotland and Wales, employees have the legal right to request flexible working from the first day in their job. In Northern Ireland, they have the right after 26 weeks of continuous employment. Employers must deal with such requests reasonably, but can refuse them for good business reasons.

A critical way to enable flexible working is by being clear about how firms will approach employee requests. Some firms have ingrained flexible working into their policies, while others are undertaking pilots.

Other firms have adopted a trial approach. For example, MCA member firm Gate One

has implemented flexible working options on a three-month trial or permanent basis. A trial can often represent a fairer means of assessing the business impact of a decision to allow an employee to work flexibly.

Creating clear policies in other areas, such as hybrid working, can also aid the implementation of flexible working. Gate One currently has a policy of a standard 50/50 split approach to hybrid working, whereas MCA member firm PwC has formally introduced a hybrid working model where employees spend 60% of their working week co-locating within PwC or at client office locations.

Creating clear opportunities for face-to-face interaction can support the successful implementation of flexible working and ensure that all employees, including those working condensed or reduced hours, benefit from the same opportunities for informal learning, networking and team building that come from in-person working.



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