



Career Prospects after **Career Breaks**



Equalitec: Advancing Women in ITEC
(Information Technology, Electronics, Communications)



dti

“Sometimes in order to get back you need retraining; most training programmes are for people who haven’t had any IT skills; What about those of us who need a rather different kind of training to recommence our work”

Equalitec: Advancing Women in ITEC

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The research forms part of Equalitec’s wider goals to increase our understanding of why the number of women working and advancing in ITEC has been persistently low; and to put in place measures designed to help employers recruit and retain more women; and to help women compete in the labour market after a career break, in particular, with regard to new employment opportunities created across a wide range of sectors through the drive towards knowledge-based economy.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report examines the career prospects for women in the UK who seek re-entry to ITEC (Information Technology, Electronics and Communication) following a career break. Using empirical data that is based on women's own views and experiences, the study finds evidence of barriers and limited opportunities for those women who want to return to their ITEC job after a career break. The study has shown that women returners are not a homogeneous group and that the length of their career break appears to play a key role in the re-entry process; the longer the break the greater the impact. Linked to these, career breaks are found to counteract career development due to the lack of support mechanisms such as flexi-time schemes and specifically part-time work and insufficient training. Further to the fact that ITEC is a fast-growing and continuously changing field, women's own perceptions and direct experiences help to sustain the image of the ITEC industry as a male-dominated one and as being unsympathetic towards people with family responsibilities; these remain the main barriers for women's recruitment, retention and advancement in ITEC. The business cases have shown that there are ITEC organisations that have become innovative in their working practices and are good exemplars of employers which have introduced support mechanisms for the advancement of women in the industry. The implications of the study for policy makers, employers and industry associations are discussed.

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

ITEC is a sector that incorporates the newest industries, consisting mainly of young firms and relatively freshly constituted forms of working practices. Despite this, several studies exist to-date that show that opportunities are limited for those women who aspire to a career in ITEC. The focus of the study is to go beyond these statistics and to examine a specific group of ITEC workers: women returners. In particular, our aim is to capture individuals' perspectives, perceptions and direct experiences and to identify those factors that enable and constrain women's return to IT occupations and compare these to other industries and occupations.

The work presented in this report and which was undertaken at the University of Bath School of Management, explores the factors that enable and constrain women returners to the ITEC industry and compares the experiences of women in a variety of organisations and career stages.

To achieve its goals, the report needs to set the scene of women returners by reviewing the literature on the subject. This involves exploring the industry characteristics including the role of women in this sector and understanding women's needs when they seek re-entry following a career break. Following from this, the results of the empirical study will be presented and the implications discussed.

PART 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Employment Patterns in the ITEC Industry in the UK

ITEC has been a fast growing sector and one of the central engines driving the economic growth of many countries as we enter the 21st century. It has also been the source of thousands of new businesses, millions of high-paying jobs and vast creative opportunities. Despite the increasing job opportunities, empirical research (Panteli, et al, 1999a) has drawn attention to the gender inequality in ITEC employment. For example, although women are employed throughout the different categories of jobs in electronics and computing, they are increasingly concentrated in areas of work that are low in status, power and rewards. As women move up the career hierarchy their representation shrinks. The proportion of women in such high tech occupations remains under-represented in top management posts and in key technical jobs (Panteli et al. 1999a; Roldan et al. 2004).

Recent research and government reports from both the UK and USA show that the number of women IT professionals is falling every year. In the UK, this has fallen from 100,000 to just over 53,700 in four years, despite the backed initiatives to encourage more women in IT (Goodwin, 2004a, b; Ahuja, 2002). Moreover, a research project led by researchers at the University of Cambridge has revealed that between 1999 and 2003 the proportion of women in the UK IT workforce fell by almost 50%, from 21% to 12.5%, following steady growth (Platman et al. 2004). In order to deal with these declining trends, several support networks in the UK such as MentorSET and Equalitec as well as numerous governmental campaigns and initiatives (e.g. Women into Science and Engineering/ WISE), have been set up since the early 1980s. Their primary role has been to support and promote women in a clearly male-dominated sector by aiming at young girls and women at the stage of selecting subjects of advanced study and career paths. More recently, the Prime Minister announced on 24 July 2004 the creation of a 'Women and Work Commission' in order to examine the problem of the gender pay gap and other issues affecting women's employment.

For the remainder of this section, we explain why in a fast growing industry like ITEC the number of female employees has been decreasing. In doing so, we discuss the main characteristics of the sector as these have been identified by research in this field. In particular, we reflect on different studies that have taken account of computing and engineering occupations.

Computer work has simultaneously been characterised by growth in demand and obsolescence of skills (Wright and Jacobs, 1995). That means that computer workers have to go through extensive training most of the time in their career if they want to stay up-to-date with the frequent changes in software, hardware and programming. Also the sector, although a comparatively new one, has been characterised as predominantly white, middle-class and male-dominated (Panteli et al. 1999b). This indicates that men hold high profile posts such as developers and managers whereas women are more likely to be seen as the users of those systems. This phenomenon has also been illustrated by Platman et al. (2004) who in their recent report have stated that the UK IT industry is male-dominated and full-time orientated, which designates that there are substantial obstacles for women working in ITEC.

Further, the Cambridge report (Platman et al. 2004) found that the lack of part-time work available for women in the IT profession is one of the main reasons why they are discouraged from the profession. The report also showed that the part-time workers in the UK, at 5.3%, are lower than the proportion in Germany (8.6%) and the Netherlands (16%). Furthermore, only the 16.9% of female IT professionals work part-time in the UK, compared with 37% in the Netherlands and 19% in Germany. The report also suggests that only women aged between 24 and 44 years old work in the sector, which means that older women may leave the profession. Moreover, another report on flexible working in the IT industry in the UK (DTI, 2004) has shown that the culture of long-hours is a well-embedded factor that is experienced by many IT professionals.

In the case of engineering, Carter and Kirkup (1990) found that in 1986 only 4.6% of professional engineers working in the industry were women. This proportion is expected to increase to between 10 to 12% by the year 2010 (McRae et al. 1991).

Although therefore the introduction of computers has changed the emphasis on mathematical models and circuit boards rather than on heavy machinery the role of women still remains very limited in engineering especially (Evetts, 1994).

Lack of well-established gender strategies within ITEC in general do not allow the implementation of policies favourable to women's employment such as part-time working. In addition, it has been observed that there is a poor work-life balance, due to long working hours, frequent over-time or travel demands, which extend the time away from home.

If women are not found in positions of influence in the ITEC industry, one of the most growing industries in modern economy, then what image is being given to prospective students, their parents and careers advisers? What influence will women have on the future developments within the discipline, hence on the industry itself?

2.2 Women Returners

Having described the general work environment for women in the ITEC industry we turn our attention to a particular group of women employees: women who seek re-entry following a career break, thus women returners.

A career break is a period of time where an employee is not working for very specific reasons (Institute of Physics, 2004). These reasons primarily include maternity leave or time-off to look after children or elderly relatives. The length of career break may vary according to the needs it attempts to cover; for example a maternity leave can be from twenty-six weeks and over, and it is often the main reason for taking a career break (DTI, 2002; Rothwell, 1980). Another reason for a career break includes the need to study e.g. for a further qualification or to follow one's partner on sabbatical leave or on a foreign assignment (Warrior, 1997).

Research has also identified a pattern for women's re-entry to the labour force. According to Rothwell (1980), this pattern includes an "in-and-out" period while children are young, followed by a part-time period, and eventually a return to full-

time employment when the children grow up. Rothwell (1980) explained that this pattern depends on women's job ambitions, on the family's financial conditions and on the local labour market.

Most of the academic studies on women returners have focused on women's choices and career orientations (Doorewaard et al, 2004) as well as on trying to identify either the demands of women for returning to work or their fears and their differences compared to men (Healy, 2004; Healy and Kraithman, 1991; Shaw et al. 1999). A major difference for example between men and women is that women shape their working lives around the competing domestic demands, e.g. childbirth, household etc. They link and adjust their work with the different phases their life is going through. There have been several reports that aimed to understand the experiences of women returners (Institute of Physics, 2004; DTI, 2002; Women Returners Network, 2002a,b,c). Despite these, the present study, that is part of the Equalitec project, is the first study that examines women returners specifically within the ITEC sector.

In order to set the scene in the UK for women returning to ITEC, we need to reflect upon studies based on other kinds of industries and on reports from governmental organisations. Initially, it is essential to look at women returners and their characteristics. According to a research study by Doorewaard et al (2004), women are more 'job-oriented' and 'people-oriented' rather than 'money-oriented' as male returners or employees. The research findings showed that women are more eager to meet other people in their new jobs, which create a rather interesting topic of debate about women returners taking into consideration that usually they face quite a lot of difficulties in order to return. For instance the same study showed that many women with care-taking responsibilities at home tend to accept relatively low-skilled part-time jobs (Doorewaard, H. et al, 2004: 22).

A survey published by the *Institute for Employment Research* (Shackleton et al, 1998) has indicated that women returning to the labour market need training in both 'hard' and 'soft' skills. Generally, such training takes a focus on the updating of existing skills, confidence building, and training in new technology. Work experience may also contribute towards raising the self-esteem levels of those wishing to re-enter

the labour market, who often feel that they lack the necessary work-related skills to compete.

In addition, Houston et al. (2003) illustrate that first time mothers do not want to return to full-time work. A great number of women were not able to return to the kind of work according to their preferences during their career break. Most of the time the lack of opportunities to fulfil their career ambitions is the main constrain if they also choose to have children, which supports Doorewaard et al (2004) findings on low-skilled part-time jobs. Moreover, according to the Women Returners Network (2002a,b,c), women wishing to return to the labour market often face significant psychological barriers associated primarily with their confidence in the skills they possess, their ability to perform in a work environment and their ability to successfully combine home and work responsibilities.

Flexible working (including part-time working and job-sharing), company crèche and time off when children are ill are identified as the usual companies' policies to support female staff to return to their work. The DTI report (2002) 'Maximising Returns to Science, Engineering and Technology Careers (SET)' found that all employers that participated in the study had policies and practices designed to encourage their own staff to return to work after childbirth. However, women interviewed for the same report acknowledged that: "employment in the SET sector is inflexible with little part-time working, job sharing, home working or flexitime and a culture of long hours" (DTI, 2002:57). Therefore, although it is reported that there are policies and friendly-family practices in place to support women, these have not been sufficiently implemented. Additionally, a report from the Institute of Physics (2004) on career breaks clearly shows that the majority of the respondents who took career breaks did not return to the same employer mainly due to the lack of availability of part-time working.

Another barrier on women's return to work is the lack of affordable, accessible, quality childcare (Women and Equality Unit, 2004). Paul et al. (2002:40) found that 18% of mothers of pre-school children who are working part-time reported that they are prevented from working longer hours by having to look after children, compared

with 25% for part-time mothers with school, but not pre-school, children. This proportion according to the authors shows that they could work longer if suitable childcare was available. Studying the availability of childcare in Britain, Paul et al (2002:98) by examining patterns of childcare provision from 1995 to 1999 recorded the following availability of childcare schemes:

1. Approximately eight nursery places and eleven playgroup places for each 100 children under the age of 5;
2. Almost seven childminder places for every 100 children under the age of 8;
3. Approximately six out-of-school club places and almost 20 holiday scheme places per 100 children aged 5 to 7.

The research concluded that provisions for women's employment with care-taking responsibilities becomes rather difficult.

ITEC has been characterised by the paradox of 'embracing flexible working as well as maintaining a culture of longer working hours' (DTI, 2004). Although it is reported that in the IT sector 51% of those working full-time take advantage of a flexible working schedule, the culture of long working hours makes them feel uncomfortable especially when it comes to the demands of senior roles where part-time working is less frequent. Moreover, significant numbers of both male and female employees said that by working long hours they do not get involved with their families and in general miss their children's development. Organisations in the same report appear to have created the structure for flexible working; however, they do not seem to fully support the idea of flexible working as they strongly promote the long working hour's culture. Nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents stated that 'people work long hours in our organisation' (DTI, 2004:17) whereas flexibility is considered as a situation where people are constantly available by working at home. Also in this study 58% of the respondents believe that their manager is working long hours. Accordingly, a great number of employees, both male and female but principally the latter, change employer or even career path in order to find a working environment with more flexible employment conditions.

PART 3: EMPIRICAL STUDY

3.1 Research Aim and Timescale

The empirical study for Action 1, led by researchers at the University of Bath¹, officially began in October 2004 and was completed in April 2005. The aim of the study was to understand the current conditions that exist for women returners in ITEC. It did so by taking account of the views of both individuals and organizations and by pursuing cross-sector and cross-organisation analyses.

The section below presents in more detail the research approach adopted and the work undertaken so-far.

3.2 Research Approach

The main data collection method involved in-depth interviewing with employer-organisations (small, medium, and large firms) and women returners. The study was carried out based on interviews with 40 participants that were undertaken during the period December 2004 and March 2005. The majority of the interviews (84%) were conducted over the telephone due to the geographical dispersion of the interviewees whilst the rest were face-to-face interviews. In particular, women who have returned to work after a career break, are currently on a career break, as well as women who have had a career break but did not return to ITEC jobs, have been invited to participate in the study. Further to these, we interviewed women who have not yet been on a career break. The participants were from a variety of sectors both public and private and currently occupy or have occupied an ITEC job.

Based on these selection criteria, we identified potential participants in our study from databases provided by the following organisations:

- i) MentorSET, a support network which aims to increase the number of women who can maintain their careers in science and technology and realise their full potential.

¹ Dr Niki Panteli (lead researcher), Despina Cochliou and Evangelia Baralou.

ii) The Daphne Jackson Trust. The Trust with its Fellowship scheme enables women to return to careers in science or engineering through updated knowledge and renewed professional skills both in academia and industry. The Fellowships also enable individuals to gain in confidence, competence and knowledge, resulting in better job prospects.

iii) Portia (Lead partner/Equalitec project), a web-based community that provides links to partner organisations, information on jobs, meetings and events and a forum for airing general concerns about women in SET and any other current topics, a learning section as well as a collection of fun topics.

Further to the above, contacts developed by the researchers at the University of Bath as a result of other projects were another source of identifying potential participants.

Though the interview questions were pre-determined (see Appendix A) to ensure that the necessary information was collected, these remained open-ended in an attempt to record the views and perceptions of the respondents. This allowed questions and issues that were revealed during the interview to be explored further. Interviews lasted from 30 to 40 minutes and were tape-recorded when the interviewees granted permission. The interview data was subsequently transcribed.

The analytical approach adopted was exploratory as the aim of this report was to discover the main issues around women's employment in the ITEC sector and in particular women returners. These issues were developed by examining major themes raised by the interviewees themselves. Our main concern was not to find out whether pre-determined themes and issues by previous research were identified by the group of the interviewees but rather to give them the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and describe in their own words what was important for them during the returning process.

The initial approach adopted to explore the data was in terms of frequency which involved counting the number of times that certain things were said in the interviews. To display the data, bar and pie charts have mainly been used.

Furthermore, the empirical study has aimed to examine the organisational views on women returners and possible mechanisms which might have been implemented to support their re-entry after a career break. Accordingly, individuals' views are supplemented with case study information from different organisations which belong to the ITEC sector. These organisations are of different sizes and were chosen to provide a variety of experiences. For these business cases, data were collected through semi-structured interviewing and documentation review in order to reveal background information about the organisations. Interviewing aimed to understand the organisations' account of how they view women's employment and career progress in general as well as specifically following a career break (Appendix B). By talking to both managers and employees, we were interested in gathering information about organisational policies such as flexi-time schemes, training and other career development procedures as well as the organisational view in general on women returners.

Parts 4, 5 and 6 present the findings of the empirical study.

PART 4: INDIVIDUALS' PERSPECTIVES

In this part of the report we present the findings of our main study on individuals' perspectives. Analysis is based on 40 interviews with women returners.

4.1 PARTICIPANTS' PROFILE

This section begins with the demographic characteristics of women who participated in this study. This information is important as it helps us to further understand their responses.

The participants were categorized as follows:

- Women currently on a career break (WCB) - 5 women;
- Women who have had a career break but did not return to ITEC (WnR) - 4 women;
- Women who have had a career break and returned either to their previous job or to another job within the ITEC sector (WR) - 26 women.
- Women who have not yet taken a career break – 5 women.

The main difference identified between the groups WnR and WR, apart from the fact that the former returned to non-ITEC occupations, is the duration of their career break. For the women belonging in the WnR group the long time they spent upbringing their family has clearly affected their return to the industry. From these women, 1 is unemployed, 1 is working in a call centre, 1 is doing voluntary work and 1 is studying for the PhD.

In the case of women returners (WR) their break lasted mainly 1-2 years. From the 26 women interviewed only one took a year off for medical reasons. From the 25 remaining women 15 had a career break between 6 months to 2 years; the remaining 10 had a career break that varied from 2 to 18 years.

In the case of women who returned following a career break of two years or less, 5 of them returned to the same company, at the same type of work and at the same level of payment; 2 of them returned to the same company but in higher positions thus with better payment than before whilst 2 of them left the private sector and found a job as part-time lecturers in academia. Moreover, 6 out of the 15 women returned after 6 months, 3 returned after 1 year, 6 within 2 years but with two children.

From the 10 women who returned after 2 years, we identified the following: 2 women had 6 years break, 5 of them had a career break that lasted between 11 to 13 years, 3 had a break of more than 15 years.

It follows from the above that nearly 60% of the women who returned to ITEC (WR group) had a maximum of 2 years career break only. This finding is important noting when interpreting the results of our study. Our findings also show, however, that it is not impossible to return to a fast changing sector such as ITEC following a longer career break.

4.2 AGE

The age of women is a substantial characteristic as it shows the broad range of the interviewees and secures validity of data. Interviewees' age ranges between 20-60 years old (see Chart no.1).

Half the women that are currently on a career break, mainly to have a family, are 31-35 years old. The other half of women currently on a career break is 36-50 years old. From the rest of the respondents the majority of them have taken a career break between 26-35 years old. 40% of the women that have not yet taken a career break or do not think of taking one are younger than 25 years old. Another 20% are 26-30 years old. The age of women returning to their jobs after a career break varies between 31-55 years old. 40% of the women aged 36-40, who have taken a career break, have not returned to their jobs. From the above it could be claimed that women taking a career break earlier on (31-35 years old), have a greater possibility to return

to their jobs. This figure could be used to indicate a difficulty for women to return to the ITEC industry after a certain age (>35).

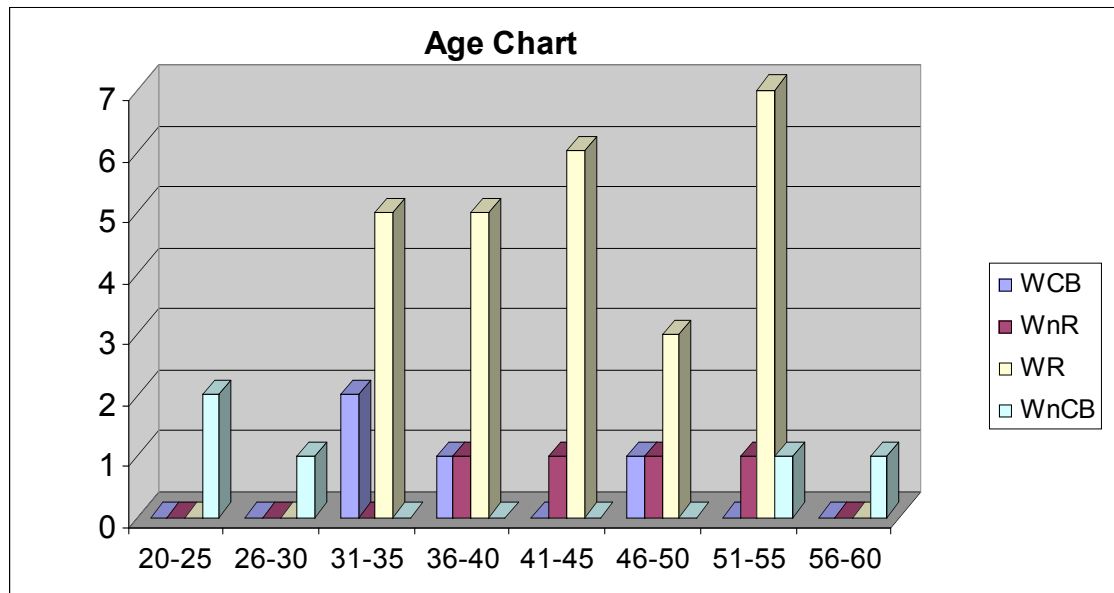


Chart no.1

4.3 QUALIFICATIONS

Chart no. 2 shows participants' qualifications. It is found that female staff hold a range of qualifications, from vocational training to PhD. It is very interesting to mention the case of women who have not returned to ITEC (WnR); although they mainly have high-level academic qualifications they have not been able to find a job in accordance with their qualifications. Interviewees' qualifications vary from vocational training to PhD. In particular, 9 in 10 women in the ITEC industry hold at least one diploma. 1 in 4 women who haven't taken a career break do not have higher education. Interestingly, 55% of women who haven't returned to their jobs after a career break have at least a basic degree, while 20% of the women that have not returned to their jobs hold a PhD. It seems that the difficulty women face in order to return to their jobs after a career break are not so strongly related to their qualifications and is certainly not due to the lack of academic qualifications.

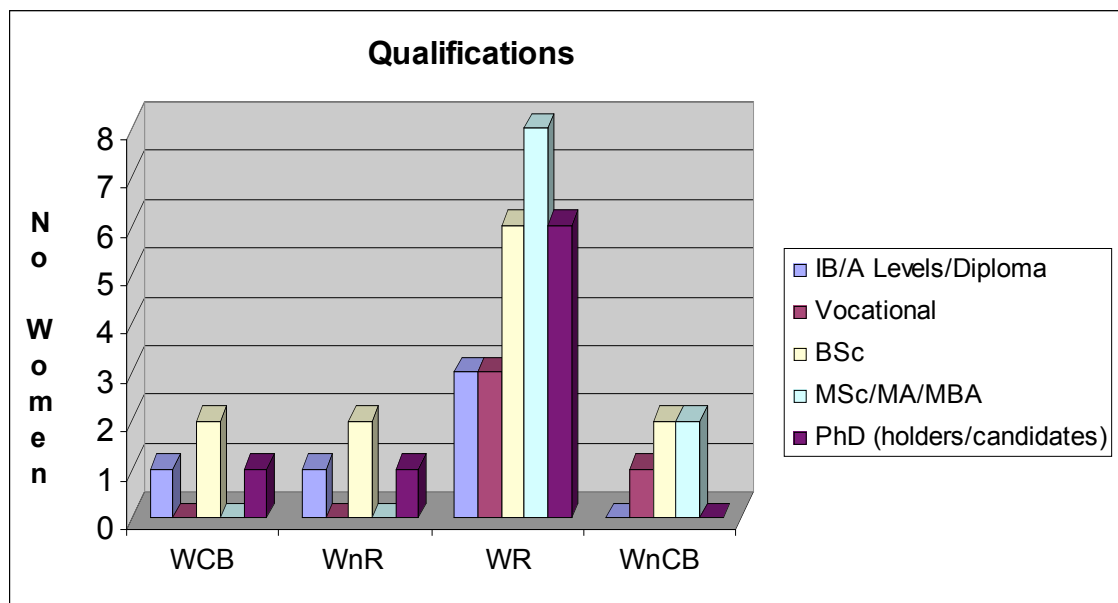


Chart no.2

4.4 JOB TITLE

Participants in our study hold or have held a variety of roles that range from systems support to IT managers and senior consultants. Again it is very important to observe the positions held by the interviewees in the second group, WnR. Chart no.3 shows the number of positions held by the interviewees. Two of the interviewees were working as project managers and two were involved in academic research. As the chart (chart no. 3) shows, however, despite the fact that some of them have high-level qualifications (e.g. PhD) they are found in jobs of low status and low payment. From the WR participants, 45% of them hold some kind of managerial positions in the ITEC industry (e.g. HR manager, process manager, project manager). This relatively high proportion was explained by the participants as being related partly to women being better managers than men due to having “softer” management skills, and partly to their perception of the greater difficulty of technical staff to return to the industry after a career break. Further, 21.4% of the WR interviewees that work in the public sector hold technical positions, while the percentage increases to 30.8% for the interviewees that work in the private sector and hold technical positions. It is also found that 1 in 5 women that have not returned to their job after a career break used to be technical staff.

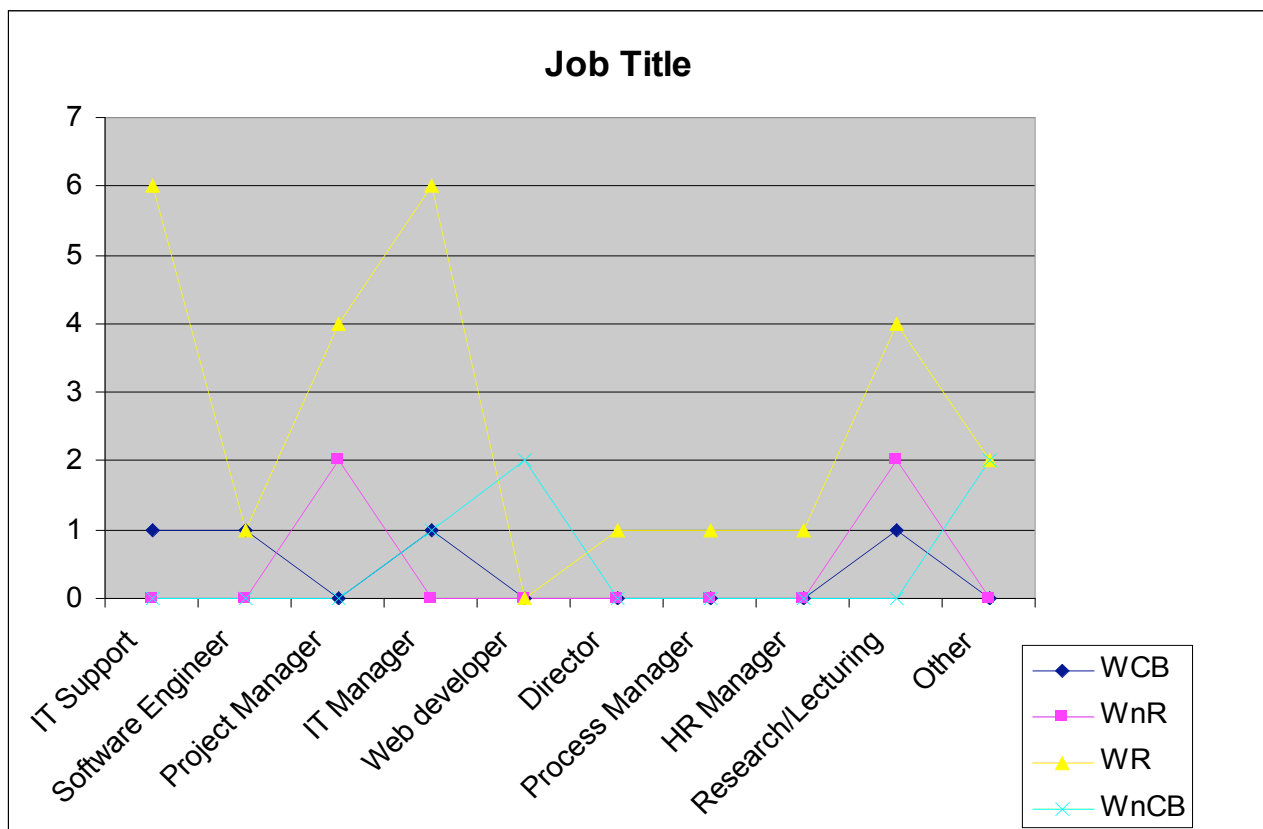


Chart no.3

4.5 EMPLOYMENT SCHEMES

Participants were asked about their current working scheme, whether this was part-time, full-time or whether they were unemployed. It is interesting here to compare chart no. 4 with chart no. 5 that shows the preferred employment deal of the interviewees. The women that have not yet taken a career break currently work full-time. Interestingly, almost half the women (46%) who have returned to their jobs after a career break currently work part-time.

Regarding anticipated employment schemes, the findings suggest that women who are currently on a career break and used to work full-time, tend to prefer to work as part-timers. The group of women, who have not returned to ITEC, would like to find a full-time job or a 'proper' job as characteristically one of them stated.

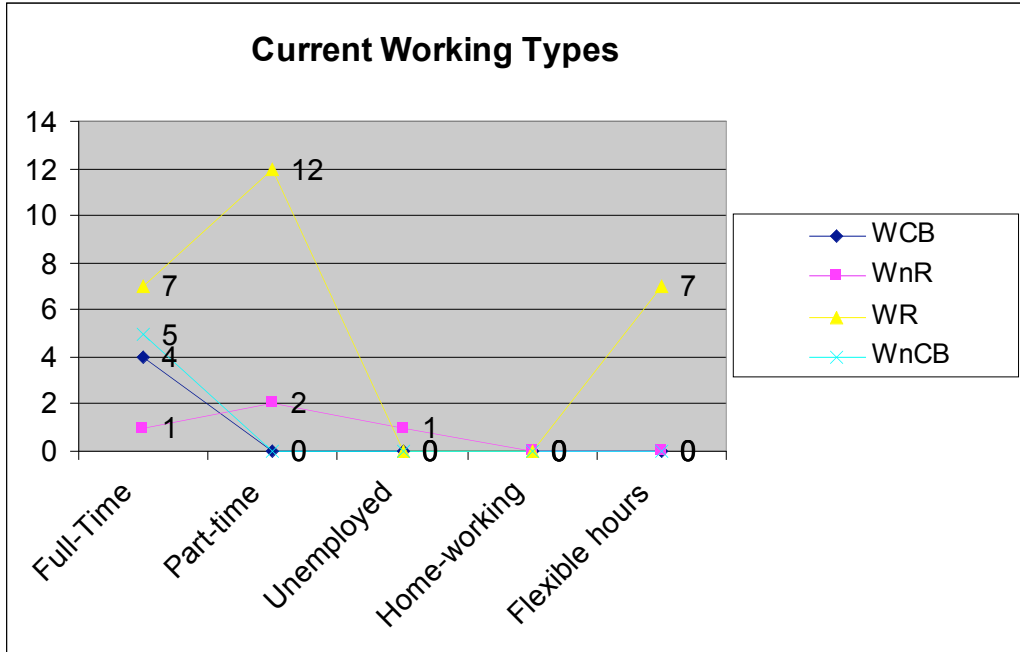


Chart no.4

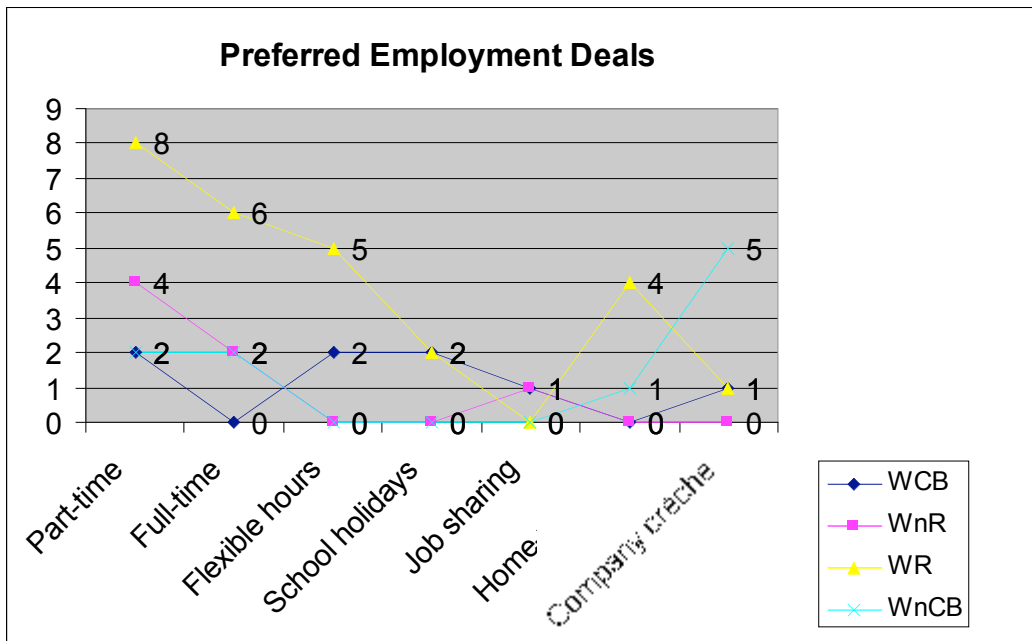


Chart no.5

4.6 REASONS FOR CAREER BREAK

Chart no. 6 refers to the reasons for going on a career break which include medical reasons, loss of job and with the main one being maternity leave. Women go on a

career break for various reasons, the most common one being a maternity leave (88.57%). Other reasons include travelling abroad (5.71%), loss of job (2.86%) and medical reasons (2.86%).

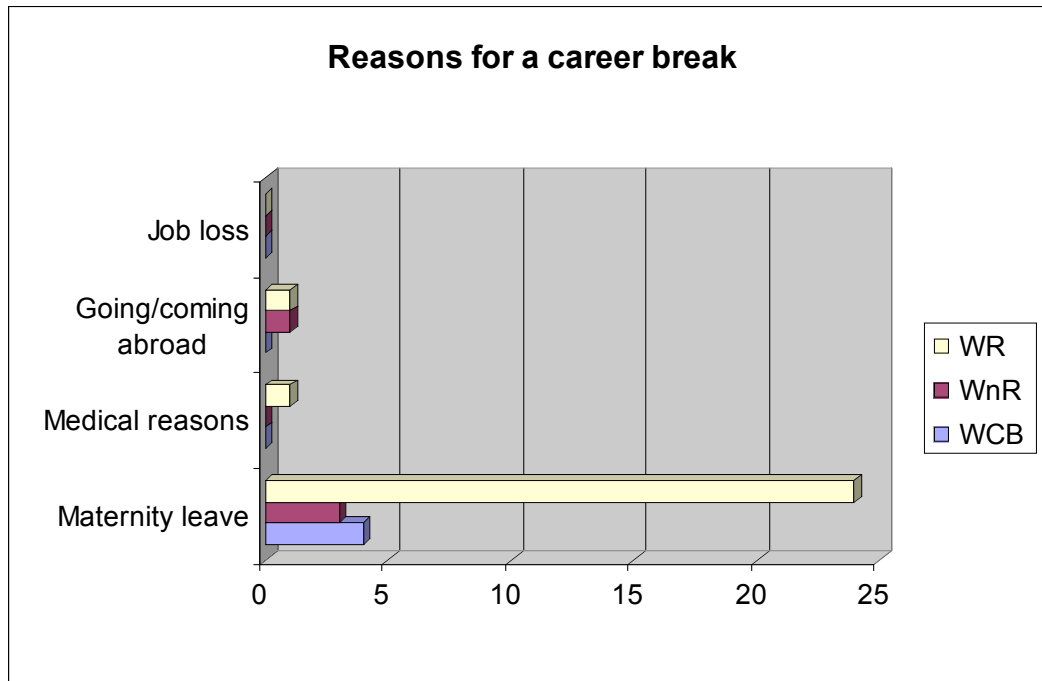


Chart no.6

4.7 BARRIERS FOR RE-ENTRY

The following two charts (7&8) show the variety of constraints the interviewees have faced during the returning process. They have been categorised as constraints related to the companies and constraints related to their individual/personal circumstances, respectively.

Our findings suggest that women in the ITEC industry face various difficulties returning to their job after a career break, which might be related to the company (see Chart no.5) or to the individual (see Chart no.6). Women returners (45.45%) report that the greatest difficulty in relation to companies is not offering or not being able to offer flexible work schemes after a career break. A rather low percentage (13.04%) of the respondents suggest that another difficulty is related to limited opportunities for career development, once switched to part-time working schemes. Both women

returners and women who have not returned to the industry suggest that ITEC companies are characterised as very competitive working environments and ITEC skills rapidly become obsolete.

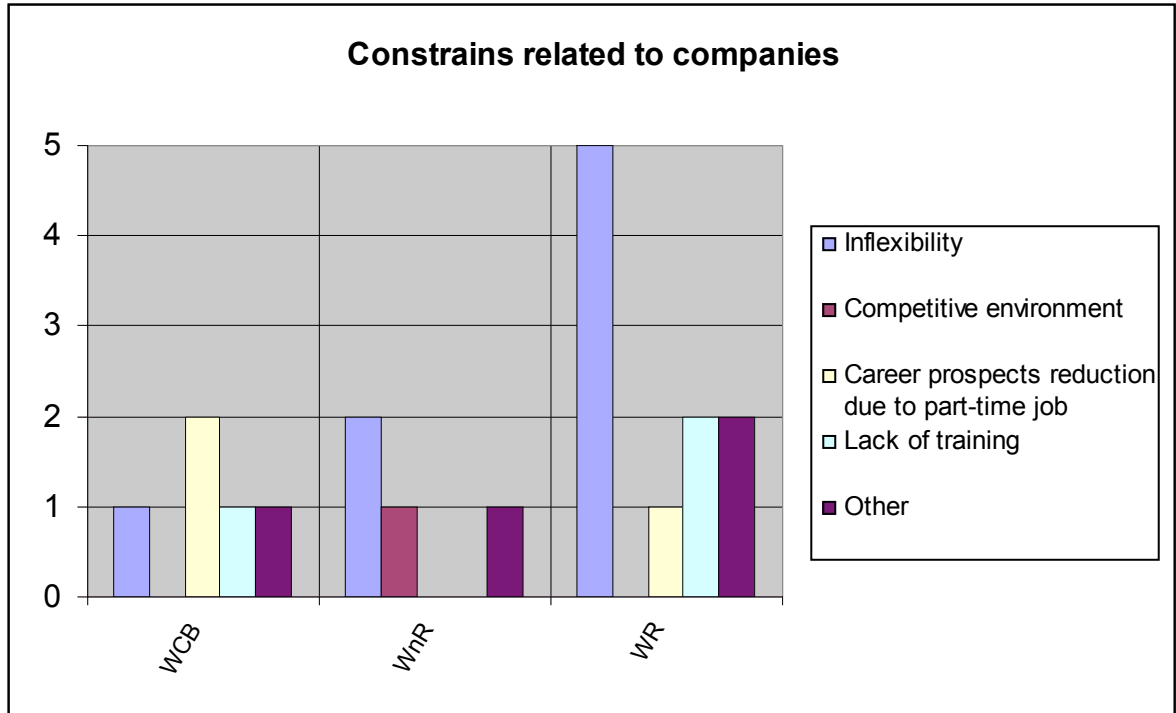


Chart no. 7

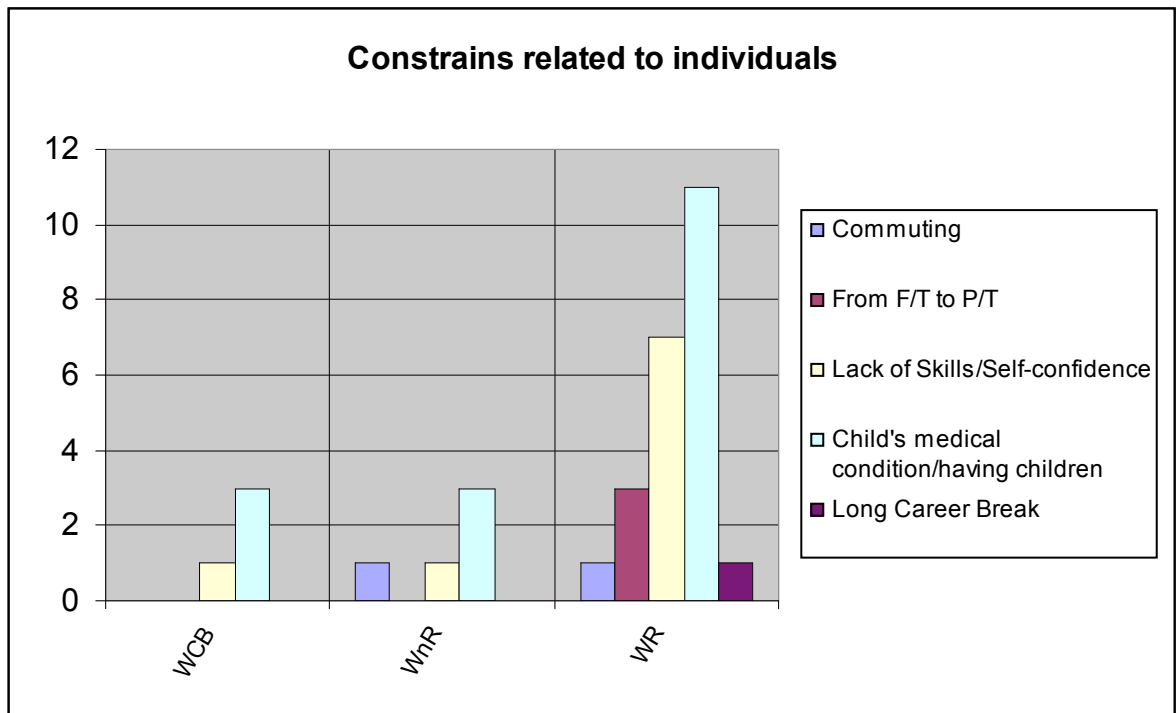
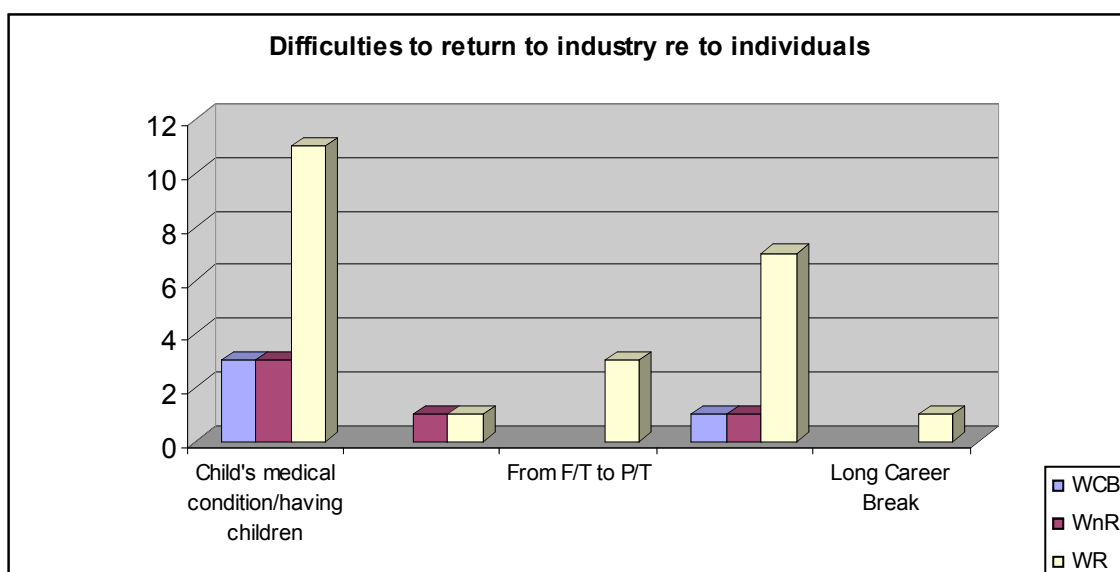


Chart no. 8

Another difficulty women face or fear they will face when returning from a career break is the lack of training from their companies. 1 in 5 women who are currently on a career break fear they may not have sufficient training when they return to their jobs and 1 in 5 women who have returned to the ITEC industry suggest that a major difficulty faced when returning after a career break has been related to lack of training, in order to up-date skills and knowledge in an industry which changes more rapidly than other more traditional industries. In addition to these, respondents reported low self-confidence in terms of returning back to their working environment from full-time to part-time employment, or after a long career break.

With regards to personal constraints to individuals, the greatest difficulty for women returners (47.83%) is considered to be having children and finding adequate childcare to accommodate their children’s needs, especially young babies or disabled children that require special care. However, women who have not returned to the ITEC industry after a career break suggest that the basic reason was having children rather than lack of technical skills. 4.35% of the women who have returned to their job after a career break suggested that another difficulty is related to the distance they have to cover on a daily basis, in order to leave their work and pick up their children due to a lack of company crèche. Also, 20% of women that have not returned to their job indicated commuting difficulties.



4.8 PARTICIPANTS' SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

In this section, we present the suggestions provided by the participants in the study on encouraging and supporting women to return to ITEC following a career break.

Women were asked what their advice would be to employers, policy makers and professional associations in terms of improving the recruitment, retention and advancement of women in the ITEC sector.

4.8.1 WCB's Suggestions

According to the first group (WCB), 32% of the women currently on a career break believe that employers must offer more opportunities for flexible working such as job sharing, part-time and home-working. They also need to ensure that cases of gender discrimination and prejudice are avoided (17%). The interviewees also think that employers should make better practice of their equal opportunities policies by offering more chances for women to work and advance and by changing the procedures of promotion (17%) (Chart no.9).

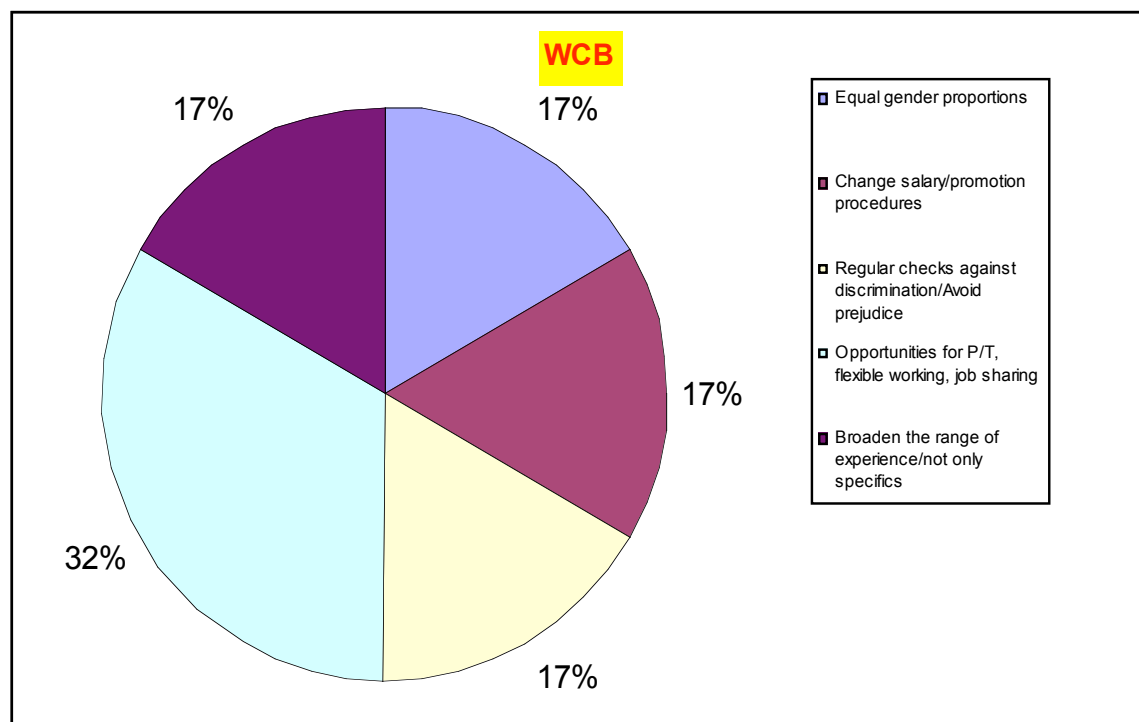


Chart no. 9

In the case of policy makers (chart no.10), this group felt that they have greater responsibility to improve the current conditions by offering tax relief for parents so they would be able to meet the increased child care costs as well as to provide more childcare schemes across the country (15%). Also extending the maternity leave was another issue, which policy makers need to take into consideration. The introduction of effective policies on the fight against gender discrimination (e.g. frequent checks) was another advice for policy makers (14%). Finally, they believe that consulting women (14%) and using academic research (14%) is the most appropriate way to address problems and find solutions.

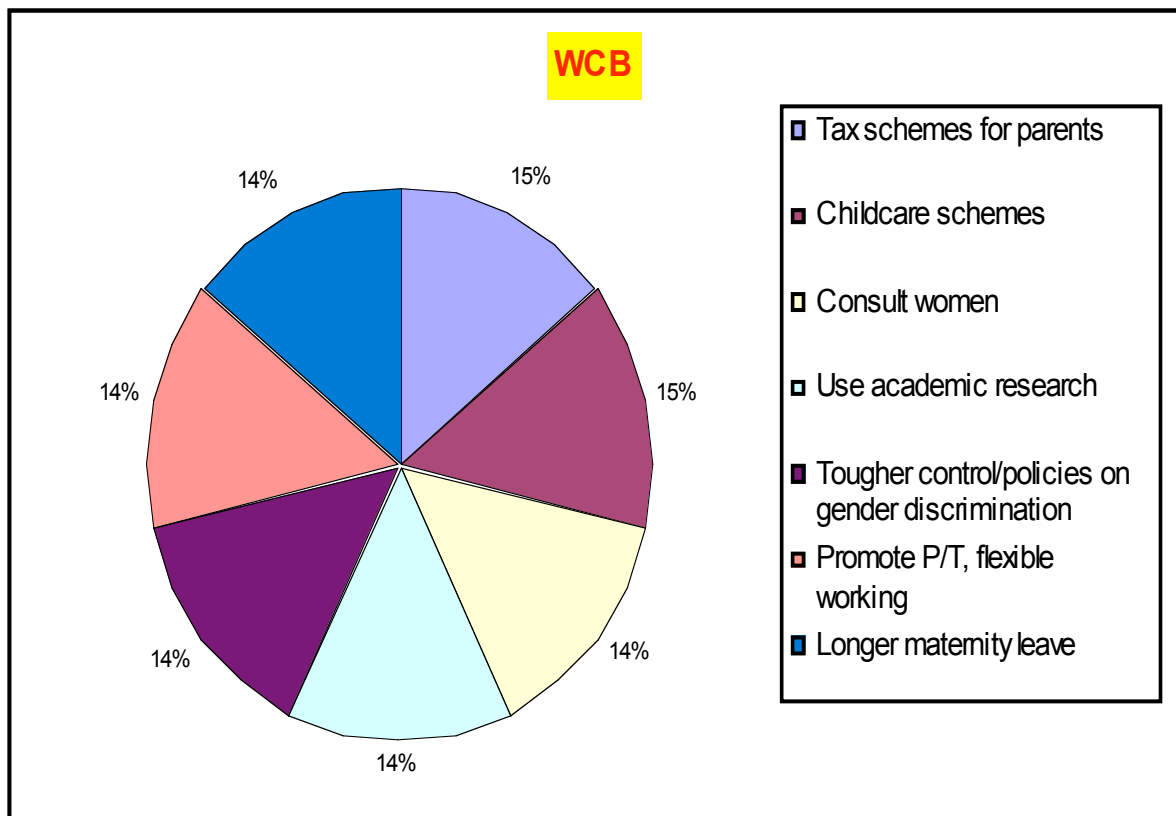


Chart no. 10

Regarding professional associations (chart no.11), the group would like to see them performing a more vigorous role in a range of issues including promoting good exemplars of companies that have used flexible working schemes successfully (12%), providing more information about flexible working (12%), supply grants/funding for training (13%) and in general provide support and encouragement to women who face serious difficulties to return to their job or find a new job.

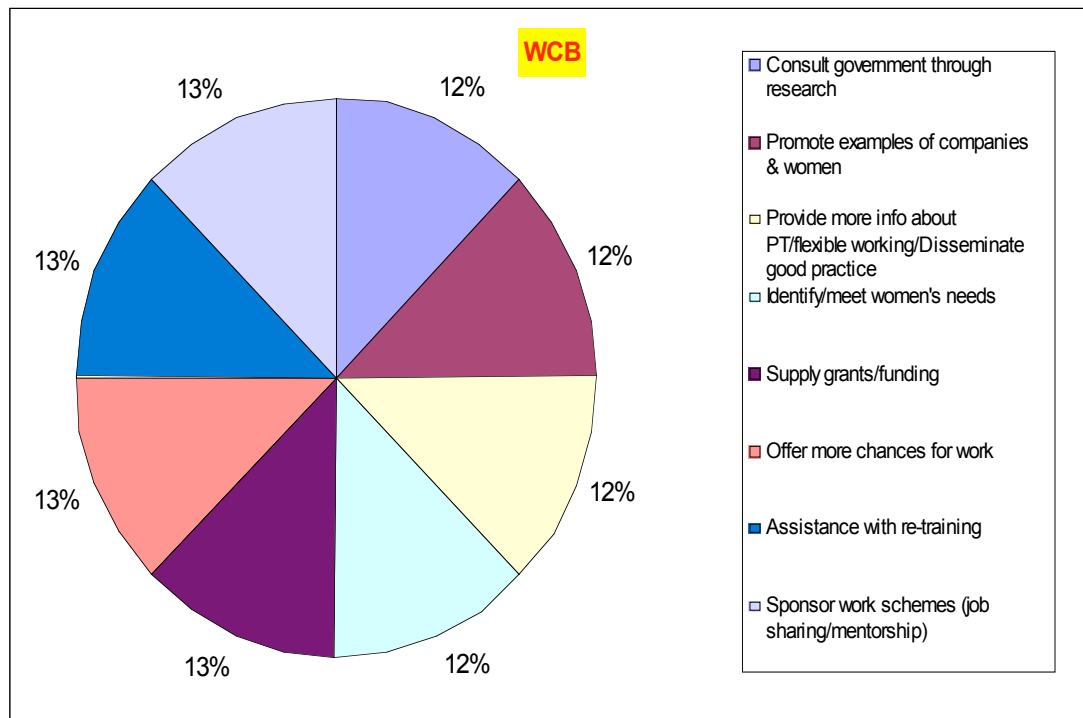


Chart no. 11

4.8.2 WnR's Suggestions

The WnR group paid more attention to the need for employers to be more open-minded in the case of women (40%) and as a result offer them the same opportunities like men. In relation to this they must also change their attitudes towards women (20%) and understand and support the duality of their role as both an employee and a mother (20%). Also the availability of company crèches and the promotion of flexible working patterns are additional measures that employers should adopt (20%).

Moving on to the policy makers, this group had a variety of suggestions (chart no.13) but the most substantial focus was on offering tax benefits to companies for employing women returners (10%), tax relief for parents and more childcare schemes. Likewise, policy makers should try and raise awareness about women's skills and abilities (10%).

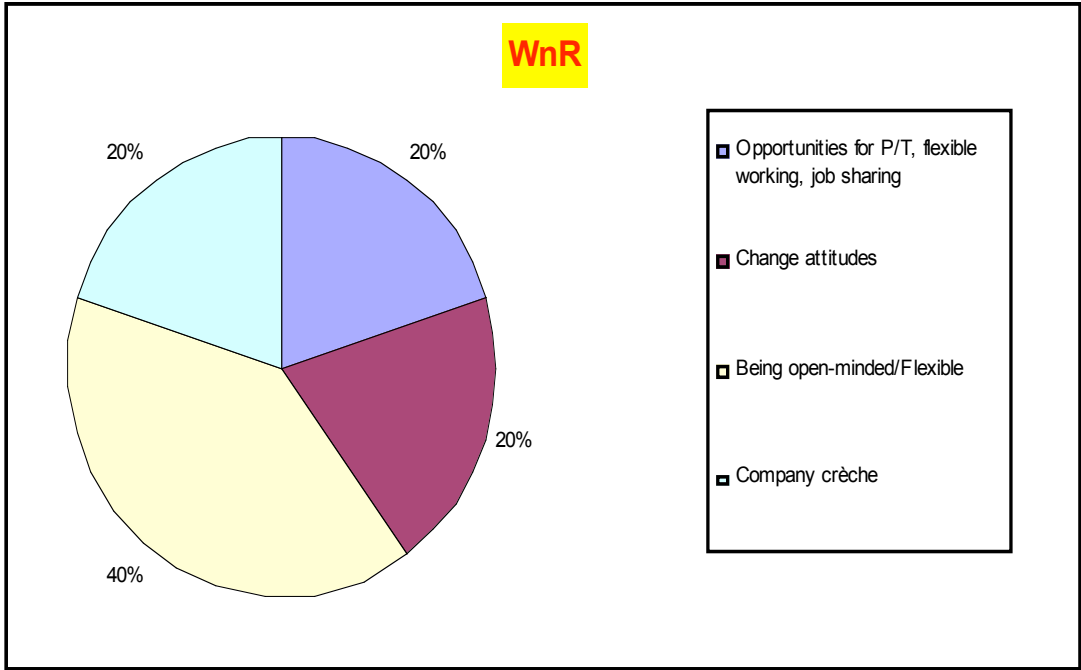


Chart no. 12

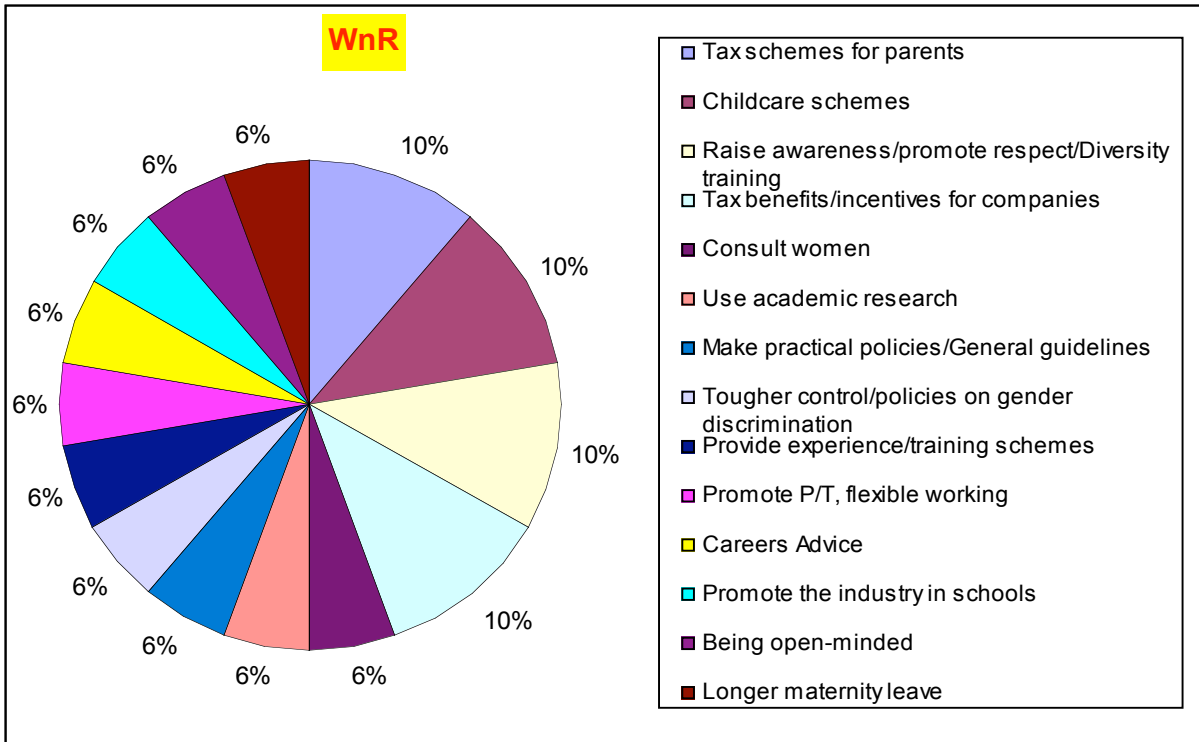


Chart no.13

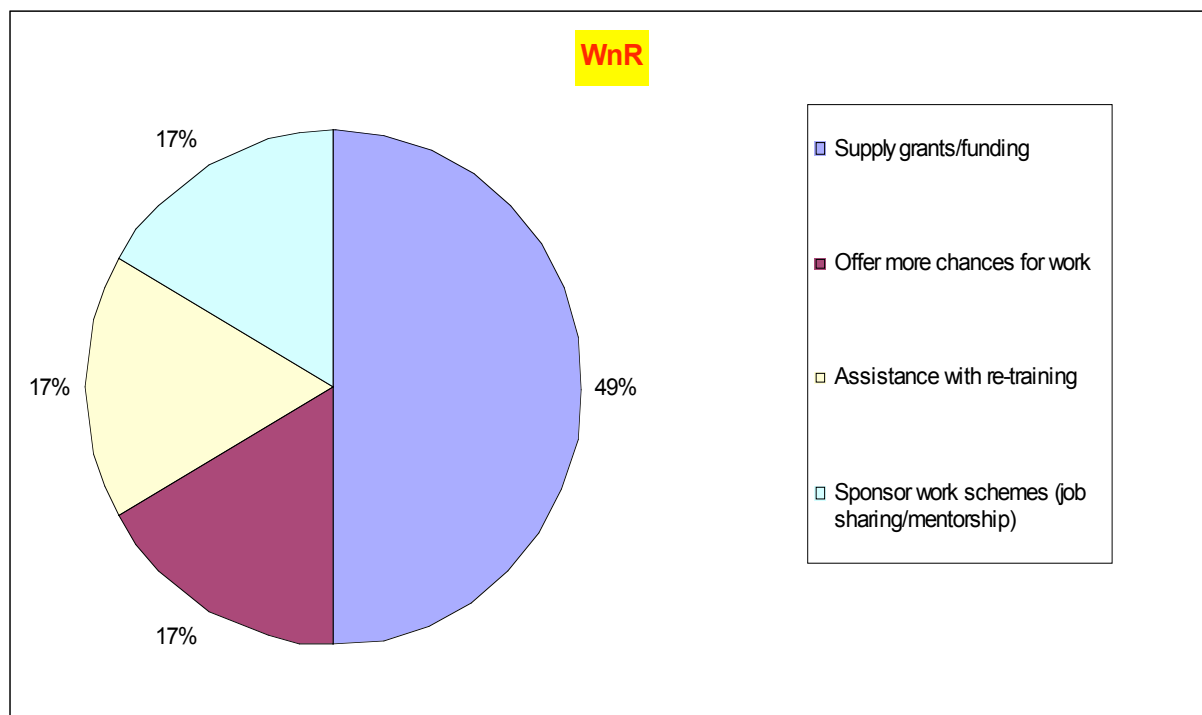


Chart no. 14

Respectively, about professional associations (chart no.14) the group suggested that they should offer funding for further education and training as well as providing assistance with re-training, for example how and where to find adequate training schemes (49%). Additionally, the group suggested that associations could sponsor work schemes like mentorship or job sharing so companies would have an incentive to accommodate those needs (17%). Government consultation on women's employment conditions including women returners was a supplementary matter through which professional associations could achieve more (17%).

4.8.3 WR's Suggestions

WR focused around issues of child policy and what it actually means to have a child. So they suggested that employers should be more sensitive with those issues as well as the need for a woman to return to her job (30%). They also recommended that employers should be more open-minded (11%) and try to avoid discrimination and prejudice against women (8%). Furthermore, they thought that it is important for a company to be prepared to support its employees with training and managerial support in order to enable them to return to employment (8%).

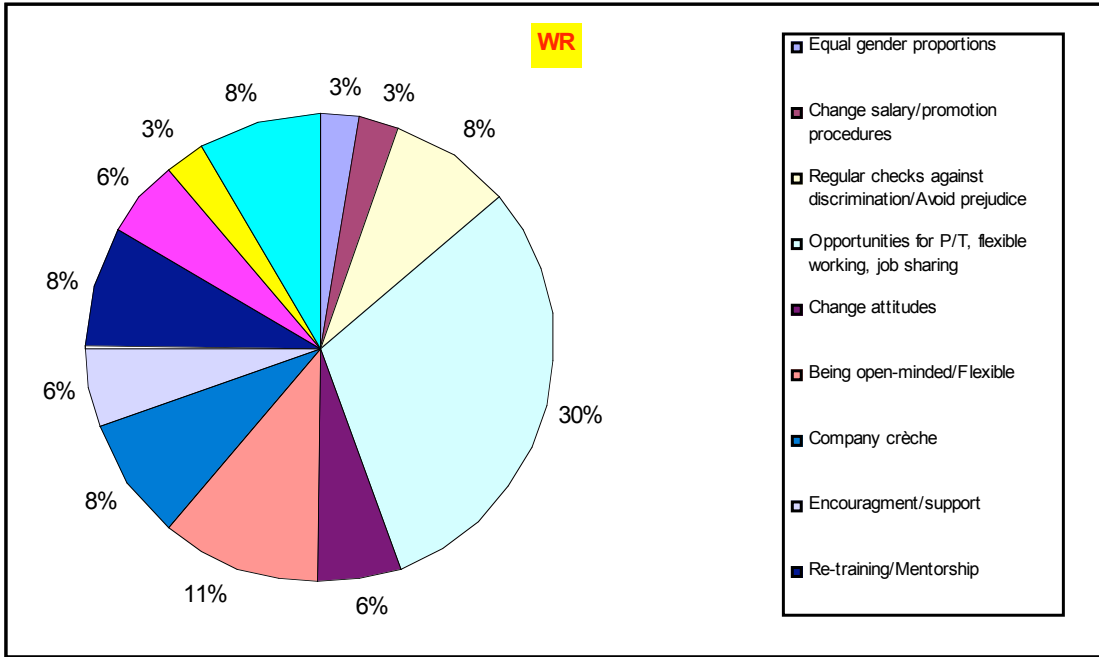


Chart no.15

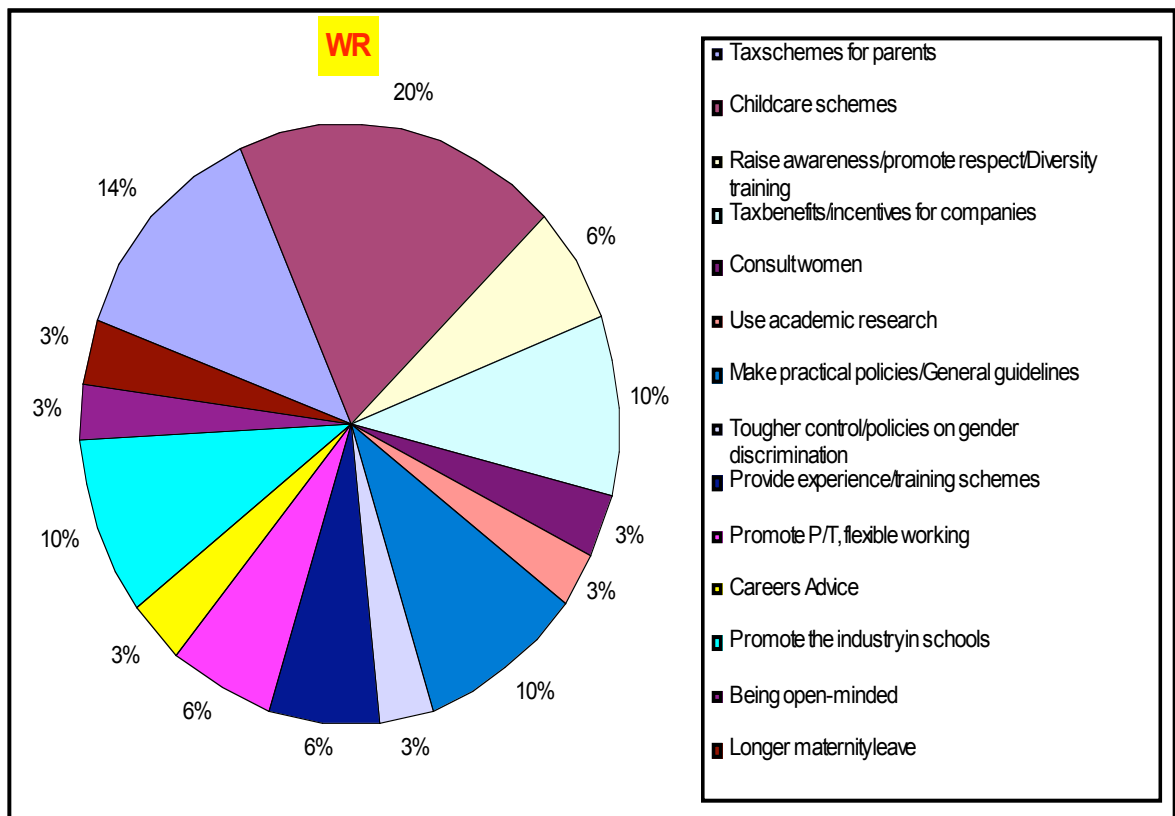


Chart no.16

In the case of policy makers (chart no. 16); the group believes that it is very important to offer tax schemes for parents (14%) as well as for companies (10%). The former

suggested tax relief schemes, whereas the latter asked for incentives in order to offer better conditions to women to return. This group like the previous two made it clear that the current childcare provisions are not sufficient. Childcare schemes need to cover after school care as well as school holidays which women struggle with (20%). Moreover, the provision of re-training (6%), career advice (3%) and the use of academic research (3%) were some of the group's suggestions in terms of policy makers' role on women's employment.

On professional associations, the third group of interviewees, as the other two, suggested that they must raise awareness (26%) around the issues of women returning to work and provide assistance with re-training (21%) (Chart no. 17). Additionally, they could encourage companies to employ more women who can act as role models within the organisation and the industry in general (17%). Other suggestions included: reduced membership fees during the career break and funding for training.

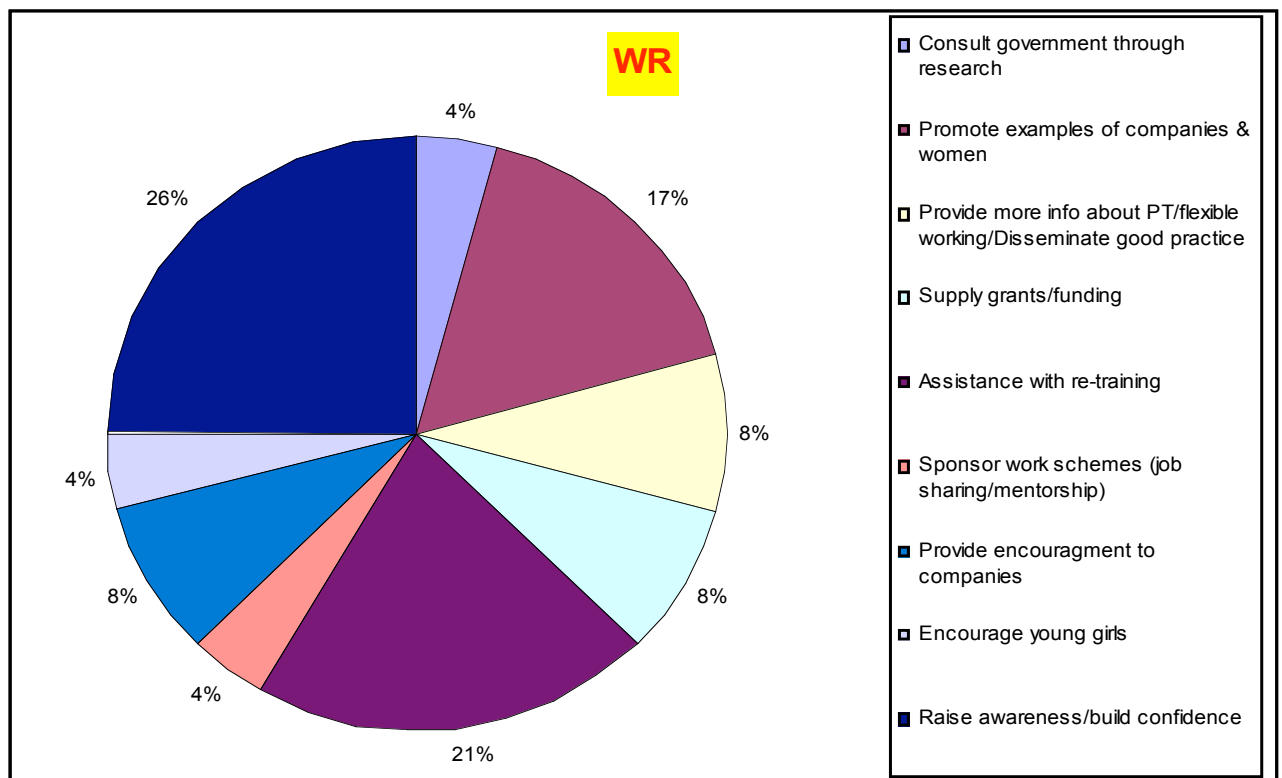


Chart no.17

4.8.4 WnCB's Suggestions

Regarding the advice of the women interviewees who have not taken a career break, this group felt that employers must act equally in 3 sectors: promote equal gender opportunities (20%), check regularly cases of discrimination against women (20%) and offer more support and encouragement to female staff (20%). They also recommended that employers should work towards changing attitudes in their organisation regarding the roles that women can undertake in ITEC (10%).

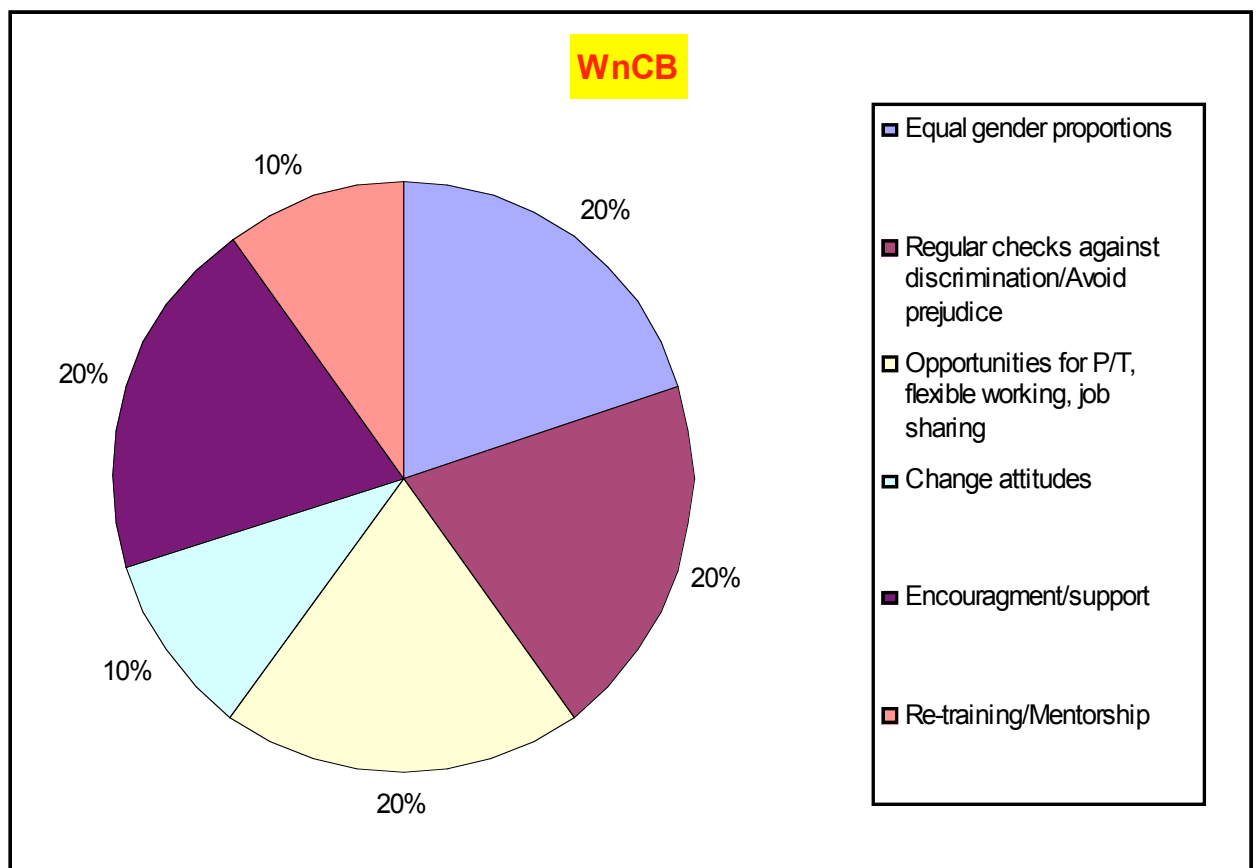


Chart no.18

In the case of policy makers (Chart no. 19) WnCB suggested that raising awareness/promoting respect and diversity training (24%) are areas where they must pay more attention. They also recommended that tougher control policies on gender discrimination are necessary (12%) as well as consulting women in policy making (12%). Promotion of flexible working (13%), and advertising the industry in schools (13%) was an additional suggestion.

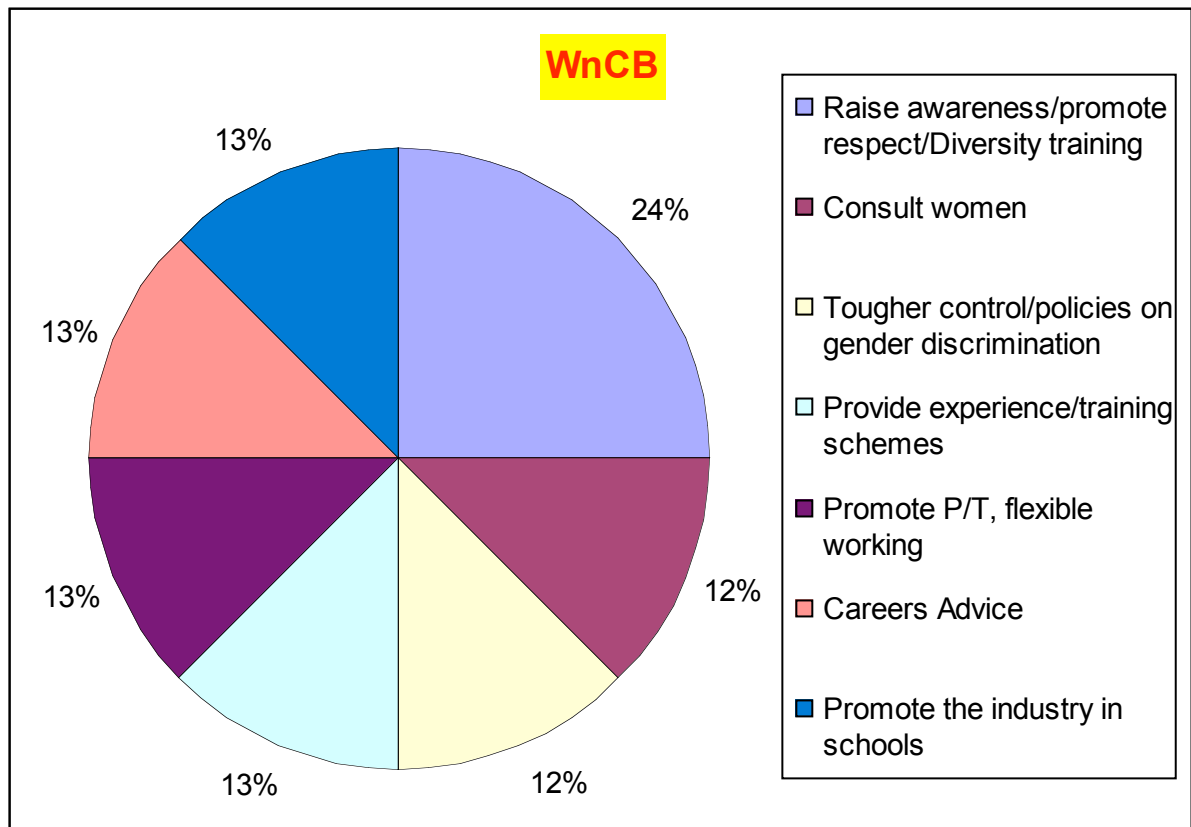


Chart no.19

Finally, in the case of professional associations the group of WnCB believed that there was very little they could do, though the suggestion was made that professional associations could make a better contribution towards raising awareness and sponsoring grants for training. The interviewees in this group felt very strongly that employers and especially management in the higher level is the factor able to change the current conditions by supporting and encouraging women’s advancement and providing better childcare facilities.

4.9 Summary

Using empirical data that is based on women’s own views and experiences, the study has found evidence of barriers and limited opportunities for those women who want to return to their ITEC job after a career break. Career breaks appear to counteract career development due to the lack of support mechanisms such as flexi-time schemes and specifically part-time work and insufficient training.

In what follows (Parts 5 and 6) a context-specific analysis is pursued by comparing the experiences of women in ITEC jobs in different sectors.

PART 5: CROSS-SECTOR COMPARISON

In this part of the report, we undertake further analysis of our data by comparing the experiences of women in different sectors, primarily public and private sectors: 60% of the participants work in private companies and 40% in the public sector. Before we embark on our analysis it is important to make the distinction between the ITEC occupations within public and private organisations.

5.1 WOMEN IN ITEC JOBS IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

The majority of women in this group (90%) were in ITEC jobs within Universities across the country. They were mainly in IT support services as system developers or project managers. Their qualifications varied from vocational training up to PhD level and their age ranged from 37 to 57 years old. All of them also had taken a career break when they had their children. Prior to their current job they had also worked in other parts of the public sector or in ITEC companies in the private sector. However, after their career break they found it very difficult to return to their previous jobs as full-time employees; they were looking for a part-time employment deal, which primarily they could only locate in the public sector. A common characteristic between all of them is that they are working either part-time or under other flexible working schemes.

5.2 WOMEN IN ITEC JOBS IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Looking at the interviewees' characteristics working in the private sector there was also a variety of age range 34 to 55 years old whereas their qualifications vary from BSc to PhD degrees. Their job titles also vary from software engineers to control systems engineers to senior consultants mostly in large size companies. The main reason for a career break was maternity leave for this group as well. However, other reasons like medical reasons were mentioned too. This group of interviewees works mostly full-time but the interviewees considered that it would be better for them if they had more options to choose from like job-sharing, home-working etc

5.3 DISTINCTION BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS

From the general characteristics mentioned above one is able to identify principle dissimilarities between the two sectors regarding women's employment in ITEC occupations. Initially, the interviews identified that the public sector offers more opportunities for flexible working schemes such as part-time work or flexible hours, which facilitate employees' family life and in particular responding to children's needs. Working part-time in the private sector was not described as employers' favourite choice:

“I kept working part-time for eight years but my career declined...” IT Project Manager

“It is totally different working to the public sector organisation rather than to industry (you need to be there all the time)” Systems Developer

On the other hand, the public sector is not an ideal environment for career advancement as part-time employees are not promoted onto the career ladder easily and as a direct consequence remain in low payment schemes. The interviewees also identified that opportunities for training and learning are limited for part-time workers, which hinder their career prospects:

“There is no discrimination to pay but the money here are less but opportunities for flexible working more”, IT Systems Supervisor

“Not enough training for part-time staff. They don't want to invest to us as part-timers and I think that's down to managers...managers don't always realise issues of part-time staff”, Systems Developer

The work types and responsibilities of women working in the public sector are also diverse from those women working in the private sector. The interviewees working in the public sector are usually employed in the sector of IT support, which includes projects managers, system designers and assistants of system developers. Most of the women interviewed from the public sector recognised that they work in low status jobs and with less payment. However, their advantage is that of flexible-hours culture

existing in the public sector, which of course compensates them better as they have the time required to spend with their families. On the other hand women in the private sector hold positions like senior consultants, which of course entail greater responsibilities as well as better payment. It is worth mentioning that in the latter group only one of the interviewees is working part-time and holding a high-status job as well. However, as it is shown later some managerial responsibilities in her role have been reduced due to working part-time.

Having described the major differences between the two sectors a more structured basis for the rest of the analysis is offered, which contributes to further and deeper interpretations.

5.4 STRUCTURAL AND CULTURAL BARRIERS FOR WOMEN IN ITEC OCCUPATIONS

In this section our aim is to discuss the barriers identified by our interviewees, which hinder women's careers in ITEC occupations in the two sectors. As it is entitled, the section is divided in two categories of barriers: structural and cultural. Although different these barriers are linked and together they form the ground for this analysis. Initially, the first category of structural constraints includes the array of factors referred to ITEC organisations (Ahuja, 2002). Features such as lack of training, long-hours culture and lack of flexible working schemes are encompassed in the category of structural obstacles, which women experience in their daily work life. Regarding the previous distinction between public and private sectors it is essential to mention that the two sectors appear to have different structural barriers for women. For example the long-hours culture is a private sector characteristic whereas the public sector which offers flexible hours does not invest in training for its employees.

The second category of cultural or social barriers contains all those factors, which are determined by the social environment. Gender and equal treatment as well as prejudice and sex discrimination constitute this category. Furthermore, Ahuja (2002) states that the cultural barriers are divided into two features, the internal view which women have for themselves (e.g. self-confidence) and the external view embedded at

the societal level (e.g. gender discrimination). This type of barrier was identified in the interviews from both the public and the private sectors. A combination of the two types of obstacles might be possible under specific circumstances and working environments within ITEC.

5.4.1 Structural barriers

Although organisations have made considerable progress towards developing their equality policies and family-friendly policies as well as social inclusion of various disadvantaged groups of the population (Women Returners Network, 2002b), women still experience difficulties derived from the organisation itself, which hinder their career retention. Among others the interviewees identified the following constraints: inflexibility, competitive working environment, lack of training, and long-hours culture.

The majority of the interviewees referred to the inflexibility of the ITEC industry to accommodate women's needs; needs related mainly with family obligations. Most of the interviewees after a career break preferred to return in a part-time job in order to be able to up bring their families. If their employer cannot offer them such an employment deal they change jobs or even career paths. There was also difficulty to find any schemes of job-sharing or home working although women were very much in favour of those working patterns rather than part-time working. Part-time working was also linked to fewer responsibilities for women in managerial roles:

“Sometimes I wonder: Do I have a family or a career? It's very hard to go back after having a family”, Project Manager

“Part-time work is a big priority for most women and out there, there are very limited opportunities”, Assistant Systems Developer

“The other thing they have done recently is to take me out of the critical path in terms of work. When I first returned I had 12 staff working for me with 2 strong deputies to manage when I was off. Recently I have been moved away from this

line of work, partly due to this phase of work finishing and I am now in charge of management aspects i.e. recruiting, resourcing, and planning for the wider team whilst there is another manager (a full time resource) who is actually running the team and staff on a daily basis”, IT Manager

That appears to be in agreement with what a recent UK based report (Platman, et al, 2004) has found about lack of part-time schemes in this particular sector. It is rather difficult to believe that ITEC, which is a relatively young industry consists, however, of very anachronistic attributes regarding women’s employment. This has to be linked with social factors, which prescribe that IT jobs are for men only (Webster, 1996, Faulkner, 2002).

ITEC was also characterised by the interviewees as a very competitive working environment in both the public and the private sector. An environment which entails less recognition for female employees, less payment and sometimes even limited career prospects in comparison with male employees, especially for those working part-time:

“IT is a closed market; very competitive and difficult to get in even if you have very good qualifications”, IT support

“There is also an acceptance curve; people seem less comfortable with women in a meeting... Yes there is lack of recognition because people cannot separate you from your family role”, Engineering Programme Manager

The long-hours culture was also included as an aspect of ITEC which constrains women from advancing their career as well as making them feel demoralised:

“One of the hardest things to get used to when I started work again was that I had gone from working long hours 8am - sometimes 7/8pm to now working 8.30am-5/5.30pm. This meant walking out of a full room of staff, most of who worked for me. It felt really intimidating at first until I got used to the fact that this was my new life and I had to let go of the past and while my team got used

to my working pattern and knew I would be out of the door prompt at 5pm in order to collect my daughter from nursery”, IT Manager

Lack of investment in training for women working part-time was also classified as a major obstacle for women who would like to get promoted or just be up-to-date. That was observed mostly in the public sector as a result of limited resources:

“Training is generally difficult if you work 3 days per week...(no time)”,
Assistant Systems Developer

An additional factor related to the organisations themselves was the lack of nursery facilities especially in private companies, which costs time and money to both employers and employees alike:

“If my company had a crèche I wouldn’t have to leave one hour earlier to pick up my child from the nursery and the company wouldn’t lose that one working hour”, Marketing Project Manager

Accordingly, one could argue that both sectors, public and private, display a variety of structural factors which constrain women’s career retention or advancement. According to the interviews, what characterises ITEC is the inability to see beyond the division of full-time and part-time work and beyond the gender segregation, of male and female employee. The consequences for women are first and foremost psychological. Feelings of solitude and stress were expressed through the interviews as well as depreciation of their job and company.

5.4.2 Cultural barriers

Regarding the cultural factors which determine women’s progress in ITEC occupations, these include internal views (women’s views for themselves) such as self-confidence and expectations, skills, and long career breaks. The external views are related to what the external environment imposes under different circumstances. These include family matters (having children), age, and finally stereotyping

phenomena, prejudice and discrimination. All these elements combined can result in job change or even career change (Ahuja, 2002).

The internal social factors determine the way women perceive themselves in certain circumstances in this case their working environment. In this study, women returners to ITEC were aware of the change occurred in them and specifically their view on how they perceived their work and their life in general after having a child. For the majority, having self-confidence and the possibility to up-date their skills, it is a very important factor in order to return back to work (Women Returners Network, 2002). The opposite could hold them back with profound results for their career:

“I stayed out of work for 6 months. I missed what had happened and that was frightening. When you are away and come back you need to start all over again”, Engineering Programme Manager

An additional factor linked with the lack of self-confidence is the career break’s duration. Women who decide to stay more than two years with their children at home found it extremely difficult to return back. Firstly, as the industry moves rapidly and changes all the time, their skills become obsolete, which means that they have to be re-trained (Webster, J. 1996). Most of the ITEC companies are not interested in re-training people who have stayed out of work for so long. They prefer to employ young people, newly qualified with the required skills:

“Some people think that by employing young people they will have consistency”, IT systems supervisor

“Sometimes in order to get back you need retraining; most training programmes are for people who haven’t had any IT skills; What about those of us we need a rather different kind of training to recommence our work?”, Project Manager

“If you have been out for a number of years, things change very quickly. Companies prefer new qualified people”, Research Scientist

“Most of the jobs are for Microsoft users I am trained to work with Linux and UNIX, what should I do?”, currently working in a call centre

Furthermore, as Platman, et al (2004) have found, age is an additional issue which functions as a discriminating factor against women. Having taken a long career break means that when one desires to resume her career a woman will not be at her 20s or 30s but maybe more than that. This is automatically a negative factor which does not allow women to re-enter ITEC regardless of their qualifications or working experience. A 42 years old project worker describes her experience to find a job as follows:

“In the interview they will always ask me about my marriage and my age, if I have children and how old they are. When they turn me down I ask for feedback and the explanation I got is that although I am suitable for the job my age and having a young child is not positive...”

Having children is perceived as a negative factor for a female employee in ITEC because that means that she will not be able to work long hours or to travel. However, these are preconceptions which have been developed within a working culture which even now states that women are supposed to do the ‘soft’ jobs and the men the ‘hard’, technical part (McIlwee, 1992, Webster, 1996). Most of the interviewees felt that having young children created rather false ideas about them and their career:

“I was turned down when I applied for a higher job soon after I returned from maternity leave and the explanation I was given from a man who had four children and his wife back at home was that ‘here we have some difficult customers and you wouldn’t want that would you?’ There was a stereotyping of what I wanted because I was a mother”, IT Manager

Phenomena of prejudice and sex discrimination have been referred to as a result of working in a male-dominated industry, which advocates the superiority of men against women. Women interviewed in this study have experienced sex harassment while working in big ITEC companies. What they have received as compensation for their excellent work was exclusion from social and working networks, ignorance and impingement of their rights:

“It’s a male dominated industry. Women have been totally put off by the culture and there are fewer women who stay on to take senior positions. Women are not treated as human beings in doing their jobs”, Senior Consultant.

5.5 SUMMARY

This part of the analysis has presented a context specific analysis on women’s employment in ITEC professions. It illustrated the differences between the public and the private sectors regarding ITEC and female employees. It has also demonstrated what factors hinder women’s recruitment, retention and advancement in this particular industry. The findings related to the dissimilarities between the two sectors lead to the view that both the sectors have weaknesses in relation to women’s employment. For example, the public sector offers flexible working but low status and low payment jobs whereas the private sector provides more prospects for successful career progression and better payment but very rarely opportunities of flexible working patterns.

PART 6: BUSINESS CASES

In Part 6 we present the cases of two organisations in ITEC, in order to understand the opportunities and barriers for women that have taken or are planning to take career breaks in the ITEC industry. Both of these organisations have a higher than average representation of women in their IT occupations.

Five semi-structured interviews were conducted in January 2005 in SmallITCo and nine semi-structured interviews have been conducted between January and February 2005 with women at all levels in MediumITCo with the aim to gather valid and reliable data in relation to the practices of both organisations assisting women to return to their job or take career breaks.

SmallITCo is a small size company, which consciously chooses to employ women. Its female workforce although relatively young has a clear picture about what women need and should be offered when employed in ITEC companies. The company has managed to create supportive structures for its employees under the umbrella of knowledge culture, which incorporates both the company's evolution as well as employees satisfaction.

MediumITCo is a company that employs women and offers flexi-time working patterns to women that have taken or are planning to take a career break. Women interviewed appreciate that the company recognizes and supports their needs. Their view of company's policies seems to be positively related to their loyalty to the company. Women report that they enjoy working in the ITEC sector, as long as they are provided with opportunities to bring up their families

6.1 SMALLITCO

SmallITCo is a small UK-based multi-lingual creative web-design firm recognised on an international level specialising in the field of Visual communication, from Corporate Identity to Web Design. SmallITCo's main objective is to coordinate the communication of Brand and Product in a coherent and consistent manner for both

off-line and on-line projects. The company was established in 1999. It employs 12 people with the majority of employees being women. In particular, the proportion of men and women is 5 to 7 respectively with women being employed mostly in IT roles.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in January 2005 with the managing director, his personal assistant, the financial accountant and two women employees who work as web developers.

Company's Employment Patterns and Policies on Women Returners

There is a profound preference to employ women especially in IT roles. That was explained by the managing director as a clear recognition of female abilities to work on specific kind of jobs and produce a great result for both the company and the client:

"Women are employed because they are extremely good in relation to their work... and products are better when women work on them" MD.

Despite its small size the company has established policies on equal opportunities, environmental policy and maternity/paternity rights and leave. On flexible working patterns the company is quite open-minded and allows its employees to start and finish work mostly at their own time as well as working from home when they feel not able to go to their office. The company is also willing to offer support and training if needed for an employee to return to their work after a career break.

On the case of women's decreasing levels in the IT industry, the female interviewees recognised that this kind of industry evolves rapidly and it demands continuous update of skills especially when an employee takes a career break. However, they also illustrated the shift from old traditional management styles to knowledge-based organisations where managers design and create more effective and efficient workplaces and organisational structures. The importance of skills in modern working environments and career development consequently promotes people who can demonstrate the existence of required skills:

“The career ladder is based on skills and that’s very good for women who have skills and also have children because they can work from home” MD.

The women interviewed all agreed that the IT industry is a challenging place to work, with a great potential for both men and women. Regarding the company they work for, they think that this offers them the opportunity to develop their career without working in an oppressive environment:

“It is great working in a company with equal numbers of both women and men. It’s not boring”.

In summary, SmallITCo is a small size company which consciously chooses to employ women. Its female workforce although relatively young has a clear picture about what women need and should be offered when employed in IT companies. It has managed to create supportive structures for its employees under the umbrella of knowledge culture, which incorporates both the company’s evolution as well as employee satisfaction.

6.2 MEDIUMITCO

MediumITCo is an independent, medium-sized IT services company, operating in the UK and Ireland. Since its formation by two women (Alison Newell and Ann Budge) in 1985, MediumITCo's objective has been to provide high quality management and computing services that assist organisations to make the most of their information systems in cost-effective ways. The company aims to develop trust and strong relationships with its clients, which cover a range of market sectors such local and central government bodies, major financial institutions, health sector clients and retailers. MediumITCo offers various services, which include consultancy, quality information security solutions, application development and system integration, testing services, application support, and business intelligence.

The company employs 350 permanent employees in its offices (at Edinburgh, Strathclyde region, London, Birmingham and Belfast) and on average 120 “contract” associates, who are IT contractors that work for the company’s clients for a few weeks or months or years on a specific project or for a specific skill. 60% of the work

is client-based and 40% of the work is conducted in the offices of the company. 37.4% of the total population of employees is women. 30.56% of the technical population of employees is women.

Company's employment patterns and policies

The company recognizes that diversity is important in the workplace, which can benefit from a more balanced workforce in ITEC. Given that the two founders of the company were women, there has always been openness in their mind to flexibility, working part-time and combining working from home, assisting women to plan a family and at the same time develop a career in all levels across the entire organisation. Thus the company offers flexi-time schemes to encourage women to plan a career break or return to their job after a career break, which also increases women's loyalty to the company.

However, this mainly applies to senior management, in which one can find the predominance of women, as 5 people out of 8 of the most senior management team are women. The majority of senior management works part-time (3-4 days per week). In total 10 to 15% of the company's people work part-time. The technical population is dominated by men, because according to the HR manager:

"the opportunities are not coming through as strongly for women as for men in terms of flexible working patterns."

It becomes more difficult to provide flexible working hours to technical people, because these people are normally client-based and then the company becomes constrained by its clients and has fewer opportunities to offer flexible working hours.

According to the HR manager, there are two categories of women who take up flexible working patterns:

- i) those who no longer have child care responsibilities but who want to pursue other interests and thus maintain a good work-life balance, and
- ii) Women that have or plan to have children and want to stay at home.

MediumITCo is a company that employs women and offers flexi-time working patterns to women that have taken or are planning to take a career break. Women interviewed in MediumITCo value their personal life and appreciate that the company recognizes and supports their needs. Their view of company's policies seems to be positively related to their loyalty to the company. Women enjoy working in the ITEC sector as long as they are provided with opportunities to bring up their families

6.3 CROSS-COMPANY COMPARISONS

Both organisations have established policies for equal opportunities, environmental policy and maternity/paternity rights and leave. The first organisation has not so far used the established policies, since the workforce is relatively young and the need for taking a career break has not arisen yet. The second organisation uses such policies by offering flexi-time schemes to encourage women to plan a career break or return to their job after a career break, which also increases women's loyalty to the company.

In both organizations, there seems to be a profound preference to employ women especially in managerial roles. That was explained by the managing director of the first case as a clear recognition of female abilities to work on managerial jobs and produce a great result for both the company and the client:

“Women are employed because they are extremely good in relation to their work... and products are better when women work on them.”

The same applies to the second case, in which one can find the predominance of women in managerial roles, as 5 people out of 8 of the most senior management team are women.

However, in the second organisation, the technical population is dominated by men, because according to the HR manager:

“The opportunities are not coming through as strongly for women as for men in terms of flexible working patterns.”

Moreover, both companies provide flexi-time work schemes. However, it becomes more difficult for MediumITCo to provide flexible working hours to technical people. The difference between the two cases and their ability to provide flexi-time working schemes is that the employees of the first organisation are based in the headquarters; whereas the employees in the second organisation are normally client-based (60% of the work is client-based). Consequently, in the second case the company becomes constrained by its clients and has fewer opportunities to offer flexible working hours to its employees.

On the case of women's decreasing levels in the ITEC industry the female interviewees recognised in both organisations that this kind of industry evolves rapidly and it demands continuous up-date of skills especially when an employee takes a career break.

All women interviewed agreed that the IT industry is a challenging place to work, with a great potential for both men and women. Women in both cases regard their respective organisations as offering them the opportunity to develop their career without working in an oppressive environment.

6.4 SUMMARY

To sum-up, SmallITCo and MediumITCo are both good exemplars of organisations that have introduced support mechanisms for the advancement of women in the industry. The cases indicate that despite the male-dominated and long-working hours culture of the ITEC industry, organisations can indeed innovate in their working practices for the recruitment, retention and advancement of their female staff.

PART 7: ANALYSIS – DISCUSSION

The report has presented the findings from our empirical study with women returners. The responses of the women based on their experience both in the private, as well as in the public sector, indicate the perspectives of women regarding the numerous difficulties they face when returning to the industry after a career break. Our purpose has been to express women's views towards their attempt to re-entry. The analysis of data has been conducted in order to find more evidence and themes related to the challenges that women in ITEC experience following a career break. In addition to this, data were analysed across different sectors and in particular compared the views and experiences of women returners in the private and public sectors. This analysis sought for factors on the specific context and occupational culture of the ITEC industry and ITEC occupations and explored how they affect women's position in terms of status and career development.

Young women that are under 25 years old do not perceive the difficulties in ITEC industry in the case of a career break mainly because at this point of their career they do not think of taking one. The majority of women that have taken a career break are between 26-35 years old.

For our interviewees this variation of the years a career break can last depends firstly on the personal choice one can make to stay home and up bring her family, secondly on lack of self-confidence to resume one's career, thirdly on the difficulty to keep one's skills up-to-date and finally on the lack of appropriate training schemes for women who want to return to ITEC after a long career break (most of the training provided by the government is for basic skills in IT so it does not cover people who already have more than basic skills).

Our findings suggest that the difficulties women face, in order to return to their jobs after a career break are not so strongly related to their qualifications, since even PhD holders cannot sometimes return to their job. On the contrary, the difficulties women face, are related to other factors as it has been demonstrated in our study.

Looking into these factors we posit that the age returning from a career break (especially if they are above 36 years old), the length of the career break (especially if it is over two years), as well as difficulties related to the individual (i.e. lack of self-confidence) appear to have a stronger impact on the process of returning after a career break. Women that return from a career break have switched or would like to switch to part-time or flexi-time working schemes. Moreover, considering that the ITEC industry is a highly competitive environment, which rapidly changes and human skills need to be constantly updated, our findings suggest that there is not sufficient training offered to women returners. A rather low percentage (13.04%) of the respondents suggest that another difficulty is related to limited opportunities for career development, once switched to part-time working schemes. Confidence levels are also found to go down as a result of a career break and this is exacerbated when women return to employment on a part time basis.

Technical staff appear to have a greater need for training after a career break. The difference in the proportion between female managerial and technical staff in the public sector is greater in comparison to the private sector. This finding may suggest the need for the private sector to focus more on the provision of sufficient training since there are more women working as technical staff. Another difference between the public and the private sector is the provision of support for childcare, which appears to be more adequate in the public sector, whereas in the private is limited.

Overall, the study has shown that women returners are not a homogeneous group and that the length of their career break appears to affect one's re-entry to ITEC. For example, women who are currently on a career break or have returned to work within only 2 years of their career break, are concerned about childcare arrangements and have a preference for flexi-time and part-time schemes, than women who have been on a career break until their children have grown up; these women, though they can more easily return to full time employment, are more in need of re-training and clearly ask for changes in employers' attitudes.

A career break creates a knowledge gap, a tremendous deficit in confidence, loss of self-efficacy and a loss of opportunities to network; thus the longer the break the

greater the impact. Women who stay more than two years with their children at home found it extremely difficult to return back. As the industry moves rapidly and continuously changes all the time their skills become obsolete, which means that they have to be re-trained (Webster, 1996).

Our findings suggest that there is not sufficient training offered to women returners. That appears to be in agreement with what a recent UK based report (Platman, K. et al, 2004) has found about lack of part-time schemes in this particular industrial sector. A rather low percentage (13.04%) of the respondents suggest that another difficulty is related to limited opportunities for career development, once switched to part-time working schemes. Confidence levels are also found to go down as a result of a career break and this is exacerbated when women return to employment on a part time basis. Unless these characteristics of women returners are known it would be difficult to introduce effective strategies for their employment and development.

Furthermore, the nature of IT occupations in the IT industry has been found to influence employment schemes. Client-based work becomes more and more popular in IT industry. The reason is mainly the need of companies to deal with evolving business conditions, become more flexible, put the focus of attention on the customer and provide customised products and support to clients through just-in-time mechanisms (i.e. client-based employees or teams) that can easily adapt to changing client needs (Rivard et al., 2004). At the same time, the development of IT allows a company to operate without an office or with reduced office space and keep employees in different places and under different conditions.

As a result of this trend, employees need to adapt to clients' work expectations and styles. The characteristics of client-based work are namely: long hours, evening and weekend working hours, growing work pressures, tight deadlines, need for multiple skills and responsibilities, work in temporary teams, and work on a wide range of tasks. A client-based business is always looking to provide solutions to the clients' challenges and demands (Richardson, 2003). A business with client-based projects is primarily interested in owning the client, not the project. The focus of a client-based

business is on maintaining the relationship at all costs by designing projects that suit the demands of clients rather than the company.

Since the focus of business is to satisfy the demands and needs of the clients, which practically means meeting tight deadlines in projects of various sizes, it becomes difficult for companies to offer collective flexible time schemes to their client-based employees. This tends to affect mostly women that return after career breaks mainly due to maternity leave and the need to manage childcare. These provisions or the lack of them tend to influence women's choice to return to the IT industry; they may as a result choose to work in an IT job in a non-IT sector or seek employment in a non-IT job.

PART 8: IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the study aid in helping us explain what factors constrain women in achieving a desired level of career within the ITEC sector. Based on organisational and personal issues the study identified several features, which constrain women from achieving career development. Therefore, it is essential to tackle those factors by consulting both the organisations operating within ITEC and women working in ITEC on how the current pessimistic situation for the future can be handled better so both parts will be satisfied. Various suggestions in the past from governmental bodies (DTI, 2002) have pointed out the importance of keeping track of women's and men's accomplishments in ITEC so it can be proved that women are treated equally because a small minority reaches the top levels of organisational hierarchy.

The UK government has promoted several initiatives over the last few years in order to encourage more women to use IT (Alexander, 2001 a,b). Richardson and French (2002) however posit that such initiatives are essential as means to fill a skills gap and question whether their involvement is seen as 'making up the numbers' to boost the economy. Treating women's absence as an economic matter alone connected purely with skills shortages is problematic according to Richardson and French (2002). Women's unequal position in IT is an issue that needs to be addressed even if there was no skill shortage (Adams et al, 2004).

The recommendations provided by the participants themselves urge for a more active role by the ITEC employers and policy makers on engaging in raising awareness about gender discrimination and inequality towards women. ITEC companies need to see beyond the existing cultural aspects, which indicate that women have not the brains for technical and managerial jobs within computing or engineering. It is also advisable that employers understand better child care and their female staff's need to perform two vital roles that of being a mother and that of being a professional. Managerial structures who support and allow women to have a period of transition when they return to work after maternity leave were also indicated as essential. Finally, it has been apparent from our analysis that companies' difficulty to retain female staff in ITEC is rooted in their existing culture of male dominance and female

exclusion. To shift that culture employers need to engage in an open dialogue with women, professional associations and policy makers.

Respondents have suggested that employers need to concentrate on providing more opportunities for flexible working schemes, providing support for childcare, training and to ensure that gender discrimination is avoided. However, it also needs to be recognized that structural issues such as client-based project nature of ITEC jobs may constrain the implementation of flexi-time schemes even in those organizations that are considered to be female-friendly.

Professional associations need to focus on providing encouragement and support for women who face serious difficulties to return to their job or finding a new job, by offering training or promoting examples of best practices in the industry. Training and updating courses need to consider the flexibility required by women seeking reentry to IT. For this, our own recommendation is to provide support *during* a career break. This support could entail: reduced membership fees, networking, awareness sessions on technology and industry changes, and advice on career development following a career break. Accordingly, they can undertake a more vigorous role in a range of issues including promoting good exemplars of companies that have used flexible working schemes successfully, providing more information about flexible working, provide grants/funding for training, re-training and further education to women who seek re-entry to the field, sponsor schemes such as mentorship or job sharing and in general provide support and encouragement to women who face serious difficulties to return to their job or find a new job.

PART 9: CONCLUSIONS

In the light of our literature review and empirical findings, one can conclude that the ITEC sector is usually not family-friendly or supportive to its staff. Bearing in mind the general focus of this study on women returners, it becomes apparent more than ever that women in this high-tech field have to overcome more constraints than women employees in any other form of industry. It is also evident that the number of women remaining in the sector has decreased because of the working conditions and consequently the career prospects. The retention and advancement of highly-skilled female personnel remain one of the major debates in the ITEC sector. The image of the industry, that is fast-growing and continuously changing, remains one that is male-dominated and unsympathetic towards people with family responsibilities; these will remain the main barriers for women's recruitment, retention and advancement in ITEC.

The main circumstances facing women returners are: lack of flexible entry to jobs and education; loss of confidence; the costs of retraining and how to offset them; lack of childcare facilities and the difficulties of keeping in touch with personal network. Family and home commitments are still the primary obstacles affecting a woman's decision about returning to work. Lack of affordable and accessible quality childcare is a big issue facing many parents across the UK. Unless there is adequate provision of family-friendly policies and affordable childcare, women are unlikely to feel they are able to re-engage with the labour market. Part-time work and flexible work patterns will help to enable many women to combine work and family commitments.

Studies from different fields, social sciences, management and IT principally focus on women's position in the particular field of ITEC and more generally on what hinders their return to work after they have had a career break. However, there is little progress connecting these outcomes with the factors that enable women to return to work by studying and comparing women's perceptions on the topic. This research initiative seeks to provide an opportunity to develop a more carefully grounded link between what deters and what encourages women to return according to their insights and experiences.

Further research and analysis is considered necessary in order to evaluate the schemes that already exist to support women returners as well as to recommend additional practices and actions to enhance the current conditions. It is the purpose of the Equalitec programme to engage with key players (training providers, industry, professional bodies, policy advisers, and women's organisations) to create an integrated approach in order to support and promote women returners to ITEC jobs.

APPENDIX A– Interview with women returners

Demographic Characteristics:

Could you please state your name and your age?

What is your current employment or last employment? Title?

When did you first start working in ITEC?

Could you please tell me your qualifications, University or other?

Have you worked in any other industry before starting in ITEC?

1. Why have you chosen to work in this kind of industry? Were there any special incentives for you? Education, parents.
2. What do you think about the current conditions on women's employment in this industry/academia, for example have you identified negative attitudes towards women, not in this company but in general, or phenomena such as lack of recognition and less payment than male colleagues?
3. When and why did you take a career break?
4. Did you return to the same company, at the same job and at the same level of payment and why?
5. What were the major difficulties you faced during the returning process for example in your personal and work life? Any compromises?
6. Did you have a strategy of how to return, e.g. keeping in touch with the company, colleagues etc. and going to training?
7. Did you undertake any training in order to return? If yes, who funded that training?

8. What sort of employment deal would you be looking for e.g. in terms of occupation, employer, pay, working hours and employment status?
9. Under what preconditions would you like to (did you) return e.g. having a company crèche, part-time job, job sharing, flexible hours?
10. How would you evaluate the current policies and practices assisting women to return to their previous job?
11. Do you think ITEC industry is different from other forms of industry in the case of women returning to work?
12. What would you advise the employers in the ITEC sector for women's recruitment, retention and advancement?
13. What would you advise the policy makers in the ITEC sector for women's recruitment, retention and advancement?
14. What would you advise the professional associations in the ITEC sector for women's recruitment, retention and advancement?

APPENDIX B: Interviews with ITEC Organisations (e.g. HR manager)

1. What is your role in the organisation?

- Number of years?
- In other ITEC companies?
- Are you responsible for just this site or all UK sites?

2. How many people work in this organisation?

- Turnover?
- % or number of female employees now? Average number of female employees?
- % of women in ITEC roles?

- In your opinion, why are there so few/many women in these roles in your organisation?

3. What are the organisation's policies on flexible working (also, virtual /remote working)?

- If no policies, why are there no policies on flexible working?
- If there are policies:
 - Which part of the organisation / jobs do they apply to?
 - How many people have taken it up?
 - What types of people take up the flexible working patterns?
 - Can you give me an example of someone who has taken up a flexible working pattern? What job do they do? How did it help?

4. How can the adoption of a flexible working pattern affect a person's career development?

5. What are the organisation's policies on career breaks?

- If no policies, why are there no policies on career breaks?
- If there are policies:
 - How does the organisation support women who wish to return to work after a career break?
 - If a (project manager/team leader etc) has a career break for a year and wants to return would they still do the same job? What would be the organisation's response if they wanted to come back part time?
 - The number of people who go on career breaks? Number of people who return? Why do you think that figure is high / low?

6. A recent DTI report showed decreasing levels of women in the ITEC industries, why do you believe that women might leave the industry?

- Why do you believe that many women do not return?

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"Imagine a society that would allow Marie Curie to stack shelves in a supermarket simply because she took a career break for family reasons"

"44% of women work part-time, frequently in jobs that fail to use the skills and qualifications or experience they developed when employed full time"

Equalitec: Advancing Women in ITEC
(Information Technology, Electronics, Communications)

Career Prospects after Career Breaks