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Impact of Externally Provided Return-to-Work Programs on Women Relaunchers´ ability to Opt-Back-in professional life in Portugal

Karen Ferrez Dalgas Frisch

Doctoral degree in Management, specialization in Human Resources and Organizational Behaviour

Supervisors:
Doctor Sandra Costa, Assistant Professor
ISCTE-IUL
Doctor Florinda Matos, Assistant Professor
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December, 2025

BUSINESS
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Jury:

Doctor Sílvia Costa Agostinho da Silva, Full Professor at Iscte - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (President of the Jury)
Doctor Pascale Daher, Professor at the University of Liverpool (United Kingdom)
Doctor António João dos Santos Nunes, Assistant Professor at Universidade da Beira Interior
Doctor Inês Carneiro e Sousa, Assistant Professor at Iscte – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa
Doctor Sandra Cristina Pereira Costa Camacho, Assistant Professor at Iscte – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

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Abstract

In recent decades, professional career trajectories have shifted from linear pathways to more diverse patterns that often include periods of voluntary or involuntary career interruption. However, individuals (particularly women) who seek to re-enter the labour market after a career break frequently encounter significant barriers. Return-to-Work initiatives, commonly known as Returnships or Return to Work Externally Provided (RTWE) programs, first introduced in 2008 in the United States, have since expanded internationally as a potential mechanism to support the reintegration of qualified women and to promote greater gender equality in the workforce.

This thesis employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the factors that influence women's decisions to return to employment after a career break, as well as the extent to which a Portuguese RTWE program addresses these challenges. The research further examined whether 133 Portuguese small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) value the experience of women returning from career breaks across different age groups, and whether participation in an RTWE program enhances candidates' prospects when applying for SME positions.

Findings indicate that while RTWE programs alone do not guarantee women's re-entry into the labour market, they substantially mitigate many of the barriers faced by this group. As such, RTWE initiatives represent an important step toward fostering more inclusive and equitable employment environments. Moreover, by supporting women in overcoming re-entry challenges, these programs help enlarge the pool of skilled candidates available to SMEs, thereby facilitating recruitment processes and contributing to a beneficial cycle for both job seekers and employers.

Keywords: Career break, Women, Return-to-work, Returnships, SME

JEL Classification System: J24 Human Capital • Skills • Occupational Choice • Labour Productivity; M14 Corporate Culture • Diversity • Social Responsibility

Resumo

Nas últimas décadas, as trajetórias de carreira profissional passaram de caminhos lineares para padrões mais diversificados, que frequentemente incluem períodos de interrupção voluntária ou involuntária da carreira. No entanto, indivíduos (particularmente mulheres) que buscam retornar ao mercado de trabalho após uma pausa na carreira frequentemente encontram barreiras significativas. As iniciativas de retorno ao trabalho, comumente conhecidas como *Returnships* ou programas de reinserção profissional oferecido externamente (*RTWE*, na sigla em inglês), inicialmente criadas em 2008 nos Estados Unidos, expandiram-se internacionalmente como um mecanismo potencial para apoiar a reintegração de mulheres qualificadas e promover maior igualdade de gênero na força de trabalho.

Esta tese utilizou uma abordagem de métodos mistos para investigar os fatores que influenciam as decisões das mulheres de regressar ao mercado de trabalho após uma pausa na carreira, bem como em que medida um programa português de RTWE responde a estes desafios. A investigação examinou ainda se 133 pequenas e médias empresas (PME) portuguesas valorizam a experiência de mulheres que regressam de pausas na carreira em diferentes faixas etárias e se a participação num programa de regresso ao trabalho melhora as perspetivas das candidatas ao candidatarem-se a vagas em PME.

Os resultados indicam que, embora os programas de retorno ao trabalho por si só não garantam a reinserção das mulheres no mercado de trabalho, eles atenuam substancialmente muitas das barreiras enfrentadas por esse grupo. Assim, as iniciativas de retorno ao trabalho representam um passo importante para a promoção de ambientes de trabalho mais inclusivos e equitativos. Além disso, ao apoiar as mulheres na superação dos desafios da reinserção, esses programas ajudam a ampliar o leque de candidatos qualificados disponíveis para as PMEs, facilitando os processos de recrutamento e contribuindo para um ciclo benéfico tanto para quem busca emprego quanto para os empregadores.

Palavras-chave: Pausa na carreira, Mulheres, Regresso ao trabalho, Regresso ao trabalho (*Returnships*), PME

Sistema de Classificação JEL: J24 Capital Humano • Competências • Escolha Ocupacional • Produtividade do Trabalho; M14 Cultura Corporativa • Diversidade • Responsabilidade Social

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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Meaning
BTM	Back-to-Market Program
CATPCA	Categorical Principal Components Analysis
CV	*Curriculum Vitae*
IAPMEI	Agency for Competitiveness and Innovation, I.P.
NS	Not significant
P	Participants
RTW	Return-to-work program
RTWE	Return-to-work externally provided program
SME	Small and medium-sized enterprises
TAM	Technology Acceptance Model
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

The debate about gender diversity and equality is in vogue through different lenses, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2022) highlighted it with Goal Number 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. The Economist (2024) performed the most extensive research on the impact of motherhood on women´s employment worldwide. In this global research (with 134 countries studied), the magazine research unit discovered that in the first year after childbirth, women often drop out of the workforce at a rate of 24%. 17% are still missing after five years. Ten years later, 15% are still not present.

So if women leave the workforce at these rates after their first child or after taking care of other family members, are there any mechanisms/ schemes that can be implemented to bring them back to the workforce efficiently? This thesis aims to address this question by focusing on the emerging topic of returnship/return-to-work programs (RTW) and return-to-work programs externally provided (RTWE) and more precisely how they can help women go back to the workforce. Scientific evidence is limited, but its preliminary findings are promising and offer new insights into how to improve equality in the labour market and society at large.

In 2022, Portugal was ranked number two in global talent shortages (ManPower Group, 2022). This country was wasting a talent pool: qualified (high-level skills, education, and experience) women who, in most cases, chose to take some time off their careers to take care of their families (not only to take care of children, but also elderly family members, disabled, and/or support a partner´s job). When these women decide to return to the job market, they have a hard time finding their way back into the workforce. The Portuguese Statistics National Institute's (Instituto Nacional de Estatística) data from December 2022 shows that 53% of the unemployed are women, compared with 48% in December 2011 (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2023). Additionally, of the 78.2 thousand people unemployed with at least a bachelor’s degree, 68% were women. Not encouraging numbers for women, who represented 59% of university graduates in 2021 (PORDATA, 2022), 40% of corporate middle managers, 16% of top management, and 6% of CEOs (McKinsey, 2023). These neglected and qualified resources have a negative economic impact when society loses the opportunity to put their talent to good use.

But why do women choose to leave the workforce and take a career break instead of maintaining their jobs while caring for their family member? A study on women in Portugal (Sagnier & Morell, 2019) shows that women with children have an average of 6 daily extra hours of work (beyond their labour hours) compared to only 3.5 for women without children. Furthermore, 31% of women reported adapting their professional lives to their personal lives. Within this group, 84% reduced their working hours and/or rejected new challenges, while 16% took the drastic measure of leaving their paid job. It is important to note that this study was published just before the COVID-19 pandemic, which made the situation even more challenging during that period.

And Portugal is not alone. McKinsey and Lean In's report demonstrates that in the USA, women represented 48% of entry-level career levels, 40% of middle-level positions, and 27% of C-level positions. Even though these numbers have improved since 2016, they indicate that a large portion of women either do not get promoted to higher levels/or leave the workforce. Moreover, managing both family and careers became a more difficult task as the COVID-19 pandemic increased pressure on women, with a higher percentage of women opting out of the workforce compared to men, as demonstrated in McKinsey & Company and Lean In (2020) report:

- 23% of women with children under 10 years of age considered leaving the workforce compared to only 13% of men during that period;
- 18% of women with children of all ages stated they considered leaving the workforce, while only 10% of men thought so;
- Both women without children and men answered the same 10%.

Furthermore, ManPower Group's report (2020) indicates that Millennials expect to take more breaks during their professional careers compared to their parents, and when asked about the reasons for that, women state their breaks will be for the birth of their child (61% compared to 32% of men), child care (33% vs. 20% of men), care for parents and aging relatives (30% vs. 25% of men), and return to education or gain new skills (23% vs. 21% of men). These data support the idea that gender equality within the corporate world will continue to be a challenge, with clear results for the economy; therefore, some action to reverse the situation is needed.

1.2. Careers

The traditional professional career concept was generally described as a series of hierarchical moves for an individual within a single organization. But as the world evolved, so did the career paths and, in the last 30 years, many career models and theories have been developed, such as the post-corporate, boundaryless, protean, or kaleidoscope (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Lent et al. (1994)´s Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) focuses on three core variables: self-efficacy (beliefs in one's abilities), outcome expectations (beliefs about the consequences of actions), and personal goals. It explains how the interaction between individual agency and contextual or environmental factors, such as social support and barriers, shapes career interests, choices, and performance over time. Baruch and Peiperl (1997) proposed the "post-corporate career," which represented a career with characteristics of being dynamic, horizontal rather than vertical, flexible, and with self-directed development. Individuals in post-corporate careers often manage their own career trajectories, seek diverse work experiences, and balance professional and personal goals, using lifelong learning, adaptability, and proactive networking. Arthur & Rousseau (1996) described the principles of a boundaryless career where men and women would not limit their career to a single company, field of expertise, or job but rather move across boundaries between employers and/or work units within employers, rejecting the traditional career opportunities for reasons related to work or nonwork. Later, Hall (2004) described the "protean career" as an evolution of the traditional concept, in which not the organization but the individual is responsible for their own path, based on their personal values and subjective measures of success. After that, in 2005, a career theory and a career model emerged. First, Savikas´ Career Construction Theory (CCT) explained how people build their careers by connecting who they are with the work they do. This theory holds that success depends on how well individuals adapt to change, balancing their own needs with societal expectations while managing challenges and transitions at work. It highlights three key elements for career success: adaptivity (the willingness to change), adaptability resources (the skills and abilities to cope), and adapting responses (the actions taken to deal with career tasks and transitions) (Rudolph et al., 2019). Second, Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) proposed the kaleidoscope career model (KCM), which states that men and women make job decisions based on three career values: authenticity, balance, and challenge, which vary in significance over time. These past authors define authenticity as being true to oneself, leading people to seek work compatible with their values. Balance refers to the desire to successfully integrate one's work and non-work lives, since today´s individuals are less

work-centric, choosing instead the "life track". Finally, challenge stands for the need that all individuals have to experience career advancement that contributes to feelings of self-worth. Mainiero and Sullivan also state that, at different stages in a woman´s life, she has some concerns that become more prevalent than others, and these factors led the women to change their minds about their careers. Even if they are still active, the remaining components then assume a more important role. Afterwards, Arthur et al. (2009) described the "intelligent career framework" as a career based on three mutually dependent ''ways of knowing," indicating how, why, and with whom people work. The Table 1 summarizes the different types of career models or theories described above.

Table 1

Summary of Career Models/ Theories

Scholar(s)	**Year**	**Contribution / Concept**	**Type**	**Focus**
Lent, Brown & Hackett	1994	Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)	Theory	How self-beliefs, goals, and environmental factors shape career interests, choices, and performance.
Arthur & Rousseau	1996	Boundaryless Career	Concept / Theory	Careers that cross organizational boundaries; emphasizes mobility, networks, and individual agency.
Baruch & Peiperl	1997	Post-Corporate Career	Model / Concept	Self-directed, flexible careers beyond traditional corporate structures, emphasizing mobility, adaptability, and lifelong learning.
Hall	2004	Protean Career	Theory	Self-directed, values-driven careers; success defined by personal standards rather than organizational criteria.
Savickas	2005	Career Construction Theory (CCT)	Theory	Career construction through adaptation, balancing personal and social demands, and managing transitions.
Sullivan & Mainiero	2005	Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM)	Model	Career decisions shaped by evolving needs for authenticity, balance, and challenge across life stages.
Arthur, Khapova & Parker	2009	Intelligent Career Framework	Framework / Model	Careers built through three types of "knowing": *why* (motivation), *how* (skills), and *whom* (networks).

Source: Data collected by the author

Even though these modern career theories focus on personal choice, flexibility, and moving across different paths, they often do not fully consider how strong social norms and gender expectations influence the way people can actually make those choices. In particular, they do not fully account for how societal role expectations influence the development of career interests, constraints, and decisions differently for men and women. Social Role Theory (Eagly et al., 2004, 2019; Eagly & Sczesny, 2019) is therefore particularly relevant as a complementary framework, as it explains how gendered patterns in career-related behaviours are not only the result of individual choices, but are also shaped by the distribution of men and women into different social roles within society. In this way, it connects broader social structures with individual psychological processes in career development, helping to explain how wider social expectations are taken in by individuals and shape gendered career paths over time.

Building on this, the influence of social roles can be seen in how gender stereotypes affect individuals throughout their lives. During someone's life, both men and women will be affected directly or indirectly by gender stereotypes. From a Social Role Theory point of view, these stereotypes are not just personal biases, but come from society. They develop from how men and women have been placed in different roles over time, and this then shapes and reinforces common ideas about how each gender should behave and what traits they should have. These gender stereotypes are created by observing from early ages how other men and women occupy different roles in society and are defined based on two major areas: communion and agency (Eagly et al., 2004, 2019). On one hand, high communion focuses on how much a person or a group of people is seen as good with people, nurturing, caring, and socially oriented. On the other hand, high agency focuses on how much a person or a group of people is seen as strong leaders, competitive, independent, and highly capable. According to social role theory, these stereotypical beliefs about communion and agency arise from the distribution of men and women into different social roles in society, which leads women to be more strongly associated with communion-related traits, while men are more strongly associated with agency-related traits (Eagly et al., 2004, 2019). In other words, women are more often associated with occupational roles that involve caring for others than men, which in turn reinforces the idea that women are more appropriate for caregiving roles (at home or in other occupations) rather than leadership positions (roles more strongly linked to agency).

It's also important to note that Social Role Theory explains how these ideas reinforce themselves over time. When men and women take on different roles, they develop related skills and behaviours that seem to "prove" the stereotypes, even though these differences mostly

come from social structures, not natural traits. This creates a self-reinforcing bias in which gendered expectations are continuously reinforced through the observation of role-consistent behaviours, leading women to be perceived as naturally high in communion rather than as developing these characteristics through accumulated social experiences and role expectations across their lives (Eagly et al., 2004; Eagly & Sczesny, 2019).

These gendered expectations do not only shape how men and women are perceived, but also influence the career decisions they make over time. One important example of this is how women's careers are often interrupted or redirected. In this context Zimmerman and Clark (2016) built on the work of (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) and proposed an integrative framework to explain women's career breaks, including three phases opting out, the career break itself, and opting back in. The term "opt-out" refers to the exodus of professional women from the workplace (Belkin, 2003), often linked to challenges in balancing work and personal responsibilities In addition, this expression characterizes the worrying talent drain of highly female talent, particularly among working mothers who step away from career advancement opportunities (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). When women return to the workforce, the terms used are opting in or re-entry (Cabrera, 2007). Most women opt to return to the workforce mainly when personal lives stabilize (e.g., children grow older and/or elderly family members no longer require as more assistance) or they need to receive compensation or a salary.

Not long ago, Lent & Brown (2019) reviewed the social cognitive career theory, focusing on how people developed interests, made career choices, and performed in work or school. They explained that two key factors, self-confidence in one's abilities (self-efficacy) and expectations about outcomes, strongly influence all three areas. The interest model examines how these beliefs shape what people are drawn to; the choice model shows how interests turn into career goals and actions; and the performance model focuses on persistence and success in tasks.

More recently, Seibert et al. (2024) discussed the importance of defining career success in modern society by incorporating both subjective career success and objective career success. Being subjective career success, personal evaluations and meanings associated with one´s career, and objective career success, quantifiable metrics like income, promotions, and occupational status. Furthermore, Seibert et al. (2024) research mentioned that gender disparities in career success stem from sociocultural barriers, unequal domestic labour division, and limited support, which, combined with women's prioritization of work-family balance, contribute to persistent pay gaps and reduced access to opportunities.

1.3. Career break

During a person's career, many career transitions will occur, such as: work to unemployment, work to another job opportunity, work to maternity leave, then back to work. A career transition is the process by which a person prepares for, experiences, and adapts to a significant shift in the context and nature of their work (Akkermans et al., 2024). These transitions can be idiosyncratic (such as work-to-work, work-to-unemployment, or unemployment-to-work) or normative (such as school-to-work or work-to-retirement) (Akkermans et al., 2024). An idiosyncratic transition can be decided by the person or by the employer. In other words, professional men or women may choose to take a career break to take care of family members (e.g., children or elderly) or will be asked by the employer to leave work and be unemployed. In both cases, it will be more difficult for this person, compared to an employed one to find another job (Pedulla, 2016; Weisshaar, 2018). But, it is far more challenging to return to the job market for someone who takes a career break using the opt-out approach. This professional hiatus, which is described as a brief interruption or sequencing tactic to balance the conflicting demands of work and family (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012) or time when an employee is not working for specific reasons (Institute of Physics, 2004), may be a voluntary or involuntary decision. It can last for a few weeks, months, or even years. The main reasons for these career gaps are maternity leave or time off to look after children, disabled, and/or elderly relatives. Other reasons may include returning to full-time education, accompanying a partner on sabbatical leave or on a foreign assignment (Cabrera, 2007; Cohen, 2012, 2021). In many cultures, women are the primary caregivers, which helps explain why they are more likely to take career breaks (Eurocarers, 2021). This is consistent with global trends showing that women carry out 76.2% of unpaid care work, such as caring for children and family members to International Labour Organization [ILO] (2018).

Almost twenty years after Hewlett and Luce (2005) research showed the main reasons for American women to take a career break to be primarily related to caring for their children, themselves, or other family members (Table 2), whereas for men, the career break is related to professional reasons, recent evidence shows little change. Borden (2024) has done an article showing that American women and men have not changed much in those reasons. Borden (2024) has used LinkedIn Economic Graph data based on LinkedIn members in the United States of America who listed a career break on their profile on 13th of February 2024 on LinkedIn, which is currently the world's largest professional network on the internet.

Table 2

Top Reasons for Career Break by Gender and Year

Female (2005)	Female (2024)	Male (2005)	Male (2024)
Family time	Full-time parenting	Change careers	Retirement
Earning a degree, other training	Health and well being	Earning a degree, other training	Career transition
Work not enjoyable/ satisfying	Caregiving	Work not enjoyable/ satisfying	Professional development
Moved away	Career transition	Not interested in fields	Personal goal pursuit
Change careers	Professional development	Family time	Health and well being

Source: Hewlett and Luce (2005) and LinkedIn (2024)

The results show that although both men and women can take career breaks, research consistently shows that women are more likely to do so to care or their families, while men use that time to redirect and improve their careers. For example, Weisshaar (2018) found that over a 20-year period (up to 2015), around 18 to 20 percent of mothers left paid work for at least one year to care for children, compared to only 1,2 percent of fathers, demonstrating that gender differences exist in the decision to take a career break.

These persistent differences can be explained by Social Role Theory, which suggests that long-term divisions in social roles shape expectations about caregiving and paid work, leading to different career paths for men and women (Eagly et al., 2004, 2019). This helps explain why men and women may approach career decisions differently. Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) study states that women approached career decisions via a relational lens; as part of the overall picture of their careers, they considered the needs of their spouses, kids, elderly parents, friends, and even coworkers and clients. In contrast, men are more likely to take a goal-oriented approach, focusing on their own career progression and keeping work and personal life more separate, often supported by women handling the complex interactions between work and their private lives.

This conclusion is corroborated by Sagnier & Morell (2019) research that shows that, in Portugal, women with children work six extra hours per day at home compared to men, and women without children work three and a half additional hours at home more than men without children as well. Similarly, McKinsey & Co. (2021) study found that during events such as the

Covid-19 outbreak, the added workload on women made balancing work and family needs increasingly difficult. The research showed that 18% of women with children of all ages considered leaving the workforce, compared with just 10% of men, and among parents with children under ten, 23% of women reported considering this option, compared with 13% of men. In contrast, men and women without children responded at the same rate of 10%.

So, if women decide to leave their jobs and take a career break, this decision represents long-term consequences, since it is not easy to return to the workforce afterwards (Hewlett & Luce, 2005). Recruitment after a career break is becoming more normal in certain countries, such as USA, Britain, and India as a way to tap into additional sources of qualified human resources, but there is still a long path to go to be normalized, as demonstrated on Weisshaar (2018) research. In this study, the author showed that it is even more difficult for someone who took a career break, compared to the unemployed to return to the labour market. The main reasons relate to the breach of the ideal worker norm, which is defined as someone with a high commitment level to work compared to other parts of their lives, in other words, who has no outside obligations or distractions, is available at all times, and is fully dedicated to their work (Acker, 1990) - making it harder for her or him to fulfil the expectations for work-family balance.

Additionally, Gupta et al. (2025) described the temporal career script as the idea that careers should move forward without breaks and that employees should always be present at work. Therefore, when people, especially women, take long career breaks, they fall out of step with these expectations and face challenges returning because organizations value constant presence and continuity.

Furthermore, Weisshaar (2018) states that career breakers are viewed as less reliable and less deserving of a job than an unemployed person. Furthermore, Weisshaar (2018) claims that the outcomes of two theories negatively affect both an unemployed person and a career breaker. The first one, Becker´s (1964) skill deterioration theory, which explains that employees´ skills degrade if they are not continuously used or updated, making them less competitive in the job market over time compared to other applicants that have not stopped to learn and developing their skills to maintain their employability and economic value. The second theory, signalling theory, states that career breaker *Curriculum Vitae*, cover letter, and interviews convey a message to organizations/employers that can be used to assess fit, qualification, and motivation of candidates (Celani & Singh, 2011). This assessment can be done based on stereotypes and preconceptions that companies have, and can influence hiring

decisions. The perceived competence in the case of a career breaker, as demonstrated in the résumé signalling theory in Weisshaar´s (2018) research was analysed as worse than the unemployment scarring signal from an unemployed person´s *curriculum vitae*. Another interesting insight from this research was that the effects of a career break depend on the competitiveness of the labour market, having a higher impact on competitive markets and almost no effect on less competitive job market contexts. In other words, in a high job-seeker market, employers are not keen on hiring career break women; however, in less competitive job markets, career breakers' résumés are treated like other employed résumés.

Extensive research has focused on career breaks or career hiatuses, particularly on the impact of women having children, whether they continue working or leave the workforce to care for their child, leading to what is often referred to as the Motherhood Penalty (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Pedulla, 2016), which in this case is considered the wage, pension and/or opportunities penalty women have after having a child. The Economist´s (2024) 134 countries/ global report used a slightly different Motherhood Penalty definition: "the average amount that a woman's probability of finding employment decreases over the ten years following the birth of her first child". This report concluded that the impact of parenthood on work varies greatly throughout nations: 80% of the difference in labour force participation between men and women in wealthy countries can be attributed to women leaving the workforce after having their first child. In comparison, motherhood only accounts for roughly 10% of the difference in the poorest countries. In 2024, the Portuguese motherhood penalty was about 22%, with the employment gap between women and men being 25%. From those, 33% is explained by women having children. In comparison, the gap in the USA is about 24% and 75% is explained by women having children. The consequences of a career break in women´s careers and lives are still not thoroughly analysed, but for sure, as mentioned by Hewlett & Luce (2005), the longer women stay out of the workforce, the higher the penalty they have.

When personal life stabilizes, e.g., children grow older and/or elderly family members do not require more assistance, most women decide to opt into the workforce (Cabrera, 2007). In other words, women decide to re-enter the labour market. However, choosing to rejoin the workforce and being able to return are two different things. Research from various regions (for example: the USA and the UK) demonstrates that many women who want to resume their professional careers after taking a career break encounter obstacles to return to the labour market (Gicheva & Keohane, 2018; Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019), and those who are able to do

so, frequently experience a decline in their status, income, and job opportunities level (Gupta et al., 2025; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Panteli, 2006, 2012; Hewlett & Luce, 2005).

Some women, as well as men, who decide to return to the workforce are called returnees or relaunchers. These concepts refer to experienced workers who, in the past, were mid- to senior-level professionals, then had an extended career break (more than a year) and wanted to return to work (iRelaunch, Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019). Most relaunchers take their career break to take care of their family members (e.g., children, parents, uncles, and sometimes themselves or to move abroad with their spouses, and when personal life stabilizes, most women decide to start working again.

Despite the impact of COVID, which has helped normalize career breaks, professionals who take longer breaks still struggle to re-enter the workforce. A longer time away from the labour market, especially more than two years, substantially reduces the ability to re-enter the workforce (McCrary-Ruiz-Esparza, 2023). The official launch of returnship programs in 2008 by Goldman Sachs started to bring some light at the end of the tunnel for returnees, who are composed mainly of women (Cohen, 2012).

1.4. Aim and overview of the thesis

To start balancing gender inside companies and therefore improve gender equality as a whole, Zimmerman and Clark (2016) suggest that two issues should be tackled. First, the number of women deciding to opt out must be reduced. Second, schemes to bring women back to work after a career break must be in place. Those schemes vary from career development and retraining workshops to placement schemes, postgraduate studying, mentoring, and reduced fees for society memberships and/or conferences (Panteli & Pen, 2010) and, more recently, tryouts (Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019). Tryouts for qualified career breaker are called return-to-work (RTW) or returnship (Cohen, 2012, 2021; Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019) or return-to-work externally provided (RTWE) (Cohen, 2012).

Research on women's career transitions and career integration phenomena has been conducted in different fields, such as human resources management, psychology, sociology, and management, for a long time, but it will continue to be worthwhile since every transition has distinct characteristics that call for a tailored research approach (Akkermans et al., 2024) and relatively little is known about the effects of the transition after a temporary career break to take care of the family (Weisshaar, 2018). Therefore, it is more challenging to implement labour-market measures to offset the drawbacks of those transitions.

Women opting out and opting in is an emerging research field, with many potential future research areas as demonstrated by Bian & Wang (2019) and Zimmerman & Clark (2016). Research on the different strategies and schemes for opting-in, even in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and India markets, is emerging, but, to the best of our knowledge, almost no research on RTWE programs and their impacts on women has been conducted.

RTWE can provide additional qualified labour to the whole economy, including Small and Medium Enterprises (SME), which are the economic base of many small-sized countries like Portugal, where SME represent 99,9% of the total number of companies in the country (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, PORDATA, 2022). Most qualified women can benefit from RTW/RTWE, depending on how these programs are developed and implemented. This thesis will analyse an RTWE to evaluate its potential benefits for supporting women's re-entry into the job market, particularly within SMEs, which are the backbone of the Portuguese and European economies.

The Portuguese RTWE to be studied, known as the Back-to-Market Program (BTM), is designed for women with educational backgrounds in management, economics, or engineering. The program provides career-break women with a new professional experience through participation in a strategic management consulting project. Researchers' proximity to the BTM, including access to its participants and outcome data, provides a unique opportunity to conduct an in-depth analysis of the program. For this reason, the present study concentrates on this particular RTWE program rather than alternative initiatives.

Moreover, while large corporations often have the capacity to operate RTW programs independently, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) typically do not. Consequently, SMEs are likely to benefit significantly from an expanded pool of talent ready to re-enter the workforce.

With those issues in mind and a focus on the Portuguese job market, a main research question (RQ) emerged to understand the phenomena of women returnees and RTWE: How can we match the needs of SMEs (the backbone of the Portuguese economy) for qualified resources with qualified career-break women who want to return to work? The main research can then be split into three research questions:

- RQ1: What are the factors related to women´s ability to return to the job market after a career break?

- RQ2: How can an externally provide Return to Work program (RTWE) enhance women´s ability to relaunch and re-enter the workforce?
- RQ3: How do small/ medium enterprises (SME) perceive the value of RTWE when assessing career break women applying for a job?

This thesis was conducted in three main phases, starting with a literature review to address the first research question: the push and pull factors influencing women's decisions to re-enter the workforce. Subsequently, a qualitative study explored the perspectives of women who had taken a career break and participated in a Portuguese RTWE program, exploring the factors that led them to exit employment, their motivations for returning, and the extent to which participation in the RTWE facilitated their reintegration. Finally, a complementary quantitative study examined Portuguese SMEs' perceptions of experienced women with and without a career break as a potential source of recruitment talent, and their views on RTWE initiatives. For the different studies of this thesis, a methodology chapter was developed to outline how the research was designed, how data were collected, and how they were analysed. The objective was to show that the chosen methods were appropriate for answering each research question and to ensure the study could be understood and replicated by others. The findings from all these analyses provided the rationale for a comprehensive conclusion to the main research question.

Chapter 2: A Literature Review on Push and Pull Factors of Women Returnees

2.1 Introduction

Increasing complexity is shaping contemporary careers, particularly for women who take a career break and return to the workforce. During their professional careers, women have higher drop-out rates, mainly due to family, child, or elderly care; furthermore, they have more difficulty returning to the workforce even if they are highly qualified, making the future of gender equality in the workplace a continuing challenge. Thus, encouraging women to re-enter the workforce after a career break makes sense from a gender perspective and can also add value to the economy by providing qualified and diverse talent to companies (large ones or small- to medium-sized enterprises, or SMEs). Additionally, this encouragement can have short- to medium-term positive effects on career-break women who would like to return to the workforce, as well as long-term effects due to lower or no pension contributions during their career break.

This study aims to identify the push and pull factors affecting women´s ability to return to the job market after a career break. The research is qualitative and exploratory, based on a literature review.

2.2 Methodology

The initial literature review was based on keywords used in the databases (Web of Science, b-on, and Google Scholar): “returnship, return-to-work program, career break, opt-in, and opt-out". The inclusion of studies was guided by predefined criteria, namely topical relevance to returnship programs, return-to-work initiatives, career breaks, or related labour market reintegration mechanisms. Keywords “women/females” were omitted since these programs are primarily focused on women, so the use of these words would be redundant.

Initially, 56 research articles, books, and reports were reviewed. As this is an emerging field, the aim was to capture a broad overview of existing research in this arena across different countries, including studies not published in top-tier journals. Therefore, a range of sources was considered at this stage, such as academic articles, books, institutional reports, and relevant online publications. Subsequently, stricter selection criteria were applied by including only academic journal articles ranked at least Q3 in the Scimago Journal Rank. This ensured both a

broad scholarly perspective and the inclusion of peer-reviewed research. Additionally, only full-text publications written in English were considered.

After reading the first set of papers, an additional 19 research papers were selected based on their citations in the reference section of the first set of papers. This snowball sampling approach (backward reference searching) allowed the identification of further relevant studies. This process led to a second round of paper reviews. Ultimately, the analysis included 48 documents (27 academic papers, eight reports, three books, and ten online articles), and 20 papers were discarded from the conclusions, primarily due to low relevance for the topic. All documents were screened based on abstracts and full texts, and those not substantially contributing to the research focus were excluded. This initial literature review contributed to the publication of the paper entitled "External Return-To-Work Programs Impact On Women Relauching Their Careers" (Ferrez Frisch et al., 2024), which abstract can be found in Appendix A1. An updated review of the initial literature led to the inclusion of five additional academic articles published in 2024 and 2025. While no strict temporal boundaries were imposed, the update prioritized recent, high-quality contributions in line with the original inclusion criteria.

Building on the findings of the two subsequent studies, *Career Breaks and a RTWE Program: Insights from Women Participants* and *Women Returnees and a RTWE Program: Insights from SMEs,* the literature was further expanded to deepen the interpretation of key results. This phase placed particular emphasis on themes such as ageism, skill deterioration, and the relationship between mental health and work, thereby strengthening the conceptual basis of the analysis.

The identification of alternative terminology for returnships (e.g., "try-out" programs) in non-academic sources revealed gaps in the initial literature search and prompted a more systematic expansion of the review. In response, stricter quality criteria were applied, prioritizing peer-reviewed journals ranked at least Q3 in the Scimago Journal Rank. Consequently, over the subsequent eighteen months, the review was significantly extended to include an additional 25 academic papers, alongside ten institutional reports and 24 online articles/ web sources.

2.3 Push and pull factors of returnees´ opt-in decisions

If a person wants to relaunch their career and re-enter the labour market, what is needed? The term "ability to relaunch" is commonly used by companies working with RTW to

define the skills and competencies required to relaunch a career. Still, no literature was found that combined the factors that enable relaunching into a single construct. Some of those factors include employability, self-esteem, and job search behaviour (Cohen, 2016; McArdle et al., 2007). Employability is a psycho-social construct comprised of three dimensions: adaptability, career identity, and human and social capital (Fugate et al., 2004).

Adaptability refers to the willingness and ability to change behaviours, feelings, and thoughts in response to environmental demands (Fugate et al., 2004) and is a key factor in career success (O'Connell et al., 2008). Individual adaptability is influenced by some factors, mainly education, gender (women are more adaptable than men), and management support (O'Connell et al., 2008).

Career identity represents the way individuals define themselves in the career context and can be conceptualized as a 'cognitive compass' used to navigate career opportunities (Fugate et al., 2004), the "knowing why" (Defillippi and Arthur, 1994). The process of transforming one's identity, including personal traits, abilities, and social presentation, into professional capital that builds a unique and trustworthy personal brand, strategically enhancing employability, is known as identity capitalization. By investing in their identity, individuals can create opportunities, secure recognition, and navigate career transitions more effectively (Mao & Shen, 2020), which is really relevant for relaunchers.

Human capital encompasses the "knowing-how" competencies: career-related knowledge, skills, and abilities gained through occupational learning and professional development (Berntson et al., 2006; Defillippi & Arthur, 1994; Fugate et al., 2004). Human capital helps employability by enhancing an individual's attractiveness to the labour market through investments in education (higher levels of education, such as university degrees, are positively related with employability, as they increase career opportunities and income potential), competence development (training and skill development improve job performance and promotion chances), and job tenure (work experience and seniority can enhance employability due to accumulated skills and expertise, although its impact may vary depending on individual circumstances) (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994). These factors make individuals more competitive in the labour market and contribute to their career success, higher wages, promotions, and improved prospects for acquiring new employment. These investments in human capital align with the human capital theory, which emphasizes that individuals can enhance their employability through self-development and career advancement efforts (Berntson et al., 2006; Fugate et al., 2004).

While human capital comes from the own individual, social capital comes from relationship with other people (Peeters et al., 2019). Therefore, social capital reflects the "knowing-whom" dimension, the goodwill and resources embedded in social networks, which provide access to information, influence, and career opportunities (Peeters et al., 2019, Fugate et al., 2004; Defillippi and Arthur, 1994).

Mruk (2006) defines self-esteem in four different ways. Firstly, related to a certain attitude to someone or something, which has a positive or negative cognitive, emotional, and behavioural reaction (e.g., the posture that a woman may have during an interview, which can be determinant of the success of obtaining employment). Secondly, it relates to the difference between what a person would like to be and what she or he thinks of herself or himself; the greater the difference, the lower the self-esteem. Thirdly, the psychological responses (feeling and affective-based) a person has toward oneself rather than attitudes alone. These responses can be positive vs. negative, or accepting vs. rejecting. Fourthly, and finally, the approach emphasized that self-esteem is a function or component of personality. In this context, self-esteem is viewed as a component of the self-system, often involving motivation, self-regulation, or both.

Job search behaviour, as described by Manroop and Richardson (2015), is a multidimensional construct encompassing three primary domains: effort and intensity, quality of actions, and persistence. Effort and intensity refer to the drive and regularity with which an individual engages in job search activities over time. The quality of actions highlights the effectiveness and sophistication of specific behaviours, such as preparing résumés, networking, making direct employer contacts, and participating in interviews. Persistence reflects the sustained determination job seekers display throughout their search, especially when faced with obstacles or setbacks.

If a returnee possesses these previous characteristics, is she able to opt in? No. These characteristics influence the likelihood of employment outcomes, but are not a guarantee of a positive result since other factors will push and pull these career-breaker women back into the workforce. Still, the overall message when someone decides to opt out is clear: "Off-ramps are around every curve in the road, but once a woman has taken one, on-ramps are few and far between—and extremely costly." (Hewlett and Luce, 2005).

Returnees face five different PUSH factors that will help them opt-in, namely corporate and other organizations' support, financial stability, personal fulfilment, personal life stability, and professional identity/ growth. These factors are described in Table 3:

Table 3

Main Returnee Push Factors

Main PUSH Factors	Examples
Corporate and other organizations support	Corporate support from return-to-work agencies that offer a step-by-step guide to look for a job, a job board of open positions on partner companies´ returnship programs and/or job fairs to present those career breakers to companies with this type of programs. (Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019); Other organizations programs that support women in their path after deciding to opt-back-in (Panteli & Pen, 2010); Existence of role models that went successfully through the same process (Cohen, Recognize women´s work and accomplishments (Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Hewlett, Sherbin & Forster, 2010); Organizations can encourage continuous networking by sponsoring professional conference participation and planning networking activities (Offermann et al., 2020).
Financial stability	Financial reasons (need to earn an income, become self-independent and/or concern about a potential pension deficit impact) (Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett et al., 2010; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Javornik, 2017; McGrath et al., 2005; PWC & Women Returners, 2016).
Personal fulfilment	Desire for an intellectual stimulation (Cabrera, 2007; McGrath et al., 2005); Desire to increase self-worth and confidence through their profession and receive prestige and stature in the community (Hewlett et al., 2010; Hewlett & Luce, 2005); Enjoy working (Hewlett et al., 2010; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; McGrath et al., 2005) Give back to society and their community (Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Hewlett, Sherbin & Forster, 2010); Knowledge that they stayed up-to-date with developments in the industry and technology by working on projects, volunteering, attending conferences, staying involved in professional groups, or enrolling in classes during their career breaks (Cabrera, 2007).
Personal life stability	Caring for family members is no longer required/ family stabilized (i.e. children or elderly parents) (Cabrera, 2007); Return home after a spouse's job relocation (Cabrera, 2007); Support from family and friends to opt-in (Offermann et al., 2020; Singh & Vanka, 2021).
Professional identity/ Growth	An attractive offer that came up (Cabrera, 2007); Craving to reconnect with people they respect and work within a team (Hewlett et al., 2010; Hewlett & Luce, 2005); Willingness for career advancement, including training (most self-employed people don´t take care of their own training and developing needs, even when they know what they need to train…) (Cabrera, 2007); Establish incentive programs within the firms that are focused on results and performance—not just on face-time, so that women see that they have a real chance for growth (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005)

Source: Data collected by the author

At the same time, these women still face an additional eight barriers (pull factors) to come back, namely confidence issues, corporate lack of support, current economy,

discrimination and bias, financial stability, networking challenges, personal life stability, and work-life balance concerns. These factors are described in Table 4:

Table 4

Main Returnee Pull/ Barrier Factors

Main PULL Factors	Examples
Confidence issues	Lack of professional self-belief (Gicheva & Keohane, 2018; McGrath et al., 2005; PWC & Women Returners, 2016); Psychological difficulty on her ability to balance work-household responsibilities(Panteli & Pen, 2010); Uncertainty about their career objectives/ interest (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012).
Corporate lack of support	Lack of knowledge/ transparency of which company job vacancies have part-job opportunities (Gicheva & Keohane, 2018; PWC & Women Returners, 2016); Recruiters showed little interest in or effort to assist (McGrath, Driscoll & Gross, 2005); A sense of not having enough opportunities for progress inside different organization, mainly if working not in full time working arrangements and a top level that a women can achieve "glass ceiling" (Cabrera, 2007; Gicheva and & Keohane, 2018); Lack of many role models in top positions (Cabrera, 2007);
Current economy	Potential currently difficult economy situation (Cabrera, 2007) or changes in the market conditions (McGrath, Driscoll & Gross, 2005; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012).
Discrimination and bias	Prejudice against older age - ageism (McGrath, Driscoll & Gross, 2005; Cabrera, 2007; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012); Bias against career breakers that they are less competent than someone is currently working (Gicheva & Keohane, 2018; Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019). Stigma starts from the moment that a career gap is seen in the CV, mainly when period out of the workforce are longer (Cabrera, 2007; McGrath et al., 2005). "You get 100 applicants, and often those with a career break go to the bottom of the pile or off to the side. Either consciously or unconsciously, there are biases" (Agovino, 2019); Risk averse mentality due to widespread perception that even for high performance women, career break erode their skills and knowledge, mainly on technological and industry trends (Cabrera, 2007; Gicheva & Keohane, 2018; McCrary-Ruiz-Esparza, 2023; McGrath et al., 2005; Pedulla, 2016b; PWC & Women Returners, 2016) Previous experience with discrimination against women in the workplace (Cabrera, 2007); Disrespect for potential company culture (mostly masculinity organizational cultures, which involves high competitive level, zero-sum views of power and hierarchical relations) (Cabrera, 2007).
Financial stability	Quality, affordability and convenience of childcare (Gicheva & Keohane, 2018) or other family care requirements (e.g. for elderly).
Networking challenges	Lack or reduced access to professional network that will help to find a job and when starting at new position (Cabrera, 2007; McGrath et al., 2005; PWC & Women Returners, 2016); Requirement of networking, when events for networking are in general later the day making it more challenging to balance work-family lives (Offermann et al., 2020).
Personal life stability	Need for continuing to care for family members, ie. children, elderly, etc (Cabrera, 2007).
Work-life balance concerns	Lack of companies´ flexible working conditions (hybrid or online) or part time/ flexible roles in quality roles (Cabrera, 2007; Gicheva & Keohane, 2018; Offermann et al., 2020; PWC & Women Returners, 2016) resulting women accepting under skill work positions with lower salaries to have those working arrangements; Lack of family support (McGrath, Driscoll and & Gross, 2005).

Source: Data collected by the author

To overcome some of the barriers described in Table 3, Jenkins (2006) argues that lifelong learning, defined as acquiring skills as an adult, significantly increases the likelihood

that women currently out of the labour market will move into paid work. Therefore, return-to-work schemes that help women obtain some qualification during the career break are an essential step towards a positive impact on a potential employer's evaluation of this returnee (Panteli, 2012).

2.4 Discussion

The findings of this study show that women's decisions to re-enter the labour market are shaped by a combination of push and pull factors.

Over the past 30 years, traditional professional career paths (typically pursued within a single organization through a sequence of hierarchical advancements) have been largely replaced by more flexible models such as boundaryless, post-corporate, protean, and kaleidoscope careers (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994; Hall, 2004; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Perperl & Baruch, 1997). These contemporary frameworks offer greater flexibility across the lifespan of one's career and place stronger emphasis on individual agency or self-directed career development and decision-making. Such self-directed actions can be shaped by pull factors (positive influences) as well as barriers (negative influences), making re-entry more complex. The purpose of this study was to examine the push and pull factors identified in the literature that influence women's decisions to re-enter the labour market.

On one hand, the study identified five key push factors that support women's return to work, particularly those related to support and stability. For example, a stable personal life and corporate and other organizational support can make re-entry more achievable (Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Offermann et al., 2020; Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019). In addition, psychological and motivational factors, such as the need for personal fulfilment, professional identity/growth and need for financial stability also play an important role (Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett et al., 2010; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; McGrath et al., 2005).

On the other hand, career break women face eight barriers (pull factors) that can limit their ability to return to the labour market. At the individual level, confidence issues, the need for personal life stability, work-life balance, and financial stability were identified as critical barriers (Cabrera, 2007; Gicheva & Keohane, 2018; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; McGrath et al., 2005; Offermann et al., 2020; Panteli & Pen, 2010; PWC & Women Returners, 2016). At the structural level, barriers such as limited networking opportunities, discrimination and bias, lack of organizational support, and broader economic conditions can further complicate women´s re-entry (Agovino, 2019; Cabrera, 2007; Gicheva & Keohane, 2018; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012;

McCrary-Ruiz-Esparza, 2023; McGrath et al., 2005; Offermann et al., 2020; Pedulla, 2016; PWC & Women Returners, 2016; Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019).

Taken together, these findings suggest a dynamic interplay in which push factors create readiness for re-entry, while barriers influence how feasible it is for women to return to work. Overall, this shows that women returnees´ decisions are not based only on personal choice, but are also shaped by wider organizational and labour market conditions.

2.5 Limitations and future research

Understanding the factors that influence women's return to the labour market enables new research into how, if any, of these factors differ across regions and age groups. It also opens opportunities to explore RTW and RTWE programs as strategies to mitigate some of the barriers found and support women re-entering the workforce. Furthermore, it raises the question of how companies of different sizes might support these women in relaunching, and whether using RTW and RTWE helps women resume their careers and expand the available talent pool for various companies in the labour market.

Chapter 3: Career Breaks and a Portuguese RTWE Program: Insights from Women Participants

3.1 Introduction

After taking time away from their professional lives to care for family members, many career break women and men choose to return to the workforce. There are many return-to-work schemes to help them re-enter the job market when they decide to do so. These schemes act as a "bridge" for the sharing of knowledge and offer the participants in the process opportunities for learning and growth (Panteli, 2012). Those schemes vary from career development and retraining workshops, placement schemes (i.e., outplacement), postgraduate studying, mentoring, and reduced fees for society memberships and/or conferences (Panteli & Pen, 2010) and more recently, Return to Work/ Returnship (Cohen, 2012, 2021) or Return to work externally provided a type of tryout.

A tryout is a hiring arrangement to select candidates for full-time positions (Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019). Tryouts typically run for weeks or months, and selected candidates are given the chance to perform job-related tasks within the organization and demonstrate their competencies and skills alongside other regular company employees before being selected as a regular full-time employee. Modern-day tryouts are also called alternative hiring arrangements and can be split among four different types: first, internships for early-career professionals (mainly college-educated workers); second, temp-to-perms for temporary workers (mid-to-low wage workers); third, returnships or return-to-work programs (RTW) for mid-career professionals or experienced workers who have taken a career break; and fourth, contract-to-hire for specialists and mid-to-high-wage workers. Sterling and Merluzzi (2019) conceptualized tryouts as alternative hiring arrangements within organizations and identified three fundamental dimensions that characterize the tryout experience. Firstly, the relational dimension addresses interactions among tryout workers, regular employees, and the organization as a whole, emphasizing how these relationships can affect integration, socialization, and the evaluation of both parties during the tryout period. Secondly, the psychological dimension, which describes the tryout worker's status as an outsider with the potential to join the organization, highlights the uncertainty and subjective nature of the tryout period, which can affect perceptions of belonging and future opportunities. Thirdly, the economic dimension refers to the financial aspects associated with tryouts, such as

compensation and legal protections stipulated by the fixed-term contract, which shape both the security and value of the tryout for the individual. One of the key advantages of all forms of tryouts for employers is the fact that soft skills can be evaluated during that tryout period since it is more difficult to evaluate that through the traditional hiring process.

RTW a short-term program (three to six months) tryouts that are run mainly through large multinational corporations (Cohen, 2012, 2021) and some public agencies (e.g., Utah Return, 2022). RTW is designed for experienced professionals (with experience of three years or more of experience) who have been on a career break, typically for at least one and a half years. Women from diverse backgrounds join these programs, but most of their education is in information technology, engineering, and management. RTW started in the USA with UBS and Lehman Brothers in 2005–2006 and spread to other companies in the USA, and after 2014, some multinational corporations launched programs in the UK, Switzerland, northern Europe, and India (Timewise and Women Returnees, 2018). RTW mainly focused on women who would like to return to the job market, but sometimes, men can also take advantage of the returnee track. In 2017, the British government launched a financial incentive program to promote RTW in the public and private sectors (Burt, 2018; Timewise and Women Returnees, 2018) that helped not only fulfil market-qualified labour vacancies, but also reduce the unemployment among women who decided to take a career break to take care of family members (Javornik, 2017). Returnships have been growing at a fast pace; for example, in the UK, the number of returnships increased from three programmes in 2014 to 53 in 2019, with 83 employers in a variety of industries, including media, telecom, tech, local and federal government, law, investment management, insurance, consultancy, transport, engineering, and construction. RTW participants' conversion rate for full-time positions is exceptionally high (50-80%). One of the main reasons for this conversion rate is “returnships 'de-risk' the hiring decision to the extent managers consider engaging with people coming off a career break as a high-risk proposition” (O’Donnell, 2018). Returnship programs have a specific application process, onboarding and introduction sessions, technical training, professional development, and exposure to senior management, mentoring, and, in general, are paid with the potential for definitive hiring at the end. Work during this period in general relates to a specific project, but recently, direct hires for regular job assignments are being done (Cohen, 2012, 2015, 2021). RTW gives some time for returnees to adapt to the workplace, and most programs run with cohorts of five to 25 people.

Return-to-work externally provided (RTWE) differs from RTW due to three characteristics: firstly, RTWE is run by an educational institution (Cohen, 2012; Shaw et al., 1999) such as Pace Law School (Cohen, 2012) or Universidade Católica Portuguesa (2024) or by a non-profit organization that supports career breakers. This means that the short-term skill-building program involves an academic component, such as information technology, job search techniques, and confidence-building building (Shaw et al., 1999; Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2024), as well as real-world work experience in partner companies for participants´ personal and professional development. Secondly, participants in RTWE are not necessarily paid (but they don´t pay to participate in the program). Thirdly, at the program's end, there is no option to be hired by the program's provider, but potential partners where the project is being done can hire and/or recommend participants. Both RTW and RTWE allow companies (sponsors and/or partners) to know the professional on the job (leading to more informed decisions and higher motivation to hire those candidates afterwards) compared with only interview sets defined in the normal hiring process (where returnees, in general, lag behind other candidates).

Different academic research has been conducted on RTW (Cohen, 2012, 2015, 2021; Kaushiva and Joshi, 2020), but not so much on RTWE. Still, there is some preliminary research exploring this program's results such as the successful British RTWE funded by the European Union for women to return to job market after career break (Shaw et al., 1999) and a short-term skill building programs from Universities like Pace Law School (Cohen, 2012) showing that RTWE helped women opt in and be happy with their new roles even though they were not necessarily at a level commensurate with their qualifications and experience, nor in their original professional area. Additionally, Panteli and Pen (2010) have evaluated another European funded program to women returnees. This program encompassed different return-to-work schemes (mentoring cycles, career workshops, job-based training – placement, funded postgraduate studies and training courses and other professional qualifications) and the authors evaluated the program focusing on the beneficiary perspective, in other words, the women returnees' perspective. Panteli and Pen (2010) used two dimension to evaluate the impact of this European Funded program on returnees: first, how returnees view the benefits of return-to-work schemes in terms of meeting their needs, in other words, if those schemes were relevant and useful by women returners. Secondly, how accessible and straightforward the support was for returnees. An important aspect on the evaluation was subjectivity in returnees feedback, which was expected based on individual perceptions, but evaluating common patterns in

feedback reports across different returnees helped identify impacts that extend beyond individual circumstances and therefore a final conclusion could be drawn. The three studies demonstrated that RTWE was the catalyst for their return to the labour market (Cohen, 2012; Panteli & Pen, 2010; Shaw et al., 1999).

3.2 Methodology

To answer the second research question of how can an externally provide Return to Work program (RTWE) enhance women´s ability to relaunch and re-enter the work force, it was selected a RTWE program in Lisbon (Portugal) called Back-to-Market Program (BTM). This project was selected using convenience sampling, as the author is directly involved in its development, allowing for ease of access to data and contextual understanding. BTM is run by Universidade Católica Portuguesa at the Católica Lisbon School of Business & Economics. It started in 2020 and until this study is written it had run seven editions with four to six women in each edition. The researchers' close association with the BTM provided direct access to its participants and outcome data, enabling an extensive and detailed evaluation of the program. Consequently, this study concentrates on this particular RTWE program in preference to other initiatives.

To determine the most appropriate method to answer this research question, a comparison of the key advantages of quantitative and qualitative approaches was conducted. Quantitative research is valuable for generating numerical findings that can be generalized and statistically tested. It typically involves large, structured samples and standardized procedures to measure "how many" or "how often", and to test specific hypotheses (Clark et al., 2021). Common methods include surveys with closed-ended questions and controlled experiments, which produce objective results through numerical data, statistics, and figures.

In contrast, qualitative research enables a deeper and more flexible understanding of people's experiences by collecting descriptive data such as words, narratives, and images. The method involves three main steps: data condensation, data organization and developing and validating the conclusions (Gioia et al., 2013; Miles et al., 2020). It relies on smaller, non-random samples and open-ended methods to explore meanings and to answer "why" and "how" questions in depth. Typically include interviews, focus groups, and observations, which generate more subjective insights expressed through themes and interpretations.

Since the BTM program was selected, which had a small total number of women participants for a quantitative study and insights could be taken through interviews, it was

decided to use a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews with all returners that participated in the BTM. The semi-structured interview script was designed to explore the push and pull factors that led women to take a career break and subsequently decide to opt back into the workforce. In addition, the script examined the reasons women chose to join the BTM program, as well as the program-related benefits and constraints they experienced while attempting to re-enter the job market. The script used for the interviews can be found on Appendix A2. A total of 31 women have participated in the BTM and 26 (or 84%) of them have accepted to be interviewed for this research.

3.2.1 Data Collection

All 26 interviews were conducted in Portuguese through Zoom. They were recorded and then the audio file was transcribed automatically with the support of the software Notta. After that, a manual transcript accuracy verification was done to each of the transcripts to guarantee precision in what was said during the interviews. Subsequently, people or companies´ names that could identify women interviewed and/or other people or companies mentioned during the interviews were changed in order to safeguard their identities. Afterwards, the corrected transcribed file was translated to English by Notta translator software, so that interviews can be read by other researchers non-Portuguese speakers if needed. Next, MAXQDA software, 2022 version, was used to code all interviews in Portuguese so that a qualitative analysis could be done. The reason to use the Portuguese file and not the English one, was that there were expressions used in Portuguese that could not be perfectly be translated to English by an automatic translator, such as “aceitar e engolir um sapo” which automatically was translated to “accept and swallow a frog” instead of the corrected translation “accept and swallow one's pride”.

3.2.2 Data Analysis: Coding

Data analysis included the development of a coding scheme (Campbell et al., 2013) based on different themes that were discussed during the interviews. For each main theme, first order codes were created which were aggregated on a second order coding (Magnani & Gioia, 2023). The coding system was subsequently discussed and finalized with the research team, after which, all interview transcripts were coded as described by the “An Overview of Eight Possible Analytical Moves” (Grodal et al., 2021). Three codes were dropped (I-B-4-Dissatisfaction with company´s job opportunities offered to this woman; III-E-12-Embarrassed/ shy to activate Network and VI-C-11- Recall business terminology), as no data

segments could be assigned to them. Therefore, these codes were not relevant for the present analysis. The final coding scheme, or coding frame, as referred to by (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020) consisted of 119 first-order codes (each supported by multiple interview segment examples), which were grouped into 35 second-order codes, and further organized under nine major themes as Magnani and Gioia (2023) suggested to show the research findings so that clarity, transparency, and trustworthiness were demonstrated.

Coded segments were then digitally translated into English. Each segment was individually reviewed to ensure the translations were accurate and that no expressions or subtle language were incorrectly translated or contained potential errors. Finally, qualitative analysis could be performed based on the results of MAXQDA.

To ensure the coding system was transparent and accurately applied to the full 1,053 segments, a intercoder reliability test was conducted using a second coder to code randomly selecting 177 segments (17% of total 1053 segment and between ten and 25% suggested by Campbell et al. (2013) and O'Connor & Joffe (2020)).

Using the proportionate agreement method, which calculates the agreement percentage of codes between two coders, the second coder was provided with these 177 segments and the list of all codes. The second coder independently coded the segments based on the code list. These results were then compared to the original codes assigned by the main researcher and a 91% agreement between the two coders was found. This satisfactory result confirmed reliability of reproducibility of coders, in other words, when different researchers code different interviews segments, they got to the same results and therefore coding scheme is reliable (Campbell et al., 2013; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

3.3 Back-to-Market Program Characterization

As RTW programs started to spread in Europe after 2014, some multinational corporation launched programs in the UK, Switzerland and northern European countries (Timewise & Women Returnees, 2018). To the extent of our knowledge, no programs in Portugal were launched of RTW or RTWE until 2020.

In 2020, Universidade Católica Portuguesa in Lisbon through its business school, Católica-Lisbon Business & Economics, launched the first Portuguese women return to work program externally provided called BTM - Program Back-to-Market (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2024). BTM is a free return to work externally provided program for career break

women with an undergraduate degree or post graduate degree in Management, Economics, Finances or Engineering. These women also had to have worked for more than ten years, mostly in management functions and had to have left the job market for more than a year in order to care for their families, no matter which main reason (e.g. children-care, elderly care). The program aims to restore these women's previous competencies, develop additional skills to boost their confidence in job interviews/ search, and support them in restarting their careers (on corporate world, social sector or creating their own business).

BTM is a university led program developed in partnership with corporate partners that offers women returnees the chance to work within a team in a strategic management consulting project for a corporate partner during three to four months in addition to benefiting from university professors training and coaching sessions during this period.

The BTM program consists of three parts: a theoretical part (through university lessons); the project phase and workshops (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2024). In addition to the previously mentioned parts, coaching sessions are held to help define individuals' career paths, exploring their interests and strengths, and providing guidance for professional direction. To promote information sharing there is an Alumni Group Network to share job opportunities, success stories and tips to be more effective in your job search. Furthermore, after workshop sessions, a network lunch in general is organized to increase network among participants. So far seven editions had been successfully completed. Components of BTM and consulting project topics for each edition of the program are described in Table 5.

Table 5

Components of the BTM Program

Category	Subcategory / Activity	Detail	Objective / Description
University lessons	Classes	Minimum of 10 classes	Teach issue analysis and other consulting frameworks, presentation skills, etc and follow up the project
Consulting Projects	Edition 1 (4 participants)	Development of company business plan	Practical consulting experience
	Edition 2 (4 participants)	Development of company business plan	Practical consulting experience
	Edition 3 (4 participants)	Development of a diversification strategy	Practical consulting experience
	Edition 4 (5 participants)	Maximization of retail profitability	Practical consulting experience
	Edition 5 (6 participants)	Group's strategic plan for innovation	Practical consulting experience
	Edition 6 (4 participants)	Development of a corporate strategic plan	Practical consulting experience
	Edition 7 (4 participants)	Development of potential strategies to attract and retain tech talent in Portugal	Practical consulting experience
Workshops offered to all women (before, during or after each edition)	I´m remarkable (Google, 2024)	Self-promotion training	Enhance self-promotion skills, and boost confidence in both personal and professional settings
	Labour Market	Market overview	Understand labour market conditions and identify more effective ways to seize its opportunities
	CVs and interviews	Application preparation	Improve résumés and interview performance
	LinkedIn	Profile optimization	Maximize effectiveness of personal LinkedIn page
	Network	Relationship-building strategies	Expand professional networks
	Corporate World Survival	Workplace skills	To equip participants with essential skills and strategies to navigate corporate challenges and manage workplace dynamics,
Coaching Sessions	Individual Coaching session	One-on-one sessions	Help define individuals career path, exploring their interests and strengths and providing guidance for professional direction
Alumni Group Network	Lunches	Post-workshop networking events	Strenghten participants connections
	WhatsApp Group	Online communication platform	Share job opportunities, success stories and job search hints

Source: Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2025

Different corporate partners financially support each edition of the program and assign company employees to follow up on the project and assist participants as needed. In return, the companies receive the results of the consulting project (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2022; Pinto, 2021). Those companies do not have an RTW but want to help women return to the workforce, aiming to promote gender equality and greater diversity in the corporate world.

The BTM begins with selecting potential relauncher candidates who apply for an edition of the program. All accepted women intended to relaunch their careers when they used for the program. Each edition has a group of four to six women, selected based on their background diversity, career break (minimum of one year), interest in opting in, and commitment to working in teams during the program (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2024).

After the team is selected and a partner company agrees to sponsor the team (financially and by providing an interesting project for returnees to work on), classes at the university begin. A minimum of 10 presential courses are supplied with extra online tutoring as needed. (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2022). Participants are taught issue analysis, various frameworks for solving client problems, presentation skills, negotiation, and client management. Additionally, participants work directly with the client every week, being challenged to present their objectives and conclusions along the way. On average, women allocate about two working days per week to this Program. The work can also involve interviewing and contacting various market players, potential or existing clients, and other stakeholders, thereby expanding participants' networks and confidence to return to the professional market.

This experience provides participants with recent, real professional expertise that they can write about in their *Curriculum Vitae* and discuss during interviews. Since a woman's career break could be many years-long (more than ten years), the intention with the consulting project is that they acquire recent experience, which can prove that their competence is still there (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2022). They can regain and update their skills quite quickly if given the opportunity.

In addition to the university lessons and consulting project, participants are invited to attend different workshops organized by the BTM management, such as job market overview

and its opportunities, how to create a better Curriculum Vitae, how to use social media platforms (i.e. LinkedIn) to look for a job and promote your competencies/ skills; and finally, networking and coaching (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2022). For those workshops, all alumni women from the program are invited. The alumni network of different editions of the program is incentivized through a social media group of these returners and lunches after each workshop. Through this WhatsApp group, new jobs and development opportunities are shared among members and individual achievements are celebrated, motivating each member not to give up. Furthermore, individual professional counselling and/or mentoring was given by the professors when participants felt it was important.

During the program's seven editions (until this research was conducted), stakeholders (academia, volunteers, and the private sector) joined forces to support the 31 women who participated. From this group, one participant dropped out due to difficulty with the required tasks. Seven participants left the program in the middle of the course since they found jobs that required them to start on short notice. The remaining 23 participants completed the classes and consulting project. Just one participant has not attended any workshop, but still finalized the consulting project; the remaining 30 women have participated in at least one workshop up to a maximum of seven.

BTM was chosen for this analysis not only because it is the first Portuguese RTWE, but also because it had been running for four years, providing program results, enabling interviews with participants, and facilitating the qualitative study.

3.4 Participants

So far, the BTM program had 31 participants and all were invited to be interviewed. Twenty-six agreed to participate in this research. At the time of their participation in BTM, the interviewed participants (P) ranged in age from 44 to 61, with an average of 51. All of them had a bachelor's degree, and 73% had a postgraduate degree (specialization or master's). These women are highly experienced, mostly managers or directors in male-dominant business environments, having worked an average of 23 years (minimum of 13 and maximum of 33), and their last position before their career break was in the corporate sector (73%) or self-employed (27%). This hiatus of unpaid full-time positions lasted an average of four years (ranging from one year to fifteen years). They were either married, with men typically in highly paid professional roles who could afford having just one source of income at home, or single/divorced with other means. Most of the women are mothers (81%) with a range of one

to five children. When these women decided to return to the job market, they were keen to resume paid employment. To avoid naming each interviewee, the women interviewed for this study will be referred to as participants: participant 1 (P1), participant 2 (P2), etc. A characterization of each interviewee and her career break is shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Characterization of participants and their career break

ID	Age	UG Degree	PG Degree	Work Exp. (Years)	Sector	Break (Years)	Worked ≤1 Year Post-BtM	Current Status
1	44	Yes	Yes	14	Corporate	9	No	Part-time
2	49	Yes	Yes	13	Corporate	14	No	No
3	61	Yes	Yes	33	Corporate	3	No	No
4	54	Yes	No	25	Corporate	4	Yes	Part-time
5	50	Yes	No	25	Corporate	4	No	No
6	44	Yes	Yes	20	Corporate	3	Yes	Full-time
7	47	Yes	No	18	Corporate	5	Yes	Part-time
8	54	Yes	Yes	25	Corporate	2	No	No
9	46	Yes	No	16	Self-employed	3	No	No
10	47	Yes	No	23	Corporate	1	Yes	Full-time
11	51	Yes	Yes	26	Corporate	4	No	No
12	60	Yes	Yes	33	Corporate	3	No	No
13	47	Yes	Yes	18	Self-employed	4	Part-time	Part-time
14	57	Yes	No	29	Corporate	6	No	No
15	59	Yes	Yes	37	Corporate	2	No	Part-time
16	48	Yes	No	17	Corporate	2	Yes	Full-time
17	51	Yes	Yes	24	Corporate	4	Part-time	Full-time
18	51	Yes	Yes	21	Corporate	7	Yes	Part-time
19	48	Yes	Yes	22	Corporate	1	Yes	Full-time
20	55	Yes	Yes	24	Corporate	2	Yes	Full-time
21	48	Yes	Yes	16	Self-employed	15	No	No
22	52	Yes	Yes	20	Self-employed	6	No	Part-time
23	55	Yes	Yes	30	Self-employed	1	Yes	Full-time
24	44	Yes	Yes	20	Corporate	2	Yes	Full-time
25	54	Yes	Yes	31	Corporate	2	Yes	Full-time
26	47	Yes	Yes	19	Corporate	1	Yes	Full-time

Note. UG = undergraduate; PG = postgraduate; Work Exp. = years of working experience prior to career break; "Worked ≤1 Year Post-BtM" indicates whether the participant resumed work within one year after BtM. Wording standardized for consistency.

Source: Data collected by the author

Of the total 26 interviewees, 14 (54%) women who participated in the BTM restarted their careers in different types of work within one year of BTM completion, and 12 have not. Of the 12, three decided not to look for a job after realizing it was not the right time to opt back in, mostly because they discovered during the program that family commitments were incompatible with the time required to return to work, 3 of them started to work afterwards Is important to note that BTM overall return to workforce results broken by age, indicate that is easier for younger women to opt back in: while 67% of women under 50 years of age were able to opt-back in within a year, only 43% of 50 or more years of age women were able to return to the workforce in the same period of time.

3.5 Results

The qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews began with the development of a coding system to group related topics discussed by participants. Although the findings will be presented in tables organized by main themes, second-order codes, and first-order codes, with corresponding participant quotes, the coding process was conducted in reverse order. Each segment was first grouped into first-order codes, which were then aggregated into second-order codes, ultimately leading to the identification of overarching themes.

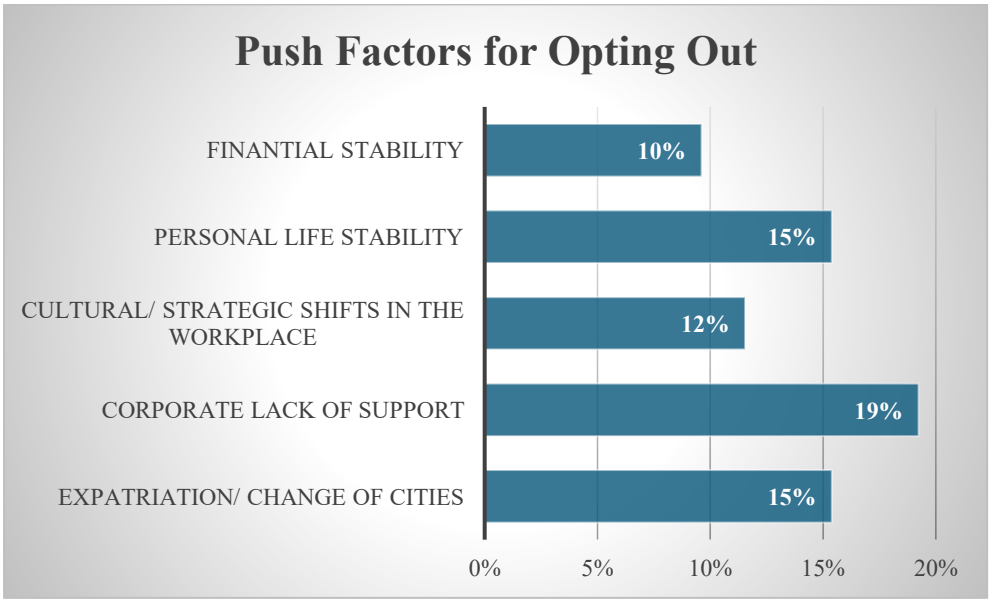
The interviews revealed ten key themes: push factors for opting out, pull factors for opting back in, push factors/ barriers for opting back in, how people learn about BTM, expectations on BTM, positive aspects of BTM, potential aspects to improve BTM, ideal work model, future career goals, and work sectors that women are working or intend to work.

3.5.1 Push factors for opting out

Starting with push factors for opting out, interviewers mentioned various reasons that push them out of their careers. The most mentioned factor, corporate lack of support, was a key driver for them to opt out, following personal life stability, expatriation of family or change of cities, cultural or strategic shifts in the workplace, and financial stability. A sense of importance among these five factors is evident in Chart 1. Note: the percentage presented on this chart and the following charts represent the number of answers that mentioned this factor over the total number of participants interviewed.

Chart 1

Level of importance of different push factors for opting out



Source: Data collected by the author

Analyzing in more detail each of the push factors for opting out, interviewees firstly described that expatriation or change to another city could be split in two main sub-themes: the opportunity for the family move abroad shown by "*My husband had the perspective of wanting to go abroad, and he has a completely different, intense job, we had recently had a daughter, this was the first consideration, I had to think first if sooner or later it was worth investing in a career here or abroad*." (Participant 21 or P21); and the second sub-theme was the company's request to move to another city when women could not move "*The proposal was made to move my functions to Porto, because once again, following new restructurings and a merger of group A with group B, they wanted to transfer the customer service functions to Porto. At the same time, the company was also beginning a layoff process in some areas. Well, I had personal concerns and didn't consider it as a possibility at the time, so I ended up becoming part of the layoff process that Portugal had started at that time*." (P26).

Secondly, interviewees mentioned that corporate lack of support related to dissatisfaction with company opportunities, such as "*They didn't offer a role in a different area, they were offering me the same role again, but in the other business unit, which was a business unit that the colleague who was there didn't get along very well with the person in charge*." (P2); or "*I was told about a position in the area of quality control, not quality management, which was of no interest to me*." (P19).

Thirdly, cultural and strategic shifts in the workplace could be split into dissatisfaction with the company´s new strategic directions, such as "*I didn't understand that they were good decisions. I didn't believe in them, and when the person doesn't believe they have two options, because the one who is in charge is the one who owns the company, so we have to comply. Therefore from the moment we share what we think and the decision is maintained, we have two options, or we do it or we leave*." (P14); and dissatisfaction with cultural changes in the company "*At a certain point in my life, I could no longer have an affinity of values in that company*." (P15).

Fourthly, personal stability referred to the need to give more time/ attention to children. "After working for 18 years in that company, I thought it was *time to dedicate myself 100% to motherhood and have availability for the family since I had this option.*" (P24). Or need to care for other family members "*Then, okay, during those years I also had assisted my father, my in-laws since I live with my in-laws.*" (P5). Or need for self-care (health/life management) such as "*I had a period when I was quite sick, I was operated and I really had to slow down. I spent a few months when I didn't do anything.*" (P19).

Finally, financial stability referred to family financial support, for example, one of the participants mentioned "*In my case there is a factor, let's see, I didn't depend on my income to live.*" (P8) and personal financial stability "*So, financially speaking, I had the financial possibility of to do that.*" (P24).

A summary of these push factors for opting out and examples of participants´ quotes for each sub-theme can be seen in Table 7.

Note for all tables in this chapter. First-order codes represent initial coding categories; second-order themes reflect higher-level thematic grouping.

Table 7

Push Factors for Opting Out and examples of participants´ quotes

Second order Coding	**First Order Coding**	**Examples Quote** (Participant)
Expatriation/ change of cities	Family move abroad	"My husband had the perspective of wanting to go abroad, and he has a completely different, intense job, we had recently had a daughter, this was the first consideration, I had to think first if sooner or later it was worth investing in a career here or abroad." (P21)
	Moving to another city in the country	"The proposal was made to move my functions to Porto, because once again following new restructurings and a merger of group A with group B, they wanted to transfer the customer service functions to Porto." (P26)
Corporate lack of support	Dissatisfaction with potential opportunities in the company	"They didn't offer a role in a different area, they were offering me the same role again, but in the other business unit, which was a business unit that the colleague who was there didn't get along very well with the person in charge." (P2) "I was told about a position in the area of quality control, not quality management, which was of no interest to me." (P19)
Cultural/ strategic shifts in the workplace	Dissatisfaction with company's new strategic directions	"I didn't understand that they were good decisions. I didn't believe in them, and when the person doesn't believe they have two options, because the one who is in charge is the one who owns the company, so we have to comply. Therefore from the moment we share what we think and the decision is maintained, we have two options, or we do it or we leave." (P14)
	Dissatisfaction with cultural changes in the company	"At a certain point in my life, I could no longer have an affinity of values in that company." (P15)
Personal life stability	Need to give more time/ attention to children	"After working for 18 years in that company, I thought it was a time to dedicate myself 100% to motherhood and have availability for the family since I had this option." (P24)
	Need to care for other family members	"Then, okay, during those years I also had assisted my father, my in-laws since I live with my in-laws." (P5)
	Need for self-care (health/life management)	"I had a period when I was quite sick, I was operated and I really had to slow down. I spent a few months when I didn't do anything." (P19)
Finantial stability	Family financial support	"In my case there is a factor, let's see, I didn't depend on my income to live," (P8)
	Personal financial stability	"So, financially speaking, I had the financial possibility of to do that." (P24)

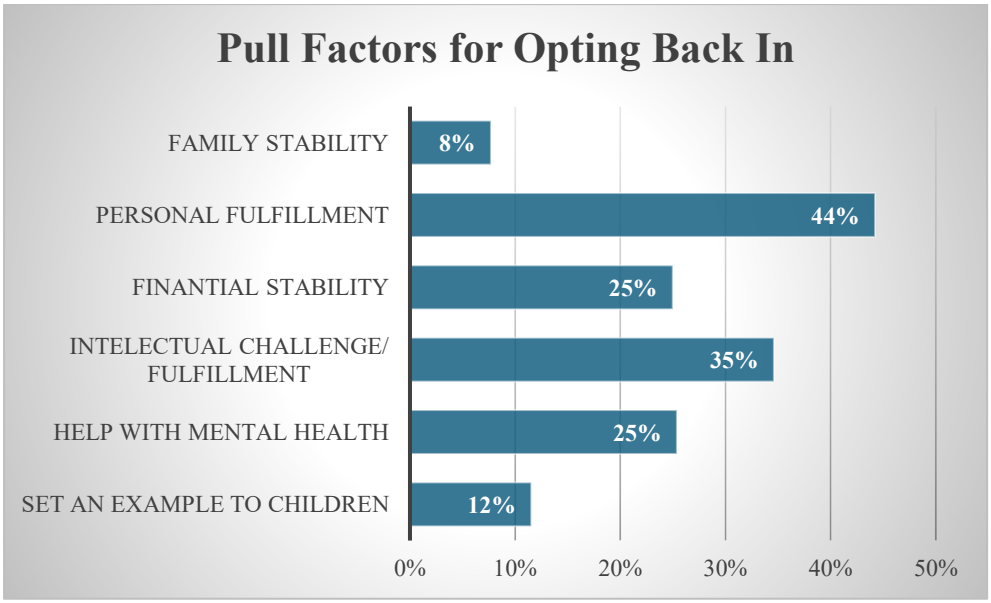
Source: Data collected by the author

3.5.2 Pull factors for opting back in

A second theme that was raised during the interviews was the pull factors for opting back in. For this theme, six factors were raised: family stability, financial stability, help with mental health, set an example to children, and then the two most relevant ones were personal fulfilment and intellectual challenge/ fulfilment. The comparative importance of these factors is shown in Chart 2.

Chart 2

Level of importance of different Pull factors for Opting Back In



Source: Data collected by the author

The six pull factors for opting back in were defined after interviewers discussed 15 sub-themes. Starting with the first factor, family stability, this can be broken down into three sub-themes. Firstly is that children no longer need less support as they grow older, as illustrated by a participant's comment: "*I've reached a point in my life when the kids are also older, they need less time.*" (P16), secondly is parents/ family no longer need any/so much support, demonstrated by "*I´ve already my life organized, my son is already an adult entering the job market, my husband also has a very stable situation.*" (P15) and thirdly is reestablishment of own health, shown by "*And then, I solved that situation in which in fact the doctor said that I had to stop for a while.*" (P23).

The second and most relevant factor for this theme consists of the other two sub-themes. The first one is satisfaction in contribution to a company/ society/ project illustrated by these quotes from participants "*One thing that gives me a lot of personal fulfilment is to see the projects happen, to see the people grow within the projects, to feel useful, let's say, to the company and to society and to feel that I help to do something constructive*." (P12) and "*I think it's essentially the part of personal fulfilment and being with a work activity that is important to me, having something to do more than being at home and dedicating myself to family, friends, myself, whatever, I feel a huge need to have a professional activity and to contribute to something else.*" (P25). The second one is satisfaction in working for a cause/ purpose, not

just home, which can be illustrated by "*Now I can combine work with projects and missions that make perfect sense to me. It's very different than working for a pure business.*" (P10).

The third factor financial stability that two sub-themes can be split, the first one relates to lack of family financial support "*Clearly, needed to ensure the sustainability of my family here and I needed to have income coming in.*" (P26) and the second one relates to the willingness to have financial independence, or as a interviewer said "*I miss the independence and independence of what? That the salary provides.*" (P1).

The fourth factor, intellectual challenge/ fulfilment, is also a quite relevant one for participants. is composed by two sub-themes. Number one, intellectual challenge shown in the comments "*The primary factor, as I said, is intellectual, because I think I still have brains and I have a lot to give.*" (P11) and "*I need to have my brain occupied, with activities that I need to think.*" (P6). Number two, enjoy learning which a simple quote goes directly to the point: "*What I value is being able to learn.*" (P15).

The fifth factor helps with mental health and combines five sub-themes. Number one is wanting to meet/ be with other people/ avoid loneliness, as pointed out by "*And I also think it's important even on a social level, because isolation at home is not good for the head. That's why I think work is also important for mental sanity.*" (P11). Number two is having routines outside the family sphere/ being busy, illustrated by "*I have a lot, a lot of motivation to keep working, a lot of desire to be busy.*" (P20). Number three, feeling valued/ recognized for what you do by friends/ society, illustrated by "*I know I do it, I know I can do it, that in what I put effort into, I can do it. I know what I've done well in my life, I know what I haven't done well. But that part of some recognition beyond my own feels good to me.*" (P4). Number four, feeling valued/recognized for what you do by friends/ society "*It's very good to have a recognition of when we work with a team, the ways of working, with the goals, the way to achieve them and to realize that the things I was, were on the right track, I really needed that reinforcement."* (P8). Finally, number six relates to wanting to stop being invisible at home, as another participant has mentioned, "*We are at home, we tend to be a little invisible. And sometimes that's what undermines confidence little by little. We don't even notice.*" (P4).

The sixth and last factor relates to setting an example to children that women and mothers can and do work. For example, a participant has mentioned "*I think it's important to set an example at home, for our children, to see their mother that also has a career. I feel like that's important, I don't want to say it is. For my daughter and son, I think it's important,*

because I don't see the difference between man and woman. I see the difference in people who want to be ambitious, want to work and want to do something in life. And that doesn't mean being a father or mother or a woman, it's an individual." (P11).

A summary of these pull factors for opting back in, along with examples of participants' quotes for each sub-theme, can be seen in Table 8.

Table 8

Pull factors for opting back in and examples of participants´ quotes

Second order Coding	**First Order Coding**	**Examples Quote** (Participant)
Set an example to children	Give an example to children that women/mothers work	"I think it's important to set an example at home, for our children, to see their mother that also has a career. I feel like that's important, I don't want to say it is. For my daughter and son, I think it's important, because I don't see the difference between man and woman. I see the difference in people who want to be ambitious, want to work and want to do something in life. And that doesn't mean being a father or mother or a woman, it's an individual." (P11)
Help with mental health	Want to meet/ be with other people/ avoid loneliness	"And I also think it's important even on a social level, because isolation at home is not good for the head. That's why I think work is also important for mental sanity." (P11)
	Have routines outside the family sphere/ being busy	"I have a lot, a lot of motivation to keep working, a lot of desire to be busy." (P20)
	Feeling valued/recognized for what you do by family	"I know I do it, I know I can do it, that in what I put effort on, I can do it. I know what I've done well in my life, I know what I haven't done well. But that part of some recognition beyond my own, feels good to me." (P4)
	Feeling valued/recognized for what you do by friend/society	"It's very good to have a recognition of when we work with a team, the ways of working, with the goals, the way to achieve them and to realize that the things I was, were on the right track, I really needed that reinforcement." (P8)
	Wanting to stop being invisible at home	"We are at home, we tend to be a little invisible. And sometimes that's what undermines confidence little by little. We don't even notice." (P4)
Intelectual challenge/ fulfillment	Intellectual challenge	"The primary factor, as I said, is intellectual, because I think I still have brains and I have a lot to give." (P11) "I need to have my brain occupied, with activities that I need to think." (P6)
	Enjoy learning	"What I value is being able to learn." (P15)
Finantial stability	Lack of family financial support	"Clearly, needed to ensure the sustainability of my family here and I needed to have income coming in." (P26)
	Wanting financial independence	"I miss the independence and independence of what? That the salary provides." (P1)
Personal fulfillment	Satisfaction in contributing to a company/ society/ project	"One thing that gives me a lot of personal fulfillment is to see the projects happen, to see the people grow within the projects, to feel useful, let's say, to the company and to society and to feel that I help to do something constructive." (P12) "I think it's essentially the part of personal fulfillment and being with a work activity that is important to me, having something to do more than being at home and dedicating myself to family, friends, myself, whatever, I feel a huge need to have a professional activity and to contribute to something else." (P25)
	Satisfaction in working for a cause/purpose, not just home	"Now I can combine work with projects and missions that make perfect sense to me. It's very different than working for a pure business." (P10)
Family stability	Children no longer need any/so much support	"I've reached a point in my life when the kids are also older, they need less time." (P16)
	Parents/family no longer need any/so much support	"I´ve already my life organized, my son is already an adult entering the job market, my husband also has a very stable situation." (P15)
	Restablishment of own health	"And then, I solved that situation in which in fact the doctor said that I had to stop for a while." (P23)

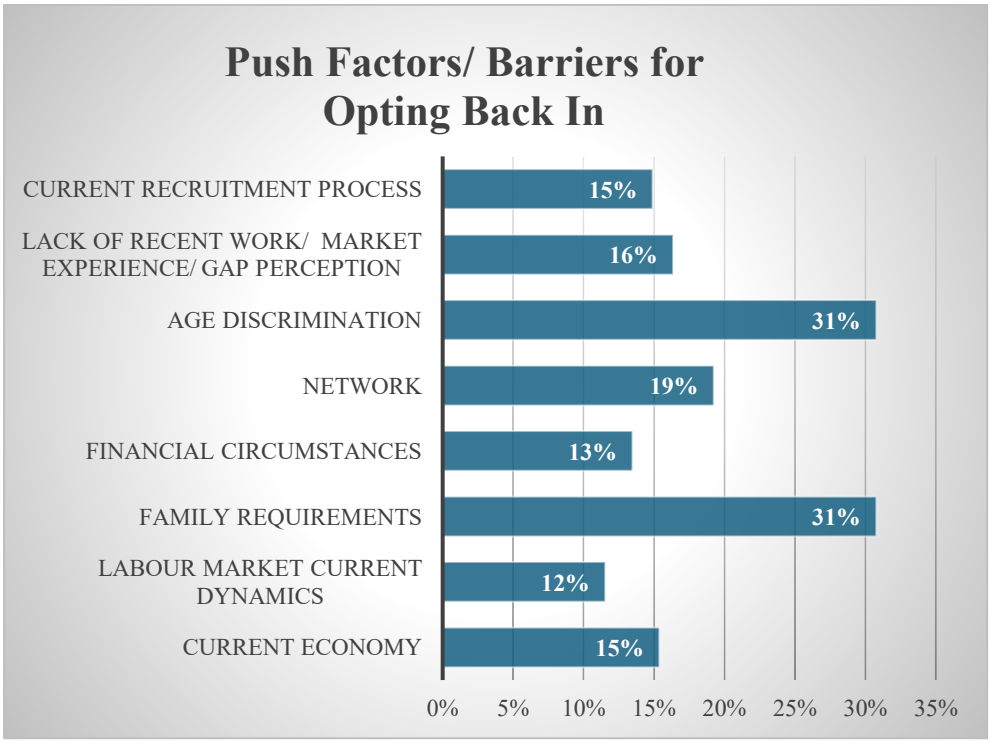
Source: Data collected by the author

3.5.3 Push factors or barriers for opting back in

The third theme presented in the interviews was the push factors or barriers that career-break women face when they opt back in. This theme was reasonably described during interviews, but factors were spread out among eight factors: age discrimination and family requirements were the two most relevant for interviewers, the other six were: current recruitment process, lack of recent work/ market experience/ gap perception, network, financial circumstances, labour market current dynamics and current economy. The comparative importance of these factors is shown in Chart 3.

Chart 3

Level of importance of different push factors/ barriers for opting back in



Source: Data collected by the author

The eight factors that compose the push factors/barriers to opting back in were organized into 25 sub-themes. Starting by the factor number one, current economy, this factor can be broken down into three sub-themes, first one is the macroeconomic situation of the country (e.g. post-Covid) that can be understood under a participant quota "*At the time, the idea was to have only one year off, but the pandemic happened, I spent two years or so without working.*" (P24). The second one relates to the change/ update in the industry/ sector women work, for example, "*As much as I had experience in digital marketing, because I also had training in digital marketing, I am not digital native."* (P20). And finally, the formal

educational that women have attended, currently is obsolete, which can be illustrated by an interviewer´s comment "*The fact is I have a course in an area that has changed in the last five years, I don't even say ten, five years has changed, ten, maybe ten has started, it has totally changed*," (P20).

Factor number two, labour market current dynamics, comprises three sub-themes. This quote can better explain the first one lack of adequate market opportunities "*Then there was a phase in which opportunities began to arise, but they were not opportunities that I wanted to grab, either because they were completely off from my profile, or because they were, that is, there were a lot of situations of call centers and administrative functions and very basic things for what I wanted to do and for what I like to do. And there were also situations in companies that could be a little more interesting, but that I also didn't think was the right thing for my know how and that I did well, but also, of course, it was nothing that also excited me a lot, but always very few opportunities, despite the fact that I made a great effort on job searching.*" (P25). The second one relates to the lack of part-time jobs. "*In Portugal, part-time is practically non-existent*." (P2). And finally, the third one relates to the lack of work with flexible arrangements regarding time and location, for example, a woman mentioned, "*I see where the companies are, if it takes three hours to get there, it's too far, I won't apply. But when I arrive at the interview after all, it was one or two days in Lisbon, the rest of work was outside Lisbon with no possibility of remote work.*" (P2).

Factor number three, family requirements, can also be broken down into two sub-themes. Number one, career break women still have to balance job/ looking for a job and family obligations, which can be understood by two participants comments "*My children, two of them don't live here, come from time to time, but I have a younger daughter, who is going through a very difficult period.*" (P5) and "*Looking for work is a full-time job. And I can't have that availability and let go and make a family understand that I need to let go of this family support.*" (P8). The number two relates to change or potential change in city or country since women are supporting in this change "*I stopped working in 2010 and in 2015, we returned to Germany, with the four of us, so it's already a family project, and initially when we went it would be something to stay for a couple of years.*" (P2).

Financial circumstances is factor number four and is divided between lack of financial need to justify a work commitment that is not what women wanted "*I don't have a financial need that forces me to accept something that go against me, that's why I kept looking.*" (P5);

and low wages offered, almost encourages volunteer with flexibility work "*But the only chance that came to me, which was in a Chamber of Commerce as well, was to work full time and dedicating 100% of my time. And I have an idea that it they offer to pay me something like €800 and I thought, no, if that´s what they are offering, I may even like the work a lot, but €800 a month... I'm going to offer my work for a non-profit association. Because in fact there are values below which I prefer... I offer my work.*" (P4).

Factor number six, network or lack or limited network, is a single sub-theme and this quote demonstrates a typical participant´s problem mentioned during the interviews "*I never promoted myself in terms of networking, which is a serious mistake, I didn't have a network.*" (P14).

Age discrimination is also an important factor in pushing women back to return. The researcher tries to break down this factor in age discrimination above 50 years of age and below 50 years, but sometimes interviewers simply mention the age discrimination. Some excerpts of the interviews explain that: "*The great frustration that I felt and that I have felt here in Portugal is called ageism.*" (P11); "*Sometimes they praised my resume but in the end, they said no, because the company does not have this policy of hiring people over 50 years old.*" (P12); "*When I started talking to her, she said: yes, because I've seen that you've worked at company X, but when did you work at company X? I said, as it is written there, I started working at company X in 1997, and she looked..., and it was 20, 25 years ago, and she... she hadn't noticed... she must not have seen the dates on my resume, clearly I saw right away that that interview was going nowhere, because she was looking at me, I don't know, because I've been told, it was even the director of Human Resources at company B for me to always try to do Zoom interviews because, I mean, I look younger and I talk like a younger person, and not a 50-year-old lady...* (P2)*" and "There is the stigma of age.*" (P12).

Factor number seven: lack of recent work, market experience and gap perception can be split in four main areas: being currently out of the labour market "*Companies prefer to employ people who are employed, rather than those who are unemployed. The word unemployment is very scary."*(P12); long time (more than two years) away from the labour market "*It is the long career break time, that's what I was told, the time when I was out of the job market.*"(P22); absence of business terminology "*Our language is no longer corporate, it becomes more familiar, less formal, the subjects we talk about are no longer so much work related and more with the other part of life, and this distances us a little.*" (P5) which affect

not only on networking conversations but also on interview discussions; and lack/ reduced local market experience for foreigner living here or Portuguese women that either were living abroad or that have worked with international markets, for example "*The guy looked at my resume and said, look, marketing is very complicated, marketing doesn't bring sales here, because you don't know the Portuguese market.*" (P18).

Lastly, factor eight is the current recruitment process, which can be split into eight sub-themes. The first one: recruiting companies' algorithms don´t select atypical returnee curriculum vitae; in other words, the algorithm filters candidates with career breaks, such as universities attended, age, etc. For example, a participant has mentioned: "*I think that the human resources algorithm, the way of hiring people, the recruitment process, I think it may not respond to the needs of companies. In other words, I also hired employees through the bank and from the resumes that arrived, they were limited to two universities.*" (P5). The second one, excessive previous experience scares potential recruiters "*I have been told several times, including in interviews, they fear too much experience."* (P11). Third one, underappreciation of prior experience "*I felt that they did not value my experience and that they gave little importance or value*." (P20). Fourth one, demotivation caused by the recruiter's lack of response or feedback. "*One thing I know, because I sent a lot of resumes, even if it was just once. I didn't have a single answer."* (P16). Fifth one, recruiters' inability to recognize the willingness of returnees. "*The fear of too much experience, that I will want to earn a lot, or that I will want high positions. It's all the opposite, isn't it? I mean, the only thing I really want is to work*." (P11). Sixth one, aim to change career, but re-entry is easier to capitalize on past career experience "*I would like to get out of the financial area a little, but it's not easy. The truth is that the area where we graduated, the area where we worked, is what we can then capitalize on, and it is what they will always capitalize on us, isn't it?"* (P7). Seventh one, business bureaucracy, "*I was interviewed in large companies, in one of them, I did seven interviews. I went to the CEO. So, this process in Portugal is extremely long. For me, it was a surprise to do seven interviews and do something that lasts more than six months, seven months to hire a person.*" (P1) And lastly, the eighth sub-theme is the lack of understanding of the candidate's potential for a job, or as mentioned, "*Companies that recruit often do not know that the fact that we are experienced does not prevent us from being able to make that learning curve, just give us that opportunity.*" (P20).

A summary of these push factors/ barriers for opting back in and examples of participants' quotes for each sub-theme can be seen in Table 9.

Table 9

Push factors/barriers for opting back in and examples of participants´ quotes

Second order Coding	**First Order Coding**	**Examples Quote** (Participant)
Current economy	Macroeconomic situation of the country (e.g. post-Covid)	"At the time, the idea was to have only one year off, but the pandemic happened, I spent two years or so without working." (P24)
	Change/ update in the industry/ sector you worked in	"As much as I had experience in digital marketing, because I also had training in digital marketing, I am not digital native." (P20)
	Educational/ formal course currently obsolete	"The fact is I have a course in an area that has changed in the last five years, I don't even say ten, five years has changed, ten, maybe ten has started, it has totally changed." (P20)
Labour market current dynamics	Lack of adequate market opportunities	"Then there was a phase in which opportunities began to arise, but they were not opportunities that I wanted to grab, either because they were completely off from my profile, or because they were, that is, there were a lot of situations of call centers and administrative functions and very basic things for what I wanted to do and for what I like to do. And there were also situations in companies that could be a little more interesting, but that I also didn't think was the right thing for my know how and that I did well, but also, of course, it was nothing that also excited me a lot, but always very few opportunities, despite the fact that I made a great effort on job searching." (P25)
	Lack of part-time jobs	"In Portugal, part-time is practically non-existent." (P2)
	Lack of work with flexible models (time and location)	"I see where the companies are, if it takes 3 hours to get there, is too far, I won't apply. But when I arrive at the interview after all, it was one or two days in Lisbon, the rest of work was outside Lisbon with no possibility of remote work." (P2)
Family requirements	Still have to balance job and family obligations	"My children, two of them don't live here, come from time to time, but I have a younger daughter, who is going through a very difficult period." (P5) "Looking for work is a full-time job. And I can't have that availability and let go and make a family understand that I need to let go of this family support." (P8)
	Change/ potential change of city/ country	"I stopped working in 2010 and in 2015, we returned to Germany, with the four of us, so it's already a family project, and initially when we went it would be something to stay for a couple of years." (P2)
Financial circumstances	Lack of family financial need to justify a work commitment	"I don't have a financial need that forces me to accept something that go against me, that's why I kept looking." (P5)
	Low wages offered, almost encourages volunteer/flexible work	"But the only chance that came to me, which was in a Chamber of Commerce as well, was to work full time and dedicating 100% of my time. And I have an idea that it they offer to pay me something like €800 and I thought, no, if that´s what they are offering, I may even like the work a lot, but €800 a month... I'm going to offer my work for a non-profit association. Because in fact there are values below which I prefer... I offer my work." (P4)
Network	Lack/ limited Network	"I never promoted myself in terms of networking, which is a serious mistake, I didn't have a network." (P14)
Age discrimination	Age discrimination against people of 50+ years of age	"Sometimes they praised my resume but in the end, they said no, because the company does not have this policy of hiring people over 50 years old". (P12) "When I started talking to her, she said: yes, because I've seen that you've worked at company X, but when did you work at company X? I said, as it is written there, I started working at company X in 1997, and she looked..., and it was 20, 25 years ago, and she... she hadn't noticed... she must not have seen the dates on my resume, clearly I saw right away that that interview was going nowhere, because she was looking at me, I don't know, because I've been told, it was even the director of Human Resources at company B for me to always try to do Zoom interviews because, I mean, I look younger and I talk like a younger person, and not a 50-year-old lady..." (P2)
	Age discrimination against people under 50	"The great frustration that I felt and that I have felt here in Portugal is called ageism." (P11)

Table 9 continues on the next page

Continue Table 9: Push factors/barriers for opting back in and examples of participants' quotes

Second order Coding	**First Order Coding**	**Examples Quote** (Participant)
Lack of recent work/ market experience/ gap persception	Being currently out of the labour market	"Companies prefer to employ people who are employed, rather than those who are unemployed. The word unemployment is very scary." (P12)
	Long time (more than 2 years) away from the labour market	"It is the long career break time, that's what I was told, the time when I was out of the job market." (P22)
	Absence of business terminology	"Our language is no longer corporate, it becomes more familiar, less formal, the subjects we talk about are no longer so much work related and more with the other part of life, and this distances us a little." (P5)
	Lack /reduced local market experience (i.e. foreigner/expat	"The guy looked at my resume and said, look, marketing is very complicated, marketing doesn't bring sales here, because you don't know the Portuguese market." (P18)
Current recruitment process	Recruiting companies algorithm don´t select atypical returnee CV	"I think that the human resources algorithm, the way of hiring people, the recruitment process, I think it may not respond to the needs of companies. In other words, I also hired employees through the bank and from the resumes that arrived, they were limited to two universities." (P5)
	Excessive previous experience scares potential recruiters	"I have been told several times, including in interviews, they fear too much experience." (P11)
	Underappreciation of prior experience	"I felt that they did not value my experience and that they gave little importance or value." (P20)
	Demotivation caused by recruiters' lack of response or feedback	"One thing I know, because I sent a lot of resumes, even if it was just once. I didn't have a single answer." (P16)
	Recruiters' inability to recognize the willingness of returnees	"The fear of too much experience, that I will want to earn a lot, or that I will want high positions. It's all the opposite, isn't it? I mean, the only thing I really want is to work." (P11)
	Aim to change career, but re-entry is easier to capitalize on past career experience	"I would like to get out of the financial area a little, but it's not easy. The truth is that the area where we graduated, the area where we worked, is what we can then capitalize on and it is what they will always capitalize on us, isn't it?" (P7)
	Business bureaucracy	"I was interviewed in large companies, in one of them, I did seven interviews. I went to the CEO. So, this process in Portugal is extremely long. For me, it was a surprise to do seven interviews and do something that lasts more than six months, seven months to hire a person." (P1)
	Lack of understanding of candidate potential for a job	"Companies that recruit often do not know that the fact that we are experienced does not prevent us from being able to make that learning curve, just give us that opportunity." (P20)

Source: Data collected by the author

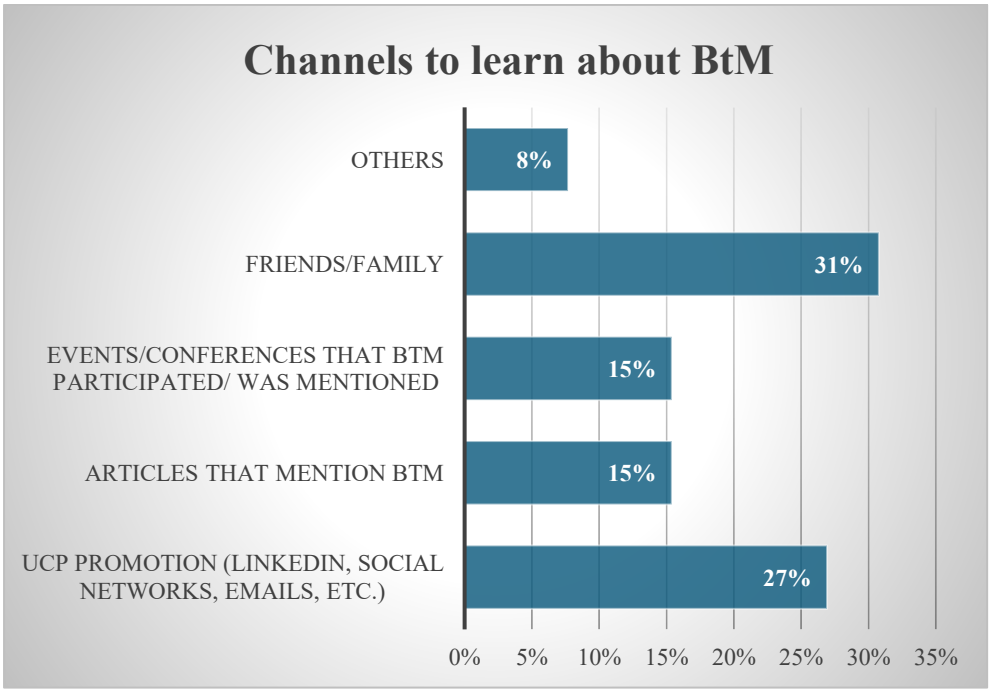
3.5.4 Channels women learned about BTM

After analysing the motivations and barriers to re-entering the job market, the fourth theme was identified: the channels women learned about BTM. The two most common sources were family and friends and University Católica Portuguesa online promotion (LinkedIn, social media, e-mail to their alumni base). Different articles, events, and conferences that BTM professors/coordinators participated in were also mentioned, but with less relevance.

A clearer sense of the importance of those sources is evident in Chart 4.

Chart 4

Channels to learn about BTM



Source: Data collected by the author

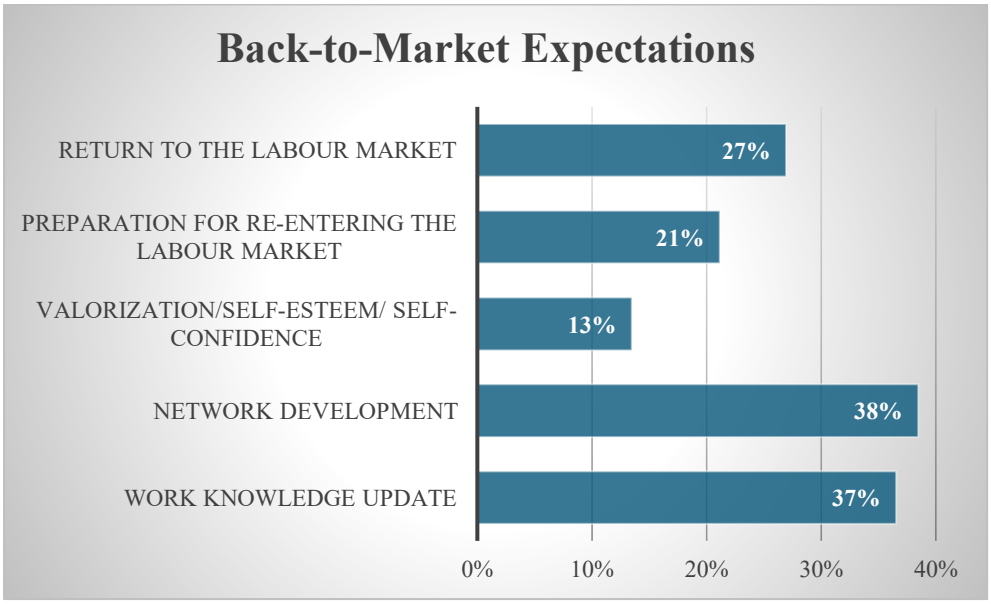
3.5.5 BTM expectations

Continuing the qualitative analysis, the fifth theme raised in the interviews was the expectations women had for BTM before joining/starting the program. This is an important theme, since it is a major factor in women's decision to participate in such a program. Five expectations were found. The two most relevant factors for interviewees were network development and work/knowledge updates, demonstrating that women expected to eliminate some barriers they felt existed to their return to the labour market. The other three expectations related to increasing their own valorisation/self-esteem/confidence, preparing them for re-entering the labour market, and the expectation to return to the labour market with the program, even though the program definition didn´t say that employment would be granted by the end of the program.

The comparative levels of importance of BTM participants' expectation factors are shown in Chart 5.

Chart 5

Level of importance of different participants' expectations about BTM



Source: Data collected by the author

Women's expectations were consolidated into five main expectations, each subdivided into 14 sub-themes. Starting with the first expectation, work knowledge update, this is a result of two sub-themes. The first one, skills update/ learn new skills/ knowledge, can be better understood with the following quotes "*When I saw the Back-to-Market program, I thought it was excellent, being an education for me and opening up new horizons.*" (P17) Or "*And also to learn new things. To update and learn.*" (P6). Or "*I gained what I expected, which was basically a recycling, I wasn't really expecting the area to be innovation, but it turned out to be fantastic., I was not waiting for a job, I was expecting it to be a period of time to acquire knowledge."*(P9). The second sub-theme related to developing consulting skills, "*Another was the opportunity to improve and learn consulting methodology.*" (P14).

The second expectation was to create or expand women´s network "*The second goal was to meet new people. I, as I always say, was very focused on the foreign market, all my network is outside Portugal. I had to start networking and building a network within Portugal, with Portuguese people.*" (P12). Networking in different ways, with program participants, "*The people who would be there would be in the same situation as me, within diversity and therefore, I was attracted to this, if you will, pre-empathy."* (P5) or "*We were all in the same situation, that is, I found my peers there. I thought, after all, I'm not the only one who is in this situation.*" (P21). And, network with customers/ partners, for example, "*Also networking, in the sense of being able to reintegrate the labour market."* (P17) or *"Another entity to also network.*" (P3).

The third expectation related to valorisation /self-esteem/ self-confidence can be broken down into regain professional self-confidence: "*To confirm that I really still had the skills, that I hadn't outdated and that I could add value again if I found a job*." (P6) and test your own ability "*My expectations were a refresh of some tools, concepts and a personal test. See if I'm capable or not.*" (P8)

The fourth expectation was associated with preparation to re-enter the labour market. This expectation summarizes four different sub-themes. The first one relates to return to work on a project/ company "*Work on an actual project. For me it was extremely refreshing to think that, in fact, I will be able to return to the job market, even if it is for three months working on a real, concrete project and not just a story, to do something that someone could enjoy."* (P12), the second one relates to recreating a work routine "*Have a systematization of tasks, of activities and of schedules.*" (P25). The third one relates to returning to a professional language and mental agility, "*And then all the techniques of work, of publishing tasks, of contact, of argumentation.*" (P24). And finally work again in teams, "*Precisely to be in a team, because I didn't want to be developing solo projects*." (P19).

The fifth and final expectation, return to the labour market, comprises four sub-themes. The first one, improve the narrative that can be told to a recruiter: I´ve not stopped can be demonstrated through the quote: "*Also, it would be a more recent experience for me, which would later allow me to share it in the context of interviews and situations that came up.*" (P26). The second one, look at/ approach the job market with another angle "*And it was a way to break with what we already had, to do something new. I think that when we continue to do the same thing, sometimes we don't have different results, so I thought, let's do something different to have a different result."* (P7). The third one, learn methods/ strategies of how to return to the labour market, "*Because I was a little lost and I didn't even know how to get back into the job market. I had this desire, I had already sent some resumes, very specific things, I lacked a strategy, I lacked a methodology, I needed to have other tools and I think it was a good way to change my situation."* (P7). And finally the fourth one is to find a job or work "*If I created expectations of finding a job after doing this program, I did*." (P5).

A summary of expectations regarding BTM and examples of participants' quotes for each sub-theme are shown in Table 10.

Table 10

Expectations about BTM and examples of participants´ quotes

Second order Coding	**First Order Coding**	**Examples Quote** (Participant)
Work knowledge update	Skills update/ learn new skills/knowledge	"When I saw the Back to Market program, I thought it was excellent, being an education for me and opening up new horizons." (P17) "And also to learn new things. To update and learn." (P6) "I gained what I expected, which was basically a recycling, I wasn't really expecting the area to be innovation, but it turned out to be fantastic., I was not waiting for a job, I was expecting it to be a period of time to acquire knowledge." (P9)
	Consulting skills development	"Another was the opportunity to improve and learn consulting methodology." (P14)
Network development	Create network with participants	"The people who would be there would be in the same situation as me, within diversity and therefore, I was attracted to this, if you will, pre-empathy." (P5) "We were all in the same situation, that is, I found my piers there. I thought, after all, I'm not the only one who is in this situation." (P21)
	Create/ expand network with customers/ partners	"Also networking, in the sense of being able to reintegrate the labor market." (P17) "Another entity to also network." (P3)
Valorization/self-esteem/ self-confidence	Regain professional self-confidence	"To confirm that I really still had the skills, that I hadn't outdated and that I could add value again if I found a job." (P6)
	Test your own ability	"My expectations were a refresh of some tools, concepts and a personal test. See if I'm capable or not." (P8)
Preparation for re-entering the labour market	Return to work on a project/ company	"Work on an actual project. For me it was extremely refreshing to think that, in fact, I will be able to return to the job market, even if it is for three months working on a real, concrete project and not just a story, to do something that someone could enjoy." (P12)
	Recreate work routine	"Have a systematization of tasks, of activities and of schedules." (P25)
	Return to professional language/ and mental agility	"And then all the techniques of work, of publishing tasks, of contact, of argumentation." (P24)
	Teamwork	"Precisely to be in a team, because I didn't want to be developing solo projects." (P19)
Return to the labour market	Find a job or work	"If I created expectations of finding a job after doing this program, I did." (P5)
	Learn methods/ strategies of how to return to the labour mark	"Because I was a little lost and I didn't even know how to get back into the job market. I had this desire, I had already sent some resumes, very specific things, I lacked a strategy, I lacked a methodology, I needed to have other tools and I think it was a good way to change my situation," (P7)
	Look at/approach labour market with another angle	"And it was a way to break with what we already had, to do something new, I think that when we continue to do the same thing, sometimes we don't have different results, so I thought, let's do something different to have a different result." (P7)
	Improve narrative to tell recruiter: I´ve not stoped	"Also, it would be a more recent experience for me, which would later allow me to share it in the context of interviews and situations that came up." (P26)

Source: Data collected by the author

3.5.6 BTM positive aspects

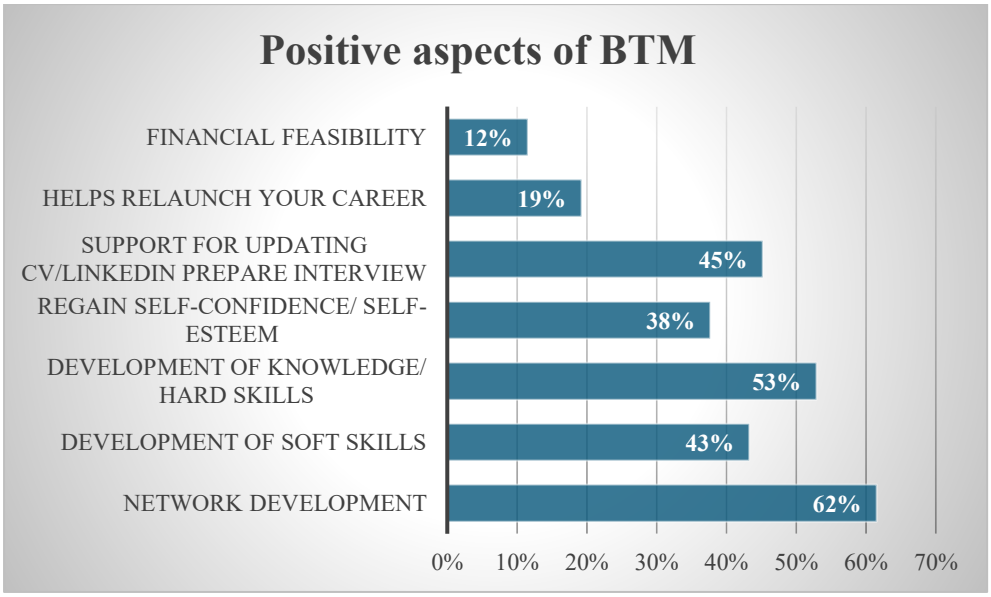
During the interviews, two additional major themes emerged: the sixth and seventh themes, positive aspects of the program and aspects for potential improvement that interviewees believe could be addressed.

Starting with the positive aspect of BTM, seven major areas were discussed. These seven features can be split into 26 sub-themes. The most mentioned feature, mentioned by more than half of the participants, was network development and the development of knowledge/ hard skills. The next most important aspect for interviewees was support for updating

CVs/LinkedIn profiles, preparing for an interview, regaining self-confidence/self-esteem, and developing soft skills. Finally, the two aspects mentioned were financial feasibility and help with relaunching your career. The relative importance of these seven positive aspects of BTM is shown in Chart 6.

Chart 6

Level of importance of positive aspects of BTM



Source: Data collected by the author

Starting with the most relevant aspect mentioned by interviewers, network development, this feature of the program can be broken firstly in network development which the following comments can illustrate: "*I resumed my network of contacts and realized how important it was to look at these people again and that it was no problem to turn to them, talk to them, understand where opportunities would be and in the end make ourselves available here a little bit to enter the market, to help with projects, whatever, I think that in the beginning I looked at it as if I was begging or looked like that. I didn't know, I didn't realize that I could do it in a slightly more professional way.*" (P7) or "*I think the Back to Market program so far has enormous value, opening doors is very important*." (P15). Secondly, in the establishment of a support network with different returnees, which can be demonstrated by "*We made friendships that I also think are very interesting and networking, right? Whether in companies or at the level of colleagues, we know that if I go to the WhatsApp group and ask a question there, someone will answer it immediately*." (P8) or "*We made friendships that I also think are very interesting and networking, right? Whether in companies or at the level of colleagues, we*

know that if I go to the WhatsApp group and ask a question there, someone will answer it immediately." (P2).

The second aspect, development of soft skills, can be broken into four sub-themes. Feature number one: teamwork, or in the words of participants, "*The project part was a unique opportunity to meet other people, work with other people, with different experiences and ways of being different and that we had to adjust and learn to work the team when we didn't have a common aspect there.*" (P15) or "*Listening more and not thinking for the other, because I had a lot of tendency to decide according to my needs. I didn't work much in a group, I thought I did, but it's very different when you work in a group where you're leading the group or when you're all in the same position.*" (P19). Feature two, development of soft skills (for example negotiation and adaptability) illustrated by "*I think it's a challenge, because you deal with different people, different groups, who have different routines and sometimes different rhythms too, always a challenge.*" (P18). Feature three, development of creativity to find solutions, evidenced by "*Intellectual challenge of having to do things differently and better than those I initially knew, I had to go after information and solutions."* (P4). Feature four, to be forced to step outside their comfort zone/ intellectual challenge exemplified by "*I remember that it was interesting that in the first classes we were doing an exercise in which the teacher asked us to do something contrary to what is usual, isn't it? And my head was blowing apart. I was looking at that and I was thinking I don't know if I'll be able to think like that, and I started to feeling sick...*" (P16) or "*Because to be comfortable, I was on the couch. So, I think, that's exactly it. One of the factors that enriched the program it´s this challenge."* (P8).

The third aspect was the development of participants' knowledge and hard skills. This aspect can be split into four sub-themes. Number one, update technical skills/ concept/know-how which can be better understood with these alumni comments: "*I felt that those classes brought me transversal knowledge that I can put into practice in any type of project.*" (P12) or "*Learning was also very important, first, because of the know-how it transmitted to us, and the demand it demanded of us as well.*" (P8). Number two, provide participants with tools/methods/ organization/ work routines and mental agility as demonstrated in the quotes "*It was also a test for my organizational skills, since I had to fit one more thing in my life. I didn't have much time available, it forced me to have things organized even more. As I said, it was a bit of a refresh in terms of management tools."* (P8) and "*Above all, also an ability to organize among all of them on a weekly basis. We had to ensure a set of tasks, activities, and organize them for the presentation, meet deadlines. Create working methods.*" (P10). Number three, experience in

carrying out consulting projects at all stages or in a participant´s words, "*I had never done consulting, and our project was a consulting project on innovation for company X. So, in itself, it was a novelty, that I had never planned/worked on a consulting project.*" (P9). Number four, the program teaches how to systematize ideas and information, this can be represented by the following quotes: "*In the midst of so much information and so much available, being able to put everything in a Power Point with the points that matter, and that's where the big challenge is and the classes were fundamental..., I loved those classes."* (P4) and "*We have not forgotten, our competences are asleep, they are in us, and we have to start working on them and, above all, work with guidance. That is, sometimes we would even know the answers, but we need guidance to get there. We were a little asleep, with less rhythm, but, with that orientation, things went extraordinarily well and then the final result is something that we are proud of, isn't it?*" (P7).

The fourth positive aspect of the program is associated with participants' regaining of self-confidence/ self-esteem. This aspect can be broken into five sub-themes. Number one, restore one´s self-confidence and self-esteem, shown by "*It gives people confidence, it gives us confidence to say, okay, I´m capable, I'm still here with my brain working, I'm actually going to apply for jobs because I can do them.*" (P2). Number two, teachers who believe in us and encourage us to reach our full potential, as demonstrated by "*And knowing that there is someone who believes in us, I speak for myself, is very important. Knowing that there is someone who stick up for you without knowing us; or a company that said, now go, you have our support, but we were the ones who go... This is trust, it is believing in the other person, and it is very important. Because we were a group of women that the teacher didn't know, she saw the curricula and it was her project, it was the name of the University that was behind it, and the teacher believed in us.*" (P19). Number three, participants' mutual motivation and sharing of success paths, as described by "*And then there's that part, starting to see people succeed and congratulate each other and all motivate each other and spur each other to action*." (P25). Number four, women in the same situation sharing experiences and fears, for example, "*Even on other editions, not all of women have solved their situation, but it was very good to see that they went there, that they also won something and that they also felt that they took something else from there*." (P9). Lastly the number five relates to support from the company team evidenced by "*It was very interesting to be in the meetings with the client, not only in the final phase, in those weekly meetings that we had with them (client). I think we had a lot of support from them."* (P2).

The fifth positive aspect was the support in updating participants' *curriculum vitae*/ LinkedIn and in preparing for interviews. This feature can be split into four sub-themes. The first one is to simulate work reality with time flexibility, shown by "*When you start the Back to Market Program, the environment is the simulation of a work environment. Well, it doesn't have perhaps the same rigor of schedules, because we had a lot of flexibility to decide what the schedules were or how much we were going to meet, if it was going to be online, if it was going to be in person.*" (P1). The second one is the university (Universidade Católica Portuguesa) name/ certification, explained by "*Back-to-Market had the name of Católica that opens doors and has a lot of credibility*." (P5). The third one is that the program help create a narrative for re-entering the labour market, illustrated by "*It´s right at the beginning of our CV, I think the Back-to-Market drew attention, right? And they asked and I explained what we had done. Okay, there were companies that already knew about the Back-to-Market, as was the case of company X and others not*." (P12). Lastly, the fourth sub-theme is the work experience for a company/ organization that participants experience, portrayed in "*I must say, because it was the closest thing of going back to the workforce that I had*." (P26).

The sixth positive aspect of the program is its help in relaunching women's careers, which can be divided into five sub-themes. The first one is to support returnees in planning their approach to the labour market. This can be illustrated by "*I think that the workshops have this very beneficial part of structuring the approach to the market and teaching us to be more efficient in this approach to the market*." (P25). The second one is to help returnees get to an interview, as shown by "*So, I thought the program opened up opportunities for interviews."* (P1). The third one, the sponsor company, promotes BTM participants´ project outcomes on social media. This can be exemplified by "*It appeared in my feed, the last group published the work they did, this is very good, the entity (client) itself published it*." (P12). The fourth one, keep motivation to re-entry can be exemplified by "*The program gave this push, like, yes, it is possible to go back to work and do something for my professional life*." (P1) and the final fifth one, having a first job that leads to more ideal job opportunities, can be represented by "*I grabbed the first opportunity that came to me, which wasn't to grab it for the sake of grabbing, because I even thought it was a nice/ interesting role, and, at the time, a little bit in line with what I wanted, I just didn't evaluate the environment/ context of the company well, but in terms of role, it was quite interesting. So afterwords, I moved to another company*." (P10).

The seventh and last positive aspect of BTM is that it was free for participants, allowing women with limited means to be part of the program as well. A participant commented, "*The other motivation was the fact that it was for free*." (P5).

A summary of the positive aspects of BTM and examples of participants´ quotes for each sub-theme can be seen in Table 11.

Table 11

Positive aspects of BTM and examples of participants´ quotes for each sub-theme

Second order Coding	**First Order Coding**	**Examples Quote** (Participant)
Network development	Network development	"I think the Back to Market program so far has enormous value, opening doors is very important." (P15) "I resumed my network of contacts and realized how important it was to look at these people again and that it was no problem to turn to them, talk to them, understand where opportunities would be and in the end make ourselves available here a little bit to enter the market, to help with projects, whatever, I think that in the beginning I looked at it as if I was begging or looked like that. I didn't know, I didn't realize that I could do it in a slightly more professional way." (P7)
	Establishment of a support network with different returnees	"We made friendships that I also think are very interesting and networking, right? Whether in companies or at the level of colleagues, we know that if I go to the Whatsapp group and ask a question there, someone will answer it immediately." (P8) "I met participant X, with whom I continue to get along very well, so it was another asset, we talk a lot with each other, who is also a person who is much more into the subject, her situation is very similar to mine, so we also understand each other well for that." (P2)
Development of soft skills	Teamwork	"Listening more and not thinking for the other, because I had a lot of tendency to decide according to my needs. I didn't work much in a group, I thought I did, but it's very different when you work in a group where you're leading the group or when you're all in the same position." (P19) "The project part was a unique opportunity to meet other people, work with other people, with different experiences and ways of being different and that we had to adjust and learn to work the team when we didn't have a common aspect there." (P15)
	Develop soft skills (i.e. negotiation, adaptability)	"I think it's a challenge, because you deal with different people, different groups, who have different routines and sometimes different rhythms too, always a challenge." (P18)
	Develop creativity to find solutions	"Intellectual challenge of having to do things differently and better than those I initially knew, I had to go after information and solutions." (P4)
	Forced to step outside their comfort zone/ intellectual challenge	"Because to be comfortable, I was on the couch. So, I think, that's exactly it. One of the factors that enriched the program it´s this challenge." (P8) "I remember that it was interesting that in the first classes we were doing an exercise in which the teacher asked us to do something contrary to what is usual, isn't it? And my head was blowing apart. I was looking at that and I was thinking I don't know if I'll be able to think like that, and I started to feeling sick..." (P16)
Development of knowledge/ hard skills	Update technical skills/concepts/knowhow	"I felt that those classes brought me transversal knowledge that I can put into practice in any type of project." (P12) "Learning was also very important, first, because of the know-how it transmitted to us, and the demand it demanded of us as well." (P8)
	Provide tools/method/organization/work routines/mental agility	"Above all, also an ability to organize among all of them on a weekly basis. We had to ensure a set of tasks, activities, and organize them for the presentation, meet deadlines. Create working methods." (P10) "It was also a test for my organizational skills, since I had to fit one more thing in my life. I didn't have much time available, it forced me to have thigs organized even more. As I said, it was a bit of a refresh in terms of management tools." (P8)
	Experience in carrying out consulting project at all stages	"I had never done consulting and our project was a consulting project on innovation for company X. So, in itself it was a novelty, that I had never plan/worked on a consulting project." (P9)
	Teach how to systematize ideas and information	"In the midst of so much information and so much available, being able to put everything in a Power Point with the points that matter, and that's where the big challenge is and the classes were fundamental..., I loved those classes." (P4)
		"We have not forgotten, our competences are asleep, they are in us, and we have to start working on them and, above all, work with guidance. That is, sometimes we would even know the answers, but we need guidance to get there. We were a little asleep, with less rhythm, but, with that orientation, things went extraordinarily well and then the final result is something that we are proud of, isn't it?" (P7)

Table 11 continues on the next page

Continue Table 11: Positive aspects of BTM and examples of participants´ quotes for each sub-theme

Second order Coding	**First Order Coding**	**Examples Quote** (Participant)
Regain self-confidence/ self-esteem	Restore one´s self-confidence and self-esteem	"It gives people confidence, it gives us confidence to say, okay, I´m capable, I'm still here with my brain working, I'm actually going to apply for jobs because I can do them." (P2)
	Teachers who "believe in us" and encourage to reach full potential	"And knowing that there is someone who believes in us, I speak for myself, is very important. Knowing that there is someone who stick up for you without knowing us; or a company that said, now go, you have our support, but we were the ones who go... This is trust, it is believing in the other person, and it is very important. Because we were a group of women that the teacher didn't know, she saw the curricula and it was her project, it was the name of the University that was behind it, and the teacher believed in us." (P19)
	Participants mutual motivation and sharing of success paths	"And then there's that part, starting to see people succeed and congratulate each other and all motivate each other and spur each other to action." (P25)
	Women in the same situation sharing experiences/ fears	"Even on other editions, not all of women have solved their situation, but it was very good to see that they went there, that they also won something and that they also felt that they took something else from there." (P9)
	Support from the company team	"It was very interesting to be in the meetings with the client, not only in the final phase, in those weekly meetings that we had with them (client). I think we had a lot of support from them." (P2)
Support in updating CV/LinkedIn and preparing for interviews	Simulate work reality with time flexibility	"When you start the Back to Market Program, the environment is the simulation of a work environment. Well, it doesn't have perhaps the same rigor of schedules, because we had a lot of flexibility to decide what the schedules were or how much we were going to meet, if it was going to be online, if it was going to be in person." (P1)
	University (UCP) name/certification	"Back-to-Market had the name of Católica that opens doors and has a lot of credibility." (P5)
	Help create a narrative for re-entering the labour market	"It´s right at the beginning of our CV, I think the Back-to-Market drew attention, right? And they asked and I explained what we had done. Okay, there were companies that already knew about the Back-to-Market, as was the case of company X and others not." (P12)
	Work experience for a company/ organization	"I must say, because it was the closest thing of going back to the workforce that I had." (P26)
Helps relaunch your career	Support returnees on planning how to approach labor market	"I think that the workshops have this very beneficial part of structuring the approach to the market and teaching us to be more efficient in this approach to the market." (P25)
	Help returnees to get to an interview	"So, I thought the program opened up opportunities for interviews." (P1)
	Sponsor company promote projects outcomes on social media	"It appeared in my feed, the last group published the work they did, this is very good, the entity (client) itself published it." (P12)
	Keep motivation to reentry	"The program gave this push, like, yes, it is possible to go back to work and do something for my professional life." (P1)
	Having a first job that leads to more ideal job opportunities	"I grabbed the first opportunity that came to me, which wasn't to grab it for the sake of grabbing, because I even thought it was a nice/ interesting role, and, at the time, a little bit in line with what I wanted, I just didn't evaluate the environment/ context of the company well, but in terms of role, it was quite interesting. So afterwords, I moved to another company." (P10)
Financial feasibility	Be free of charge to participants	"The other motivation was the fact that it was for free." (P5)

Source: Data collected by the author

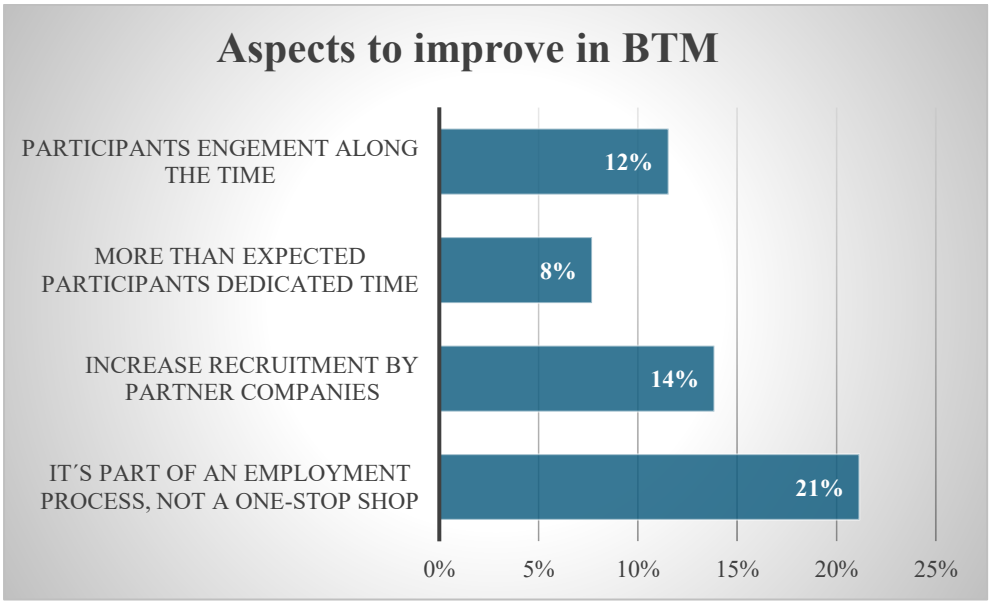
3.3.7 BTM potential improvement aspects

The seventh theme raised during the interviews was the BTM aspects that interviewees believe could be improved. These aspects were significantly less commented than the positive aspects of the program, but still could be identified and split into four main areas that can be subsequently split into 14 sub-themes. The four areas that participants commented on most during the interviews were: it´s part of an employment process, not a one-stop-shop, increase recruitment by partner companies, participants´ engagement over time, and more than expected

participants dedicated time. The relative importance of the aspects to be improved in BTM is shown in Chart 7.

Chart 7

Level of importance of aspects to improve in BTM



Source: Data collected by the author

Starting with the first aspect to be improved in BTM, it´s part of an employment process, not a one-stop-shop, two sub-themes formed this aspect, first one: by itself, it does not generate employability, which can be illustrated by "*But BTM was alone and this needs to have other pieces to work, like a Lego or a machine that needs to be oiled to start working and get into a gear. I don't know if this metaphor helps…*" (P11) and "*I think that Back-to-Market covers a lot, or almost all aspects of relaunching in the market. From inside to the practical part of qualifications. What else could have been done? Now, nothing. I mean, you are not an employment agency, are you? So this part, people will have to go look for themselves*." (P9). Second one, not much help from BTM to network, which can be shown by "*What I think is that there could be more networking, right? So, for example, I only had contact with one company, didn't I? It was the company for the project I worked, and then nothing else. It could have been some more workshops, even with companies such as service providers.*" (P17).

The second aspect to improve BTM is to increase recruitment by partner companies, which can be split into five different sub-themes. The number one is that companies are not aware of the program's/returnees' potential, as illustrated by "*Maybe a little more visualization, I don't know, more publicized the potential of the women who are in this program."* (P12).

Number two, a lack of job exchanges, partnerships, or other projects, can be shown by "If they could associate a company interaction service with the program to integrate people." *(P8) and* "*Launch a kind of stock exchange*." (P20). The number three, low recruitment of participants by corporate sponsors can be demonstrated by "*I think in my case the negative part was the job perspective for that company.*" (P18). The number four, university alumni service insufficient support, can be exemplified by "*In the same way that in colleges there is always an office that establishes contacts with companies to try to arrange internships for students, university could do this*." (P8). The final one, number five, increase recruitment level of returnees to top positions, can be evidenced by "*Eventually work on trying to position the Back-to-Market women in a niche or on a level a bit above of current one. Since, from what I have seen of positions that my BTM colleagues and/or friends get, they are all intermediate positions*." (P25).

The third aspect, and one less mentioned by participants, relates to the time they dedicated to the program, which was more than expected. This aspect can be broken into three sub-themes. The first one, participants' time demand is greater than expected, in the words of a participant, "*The only disadvantage I felt, is not really a disadvantage, but the project itself turned out to be more labourious than the information that had initially been transmitted to us*." (P13). The second one, team meetings were out of working hours/ online, in other words, "It was a lot of online work, with difficulty, *and it was all done at night, I mean, at night I have to sleep*." (P14). Finally, the third one relates to women leaving the program in the middle of the consulting project when they found a job, leaving extra work to the team, in other words "*What I thought went less well, was that we, in fact, were not many, we ended up being only two, for example, to do the work in the end...*" (P17).

Lastly, the fourth aspect was the level of participant engagement over time. This aspect comprises four sub-themes. The first one has more mentoring/ accompanying time for participants, which can be evidenced by "*In my specific case, I needed to be pushed even further: what have you done, what you haven't done, and why you haven't done it, why yes, why not*." (P13). The second one, insufficient participant engagement over time, which can be reflected by "*And I would say that most women, as time goes by, that they have done the first or second or third edition, have already gone astray*." (P11). The third one, competition among 'women of a team, can be shown by "*Because there is a little possibility that the company would be hiring someone, so there is a competition between the participants*." (P1). The fourth one, having more workshops along the program, can be illustrated by "*Empower people*

through workshops. Having partnerships with some entities that then develop, for example, I'll give you an example, I think it's very important and useful to know how to use LinkedIn and know how to make a good LinkedIn profile." (P15).

A summary of the aspects to improve the BTM and examples of participants´ quotes for each sub-theme can be seen in Table 12.

Table 12

Aspects to improve the BTM and examples of participants´ quotes for each sub-theme

Second order Coding	**First Order Coding**	**Examples Quote** (Participant)
It´s part of an employment process, not a one-stop shop	By itself it does not generate employability	"I think that Back-to-Market covers a lot, or almost all aspects of relaunching in the market. From inside to the practical part of qualifications. What else could have been done? Now, nothing. I mean, you are not an employment agency, are you? So this part, people will have to go look for themselves." (P9)
		"But BtM was alone and this needs to have other pieces to work, like a Lego or a machine that needs to be oiled to start working and get into a gear. I don't know if this metaphor helps…" (P11)
	Not much help from BtM to network	"What I think is that there could be more networking, right? So, for example, I only had contact with one company, didn't I? It was the company for the project I worked, and then nothing else. It could have been some more workshops, even with companies such as service providers." (P17)
Increase recruitment by partner companies	Companies are not aware of the program/ returnees potential	"Maybe a little more visualization, I don't know, more publicized.the potential of the women who are in this program." (P12)
	Lack of job exchange/partnerships/other projects	"Launch a kind of stock exchange." (P20)
		"If they could associate a company interaction service with the program to integrate people." (P8)
	Low recruitment of participants by corporate sponsors	"I think in my case the negative part was the job perspective for that company." (P18)
	University alumni services insufficient support	"In the same way that in colleges there is always an office that establishes contacts with companies to try to arrange internships for students, university could do this." (P8)
	Increase recruitment level of returnees to top positions	"Eventually work on trying to position the Back-to-Market women in a niche or on a level a bit above of current one. Since, from what I have seen of positions that my BtM colleagues and/or friends get, they are all intermediate positions." (P25)
More than expected participants dedicated time	Participants´ time demand greater than expected	"The only disadvantage I felt, is not really a disadvantage, but the project itself turned out to be more laborious than the information that had initially been transmitted to us." (P13)
	Team meetings were out of working hours/ online	"It was a lot of online work, with difficulty and it was all done at night, I mean, at night I have to sleep." (P14)
	Women leaving, leave extra work to the team	"What I thought went less well, was that we, in fact, were not many, we ended up being only two, for example, to do the work in the end…" (P17)
Participants engagement along the time	Have more mentoring/accompanying time for participants	"In my specific case, I needed to be pushed even further: what have you done, what you haven't done, and why you haven't done it, why yes, why not." (P13)
	Insufficient participants engagement along the time	"And I would say that most women, as time goes by, that they have done the first or second or third edition, have already gone astray." (P11)
	Competition among women of a team	"Because there is a little possibility that the company would be hiring someone, so there is a competition between the participants." (P1)
	Having more workshops along the program	"Empower people through workshops. Having partnerships with some entities that then develop, for example, I'll give you an example, I think it's very important and useful to know how to use LinkedIn and know how to make a good LinkedIn profile." (P15)

Source: Data collected by the author

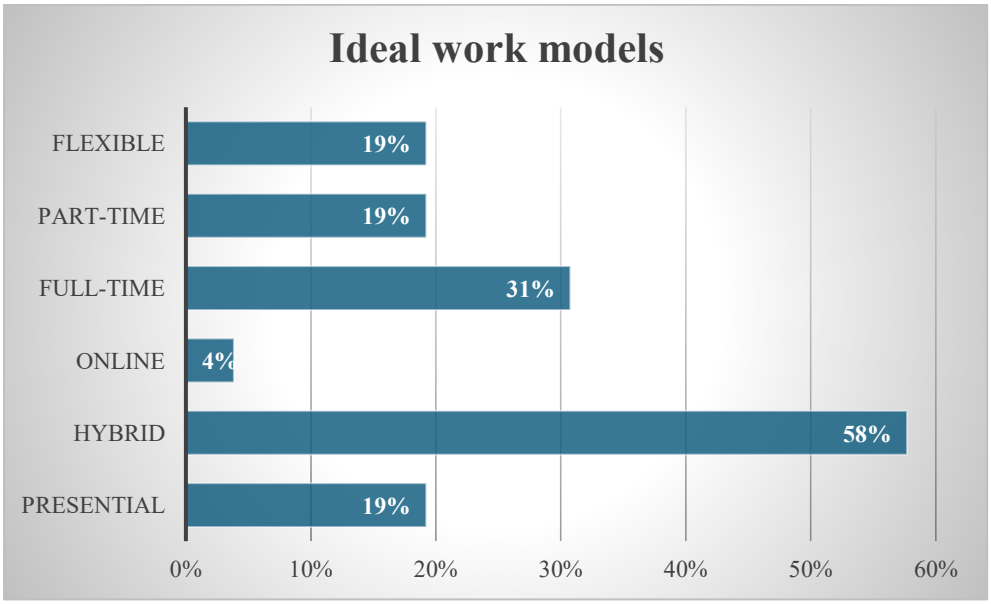
3.5.8 Ideal working model

After understanding women´s opting out process, why they decided to participate in BTM as well as what they thought about it, the research found out participants' eight major themes: ideal working models, which will be associated with the ninth and tenth themes: future career goals and work sector that they intend to work in or are working in.

Starting with the eighth theme, ideal work models, this theme relates to how women wanted to work, in terms of time (flexible, part-time, or full-time) and location (presential, hybrid, or online/ remote). The majority of the participants preferred full-time and hybrid work. The relative importance is shown in Chart 8.

Chart 8

Level of importance of ideal work models



Source: Data collected by the author

No other ideal work location model was closely referred to by interviewers as hybrid, which follows the trend of partially remote work after the COVID pandemic. This can be better understood with the following participants comments "*Work can be hybrid three days in the office, two days at home, okay, perfect.*" (P2) or "*I think that hybrid, perhaps is the most balanced solution nowadays.*" (P5) or "*I go to the offices three times a week, another two days a week, I'm at home with some freedom.*" (P7). Regarding presential, participants mentioned "*I was also looking for in person, I don't mind.*" (P5). For some women who wanted to live in different parts of the world, entirely online was beneficial, as stated by "*Remotely, right? That allows me to be anywhere in the world.*" (P17).

In relation to time ideal working model, full-time was the preferred ideal model and can be shown by "*My ideal job would be full time*." (P9) or "*It doesn't matter to me if I'm going to work eight hours, if I'm going to work part-time. I honestly don't think part-time you can develop much, because the day flies by.*" (P1). Part-time and flexible hours are not entirely mutually exclusive; in fact, they can often complement each other, as illustrated by these quotes on part-time and flexible work: "*I work according to my availability. Therefore, I do more or less a planning of a certain project, I see how many hours I am going to use and then, I work those hours according to my availability, so I am not dedicated to eight hours a day to that project.*" (P17) and "*I work every day like this, if I count it, it's middle ground/ flexible. In other words, on peak days, on negotiations to close a deal and the deeds, then it's all day, others will be part-time*." (P13).

A summary of ideal work models and examples of participants´ quotes can be seen in Table 13.

Table 13

Ideal work models and examples of participants´ quotes

Second order Coding	**First Order Coding**	**Examples Quote** (Participant)
	Presential	"I was also looking for in person, I don't mind." (P5)
	Hybrid	"Work can be hybrid three days in the office, two days at home, okay, perfect." (P2)
		"I think that hybrid, perhaps is the most balanced solution nowadays." (P5)
		"I go to the offices three times a week, another two days a week, I'm at home with some freedom." (P7)
	Online	"Remotely, right? That allows me to be anywhere in the world." (P17)
	Full-time	"It doesn't matter to me if I'm going to work eight hours, if I'm going to work part-time. I honestly don't think part-time you can develop much, because the day flies by." (P1)
		"My ideal job would be full time." (P9)
	Part-time	"I work according to my availability. Therefore I do more or less a planning of a certain project, I see how many hours I am going to use and then, I work those hours according to my availability, so I am not dedicated to eight hours a day to that project." (P17)
	Flexible	"I work every day like this, if I count it, it's middle ground/ flexible. In other words, on peaks days, on negotiations to close a deal and the deeds, then it's all day, others will be part-time." (P13)

Source: Data collected by the author

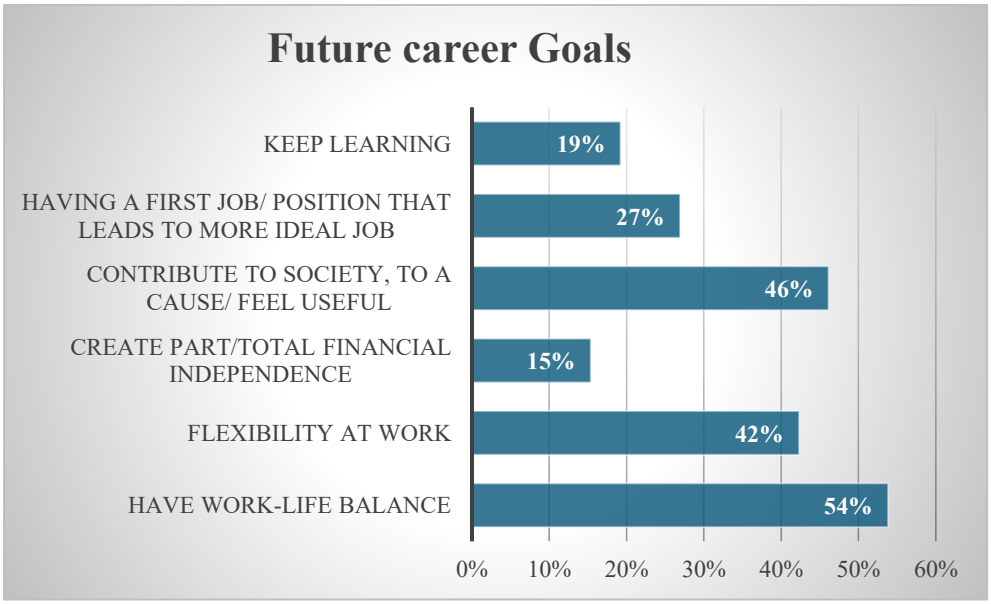
3.5.9 Future career goals

The ninth theme raised during the interviews was the participants' future career goals. This theme can be broken down into six different objectives. The three most important ones, mentioned by about half of the participants, were: contributing to society or a cause, feeling useful, flexibility at work, and having a work-life balance. The other three objectives were:

keep learning; have a first job/ position that leads to a more ideal job; and achieve partial or full financial independence. The relative importance of these six goals is shown in Chart 9.

Chart 9

Level of importance of future career goals



Source: Data collected by the author

Going into more detail about these six main future career goals, the first relates to participants' clear focus on work-life balance. This can be better explained by "*The issue of balancing personal and professional life is relevant, as it always has been, and increasingly, for family issues as well, because I wants to be more present and more available. I think that as we get older, we start valuing other types of things and I want to be able to be closer to the family*." (P26); "*In order for me to enjoy life, I try to maintain the best possible work-life balance.*" (P25) and "*Work-life balance is something very important, because regardless of a future, whether I continue to work on my own or work on behalf of another, for example, this issue of the non-profit Advisory Board is something that I want to maintain*." (P19).

The second objective relates to work flexibility, primarily regarding working hours. This can be exemplified by "*To have a lot of availability, to make my own work schedule. It's not always, but, for example, if I have to miss a day or have a doctor´s appointment, there's no problem, if I'm sick, it's really to stay at home*." (P24); "*The thing is that you can have flexibility. Look, today my son is sick and I´ll be working from home. Today I need to go to a meeting, okay, I'm going to work at late at night*." (P1) or "*I believe that the development of certain projects, jobs, goals, schedules must always be flexible*." (P14).

The third objective is to create partial financial independence, “So many shoes I’m going to buy with 20 thousand euros…” (P21) or total financial independence, “*I can't complain in financial terms, I'm managing to balance myself with all the trainings I teach.”* (P19).

The fourth future career goal is to contribute to society, to a cause, and/or feel useful, as interviewers mentioned, “*I spend my day working towards a mission and a purpose that makes sense to me. In other words, my day-to-day work today is not pure work, in the sense of working for a business, is working for a cause, for a mission.” (P10)* or “*I wanted to work, no one wanted me, so I keep studying, or something like that, and then I was discussing with a ex-colleague and I was already enrolling in other courses. And he told me: do you want to work, but do you really want to work? And I said: yes I do, and he offered me to work on that*.” (P22) or in this simple statement: “*I am contributing positively to a company, to an entity*.” (P25) or “*I have this desire to potentially impact people's lives and to make a difference in the future*.” (P26).

The fifth objective is to have a first job or position that will lead women to a more ideal job, as is shown by “*My goal is: I have credit risk experience, but I wanted to start having another type of experience. There is liquidity risk, there is market risk and I defined with my manager that in two years, I´ll move on to another team.*” (P24).

Lastly, the sixth objective is to keep learning represented by “I want to work in that area, because it is what I like to do, it is what I want to do, where I can add value, *and I still can learn even further.”* (P6).

A summary of future career goals and examples of participants´ quotes can be seen in Table 14.

Table 14

Future career goals and examples of participants´ quotes

Second order Coding	**First Order Coding**	**Examples Quote** (Participant)
	Have work-life balance	"In order for me to enjoy life, I try to maintain the best possible work-life balance." (P25) "Work-life balance is something very important, because regardless of a future, whether I continue to work on my own or work on behalf of another, for example, this issue of the non-profit Advisory Board is something that I want to maintain." (P19) "The issue of balancing personal and professional life is relevant, as it always has been, and increasingly, for family issues as well, because I wants to be more present and more available. I think that as we get older, we start valuing other types of things and I want to be able to be closer to the family." (P26)
	Flexibility at work	"To have a lot of availability, to make my own work schedule. It's not always, but, for example, if I have to miss a day or have a doctor´s appointment, there's no problem, if I'm sick, it's really to stay at home," (P24) "The thing is that you can have flexibility. Look, today my son is sick and I´ll be working from home. Today I need to go to a meeting, okay, I'm going to work at late at night." (P1) "I believe that the development of certain projects, jobs, goals, schedules must always be flexible." (P14)
	Create part/total financial independence	"But I can't complain in financial terms, I'm managing to balance myself with all the trainings I teach." (P19)
	Contribute to society, to a cause/ feel useful	"I spend my day working towards a mission and a purpose that makes sense to me. In other words, my day-to-day work today is not pure work, in the sense of working for a business, is working for a cause, for a mission." (P10) "I wanted to work, no one wanted me, so I keep studying, or something like that, and then I was discussing with a ex-colleague and I was already enrolling in other courses. And he told me: do you want to work, but do you really want to work? And I said: yes I do, and he offered me to work on that." (P22) "I am contributing positively to a company, to an entity." (P25) "I have this desire to potentially impact people's lives and to make a difference in the future." (P26)
	Having a first job/ position that leads to more ideal job	"My goal is: I have credit risk experience, but I wanted to start having another type of experience. There is liquidity risk, there is market risk and I defined with my manager that in two years, I´ll move on to another team." (P24)
	Keep learning	"I want to work in that area, because is what I like to do, is what I want to do, where I can add value and I still can learn even further." (P6)

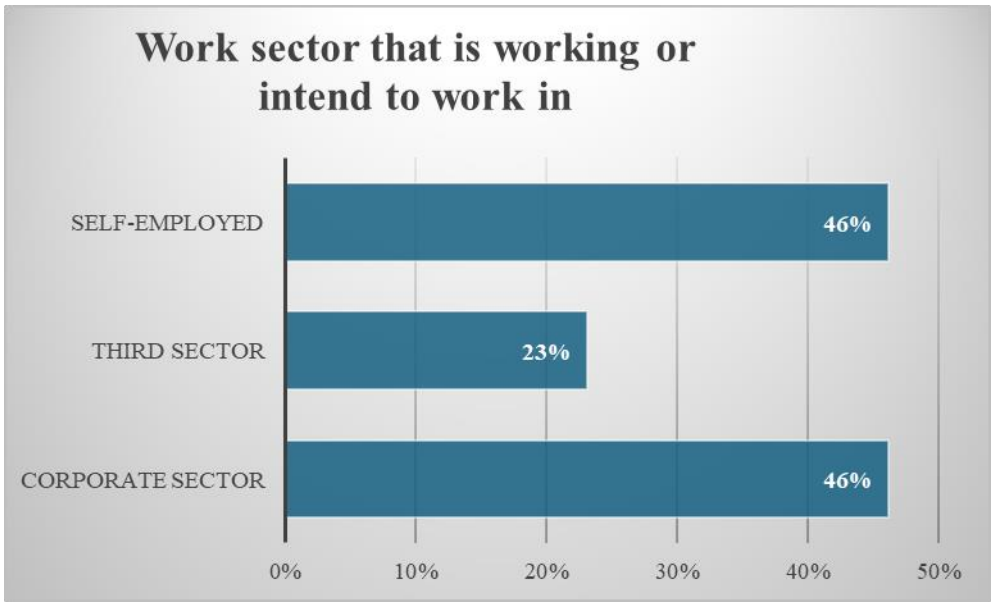
Source: Data collected by the author

3.5.10 Work sectors that women are working or intend to work in

Another aspect of future career goals discussed in the interviews was the sector in which women planned or were already working. The corporate sector and self-employment were the most frequently mentioned, as Chart 10 shows.

Chart 10

Level of importance of work sectors that women are working or intend to work in



Source: Data collected by the author

Self-employed were as mentioned as corporate sector as the working or intended sector to work. As participants refereed to self-employed can be illustrated by "*I decided to become an entrepreneur again. So, at this moment that I'm working on a business plan for me*." (P1) or "*At this stage, develop more projects in the area of No Code, which is low code, make websites, apply apps, quickly and much cheaper, and also CRM, much cheaper, with the same results that companies do with programming, with code, and therefore I intend in the next three years to develop this area in a more professional way*." (P17) or "*I'm working on my own. I am self-employed. I do consulting and training in the area where I have always worked*." (P19) and finally "*And that sometimes and that's why I haven't started yet, because it's not easy to reconcile everything. When we get involved in a personal project, it ends up being even more demanding maybe."* (P8). Interestingly enough, two of the participants who were self-employed in the early stages, after a month when interviews were conducted, had job offers in the corporate sector and both accepted, demonstrating that self-employment is an option to avoid being out of work, but not as attractive as the corporate world.

During the interviews, some participants demonstrated interest in both the self-employed and the corporate sector. There were no cases in which a participant wanted to join the third sector or the corporate world, or to be self-employed.

Regarding interviewees that wanted to join the corporate sector, some comments can show the main reasons for that "*It's a world that I like, a corporate world is the world that I like, regardless of its demand*." (P18) or "*But I am still interested in entering the job market in another way, in joining a company*." (P19). Some participants were already working in the corporate sector, as demonstrated by "*I work in a consulting company*." (P23) or "*The company operates in the area of tourism and real estate investments*." (P7).

The third sector, or not-for-profit sector, was the least-mentioned sector participants wanted to work in or were working in, "*Given that I am now in an association in the social sector*." (P10). Some participants wanted the social sector, but more specifically in the education sector, "*Is to try to at least get into the training part, because there was a Portuguese consultant here who was asking for trainers in the area of oil and gas for the PALOP countries*." (P12).

A summary of work sectors that participants were working in or intended to work in, and examples of participants´ quotes can be seen in Table 15.

Table 15

Work sectors that participants were working in or intended to work in, and examples of participants´ quotes

Second order Coding	**First Order Coding**	**Examples Quote** (Participant)
	Corporate sector	"It's a world that I like, a corporate world is the world that I like, regardless of its demand." (P18) "But I am still interested in entering the job market in another way, in joining a company." (P19) "I work in a consulting company." (P23) "The company operates in the area of tourism and real estate investments."
	Third sector	"Given that I am now in an association in the social sector." (P10) "Is to try to at least get into the training part, because there was a Portuguese consultant here who was asking for trainers in the area of oil and gas for the PALOP countries." (P12)
	Self-employed	"I decided to become an entrepreneur again. So, at this moment that I'm working on a business plan for me." (P1) "At this stage, develop more projects in the area of NoCode, which is low code, make websites, apply apps, quickly and much cheaper, and also CRM, much cheaper, with the same results that companies do with programming, with code, and therefore I intend in the next three years to develop this area in a more professional way." (P17) "I'm working on my own. I am self-employed. I do consulting and training in the area where I have always worked." (P19) "And that sometimes and that's why I haven't started yet, because it's not easy to reconcile everything. When we get involved in a personal project, it ends up being even more demanding maybe." (P8)

Source: Data collected by author

3.6 Discussion

BTM alumni women opted out of their careers not only to care for family members and improve their quality of life, but also due to organizational changes and the lack of support for

women's career development. These factors discouraged them from continuing their careers, especially as doing that meant sacrificing aspects of their personal lives Weighing the trade-off between future career prospects and personal fulfilment, all of them chose to leave their companies. Afterward, most of them stayed out of the workforce and/or continued longer than they anticipated. These findings are in line with McGrath et al. (2005) and Eagly et al. (2004) work.

The factors that influenced BTM participants' decision to opt back in were sixfold: intellectual challenge/fulfilment, financial stability, personal fulfilment, and family stability. Also, the sub-theme feeling value/ recognize for what you do by friends and society were in line with the literature review (Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett et al., 2010; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Javornik, 2017; McGrath et al., 2005; PWC & Women Returners, 2016).

This study introduces two new opt-in factors to the literature, identified through interviews as motivational drivers encouraging women to re-enter the workforce: a willingness to serve as role models for their children, and a recognition of work as a supportive factor in maintaining mental health.

The first factor, willingness to serve as a role model for their children, is achieved by demonstrating that women and mothers participate in the workforce. Even though BTM participants have taken a career break, they wanted to break the gender stigma that women don´t have a career and are only taking care of the family while men are the sole house providers. This is particularly important, as a Harvard Business School study (2015) in 24 countries found that daughters of working mothers are more likely to be employed as adults, earn higher salaries, and hold supervisory or leadership positions compared with daughters of stay-at-home mothers, while sons are more likely to contribute to household activities and spend more time caring for family members. Furthermore, this perspective aligns with Eagly's social role theory, which argues that gender stereotypes are not based on fixed abilities or competence, but rather on social structures and divisions of labour that shape people's roles. In this sense, these women aimed to show their children that such stereotypes are socially constructed and can be changed if the next generation chooses to act differently (Eagly et al., 2004; Eagly & Sczesny, 2019).

Breaking gender stereotypes by creating balance at home, where both parents work and share household duties, is a key strategy to reduce the gender wage gap (Matteazzi & Scherer, 2021; Pailhé et al., 2021). From a social role theory perspective, these changes are particularly relevant because they change the distribution of roles within the household, which in turn

changes the beliefs about what men and women are expected and able to do (Eagly et al., 2004). In addition to increasing household income, women who engage more in the workforce also have greater opportunities for career advancement, which can help close long-term pay gaps. Furthermore, the traditional division of tasks inside a family is challenged when males take a larger portion of caregiving and domestic tasks, leading to more equitable views of gender roles inside the household (Pailhé et al., 2021). From a social role theory perspective, these patterns matter because gender differences in behaviour are shaped by the roles people occupy, not by fixed abilities, so changing the division of labour at home can also change beliefs about what women and men can do (Eagly et al., 2004, 2019). This shift in mentality brings tangible benefits to both household and professional environments: at home, families work on the principles of shared responsibility, while organizations begin to standardize flexible work arrangements for all employees (rather than just women), fostering an environment that supports work-life balance and encourages equal participation in the workforce (Russell et al., 2007).

The second opt-in factor introduced in this study is recognizing work as a supportive factor for maintaining mental health. The main sub-themes for women who mentioned that opting back into the workforce will help mental health were: the opportunity to meet other people, create social connections and avoid loneliness; have routines outside the home and have a busy life; want to be and feel recognized by their families for what they do and accomplish, and finally wanting to stop being invisible. From a social role theory perspective, these feelings of invisibility may result from being in roles that are less recognized or valued by society and women´s families. Paid work not only provides financial independence, but also gives women a sense of identity and recognition, which create a positive impact on their mental health and self-perception (Eagly et al., 2004).

Even though this thesis literature review was not focused on mental health issues, this problem and its relationship to work or lack of work have gained global attention due to the highest frequency of mental diseases and mental suffering in modern society, mainly after the COVID-19 pandemic (Borges et al., 2023; McDowell et al., 2021). Many papers have been recently published in renowned publications showing that work, workplace, and mental health are closely related (Hammer et al., 2022). These studies indicate that changing aspects related to individual work and/or workplace can positively affect people´s mental health, corroborating the BTM participants' suggestion that returning to the workforce should improve their mental health. Furthermore, as the World Health Organization (2025) states, "*work can protect mental*

health. Decent work supports good mental health by providing: a livelihood; a sense of confidence, purpose, and achievement; an opportunity for positive relationships and inclusion in a community; and a platform for structured routines, among many other benefits".

From push factors of returnees´ opt-in decisions research described on the literature review described on Chapter 2, one factor that participants did not mention was corporate organizational support. We attribute that to three main factors. First, the Portuguese welfare state tends to place the responsibility for employability on government-led initiatives rather than on the corporate sector. Second, with a few exceptions, mainly American consulting firms in Portugal, Portuguese universities and companies generally do not cultivate a culture of maintaining long-term relationships with former alumni or employees, even high performers. As a result, individuals do not expect their previous employers or universities to assist them in re-entering the job market or making career transitions. Third, conferences and similar initiatives usually require full payment, and organizers rarely partner with companies to offer discounts or sponsorships for unemployed or career-break individuals seeking to stay updated with market trends.

From the eight pull factors or barriers to opt back in mentioned by BTM participants (current economy, labour market dynamics, family requirements, financial circumstances, lack or limited network, age discrimination and other types of discrimination, such as bias against excessive experience, underappreciation of prior experience/ knowledge, which were more associated with current recruitment process and lack of recent work/ market experience/ gap perception) only two barriers had sub-themes that were not found on the literature related to barriers to opt back in.

The first one was the current economic factor, with the sub-theme education/formal course, which is currently obsolete. To overcome that and adapt to the new technology, women should commit to reskill and upskill their knowledge and abilities, making professional development a priority for them in the future, the same way that businesses need to do the same for their workforce (Li, 2024).

The second one, the current recruitment process, has three sub-themes that were not previously mentioned in the literature. Firstly, most recruiters do not respond to candidates who were not accepted. This ongoing lack of response creates significant demotivation among returnees. Secondly, when recruiters rarely pay attention to a returnee's application, they don´t understand the returnee's willingness to return to the job market, which is mostly not about

financial gain or a top position, but about feeling useful and recognized (Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett et al., 2010; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; McGrath et al., 2005). Finally, candidates who have used their career break to rethink their careers and decide to make a career shift find it difficult to do so, since re-entry is easier for those with past career paths.

Even though the literature review identified confidence as a barrier to re-entering the workforce (Gicheva & Keohane, 2018; McGrath et al., 2005; PWC & Women Returners, 2016), BTM participants did not described the lack of confidence issues as an obstacle. Instead, they described improvements in confidence and self-esteem as anticipated benefits of the BTM program and as positive outcomes that ultimately supported their return to the job market. This discrepancy may be explained by the timing of the interviews, which were conducted after participants had completed the BTM program, at which point their confidence and self-esteem may already have been restored. As one of the BTM founders noted when presenting the program's results: *"In the kick-off meetings, participants' body language, shrugged shoulders, downcast eyes, and low voices, revealed how uncertain they were about their ability to complete the project. By the final presentation, however, with the mission accomplished, they stood with open shoulders, looked their clients in the eye, and spoke with confident voices."*

From the study we concluded that most women who participated in BTM learnt about the program through family and friends or UCP social media marketing posts. Articles and events were also mentioned, but had lower importance than the previous channel, demonstrating that to reach potential new participants and attract these women to the program, the university should be involved in its promotion. As participants applied to the program, they developed different expectations about its benefits, which can be summarized in five main topics. The two most relevant areas were updating their working knowledge and creating a network, both of which are extremely important for women who have been out of the workforce for many years. But also, they wanted to regain self-esteem and self-confidence to prepare themselves for re-entering the labour market and actually return to the job market, which we can split into learn methods/creating narratives to enter the job market and to find a job itself. From these five expectations, except for finding a job, which most women did, but not all of them. The others they had were also mentioned as positive aspects of BTM.

Regarding the positive aspects from BTM, like the experience obtained from women placement experience in the British Equalitec Program from the European Social Fund (Panteli & Pen, 2010), the participants from the Back-to-Market program developed their hard and soft skills and regained self-confidence and self-esteem during the program through the university

classes as well as the consulting job experience. Additionally, the workshops on improving CVs, LinkedIn, and networking filled gaps formed during their career break and created a stronger narrative with recruiters, helping most women get back to work.

Participants also shared suggestions for improving this program to better support them on their relaunch journey. The central aspect raised during the interviews was that BTM, by itself, does not guarantee employability and is not designed to be a one-stop solution; rather, it is one component in a larger process. Therefore, BTM professors must encourage participants to take an active role in their job search by fostering proactivity and persistence, because as Kanfer et al. (2001) demonstrated in their research, job search is a self-regulating, multidimensional process that is influenced by motivational factors and personality traits. Variables like conscientiousness, self-efficacy, and effort intensity play a decisive role in determining who ultimately secures employment. Furthermore, as described by Manroop & Richardson (2015) the two behaviours mentioned before (proactivity and persistence) are key elements of the multidimensional construct of job search behaviour, which involves effort and intensity (how hard and often someone looks for a job), content and direction (the behaviours used, such as formal versus informal channels and which strategies are adopted, such as focused or all options explored) and temporal persistence (the adaptability and durability of these behaviours). Together, these elements are essential for successfully re-entering the workforce.

The outcome of the BTM for women returnees who participated in the program is the result of all the return-to-work schemes implemented during this period, not only the main one (the consulting project). These women gained greater inspiration, drive, and confidence through the variety of return-to-work schemes offered in the BTM program, which helped many of them successfully return to work. As Panteli (2012) described about the Equalitec Program in the UK, BTM shows that the involvement of different stakeholders (private sector, university and workshop volunteers) has a positive result on returnees by providing them with different experiences that help them develop personally and professionally. Furthermore, it was not only the BTM responsible for these women's successful return. In line with Singh & Vanka´s (2021) research findings, it was also important for women to be proactive during the program to make the most out of BTM and afterward to find a job. BTM, as well as other RTWE, is an important step to facilitate and accelerate the return to employment, but by itself, it will not be sufficient to make women enter the workforce again.

In line with Cabrera´s (2007) conclusion that "*KCM predictions, mid-career women were most interested in finding balance in their lives and the desire for authenticity increased across the lifespan*" more than half of BTM participants referred that work-life balance was key for their future career and that flexibility was also quite important. Furthermore, contributing to society and/or to a cause and feeling useful were other key aspects mentioned by interviewers. Before their career break, the interviewees were mostly in the corporate sector (21 out of 26 participants), with the remaining self-employed. In line with McGrath et al. (2005) findings, BTM women changed or intend to shift working sectors and functional roles after opting back in, and just half of the women intended or were working in the corporate sector. Furthermore, in general, according to McGrath´s findings, the corporations women entered were smaller than the ones they had worked for before. Additionally, half of the women also considered and/or were working as self-employed, mainly when they thought it would be more difficult to re-enter the corporate world or preferred to have better control of their lives, and one fourth were thinking or were working in the social/ not-for-profit sector in line with Lovejoy and Stone (2012, 2021). These authors revealed that when professional women refocus, they frequently move from traditionally male-dominated or mixed-gender employment to historically female-dominated fields, as well as from the corporate to the social service sectors. Rather than being only individual preferences, these priorities may also be influenced by ongoing social expectations that place women as the main caregivers and associate them with communal types of roles, which in turn influences the types of jobs they see as possible or suitable for them (Eagly et al., 2004, 2019).

As Lovejoy and Stone (2012, 2021) also found, women who took career breaks have experienced a decline in employment status and income afterward. Employer discontinuity, career redirection towards lower-status, lower-paying industries and part-time work, skill obsolescence, and the decline of human capital and productivity were the causes (Lovejoy and Stone, 2012, 2021). We have seen the same trend among BTM participants who were reemployed, with almost everyone downgrading their positions and salaries, but expecting to be promoted and return to a better-paid position in the future. Given the limited availability of part-time positions in the Portuguese corporate sector, women seeking part-time positions were predominantly able to do so through self-employment or by working in the social sector.

Another relevant aspect that could be drawn from the research was ageism. Batinovic et al. (2023)´s recent study shows that there is a significant amount of ageism in the hiring process, beginning with those between the ages of 40 and 49 and increasing as candidates are

older. Given the ongoing political efforts in many nations to extend job opportunities and work beyond for older people, ageism for older candidates and employees may not only have detrimental effects on the individual worker's health and finances, but it may also prove to be detrimental primarily to society as a whole because many qualified candidates are being prevented from re-entering the labour market. According to Patient et al. (2024) study in Portugal on ageism in the workplace, human resources, and staffing decisions involving younger (18 to 34 years old) and older workers (50 years old or older) are often biased based on age. Older applicants have less access to interviews and higher-paying jobs, and fewer training opportunities than younger applicants. The same study found that older workers, compared to younger ones, are also evaluated more unfavourably in terms of performance, development potential, and interpersonal skills, such as vitality and risk-taking ability, which leads to lower intention of recruiting older candidates. Therefore, it is not surprising that we also found age discrimination in the recruitment process persisted among BTM participants, especially after age 50. The older they were, the more difficult it became for them to return to the job market. As mentioned by Patient et al. (2024) study, ageism stigma, that older people are less competent than younger people, continues to be quite strong among companies´ employees, and the positive aspects of BTM were not able to eliminate that. In this BTM participant study, we saw the same stigma applied to women with a longer career break; the longer the career break, the harder it is to opt back in.

Mainiero and Sullivan's (2005) kaleidoscopic career model (KCM) shows that women reorganise their responsibilities and relationships to change the trajectory of their careers by focusing on various facets of their lives. Hence, rather than basing decisions solely on her own isolated acts as an independent actor, every career move is assessed in the context of how it might affect her relationships with others. KCM´s three parameters or mirrors (authenticity, balance, and challenge) blend in different ways throughout a woman's life, mirroring the distinct patterns of her career. Most of the women interviewed from the BTM (24 out of the 26) followed the KCM model, while only two pursued a linear career path. In doing so, these women actively challenged the traditional career model to balance their professional and family responsibilities.

3.7 Limitations and future research

This study is relevant because it addresses an emerging topic for which there is little scientific literature. As suggested by Sterling & Merluzzi (2019, p.10) in their research agenda

paper, “Across the alternative hiring arrangements (AHA) typology, the least studied form of tryout is the returnship, with some industry reports suggesting career returnees may have more than a 50% chance of receiving a permanent offer. Yet, this has not been systematically studied by scholars.” Furthermore, “We need to learn more about the experiences of returnees, both in the workplace and their home life”, and understand what the results of returnships are in women´s lives, even when they do not get a direct offer from the returnship company that they have worked with.

While this study provided valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The findings are shaped by the scope of the selected literature and the Portuguese contexts in which this study was conducted. Variations in cultural, organizational, and economic environments may limit the extent to which the conclusions can be generalized across different settings. In addition, this study relies on a limited number of BTM women participants. Furthermore, BTM was designed for women with a management, economics, or engineering undergraduate degree and/or with a post-graduate or master's degree in those areas.

Future research could build on these findings and evaluate women participants of different RTW and RTWE across a broader range of industries and educational backgrounds. More longitudinal and comparative studies would help deepen understanding of how career breaks influence long-term career trajectories and the effectiveness of reintegration programs, such as BTM, over time. It is important to mention that there are many studies on the effects of maternity leave on women's professional careers. Still, to the researcher's knowledge, the consequences of a career break for other family reasons, such as taking care of a parent or a disabled family member, are mostly not being considered in academic studies.

On another topic, most recruitment selection processes nowadays use algorithms to select CVs or LinkedIn profiles, and this automated process excludes the CVs and candidacies of atypical returnees. Research on algorithms and artificial intelligence used to select candidates is an emerging area of the literature, and future research could explore how artificial intelligence is used to examine how human resources hiring practices affect career break candidates.

In addition to that, as mentioned by BTM participants, the lack of work and return to work process affects their mental health; and literature demonstrate that changing those aspects can improve their mental health, therefore it will be interesting to further explore this issue in

the subgroup of career break women do confirm that changing those aspects indeed improved women´s mental health.

Finally, it is important to note that this research relied on BTM participant perceptions. As perceptions are essentially subjective, they are susceptible to change over time, influenced by both individuals' life circumstances and the specific market conditions in which their firms operate. Therefore, repeating the same survey with the same women's profile in a couple of years and with a larger sample of women can also validate the current conclusions.

Chapter 4: Women Returnees and RTWE Programs: Insights from SMEs

4.1 Introduction

Most RTW are run mostly by large corporations (Cohen, 2012, 2021; Timewise and Women Returnees, 2018), but the backbone of the European economy are the small-to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which the European Union defines as companies that employ less than 250 people and have an annual turnover of less than 50 million euros and/or a balance sheet total of less than 43 million euros" (EuroStat, 2022).

In Portugal, there is a public entity that certifies that a company can be considered a SME: IAPMEI - Agency for Competitiveness and Innovation, I.P. (2025). IAPMEI is the main Portuguese public body dedicated to supporting the sustainable development of SMEs through a wide range of services, including financial incentives, certifications, training, and technical support. It serves as a strategic partner to promote innovation, competitiveness, and business growth nationwide. Apart from the SME certification, IAPMEI also awards two other certifications: the SME Leader seal and the SME Excellence seal. In more detail, the SME Certification assesses whether a company meets the definition of a small or medium-sized enterprise under the EU regulation/recommendation (EU 2003/361) and is helpful for eligibility for certain funds/incentives aimed at SMEs. The SME Leader status is awarded to companies that demonstrate solid economic and financial performance, strong management, and a sound risk profile, serving as a seal of reputation and credibility in the market. The SME Excellence distinction represents a higher level of recognition, granted annually to the best-performing companies among the SME Leaders, highlighting those with exceptional growth, competitiveness, and financial stability. Together, these distinctions help increase business visibility, build trust with partners, and encourage continued excellence among Portuguese SMEs (IAPMEI, 2025).

Even though the total of the Portuguese economy and the number of enterprises is much smaller than the European Union, the composition of the different types of enterprises are quite similar (European Commission, 2025). SMEs represent 99,9% of total enterprises in Portugal compared to 99,8% in the European Union (European Commission, 2025) and serve as a key driver of employment, innovation, and regional development. Data on the Portuguese and European Union countries, number of enterprises by enterprise size, number of people

employed by enterprise size, and the monetary value added they bring by enterprise size can be seen in Table 16.

Table 16

Enterprise Distribution, Employment, and Monetary Value Added by Firm Size in Portugal and the European Union

Indicator	Type of Enterprise	Portugal (Number/ € Billion)	Portugal (Share)	European Union (Number/ € Billion)	European Union (Share)
Number of Enterprises	Micro	1.056.056	95,5%	24.514.649	93,6%
	Small	41.884	3,8%	1.404.631	5,4%
	Medium	6.751	0,6%	214	0,8%
	Total SMEs	**1.104.691**	**99,9%**	**26.133.280**	**99,8%**
	Large Enterprises	1.117	0,1%	44.358	0,2%
Employment	Micro	1.613.293	39,7%	41.540.252	30,1%
	Small	812.709	20,0%	26.889.824	19,5%
	Medium	670.297	16,5%	21.358.947	15,5%
	Total SMEs	**3.096.299**	**76,3%**	**89.789.023**	**65,1%**
	Large Enterprises	962.579	23,7%	48.039.714	34,9%
Monetary Value Added	Micro	34	24,5%	18.164	20,1%
	Small	30	21,4%	15.044	16,6%
	Medium	30	22,0%	15.275	16,9%
	Total SMEs	**94**	**67,9%**	**48.483**	**53,6%**
	Large Enterprises	44	32,1%	42.044	46,4%

Note, SMEs = small and medium-sized enterprises, Values for "Number of Enterprises" and "Employment" are absolute counts, while "Monetary alue Added" is expressed in billions of euros,

Source: European Commission, 2025

Due to their limited scale and resources, SMEs often face greater challenges in developing or managing RTW by themselves. Nevertheless, they can still benefit from accessing the valuable talent pool of career-break women seeking to re-enter the workforce, as well as by hiring returnees from existing RTW or RTWE (Timewise & Women Returnees, 2018). Since 2018, Women Returners (2021) has launched several cross-company initiatives within the legal, financial, and professional services sectors. These collaborative programs enable SMEs to participate in RTW initiatives aligned with smaller-scale recruitment needs or to pilot the concept before implementing their own (Women Returners, 2021). This model allows both SMEs and larger corporations to share knowledge and costs, while jointly

advancing workforce diversity across their industries. Furthermore, even when SMEs are unable to implement an RTW program independently or through cross-company collaboration, they can still access a wider pool of qualified professionals by recruiting participants from existing RTW and RTWE programs who have been effectively prepared for re-entry into the labour market (Timewise and Women Returnees, 2018; Women Returners, 2021).

Companies are finding that these career breakers can bring many advantages to their businesses (Timewise and Women Returnees, 2018). Returnees are workers who understand the culture and expectations of the workforce (O'Donnell, 2018) and have huge previous valuable experience. They bring gender and background diversity to companies´ teams, which has already been proven to bring better business decisions, higher competitiveness, and greater shareholder value. Government policies were created, for example, in the UK, but there is still little research on their impact (UK Government, 2017). In countries such as Portugal, no research was found on the outcomes of RTW or RTWE initiatives, even though three RTW programs had been launched in the two years preceding this study and an RTWE had been implemented, and is still running, four years earlier (Mercedes-Benz.io, 2022; Organon, 2022; Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2022). Therefore, this study aimed to understand of how Portuguese SMEs perceive experienced women professionals, with or without a career break, and to assess the impact of an RTWE program on career-break women when applying for jobs. It examined the potential benefits and limitations/risks these women may bring to companies, as well as SMEs' hiring practices and the conditions that might facilitate the recruitment of women returning from a career break. Additionally, the study explored whether age also influences SMEs' perceptions of career-break women.

4.2 Methodology

To answer the third research question of "*How do small/ medium enterprises (SME) perceive the value of RTWE when assessing career break women applying for a job?"* Quantitative research was selected since is particularly valuable for generating numerical data that can be statistically tested and generalized. It focuses on measuring variables (such as quantity and the frequency it occurs) and testing specific hypotheses, typically through the use of large, structured samples and standardized methods (Clark et al., 2021). Common quantitative techniques include surveys with closed-ended questions, which produce objective data in the form of numbers, figures, and statistical results (Nardi, 2018). Given that the objective was to research the perception of SMEs, for this research an online survey with

mostly closed-ended questions was developed to generate statistical results that would support the study's conclusions.

4.2.1 Survey

The survey aimed to explore SMEs' recruitment practices for experienced professionals, focusing on companies' views of the benefits and, limitations/risks associated with experienced women with over ten years of professional experience, whether currently working or on a career break of at least one year. It also examined the length of career break that companies consider acceptable when making hiring decisions, the conditions under which they are more willing to hire women returning from a career break, their perceptions of returnship programs, and the types of support they would be willing to provide.

The ten-question survey was developed based on insights from a prior study involving women participating in the BTM. It also considers the evidence on the benefits reported by companies that intended to hire and/or were working with returnees from this group of professionals with career breaks (Kaushiva & Joshi, 2020; Women Returners, 2021). These studies identified key challenges, motivations, and perceived benefits associated with women's return to the workforce, which directly informed the thematic focus and formulation of the survey items. While the survey is not a direct replication of a validated instrument, it is based on existing research and reflects commonly studied themes in career re-entry.

The survey relied on structured response formats, using a combination of nominal (categorical) and ordinal (interval-based) response options. Multiple-choice questions, both single-response and multiple-response, were used to understand SMEs' perceptions, practices, and preferences, while interval-based response options were employed to capture ordered, time-related information. This approach made it possible to analyse the data in a clear and organized way, while also keeping the questions simple and easy for people in organizations to answer.

Specifically, the first multiple-choice categorical items question with multiple answers aimed to measure SMEs' perceptions of the potential benefits of women with more than ten years of professional experience. Fourteen different benefit items were listed, along with an additional option of "no benefits." The second multiple-choice categorical items question with multiple answers assessed SMEs' perceptions of potential limitations and risks associated with these women, listing fifteen items and including a "none of the above" option. The use of

multiple-response items allowed respondents to select all applicable options, providing a more comprehensive representation of SMEs' perceptions and enabling the identification of co-occurring benefits and limitations/risks.

The third question was a single-response item using an ordinal, interval-based response scale to assess the maximum duration of a career break that SMEs considered acceptable when evaluating candidates. Response options began at one year, aligned with the threshold used by the Portuguese Professional Training and Employment Institute (*Instituto de Emprego e Formação Profissional – IEFP*) to classify long-term unemployment, and increased in two-year increments up to "more than five years" (IEFP, 2024). An additional option of "no timeframe is taken into account" was included to capture firms that do not consider career breaks as a limiting factor. This structure enabled the analysis of variation in SMEs' tolerance for career breaks by identifying the maximum duration considered acceptable across respondents.

The fourth question was also a single-response item using ordinal interval categories to determine when the company last hired a new employee, ranging from short-term (less than six months; six to twelve months) to medium-term (one to two years) and longer-term periods (more than two years). The fifth question was an open-ended inquiry designed to understand the average number of hires per year.

The sixth and seventh questions were multiple-response categorical items, intended to assess different aspects of the recruitment process. Question six focused on the number of experienced professionals, distinguishing between men and women, with or without a career break, who applied for the SMEs' open positions. Question seven examined the number of these same types of candidates who were actually hired. This structure enabled comparison between applicant pools and hiring outcomes.

The eighth question was also a multiple-response categorical item designed to identify the types of conditions SMEs would be more willing to hire experienced professional women, both with and without a career break. The listed options were defined based on conditions frequently mentioned in the prior qualitative study and supported by the literature review. The ninth question was a dichotomous yes-or-no item intended to determine whether SMEs considered returnships important for professionals on a career break who wished to re-enter the labour market. To conclude this part, the tenth question was a multiple-response categorical

item, aimed at understanding the types of support SMEs were willing to provide to the BTM program, with response options based on the program's proposed partnership elements.

Finally, four questions were included to capture the respondent's profile, along with seven questions that described the company's characteristics.

It is also important to note that on the survey, the group of women on a career break was sub-divided into two age categories: 30–49 years old and 50 years or older to understand if results varied between age groups. This decision was made due to previous literature research show that workers and applicants above 50 years old experience age-related bias ("ageism") (Batinovic et al., 2023; Patient et al., 2024). Additionally, internal data from the BTM program (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2025) showed significant differences in return-to-work outcomes between these groups, with a 67% reintegration rate within one year for women under 50, compared to 43% for those aged 50 and above.

4.2.2 Procedure

The survey instrument was pilot-tested with corporate partners affiliated with Universidade Católica Portuguesa to assess face validity and ensure the clarity and relevance of its items. All data collected during the pilot phase remain confidential and are restricted to internal use within Universidade Católica Portuguesa. Following the validation process, the survey underwent minor grammatical and phrasing refinements to improve readability, alongside small content adjustments made to enhance the clarity of certain items and facilitate the drawing of conclusions; however, the core structure and theoretical base of the original questions remained unchanged.

The selection of SMEs was guided by official certification criteria. In Portugal, SME status is formally recognised through certification by IAPMEI, the national agency responsible for competitiveness and innovation, which serves as the benchmark for eligibility for various state incentives and support programmes (IAPMEI, 2025). Therefore, to address the third research question, a partnership was established with IAPMEI (2025) to study SME companies holding the SME Leader and Excellence certifications in 2023. In that year, 11,368 Portuguese SMEs were awarded SME Leader certifications, of which 4,136 also achieved SMEs Excellence certifications. From the pool of companies that received these awards, a sample of more than half of the companies was selected, specifically 2,329 firms. These companies had export experience and operated in sectors producing marketable goods.

IAPMEI sent an email to selected sample, inviting them to complete an online survey hosted on Qualtrics, accessible via a link included in the email. Both the email and the survey were conducted in Portuguese. An English version of the survey questions (translated using Google Translate software) can be found in Appendix A3. A total of 133 company responses were received: 102 fully completed the survey and 31 partially completed it, resulting in a response rate of approximately 6%. The survey was conducted between April 1 and April 25, 2025.

The profile of the IAPMEI responding companies was in accordance with the dimensional and sectoral distribution of the Leading SMEs. 64% of companies are small, with 10 to 49 employees; 32% are medium-sized, with 50 to 249 employees; 3% are micro, with six to nine employees; and only 1% are large, with more than 250 employees. The sectors represented were primarily industrial, accounting for 54% of the companies in the sample; followed by the commercial and service sectors at 26%; transport and logistics at 7%; information technology at 5%; and other sectors, which together accounted for the remaining 8%. Regarding nationality, the majority of companies were Portuguese (96%), while 3% were Portuguese-registered but headquartered abroad. A small proportion (1%) was headquartered in Portugal but had most of its branches in other European countries.

SMEs were almost entirely led by men (89%), only 7% were under the leadership of women, and 4% preferred not to answer. For the majority of surveyed SMEs women represented less than 50% of the workforce. In more detail, 26% of companies mentioned that women represent zero to 10% of workforce; 26% of companies state that women represent 11 to 30% of workforce; 28% of companies indicate that women represent 31% to 50% of workforce; only 15% of companies mentioned that women represent 51 to 70% of workforce and the remaining companies stated that women represented more than 70% of the workforce. Companies reported higher turnover among employees under 30 years of age, with 54% turnover among employees under 30, 42% among employees between 30 and 49, and only 4% among employees 50 years old or above.

The questionnaire was answered mainly by senior-level individuals with management responsibilities (48% of board members or director level; 29% of managers; 22% of assistants or technicians, and only 1% of junior or operational level) from mostly financial (37%) and human resources (22%) areas. Other areas included operations (10%), commercial (4%), and others (27%). There was a balanced distribution between males (48%) and females (51%), with

1% preferring not to respond to this question. Finally, respondents' ages were equally distributed between 30 and 49 and 50 and above, with 48% in each group; the remaining 4% were respondents under 30 years of age.

4.2.3 Data Analysis

In this study, both basic descriptive statistics and more advanced analyses were conducted to ensure robustness of the findings. Simple statistics such as minimum and maximum as well as averages were first calculated to summarize the data in Excel, followed by more sophisticated tests (including Cronbach's alpha to assess internal consistency and the Cochran´s Q test to evaluate homogeneity across groups) in SPSS. This combination of methods provided both an overview of the dataset and a deeper examination of its reliability and validity.

Descriptive measures and charts served to outline the central tendencies, variability, and ranking among responses for all questions. Afterwards, depending on the questions, the following analyses were performed: Cochran's Q test, Cronbach's alpha test, Categorical Principal Components Analysis (CATPCA), and Friedman's test.

The Cochran Q test was applied to three questions to detect heterogeneity and assess the comparability of results across evaluated groups (active experienced women aged 30 or more years, career break women aged 30-49 years, and career break women aged 50 or more years). Cochran's Q test is a nonparametric statistical test used to determine if there are significant differences in a dichotomous (success/failure or has a condition/doesn´t have a condition) dependent variable across three or more related (matched) groups. The test analyses whether the proportion of a specific outcome (e.g., having or not having a given benefit) is consistent across these repeated measurements.

To assess the reliability of the same three different questions, we employed the internal consistency method by calculating Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951), a widely used coefficient regarded as a strong indicator of reliability (Nunnally, 1978). This coefficient can take values between 0 and 1. Cronbach (1951) argues that internal consistency reflects the degree to which an instrument is reliable: when the variability of the same indicator across participants is low, the associated measurement error is also reduced. In other words, the smaller the overall variance among respondents, the closer Cronbach's alpha approaches 1, indicating greater consistency and, consequently, higher reliability of the instrument. Nunnally

(1978) suggest that a value of 0,70 or higher is generally considered acceptable for many research applications, especially in the early stages of research or when developing new instruments, values above 0,80 are often considered good, and values above 0,90 are considered excellent. In our survey, the alpha Cronbach in different questions varied between 0,84 and 0,92, demonstrating that the survey has high reliability.

To evaluate whether the items from the question on limitations/risks perceived by SMEs regarding experienced women, with and without a career break, could be reduced to a smaller set of uncorrelated variables, we conducted a Categorical Principal Components Analysis (CATPCA). CATPCA is a statistical technique used to reduce and summarize data when the variables are categorical or ordinal (for example, survey questions with responses such as “agree/disagree").

Finally, the Friedman test was used for another two questions that examined SME practices across different groups of men and women over time. This test was chosen because it can detect differences between three or more related groups when the data does not meet the assumption of normality.

4.3 Results of the Survey

As mentioned in the methodology section, the SME´s survey was composed of ten questions to evaluate both the perception of SMEs on the benefits and limitations/risks that experienced professionals can bring,

4.3.1 SME´s perceptions of potential experienced women benefits

The first survey question aimed to investigate SMEs’ perceptions of the organizational potential benefits of employing women with more than 10 years of professional experience, either currently active in the labour market and over the age of 30, or returning from a career break of more than one year and aged between 30 and 49, or 50 and above. In this question, 131 representatives from different SMEs have answered. The results are shown in Chart 11.

Chart 11

SME´s perceptions of potential organizational benefits of recruiting experienced women who are currently working or are on a career break



Source: Data collected by the author

After the frequency chart was created, we performed Cochran's Q tests to determine whether respondents significantly differed in their association of each benefits with each of the three professional groups (these groups are like repeated measures). This Cochran Q test is appropriate for multiple binary (related) responses. For each benefit, the test will compare the proportion of respondents who selected that benefit across the three professional groups. Two hypotheses were formulated:

- Ho considered that no differences between the groups;
- Ha: at least one of the groups is statistically different.

The results of this test are shown in Table 17.

Table 17

Cochran Q Test on perceived benefits in recruiting women with more than 10 years of experience

Benefits	**Q**	**p-value**	
Speed of integration	66,685	<0,001	***
Contribution to innovation	72,021	<0,001	***
Motivation	23,408	<0,001	***
Initiative	61,473	<0,001	***
Responsibility	0,556	0,757	n.s.
Availability and flexibility	10,807	0,005	**
Commitment	2,696	0,260	n.s.
Diversity	1,171	0,557	n.s.
Response to temporary needs	2,810	0,245	n.s.
Mentoring the youngest	9,475	0,009	**
External visibility	4,132	0,127	n.s.
Ethics	4,837	0,089	n.s.
Network of contacts	23,357	<0,001	***
Turnover	42,457	<0,001	***
None of the above answers applies	1,273	0,529	n.s.

where:

- *n.s.* means *not significant*, in other words, respondents did not perceive statistically significant differences among the women´s groups
- *significant* means respondents associate the benefit in a statistically different way between at least one of the groups
    - *** p<0,001
    - ** p<0,010
    - * p<0,05

To assess internal consistency and determine whether the 14 benefits ("none of the above answers apply" answer was excluded from this analysis) measure a latent reality, that is, whether they are coherent with each other, the Alpha Cronbach test was used. The results are shown in Table 18.

Table 18

Alpha Cronbach Test on the benefits for different 10-year experienced women´s group

All benefits for the group	Alpha Cronbach Value
Active and over 30 years of age	0,920
On a career break for more than 12 months and between 30 and 49 years of age	0,908
On a career break for more than 12 months and 50 or older years of age	0,911

All Cronbach's alphas were above 0,9, considered excellent in terms of internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978), indicating that the items are stable across all groups and measure the same concept. That is, people who report one benefit tend to report others, converging on the same latent trait: the perceived benefit of recruiting women. Cronbach's alpha also remains stable across professional groups, indicating that reliability does not vary substantially. In other words, these items measure the concept with the same quality across all profiles of female professionals analysed. This suggests that comparisons among groups are well-supported.

From the perspective of companies, women who are currently active have advantages over those outside the labour market in terms of speed of integration, contributions to innovation, greater motivation, and greater initiative.

Women aged 30-49 who are out of the labour market for more than 1 year have the same level of commitment as those who are active, but with more contacts and lower turnover. But clearly, for SMEs, this group of women lags behind the benefits that active working women have.

Women over 50 years old, also out of the labour market for more than 1 year, stand out in more than twice as many as the other two profiles, in benefits such as lower turnover, availability, and flexibility, and also in mentoring the youngest and their networks of contacts. For companies, this profile of women also offers greater diversity and external visibility, a stronger sense of responsibility, ethics, and commitment, but respondents did not perceive statistically significant differences among the three women´s profile groups.

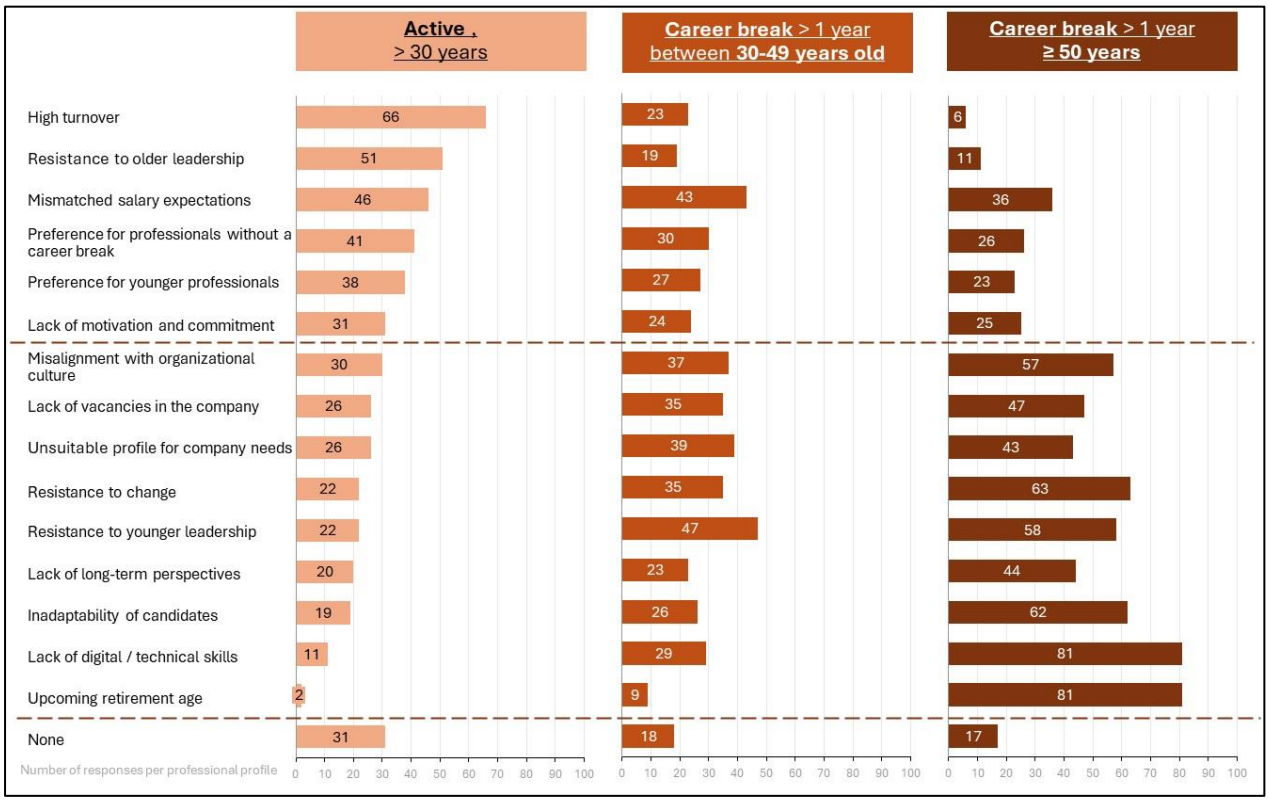
It is important to underline that, from the perspective of companies, this profile of women on career break over 50 years of age offers more benefits (10 out of 14 benefits are substantially above those of the other two women´s profiles) than the other groups.

4.3.2 SME´s perceptions of potential experienced women limitations and/or risks

The second question aimed to investigate SMEs' perceptions of the potential organizational limitations (preference for professionals without career breaks; preference for younger professionals, lack of vacancies in the company and unsuitable profile for company needs) and/or risks (high turnover, resistance to older leadership, mismatch with candidate salary expectations, lack of motivation and commitment, misalignment with organizational culture; resistance to change, resistance to younger leadership, lack of long-term perspective for candidates, inadaptability of candidates, lack of digital or technical skills and upcoming retirement age) of employing experienced professional women with more than 10 years of professional experience, either currently active in the labour market and over the age of 30, or returning from at least a one-year career break and aged between 30 and 49 or 50 and above. In this question, 108 people have answered. The results are shown in Chart 12.

Chart 12

SME´s perceptions of potential organizational limitations/risks of recruiting experienced women who are currently working or are on a career break



Source: Data collected by the author

After the frequency chart was created, we performed Cochran's Q tests for each limitation/risk, as we did for the benefits, to determine whether respondents differed significantly across the three professional groups (these groups are like repeated measures). For each limitation/risk, the test compared the proportion of respondents who selected that limitation/risk across the three professional groups. Two hypotheses were formulated:

- Ho considered that no differences among the groups;
- Ha: at least one of the groups is statistically different.

The results of this test are shown in Table 19.

Table 19

Cochran Q Test Limitations and Risks in recruiting women with more than 10 years of experience

Limitations and/or risks	Q	p-value	
High turnover	71,725	<0,001	***
Resistance to older leadership	42,000	<0,001	***
Mismatch with candidate salary expectations	2,324	0,313	*n.s.*
Preference for professionals without career breaks	5,324	0,070	*n.s.*
Preference for younger professionals	5,246	0,073	*n.s.*
Lack of motivation and commitment	1,323	0,516	*n.s.*
Misalignment with organizational culture	15,707	<0,001	***
Lack of vacancies in the company	13,059	0,001	***
Unsuitable profile for company needs	6,493	0,039	*
Resistance to change	31,357	<0,001	***
Resistance to younger leadership	25,210	<0,001	***
Lack of long-term perspective for candidates	14,657	<0,001	***
Inadaptability of candidates	43,753	<0,001	***
Lack of digital or technical skills	94,381	<0,001	***
Upcoming retirement age	133,419	<0,001	***
None of the answers applies	9,892	0,007	**

where:

- *n.s.* means *not significant*, in other words, respondents did not perceive statistically significant differences between the women´s groups
- *significant* means respondents associate the limitation/risk in a statistically different way between at least one of the groups
    - *** p<0,001
    - ** p<0,010
    - * p<0,05

To measure internal consistency and determine whether the 15 limitations/risks ("none of the above answers apply" answer was excluded from this analysis) measure a latent reality, that is, whether they are coherent with each other, the Alpha Cronbach test was used. The results are shown in Table 20.

Table 20

Alpha Cronbach Test on limitations and risks for the different 10-year experienced women´s groups

All limitations/risks for the group	Alpha Cronbach Value
Active and over 30 years of age	0,841
On a career break for more than 12 months and between 30 and 49 years of age	0,879
On a career break for more than 12 months and 50 or older years of age	0,919

All Cronbach's alphas were above 0,8, considered good in terms of internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978), indicating that the items are stable across all groups and measure the same concept. That is, people who report one limitation/risk tend to report others, converging on the same latent trait: the perceived limitations/risks of recruiting women. Cronbach's alpha also remains stable across professional groups, although higher in the older women's group, indicating that reliability does not vary substantially. In other words, these items measure the concept with the same quality across all profiles of female professionals analysed. This conclusion suggests that comparisons among groups are well-supported.

Categorical Principal Component Analyses (CATPCA) were carried out for the limitations/risks items within each of the three women´s groups: "Employed, aged over 30," "On a career break for more than 12 months and aged between 30 and 49," and "On a career break for more than 12 months and aged 50 or older." The aim was to verify whether the set of limitations/risks items was measuring the same dimension or whether it would be better to subdivide it into more than one dimension. For each group, analyses demonstrated a strong dimension 1, in other words, the items clustered strongly within a single main factor, indicating that they all relate to the same underlying construct, limitations/risks, and the internal consistency, as shown by Cronbach's alpha, was good, confirming that the items function coherently together. There were indications of a second dimension, but it was very weak, and its internal consistency was low, showing that separating the items into two groups would not be worthwhile. Therefore, it is preferable to keep all items in one block (a decision supported by earlier Cronbach's alpha results showing good overall reliability).

Therefore from the SME´s perspective, when we evaluate their perception on women who are currently working with more than 10 years of experience and are more than 30 years-old, this group presents six limitations/ risks higher than the ones perceived in other experience women groups with more than 10 years of experience (first with 30 to 49 years-age and the

second with 50 or more years of age), but with more than one year of career break. Of these six limitations/risks, only two are significant demonstrated in Cochran Q test: high turnover (61% of SMEs or 66 respondents, compared to 23 career break women with 30-49 years and six respondents for career break women with 50 or more years of age) and resistance to older leadership (51 respondents vs. 19 and 11 for career break women). The other four limitations/ risks (mismatched salary expectations, preference for professionals without a career break; preference for younger professionals and lack of motivation and commitment), the Cochran Q test indicate that they were not significant. In other words, the differences among the answers of the three groups were not significant, meaning that SMEs do not perceive lack of motivation from career breakers higher than active women.

Regarding women between the ages of 30 and 49 who have been out of the workforce for more than a year, SMEs has a perception that their limitations/ risks compared to active women with more than 30 years of age are worse in the following limitations/ risks: misalignment with organizational culture (37 respondents for career break 30-49 years of age vs. 30 for active women with more than 30 years of age); lack of vacancies in the company (35 vs. 26), unsuitable profile for company needs (39 vs. 26), resistance to change (35 vs. 22), resistance to younger leadership (47 vs. 22), lack of long-term perspective for candidates (23 vs. 20), inadaptability of candidates (26 vs. 19), lack of digital or technical skills (29 vs. 11) and upcoming retirement age (9 vs. 2). We must note that, for the factor of lack of long-term perspective, this group of women is perceived almost the same as the active women group (23 vs. 20), and the variation among the three women´s groups of these risks is the smallest among the significant limitations/risk factors. At the same time, this group of women outperforms the career-break women aged 50 or more on the same criteria.

In other words, career break women who are over 50 years old are perceived as facing many more limitations/ risks than the other women´s group. Nine of the 14 most frequently mentioned limitations/risks are associated with this group of women. The most important limitations/ risks for this group, and also stands out compared to the other groups through the Cochran Q test, are upcoming retirement age (81 SMEs mentioned that for this women´s group compared to only 2 for active women group and 9 for career break women with 30-49 years of age); lack of digital or technical skills (also 81 respondents mentioned it for these women´s group compared to 11 for active women and 29 for career break women with 30-49 years of age); resistance to change (62 vs. 22 and 35); followed by inadaptability of candidates (62 vs.19 and 26) and resistance to younger leadership (58 vs 22 and 47). It is worth noting that these

women are perceived to have very low turnover rates and to have low resistance to older leadership.

4.3.3 SME´s recruitment practices

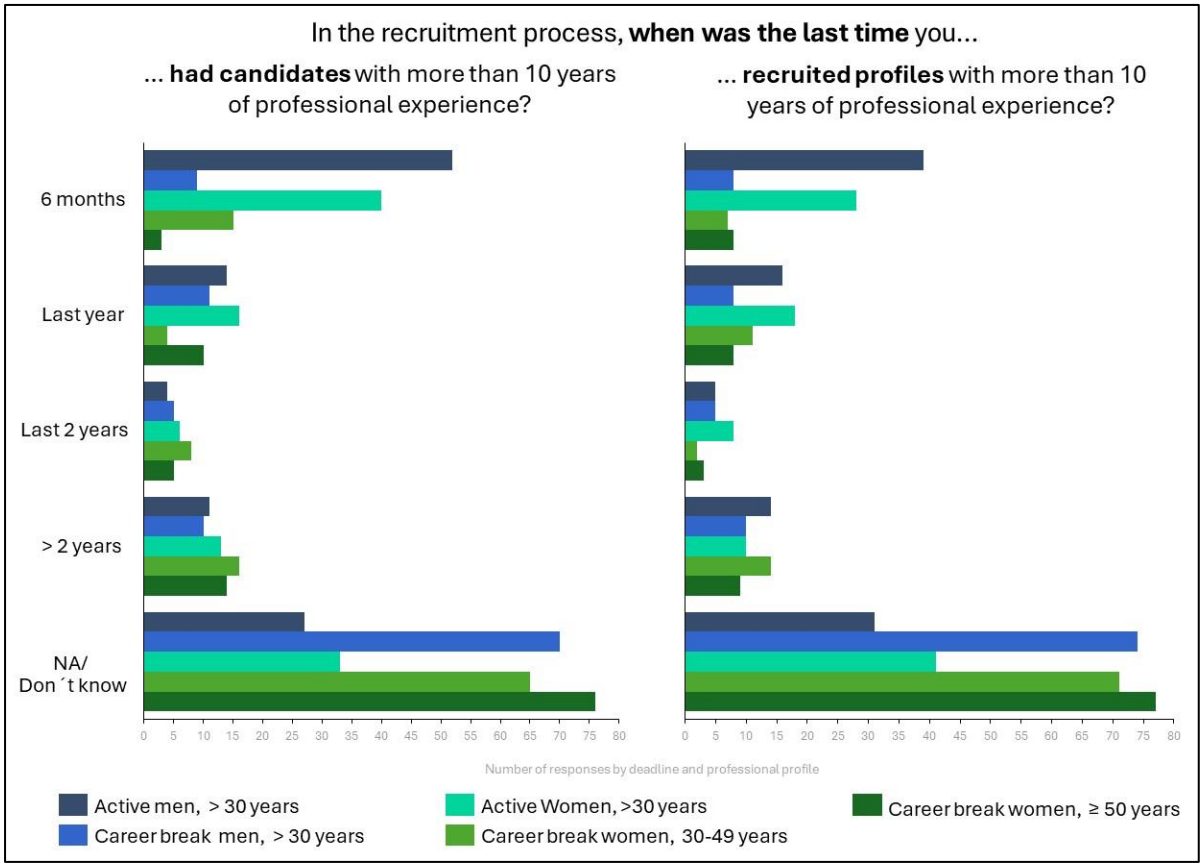
Afterwards, this study tried to understand companies´ recruitment practices. To do that, this research evaluated SMEs´ turnover by employees´ age group to understand if different age groups had higher turnover and therefore made sense the perception that SMEs had that the younger the age group, the higher the turnover. More than half of companies (55%) reported that employees under 30 have the highest turnover, followed by 43% reporting that employees between 30 and 49 have the highest turnover, and 4% reporting that employees over 50 have the lowest turnover. These results align with the benefits and limitations/risks perceived by SMEs for each of the women´s groups described above.

Regarding the last time the company recruited an employee, most respondents (85%) reported hiring within the past six months, while 10% recruited in the previous year, 3% within the past two years, and only 2% more than two years ago. Among these SMEs, 62% indicated that they typically recruit on average one to five employees per year, 27% hire on average of six to ten employees annually, and 5% recruit on average between 11 and 20 employees each year; 5% of companies hire on average 21 to 50 employees per year and finally only 2% mentioned that they don´t hire anyone on an annual basis.

The following two survey questions explored SMEs' experiences in their previous recruitment processes. Chart 13 shows the number of candidates compared with the number of professionals actually hired over the past years, as reported by the companies. Candidates are categorized into five groups: active men over 30 years of age, career-break men over 30, active women over 30, career-break women aged 30 to 49 years, and career-break women aged 50 or older. These results are further broken down by time period: the last six months, the last year, the last two years, more than two years ago, and not applicable/don't know.

Chart 13

Number of Experienced Candidates Vs. Experienced Recruited Professionals in previous years



Source: Data collected by the author

Since the responses are on a temporally ordered scale, we have used the Friedman Test statistic to assess whether responses differed between when they had candidates and when they actually hired different group profiles.

The first Friedman test was on the last time they had "candidates" with more than 10 years of experience. The chi-square test value result was high (140.054), and the p-value <0.001. Therefore, since the p-value is lower than 0,05, there is a statistically significant difference between the different professional groups across all periods of time/responses.

The second test was on the last time they "recruited" profiles with more than 10 years of experience: the chi-square test value was 113,934, with a p-value <0,001. As in the previous test, the chi-square was high with a p-value lower than 0,05; therefore, there is a statistically significant difference between the different professional groups and the selected temporal options.

Further, a descriptive analysis over the six-month period concluded that the number of active men applying and being recruited is more than 35% higher than the number of active women. Active professionals (men or women) have significantly more candidates and recruits than women on career break (three times as many in the case of active women vs. women on career hiatus). During this period, the recruitment rate (compared to the number of applicants) decreases by 25% for active men and 24% for active women. This figure reduces to 11% for men taking a career break, and it doubles (53%) for women taking a career break up to age 49; the figures for women over 50 are reversed, with more being hired than candidates applying, which we can assume is due to direct hiring based on women's networking.

The high number of 'don’t know/not applicable' responses for both men and women with a career break, exceeding the combined total for all other time frame options, highlights how uncommon it is to find or hire professionals with a career break. Moreover, the most recent period (within the last year) clearly shows that active candidates are more likely to be hired than those returning from a career break.

Afterwards, it was asked what SMEs considered an acceptable time out of the job market for hiring candidates with professional experience. More than a third (37%) of companies consider it acceptable to be out of the job market for up to 1 year, and another third (34%) accept a period of up to 3 years. The number of companies for which it is acceptable to be out of the market for 3 to 5 years is insignificant (4%).

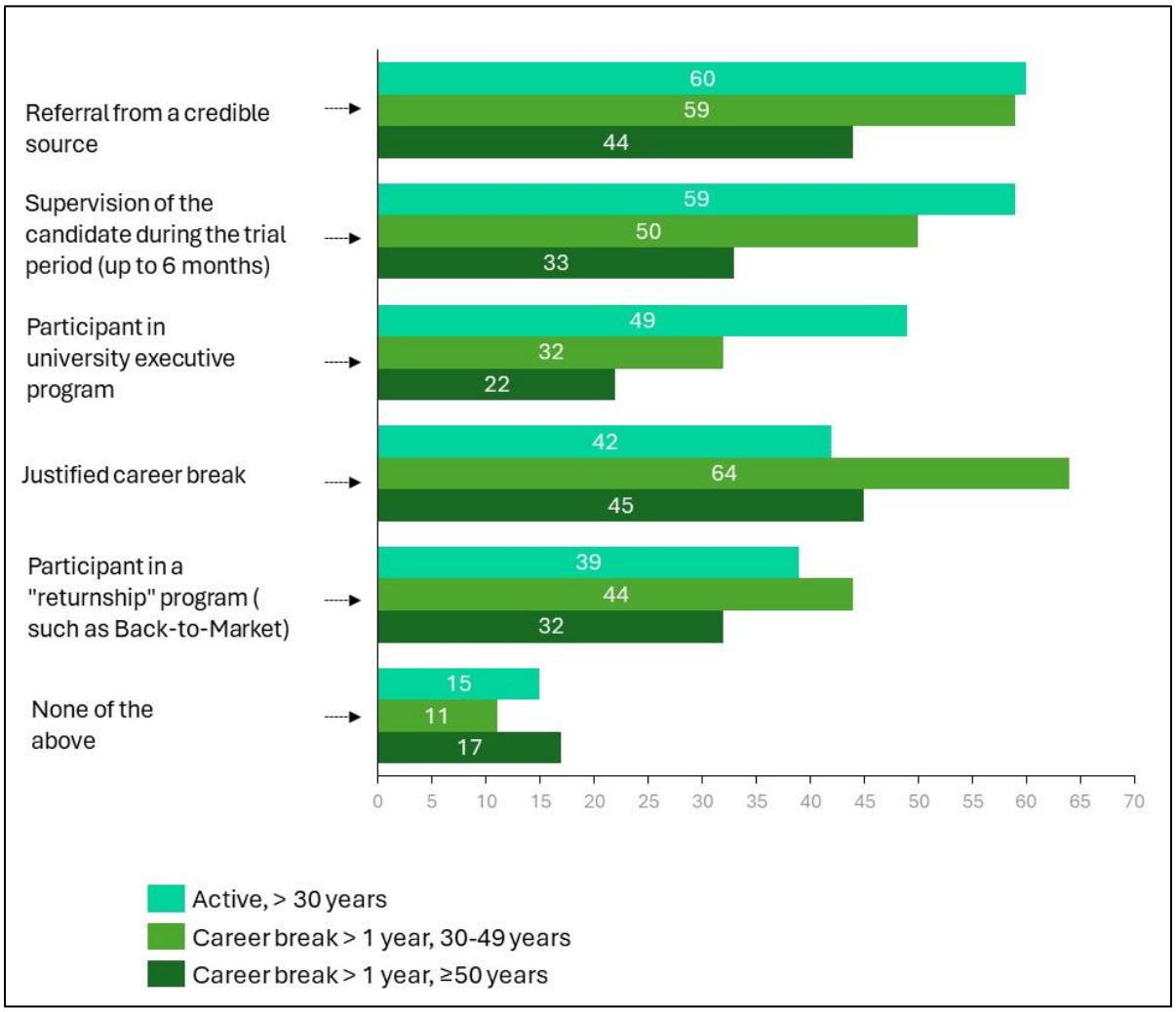
Although 26% of companies reported not considering the 'out of the market' factor in their recruitment process, an analysis of their recruitment practices through this survey's previous questions reveals a clear preference for active professionals. On average, these companies favour active men and women by about 60% compared to those returning from a career break. The same group of companies has greater difficulty responding (don´t know/not applicable) to hiring experienced professionals on career hiatus than to hiring active professionals. These results highlight the fact that for SMEs, the longer that a woman is in a career break, the more difficult it is for her to come back to the job market since there are stereotypes and preconceptions from SME´s perspective about the benefits and limitations/ risks that these women provide.

4.3.4 SMEs' conditions to help hire experienced women professionals

Becker's (1964) skill deterioration theory states that unused or not updated skills decline over time, reducing people competitiveness and employability. Therefore the researcher initially believed was that SMEs would prefer hiring active, experienced professionals instead of career break professionals. To evaluate if there were some conditions that would make SMEs willing to hire women with more than 10 years of experience without a career break as much as with a career break, another question was posed to SME´s respondents. The results are shown in Chart 14.

Chart 14

Conditions that companies will be willing to hire 10-year experienced women professionals



Source: Data collected by the author

After the conditions under which companies will be willing to hire 10-year-experienced women professionals were charted, we performed Cochran's Q tests to determine whether

respondents associated each condition significantly differently with each of the three professional groups (these groups are like repeated measures). This Cochran Q test is appropriate for multiple binary (related) responses. For each condition, the test will compare the proportion of respondents who selected that condition among the three professional groups. Two hypotheses were formulated:

- Ho: considered that no differences between the groups and;
- Ha: at least one of the groups is statistically different.

The results of this test are shown in Table 21.

Table 21

Cochran Q Test on the hiring conditions companies have to recruit 10-year experienced women professionals

Hiring Conditions	**Q**	**p-value**	
Referral from a credible source	8,310	0,016	*
Supervision of the candidate during the trial period (up to 6 months)	18,351	<0,001	***
Participant in university executive program	23,292	<0,001	***
Justified career break	14,475	<0,001	***
Participant in a "returnship" program (such as Back-to-Market	4,449	0,108	*n.s.*
None of the above	2,154	0,341	*n.s.*

where:

- *n.s.*. means not *significant*, in other words, respondents did not perceive statistically significant differences between the women´s groups
- *significant* means respondents associate the conditions in a statistically different way between at least one of the groups
  - *** p<0,001
  - ** p<0,010
  - * p<0,05

To assess internal consistency and determine whether the six conditions measure a latent reality, that is, whether they are coherent with each other, we have used the Cronbach's alpha test. Note that the "no answer applies" was excluded from this test. The results are shown in Table 22.

Table 22

Alpha Cronbach Test on the hiring conditions companies have to recruit a 10-year experienced women´s group

All hiring conditions for the group	Alpha Cronbach Value
Active and over 30 years of age	0,887
On a career break for more than 12 months and between 30 and 49 years of age	0,872
On a career break for more than 12 months and 50 or older years of age	0,872

From the descriptive analysis, we can see that across all women´s groups, companies prefer defining specific hiring conditions to recruit experienced women (whether they are active or on a career break) rather than imposing no conditions. In a general analysis, 85% SMEs mentioned referral from a credible source as the most important condition for all women. Followed by a justified career break and supervision of the candidate during the trial period (up to 6 months), which was mentioned by 81% of companies. Afterwards, 66% of companies referred participants in a "returnship" program (such as Back-to-Market) as an important hiring condition, and 62% participants in a university executive program. Less than one-third of companies (29%) reported that none of the other hiring conditions were relevant. Across the board, there are fewer responses for the profile over 50 years old on a career break, which we conclude that, even under certain conditions, SMEs are not keen on hiring this profile. Companies value the participation of active women in executive programs and consider women's participation in returnship programs relevant, but not the most pertinent hiring criterion.

Afterwards, we have analyzed the differences among the women´s groups for each of the hiring conditions. From the Cochran Q test, we could verify that the hiring conditions “participant in a 'returnship' program (such as Back-to-Market)” and “none of the above” were not significant among different women´s groups.

All Cronbach's alphas were above 0,8, considered good for internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978), indicating that the items are stable across groups and measure the same concept. That is, companies that report one hiring condition tend to report others, converging on the same latent trait: the perceived conditions they face in recruiting experienced women. Cronbach's alpha also remains stable across professional groups, indicating that reliability does not vary substantially. In other words, these items measure the concept with the same quality

across all profiles of female professionals analysed. These analyses suggest that comparisons among groups are well-supported.

Going into more detail for each of the hiring conditions per women´s group, for active women, the most important hiring conditions that will help companies recruit them are referral from credible sources (60 companies mentioned) and supervision of candidates during their probation period (59 answers), followed by participating in an executive program.

Regarding career break, women between 30 and 49 years of age, the most relevant condition mentioned by the company was a justified career break (64 answers and the highest number among all women´s groups and hiring conditions), followed by referral from credible sources (59 companies mentioned) and supervision of candidates during their probation period (50 answers).

Unlike previous women´s groups, career-break women aged 50 or older reported lower hiring conditions, suggesting that companies are less likely to hire them. For this group, the three most relevant hiring conditions were a justified career break (45 responses), followed by referral from a credible source (44 responses), and supervision of candidates (33 responses). This last point reflects a perception that older women don´t need as much supervision as their younger counterparts.

For both groups of career break women, the fact that referral from a credible source is the second most important condition SMEs to consider hiring these women, demonstrates the importance of women using networking to work in their favour. The lack of a network can create a barrier for women to opt back in, as seen in the previous study of this thesis. Additionally, SMEs ranked participation in a RTWE, such as BTM, fourth on the list of conditions that would help companies hire women who have taken career breaks. This was surprisingly mentioned far more often (44 answers for career break women between 30-49 years of age and 32 answers for 50 or more years of age) than the condition of having completed an executive program from various universities (32 and 22 answers for the two career break women´s groups).

Finally, another question was asked regarding SMEs interest in returnship programs that help prepare women and men for re-entry to the job market after a career break. Only 8% of companies said they do not consider RTW important; the vast majority, 92%, said they do. From this group, a new question was asked of how they would be interested in supporting these programs and SMEs could choose multiple answers. The majority of the companies, 61%,

mentioned that they will be willing to disseminate the program information among partners, other companies or business associations; 35% would be willing to participate in an edition of the RTW with the possibility of hiring at least one participant; 25% would recommend potential participants to the programs while 14% would be willing to hire program alumni on a service provision basis for consulting projects or interim management roles, 10% will be willing to sponsor events or workshops and 7% sponsorship of an edition for five women in their company or in a company of their choice, finally 14% mentioned other different ways. It is important to note that when comparing the 14% of companies that expressed openness to hiring former participants of RTW/RTWE programs with the responses to the question 'Under what conditions would you be willing to hire women with more than 10 years of experience?', the difference is striking. The potential hiring of returnship program participants shows much higher numbers, between 32 and 44 companies, compared to only 12 companies in the latter case.

4.4 Discussion

This study separated returnees into two age groups and the results showed that not only are active versus career-break women perceived differently by SMEs, but also SMEs perceive career-break women differently based on their age group. Contrary to findings in the literature suggesting that older workers are perceived by employers as less capable and as having greater limitations (Batinovic et al., 2023; Patient et al., 2024), the present study shows a more nuanced pattern. Women aged over 50 were perceived as having more benefits than career-break women aged 30–49; however, these advantages were offset by a higher perception of limitations and risks compared to the younger group. This study also found that in general RTWE is positively perceived by SMEs, but this is not sufficient to make returnees to be hired. The time that career break women are away from the job market is also relevant, since this time out of the job market reflected in a resumé signals that the person violated the ideal worker norm to employers (Weisshaar, 2018). Consistent with the literature indicating that longer periods out of the labour market make re-entry increasingly difficult (Cabrera, 2007; McGrath et al., 2005), this study found that the longer individuals are absent from the labour market, the more difficult it is for them to be hired by SMEs. This pattern persists regardless of whether employers perceive a positive balance between benefits and limitations or risks. As younger generations increasingly take career breaks (Upton-Clark, 2023) as part of their professional life, in the future the number of candidates with such gaps in their employment histories is likely to grow. Consequently, companies seeking to broaden their talent pool will need to reassess and reduce

existing negative biases toward candidates with career breaks if they want to continue to have all potential candidates included in their recruitment evaluation process.

As found in this research, SMEs consider a justified career break and referrals from reliable sources to be important factors when hiring women returning to work after a career break. These elements help balance the résumé signal that may otherwise violate the ideal worker norm by providing credible information about a candidate's competencies and commitment (Weisshaar, 2018). Furthermore, this highlights that networking is also a key driver for women opting back into the workforce. These factors are important for women who decide to opt back in, as they can strategically leverage this knowledge to their advantage.

In this study, women in active employment with more than 10 years of experience and over 30 years of age are generally perceived by SMEs as professionals who can quickly integrate into a new company, contribute to innovation, and demonstrate strong motivation and initiative, in line with the ideal worker norm (Weisshaar, 2018) . However, this group is also perceived as presenting challenges, including high turnover rates, salary expectations that companies often struggle to meet, and occasional resistance to working under older leadership. But even with these challenges, this group of professional women was hired more than the other groups.

Women returning from a career break, aged 30 to 49 and with over 10 years of experience, are generally perceived somewhat less positively than their peers who have remained continuously employed. Their perceived main advantages include stronger professional networks and lower turnover rates, qualities highly valued by employers. However, they are also perceived as resistant to younger leadership and as having higher salary expectations, creating challenges similar to those faced by actively employed professionals. Interestingly, while companies view these women networks as a key strength, many women themselves report, both in the literature (Cabrera, 2007; McGrath et al., 2005; Offermann et al., 2020; PWC & Women Returners, 2016) and in the qualitative research with BTM participants done previously for this thesis, that they feel their professional networks are limited or diminished, which they see as a barrier to finding new job opportunities and thriving in a new role.

The career break women group with 50 or more years of age profile stands apart from both active or in a career break above 30 years of age women groups, offering distinctive strengths. These professionals are recognized for their sense of responsibility, flexibility,

availability, stability, and mentoring ability, while also showing the lowest perceived turnover rates (which align with SMEs' responses on internal turnover rates by age group). These benefits perceived by SMEs are similar to those found by large corporations for all ages (Cohen, 2012, 2016, 2021) together with high motivation, resulting in returnship programs spreading across many countries and multinationals to attract those professionals. Interestingly enough, even though companies perceived these women as more available and flexible than younger professionals, we found in our study that these women look for opportunities with more work-life balance the same way that other academics found in their research. (Cabrera, 2007; PWC & Women Returners, 2016; Gicheva & Keohane, 2018; Offermann et al., 2020) which doesn´t mean they will not have a high commitment to the company (Cohen, 2012, 2016, 2021), instead, they want more flexible working arrangements. At the same time, according to our SME survey, this profile encounters significant barriers that matches findings from existing literature: being perceived as close to retirement age and lacking digital or technical skills, consistent with the barriers identified by Lai et al. (2025) in their scoping review. Additionally, our survey revealed perception within this group of resistance to change or younger leadership. Also often perceived as less aligned with organizational culture and showing lower initiative, slower integration into new companies, and limited contributions to innovation, particularly among women who have experienced a career break.

The conclusions above were in line with Cohen´s (2021) overall conclusions on returners, even though her research has not explored the age differences among returnees. The fact that women over 50 with a career break were perceived as bringing more benefits than those in the 30-49 age group is offset by the greater limitations and risks attributed to them compared to younger women, both on a career break and in employment, an outcome that was expected given the influence of ageism as previously been mentioned by Patient et al (2024), Lovejoy and Stone (2012), Cabrera (2007), and McGrath et al. (2005).

One-third of companies mentioned in this survey that they are open to career breaks of up to one year, while another third of SMEs accepts one to three year career break; and although 26% of employers claim not to factor the break itself into their decision, when we analyse their recruitment practices, it can be seen that they still tend to favour active professionals. Across all industries, there remains a clear preference for younger profiles. This type of biased perception against career breakers, which companies perceive as less competent than someone who is currently working, was also seen by many researchers (Gicheva & Keohane, 2018; Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019). Career break stigma begins as soon as a professional gap appears

on the résumé, particularly when the duration of time out of the job is longer (Agovino, 2019; Cabrera, 2007; McGrath et al., 2005). Additionally, the higher number of active male candidates and hired compared to active female candidates, along with the shorter career breaks candidates and hired among men relative to women, aligns with social role theory (Eagly et al., 2004, 2019) where man has more agency and ambition compared to women and women has more communion roles than men, and career break are more acceptable for women than men. In other words, according to this framework, men are typically socialized to show more agentic behaviours, emphasizing ambition, assertiveness, and career advancement, whereas women are encouraged for communal roles that prioritize social connection, caregiving, and relational responsibilities (Eagly et al., 2004).

SMEs are generally open to justified career breaks, particularly for women aged 30-49. Having a referral from a credible source can further strengthen their candidacy, underscoring the importance of maintaining and leveraging professional networks to support re-entry into the job market. While executive programs are most valued by women who remain active in the workforce, returnship programs are especially appreciated by career-break women and are particularly valuable for women between 30 and 49, as they provide a structured pathway back into the workforce. SMEs broadly recognize the importance of these initiatives, with most expressing interest in supporting or promoting return-to-work opportunities. Among SMEs surveyed, one-third reported a willingness to participate directly in such programs, while 14% indicated openness to hiring professionals who complete them. These findings reflect growing confidence in the potential of returnship programs, while also pointing to the need for greater awareness of their benefits and more substantial support for women resuming their careers after a break. This matches the increasing trend of returnship implementation not only in large corporations (Cohen, 2021; Timewise and Women Returnees, 2018), but also on cross-company programs for smaller organizations or SMEs (Women Returner, 2021).

4.5 Limitations and future research

From a business perspective, returnees and RTW/RTWE offer a strong business case for filling talent vacancies. However, there is still significant scholarly potential to better understand the impacts of returnships, particularly externally provided return-to-work, across different types of enterprises (large corporations or SMEs) and geographies where companies are located.

This research was conducted in Portugal, where SMEs represent 99,9% of total non-financial enterprises (INE, 2025). The same report on SMEs, based on 2023 data, states that SMEs are less efficient than large enterprises. To be more precise, SMEs' apparent labour productivity ratio (€25.6 thousand per worker) is almost half that of large enterprises (€51.1 thousand per person employed). From these SMEs, 96% are micro-enterprises (with less than 10 employees), 4% small-enterprises (with 10 to 49 employees), and 1% medium-enterprises (50 to 250 employees) (European Commission, 2025), while in 2025 European Union SMEs are composed of 94% micro-enterprises, 6% of small-enterprises, and 1% of medium-enterprises (Statistica).

Microenterprises tend to have even lower productivity and innovation than small and medium enterprises and larger organizations. This survey was done in partnership with the leading Portuguese SMEs organization body and focused on SMEs that had an award of excellence and export activities, demonstrating that overall SME perception can provide results on benefits as well as limitations/ risks worse than the current research results when comparing to the whole Portuguese SMEs universe and in comparison with the European Union SME reality.

The benefits and limitations/risks defined for the SMEs perception survey were based on the literature review and on previous interviews with BTM alumni women. As literature on this field evolves and knowledge of returnees and returnship programs develops, it will be interesting to understand whether the benefits and limitations/risks researched remain the same, and, if so, whether the survey results remain the same.

Additionally, to the researcher knowledge, no other international or national academic research was done focusing to understand SMEs perspective on career break women, leading to an opportunity to expand research on SMEs and how they can benefit from these existing professional talent pool, which can already have participated in returnship programs from large corporations or even SME, cross-companies returnships or externally-provided return to work program that have been deployed.

Among the SMEs surveyed, men represented not only a higher number of candidates in the recruiting process, but also the employees hired afterwards. Even though 54% SMEs surveyed were from the industry sector, a sector dominated by male employment, and 26% SMEs were from service and commercial sectors, it would be interesting to understand if in

Portugal or other countries, changing the SME´s sectors affect the perception of career break women's benefits and limitations/risks.

Moreover, since this is the first study that tried to understand if age groups differences on career break women changed SMEs´ perception, it will be important to have more studies to confirm those differences across age groups and if SMEs perceptions and bias changes along the years. Additionally, it will be interesting to understand the if RTWE and RTW results differ depending on age groups.

Finally, it is important to note that several survey questions in this study relied on respondents' perceptions. As perceptions are essentially subjective, they are susceptible to change over time, influenced by both individuals' life circumstances and the specific market conditions in which their firms operate. Therefore, repeating the same survey with the same target companies can also validate the current conclusions.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

This thesis is guided by the main research question: *How can we match the needs of SMEs (the backbone of the Portuguese economy) for qualified resources with qualified career-break women who want to return to work?*

Addressing this question requires understanding the broader context of gender inequality in the labour market. Gender disparities are maintained and reinforced by the way labour is organised, creating systemic disadvantages for primary carers (Weisshaar, 2018). Under prevailing societal norms, women are far more likely than men to leave their jobs to care for family members in various ways (Eagly et al., 2004), recent data from International Labour Organization (2024) demonstrate that unpaid care prevent 708 million women outside the workforce for unpaid care while only 40 million men do the same. Women are not only pushed out of the workforce when caregiving needs arise, but also face substantial barriers when attempting to return. To effectively reduce the gender gap, society must find ways not only to retain women in the workforce, but also when they do step away, they can opt back in.

Women returning from career breaks can bring many advantages to an organisation and workforce. They have previous professional experience, understand workplace culture and expectations (O'Donnell, 2018), and contribute to increase female participation and background diversity, which is associated with improved decision-making, greater competitiveness, and enhanced shareholder value. Recognising these benefits, several governments, including the UK (UK Government, 2017), created programs to incentivize organizations to invest in tryouts for qualified career breakers also called returnships. Returnships (RTW) are typically run by large corporations (Cohen, 2012, 2021; Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019) but also can be externally provided (RTWE) (Cohen, 2012). In Portugal, in recent years, multiple corporate RTW programmes (Mercedes-Benz.io, 2022; Organon, 2022) including a RTWE (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2025) were launched. However, the functionality and impact of returnships are still an emerging field of research. To contribute to this gap, this thesis examines the main research question through the following sub-questions:

- RQ1: What are the factors related to women´s ability to return to the job market after a career break?
- RQ2: How can an externally provide Return to Work program (RTWE) enhance women´s ability to relaunch and re-enter the work force?

- RQ3: How do small/ medium enterprises (SME) perceive the value of RTWE when assessing career break women applying for a job?

Together, these sub-questions help build a comprehensive understanding of how qualified returnees and SMEs can be effectively connected, thereby addressing the main research question.

This research conclusion is that professional women who decide to take a career break, most often to support family members, face a range of push and pull factors when considering whether to re-enter the labour market. Most of the push and pull factors that either facilitate or hinder women's return were consistent with those identified in the literature (i.e. Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett et al., 2010; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Offermann et al., 2020; Panteli & Pen, 2010; Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008) and were also evident among participants in qualitative study. The Portuguese RTWE examined in this thesis proved effective in helping these women overcome many of the barriers associated with opting back in. Furthermore, the results show that although RTWE alone do not guarantee women's re-entry into the workforce, but they significantly reduce many of the obstacles faced by this women's group. As such, RTWE initiatives represent an important step towards fostering more equitable and inclusive workplaces. By supporting women in overcoming re-entry challenges, these programmes also enable SMEs to access a larger pool of qualified candidates, thereby streamlining recruitment processes and creating a positive cycle for both employers and job seekers.

5.1 Overall conclusions by research sub-question

To better understand how these outcomes emerged from this research, the following analysis revisits the study's conclusions in relation to each research sub-question.

5.1.1 RQ1: What are the factors related to women´s ability to return to the job market after a career break?

The first research sub-question examined the push and pull factors that affected women returnees when re-entering the labour market. On one hand, in literature, we identified five push factors. These push factors could be split into factors related to support and stability (e.g., stable personal life and corporate and organizational support) (Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett et al., 2010; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Offermann et al., 2020; Panteli & Pen, 2010; Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019) and to psychological-motivational characteristics (e.g., need for personal fulfilment, professional identity/growth, and need for financial stability)(Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett et al.,

2010; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; McGrath et al., 2005; PWC & Women Returners, 2016; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). On the other hand, these women face eight barriers (pull factors). These pull factors could be broken down into individual barriers, such as confidence issues, the need for personal life stability, work-life balance, and financial stability (Cabrera, 2007; Gicheva & Keohane, 2018; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; McGrath et al., 2005; Offermann et al., 2020; Panteli & Pen, 2010; PWC & Women Returners, 2016). Furthermore, barriers can also be related to the current labour market, such as challenges to networking, discrimination and bias, a lack of corporate support, and the potential current economic situation (Agovino, 2019; Cabrera, 2007; Gicheva & Keohane, 2018; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; McCrary-Ruiz-Esparza, 2023; McGrath et al., 2005; Offermann et al., 2020; Pedulla, 2016; PWC & Women Returners, 2016; Sterling & Merluzzi, 2019).

5.1.2 RQ2: How can an externally provided Return to Work programme (RTWE) enhance women's ability to relaunch and re-enter the workforce?

After analysing the push and pull factors discussed in the literature on women opting out of and re-entering the labour force, the researcher turned to the second research sub-question: *How can an externally provided Return to Work programme (RTWE) enhance women's ability to relaunch and re-enter the workforce?* The qualitative study examined whether the push and pull factors discussed in the literature review were also evident among participants in a Portuguese RTWE initiative, the Back-to-Market Programme (BTM) run by Universidade Católica Portuguesa since 2020, and concluded that most of these factors were indeed the same, while also revealing some new push and pull factors specific to this context. It then assessed whether participation in the BTM programme helped reduce these barriers and strengthen women's capacity to successfully re-enter the labour market. The findings indicate that the BTM programme contributed to the development of both hard and soft skills and enabled participants to regain self-confidence and self-esteem through its various return-to-work components. However, the study also found that, without individual proactivity and persistence in the job search process, opting back into the labour market is unlikely to be successful.

These overall conclusions are reinforced by a closer examination of participants' experiences. In the same way that the literature reviewed demonstrated, the qualitative research performed in this thesis revealed that there were several reasons that BTM participants considered when deciding whether to opt back in. The ones that aligned with the literature review discussed earlier were: intellectual challenge/fulfilment, financial stability, personal

fulfilment, family stability, and feeling valued/recognized for what you do by friends and society. This study introduced two new opt-in factors to the literature: a willingness to serve as role models for their children and a recognition of work as a supportive factor in maintaining mental health. Both factors open new avenues for future research on the drivers of women's return to the workforce.

The research also investigated the pull factors or barriers to opt back in that the BTM participants faced before. Only two (current economy and recruitment process) out of the eight factors (current economy, labour market dynamics, family requirements, financial circumstances, lack or limited network, age discrimination and other types of discrimination, such as bias against excessive experience, underappreciation of prior experience, which were more associated with current recruitment process and lack of recent work/ market experience/ gap perception) had sub-themes that were not found on the literature before.

The first pull factor that had sub-themes that were not found in the literature was the current economy with the sub-theme that education/ formal courses are currently obsolete. To successfully address this sub-theme and effectively adapt to emerging technologies, women must prioritize continuous professional development by committing to reskilling and upskilling their knowledge and competencies, much as organizations are required to do for their workforce (Li, 2024).

The second pull factor that had sub-themes that were not found in the literature was the current recruitment process. This factor comprises eight sub-themes, three of which are new to the literature. Firstly, most recruiters do not provide feedback to candidates who are not selected, and this persistent lack of response creates considerable demotivation among returnees. Secondly, on the rare occasions when recruiters review returnee applications, they often fail to recognize that the motivation to re-enter the workforce is not primarily financial or status-driven, but rather a desire to feel useful and recognized as the KCM predicted (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). Finally, candidates who have used their career break to rethink their careers and pursue a career change encounter significant challenges, as re-entry is generally more accessible within their previous career paths, which means they ended up undergoing a drop in both job level and earnings as seen by Lovejoy and Stone (2012; 2021).

When BTM participants applied to join the program, they had various expectations regarding its potential benefits, which we grouped into five main categories. The two most relevant were updating their professional knowledge and building a network, both of which are

essential for women who have been absent from the workforce for a couple of years (Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Li, 2024; Wang, 2009). Additionally, participants wanted to restore their self-esteem and confidence in preparation for re-entering the labour market, learn methods and create narratives for employability, and finding a job. Of the five expectations, four were fully met and regarded as positive outcomes of the BTM program, while the fifth, securing a new job, was achieved by some participants, but not by all. This can be explained by the two individual behaviours identified by Manroop and Richardson (2015), proactivity and persistence, which are key components of job-search behaviour. While BTM professors can encourage participants to develop these behaviours, their effectiveness ultimately depends on the individuals themselves.

Participants from BTM developed their hard and soft skills and regained self-confidence and self-esteem during the program through university lessons and consulting job experience. Furthermore, the workshops designed to enhance their networking, LinkedIn, and resumes closed any gaps that had developed during their career break. They improved their ability to interact with recruiters, enabling most women to return to the workforce. The outcome of the BTM on women returnees who participated in the program is the result of all the return-to-work schemes involved in this period, and not only the main one (the consulting project) the same way that the British Equalitec Program experienced (Panteli & Pen, 2010).

5.1.3 RQ3: How do small/ medium enterprises (SME) perceive the value of RTWE when assessing career break women applying for a job?

After examining women´s perceived benefits of RTWE programs to help them re-enter the workforce, the researchers turned to the third research sub-question: *How do small/ medium enterprises (SME) perceive the value of RTWE when assessing career break women applying for a job?* This study explored the perspectives of SMEs, which account for 65% of employment in Europe and 76% in Portugal (European Commission, 2025), regarding both the benefits and potential limitations/ risks of hiring women returnees, as well as the extent to which RTWE programs could support women opt back in.

This quantitative research of SMEs' perceptions of the organizational potential benefits and limitations/risks of employing women with more than 10 years of professional experience was split among three professional groups (currently active in the labour market and over the age of 30, returning from a career break of more than one year and aged between 30 and 49, returning from a career break of more than one year and aged 50 and above). This overall conclusion will focus mostly on the results of the two career-break women groups

The study finds that SMEs perceive women on career breaks differently by age. Women aged 30–49 who have been out of the workforce for over a year are seen as equally committed as active workers, with strong networks and lower turnover. Women over 50 are perceived to offer even greater benefits, such as flexibility, mentoring, loyalty and stable, provide positive contributions to diversity and ethics, have low-turnover employee. However, prior research shows that these perceived benefits are often overshadowed by ageist preconceptions that frame older workers as higher-risk candidates (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). In our study, these preconceptions were reflected in assumptions about proximity to retirement, limited digital skills, and resistance to change.

Hiring practices of the SMEs surveyed show that while SMEs do recruit career-break women, longer breaks significantly reduce employability. Most firms accept breaks of up to one year, fewer up to three years, and almost none beyond that. The main conditions for hiring include a justified career break, strong referrals, and probationary supervision, highlighting the importance of networking. RTWE are widely supported and significantly improve hiring prospects for career break, often more than formal executive education.

Insights from SMEs' experiences provide additional confirmation of these conclusions. Women between 30 and 49 years old, out of the labour market for more than one year, is perceived to have the same level of commitment as those who are active, but with more contacts and lower turnover. Women over 50 years old, who are also out of the labour market for more than one year are perceived to have twice as many benefits as the other two profiles, including lower turnover, greater availability, greater flexibility, mentoring the youngest and their networks of contacts. Furthermore, the respondents reported that they perceived this profile of women to offer companies greater advantages in terms of diversity, external visibility, ethics, dedication, and sense of responsibility. Still, these benefits were not statistically significant across the three women's profile groups.

Afterwards, the study analysed the limitations/ risks perceived by SMEs on the same groups of women. Career break women over 50 are perceived as having many more limitations/ risks than other women´s groups. Nine of the 14 most frequently mentioned limitations/risks are associated with this group of women. The most important limitations/ risks for this group, and also stands out compared to the other groups are upcoming retirement age; lack of digital or technical skills, resistance to change. Furthermore inadaptability of candidates and resistance

to younger leadership were also noticed. It is worth reminding that these women are perceived to have very low turnover rates and to be less resistance to older leadership.

The study then examined these companies' hiring practices to determine whether women who had taken career breaks were being hired. While career-break women are indeed hired by SMEs, their time away from the job market is taken into account during the recruitment process. According to the SMEs surveyed, around one third of companies found it acceptable for candidates to have been out of the workforce for up to one year, while another third were open to a career break of up to three years. However, only a four percentage of companies were willing to accept breaks of three to five years, highlighting common misconceptions and concerns within SMEs about the potential advantages and limitations/risks of hiring these women. This suggests that the longer women are out of the workforce, the harder it becomes for them to return.

Subsequently, an analysis of SMEs hiring conditions for career break women with more than 10-years of experience revealed that for this career break women between 30 and 49 years of age the most relevant condition mentioned by companies were a justified career break followed by referral from credible sources and supervision of candidates during their probation period.

Compared with the previous women's group, the employment conditions reported by SMEs for career-break women aged 50 or older were lower. The three most important recruiting criteria for this group were a justified career break, a reference from a credible source and candidate supervision. This last point reflects a perception that older women don´t need as much supervision as their younger professionals.

The finding that referrals from reliable sources rank second in importance for SMEs when considering recruiting career-break women highlight the critical role of networking in facilitating women's re-entry into the workforce (Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Wang, 2009). Conversely, the absence of professional networks can constrain women's ability to return, as demonstrated in the previous study presented in this thesis. Furthermore, SMEs ranked participation in a RTWE, such as BTM, fourth among the conditions that would help companies hire women with career breaks. Surprisingly, this was mentioned more often than completing an executive program at a university.

Most SMEs regard returnship programs important, with 92% supporting their existence and only 8% considering them unimportant. Among companies that demonstrated interest in

supporting the program. 61% were willing to promote such programs, 35% might hire participants, and smaller proportions would recommend candidates, hire alumni for consulting or interim roles, sponsor events, or support women-focused editions. Notably, one third of companies answered (for 50-year old or older career break women) and 44 (for 30-49 years of age career break) that were open to hiring returnship participants, compared to only 12 companies willing to hire women with over 10 years of experience under different conditions, highlighting the greater impact of these programs.

5.2 Theoretical implications and practical recommendations

From this research, two theorical implication could be drawn. One related to related to planned career break and another one on the KCM for career break. In addition to that, two practical recommendations emerged: one for universities and another one for corporate. Both to support career break women.

5.2.1 Theoretical implication 1: Planned Career breaks

Traditional linear career trajectories have evolved, allowing for a range of alternative career paths to be possible. From the Boundaryless Career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) in which career develops cross organizational boundaries, to Post-Corporate Career (Baruch & Peiperl, 1997) where flexibility extends beyond traditional corporate structures and to the Protean Career in which success is defined by personal standards rather than organizational criteria (Hall, 2004). All those concepts have considered that career is dynamic and evolving processes with two types of career transition: idiosyncratic (such as work-to-work or work-to-unemployment) or normative (such as school-to-work or work-to-retirement) (Akkermans et al., 2024). However, none of them explicitly recognize career breaks taken for family responsibilities as a normal or successful component of a career path, since this decision goes against the ideal worker norm (Acker, 1990), which assumes that individuals should prioritize work above other life domains and have an uninterrupted professional life.

This study extends contemporary career theories by including career breaks for family responsibilities in the broader understanding of non-linear careers. Boundaryless, protean, and post-corporate career models highlight flexibility across organizational and identity boundaries (Crocitto et al., 1998; Hall, 2004; Perperl & Baruch, 1997), but they still tend to reinforce the ideal worker norm (Acker, 1990) by assuming that individual choice is mainly expressed through continuous employment. This study introduces planned career break as part of career development and claim that it can be a positive element of career management rather than a

disruption. This challenges the assumption that uninterrupted employment is necessary for career success and is more consistent with new generations career aspirations, especially Gen Z (Upton-Clark, 2023). In this perspective, career breaks are not seen as interruptions, but as legitimate phases of professional development that are driven by individual choice and that can support adaptability and improve work–life balance throughout the lifetime.

5.2.2. Theoretical Implication 2: KCM for career break

The Kaleidoscopic Career Model (KCM) (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) offers an alternative perspective by illustrating how women reorganize responsibilities and relationships across different life stages, continuously adjusting their career trajectories through multiple life lenses. Guided by the model's three parameters (authenticity, balance, and challenge), career decisions are defined by both professional aspirations and personal relationships, rather than by linear progression alone. These priorities are not only individual preferences but are also shaped by social role expectations that position women as primary caregivers and associate them with communal roles, which in turn influences the types of careers they consider feasible or appropriate (Eagly et al., 2004).

Most women interviewed in the BTM programme (24 of 26) followed a non-linear career path and, due to family priorities, temporarily withdrew from paid employment. This research corroborates KCM's findings, showing that it can be extended its applicability to women on career break. Additionally, KCM provides a valuable theoretical lens for reframing this period as a legitimate and meaningful career phase rather than a failure. The model highlights how, at certain life stages, women may prioritize balance or personal values over advancement in their careers and encourages reflection on the types of work that best align with their current needs and identities, even when they are outside paid employment. Furthermore, this model offers a conceptual framework to support women in planning their return to work by guiding them toward roles and organizational contexts that reflect their revised priorities, such as flexible or values-driven employment. Finally, by redefining career success as adaptable and personal, the model can help reduce the stigma and internal pressure associated with career breaks in other non-linear career paths; however, it does not eliminate the external barriers and biases that organizations continue to hold toward this group.

Building on Mainiero & Sullivan (2005) three women´s career values, Zimmerman and Clark (2016) developed an integrative framework that connects these values to women's off-ramps and on-ramps in the workforce. While this research corroborates with this integrative

framework in the first two phases (opt-in and career break), it suggests a refinement in the third opting-in phase, when women decide to return to the labour market. In this phase, opting-in experiences and opting-in strategies appear to be closely intertwined rather than distinct, as originally proposed. This research shows that participating in a RTWE helps reduce many of the barriers faced by returnees and improves the opting-in experience. Consequently, the barriers women encounter upon re-entry depend largely on the strategy they choose to pursue.

5.2.3 Practical recommendation 1: Universities

As previously mentioned, in 2023 (Instituto Nacional de Estatística), 68% of the 78.200 people unemployed with at least a bachelor's degree in Portugal were women, a huge pool of talent that is not being used. A portion of these unemployed women are career breakers who decided to pause their careers to take care of family members or themselves for different reasons.

As mentioned by Cabrera and McGrath et al. (2007; 2005), for women who wish to re-enter the job market, universities have a lot to offer. Universities and educational institutions should strengthen their support for women returning to the job market after a career break across different locations. This support should go beyond incentivizing and replicating return-to-work programs (RTWEs) to include comprehensive career services such as career counselling, networking opportunities, job-search skills workshops, job fairs, and access to refresher courses already offered through Executive Education. Finally, career services can further encourage re-entry by promoting successful return-to-work stories in alumni publications.

To better support women returning to work after a career break, it is important to understand why they choose to re-enter the workforce. Knowing their motivations helps universities and other institutions design more relevant and effective support programs.

Women in career breaks who decide to return to the workforce in general do so because their family is more stable and/or no longer requires their full attention and/or because they need financial stability or independence. Also, as noted in previous academic literature, these women sought to increase their intellectual challenge and personal fulfilment. Furthermore, many women who participated in this research stated that they would like to be an example to their children and that returning to the job market could improve their mental health.

At the same time, when returnees decide to opt back in, they face many barriers. They need to reconnect or rebuild their network, as well as understand the current labour market

dynamics and requirements for the areas in which they would like to apply. Furthermore, understanding other most common push factors to opt-back in (such as if their educational background and/or their professional experience are obsolete in a such technology evolving market or what are the levels of age discrimination in different industry sectors and what to expect from current recruitment process practices) allow them to take preventive action to overcome their perceived weakness by the labour market.

One of the potential strategies to do that is applying for a RTWE, since companies value RTWE alumni. Additionally, this research found that RTWE has helped career-break women reestablish their self-esteem and self-confidence, which are important attributes for women who decide to apply for job openings. Furthermore, women who attend an RTWE restart their professional careers in a more secure and time-flexible way, providing them with time and guidance to adapt their lives to a new reality, shifting their focus towards their professional lives rather than fully on their personal lives.

5.2.4 Practical recommendation 2: Companies

This research indicates that SMEs perceive active workers differently from individuals who have taken career breaks. Within the group of career breakers, perceived limitations/ risks increase with age, suggesting that ageism remains present in these organizations. SME respondents reported that career breakers are more likely to be considered for hiring when they had plausible reason for their career break and/or are recommended by a credible source and/or, have participated in an RTW/RTWE. Experienced women returning from career breaks tend to apply for fewer SME job vacancies than active women, which contributes to their continued underrepresentation in recruitment. Organizations can take several actions to encourage women to return from career breaks and increase their participation in the labour market.

Firstly, as seen in this research and the academic literature, corporations and other organizations can help these women by creating, supporting, and publicizing programs that support women such as RWE and RTWE on their path after deciding to opt back in. Not only does this directly support women, but also create greater awareness of these programs within the labour market and the recognition of the value career-break women bring to companies also make it easier to challenge preconceived notions and reduce prejudice about both the professionals themselves and career breaks in general. Treating career breaks as a typical path for experienced professionals rather than an exception will incentivize a larger pool of career-

breakers and competent candidates to apply to companies, allowing companies to more easily fulfil their vacancies with more qualified candidates, creating a virtuous cycle.

Secondly, reducing/eliminating SMEs' bias against these women by training their managers to be aware of the age and career break bias (Posthuma & Campion, 2009) will further incentivize SMEs to adapt their recruitment process, so that companies don´t filter these résumés before the company fully understands women´s real interests in rejoining the labour market, their qualifications and their willingness to update/upskill their expertise/competence to be up-to-speed with current market challenges.

Thirdly, organizations should redesigning work to make it more flexible (e.g. with hybrid, online or part-time working schemes), offering alternate career routes, holding senior management accountable for women's progression rates, and rewarding performance rather than face time are some actions organisations may take to keep women in the workforce (Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett et al., 2010; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005), but it is also quite important to allow women to on-ramps when they decide to do so. Additionally, companies should keep in touch with women who choose to opt out, for instance by building an alumni network (Hewlett et al., 2010; Hewlett & Luce, 2005), mainly when they prove to be important assets to the companies.

5.3 Limitations and future research

Besides the limitations highlighted in the previous chapters, the overall context of this research may not allow for generalization or transference. The studies that were the base for this thesis have its own limits: firstly, it focuses on Portugal and secondly it includes a small group of highly educated women (in the case of BTM participants) and a sample of Portuguese SMEs. In both cases, they rely on participants/ respondents' personal views, which may change over time.

Future research on career break women should include women from different backgrounds, industries, and types of career breaks. Longitudinal studies that follow women before, during, and after a career break and for longer periods, can help better understand their psychological and emotional experiences, as well as how their perspectives change over time. Additionally, future research should examine how automated recruitment systems may disadvantage returnees and explore the impact of career breaks and return-to-work programs on women's mental health.

Future research should also look at how society sees women today, and whether traditional views about women still exist or are changing. Larger and repeated studies would help to validate and strengthen these findings.

Is important to note that since this research was conducted in Portugal and focused on high-performing SMEs, the results may be more positive than for SMEs in general.

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Appendix

A.1 Abstract of the paper published on the Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Gender Research

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External Return-To-Work Programs Impact On Women Relauching Their Careers

Karen Ferrez Frisch[1], Sandra Costa[2] and Florinda Matos[3]

[1, 2] Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Business Research Unit (BRU), Lisbon, Portugal

[3] Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Centro de Estudos sobre a Mudança Socioeconómica e o Território (DINÂMIA'CET), Lisbon, Portugal

karen_frisch@iscte-iul.pt
Sandra.Costa@iscte-iul.pt
Florinda.Matos@iscte-iul.pt

Abstract: Women have higher drop-out rates during their professional careers, mainly due to family, child, or elderly care; furthermore, they have more difficulty returning to the workforce even if they are highly qualified, making the future of gender equality in the workplace a continuing challenge. Thus, encouraging women to re-enter the workforce after a career break makes sense from a gender perspective and, at the same time, can also add value to the economy by providing qualified and diversified resources to companies (large ones or small-medium-sized enterprises, or SMEs). Additionally, this encouragement can have short- to medium-term positive effects on career-break women who would like to return to the workforce, as well as long-term effects due to lower or no pension contributions during their career break. The aim of this study is to identify the push and pull factors affecting women´s ability to return to the job market after a career break. Moreover, the purpose of this study is to understand what has been studied about the impact of return-to-work/returnship programs (RTW) and externally provided return-to-work programs (RTWE) in helping bring back women to the labor market. The research is qualitative and exploratory, based on a literature review. The findings of this research provide an overview of relevant factors related to women's return to the market and allow for new research avenues on RTWE's outcomes for both women and small and medium-sized enterprises. In terms of originality, the goal of this research is to encourage data-driven debates about the potential implications of women's return-to-work programs as a strategy to help women return to the workforce and whether this strategy can be adopted by different-sized companies.

Keywords: Women, Career Break, Return-to-Work, Returnship, re-Entry

A.2 Back-to-Market Program women´s interview script

Interview Guide

Study Title: *How can an externally provide Return to Work program (RTWE) enhance women´ ability to relaunch and reenter the work force?*

1. Introduction

a. **Interviewer Introduction**: Thank you for your time and for your willingness to participate in this study. My name is Karen Frisch, and I am currently pursuing a PhD in Management with a focus on Human Resources. As part of my thesis, I am conducting a qualitative study on the effects of RTWE programs, such as the Back-to-Market program, on the ability of women who have taken a career break to return to the workforce.

b. **Assurance of Confidentiality**: This interview is confidential. Your name and the names of companies you work for or have worked for will not be disclosed under any circumstances.

c. **Objective of the Interview**: The purpose of this interview is to better understand why you chose to participate in the Back-to-Market Program, what your experience in the program was like, and what impact it has had on your professional career. There are no right or wrong answers; I am only interested in your perspective so that I can later consolidate responses to identify common themes among participants.

d. **Permission to Record**: I would like to ask for your permission to record this interview, as it will facilitate transcription and ensure the accuracy of the information.

e. **Interviewee Information**: Could you please confirm your current age and whether or not you are currently employed? If you are employed, could you specify your role, the company you work for, and your work model (e.g., full-time or part-time; hybrid, in-person, or online)?

2. "Warm-up"

a. Interviewee Background / Professional Background

i. To start, I'd like to hear a little bit of your story. Could you briefly share your career path up until you took a career break? Specifically, what was your last position before this career break?

ii. What were the main reasons for deciding to take this career break?

iii. How long have you been, or were you, on this career break?

iv. If you mentioned that you are currently working:

1. Could you please describe how your career has progressed since completing the Back-to-Market Program?
2. What is your ideal work model?

v. If you are not currently working:

1. Could you elabourate on whether you worked at any point during this period, or if you have been searching for work?
2. What is your ideal work model?

3. Main questions

3.1. Reasons for deciding to return to the job market

i. Why did you decide to return to the job market?

ii. What were the most important factors that encouraged this decision?

1. What were the personal factors?
2. What were the external factors that encouraged you to make this decision? *Consider factors such as those related to the job market, family, or friends.*

iii. What were the most important factors that discouraged or demotivated you from making this decision?

1. What were the personal factors?
2. What were the external factors that encouraged you to make this decision? *Consider factors such as those related to the job market, family, or friends.*

3.2. Reasons for participating in an RTWE program

i. How did you find out about the BTM program?
ii. Why did you decide to participate in the BTM program? What were the reasons/factors that led you to join?
iii. What were your expectations about the program?
iv. Could you clarify if you had previously participated in other programs supporting reentry into the job market, and if so, what made this program different.

3.3. Advantages and Disadvantages of the Program

i. The BTM program included various components (e.g., lessons, consulting project, workshops). Could you please explain what you saw as the biggest benefits and disadvantages of:
    1. The different components of the program and why?
    2. The program as a whole and why?
ii. Previously, you mentioned your expectations for the BTM. Could you elabourate on the reasons why you feel that your expectations were met, exceeded, or not fulfilled.
iii. In summary, what is your opinion on BTM's in helping to relaunch women's careers here in Portugal?
iv. Is there any aspect of this program that you think could be improved to enhance its impact on the professional relaunch of women?

4. "Cool-off"

How do you see your future?

a. If you are not currently working, could you please elabourate on whether your goals include continuing to search for a job and what type of work and work model you would like to pursue? If you do not intend to look for a job, what are your objectives for the next 2-3 years.
b. If you are currently working, could you please elabourate on what your main objectives are? Additionally, could you clarify if these objectives relate to a more balanced approach to work-life management.

5. Conclusion

Thank you to the participant.

A.3 SMEs survey

Dear Participant,

IAPMEI **together with Católica Lisbon School of Business and Economics and ISCTE are conducting a Study on ' Returnship ' and programs such as Back-to-Market.**

Returnship ' programs have been increasingly used around the world, **with the aim of supporting the professional reintegration of** people, especially **women, who** for some

reason, namely the difficulty in balancing personal and professional life, **have interrupted their careers for more or less long periods** .

This **questionnaire aims to assess the perception, interest and behaviour of employers in attracting and recruiting qualified women with more than 10 years of professional experience with or without a break in their careers** .

Your participation, which we thank you in advance, is essential and **should not take more than 5-10 minutes for the 10 questions** in this survey.

The data collected is confidential (it will be treated in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) Law No. 59/2019) and is intended for academic research purposes only. No individual information will be evaluated.

Answers should reflect current practices within your company.

Thank you for your collabouration!

1. What **benefits** do you find in recruiting professional women with more than 10 years of professional experience? (Select a maximum of 5 options for each group of professionals)

	Active over 30 years of age (1)	On career break for more than 12 months and between 30 and 49 years of age (2)	On career break for more than 12 months and 50 years of age or older (3)
Motivation (1)	☐	☐	☐
Ethics (2)	☐	☐	☐
Commitment (3)	☐	☐	☐
Responsibility (4)	☐	☐	☐
Initiative (5)	☐	☐	☐
Availability and Flexibility (6)	☐	☐	☐
Speed of integration (7)	☐	☐	☐
Diversity (8)	☐	☐	☐
visibility (9)	☐	☐	☐
Contribution to innovation (10)	☐	☐	☐
Mentoring of the most new (11)	☐	☐	☐
Lower turnover (12)	☐	☐	☐
Networking (13)	☐	☐	☐
Response to needs temporary (14)	☐	☐	☐
None of the answers apply (15)	☐	☐	☐

2. What **limitations/risks** do you encounter in recruiting female professionals with more than 10 years of professional experience? (Select a maximum of 5 options for each group of professionals)

	Active over 30 years of age (1)	On career break for more than 12 months and between 30 and 49 years of age (2)	On career break for more than 12 months and 50 years of age or older (3)
Inadaptability of candidates (1)	☐	☐	☐
Misalignment with organizational culture (2)	☐	☐	☐
Lack of motivation and commitment (3)	☐	☐	☐
Resistance to change (4)	☐	☐	☐
Resistance to younger leadership (5)	☐	☐	☐
Resistance to older leadership (6)	☐	☐	☐
Lack of digital or technical skills (7)	☐	☐	☐
High turnover (8)	☐	☐	☐
Professionals approaching retirement age (9)	☐	☐	☐
Profiles inadequate to the needs (10)	☐	☐	☐
Organizational preference for younger people (11)	☐	☐	☐
Preference for professionals without career interruptions (12)	☐	☐	☐
Lack of vacancies in the company (13)	☐	☐	☐

3. In the company's recruitment process, what is the **acceptable time period outside the job market for hiring** candidates with professional experience? Select the option that best reflects the company's reality.

< 1 year (1)
1 to 3 years (2)
3 to 5 years (3)
> 5 years (4)
We do not take into account (5)

4. When was **the last time the company onboarded new employees** ? Select the option that best reflects the company's reality.

Last six months (1)
Last year (2)
Last two years (3)
More than two years (4)

5. How many people **do you recruit on average per year** ? Please provide an approximate number.

_____

6. In your recruitment process, when was the last time **you had candidates with more than 10 years of professional experience** ? Select the option that best reflects the company's reality.

	Last 6 months (1)	Last year (2)	Latest two years (3)	More than 2 years (4)	I don't know how to answer/ Not applicable (5)
Women in active employment over 30 years of age (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Women on career break for more than 12 months and between 30 and 49 years of age (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Women on a career break for more than 12 months and aged 50 or over (3)	○	○	○	○	○
Active men over 30 years of age (4)	○	○	○	○	○
Men on career break for more than 12 months and over 30 years of age (5)	○	○	○	○	○

7. When was the last time you recruited profiles with more than 10 years of professional experience?

	Last 6 months (1)	Last year (2)	Latest two years (3)	More than 2 years (4)	I don't know how to answer/ Not applicable (5)
Women in active employment over 30 years of age (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Women on career break for more than 12 months and between 30 and 49 years of age (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Women on a career break for more than 12 months and aged 50 or over (3)	○	○	○	○	○
Active men over 30 years of age (4)	○	○	○	○	○
Men on career break for more than 12 months and over 30 years of age (5)	○	○	○	○	○

8. **Under what conditions** would your company be willing to hire professional women with more than 10 years of professional experience? Select the options you consider relevant.

	Active over 30 years of age (1)	On career break for more than 12 months and between 30 and 49 years of age (2)	On career break for more than 12 months and 50 years of age or older (3)
Supervision of the candidate during the trial period (up to 6 months) (1)	☐	☐	☐
Source referencing credible (2)	☐	☐	☐
Justified career break situation (3)	☐	☐	☐
returnship " program (such as Back -to- Market)* (4)	☐	☐	☐
University Executive Program Participant (5)	☐	☐	☐
None of the above (6)	☐	☐	☐

Returnship Programs externally Provided programs are programs run by entities outside the company to retrain and prepare women to return to the job market. An example of these programs is the Back -to- Market Program.

9. Do you consider it important to have **returnship programs that** facilitate the preparation of women and men for returning to the job market after any career break?

Yes (1)
No (2)

10. In what way would you be interested in supporting ' **returnship ' programs, such as the 'Back -to- Market' program*** , developed by the Catholic University of Portugal? Select the applicable options.

☐ Dissemination of the program among partners / to other companies / to business associations (1)

☐ Event / workshop sponsorship (2)

☐ Sponsorship of an edition for 5 women in your company or in a company of your choice (3)

☐ Participation in an edition with the possibility of hiring at least 1 participant (4)

☐ Recruitment of Alumni on a service provision basis for consulting projects or interim management roles (5)

☐ Participant Recommendation for the Program (6)

☐ Others (7) _____

To learn more about the ' **Back -to- Market ' program** , see **here** .

End of Block: Default Question Block

For statistical research purposes, please inform us:

1. How old are you?

under 30 years old (1)
30 to 49 years old (2)
50 or older (3)

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2. What is your gender?

Female (1)
Male (2)
I prefer not to answer (3)

3. What area do you work in at your company?

Human Resources (1)
Commercial (2)
Operational (3)
Financial (4)
Other (5)

4. What is your role in the company?

Junior or Operational (1)
Assistant or Technician (2)
Manager (3)
Director/Administrator (4)

5. How many employees does your company have?

0-5 (1)
6-9 (2)
10-49 (3)
50-249 (4)
250 or more (5)

6. The company is led by a:

Man (1)
Woman (2)
Prefer not to answer (3)

7. In which age group of employees does the company have the highest employee turnover?

< 30 years (1)
30 to 49 years old (2)
50 or older (3)

8. What is the approximate percentage of women in the total number of employees?

0-10% (1)
11-30% (2)
31-50% (3)
51-70% (4)
+ 70% (5)

9. What is your company's sector?

Trade and Services (1)
Communications (2)
Energy and Environment (3)
Industry (4)
Information Technology (5)
Transport and Logistics (6)
Health and Pharmaceutical (7)
Other (8)

10. What is the nationality of the majority of your company's capital?

Portuguese (1)
Portuguese with parent company abroad (2)
Portuguese parent company, but most branches in Europe (3)
Portuguese parent company, but most branches in the US or Canada (4)
Portuguese parent company, but most branches in Africa (5)
Portuguese parent company, but most branches in Latin America (6)
Portuguese parent company, but most branches in Asia (7)
Portuguese parent company, but most branches in Oceania (8)

11. **Type of your company** (According to the definitions of Decree-Law No. 372/2007, of November 6, on SMEs)

Microenterprise (1)
Small business (2)
Medium-sized company (3)

If you have any questions or need any clarification in the context of the study or the ' Back -to-Market ' program, do not hesitate to contact the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, via email: karenfrisch@ucp.pt **Thank you for your participation!**
