

IBM's return-to-work program helps women ease back into the workforce following a career break

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After working briefly in an IT role, Anam Raza took almost four years away from work for family reasons. But when she was ready to return to work, her unproductive job search left her disheartened. “I spent tons of time applying to dozens of jobs, but didn’t even receive interview calls.”

Neha Kulkarni, who had a 10-year career gap and had not worked in the IT field since 2009 experienced similar dismay. “It takes a lot of hard work and effort to find a job, especially one of your liking. Employers want to see experience along with the qualifications. But the fact is, one cannot gain experience without opportunity.”

Anam and Neha’s experiences are not uncommon. Overall, women take career breaks much more often than men, usually to take care of family. A [LinkedIn and Censuswide survey](#) conducted last March found that almost half of working moms take an extended break after childbirth, with the average break being approximately two years.

And although re-entering the workforce after a prolonged career break can be [challenging](#) for anybody, women often have trouble returning at the level they held prior to their absence. They also can face challenges breaking through the middle management level to assume more senior leadership positions.

IBM’s IBV report ‘[Women, leadership and missed opportunities](#),’ released earlier this year, highlights the disparity between men and women in leadership positions. What’s more, there are fewer women in the pipeline to become senior leaders today than in 2019, a situation made worse by the pandemic.

IBM’s Tech Re-Entry Program

One of the ways organizations can help bridge this gap is by making it easier for women to enter and/or re-enter high-growth fields.

Nearly 90% of career re-entry candidates are female, says [Carol Fishman Cohen](#), the CEO and co-founder of [iRelaunch](#), a company that creates corporate career re-entry programs for people who have taken a career break.

IBM's [Tech Re-Entry](#) Program welcomes women back to work by providing them with skills training and mentoring while being paid.

Launched in 2016, the program was developed in partnership with the [Society of Women Engineers](#) (SWE) and [iRelaunch](#), and actively hires skilled professionals for roles such as software developers, data scientists and technical project managers. The program, initially launched in USA has now expanded into ten countries including Canada, Brazil, India and China and has hired over 200 returners since it started.

Through the program we hire participants in a 6-month returnship program to refresh skills and prepare them for a transition to full time opportunities. The experience provides personalized technical learning to update and gain additional skills; earning badges and credentials along the way.

Both Anam and Neha, who joined IBM Canada in 2019 through our Tech Re-Entry program, now work full time at our Lab in Toronto.

"I was determined to use this opportunity as a means of entering back into the workforce and upgrading my skills. I didn't have all the listed skills for the position at IBM but a few of my programming and development skills were transferrable. I have always enjoyed working in IT and believed that I could learn other skills required for the job. Willingness to learn is the key to a successful career," shares Anam.

Neha, who's always been passionate about learning and for technology, kept updating her skills and even worked as an IT instructor in a college all throughout her career break. She said, "Before getting hired at IBM, I missed landing a couple of well-suited opportunities. I had the right qualification but not enough experience in the field. The returnship at IBM helped me to get the relevant experience and gave me the needed confidence in my skills."

Anam and Neha are highly capable professionals, and we are lucky to have them join the IT workforce back after their extended leaves.

IBM Canada has been hiring skilled workers through this program every year since its beginning. Although we began with hiring only two cohorts per year, two years ago we streamlined the program to help us scale it further. We now hire participants all throughout the year, with many participants getting hired full-time within IBM.

In addition to the Tech Re-Entry program, [IBM's SkillsBuild](#) is a skills-based learning program that offers access to free digital learning, resources, and support focused on the core technology and workplace skills needed to students, educators, job seekers, and the organizations that support them to help people succeed in 'new collar' jobs.

Programs like these have long-term benefits. We know that diversity drives innovation, leads to [better retention of skilled employees](#), and to better business results.

IBM's Tech Re-Entry not only helps remove the career break barrier, providing an employment on-ramp for these talented technical individuals but also helps improve gender diversity in the IT field. Having this program helps us open up our jobs to a larger pool of candidates and make an impact on the gender diversity front in the traditionally male-dominated IT job fields.

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