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Breaking Point

**Attitudes towards
'career breaks' across
four countries & how
to create a system
fit for purpose**

2022



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The Serco Institute is an international think tank working to help governments develop the next generation of public service solutions for citizens.

Globally we work collaboratively with government, the private sector, academia, and with citizens to develop the future of public service policy, design and implementation.

info@sercoinstitute.com



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**Executive
Summary
and Key
Recommendations**

Executive Summary & Key Recommendations

Policies pertaining to career breaks have improved significantly in recent years but fundamentally continue to leave employees – and employers – wanting. As confirmed by our research, those who want to take a break from employment often don't feel able to, and those who do take a break indicate that they faced significant challenges when returning to work.

Alongside a greater understanding and willingness to listen to the views of people who have taken career breaks, reform of working practices is needed to accommodate the changing demands of modern life and the desires of the next generation - reforms so far-reaching that ending the '9-to-5' workday as we know it should not be discounted.

This is not only to allow those who want to take a career break to do so and to support those returning to work from a career break to more easily transition, but to stop the significant loss of talent that also results from 'enforced' career breaks: the situation – more often than not faced by women – where a career break is not something they wish to take, but a requirement due to a life event colliding with outdated workplace practices.

The pandemic has forced societies around the world to move away from traditional, in-person work and instead look to embrace more flexible ways of operating where possible. It has also shone an even brighter light on employees' physical and mental health and there now exists an unprecedented opportunity to embed career break policies that are fit for purpose in everyday working life. Given issues in many countries around labour shortages in crucial sectors, expanded contractual or legislative opportunities for career breaks may go a long way towards helping these industries attract, recruit and retain vital employees. Furthermore, insights into the barriers preventing people from returning will allow employers to pursue policies aimed at creating 'employment for everyone', ensuring a more diverse and inclusive workforce and fostering a work culture which prioritises employees' wellbeing.

Fundamentally, there exists surprisingly little recent research into barriers to taking career breaks across different genders, age groups, international borders and sectors of work - research arguably made more important by the changes to working practices and our conceptions of work brought about by the pandemic. We have sought to generate such research to help organisations retain their staff, improve employee wellbeing and help pave the way for a fairer, more balanced working world with increased opportunities for a more diverse range of people.

It leaves us with little understanding of how individuals' attitudes towards career breaks may be shaped by employment sectors, demographic characteristics, the regulatory and statutory frameworks under which they work, or their countries of residence and cultural approaches to work. In analysing responses to the survey in all four countries, we examine in particularly acute detail the sentiments of working respondents across four areas of employment. These are the public sector, the private sector delivering government services, the private sector not delivering government services, and the charity sector. The Institute's focus on public services – and the people who deliver them – motivated this specific line of inquiry.

Our research is based around a series of significant international polls. The Institute commissioned simultaneous nationally representative surveys, carried out by leading market research experts at Kantar in August and September 2021, across four countries: Australia; the UK; the USA; and the UAE. This paper sets out the analysis of 7,216 responses to multiple questions relating to career breaks, and the challenges people face when returning to work.

Some of our most important findings are below:



Perhaps unsurprisingly, Maternity was perceived as the most legitimate reason for a career break in all four countries.



However, the survey data also reveals that, somewhat more surprisingly, around one-third of Australians, Britons and Americans still believe that maternity is not a legitimate reason for an employee to have extended leave from work, and even more in the UAE (36% overall; 31% in Australia; 34% in the UK; 35% in the US; and 51% in the UAE).



Across all four countries, the concern about taking a career break most commonly identified by our respondents was 'financial concerns': 87% of all respondents felt this was either a 'major' or 'minor' concern. That said, a significant number of people (82%) also considered 'lack of flexibility from the employer' a concern, while 80% felt a career break's 'potential impact on career progression' would worry them.



'Lack of flexibility and work-life balance' was the barrier identified by most respondents as preventing career breakers from returning to work, with 54% of respondents globally feeling inflexible working would impede career re-entry. When it comes to the employer, a potential 'change in management' and 'negative attitude' were also seen by majorities of respondents (both 51%) as barriers to re-joining the workforce.



Women across the four surveyed countries consistently felt less confident than men about taking a career break and about being able to return from one. Our research confirms that women are consistently more likely than men to take career breaks on becoming parents and to care for children, but also that women face more barriers returning to work afterwards, even for the most commonly 'accepted' breaks such as maternity leave. Attitudes were also divided along other demographic lines. For instance, young people in all surveyed countries were more receptive than their older counterparts to taking career breaks, with the proportion of 55-64-year-olds who had never taken a career break (61%) nearly double the corresponding figure of 25-34-year-olds (31%).



However, younger age groups were also more likely than older respondents to consider something a concern possibly preventing them from taking a career break and to perceive barriers impeding their post-break return to work. With 84% of Millennials expecting to take a career break at some point [1], it is clear that much more will need to be done to assure them that they will be able to do so, so as to not exclude them from employment opportunities.

[1] 'The pros and cons of taking a career break' – LinkedIn.



We discovered that private sector employees delivering government services were consistently more cautious than their peers in other sectors about taking and returning from a career break. Furthermore, government-contracted private sector workers were more likely to consider the impact of a career break on their colleagues and on their employer a concern before taking a break. We hypothesise that this is due to a duality of conditions stemming from working in the private sector and a pronounced sense of duty that goes with delivering vital public services. We have named this pattern the ‘government contractor squeeze’, and it is explored in much greater depth in the paper.



Although the **UK** public was supportive of career breaks overall, 53% had never taken one themselves. Additionally, only 49% believed they could take a career break without detriment to their professional lives, the lowest percentage of the four countries. The most frequently perceived barriers to returning to work were an employer’s ‘negative attitude’ and a potential ‘change in management’.



Australia’s comprehensive package of leave benefits creates a regulatory environment more conducive to career breaks relative to other countries. However, still 45% of Australians did not agree they were able to take a career break without it negatively impacting their careers.

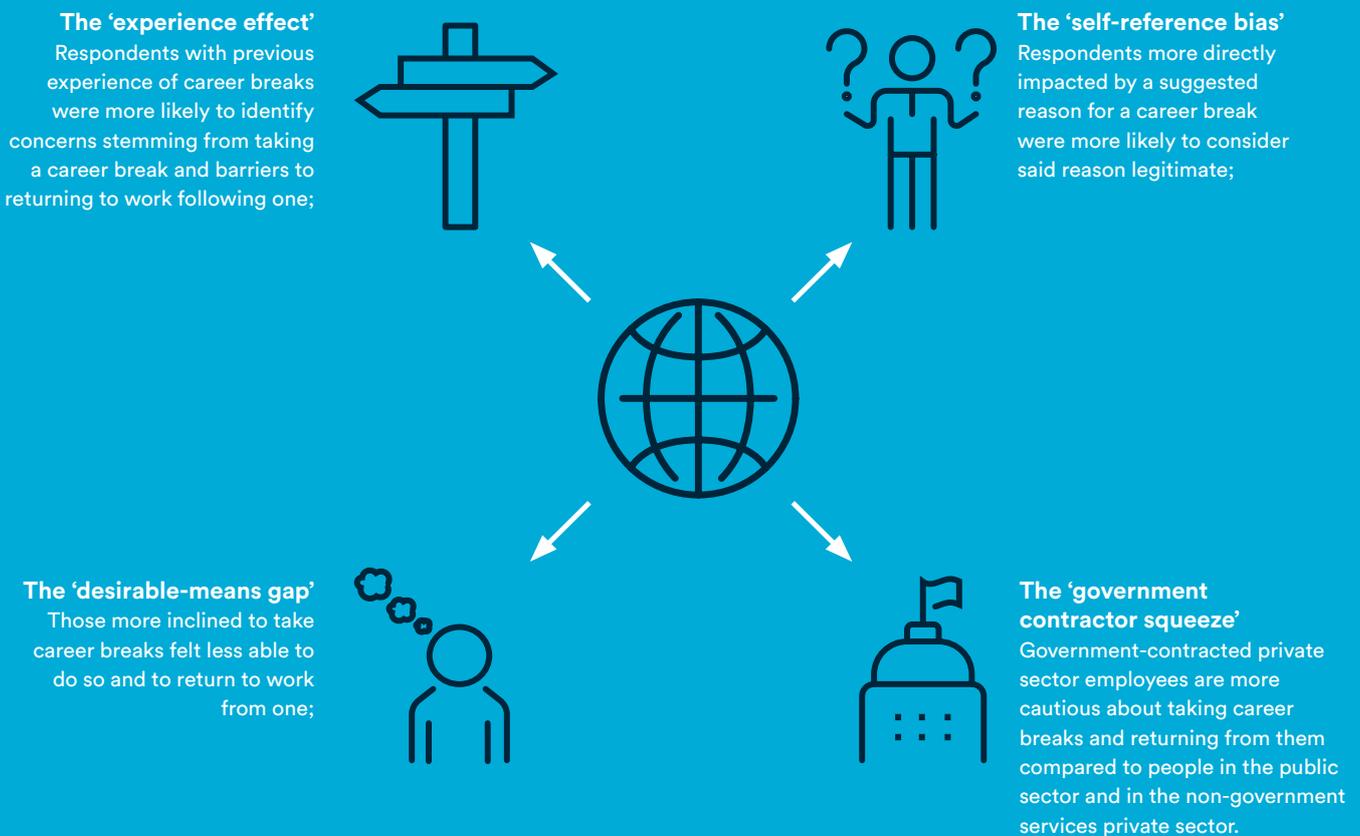


In the **US**, people receive, on average, far less leave than their British and Australian counterparts. Additionally, the lack of a social safety net may mean Americans feel more financially insecure without their jobs, with 65% of US respondents considering ‘financial concerns’ a ‘major’ concern - the highest such proportion among the countries polled.



The **UAE’s** cultural and regulatory distinctiveness from the other three countries was reflected in its results. 84% believed they could take a career break without suffering negative professional repercussions and 72% had already taken one – both these figures were far higher than in the UK, US and Australia.

In addition to these key statistics, we also uncovered four major trends across the four polled countries:



Given the enormous disruption to normal working patterns of the past few years, employers and employees are re-evaluating their work-life balance and how this can best be adjusted according to the emerging world of work. More workplaces than ever before are instituting flexible working to better accommodate the needs of employees, and the momentum is with those who would expand non-traditional employment practices. We hope that our paper helps shed light on people's hopes, fears and ambitions regarding career breaks as we enter a new, dynamic period in the working world.



Our research shows that for many young people in and entering the workforce, career breaks are not just desired, but taken to be a given.

As such we have developed a range of recommendations, a selection of which that apply to all four countries included in this study can be found below. Country-specific recommendations can be found at the end of each chapter and a full list in the conclusion.



Ending ‘9-to-5’ – Making a Modern Living?

Employers need to think more creatively about how they can transition employees back into work following a career break. Where flexible working is practicable organisations should increasingly seek to not only allow it but normalise it as part of general workplace culture. However, we suggest that this should be taken still further, and work should increasingly be considered on a basis of delivered outcomes, rather than an hourly basis. Many people’s experience – particularly office-based workers – of the pandemic has shown the typical ‘9-to-5’ working pattern is not a prerequisite for productivity. We believe that the five-days-a-week, 9-to-5 model is increasingly outdated, designed for a less diverse workforce, and only reinforces barriers to work – particularly for those who are caregivers and parents. As such, a move to a genuinely more flexible – outcome-focussed – way of working would not only help people returning from career breaks, but reduce the need for people with no desire to take leave to take career breaks in the first place.



Innovation for ‘In-person’ Employees

Where in-person work is needed, employers should examine more innovative solutions, such as – where possible – allowing employees greater flexibility in choosing their working hours, or simply requiring that people be available between two specified points of each workday but allowing them to determine their hours within and outside those hours where possible. Technologies and innovations used in the ‘gig economy’ could be repurposed to assist with this change. Equally, these avenues may even be more traditional, such as paying for or even providing day care centres.



Women and the Workplace

Fundamentally, a significant cultural shift is required to ensure women are not only aware of their entitlements but feel confident in being able to use them. This will require a sustained push by governments, employers and other organisations to ensure the normalisation of career breaks – particularly for family reasons, as our polling and research indicate that women are disproportionately likely to shoulder caregiving and parental duties. Employers should also take steps to ensure that women in their workplace are conscious of their entitlements and assured of their position upon returning to work. Such steps should include a range of measures, including improved and clearer communication targeted at women for career break policies targeted specifically at new mothers or women with ailing loved ones, such as entitling these women to more generous flexible or home working arrangements (as outlined above). Employers may also wish to explore expanding paternity and childcare leave for men (as outlined below), to combat long-held cultural assumptions that women should give up work and instead encourage men to take a more active role in caring for their families and children



Parental Leave by Default

Given that starting a family and caring for children are key, or perhaps even the principal, motivations for many people looking to take career breaks, employers' career breaks policy should recognise the importance of these and be more explicit in setting out employees' rights to parental leave (maternity and paternity leave). As such, legislation – or organisations, in lieu of a change in law – should seek to introduce 'opt-out' maternity leave [2], with women automatically receiving an appropriate amount of leave following the birth of a child. Paternity leave should also be by default, meaning men receive an appropriate amount of leave following the birth of a child [3]. We believe these rights should also be extended to adoption and surrogacy leave.



Great Expectations of the Next Generations

Our research shows that for many young people in and entering the workforce, career breaks are not just desired, but taken to be a given. To attract and retain the best young talent, employers should pre-empt the inevitable and look to incorporate more creative career break policies into their business practices and employee contracts now. Underpinning these policies should be clear stipulations on when non-statutory career breaks are permitted – for example, after a particular length of service; for how long these career breaks are permitted; how much of an individual's salary is paid whilst they are on a career break; and finally, whether hybrid models of career breaks are practicable, such as allowing an individual to take a 'part-time' career break whereby they work a certain number of hours per week. The latter may allow individuals to take a non-statutory career break, whilst ensuring employers are not overly burdened by the employees' departure. Ultimately, career breaks can and should be cast in a less 'final' way, with an 'open-door' return policy for those who decide to return to their positions.

[2] In the UK, mandatory maternity leave already exists for women, who are legally required to take two weeks (four weeks if they are employed in a factory) paid leave following the birth of a child. Although we can see the benefit of mandating parental leave, we believe this will be too great a leap for some organisations / legislatures and allowing a certain level of flexibility allows employees as well as employers – more choice.

[3] This research does not identify what an 'appropriate' amount of time would be for parental leave. This would need further examination of existing legislation, cultural norms and employee expectations.





Remaking Breaking

Employers should be more proactive in categorising different types of career breaks and developing tailored policies for each category. Maternity leave, for example, will require a significantly different policy compared to sabbaticals taken for study. Additionally, given rising interest in career breaks taken for travel, particularly among young people, employers may wish to introduce new forms of schemes for ‘self-enrichment’ career breaks, allowing them to travel or pursue interests outside work for a specified amount of time. A cultural shift in working people’s mindsets should be encouraged so as to give those who wish to take career breaks the confidence to do so.



A Fair Framework for All

Whilst employers need to be more creative in their career break policies, they need to ensure that those employees who choose not to take a career break – the single largest cohort of employees across all four surveyed countries – are not at a disadvantage relative to those who do, whether it be on a financial or holiday basis. This could take the form of monetary compensation or more generous non-leave benefits to reward people who choose not to take career breaks upon becoming eligible.



Capturing the Experience Effect

The experiences of previous career breakers merit particularly close attention, as these reflect the actual conditions in which people on career breaks find themselves and addressing any issues will go a long way to making career breaks easier for those who wish to take them. Organisations should seek to systematically capture the views of employees who have taken career breaks through forums or surveys, use these views to shape career breaks policy and seek to directly address the issues raised to remove barriers for returners in future.



Decompressing the Government Contractor Squeeze

People in the private sector delivering government services demonstrated a strong commitment to their duties and work, with respondents in this employment category agreeing in higher numbers that a career break's impact on their employer and co-workers would be a concern for them. We recommend two broad steps are taken to address the perceived greater challenges to taking a career break and barriers to returning to work for government contractors:

Firstly, government contractors should look to how the public sector structures career breaks for roles and sectors in which they operate. Employers should have in place effective structures and teams, allowing for processes which are not dependent on any individual's presence and for seamless succession following an employee's departure or leave of absence. Private sector employers should also ensure that the balance between generally higher wages versus increased non-financial benefits meets the expectations of the modern workforce.

Secondly, government contractors should be more proactive in promoting and communicating career breaks to their employees as an entirely valid aspect of workplace life. Much of these workers' hesitation in taking a career break may stem from their lack of awareness as to what they are entitled to, and these opportunities should be communicated and normalised to set them more at ease. Furthermore, if government-contracted workers feel hesitant to take career breaks due to a reluctance to disrupt the essential services they provide, it is important that employers communicate to them that they are able to take a career break without an impact to public service users.

We believe these changes will have a significant impact in removing the barriers to people returning to work from a career break and stop people who do not wish to from being forced to take career breaks or leave the workforce entirely. These broad, international recommendations are further supported by country-specific recommendations are outlined at the end of each chapter.

Introduction

**There's More To
Life Than Work?
Attitudes to
'Career Breaks'
Across Four
Countries**

On first glance, the subject of ‘career breaks’ may seem like the redoubt of human resources departments and a minority of colleagues.

Dig deeper, though, and the notion of a ‘career break’ gets to the heart of human sensibilities, wants, and needs: questions of career progression; how we are regarded by colleagues and friends; the urge to make the most of life’s experiences; maintaining a healthy work-life balance; preserving familial relationships; optimising mental and physical wellbeing. In addition, the subject is likely to become more prominent as societies embrace more flexible ways of working and the increasing awareness of employees’ mental and physical health – particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the experience of either challenges faced by key workers on the frontline or, conversely, the many people constrained by ‘working from home’ directives around the world.

The notion of career breaks is relevant to all of us. The concept, however, is difficult to pin down and understood differently by individuals depending on their employer and sector of work, their age, gender, nationality, and the prevailing culture of work in the country where they are employed.

Despite the undoubted relevance career breaks has to employers, employees, families, and policymakers, the subject remains under-researched. The existing literature is weighted heavily towards a focus on maternity and paternity leave or a specific occupation – all crucial themes. However, there is limited comparative research addressing barriers to taking a career break that cut across genders, multiple geographies, ages, and the broad sectors in which individuals are employed. We also have little evidence-based understanding of the reasons why people take career breaks in the first place. We know little of how continuing conceptions of gender roles at work combined with statutory or contractual regulations governing leave may impact the rates at which men and women take career breaks, or of how changing attitudes towards working life may motivate career breaks for different reasons among younger people relative to older generations. Equipped with this knowledge, employers may be able to adapt their leave policies to suit the sensibilities of a modern workforce.

The need for such research, especially in light of the pandemic and its impact on work-life balance, motivated the Serco Institute to undertake a research project to this effect. At its core, the project seeks to understand not only general attitudes to career breaks, but the perceptions that underpin what different demographics consider to be the barriers to taking a career break and returning to work following one, as well as the life events and changes, such as motherhood or fatherhood, which drive people to take career breaks in the first place. To do this, the Serco Institute partnered with leading market research agency, Kantar, to undertake extensive polling across four countries: Australia, the UAE, the UK, and the USA [4].

This report analyses the polling responses of 7,216 people to understand attitudes towards career breaks across the four countries. In our study, a 'career break' is considered as such if an individual has opted not to work for a period of time outside of their standard leave or sick leave entitlement.

This includes leave where the individual is paid by their employer or the state, as well as leave that is not.

[4] Methodology: A total of 7,216 individuals were polled, with a sample size of between 1,036 and 2,090 aged 16-64 (16-54 in the UAE) in each country. A total of 8 questions were presented to each respondent. Interviewing was conducted by online self-completion from 26th August to 30th August 2021, and 2nd September to 6th September 2021. Where unweighted base figures are less than 100, data should be treated cautiously, as large margins of error are possible.

What people think are legitimate reasons for taking a career break

For what reasons people feel they could or would take a career break in the future



The affects that a career break will have on a person's professional life



The poll addressed the following themes:



How frequently people feel there are barriers to a career break



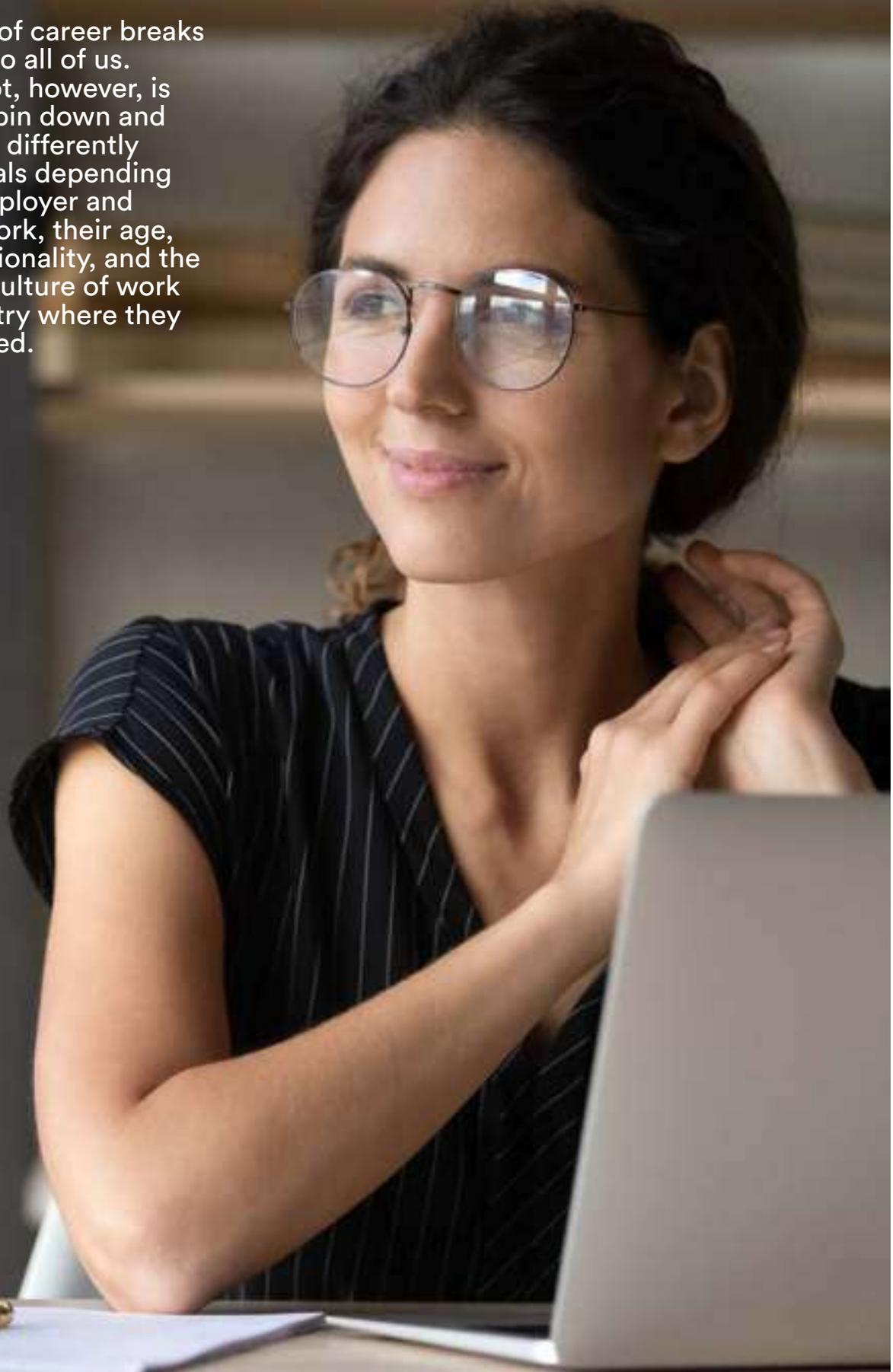
For what reasons people have taken a career break



Whether people have taken a career break and for what reason



The notion of career breaks is relevant to all of us. The concept, however, is difficult to pin down and understood differently by individuals depending on their employer and sector of work, their age, gender, nationality, and the prevailing culture of work in the country where they are employed.



The datasets generated through the poll have also allowed us to divide responses according to location of employment, age, and gender. As such, we can attempt to get to the heart of why people of different nationalities, ages, and genders, hold contrasting attitudes to the concept of ‘career breaks’. In analysing responses to the survey in all four countries, we examine in particularly acute detail the sentiments of working respondents across four areas of employment. These are the public sector, the private sector delivering government services, the private sector not delivering government services, and the charity sector. The Institute’s focus on public services – and the people who deliver them – motivated this specific line of inquiry.

A defining characteristic of the research is to understand the variances in attitudes to career breaks across different sectors, principally ‘private’, ‘public’, and those employed in the private sector but who deliver public services [5]. Too often, the differences between the public and private sectors are based on lazy assumptions. Viewing these contrasts through the prism of ‘career breaks’ provides original insight and nuance to the differences between the public and private sectors. By including those who are employed in the private sector delivering public services, the research sheds light on an especially under-researched cohort of workers. Like those employed in the public sector, attitudes towards career breaks are an interesting proxy for the general attitudes of these workers have towards their job and working culture. This is especially important given multiple studies have shown how more contented frontline workers deliver better public services to citizens [6] [7].

[5] On occasion, ‘government-contracted private sector workers’ or ‘government contractor’ may be used as shorthand for those employed in the private sector delivering public services.

[6] Happy workers are 13% more productive’ – University of Oxford.

[7] Why Government Workers Are Harder to Motivate’ – Harvard Business Review.

We hope that the data, findings and recommendations presented in this report, are of real-life interest to employees and employers in both the public and private sectors, and policymakers. The report might even prompt readers to reframe the feasibility of taking a career break themselves.

The report is divided into five chapters, starting with a global comparison of each country, before moving onto a detailed country-by-country analysis, where we explore in depth citizens' attitudes and experiences of career breaks.



Chapter 1
International
Comparison

Overview

This chapter compares the responses of citizens from across our four surveyed countries: Australia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US).

We begin by providing a summary of the key findings, followed by analysis of the data, which is divided into three sections: different countries'/demographics attitudes towards career breaks and the reasons for taking such a break; what factors do citizens consider a concern prior to taking a career break; and what barriers do citizens face after returning to work from a career break. leave policies to suit the sensibilities of a modern workforce.

Generally, it is notable how much alignment there is between the four countries. Given their shared history and culture, such alignment between the UK and Australia is perhaps unsurprising. The US shares some cultural and historical similarities with these countries, but has a very distinct, almost exceptional working and employment culture, and regulatory landscape. The UAE is genuinely distinct from other surveyed countries and this is, to some extent, evidenced in the results. However, this should not be overstated – there is sufficient alignment amongst all the countries to conclude that consistency of response is the clear theme of the findings. That said, whilst this is true on a country basis, there are much clearer divergences when it comes to age, gender, and sector of work.



Some of our most important findings are below:



56% of respondents indicated that they had taken a career break of some kind, the most common reason being maternity leave. A fifth of respondents who had not yet taken a career break said that they felt unable to take a one.



A majority of people across all countries thought some form of career break was deemed 'legitimate', with Maternity receiving the most support across all four countries.



That said, a significant portion (between a third and a half) of people in every country remained sceptical that even maternity leave was a legitimate form of career break.



There was a general 'self-reference bias' – that the 'closer' you were to a reason for a career break, the more likely you were to see it as legitimate. For example, women were consistently more likely than men to see Maternity as a legitimate reason for a career break; or, younger people were less likely to see Carer's Leave as a legitimate reason compared to middle-age and older respondents.



Across all countries, a significantly larger proportion of respondents felt that a career break would not impact their career compared to those that did. Across all four countries there was strong evidence of a negative 'experience effect'; that is, the responses of those who have taken a career break indicate that the reality of taking one is more difficult than other people think.



Men were 15 points more likely than women to be confident in their ability to return to work after a break without their professional life suffering.



In all four countries, government-contracted private sector workers were most cautious about taking a career break and returning from one.



Younger respondents were more likely to have taken a career break than older cohorts. Respondents in all countries felt that financial concerns were the most significant barrier to them taking a career break.



There was evidence of a 'desirability-means' gap – that those who most wanted to take a career break were the most likely to believe they faced the most significant challenges in doing so.

Background

Australia and the UK have more generous statutory rights for career breaks than the USA and the UAE, yet provision would still be considered relatively light compared to other countries, particularly those in Scandinavia, for example. Although both federations, Australia has a much more comprehensive package of employee rights enforced at state level than the USA, a country with similar provisions to the UAE.

Australia has paid holiday, and a mixture of paid/unpaid statutory provision for maternity leave, paternity leave, surrogacy, adoption, and carers. Although there is no specific legislation on career breaks or sabbaticals, employees may benefit from 'Long Service Leave', depending on individual states and territories; that is, a period of extended paid leave following employment after a specific amount of time.

Like Australia, the UK has a fairly comprehensive range of measures, including paid requirements for holiday, illness & injury, surrogacy, parental bereavement, and adoption. There is a mixture of paid/unpaid statutory requirements for shared parental leave, maternity leave, and paternity leave; whilst leave for childcare, emergency involving a dependant, and extended illness, do not require an employer to pay. There are no laws that deal specifically with taking a break.

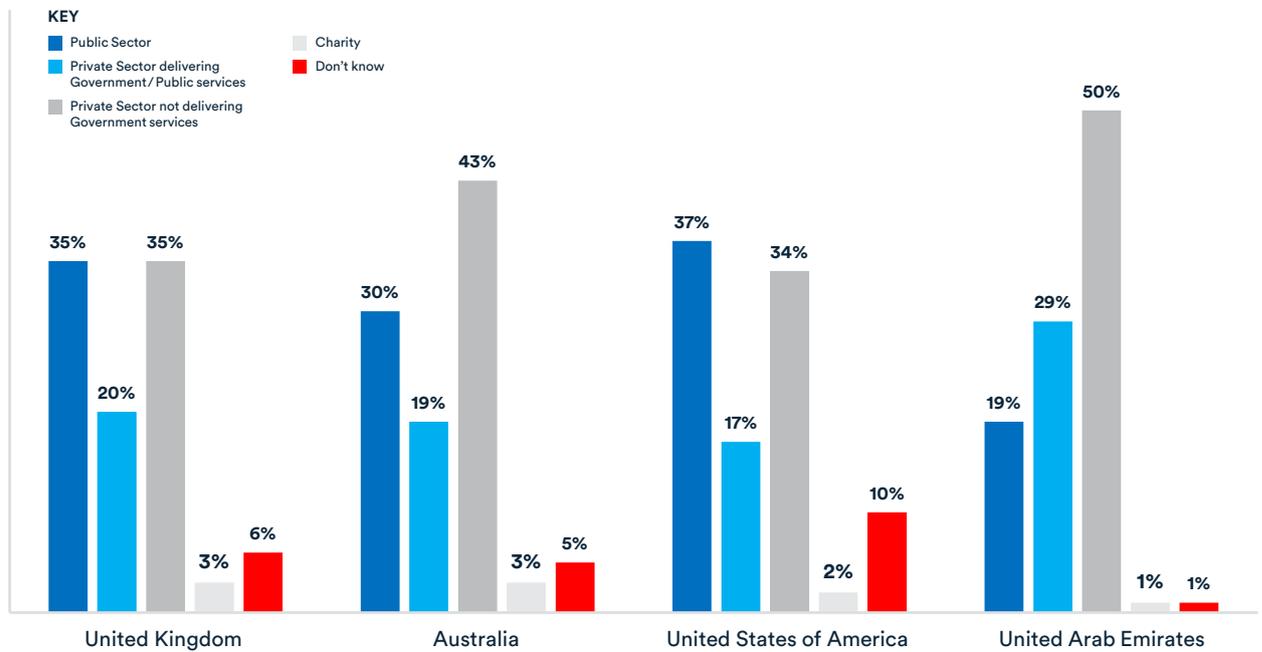
The US is well known for having employer friendly statutory laws. Other rights which employees are permitted but which go unpaid at Federal level include: illness & injury, maternity leave, paternity leave, surrogacy, adoption, and carer's leave. However, it should be noted that there are significant differences across states. Annual holiday entitlements are the only paid leave mandated at Federal level.

Employment laws regarding leave are on a more nascent footing in the UAE. There are only three nationwide statutory requirements to provide leave. These are paid holiday leave, a mix of paid/unpaid leave for illness and injury, and unpaid maternity leave. Leave entitlements also vary between different parts of the UAE, a country of seven emirates. Specific to the UAE is the country's Kafala System which governs labour migration. Under Kafala, migrant workers' legal status rests with their employer, a local individual or company. This is significant where career breaks are concerned, as a sizeable majority of workers in the UAE are migrants.

Breakdown of Respondents

Our survey consisted of 7,216 respondents in total, with 28% of these based in Australia, 29% in the UK, 29% in the USA, and 14% in the UAE. We asked respondents to self-define their sector from four options: public sector, private sector workers delivering government services, non-government private sector workers, charity sector, and 'Don't know'.

International comparison: Breakdown of respondents by country

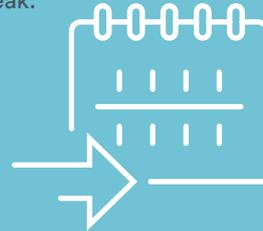


Attitudes towards Career Breaks

56% of respondents indicated that they had taken a career break of some kind, the most common reason being maternity leave.



In the UK, Australia, and the USA, maternity leave was the leading reason why respondents had taken a career break.



A significantly larger proportion of respondents felt that a career break would not impact their career compared to those who thought it would. This was most marked in the UAE compared to other countries.



A fifth of respondents who had not yet taken a career break said that they felt unable to take a one. For those who felt able to (and wanted to), Travel/Hobby was the most cited reason to take a career break.



Respondents who have taken a career break were more likely to regard a category as a 'legitimate reason' for taking leave; however, they were less confident of taking another career break in the future.

Women in all four countries believe a career break is more likely to impact their professional life than men.



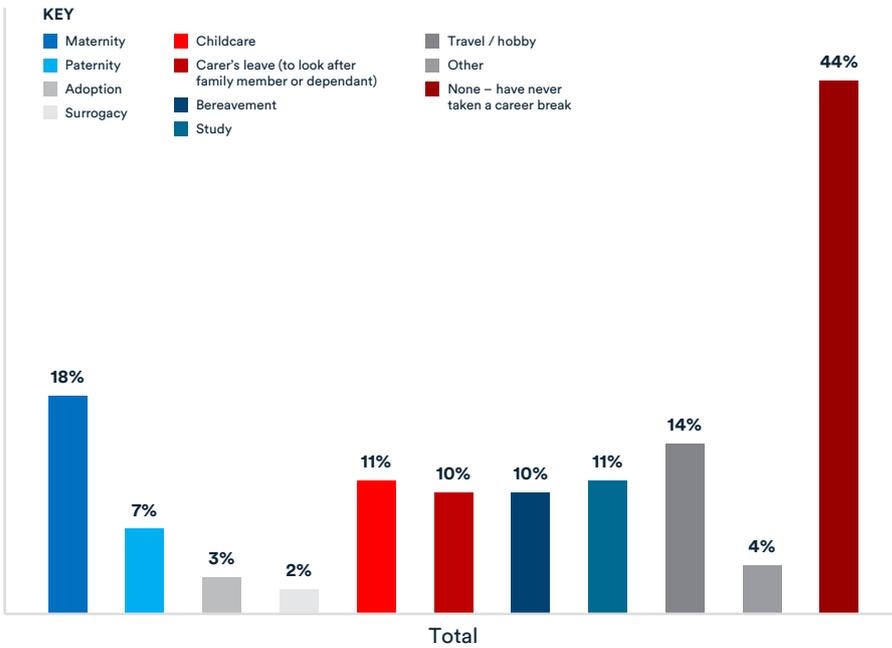
In all four countries, government-contracted private sector workers were most cautious about their ability to take a career break.



Younger cohorts were more likely to have taken a career break than older cohorts.

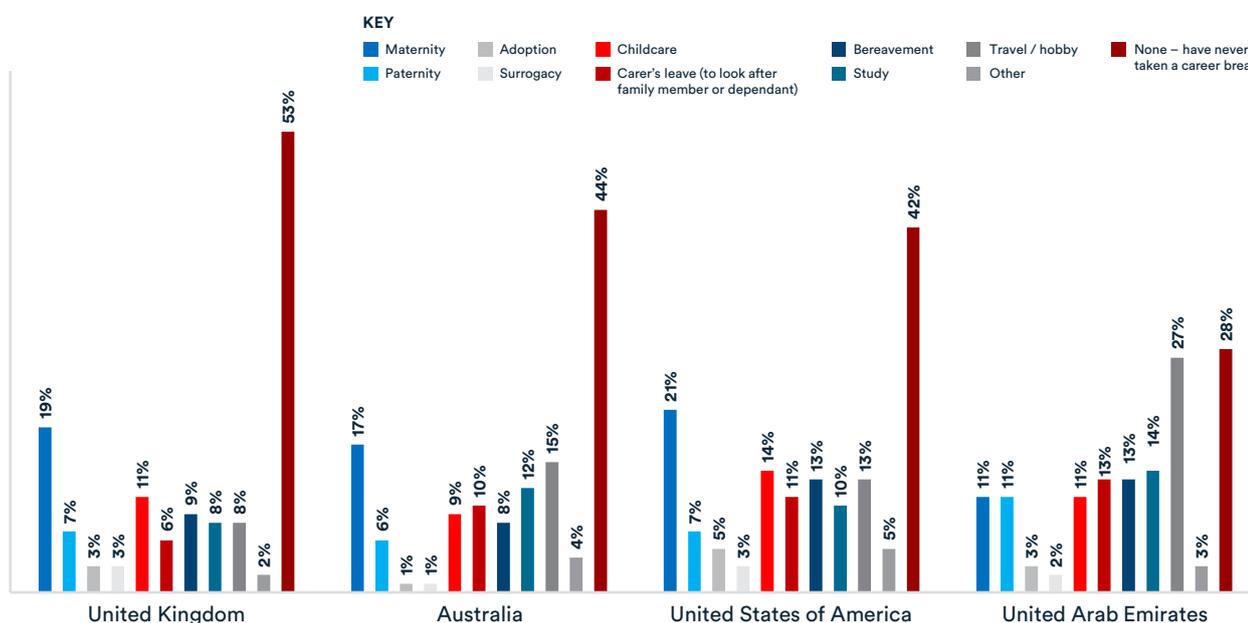
56% of respondents indicated that they had taken a career break of some kind, the most common reason being maternity leave at 18% of the overall total (31% if you include just women), which increases further if you include the 7% of the overall total (or 11% of men) who indicated that they had taken paternity leave. The most common reason for taking a career break for men, and the second most common reason overall, was Travel/Hobby. That said, the rate at which career breaks were taken varied significantly from country to country: only 47% of UK respondents had taken a career break, while 56% of Australians indicated as such, rising to 58% of respondents in the US, and peaking at 72% in the UAE.

International comparison: Ever taken a career break



Across all countries, a significantly larger proportion of respondents felt that a career break would not impact their professional life as compared to those who thought it would. In the UK there was a 28-point differential, in Australia and the US it was 30 and 44 points respectively, and in the UAE - the glaring outlier – some 84% of respondents felt a career break would not impact their career compared to just 5% of respondents who did.

International comparison: Country-by-country - Ever taken a career break

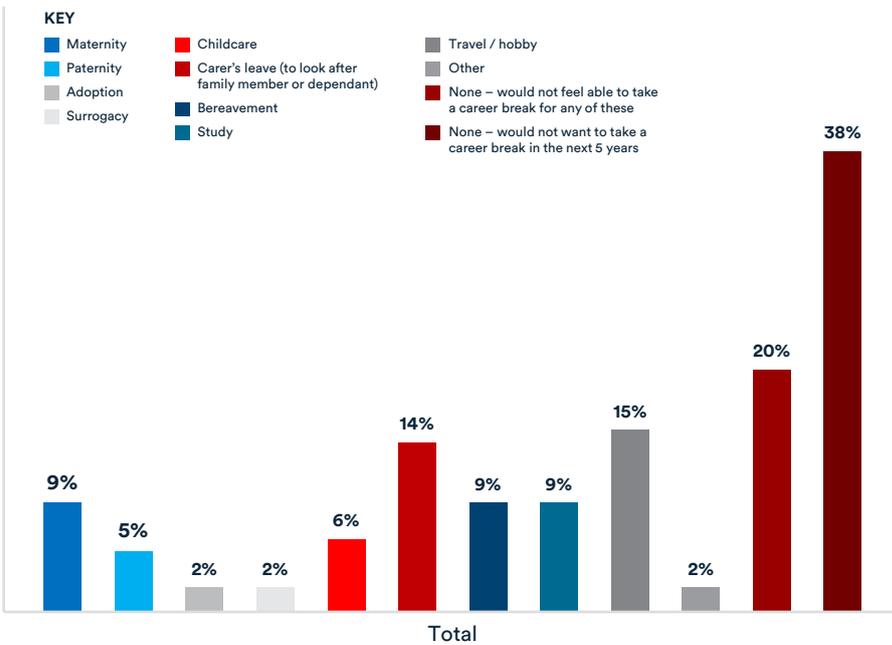


The majority of respondents were confident their professional lives would remain uninhibited by a career break. On first view, this is perhaps surprising given the myriad of concerns people might have about taking a career break. One explanation is that respondents had in mind the career breaks they deemed most legitimate when answering the question; those which are deemed historically and socially acceptable, both on an innate human level and which are possibly enshrined in law. Maternity and paternity leave, carer's leave, and, to a lesser extent, bereavement, fit into this category. Respondents may have thought, "what reasonable employer or colleague could possibly compromise my career due to my departure for one of these very personal and humane reasons?". As regards the UAE, we need to consider the demographics of the workforce, a considerable majority of which are migrants. Could it be that a significant proportion of respondents are used to working in stints of a few years in the UAE, after which they may return home for a break before the next role? This natural cycle may lend itself to being considered particularly legitimate by migrant workers in the UAE. The role of personal proximity to a specific reason, for instance women's greater proximity to maternity relative to men, therefore plays an important role in determining respondents' support for something as grounds for a career break: this pattern we have named the 'self-reference bias'.

Aggregating responses across all four countries, a fifth of respondents who had not yet taken a career break said that they felt unable to take a one. At the top of the range was the US with 22% of respondents indicating an inability to take a career break; the UK sat in the middle at 21% and 17% of respondents in both the UAE and Australia indicated as such.

Across all four countries an average of 38% of people who had not taken a career break said that they would not want to in the next five years. Again, there was variance between different countries, with the UK at 44% at the top end, the USA at 38%, Australia at 35%, and the UAE with a markedly lower return of 25%.

International comparison: Able to take a career break



For those who felt able to (and wanted to), Travel/Hobby was the most cited reason to take a career break (15%) – however, 16% of women and 8% of men also cited Maternity or Paternity as a reason, meaning if you take both together, childbirth would be the highest single category. Furthermore, the motivations for taking a career break within the next five years varied significantly by age – 24-35-year-olds cited maternity (25%) most often, whereas the youngest age group indicated Study (24%) and Travel/Hobby (22%) as the primary reasons for taking a career break. The age group containing the largest number of people who felt unable to take a career break was the oldest age group 55-64-year-old category (22%), who were also the least likely to want to take a career break.



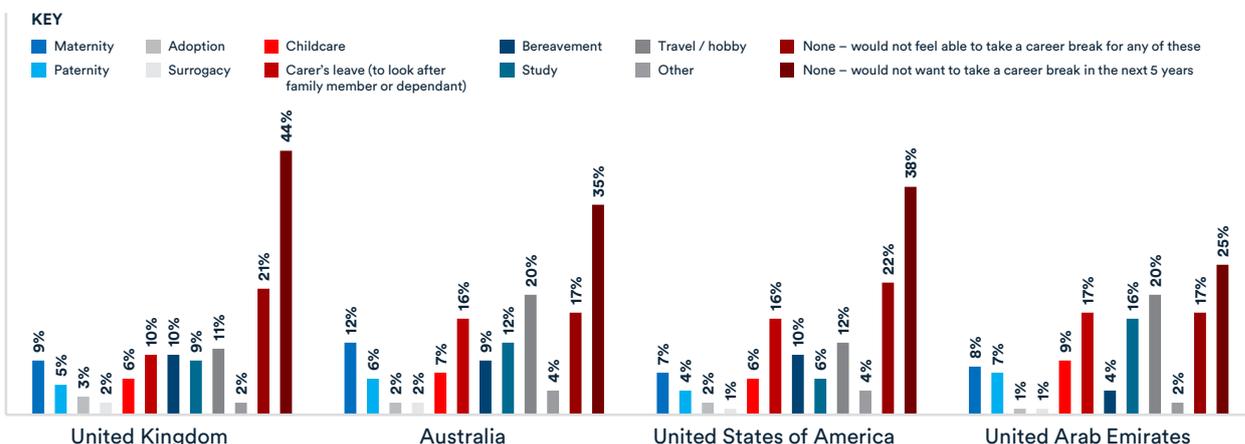
For those who felt able to (and wanted to), Travel/Hobby was the most cited reason to take a career break (15%).

Confidence levels differed according to gender. Indeed, a clear theme emanating from the data is that women in all four countries believe a career break is more likely to impact their career than men. This plays to traditional views of the workplace and work culture as being constructed primarily for men. It should be noted that, although men felt more able than women to take a career break without feeling it would impact their career, over 50% of women respondents were confident a break would not affect their career. On first view, this finding might be grounds for cautious optimism; however, if we consider what people feel the most legitimate reasons to take a career break are, then just over half of women being comfortable taking a break without thinking it will negatively impact upon their career becomes less encouraging. For example, when responding to whether a break would impact their career, it is possible that women would have in mind those reasons they deemed most legitimate justifications for a career break - Maternity, Childcare, and Carer's Leave. If only a slim majority of women are confident to take a career break for these very human – non-negotiable? – reasons, then there is significant progress still to be made.

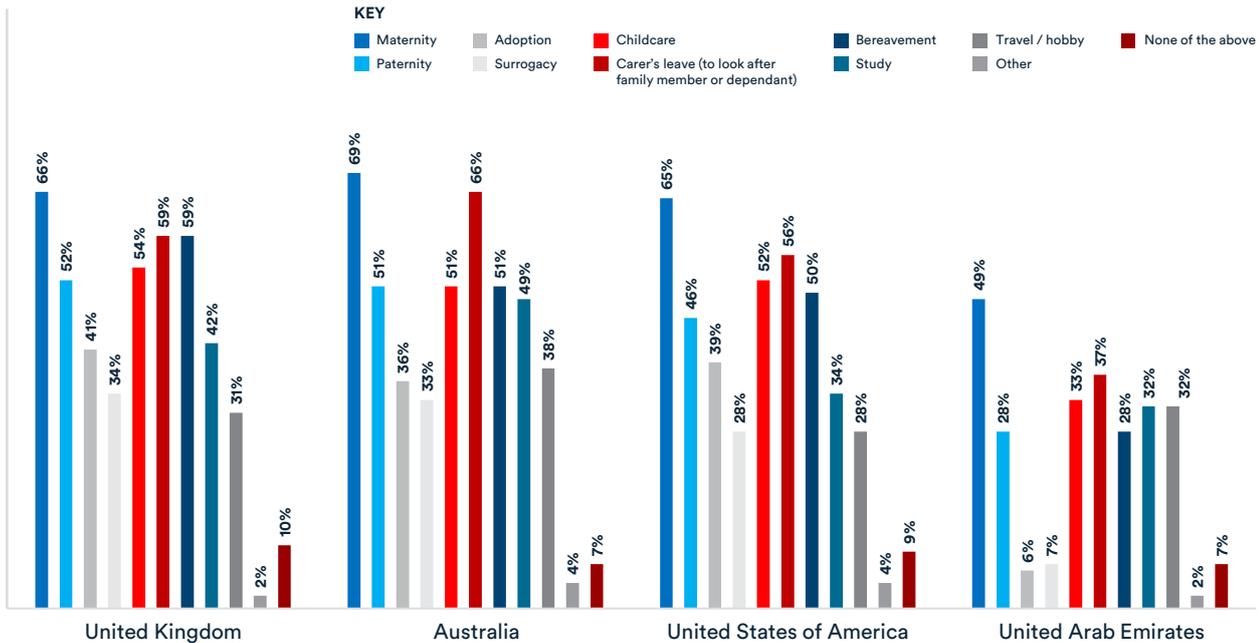
There were also some marked differences in the confidence levels depending on work sector. In all four countries, our polling showed that government-contracted private sector workers were most cautious about taking a career break. It could be that these respondents feel the traditional competitive pressures associated with the private sector and also face questions of duty associated with the public service delivery, hence the caution these workers feel when considering taking time off. These dual private-public sector pressures lead to a 'government contractor squeeze', limiting these workers' perceived capacity to take a career break.

As outlined in more detail throughout this report, the majority of government-contracted private sector workers are likely to be operating in essential public services as, for example, a hospital porter, engineer, or prison officer. If they leave their employment, it is a necessity that their position is filled as a matter of urgency. Therefore, their confidence to take a career break is likely to be impacted as their position will be filled if they do go on such a break.

International comparison: Country-by-country - Able to take a career break



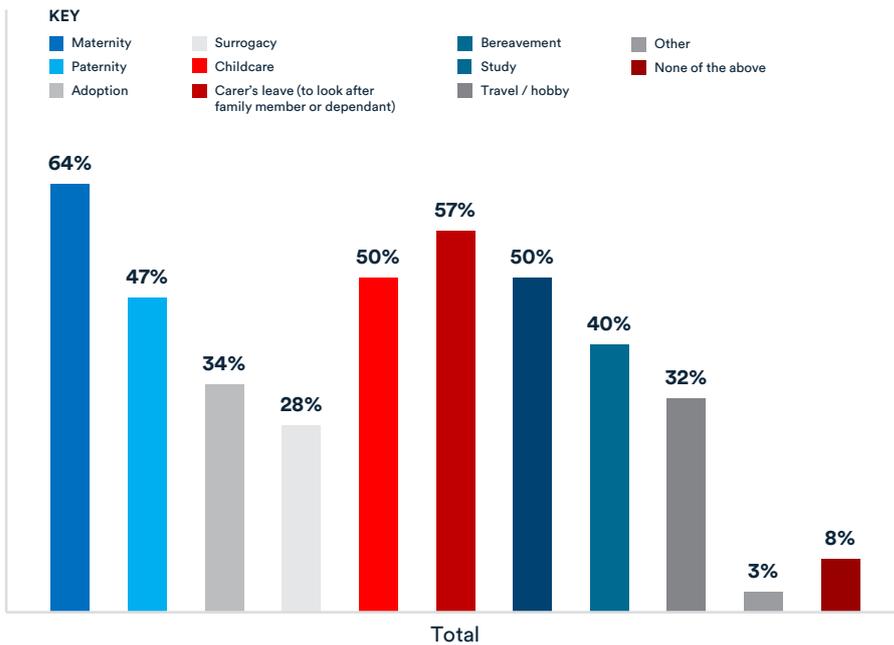
International comparison: Country-by-country – Legitimate reasons for a career break



In all four countries, maternity leave was deemed the most legitimate reason for a career break. In the UK 66% of respondents regarded it as legitimate, as did 69% in Australia, 65% in the US, but only 49% in the UAE. However, it should be noted that this latter figure was some 12 points higher than the next reason deemed most legitimate in the UAE, Carer's Leave; incidentally, this was also considered the second most legitimate reason in each of the UK (joint second with Bereavement), Australia, and the USA. It is perhaps unsurprising that these two, very family related issues are considered the top reasons for taking a career break in all jurisdictions; not only because of human beings' 'family first' orientation, but also necessity – in both examples, a career break may be required because there is simply no other option – and, finally, especially where maternity leave is concerned, there is a longer standing culture of taking such a break, independent of whether a country has statutory paid maternity leave or not. Why, though, does the UAE have a noticeably lower approval rate for Maternity than the US, Australia, and the UK? One reason is the sample of survey respondents in the UAE, three-quarters of whom were male, a demographic which, across all four surveyed countries, was less likely to deem Maternity a legitimate reason compared to women. Whilst particularly pronounced in the UAE, it is worth noting that men in the other three countries polled felt Maternity to be less legitimate than women; indeed, in the UK, USA and Australia around a third of men felt that Maternity was not a 'legitimate' reason to take a career break.

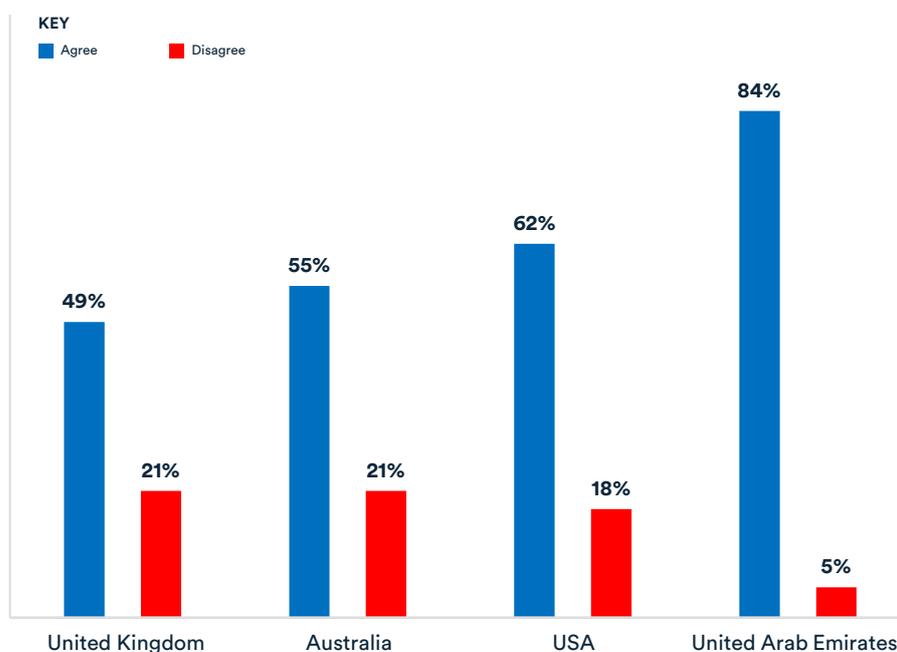
Attitudes to what is considered a legitimate reason are also borne out on a practical level. In the UK, Australia, and the USA, Maternity was the leading reason why respondents had taken a career break. This is unsurprising given maternity leave could be regarded as the most well-established 'career break' in most Western countries. Indeed, in both the UK and Australia paid maternity leave is a statutory right. As mentioned above, taking maternity leave is, in many cases, likely to be a necessity on both human and financial levels. The UAE was a clear outlier where reasons for taking a career break were concerned. Maternity did not register in the top three. In contrast, and by a significant margin, Travel/Hobby was the most likely reason for respondents to take a career break. Again, the explanation might revolve around the migrant-orientated nature of the UAE's workforce. It is a possible that many respondents work in the UAE for stints of a few years, after which they return to their home country for a break before another stint in the UAE or elsewhere.

International comparison: Legitimate reasons for a career break



The data is revealing with regard to which age cohorts had the highest propensity to take career breaks. Logically, one may have assumed that older people were more likely to have taken a career break than younger people, simply due to the laws of probability: more years worked means there is a higher chance of taking a career break, especially taking into account the higher likelihood of maternity/paternity leave and carer's leave; the older people are, the more likely they are to have had children and elderly parents. This logic was firmly turned on its head by the results. In fact, 64% and 69% of those aged 25-34 and 35-44 respectively had taken career breaks, whilst only 39% of 55-64-year-olds had done the same.

**International comparison:
I can return without an impact to my professional life**



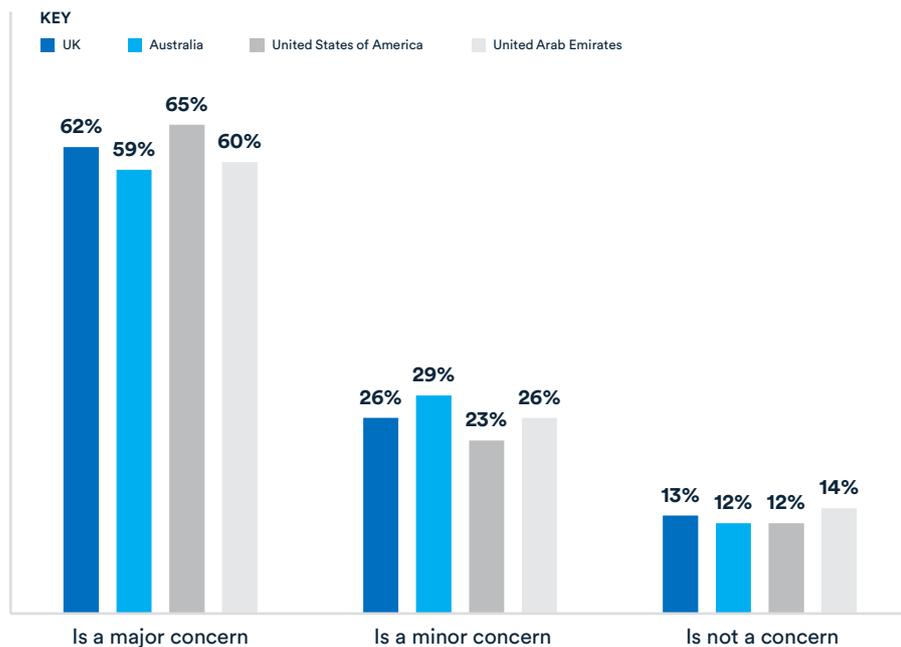
Is this result indicative of how attitudes to work have changed? One possible explanation is that younger cohorts more frequently change jobs than older generations. As a result, there are more natural hiatuses between finishing one role and starting the next one. Could it be that some younger respondents regarded this time not so much as a natural gap between jobs, but as a career break? In addition, it may be that younger people are simply more likely take a career break even without a job already fixed in the future. Such a theory would certainly chime with feeling that younger people place more of than emphasis on 'life experiences' than older generations. A final possible reason is that career breaks are now more formally integrated into employers' policies, thereby raising awareness of such opportunities amongst employees: 'build it and they will come'. Such opportunities may simply not have been available to older cohorts of workers.

Concerns



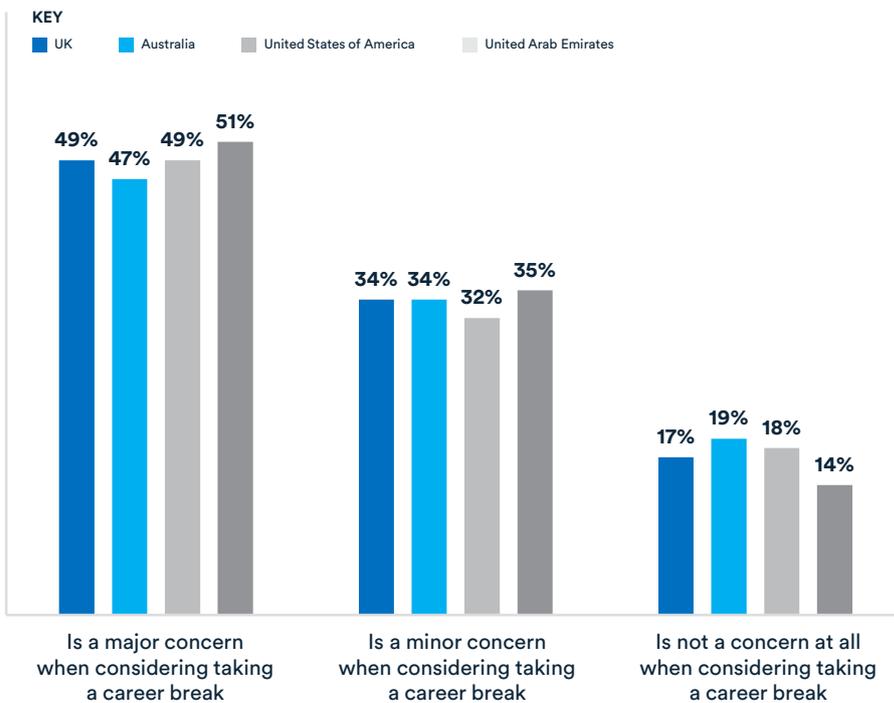
There were some clear similarities regarding how respondents frame particular concerns about taking a career break. The most strongly felt concern in all four countries was the potential effect on personal finances. In the US, 65% of respondents felt it a 'major concern', in the UK it was 62%, Australia 59%, and the UAE 60%. Interestingly, this uniformity is despite some surveyed countries having considerably more generous statutory requirements than others. The UK and Australia have a raft of paid career breaks in contrast to the USA and the UAE, where paid breaks are confined to holiday, injury and illness. However, the fact that respondents across all countries have major concerns about the financial implications of taking a career break may suggest the paucity of those statutory requirements even in the supposedly more generous countries: in short, they are not sufficient to move the needle even when compared to less generous systems in the USA and UAE.

International comparison: Concern – Financial concerns



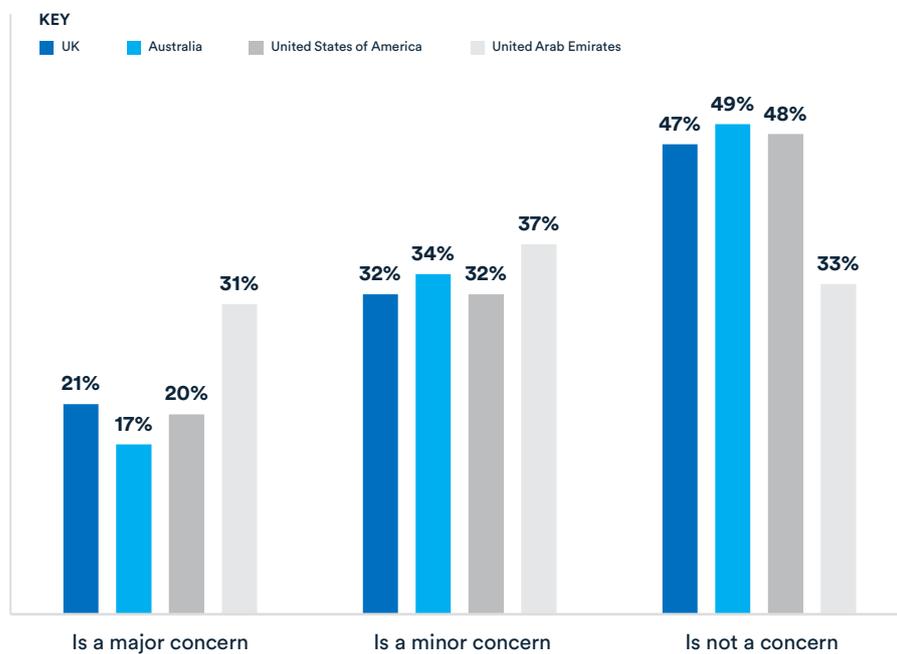
Employer flexibility was the second most strongly felt concern across all four countries. Some 51% of respondents in the UAE reported this as a major concern, with 49% in both the UK and the US, and 47% in Australia. Again, the similar results here are surprising given the different employment practices and levels of generosity across each jurisdiction. One theory to explain this finding is that respondents had in mind those reasons for which there is not a statutory requirement for employers to grant a career break. Such reasons may include a sabbatical for Travel/Hobby or Bereavement. Concerns over employer flexibility would likely have been lower had respondents answered with those career breaks in mind that are backed up by statutory requirements.

International comparison: Concern – Flexibility of your employer



The results as regards the 'disapproval of friends, family or peers' show the UAE to be a clear outlier with 31% reporting this consideration as a 'major concern', compared to 21% in the UK, 20% in the USA, and 17% in Australia. Indeed, these latter three countries were between 47% and 49% in being clear that this consideration was not a concern, compared to 33% of those in the UAE.

International comparison: Concern – Disapproval of friends, family or peers





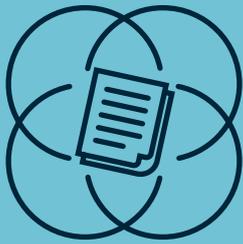
Across all four countries, there was clear evidence of what we term the ‘experience effect’: that is, respondents who had taken a career break were more likely to identify concerns regarding the impact of taking one.



What is behind this discrepancy? In contrast to other surveyed countries, around three-quarters of respondents were male. The results may indicate concerns men have of upholding their role as the bread winner in the eyes of friends and family. The results in Australia, the UK, and the US may indicate a shift in cultural attitudes to career breaks, which are now viewed as being a more acceptable and regular feature of people's lives. Such a feeling may have been accelerated by the pandemic, the effects of which have encouraged workers, especially in Western countries, to reassess work-life balance.

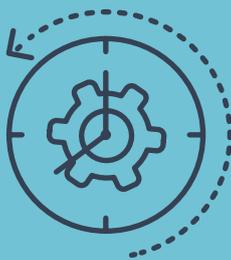
Across all four countries, there was clear evidence of what we term the 'experience effect': that is, respondents who had taken a career break were more likely to identify concerns regarding the impact of taking one. This may indicate that the reality of taking career breaks is more of a challenge than people expect, especially when it comes to the impact on an individual's career. As our survey asked respondents whether or not they had taken a career break, we were able to directly compare the responses of those who had taken breaks with the responses of those who had not: however, the 'experience effect' was also evident in the differing responses of groups more likely to have taken career breaks and groups less likely to have done so. For instance, this view pervaded amongst younger cohorts who were more likely than older respondents to have taken a career break. Over the coming years, it will be interesting to see if this younger generation utilise their arguably more politically active culture to push for change amongst employers, so that career breaks are more culturally acceptable in the workplace and a more formalised part of people's working lives.

Barriers



There was a significant degree of similarity across the responses provided by people in the four different countries.

A lack of flexibility and work-life balance was the most cited barrier for those returning to work following a career break.

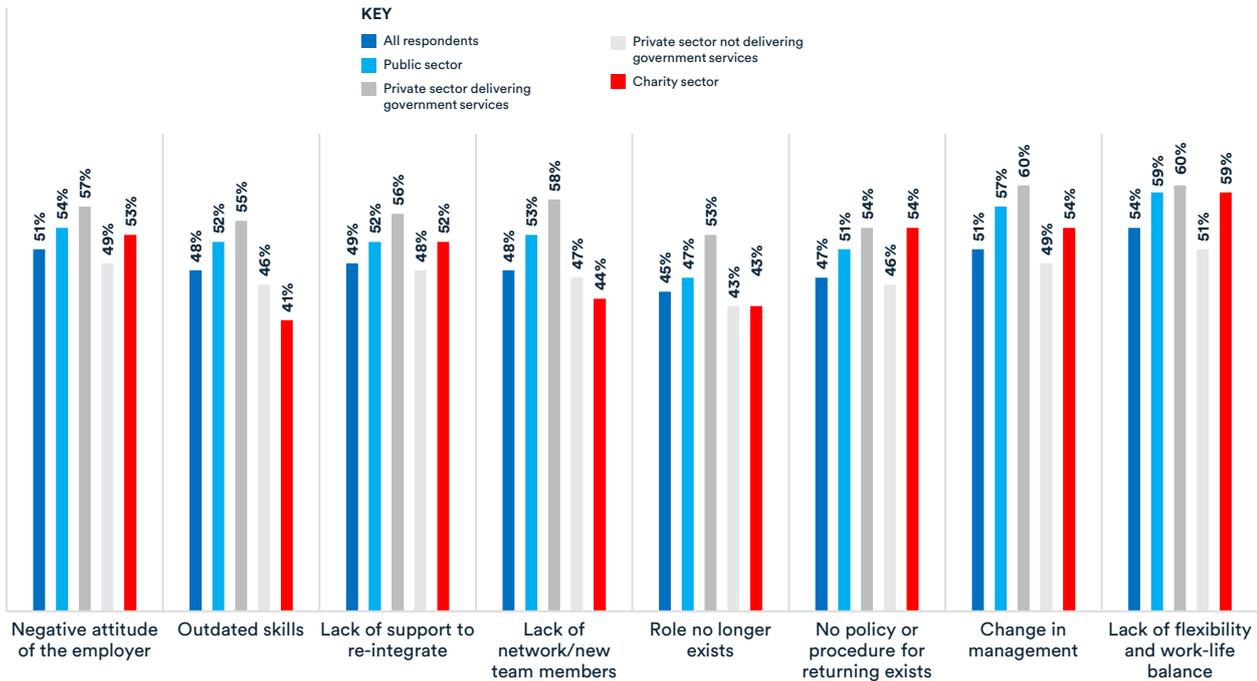


Over half of those delivering public services - employed in either the public or private sector – believed 'outdated skills' to be a major barrier to taking a career break.

From a country comparison perspective, the same rule tends to apply. Yes, there are undoubtedly differences between what respondents consider a barrier to a return to work, but a high level of consistency in responses is again the theme. Where 'barriers' are concerned, the insightful results tend to be across demographics other than those related to country of residence.

Those working in the public sector (52%) and in the private sector delivering public services (55%) were more likely than those in the private sector not delivering public services (46%) to believe outdated skills frequently constituted a barrier to returning to work.

International comparison: Frequently encountered barriers to returning

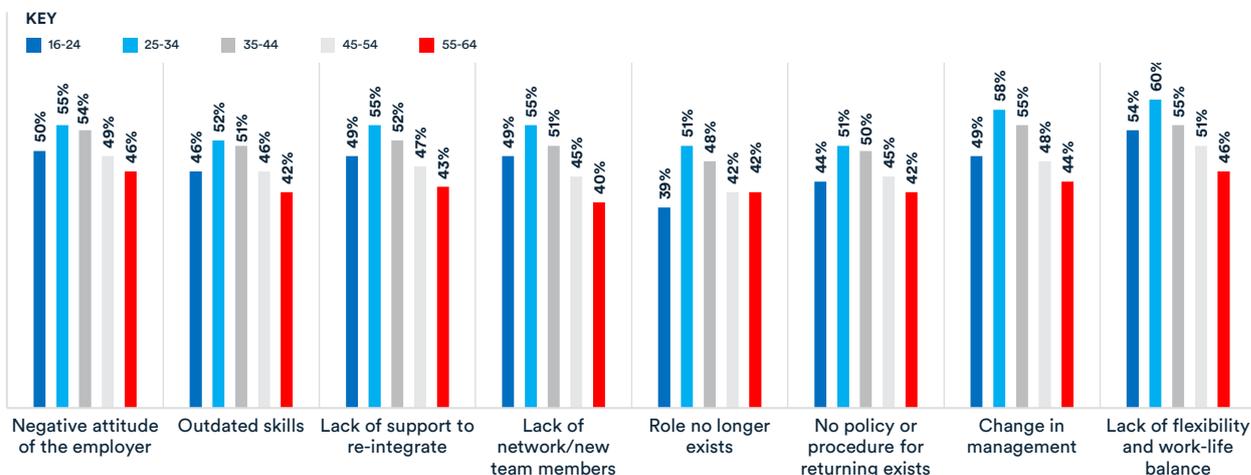


This is perhaps an unexpected finding. It is generally assumed that the public sector is slower to introduce technological innovations than the private sector. It follows that longer standing skills may have more relevance over longer periods as the public sector takes more time to implement the technology and processes that require new skills. Whilst there are many notable exceptions, a significant proportion of public services require – at least for the foreseeable future – frontline, human workers; think of the military, hospitals, and teachers, all areas that to some extent require longer standing skills.

Why, then, are public sector workers and government-contracted private sector workers more likely to believe outdated skills are a barrier to a career break? Specialists are often required to deliver public services effectively; think oncologists or naval engineers. The services such specialists provide are not optional, but rather a necessity, and are delivered through ever evolving technological advancements and improved frameworks. Furthermore, these highly regulated environments and their quickly evolving policies and standards may mean there is a high rate at which workers find themselves lacking up-to-date qualifications, skills or knowledge to provide certain services following a career break. It may be that respondents delivering public services were mindful of this factor, hence more than half believing outdated skills as a barrier to a career break.

There were some notable variances across different age cohorts. Some 58% of 25-34-year-olds considered a change in management as a challenge when returning from a career break, in contrast to just 44% of 55-64-year-olds. This would seem logical given the older age cohort is more likely to contain those in management positions. In short, why be concerned about a change in management when you yourself are the management? And in a similar vein, if a longstanding colleague is your manager and of your age cohort, then an individual’s confidence in returning to work is likely to be greater. The opposite is true of those aged 25-34, where career progression is more likely to be dependent on an older manager.

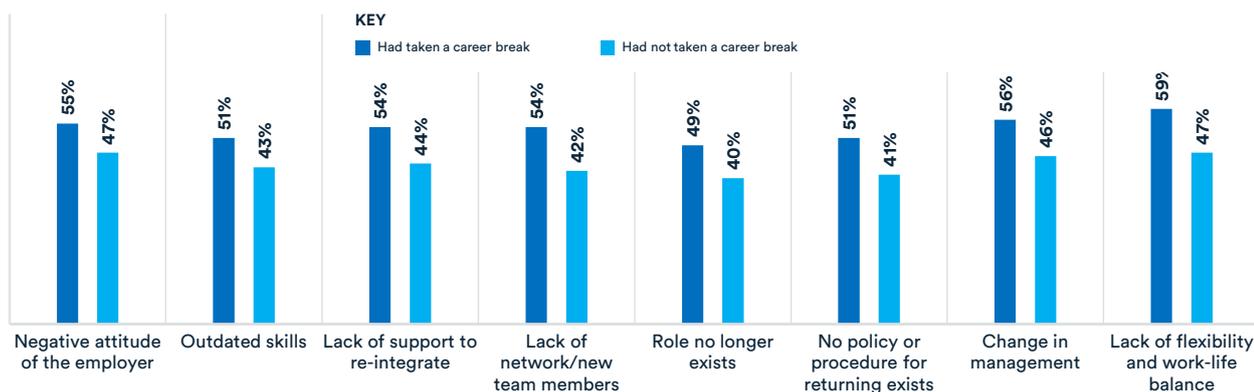
International comparison: Frequently encountered barriers to returning



Another notable – but more inexplicable – finding indicated that 24-34-year-olds were considerably more likely than other cohorts to think their job will no longer exist after a career break. Some 51% of this cohort reported this as a barrier to their return, compared with 39% for 16-24-year-olds. It may be that 24-34-year-olds are more likely to have settled into a full-time role and, therefore, feel they have more to lose by going on a career break. The younger cohort will likely have higher numbers of those whose work experience has involved seasonal/short-term roles, or no working experience at all, possibly due to education or training commitments. Therefore, it follows that younger respondents are more confident of a role existing in the future because they are not leaving a long-term role in the first instance.

There were some clear divergences between those who had taken a career break and those who had not. 54% of those who had taken a career break believed there was a lack of support to re-integrate them back into the office, compared to just 44% of those who had not taken a career break. This hits upon our theory of the ‘experience effect’, whereby those who have experienced career breaks are more likely to regard them as an imposition on their careers. According to our findings, it appears that employers could do more to support employees back into the office following a career break. However, for effective re-integration, employers will need to tailor re-integration programmes depending on the underlying reason for a career break, and the length of absence. For example, someone returning from a year’s maternity leave will require a different programme of re-integration compared to someone who has taken a shorter break for travel purposes.

International comparison: Frequently encountered barriers to returning



At 56%, women were five points more likely than men to consider ‘work-life balance’ as a barrier to their return. This plays into the longstanding theme that, despite some progress in recent years, the workplace is still structured as one that is more suited to men than women. The complexities of returning to work following maternity leave, for example, will need to be addressed if women are to be more positive about their work-life balance following a return to work. It would be interesting to see whether women become more positive in this regard following the introduction of more flexible hybrid working, a change clearly accelerated by the pandemic.

Reflections

The results reinforce some familiar themes, produce a number of surprises, and in all cases raise interesting questions for employees, employers, and policymakers. Perhaps the biggest surprise of all is the general uniformity of responses across countries. Significant variances tended to be between different groups of people rather than location of work; this despite the differing work cultures and statutory provision in each country. However, it should be acknowledged that the UAE deviated slightly more from the general responses than other countries – the only surprise being responses were not more dissimilar in spite of the country’s distinctive employment laws, large proportion of migrant workers, and more traditional working culture.

The results show that government-contracted private sector workers are more cautious than those employed in the public or non-government private sectors. Employers should consider designing more tailored career break policies that recognise the often-unique pressures faced by their employees in delivering public sector work.

One finding worthy of further examination is the insecurity those aged 24-35 feel about career breaks. This age group was most likely to have taken a career break, yet felt most concerned about taking another in the future, and were fearful that their career would be compromised on returning to work, notably with regard to their role having disappeared altogether or due to a change of management. The concerns – and experiences – of this age group should pique the interest of employers, not only from an employee welfare perspective but also for commercial considerations: this group is likely to consist of an employer’s future leaders. Keeping them motivated and integrated would likely have commercial benefits.

Although women were moderately confident about career breaks in general, their perceptions and experiences of career breaks were deemed as more detrimental to their lives than men. Our findings indicate that employers and governments still have some way to go to ‘level the playing field’ where women and career breaks are concerned.



Chapter 2
The United
Kingdom

Overview

This chapter examines the responses of UK residents to our survey on career breaks.

We begin by providing a summary of our findings, before examining, in three sections, British respondents' attitudes towards career breaks and the reasons for taking such a break; factors which Britons contemplating a career break might consider a concern prior to doing so; and factors which those returning to work after a career break may encounter as barriers to re-entering the workforce. We conclude by commenting on key trends and the consequent implications for the British workforce.

Key findings include:



The British public appeared on the whole supportive of career breaks in principle, with just one in 10 not supporting any of the suggested reasons for a career break. However, just over half (53%) of Britons had never taken a career break, and of these nearly two-thirds (65%) did not envision themselves taking one in the next five years.



Private sector workers not delivering government services were consistently less inclined to take career breaks and less likely to identify concerns about taking a career break or identify barriers when returning to work.



Private sector workers delivering government services, on the other hand, were the group of workers most likely to regard with concern the various factors suggested to them by our poll.



Despite being more supportive of career breaks for family or care-related reasons, women felt less able to take career breaks without detriment to their professional lives, and more vulnerable to limiting factors, such as concerns related to pay and career progression, which would prevent them from taking career breaks.



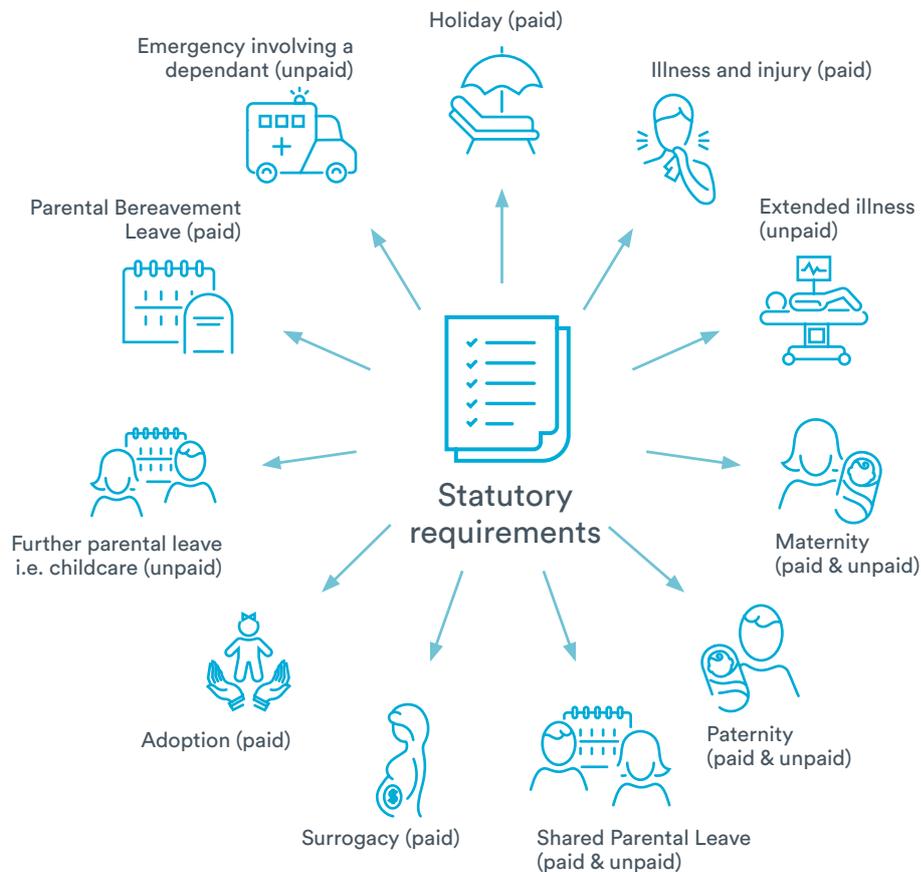
Younger age groups exhibited attitudes more open to taking career breaks, but were more pessimistic about concerns and re-entry barriers restricting their ability to do so.



Previous experience of career breaks proved to be a predictor of attitudes – what we have termed ‘the experience effect’ – with respondents who had taken a career break and respondents belonging to groups more willing or likely to have taken a career break proving more worried about suggested concerns and barriers to returning to work.

Background

There are statutory requirements in the UK to provide leave from work for:



There are no laws that deal specifically with taking a career break (as defined by the UK Government) – such breaks are usually only an agreement between the employer and the employee. Employers do not have to offer career breaks.

Following the large increase in working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Government announced plans to allow employees the right to request flexible working from their first day on the job [8], and introduce leave for unpaid carers. In December 2022, the Government moved forward with their proposals, pledging to introduce legislation to allow British workers to request flexible working arrangements from their first day in a new job [9]. It would appear, therefore, that statutory working entitlements are moving in a more flexible direction.

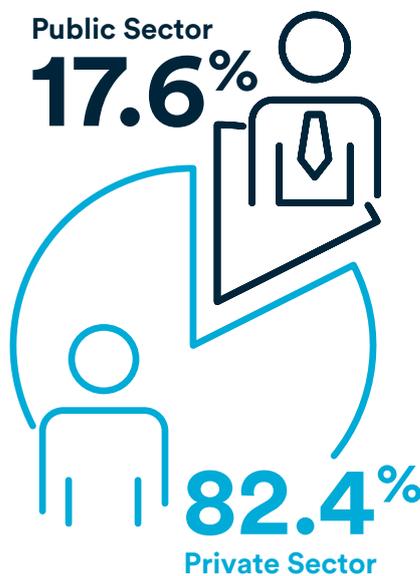
[8] 'UK staff to gain right to request flexible working from day 1' – The Guardian.

[9] 'UK staff to have right to ask for flexible working from day one in job' – The Guardian.

Breakdown of Respondents

A total of 2,090 UK residents took our survey on career breaks. Of these, 1,453 respondents were in work, with 502 (34% of working respondents) employed in the public sector; 291 (20%) in the private sector delivering government services; 505 (35%) in the private sector not delivering government services; and 45 (3%) in the charity sector. Due to the small sample size of charity sector workers in our poll, any data relating to the charity sector should be treated with caution [10].

Data from the Office for National Statistics suggests that, as of mid-2021, the public sector accounted for 17.6% of UK workers [11]. This figure is proportionally half of the number of respondents employed by the public sector captured in our poll. It is worth noting, however, that definitions of the public sector may differ between those responding to the ONS survey, which used the ONS definition of the public sector, and our survey, which relied on respondents' own self-definition of the sector.



ONS Employment Statistics – June 2021

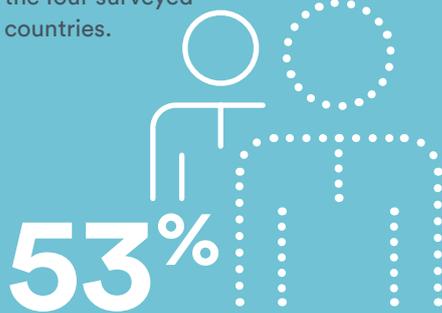
As of June 2021, 5.68 million workers are classified as public sector workers by the ONS, comprising 17.6% of the British workforce. The private sector accounts for 26.7 million workers, or 82.4% of workers [4]

[10] For one question, which used a smaller base of respondents not in work – ‘If you were to take a career break in the next five years, do you feel you would be able to for any of the following reasons?’ – the sample size of charity sector workers was beneath the minimum base of 30 and therefore does not offer credible data.

[11] ‘EMPO2: Public and private sector employment’ – Office for National Statistics.

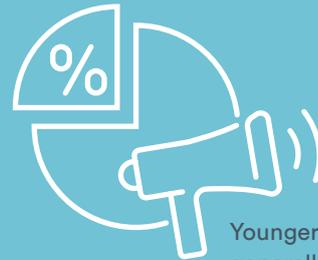
Attitudes towards Career Breaks

Over half (53%) of UK residents had never taken a career break. 44% of these had no intention of doing so in the next five years, and a further 21% said they would not feel able to, meaning nearly two-thirds (65%) of Britons who had never taken a career break did not foresee this changing. These statistics make the UK, arguably, the most sceptical of career breaks among the four surveyed countries.



Reasons relating to family and care for family members found the highest levels of sympathy among Britons, a majority of whom considered Maternity, Paternity, Childcare, Carer's Leave and Bereavement legitimate reasons for career breaks. Private sector workers not delivering government services were less likely to have taken a career break, less inclined to take one in future, and more likely to find none of the suggested reasons a 'legitimate' justification for a career break.

Women were consistently more likely than men to consider reasons related to care for family members legitimate, but less confident in their ability to return to work without suffering negative consequences.

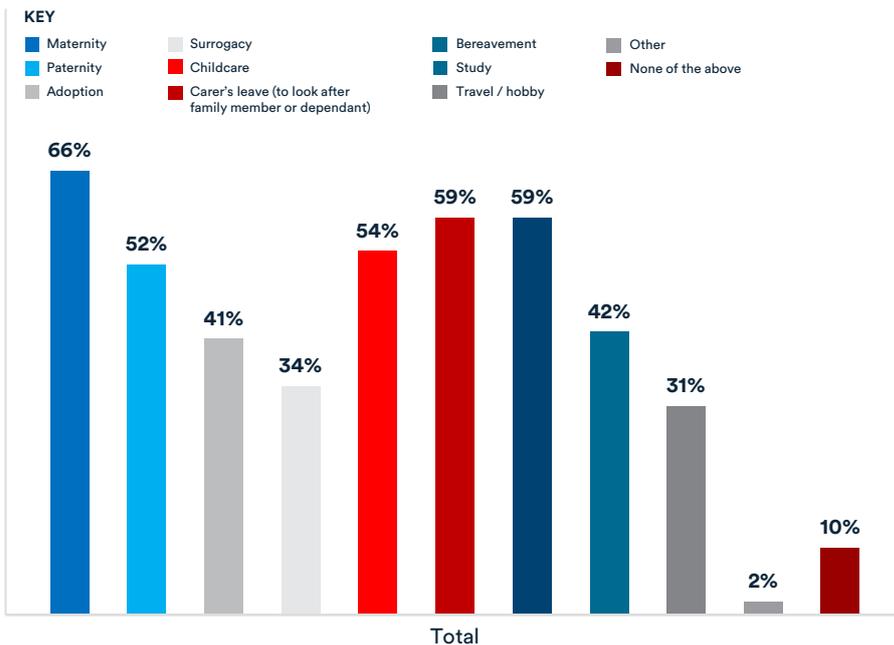


Younger age groups generally were more likely to take career breaks than older generations. However, younger respondents tended to voice support in greater numbers for reasons related to self-fulfilment rather than care for others.

Our UK survey suggests that it is a country of workaholics. Although just one in 10 UK respondents felt none of the reasons our poll suggested would justify a career break, in practice many seemed personally reluctant to take one: over half (53%) had never taken a career break themselves, the highest proportion of the four countries we polled. Of those who had not taken a career break, 44% had no inclination to take one in the next five years – once again the highest proportion of the surveyed countries – and a further 21% did not feel able to.

Of those who did see themselves taking a career break in the future (just 35%), the most cited reason was Travel/Hobby (11%). Presumably, this was driven by younger age groups, as 19% of 16-24-year-olds and 21% of 25-34-year-olds saw themselves as taking a career break for this reason in the next five years (compared to just 4% of those aged 55-64).

UK: Legitimate reasons for a career break





Our UK survey suggests that it is a country of 'workaholics'. A majority of people had never taken a career break themselves, the highest proportion of the four countries we polled.

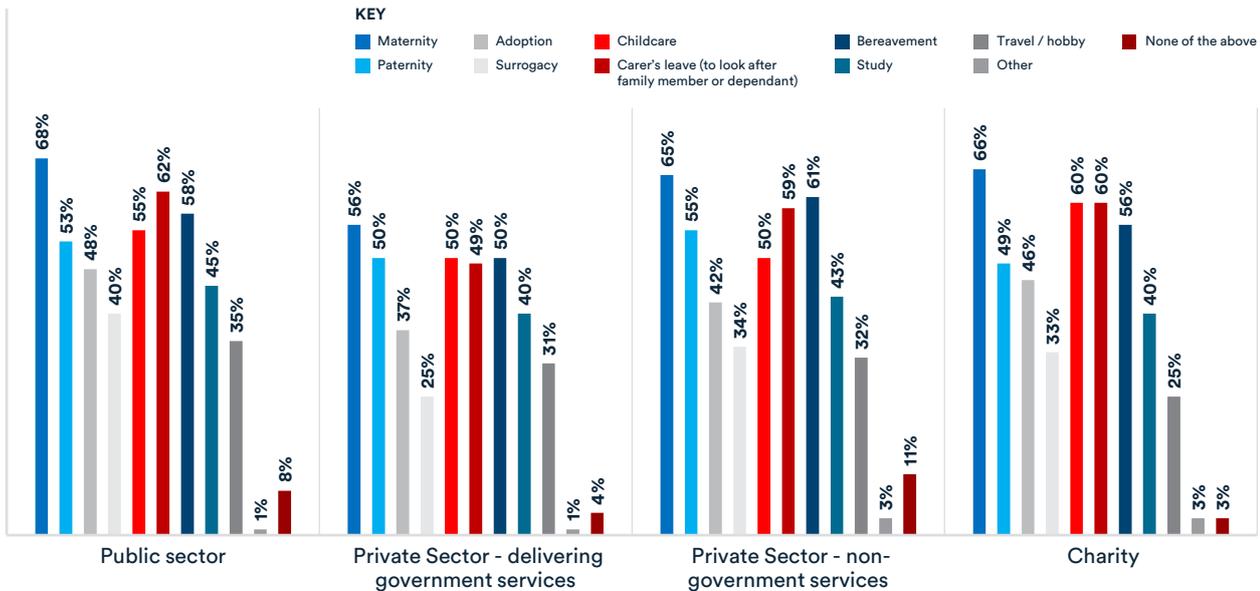


Among those who had taken a career break, the most popular reason for having done so was Maternity, the reason for 19% of respondents (and 31% of women) having taken a break. Paternity was, by contrast, far less popular as a reason, with just 13% of men (7% of overall respondents) having taken a career break on account of becoming a father. When added together, however, these figures suggest that over one in four (26%) Britons overall had taken parental leave, far outstripping any other reason for taking a career break. The second-most popular reason was Childcare, which 11% of survey takers cited as the reason for their break: women were, at 13%, four points more likely than men to have taken a career break to care for children. This means that parenthood and caring for children accounted for the career breaks of nearly four in 10 (37%) of Britons who had taken a career break, suggesting that starting and caring for a family continues to occupy a position of central importance in many people's lives. Other reasons of moderate importance to UK residents overall, such as Travel/Hobby and Study (both 8%), were far more popular among certain age groups than others: 14% of 16-24-year-olds and 13% of 25-34-year-olds had taken career breaks for Travel/Hobby, compared to just 2% of 55-64-year-olds. Similarly, 15% of 16-24-year-olds and 13% of 25-34-year-olds had taken a career break for Study, but this figure fell to 1% of 55-64-year-olds.

Perhaps it is unsurprising, therefore, that the reason for a career break which found the greatest support amongst British respondents was Maternity, considered by 66% of respondents to be a legitimate reason – this was 14 points above the corresponding figure for Paternity. Other reasons which found majority support were often related to family. Nearly six in 10 believed Bereavement and Carer's Leave were legitimate reasons for a career break, and 54% felt similarly about Childcare. Surprisingly, however, respondents were less sympathetic towards Adoption and Surrogacy (41% and 34% respectively felt these factors were legitimate reasons for career breaks), despite these leading to similar pressures and lifestyle changes as childbirth and associated parental leave. Reasons such as Travel/Hobby and Study also found little support (42% and 31% respectively), and one in 10 did not feel any of the reasons were legitimate to justify a career break.

Our data revealed interesting patterns, including some large discrepancies between different groups of respondents. Notably, private sector workers not involved in delivering government services were consistently most sceptical of career breaks. 58% had never taken a career break, the highest proportion of the polled sectors – by contrast, only 27% of charity sector workers had never taken a career break. Over two-thirds (68%) of those in the private sector not delivering government services felt either unable or unwilling to take a career break in the next five years, while only 57% of public sector workers and 59% of workers in the private sector providing government services felt the same way.

UK: By employment type – Legitimate reasons for a career break



Factors relating to the working conditions of private sector providers in comparison to that of public service providers, whether in the public or private sector, may be at play here. Less than half (46%) of private sector workers not delivering government services felt able to take a career break without suffering repercussions in their professional life, compared to 71% of charity sector workers and 70% of private workers delivering government services. Fewer than one in three (32%) private sector workers not providing government services felt able to take a career break for any reason, 11 points below the percentage of respondents in the public sector who felt the same. One may infer from this that there may be fewer opportunities for a career break for those private sector workers not delivering government services. Existing schemes for career breaks or sabbaticals are often offered mostly by larger employers or public sector

organisations at their discretion [12]: small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which employ three-fifths of Britain's private sector workers [13], may offer fewer opportunities for career breaks due to a lack of capacity to accommodate career breaks among their employees.

Our data also unearthed some possible differences in the attitudes between workers in different employment sectors towards career breaks. When asked about future plans to take such a break, private sector workers not delivering government services were, at 44%, also more likely to not want to take a career break in the next five years than workers in the public sector and in the private sector delivering government services. Workers in the private sector not delivering government services were also, at 11%, most likely to state that none of the 10 reasons suggested by the survey to take a career break were legitimate.

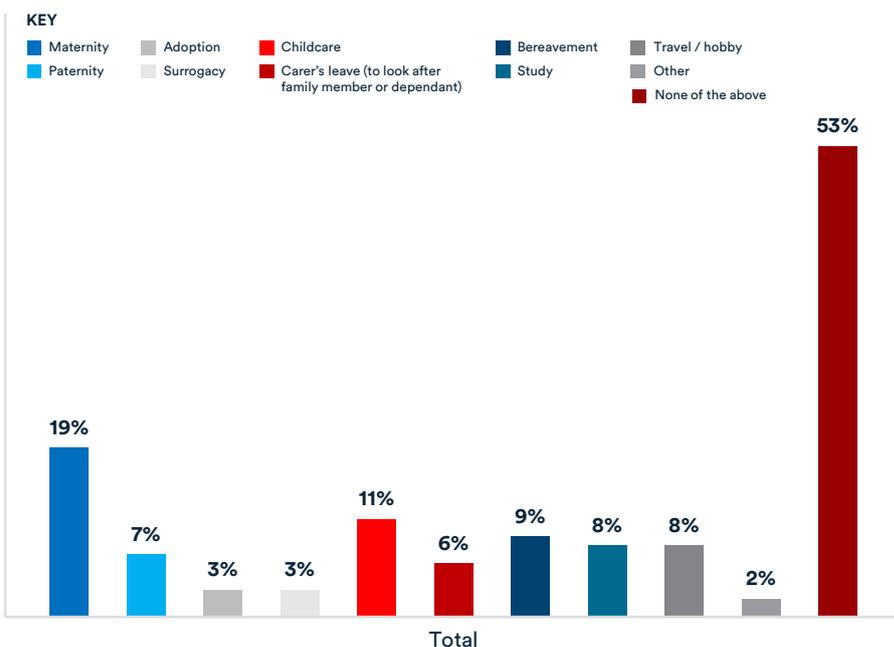
[12] 'Sabbaticals guide' – CIBD

[13] 'UK Small Business Statistics' – Federation of Small Businesses

The poll also indicated substantial discrepancies in the sentiments of different demographic groups with regard to career breaks. Women, for instance, were 19 points less likely than men to agree that they could return to work following a career break without a negative impact on their professional life. An examination of the reasons offered by the poll as possible justifications for a career break similarly reveals gendered attitudes towards career breaks, with 77% of women and just 54% of men considering Maternity a legitimate reason for taking a career break. This means that the proportion of men who do not feel maternity leave justifies a career break is twice as high as that of women and that, astonishingly, nearly a quarter of women and nearly half of men in the UK today do not consider maternity leave a legitimate reason

for a career break. The continuing presence of gender norms in the workforce is reinforced by the fact that men (13%) were 18 points less likely than women (31%) to have already taken parental leave, suggesting that there remains an expectation that men stay in uninterrupted work even after they become fathers. Aside from the discouraging evidence of continuing gendered conceptions of the world of work, this may be interpreted as evidence of the phenomenon we have observed and named the 'self-reference bias': in this case, as maternity leave is of much more immediate relevance to women as they may already have taken maternity leave or anticipate doing so in future, women exhibit a much greater propensity to consider maternity valid grounds for taking a career break.

UK: Ever taken a career break



As further evidence of the 'self-reference bias', women consistently agreed in higher numbers than men that reasons relating to care for family members or childrearing were legitimate reasons for career breaks. This is likely a reflection of caregiving responsibilities in the main traditionally falling to women rather than men, with British women three times more likely than men to take time off for childcare and less likely than men to return to full-time work after having taken time away from the workplace [14]. With Carer's Leave and Childcare more likely to directly affect women, women respondents were consequently more likely to view these as legitimate reasons for career breaks – this was reflected in the higher proportion of women (13%) who had taken a career break for Childcare than men (9%). Generational differences were also apparent, as over two-thirds (68%) of 55-64-year-olds had never taken a career break, a figure which dropped to 39% among 25-34-year-old respondents. This likely reflects diverging generational attitudes towards work and careers: a 2016 multinational study by ManpowerGroup found that 84% of Millennials envision 'significant

breaks' of over four consecutive weeks away from work in their professional futures, in a shift away from the 'Career Ladders' of previous generations and towards 'Career Waves'. ManpowerGroup also found that Millennials' priorities in taking career breaks centre around self-care and 'me-me-me time', with 40% of those polled intending to take breaks for relaxation, travel and holidays [15]. The self-reference bias among younger generations is reinforced by our survey data: respondents in the 16-24 and 25-34 age bandings were, at 14% and 13% respectively, substantially more likely than 55-64-year-old respondents (2%) to have taken a career break for Travel/Hobby. However, younger age groups in our survey proved more sceptical of reasons for career breaks relating to care for family members, with just less than half of respondents aged 16-24 and 25-34 (both 49%), and by contrast 71% of 55-64-year-olds, considering Carer's Leave a legitimate reason for a career break. Once again, this is consistent with younger generations' more self-focused mindset, while presumably older respondents more likely to be in need of care were better disposed towards Carer's Leave.

[14] 'Women more likely to take career break for caring responsibilities' – HR Magazine.

[15] 'Millennial Careers: 2020 Vision' – ManpowerGroup.

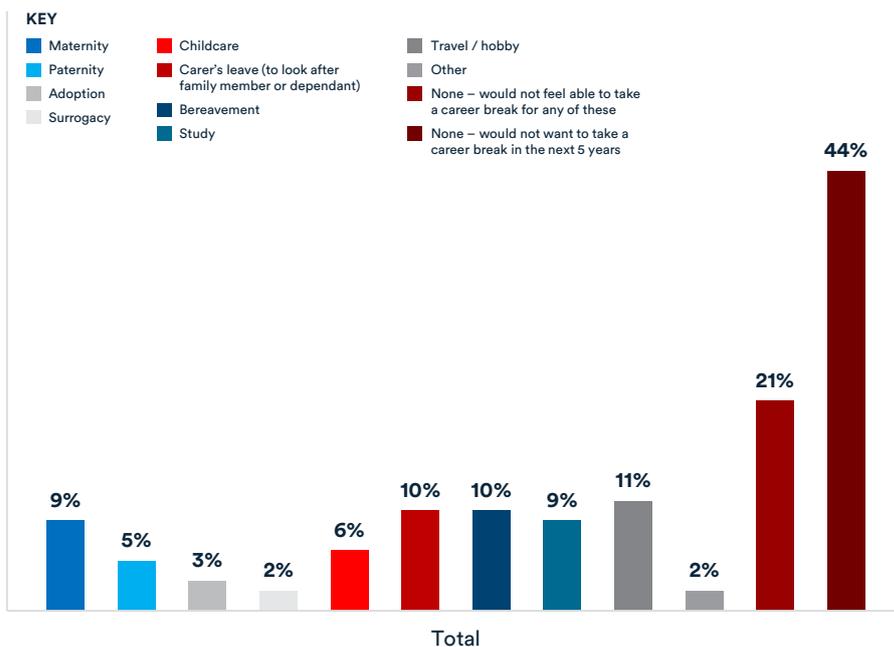
In general, groups more receptive to taking career breaks were also more likely to consider certain reasons legitimate than groups more opposed to taking breaks. Maternity was the reason considered most legitimate overall, with nearly two-thirds (66%) of all UK respondents agreeing that Maternity justified a career break. This does not account for significant variations between groups of respondents: as mentioned above, men were twice as likely as women to not consider Maternity a valid reason for a career break. Meanwhile, 55-64-year-olds, at 79%, were over 20 points more likely than their counterparts aged 16-24 and 25-34 (both 57%) to feel becoming a mother would justify a career break. This is likely due to shifting generational attitudes towards working mothers: in 2019, 75.1% of British mothers with children under 18 were in work [16]. Other reasons seen

by most respondents as legitimate included Childcare (54% of all respondents), Bereavement and Carer's Leave (both 59% of all respondents). Once again, this disguised sharp differences in opinion across groups: only 39% of 16-24-year-olds and 51% of 25-34-year-olds, the age groups most in favour of career breaks, found Bereavement to be a legitimate reason for a break, compared to 74% of 45-54-year-olds and 71% of 55-64-year-olds, the groups least enthusiastic about taking career breaks.

Our survey therefore made clear that attitudes towards career breaks varied considerably between employment sectors and demographic groups. In the case of the former, this could be determined in part by differing workplace conditions or support systems, leading to differing inclinations by workers in certain sectors to take career breaks.

[16] 'Families and the labour market' – Office for National Statistics.

UK: Would you feel able to take a career break



Concerns



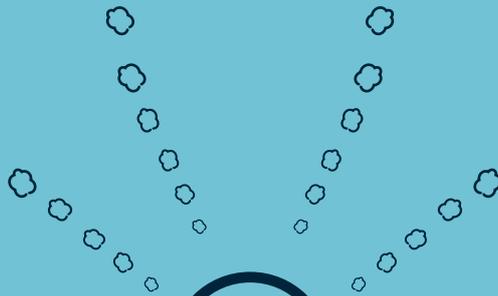
The factors most of concern to respondents – ‘financial concerns’; ‘lack of flexibility from the employer’; and ‘potential impact on career progression’ – were those which impacted their own professional and earning prospects.



Private sector workers delivering government services were more likely than public sector workers and private sector workers not delivering government services to consider a factor a hurdle to taking a career break.



Those who had taken a career break were more likely than those who had not to perceive a suggested factor as a concern when taking a career break.

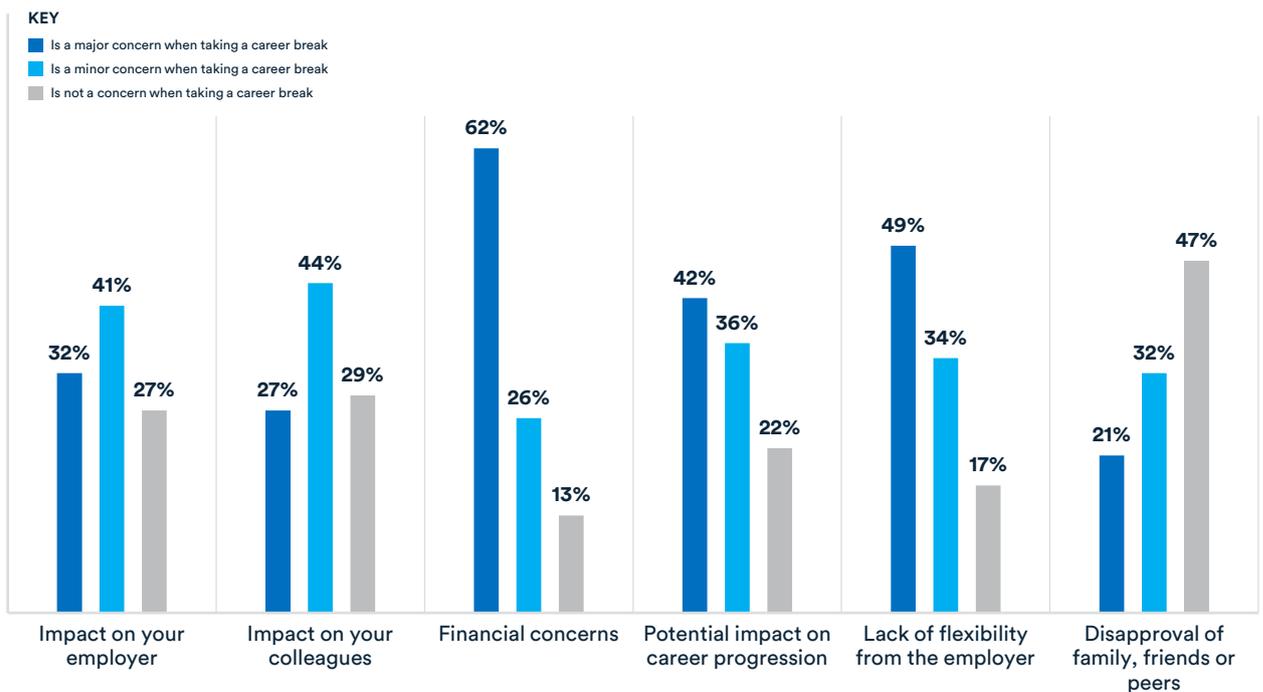


Younger age groups were considerably more likely than older age groups to identify a concern when considering a career break.

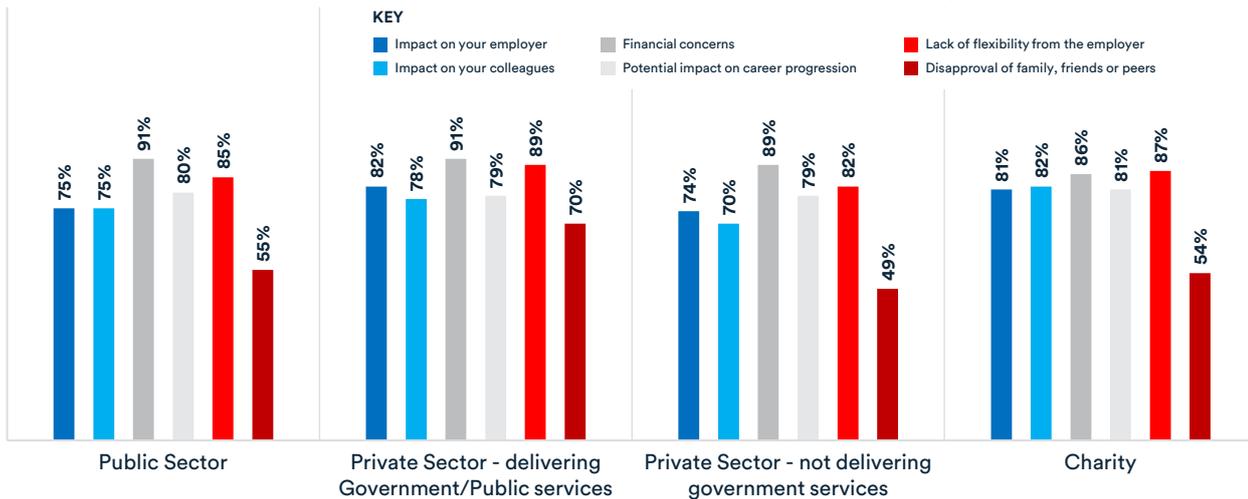
The factors which most worried UK respondents were 'financial concerns', which 62% identified as a 'major' concern and 26% identified as a 'minor' one (totalling 88%); 'lack of flexibility from the employer', seen by 83% of respondents as either a 'major' (49%) or 'minor' (34%) issue; and 'potential

impact on career progression', regarded by 78% of respondents as either a 'major' or 'minor' concern. On the other end of the spectrum, the 'disapproval of family, friends or peers' was least likely to trouble Britons, with nearly half (47%) saying it was not a concern at all for them.

UK: Summary of concerns



UK: Summary of concerns broken down by role



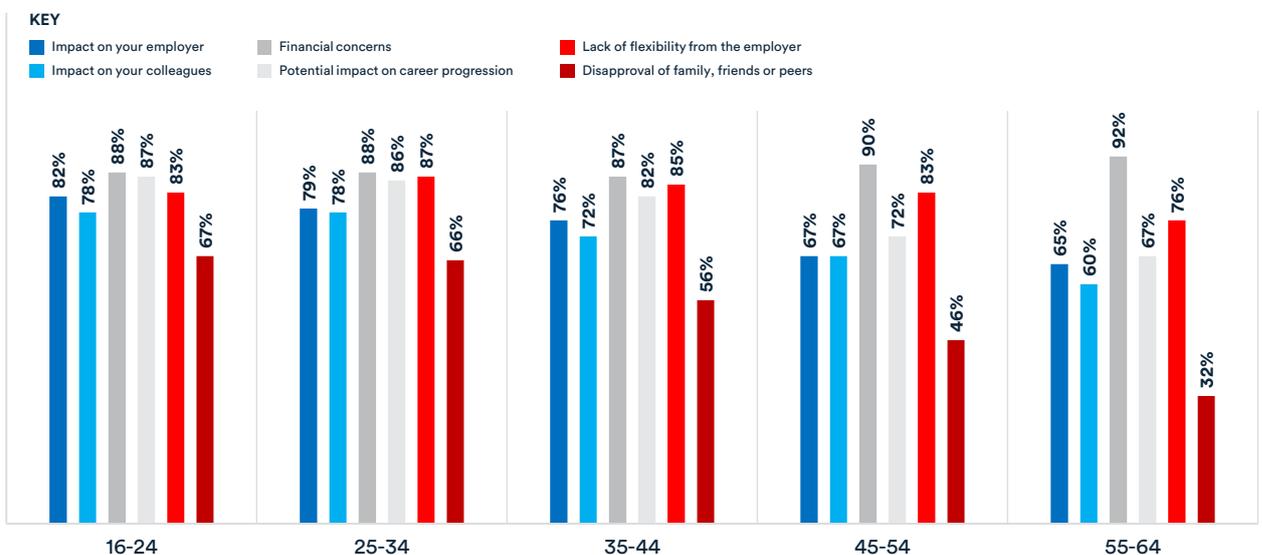
Respondents in the private sector delivering government services were more likely than the average respondent across all six suggested areas to identify a given factor as a hurdle to taking a career break, by a (mean) average of seven percentage points. For instance, when respondents were asked to consider the ‘disapproval of family, friends or peers’, 70% of workers in the government services private sector category considered this a concern when taking a career break, 17 points above the proportion of all respondents and above their peers in the charity sector (54%, although this data was based on a small sample size), the public sector (55%) and non-government services private sector (49%).

Private sector workers delivering government services were more likely to consider something a ‘major’ concern in taking a career break: while 27% of all respondents considered the impact on one’s colleagues a ‘major’ concern in taking a career break, 41% of employees in the government services private sector felt this way. We have here observed the so-called ‘government contractor squeeze’. For example, 82% of private sector employees delivering government services state that the impact on their employer would be a concern (compared to 75% of the public sector and 74% of the non-government services private sector). The ‘government contractor squeeze’ is likely compounded by the often sensitive and vital nature of the ‘Business-to-Government’ (B2G) services provided by government-contracted private sector workers, rather than the ‘Business-to-Business’ (B2B) or ‘Business-to-Consumer’ (B2C) transactions of other private sector businesses.

Additionally, those who had taken a career break were more likely than those who had not to regard a given reason as a concern when taking a career break. Across all six polled areas, this margin between breakers and non-breakers was never less than eight percentage points. This disparity was once again widest when respondents were asked to consider the 'disapproval of family, friends or peers', which 62% of respondents who had taken a career break cited as a concern, compared to just 45% of those who had not taken a break. One may pessimistically interpret this as evidence that survey takers who had prior experience of taking a career break had encountered these factors themselves, and thus these factors were more likely to make them pause for thought before taking another such break. This pattern forms part of what we have called the 'experience effect', whereby an individual's previous experience of career breaks is correlated with scepticism as to their ability to take and return from one.

The data further revealed some differences in attitudes between demographic groups. Across three of the six suggested areas of concern, women were more likely than men to have concerns when taking a career break: these three areas included 'financial concerns' and 'potential impact on career progression', and the fact that women reported higher levels of concern regarding these factors may indicate the unequal conditions they face at work. The only area which men were, at 59%, more likely than women (48%) to consider a concern was 'disapproval of family, friends or peers'. Gendered expectations for men to remain at work and fulfil the breadwinner's role are likely have an impact here. Younger age groups were also substantially more likely than their older counterparts to consider a given factor a concern.

UK: Summary of concerns broken down by age



This is partly attributable to younger respondents' early-stage careers and the attendant lesser likelihood of having attained a certain degree of seniority at their workplace: 87% of 16-24-year-olds and 86% of 25-34-year-olds cited 'potential impact on career progression' as a concern about taking a career break, compared to just 67% of survey takers aged 55-64. However, once again generational attitudes made themselves known in the response to 'impact on colleagues'. 78% of respondents in both the 16-24 and 25-34 age groups considered this a concern when taking a career break, 18 points above those aged 55-64. This likely reflects the greater importance younger people attach to workplace relationships: 80% of Millennials value working with 'great people' in ManpowerGroup's study [17].

Certain groups of respondents, and in particular private sector workers delivering government services and respondents who had taken a career break, were therefore more likely to cite concerns about taking a career break. Measures should, then, be taken to address these concerns, especially of those in the private sector delivering government services.

[17] Millennial Careers: 2020 Vision – ManpowerGroup.



Barriers

Britons appeared to perceive their ability to return from a career break to be at the discretion of their employer, with majorities feeling that an employer's 'negative attitude' or the instalment of a less sympathetic employer might prevent them from returning to the workplace. Perhaps this speaks either to their unawareness of or lack of faith in institutional and/or contractual entitlements to career breaks.



Workers in the non-government services private sector were least likely to consider any given factor a frequent barrier for those returning to work.

Survey takers who had taken a career break were more likely than those who had not taken a break to consider a factor a barrier to returning to work.

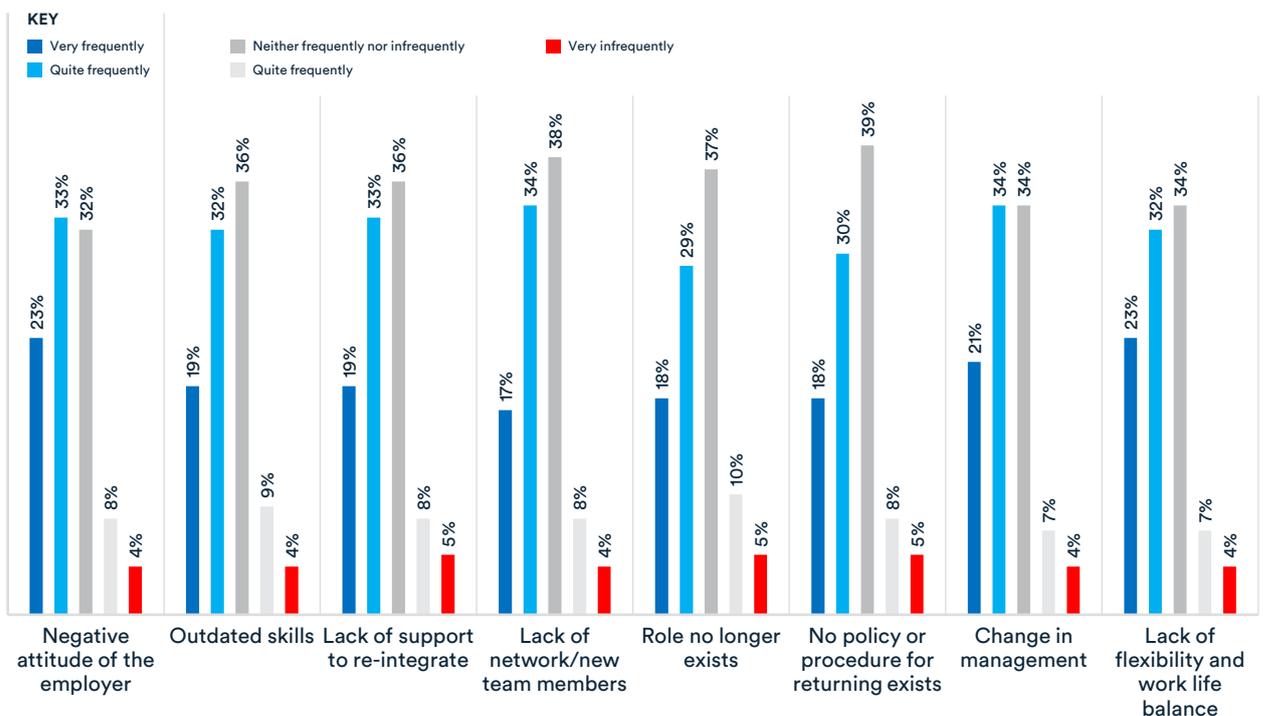


The 25-34 and 35-44 age groups were the two groups most likely to identify a factor as a barrier for returners, while the youngest and oldest age groups (16-24 and 55-64) were the groups least likely to regard a factor as a barrier for returners.

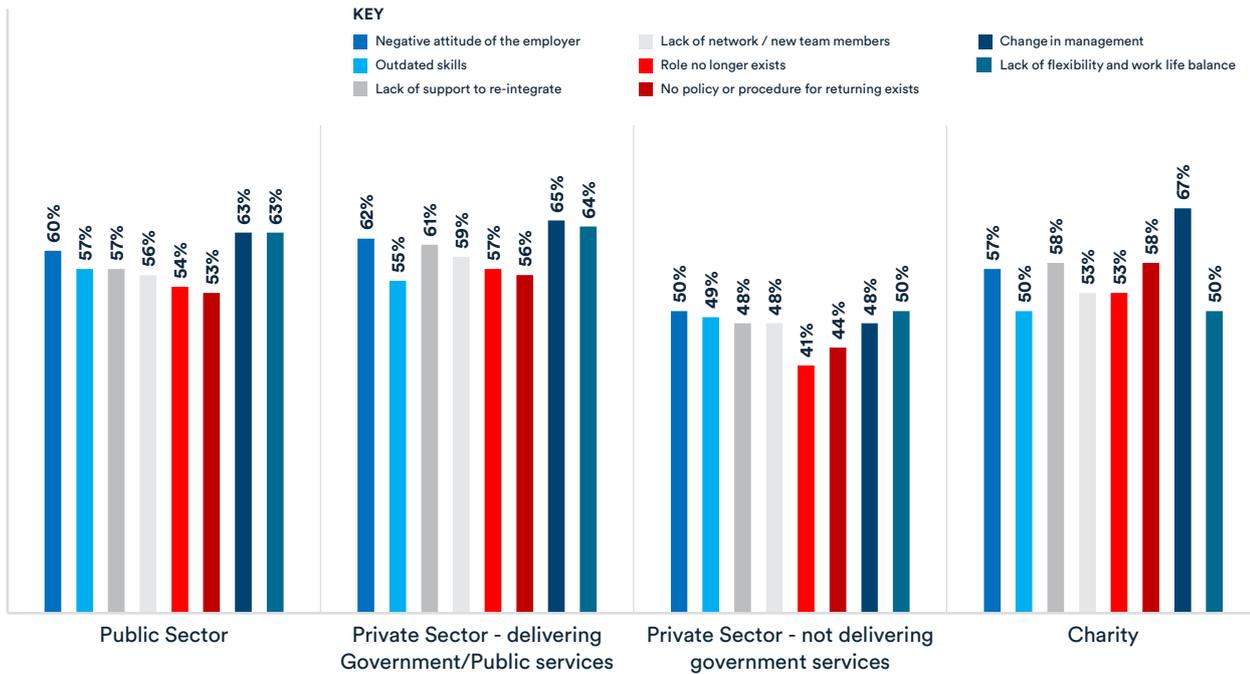
The factors deemed most likely to pose a barrier to post-break returners were 'negative attitude of the employer', which 56% of respondents felt would either 'very' or 'quite' frequently constitute a hurdle for those returning, and 'change in management', which 55% of respondents believed would be a barrier to returning.

Across all eight polled areas, private sector workers delivering government services and public sector workers were the two groups of working respondents most likely to identify a given factor as a frequent barrier for returners – percentages of respondents in these two groups agreeing that a factor was a frequent barrier were always within four points of one another. By contrast, private sector workers not delivering government services were consistently less likely than workers providing government services - whether in the private or public sector - to consider something a barrier to re-entering the workforce.

UK: Summary of barriers faced when returning to work



UK Comparison: Barriers faced when returning to work by role



There are a number of candidate theories to explain this trend. In some cases, these attitudes may reflect conditions in the non-government services private sector. For instance, only 44% of non-government-contracted private sector employees felt a lack of procedure for returning to work would be a frequent barrier to returning to work, compared to 53% of those in the public sector and 56% of those in the private sector delivering government services. This may indicate that private sector companies may in fact have better policies and procedures in place to aid career breakers return to work. Furthermore, with 58% of respondents in the non-government services private sector never having taken a career break, it may be inferred that workers in this

sector lack both the experience of career breaks and subsequent barriers in returning to work afterwards, leaving them less able to or interested in identifying those factors which may constitute barriers for returners.

Of course, it should be acknowledged there will likely be private sector workers who, despite being well-informed about career breaks, simply have no desire to take one: this is supported by the data, which shows that 44% of private sector workers not delivering government services stated they would not want to take a career break in the next five years, compared to 36% of public sector workers and 34% of government-contracted private sector workers, although the sample size of respondents in this latter employment category was small and

data is therefore not definitive. This therefore forms part of our broader 'desirability-means' gap theory: groups less inclined to take a career break, in this case workers in the non-government services private sector, were inversely more confident in their ability to return from a break, while the reverse was true for groups more inclined to take career breaks.

A final candidate theory is that the non-government services private sector attracts workers with a certain mentality, or that the sector fosters culture of a more competitive environment for its workforce: given the perceived higher competitiveness of private sector services, it may be that workers in this sector take less issue with potential barriers for returners. This more assertive disposition may be the reason for workers in this sector being less likely to identify potentially frequent barriers to resuming work.

Once again, respondents who had taken a career break were, across all eight suggested factors, more likely than those who had not to consider something a frequent barrier to returning to work. In some cases, the disparity was quite large: for instance, 65% of those who had taken a career break stated that 'lack of flexibility and work-life balance' would be a frequent barrier faced by returners, 19 points above the percentage of respondents who had not taken a break. Similarly, 61% of past career breakers felt a 'lack of support to re-integrate' would pose a barrier to those returning to work, a figure 17 points higher than survey takers who had not taken a career break. This may, again, be a reflection of true obstacles faced by real-world returners to work after a career break, and these results may

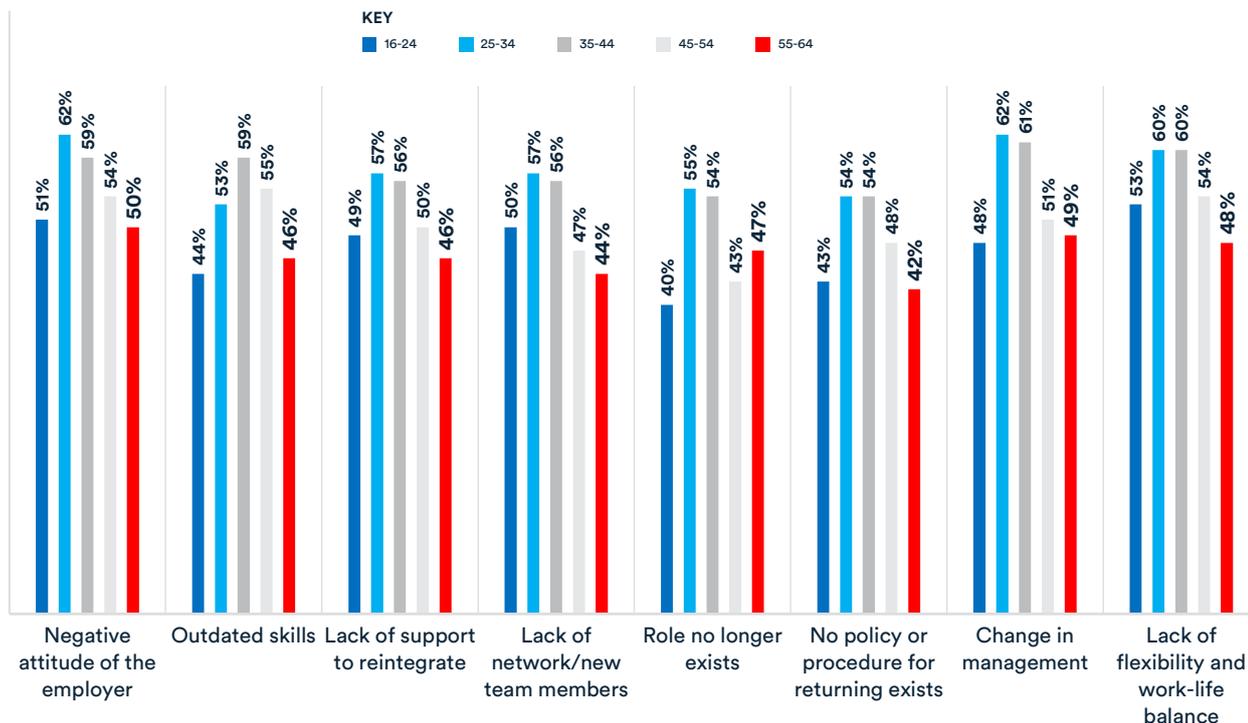
therefore offer an understanding of current work conditions and culture and how these barriers may be smoothed to encourage more people to return to work following a break. This trend is one which recurs across different countries and demographic groups more likely to have taken a career break: we have termed it the 'experience effect', whereby respondents with previous experience of career breaks are more likely to perceive difficulties in taking breaks and in returning to the workplace afterwards.

With regard to demographic disparities, men and women's sentiments were more homogeneous here, with equal or close proportions of men and women identifying factors as barriers for returners. In a break from previous patterns, however, the two age groups most likely to identify a factor as a frequent barrier when returning to work were the 25-34 and the 35-44 age bands. 16-24-year-olds often seemed in-step with their 55-64-year-old counterparts, with the youngest and oldest age groups generally less likely to consider a factor a barrier frequently encountered by people returning to work. For instance, while 62% of 25-34-year-olds and 61% of 35-44-year-olds felt a 'change in management' would be a barrier to returning, less than half of respondents aged 16-24 (48%) and those aged 55-64 (49%) felt the same way. This is, however, unsurprising. Firstly, the majority of respondents in the youngest and oldest age groups (55% and 68% respectively) had never taken career breaks, compared to only 39% of 25-34-year-olds and 41% of 35-44-year-olds who had never taken a break.

This means these 16-24-year-old and 55-64-year-old respondents were less likely to be familiar with the obstacles faced by returners. Secondly, given that respondents aged 55-64 would be more likely to be senior staff members, they might therefore be expected to be less familiar with the challenges faced by employees seeking to return to work. Conversely, those aged 16-24 would, being at the beginning of their professional lives and presumably in more junior roles, not have had to contemplate potential barriers in returning to work after a career break.

Experience of having taken a career break therefore played a significant role in attitudes towards barriers faced by those returning to work: those who had never taken a career break and those belonging to groups less likely to have taken a break were consistently less likely to identify something as a true barrier for returners.

UK: Perceptions of barriers broken down by age



Reflections

Overall, the British public appeared supportive of career breaks, at least in principle: it is notable that just 10% of respondents did not feel any of the reasons suggested by the poll would justify a career break. However, theory differs from practice: a majority (53%) had themselves never taken a career break, and nearly two-thirds (65%) of these respondents did not see themselves doing so in the coming five years. It is furthermore noteworthy that less than half (49%) of survey takers believed a career break would not be damaging to their professional lives. Given that a 'negative attitude of the employer' and a 'change in management' were perceived to be the two most frequently encountered barriers to returning to work from a career break (56% and 55% of respondents respectively felt this way), it may be inferred that Britons may mostly be unaware of legal or contractual entitlements to career breaks, and believe career breakers' ability to return to work rests within their employer's discretionary power. More effective communication of such entitlements may be needed to ensure those who wish to take career breaks are more conscious of their capacity to do so.

Additionally, some startlingly traditional attitudes towards career breaks occasionally made themselves apparent in our survey data. Although Maternity, at 66%, was the reason for a career break regarded as most legitimate, what is astonishing is that over one in three (34%) Britons did not feel that motherhood justifies leave from work.

Also surprising is that while career breaks for reasons such as Childcare, Carer's Leave and Bereavement commanded majority support, far fewer survey takers were in favour of breaks taken for Adoption and Surrogacy, perhaps signalling that the UK public conceives of families in a more traditional sense. Perhaps more work needs to be done to raise awareness of alternative families, whose members should be able to take career breaks on equal terms with colleagues of more traditional backgrounds.

One of the trends most evident from our UK survey was that private sector workers not delivering government services were the group of workers least inclined to take a career break, but also most confident in the seamlessness of a return to work: the reasons for this merit further attention, as perhaps private sector practices or procedures conducive to allowing employees to take career breaks can and should be replicated for those workers who provide government services. Creative ways to ease pressures or create mechanisms so that government-contracted workers feel as open to career breaks as their counterparts in the public sector and the non-government services private sector should be explored, to ensure the government services private sector maintains and grows its appeal to employees and potential employees.



Although Maternity, at 66%, was the reason for a career break regarded as most legitimate, what is astonishing is that over one in three (34%) Britons did not feel that motherhood justifies leave from work.

Data gleaned from respondents who had taken a career break may also offer insight into how returning to work can be encouraged and facilitated, by examining those factors recognised by the highest proportions of respondents from this group as a barrier to career re-entry, such as 'lack of flexibility and work-life balance' (65%) or 'change in management' (63%). Perhaps steps can be taken to remove these barriers to allow returners back into work more easily: expanding flexible working arrangements may go some way to alleviate career breakers' concerns, or putting in place solid procedures or agreements for career breakers which survive a change in management. In observing the 'experience effect', therefore, in which those with experience of career breaks were more likely to identify concerns before taking one and barriers upon returning, we may be able to better facilitate transitions back into the workforce for those workers taking career breaks.

Furthermore, our survey indicated that barriers are not faced evenly by all prospective career breakers: women, for instance, reported different experiences of work from men. Despite being more inclined, or perhaps expected, to take career breaks to care for loved ones, women felt much less able to return post-career break without negative ramifications in their professional lives, and issues relating to pay and career progression were a greater concern to women than to men.

Even the higher proportion of men who reported that 'disapproval of family, friends or peers' was a concern to them when considering a career break speaks to the continuing presence of gender norms in the workplace. This evidences the 'desirability-means' gap phenomenon, whereby those groups more likely to want to take career breaks, in this case women, feel they are less able to do so. Measures should be taken to safeguard women's place and position at work, to allow them to take career breaks – or indeed go about their professional lives – on an equal footing with men.

Finally, shifting generational attitudes towards career breaks were very apparent in our data, and the 'desirability-means' gap once again manifested itself in our analysis of age groups. Younger respondents appeared much more open to career breaks than their older counterparts, and in particular career breaks for reasons focused on self, such as Travel/Hobby. However, it was clear that it was the age groups most open to taking career breaks who were most pessimistic about barriers to re-entry, in part perhaps due to the inflexibility of older colleagues in employer or senior decision-making roles who did not share their sentiments. As attitudes towards career breaks continue to shift, barriers to re-entry should continue to be reassessed and realigned, to allow for younger workers who may wish to take a break to more easily do so without fear of being unable to re-enter the workforce.

ONS figures unveiled in May 2022 show that job vacancies, at a record high of 1.29 million, have outstripped the number of unemployed people in the UK for the first time on record [18] –with Britain facing a tight labour market and labour shortages, employers should seek to do everything possible to make the prospect of remaining in work appealing to people. The UK Government, as mentioned previously, has already begun to take steps to introduce a right to request flexible working, embedding flexibility further as a norm in British working life. There is some evidence that British employers are beginning to recognise that examining their approaches to working life may be key to attracting staff: not only are increasing numbers of companies offering four-day working weeks to job applicants, many are updating their leave packages, including unlimited annual leave and longer paid holiday.

The digital bank Monzo, for instance, is offering employees who have worked for the company for four years a three-month paid sabbatical, in addition to an existing annual one-month unpaid sabbatical scheme [19]. Furthermore, British workers show no signs of wishing to abandon the working practices adopted during Covid: while commuting journeys in France, Germany and Italy have nearly returned to pre-Covid levels, commutes in the UK remain 22% down on pre-pandemic levels as of May 2022 [20].

It is clear that the sweeping changes to British employment brought about by the pandemic are not going away anytime soon. Given this, and the difficulties many businesses are encountering in recruiting staff, it may be time for companies and employers to revisit conventional working practices to better fit the labour market emerging from Covid-19.

[18] 'UK unemployment drops to 50-year low of 3.7%' – The Times.

[19] 'Workers get taste for four-day week' – The Times.

[20] 'Britons work from home while Europe goes back to the office' – The Times.

We have developed a small number of country-specific recommendations based on the above for the UK:

Communicating Current Policies

In view of concerns regarding how management would react to career breaks in the UK, there should be greater or more effective communication or publicisation of workers' existing career break entitlements and opportunities: this is especially important for government-contracted private sector employees, who were more likely to view the impacts of a career break on their employer and on their co-workers as concerns prior to taking a break. Publicisation efforts should include an emphasis on how these opportunities, rather than being at the discretion of employers, have a grounding in employment law, employee contracts or in company protocols. This should also include schemes to educate Britons about existing statutory paid leave for prospective parents by adoption or surrogacy, to raise awareness of alternative families – such as same-sex couples, foster parents and opposite-sex couples struggling to conceive – and how these should be entitled to leave on similar terms as more traditional families.

Self-enrichment Career Breaks

In light of younger generations' interest in career breaks for reasons such as Travel/Hobby and in taking breaks over the course of their professional lives, employers need to consider how to facilitate these by creating 'self-enrichment' career break schemes, in order to remain competitive and attractive to these workers. Expanded opportunities for career breaks should be accompanied by clearly defined terms as to which employees are eligible for these sabbatical leave schemes and how much of their salary workers on these schemes will receive. These should be set out in the terms of employment, making them a more commonplace part of workers' contracts. Such schemes will be greatly appealing to many younger workers who perceive breaks from work to be a non-negotiable part of working life.



Chapter 3
The United
States

Overview

In this chapter, we examine survey data from our respondents in the United States, opening with an overview of our findings.

We begin our analysis by exploring the attitudes of workers in the US towards career breaks, including respondents' prior experience of career breaks and their reasons for taking them. The chapter then discusses the results obtained when respondents were asked to identify concerns which might prevent people taking career breaks. The final part of our analysis explores factors which workers returning to their careers from breaks may encounter as barriers. We then outline key trends and discuss how these may be resolved in the US economy to allow workers to more easily take career breaks and return from them.

Key findings include:



Maternity was seen as the most legitimate reason to take a career break, followed by other care-related reasons, such as Childcare and Carer's Leave. That said, fewer than half of Americans view Paternity as a legitimate reason to take extended leave from work.



Financial concerns dominate the reasons why people worry about taking a career break, whereas the 'disapproval of family or friends' was by far the lowest concern amongst Americans.



A 'lack of flexibility & work-life balance' is seen as the barrier most widely faced by people returning from a career break.



Although more inclined to take career breaks, private sector workers delivering government services were consistently most likely to identify potential hurdles preventing them from taking such a break, as well as barriers preventing them from returning to the workforce satisfactorily after having done so.



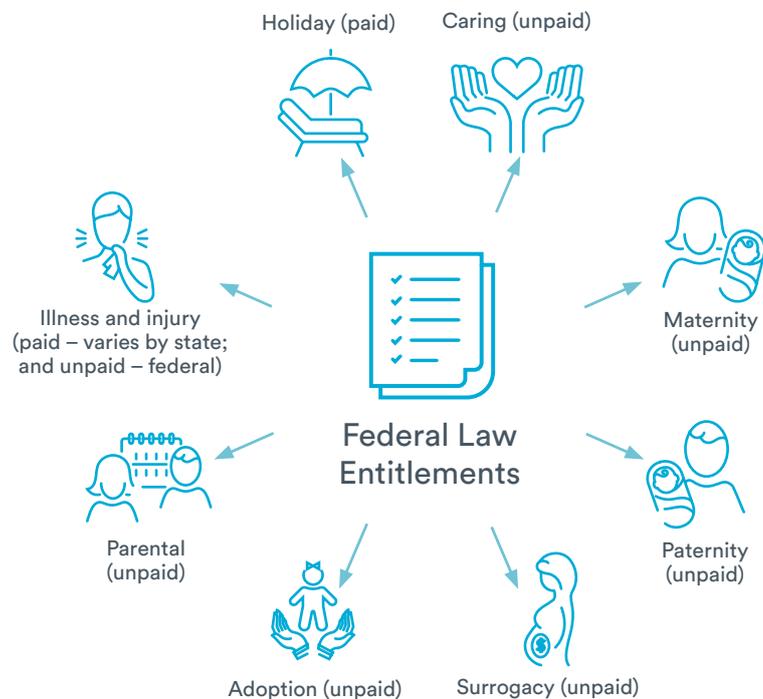
Women were more willing to take career breaks, often for reasons relating to care for children or family members. However, men were more worried about obstacles keeping them from returning to jobs following a career break.



Younger age groups were more receptive to taking career breaks than older respondents, but consistently more likely to indicate a concern when contemplating a career break and when considering barriers preventing them from returning.

Background

The United States has relatively few statutory rights for leave at the federal level, and in fact is one of only seven countries in the world currently without any form of national paid leave [21]. It is worth noting, however, that individual states have largely introduced legislation which enhances the rights of employees to take leave. Under federal law, employees are entitled to:



On average, workers in the US receive only 10-12 days of paid vacation, in comparison to European workers' holiday entitlement of 20-25 days [22]. Furthermore, leave entitlements are often contingent on an individual's employer and work sector: while federal employees enjoy 12 weeks of paid parental leave [23], this benefit is available to less than one in four (23%) private industry workers [24]. The Biden administration's Build Back Better package, which was defeated in the Senate late in 2021, would have created the first federal paid and medical leave benefit in US history if approved, as well as unprecedented investment in childcare and pre-kindergarten [25].

There is currently no federal legislation to allow 'career breaks' or 'sabbaticals'. Some employers, however, offer career breaks as part of employee benefit programmes: as of 2017, the proportion of US employers offering both paid and unpaid sabbaticals stood at 17% [26]. Such programmes are popular among workers: in a 2017 poll, some 63% of American workers claim they do not have sufficient leave, and three-quarters (75%) expressed a desire for an extended break from work [27]. Despite this, sabbatical leave is available to just one in five (22%) US workers [28].

[21] 'The U.S. was close to universal paid leave. With the collapse of Build Back Better, it's all fallen apart.' – The 19th.

[22] 'This Underrated Employee Benefit Is Helping American Workers Recharge.' – Forbes.

[23] 'The World "Has Found a Way to Do This": The U.S. Lags on Paid Leave' – The New York Times.

[24] 'Employee Benefits in the United States' – US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

[25] 'The U.S. was close to universal paid leave. With the collapse of Build Back Better, it's all fallen apart.' – The 19th.

[26] 'Research Shows That Organizations Benefit When Employees Take Sabbaticals' – Harvard Business Review.

[27] 'This Underrated Employee Benefit Is Helping American Workers Recharge.' – Forbes.

[28] 'American employees are rated the most burnt-out and overworked' – eDreams.

Breakdown of Respondents

2,073 residents of the United States took our survey on career breaks, of whom 1,396 were in work. 519 (37% of working respondents) were employed by the public sector; 235 (17%) by the private sector delivering government services; 468 (34%) by the private sector not delivering government services; and 28 (2%) employed by the charity sector. With the sample size of charity sector workers under the minimum base of 30, it would be inappropriate to draw conclusions about their attitudes and as such this report will not make specific reference to the sentiments of charity sector workers in the US.

Statistics from the Brookings Institution indicate that public sector employees at the local, state and federal level number 24 million, accounting for just over 15% of the US workforce. This percentage is less than half of the proportion of working respondents in our poll employed by the public sector. It is worth noting that this may reflect a discrepancy between the Brookings Institution's definition of who constitutes a public sector worker – workers 'involved in military, public and national service at the local, state and federal levels' – and how respondents who took our survey may have defined their place of work [29].

[29] 'Public service and the federal government' – Brookings Institution.

Attitudes towards Career Breaks



42% of our US respondents had never taken a career break. Of these, 22% did not anticipate being able to take a break in the next five years, while a further 38% did not want to, meaning that just 40% of Americans who had not taken a career break expected to take one in the future. Of those who had taken a break, Maternity was the most cited motivation.

Maternity was seen as the most legitimate reason to take a career break, followed by other care-related reasons, such as Childcare and Carer's Leave. That said, fewer than half of Americans view Paternity as a legitimate reason to take extended leave from work.



Women were more likely than men to agree that a career break was legitimate and would justify leaving work, but were less confident in their ability to return to the workplace afterwards.

Private sector employees not delivering government services felt least able and willing to take a career break, possibly due to the lack of opportunities to do so available to them.



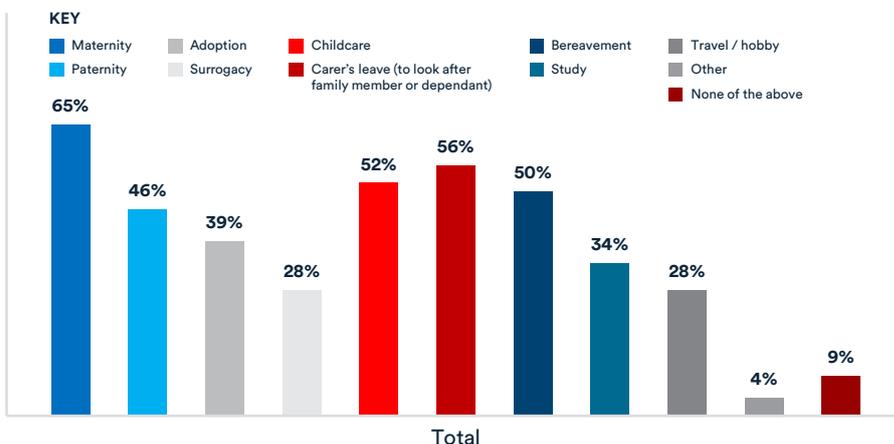
Younger generations were considerably more open to the idea of career breaks than their older counterparts, and were more likely to have already taken one.

A majority (58%) of Americans had taken a career break prior to the poll. Of these respondents, the most commonly cited reason for doing so was Maternity (21%), by a margin of seven percentage points above the next most popular reason – this was the highest percentage of respondents who had taken a career break for Maternity among the four countries we surveyed. Furthermore, over one in three (34%) women respondents in the US reported having taken maternity leave, once again the highest such proportion of the four polled countries. Combined with the figure of respondents who had taken a career break for Paternity (7%), nearly three in 10 Americans (28%) had taken parental leave.

Childcare (14%), Bereavement (13%) and Travel/Hobby (13%) were also more common reasons for having taken a career break. There existed, however, significant variation along demographic lines. Women, for instance, were seven points more likely than men to have taken a career break for Childcare (18% vs. 11%), and respondents in the 25-34 and 35-44 age bandings (both 21%) were three times as likely as their 55-64-year-old counterparts (7%) to have taken a career break for Childcare. The predominance of Maternity and Childcare among Americans' reasons for having taken a career break speaks to how starting a family retains a central position in Americans' lives. Additionally, with women 23 points more likely than men to have taken parental leave (34% vs. 11%), our survey reflects evidence that family-related responsibilities continue to be shouldered predominantly by women rather than men in the United States.

Of the large minority who had not taken a career break, 38% stated they would not want to in the next five years, while a further 22% did not expect to be able to: in total, therefore, six in 10 Americans without career break experience did not expect to take a break in the coming five years. Among those who did see themselves taking a career break in the future, the most cited reasons were Carer's Leave (16%) and Travel/Hobby (12%). Responses once again diverged sharply according to demographic factors: for instance, while just 6% of Americans overall foresaw taking a career break for Study, this figure rose to 20% among 18-24-year-olds and dropped to 1% among 55-64-year-olds.

US: Legitimate reasons for a career break

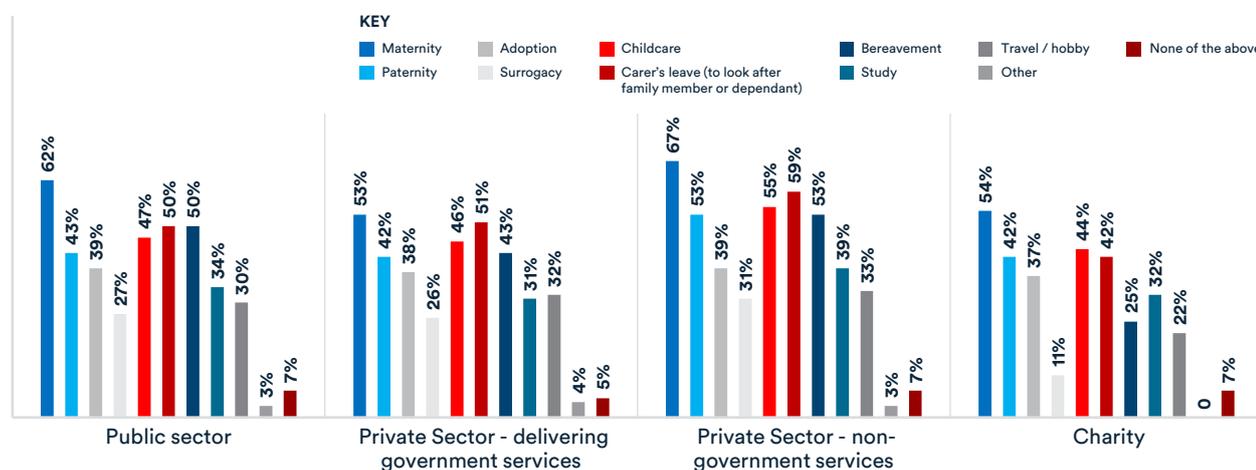


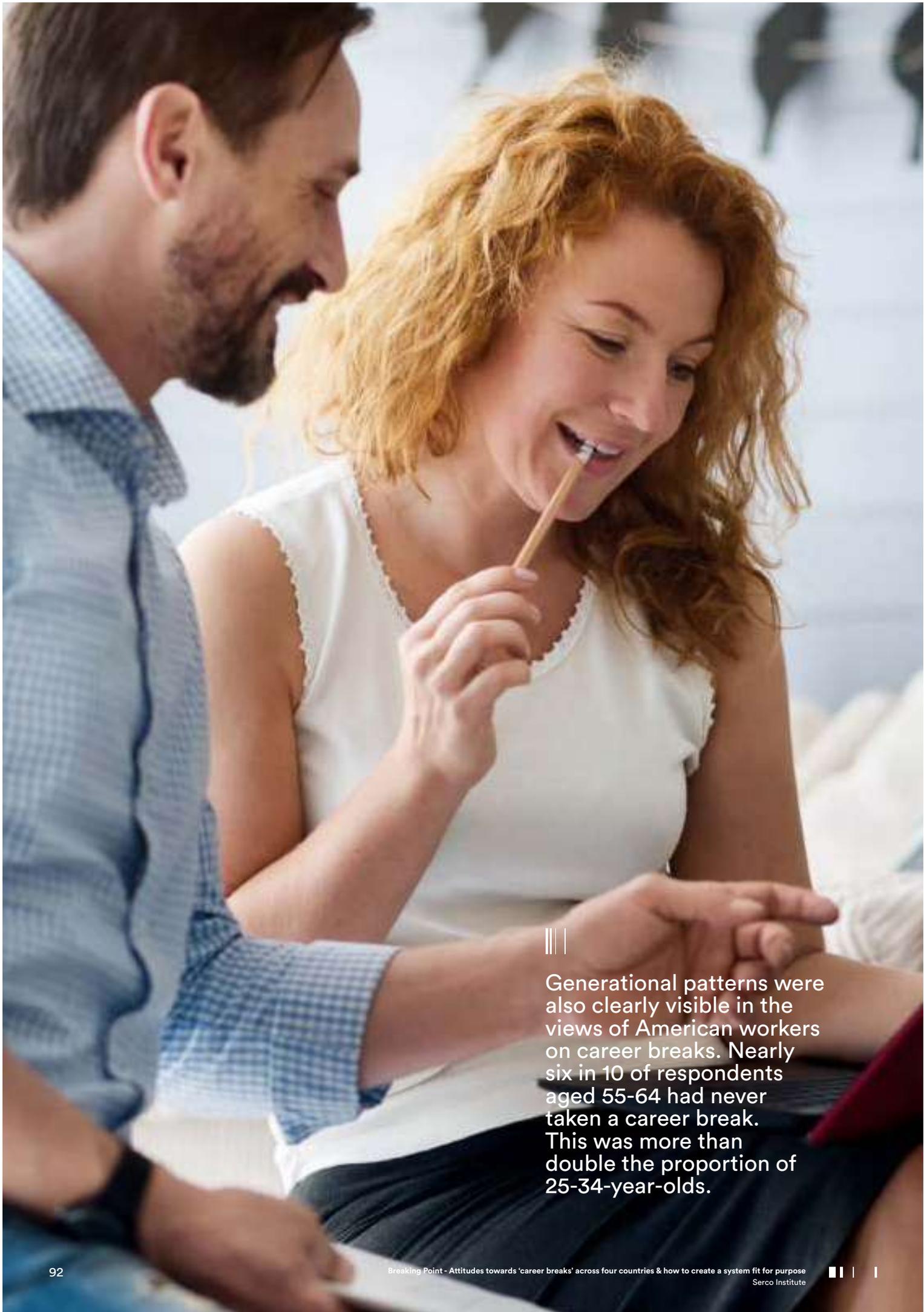
As with other countries, Maternity received the highest level of responses describing it as a 'legitimate' reason for a career break (at 65%). Nonetheless, this still means over a third of Americans do not believe Maternity is a legitimate reason to take a career break. Furthermore, Paternity saw even lower levels of support, with less than half (46%) of the representative sample indicating that they saw it as legitimate. Only three other reasons were cited as legitimate by at least half of Americans in our poll – Carer's Leave (56%), Childcare (52%) and Bereavement (50%). Caregiving was clearly a theme amongst those areas that people saw as legitimate, whereas Travel/Hobby and Surrogacy – which can be a paid-for service in the US – at 28% were seen as the least legitimate as reasons for a career break.

That said, 91% of Americans said that they agreed that at least one of the reasons suggested in the poll was a legitimate reason for a career break. However, this alone failed to capture significant variation between different attitudes towards individual reasons for career breaks. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of women, for instance, believed Maternity was a legitimate reason for taking a career break, compared to just 55% of men. In fact, women were more likely than men to agree that a given reason was legitimate in justifying a career break across nine of the 10 suggested reasons, which included Childcare (considered a legitimate reason for a career break by 60% of women but just 45% of men) and Carer's Leave (64% of women and 47% of men considered this a legitimate reason to leave work). The sentiments expressed here suggest that women are more prepared than men to take a career break to care for children or loved ones, a theory supported by evidence that, since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, American women have left the workforce, at least temporarily, in larger numbers than men: NextAdvisor has found that 28% of women in the US with children under 18 have left work either temporarily or permanently, in comparison to 10% of men [30]. At 57%, women in our poll were also 10 points less likely than men to feel that, once on a break, they would be able to return to work without suffering negative consequences in their professional life.

[30] 'Women Are Getting Pushed Out of the Workforce – With Few Ways to Return' – NextAdvisor.

USA: By employment type – Legitimate reasons for a career break





Generational patterns were also clearly visible in the views of American workers on career breaks. Nearly six in 10 of respondents aged 55-64 had never taken a career break. This was more than double the proportion of 25-34-year-olds.

An examination of responses by workers in different sectors of employment also yielded interesting results. Private sector workers delivering government services seemingly felt most able, at least initially, and inclined to take career breaks: 81% reported that they felt able to return to work after a career break without suffering negative repercussions in their professional life, and a very similar proportion (80%) of respondents in this group of workers had already taken a career break. However, while government-contracted private sector workers seemed initially confident in their ability to take a career break, as we will discuss in greater detail later, they were consistently more likely than workers in other sectors to perceive concerns about taking a career break and barriers preventing them from returning to work after doing so. By contrast, just 53% of private sector workers not delivering government services had ever taken a career break. These workers were also, at 38%, most likely to express a disinclination to take a career break in the next five years, compared to 30% of public sector employees and 23% of workers identifying as government contractors [31]. Furthermore, almost a fifth more workers in the private sector delivering government services felt that they could potentially encounter stumbling blocks when returning to work when compared to their private sector compatriots who do not deliver government services. Perhaps workers in the non-government services private sector feel less able to take career breaks due to the lack of schemes offering such breaks in their sector: a 2016 study by the Society for Human Resource Management found that government and non-profit organisations were more likely to offer paid sabbatical leave to full-time employees than privately owned for-profit organisations [32].

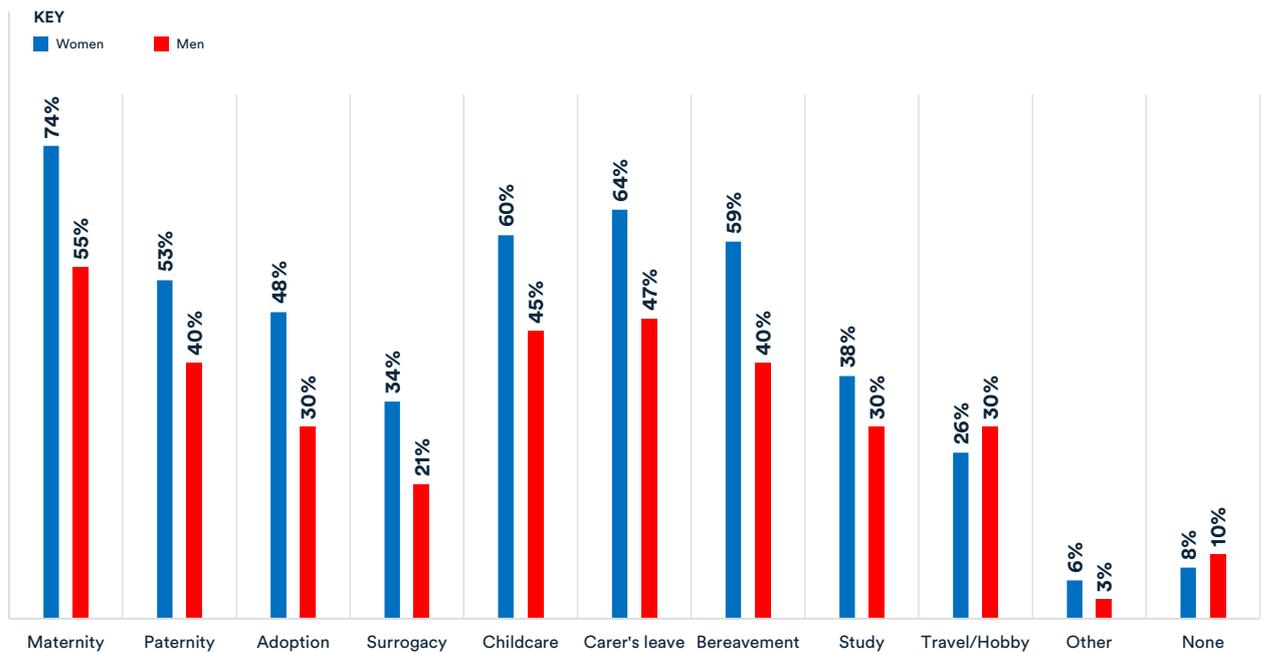
Generational patterns were also clearly visible in the views of American workers on career breaks. Nearly six in 10 (59%) of respondents aged 55-64 had never taken a career break: this was more than double the proportion of 25-34-year-olds (26%) and 23 percentage points above the proportion of 35-44-year-olds who had never taken a career break. Younger generations were also much more confident in their ability to take a career break without it negatively affecting their professional life, with 66%, 75% and 70% of the 18-24, 25-34 and 35-44 age cohorts respectively feeling this way, compared to just 43% of the 55-64 age banding. Most tellingly, nearly half of 55-64-year-old respondents (46%) had no desire to take a career break in the next five years, compared to 28% of 18-24-year-olds and 30% of 25-34-year-olds. This is likely a reflection of changing attitudes and the diminishing appeal of a long, unbroken career among younger people, who, suggest co-authors Morag Barrett and Linda Sharkey of *The Future-Proof Workplace* after interviews with Millennials, are more likely to take sabbaticals over the course of their professional lives and may even abandon traditional retirement in favour of a series of sabbaticals [33].

[31] This question – If you were to take a career break in the next five years, do you feel you would be able to for any of the following reasons? – used a smaller base of respondents who had never taken a career break. As such, the sample size of private sector workers delivering government services was below 100 and data relating to this group should therefore be regarded with caution.

[32] 'SHRM Survey Findings: Paid Leave in the Workforce' – Society for Human Resource Management.

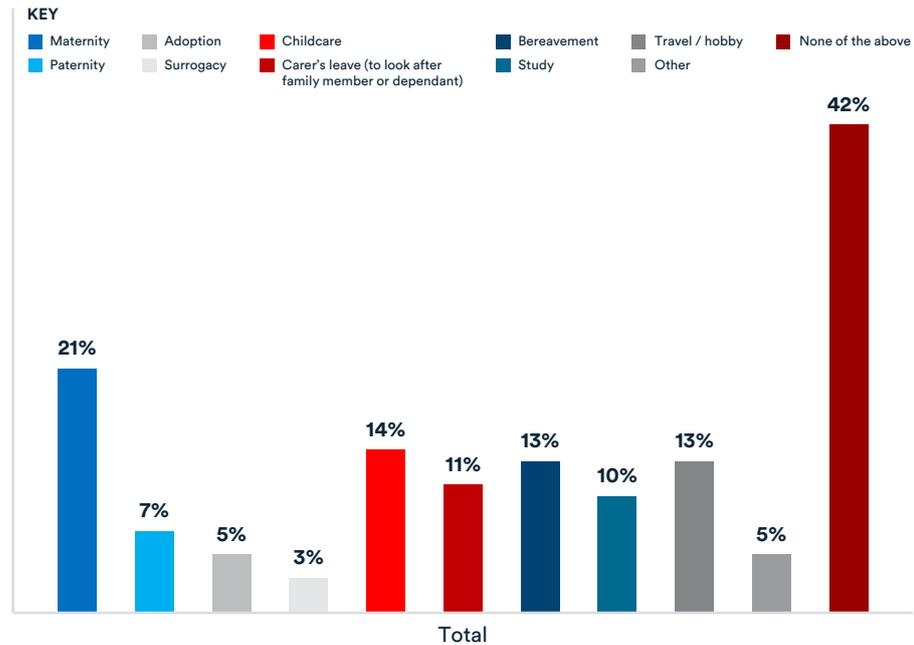
[33] 'Millennials: Traditional Finance May Not Be In The Cards' – Forbes.

USA: By gender – Legitimate reasons for a career break



The reasons motivating certain groups of Americans to want to take career breaks also varied considerably. In an interesting development, those respondents belonging to groups more open to taking career breaks seemed to want to take career breaks for reasons relating to themselves rather than others. Younger age groups, who were more optimistic about and receptive to taking career breaks, were also more enthusiastic about reasons focused on self-betterment, such as Travel/Hobby (35% of 18-24-year-olds considered this a legitimate reason, compared to 19% of 55-64-year-olds) and Study (40% of 18-24-year-olds and 33% of 55-64-year-olds saw this as a legitimate reason). This trend was also evident among young people in the UK, who were similarly more likely to prioritise themselves when pondering a career break. Younger Americans were, conversely, less supportive of taking career breaks for reasons such as Bereavement: just 25% of 18-24-year-olds and 39% of 25-34-year-olds found this a legitimate reason for a career break, compared to 68% of 55-64-year-olds.

USA: Ever taken a career break

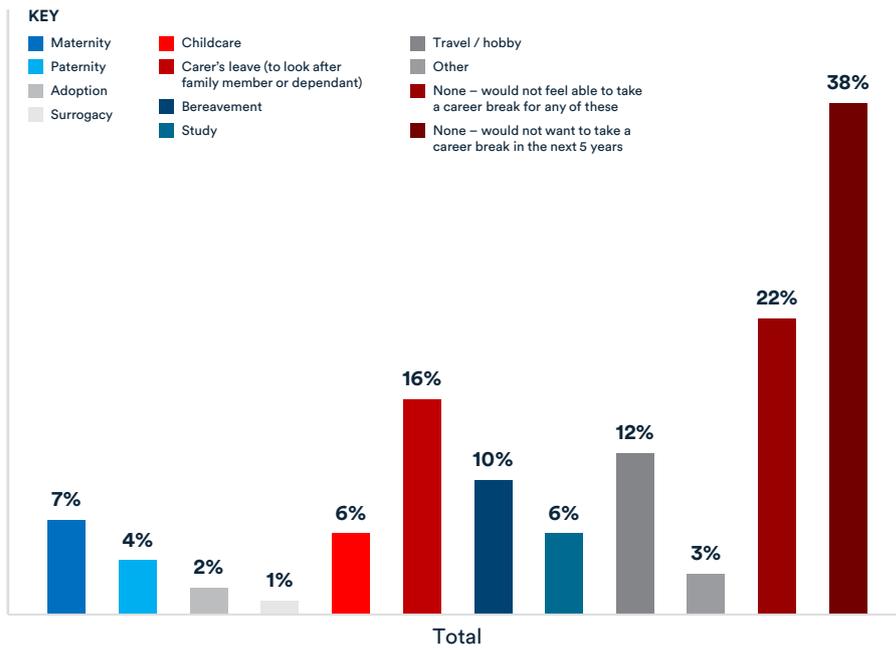


These findings fit with our view that there is a discernible self-reference bias – that people who have experienced or anticipate experiencing a career break for a stated reason are more likely to feel it to be legitimate. For example (and as outlined above), older people tend to be more supportive of care, or bereavement, likely as they have or believe that they will soon experience it.

Private sector workers delivering government services, the group of workers most open to career breaks, were similarly unenthusiastic about reasons such as Bereavement, which only 43% considered a legitimate reason for a career break. This figure stood in contrast to private sector workers not delivering government services, the group of workers most sceptical of taking career breaks: 53% of these workers felt Bereavement was a legitimate reason. In the same vein, just 53% of private sector workers delivering government services found Maternity to be a legitimate reason for a career break, compared to 67% of private sector workers not delivering government services. One candidate theory to explain this is that respondents in those groups who are more open to taking career breaks, such as young people and workers in the government services private sector, were less likely to consider something as life-changing as, say, becoming a parent as a legitimate reason for a career break when they would support such a career break in principle regardless. In contrast, groups more sceptical of taking career breaks would only consider big life-changing events such as suffering a bereavement as legitimate reasons which would justify taking a career break.

Our poll therefore revealed significant differences in the inclination, as well as perceived ability, of different groups of respondents to take career breaks.

USA: Would you feel able to take a career break



Concerns



Financial concerns dominate the reasons why people worry about taking a career break, whereas the 'disapproval of family or friends' was by far the lowest concern amongst Americans.



Private sector workers delivering government services were most cautious about taking a career break, especially in relation to private sector workers not delivering government services.



Survey takers who had taken a career break were more likely than those who had not to consider a given factor a concern when taking a career break.

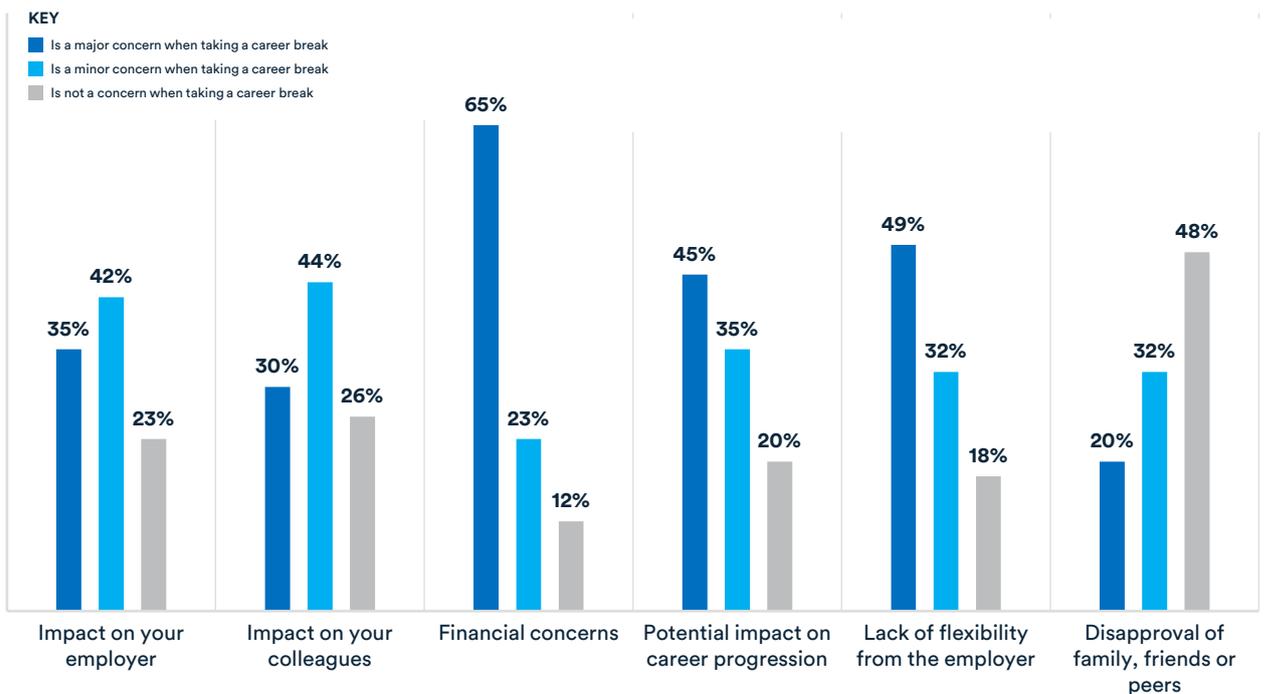


Younger age groups were also more likely than older age groups to identify something as a concern when taking a career break. This may be a reflection of their relative juniority at work and their having reached a particularly work-focused point in their lives.



Financial concerns were, by a significant margin, the most prevalent worry amongst Americans when considering a career break. 65% of people cited it as a 'major' concern when considering a career break, compared to the next highest 'major' concern, 'flexibility of the employer', at 49%. Conversely, 'disapproval of family & friends' was the least worrying issue amongst Americans when considering issues that could arise from taking a career break – with 48% of people saying it is not a concern at all, and only 20% saying it would be a major concern. Of course, this does not mean that Americans do not worry about the opinions of their family and friends, as it is possible that many respondents believe that their family or friends would simply not disapprove of their decision to take a career break if they chose to do so.

USA: Summary of concerns



Private sector employees delivering government services were the group of workers most likely to find any given reason a concern when taking a career break. The only exception was 'financial concerns', which public sector workers, at 92%, found more concerning than workers in the private sector, presumably due to the typically lower pay among government employees relative to their peers in the private sector.

A significant disparity within the private sector, between those delivering government services and those who do not, was evident from our survey. For example, while two-thirds (67%) of private sector government contractors felt the 'disapproval of family, friends or peers' would be a concern when taking a career break, less than half (49%) of those in the private sector who did not undertake work for the government (and 56% of public sector workers) shared their sentiment. One theory to explain this trend is that private sector workers delivering government services feel pressures associated with working in the private sector in addition to responsibility associated with the delivery of essential public services. Such criticisms, to do with both these workers' private sector role and their duty delivering government services, would represent what we have already termed the 'government contractor squeeze'.

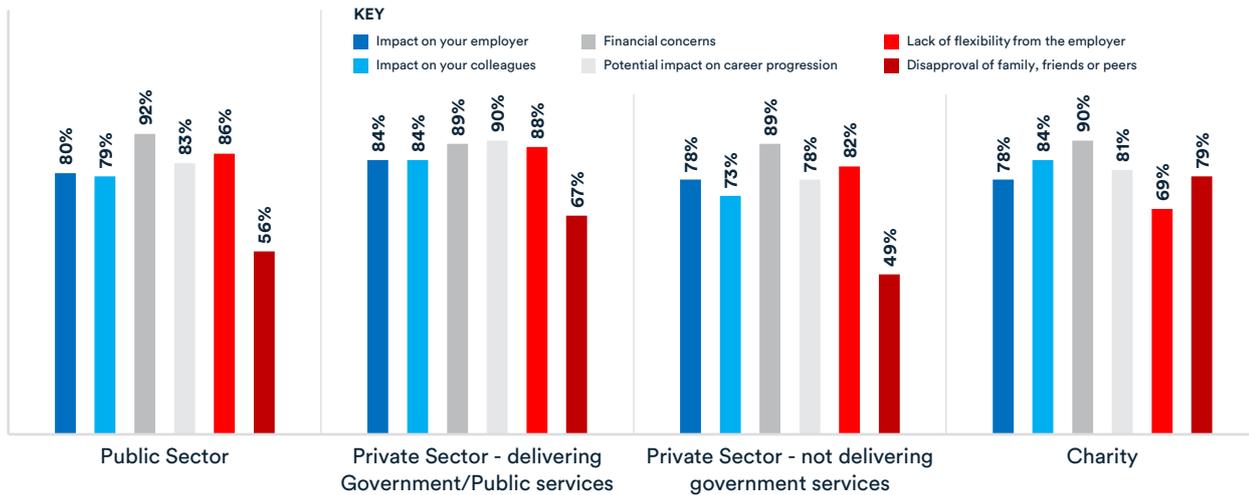
This section of the poll revealed relatively homogeneous results between men and women, who reported similar attitudes in similar proportions across most of the suggested areas for concern. The noteworthy exception was regarding the 'disapproval of family, friends or peers', considered by 59% of men to be a concern but only 45% of women. This trend was notably also present among respondents outside the US, with men in the UK, the UAE and Australia also more likely than their female compatriots to consider the 'disapproval of family, friends or peers' a concern (although in the UAE this was only by one percentage point). It is likely that gendered role expectations are responsible for this, with men expected to remain in work while women expected to leave: a survey of dual-income households with children in the US found that, when asked which of the parenting pair would be more likely to leave work to be their children's primary caregiver, 69% of women said they would, compared to just 31% of men [34]. This is reinforced by the fact that although 34% of women in our US survey reported having taken maternity leave, just 11% of men had taken paternity leave: perhaps men feel social pressure to remain in work without pausing their careers even after becoming parents.

[34] 'Women Are Getting Pushed Out of the Workforce – With Few Ways to Return' – NextAdvisor.



Respondents who had taken a career break were more likely than those who had not to identify concerns.

USA: Summary of concerns broken down by role



Large disparities between the sentiments of different age groups were also mostly absent, although younger age groups were more likely to have concerns about taking a career break. In some cases, variances can be attributed to respondents' life stage: 82% of Americans aged 25-34 stated that the 'impact on [their] employer' would constitute a concern, a figure six to seven points above the corresponding percentages across all other age groups. This may be due to a combination of factors, such as respondents in this group having reached an age when they have relatively few responsibilities outside work and are therefore more invested in their careers; when they have attained a degree of operational responsibility in middle management where their absence would result in considerable disruption to their employer and their work; and when they may be seeking professional advancement and so have greater focus on their work. To further illustrate this latter point, 86% of both 18-24-year-olds and 25-34-year-olds, who are more likely to occupy junior roles at work, were concerned about a break's impact on their career progression, 13 points above the percentage of 55-64-year-olds, who are more likely to occupy senior roles, who said the same.

Finally, across all six suggested areas for concern, respondents who had taken a career break were more likely than those who had not to identify something as a concern. In some instances, this disparity was especially striking, such as when asked about the 'impact on your colleagues': 80% of past career breakers saw this as a concern, compared to 66% of those who had not taken a career break. Similarly, 59% of respondents who had taken a career break believed the 'disapproval of family, friends or peers' was a concern, 15 points above the corresponding number of respondents who had not taken a career break. As seen in relation to other countries – and we have termed this 'the experience effect' – this suggests that those respondents with personal experience of career breaks had, when taking their breaks, encountered these issues. These results therefore may be indications of the matters that should be addressed in efforts to assure workers of their ability to return following a career break.

Barriers

A 'lack of flexibility & work-life balance' is seen as the barrier most widely faced by people returning from a career break.



Private sector workers delivering government services were more likely than workers in the public sector and in the non-government services private sector to identify barriers to re-employment after a career break.

Men were more likely than women to feel that there were barriers for returners.



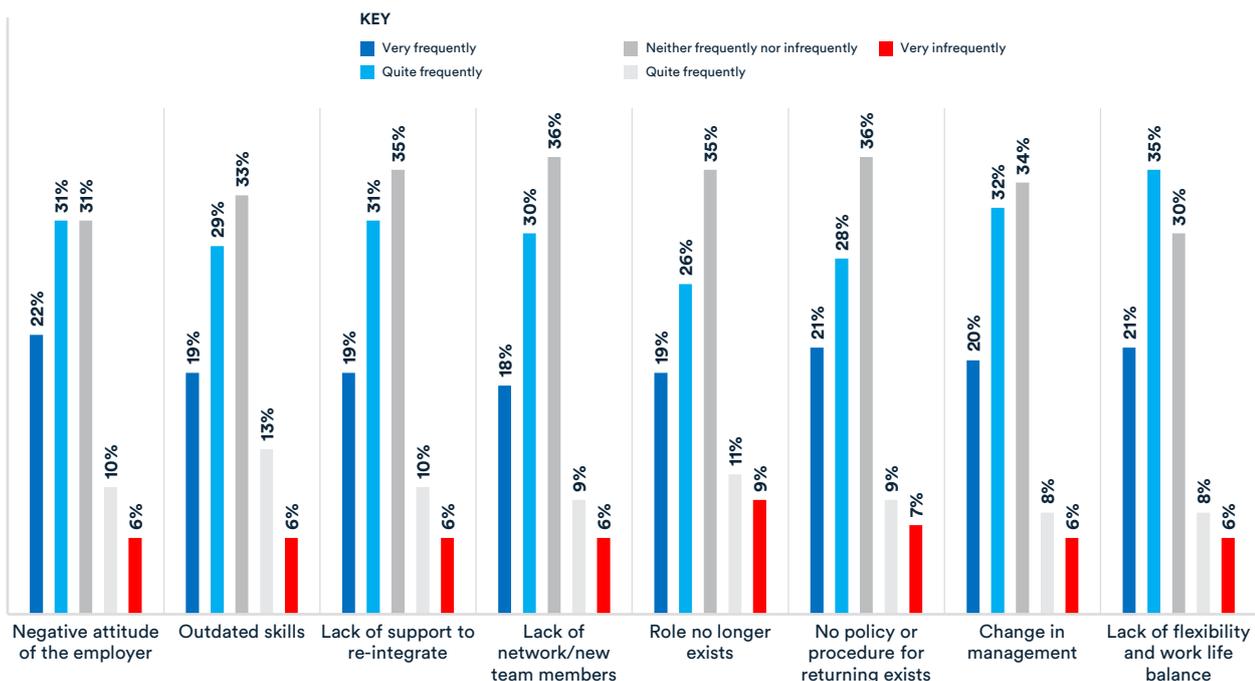
Respondents aged 25-34 were the age group most likely to identify obstacles to people returning to work.

Respondents who had taken a career break were more likely than those who had not to consider a given factor a barrier to returning from a career break.



The issue Americans see as the overall most frequent for people returning from a career break is a 'lack of flexibility & work-life balance' – with 21% of people indicating that it is a 'very' frequent barrier and 35% of people citing it as a 'quite' frequent barrier. That said, a 'negative attitude of the employer' are marginally (by one point, therefore within the margin for error) cited by more people as a very frequent barrier for those returning to work (22%). Excluding these two issues – a 'lack of flexibility & work-life balance' and 'negative attitude of the employer' – the most common response across all other barriers asked about was 'Neither Frequently nor Infrequently'.

USA: Summary of barriers faced when returning to work

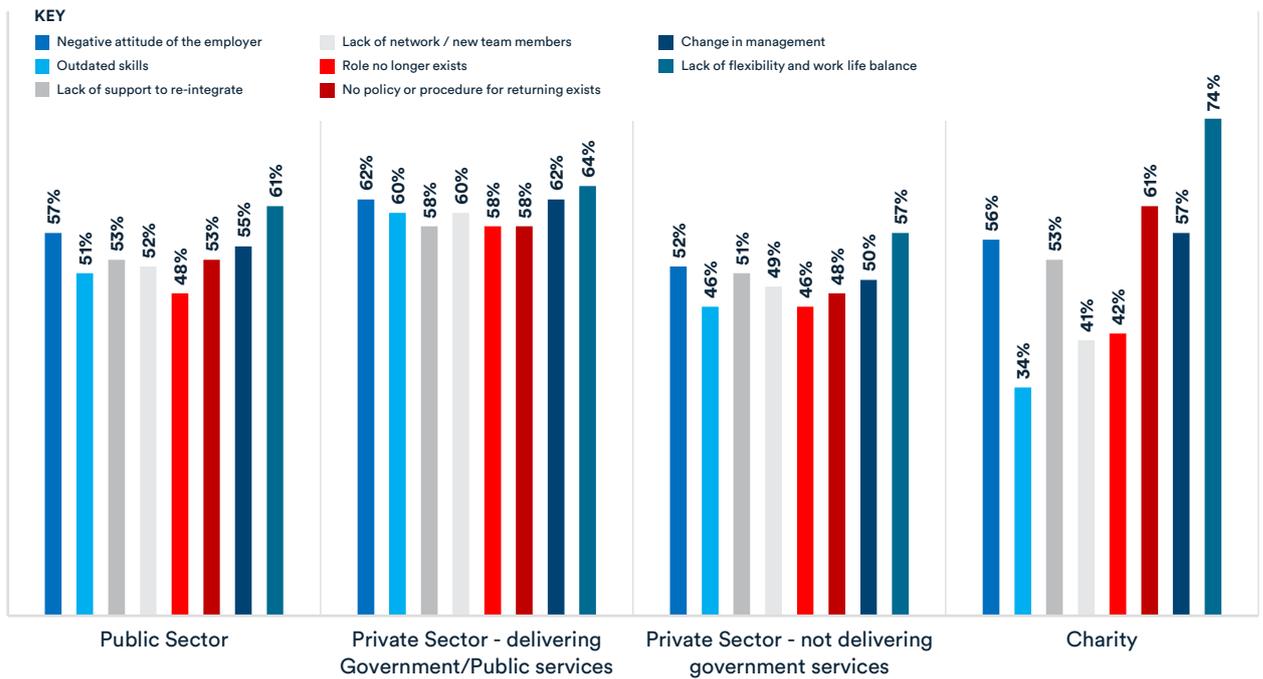


Across all eight polled areas, private sector workers delivering government services were the category of workers most likely to consider something a frequent barrier to returning to work following a career break. The most striking differences were again within the private sector – between those workers providing government services and those who were not. However, the survey also found that private providers of government services generally perceived more barriers to career re-entry than their counterparts in the public sector. For instance, 60% of workers in the private sector delivering government services believed 'outdated skills' would constitute a barrier to returners, compared to 51% of public sector workers and 46% of workers in the non-government services private sector. Once again, this may reflect the 'government contractor squeeze', previously mentioned as the phenomenon whereby workers in the government services private sector may feel especially vulnerable to issues such as outdated skills.

More generally, the fact that public sector workers were less likely than their fellow government service deliverers in the private sector to identify barriers to returning to work could be the result of the conditions of the public sector. While private sector pay is generally higher, for example, benefits in the public sector are typically more widespread: government jobs typically offer lower-cost healthcare plans and favourable pensions [35], and research indicates health and retirement benefits are more highly valued than salary by public sector workers in state and local government [36]. What is more, existing leave benefits are far more generous for federal employees than for the average American worker, including 12 weeks of paid parental leave [37]. These perks may contribute to a greater sense of security, leading these workers to be less likely to identify barriers to returning to work.

- [35] 'The Pros and Cons of Working for the Government' – The Balance Careers.
- [36] 'State and Local Employees Views on Their Jobs, Pay and Benefits' – National Institute on Retirement Security.
- [37] 'The World "Has Found a Way to Do This": The U.S. Lags on Paid Leave' – The New York Times.

USA: Barriers faced when returning to work by role



Men were more likely than women across all eight surveyed areas to perceive barriers to returning to work. Although in most cases this was only by statistically insignificant margins of one to three percentage points, in two instances the gap was wider – at 48%, men were six points more likely than women to believe that a role no longer existing would be a barrier frequently encountered by those returning to work after a career break. This may speak to men’s higher chance of being employed in declining industries in the US, such as the coal mining industry, only 4.4% of whose employees were women as of 2018 [38], or manufacturing, where women comprised under 30% of employees in 2016 [39]. At a significant rate, men were also more likely (53%) than women (45%) to believe that a lack of a policy or procedure for returning would pose a barrier for returners. With 63% of American men surveyed by our poll having reported they felt unable or unwilling to take a career break in the next five years, could this result be due to a lack of awareness of existing policies or procedures to allow returners back into work? Or were men simply more likely to be employed in those workplaces which lacked adequate policies and procedures for returners?

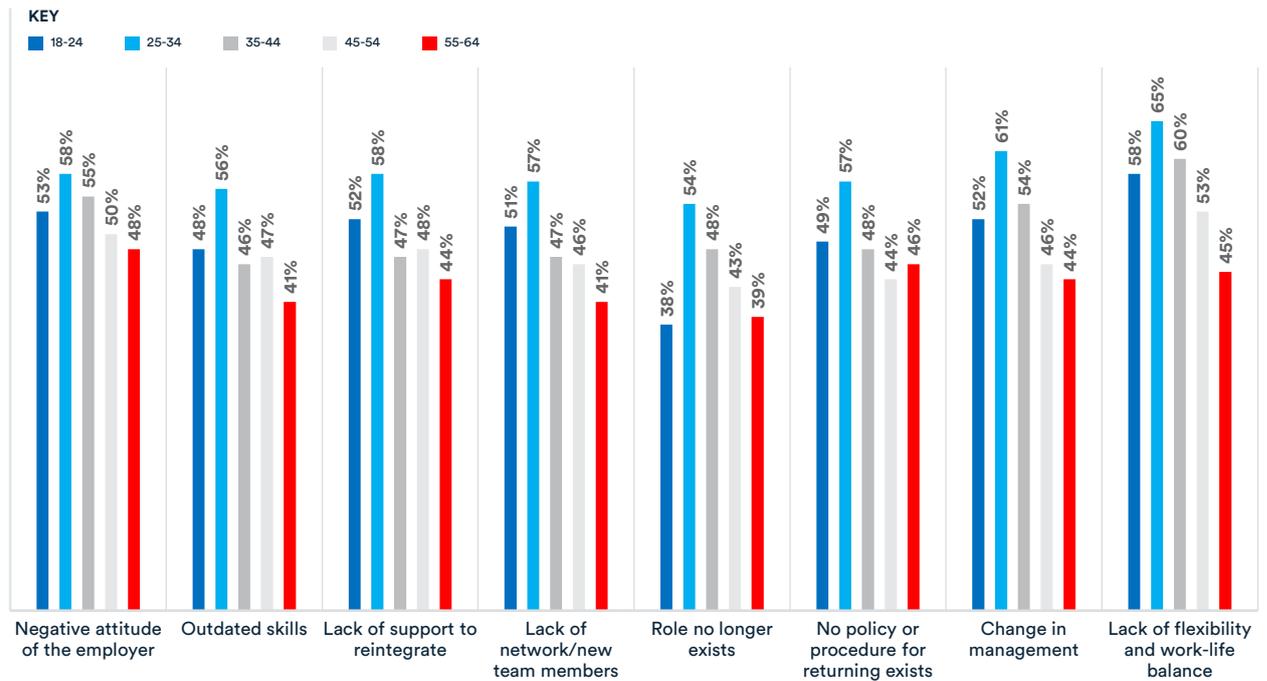
An examination of the responses by age group revealed that 25-34-year-olds were without exception the age cohort most likely to feel they faced barriers to re-employment. In the case of ‘change in management’, 25-34-year-olds were, at 61%, considerably more likely than respondents of other ages to perceive a barrier to returning to work (only 52% of 18-24-year-olds and 44% of 55-64-year-olds shared their view). This likely reflects the fact that workers aged 25-34, unlike those in the youngest age cohort, would have amassed enough years of experience to contemplate taking a career break but not, unlike older respondents, gained enough seniority for a change in management not to constitute a barrier to their re-entry. In other cases, 25-34-year-olds reported similar views to similarly aged respondents, likely as a result of generational attitudes. In light of studies which indicate that over 80% of Millennials seriously consider work-life balance when weighing job prospects [40], it is unsurprising that 65% of 25-34-year-olds and 60% of 35-44-year-olds agreed that a ‘lack of flexibility or work-life balance’ would be a frequent barrier faced by those returning to work after a career break (just 45% of the 55-64 age cohort felt this way).

[38] 'Male-dominated mining sector explores fiscal, ESG benefits of hiring more women' – S&P Global.

[39] 'Women in Manufacturing' – United States Census Bureau.

[40] 'Millennials Want A Healthy Work-Life Balance. Here's What Bosses Can Do' – Forbes.

USA: Perceptions of barriers broken down by age



Additionally, those who had taken a career break were again more likely than those who had not to perceive reasons suggested by the poll as frequent barriers for returners. In most cases, the gap between past career breakers and non-breakers was 10 percentage points or over, and in some cases the gap was particularly pronounced: for instance, 'lack of flexibility and work-life balance' was seen by 62% of past career breakers and 47% of non-breakers as a frequent barrier to returning to work. These results, a further affirmation of the 'experience effect', may be cynically taken as an indication that the barriers suggested by the poll are, to varying degrees, genuine obstacles preventing people on career breaks from returning to work. Smoothing said obstacles will therefore require closer engagement with career breakers to understand the barriers they have faced when returning to work, so that re-entry to the workforce might be made more seamless and welcoming.



Reflections

After years and months of working from home and spending time with family, it is clear that Americans are recalibrating how they think about working life: the number of monthly voluntary job resignations reached an all-time high of 4.3 million, or 2.9% of the entire American workforce, in August 2021 [41]. With US workers demonstrating they are willing to abandon the old norms of the working world, the findings of our poll take on greater salience, as they similarly point to the need for a more flexible working culture and greater leave opportunities relative to the pre-Covid period.

Despite a significantly different legislative environment, responses in the US matched those from the UK and Australia, and to some extent the UAE. Reasons relating to family, such as Maternity and Childcare, were the principal motivations for Americans who had taken a career break. There was clear evidence of the patterns identified in other countries: the self-reference bias – where a reason for a career break has or is likely to affect you, support rises, for example older generations feeling ‘Carer’s Leave’ to be more legitimate than their younger compatriots; the ‘experience effect’ – if you have taken a career break, you are more likely to be pessimistic about the challenges and barriers you face from taking one; the ‘desirability-means’ gap – the fact that those most wanting to take a career break, were the most likely to identify an issue with doing so; and the government contractor squeeze – the indication that private sector workers delivering government services feel there are more challenges to taking a career break.

These final two patterns are further evidenced by the fact that, in the US, private sector workers delivering government services expressed the greatest interest among all workers in taking a career break, but despite this were also most likely to identify both concerns about taking a career break and barriers preventing them from returning following one. Perhaps opportunities for career breaks, such as designated sabbatical schemes, can be expanded for those working as government contractors. Alternatively, employers in this sector could re-examine whether the current balance between salaries, leave and retirement benefits available to their employees is meeting the needs of their workforce, and whether this balance may be revised to adapt to greater demands for flexibility at work.

[41] ‘Explainer: What’s driving “the Great Resignation”?’ – World Economic Forum.

Additionally, demographic groups differentiated themselves from one another in their sentiments towards career breaks. Despite women expressing a greater readiness to take a career break for reasons relating to child or family care, men were more likely to feel there were barriers to returning to work following a career break. Perhaps these sentiments among men are a symptom of a wider work culture built on the assumption that 'men are meant to stay in work', leading men to perceive greater barriers to returning to work and so express greater reluctance to leave the workplace in the first place. Gender norms and expectations governing men and women's decisions to leave, stay in and re-enter work should be combatted, so that men and women alike feel equally able to take career breaks and return to work afterwards.

In view of younger age groups' greater receptiveness to career breaks, it is unfortunate that they were more likely than their older counterparts to have concerns before taking a career break and also feel they faced barriers when returning to work. One may even interpret the fact that younger respondents were more likely to have taken a career break in combination with the fact that younger age groups more often identified barriers to career re-entry that some of the factors suggested by the poll are informed by real-world experiences which prevent younger people from re-joining the workforce following a career break. With the world of work changing and younger demographics more likely to take career break opportunities and other aspects of flexibility into account when considering jobs, employers should take note of younger workers' sentiments and explore instituting schemes or programmes for workers to take sabbatical leave.

Finally, that respondents who had taken a career break were consistently more likely than those who had not to identify both concerns when taking a career break and also barriers to returning to work suggests that these factors, both concerns and barriers, are problems for workers in the United States considering a career break and seeking re-employment. This may in fact offer valuable insights into those factors which pose particular problems for career breakers and returners, and employers may wish to take heed and adapt their offers to new hires or prospective job applicants.

Based on the above, we have developed a small number of US-specific recommendations:

The Need for Federal Parental Leave Legislation

Given that 28% of US respondents had taken either maternity or paternity leave, Americans' evident prioritisation of family responsibilities should be mirrored in the career break opportunities available to them. Paid parental leave should be explored beyond the nine states and the District of Columbia where these benefits are already available [42]. The US is the only large economy that has no nationwide legislation granting parental leave to employees in all sectors of the economy. This is of particular importance in allowing women, who shoulder a disproportionate share of parental and childcare responsibilities in the US, to remain in work and experience job security on equal terms with men.

Increasing Flexible Working, Removing Barriers to Re-Entry

A higher proportion – 62% – of Americans who had taken a career break felt that a 'lack of flexibility and work-life balance' would be a barrier to re-entry, suggesting that this is a genuine obstacle faced by returners to work. In line with our international recommendations, flexible working/home working arrangements should be expanded and made permanent to smooth barriers to career re-entry and to allow groups such as women to remain in work while carrying out child-rearing or caregiving responsibilities. These arrangements can help instil nurture greater faith among many employees in their perceived ability to take career breaks, as the reduced number of obstacles will help smooth their path back into the workforce.

Balancing Public and Private Sector Benefits

In view of public sector workers' greater and more generous access to sabbatical leave, private sector employers should look to procedures and schemes for leave and career breaks in the public sector for inspiration when designing their own programmes. Consideration should be given as to whether the balance between typically higher wages in the private sector versus non-financial benefits in the public sector is correct. To ensure that workers are in fact able to take leave without disruption to their work, employers should ensure that all services and processes at work are dependent on structures, procedures and teams rather than on individuals. Greater efforts should also be made to communicate the availability of leave entitlements to government-contracted private sector workers, and employers should make clear to these workers that they are able to take career breaks without risking disruption to the services they provide.

[42] 'The World "Has Found a Way to Do This": The U.S. Lags on Paid Leave' – The New York Times.



Chapter 4

Australia

Overview

This chapter examines the responses of Australian residents to our survey on career breaks.

We begin by providing a summary of our findings, followed by analysis of our research broken down into three sections: respondents' attitudes towards career breaks and the reasons for taking such a break; factors which Australians contemplating a career break might consider a concern prior to doing so; and factors which those returning to work after a career break may encounter as barriers. We conclude by commenting on key trends and the implications of these for the Australian workforce.

As with the other countries analysed in this report, we pay close attention to the sentiments of working respondents across four particular areas of employment. These are the public sector, the private sector delivering government services, the private sector not delivering government services, and the charity sector.

Key findings include:



Overall, 56% of Australians have taken a career break – 52% of men and 59% of women. The most commonly cited reason was Maternity. For men, the most commonly cited reason was Travel/Hobby.



A majority (55%) of Australians said that they felt they could take a break from work without it impacting their professional life. As with other countries, childbirth/childcare was seen as the most legitimate reason for taking a career break.



17% of respondents (who had not already taken a career break) indicated that they felt unable to take a career break – the joint lowest number with the UAE.



‘Financial concerns’ were both the net highest (88%) and the highest ‘major’ concern (59%) for people when considering a career break.



‘Lack of flexibility and work-life balance’ was the most frequently cited barrier to returning to work – with 50% of respondents indicating that they believe it to be a very or somewhat frequently faced issue.



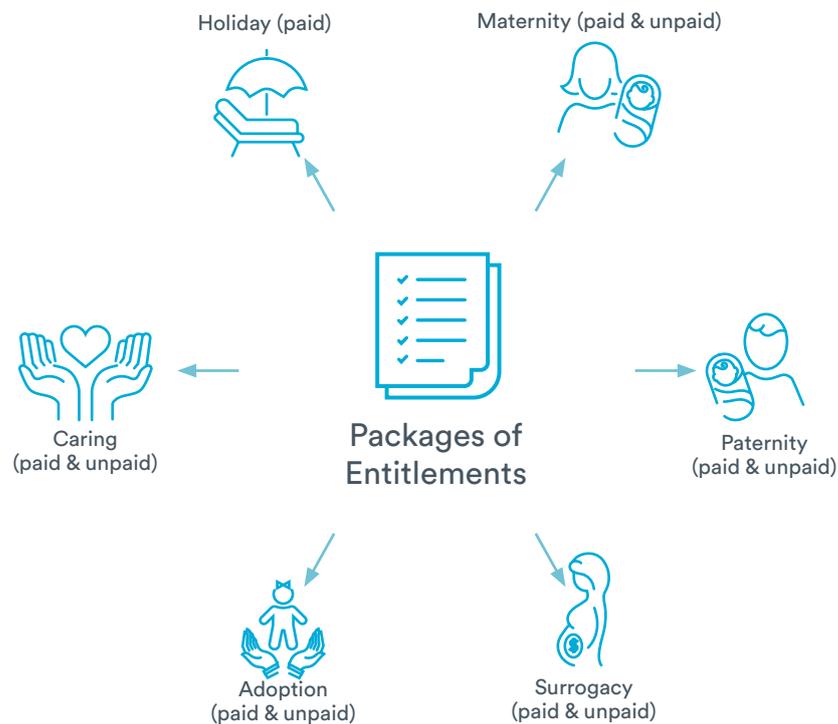
Women were more likely to take career breaks (and to want to take them in future), yet were the most concerned about their impact, and felt they faced the biggest barriers in returning to work. Equally, the older age groups were generally the least likely to indicate a barrier as being ‘frequently’ faced when returning from a career break. As already noted, however, it is these age groups that were the least likely to want to take a career break.



Those working within the private sector delivering government services – although marginally more likely to say that they feel a career break would not adversely impact their career – were more likely than workers in the public sector or private sector not delivering government services to cite something as a hurdle that could dissuade them from taking a career break, or believe they would frequently face a barrier when returning following a career break.

Background

The Australian Federal Government has a relatively comprehensive package of employee rights to leave. These include:



There is no specific legislation or regulations on 'career breaks' or 'sabbaticals' in Australia. However, there are some laws (both at a federal and state/territory level) relating to 'Long Service Leave'. This initiative gives employees who have served for a particular employer for a defined period of time extra leave on full pay. Legal entitlements vary between the states and territories, but common Long Service Leave schemes see an employee entitled to 90 days' paid leave following 10 years of continuous work for the same employer [43].

As with Long Service Leave, there is some degree of variance between Australia's states and territories when it comes to other forms of leave. Melbourne Cup Day (which centres on the Melbourne Cup Horse Race) is a public holiday in Victoria only, for example. There is even variance within states: for example, Brisbane Show Day is a public holiday in Brisbane, but not the rest of Queensland.

[43] 'Long service leave' - Fair Work Ombudsman.

Breakdown of Respondents

A total of 2,017 Australian residents took our survey on career breaks. The figures were weighted to make them reflective of the wider Australian population. Therefore, although 1,314 respondents were in work, the weighted sample was increased to 1,327, with 397 (30% of working respondents) employed in the public sector; 255 (19%) in the private sector delivering government services; 576 (43%) in the private sector not delivering government services; and 33 (3%) in the charity sector. Due to the small sample size of charity sector workers in our poll, any data relating to the charity sector should be regarded with caution.

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics suggests that, as of August 2021, the public sector accounted for just under 15% of Australian workers [44]. This figure is proportionally half of the number of respondents employed by the public sector captured in our poll. It is worth noting, however, that definitions of the public sector may differ between those responding to Australian Bureau of Statistics survey, and our survey, which relied on respondents' own self-definition of the sector in which they are employed.

[44] 'Labour Force, Australia, Detailed, Sept 2021' - Australian Bureau of Statistics.

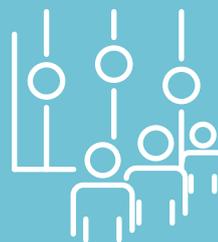
Attitudes towards Career Breaks

17% of respondents (who had not already taken a career break) indicated that they felt unable to take a career break – the joint lowest number with the UAE.



As with other countries, childbirth / childcare was seen as the most legitimate reason for taking a career break.

A majority (55%) of Australians felt they could take a break from work without it impacting their career.

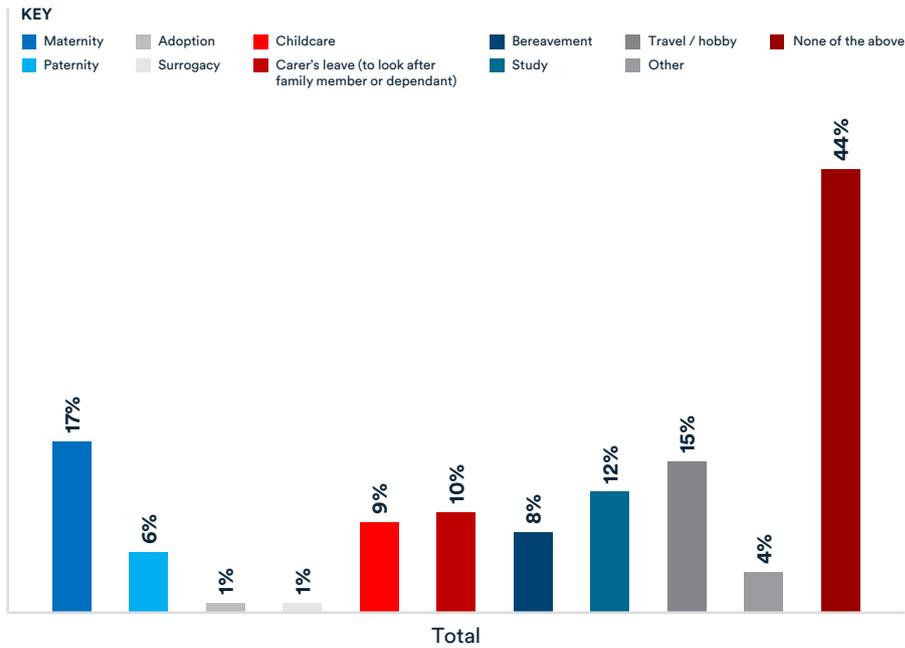


The two oldest age groups were least likely to have taken a career, with those aged 25-34 most likely (67%) to have taken a career break, followed by the 35-44 age group (61%) and then the youngest, 16-24 (57%).



Private sector workers delivering government services were the most comfortable with taking a career break, followed by public sector workers were close behind, then private sector not delivering government services and finally the least confident in their ability to take a career break without it impacting their career were the charity sector, however, as already discussed the small sample size makes this data less reliable.

Australia: Ever taken a career break



Overall, 56% of Australians had taken a career break – 52% of men and 59% of women.

The most commonly cited reason was Maternity (29% of women). Interestingly the gender divide when it comes to career breaks and children seems to persist in Australia with only 9% of men indicating they had taken paternity leave [45]. Women were also twice as likely to cite Childcare (12%) as men (6%). The most common reason for a career break cited by men was Travel/Hobby at 17% (this is five percentage points higher than women in this category).

Of the different employment groups examined in this research, private sector workers delivering public services were the most likely to have taken a career break (75%), followed

by charity workers (66% - although the issue of a small sample size persists in relation to this group). Public sector workers were next (61%) and finally came workers in the private sector not delivering government services (52%).

The two oldest age groups were least likely to have taken a career, with those aged 25-34 most likely (67%) to have taken a career break, followed by the 35-44 age group (61%) and then the youngest, 16-24 (57%).

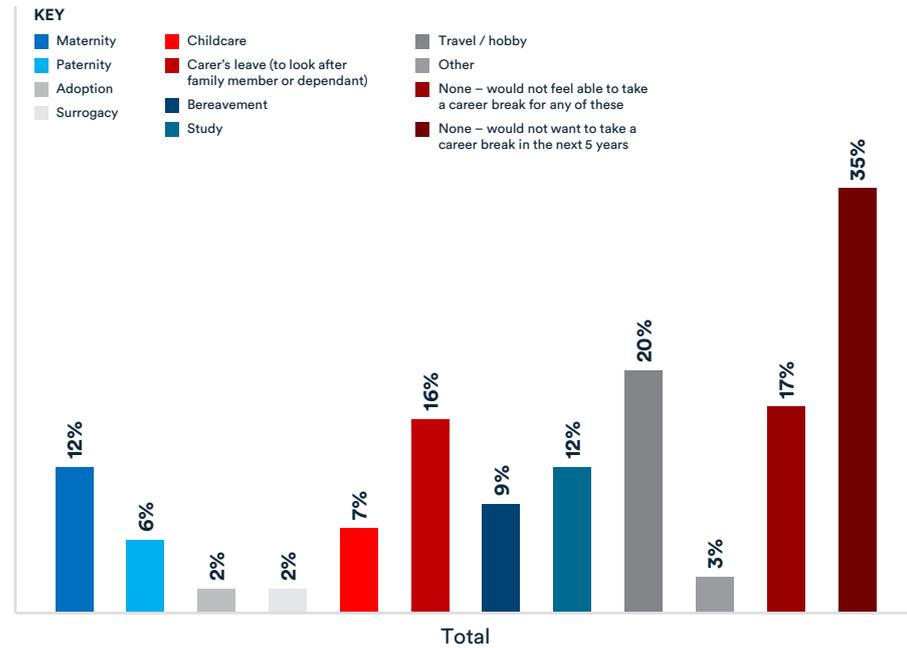
Of those who had not taken a career break, most people either did not want to in the next five years (35%) or didn't feel able to (17%). For those who could (and wanted to), Travel/Hobby was the most cited reason (20%) – however, 19% of women and 9% of men also cited Maternity or Paternity as a reason.

[45] The net totals relating to Maternity (17%) include 5% of men saying they have been on maternity. Similarly, in relation to the net total for Paternity (6%), 3% of women indicated that they had been on paternity leave.

Furthermore, the motivations for taking a career break within the next five years varied significantly by age – 25-35-year-olds cited Maternity (32%) most often, whereas the youngest age group indicated Study (29%) and Travel/Hobby (26%) as the primary reasons for taking a career break. The age group containing the largest number of people who felt unable to take a career break was the 45-54-year-old category (21%). Moreover, the oldest age group (55-64) were least likely to want to take a career break.

Consistent with other countries polled, the reason most people saw as ‘legitimate’ for a career break was Maternity, at 69%. That said, only 61% of Australian men chose to indicate that they thought Maternity was a ‘legitimate’ reason for a career break, as compared to 77% of Australian women. In fact, without exception, across all nine areas (excluding ‘other’) we asked about, more women than men indicated that they felt it was a legitimate reason to take a career break.

Australia: Would you feel able to take a career break

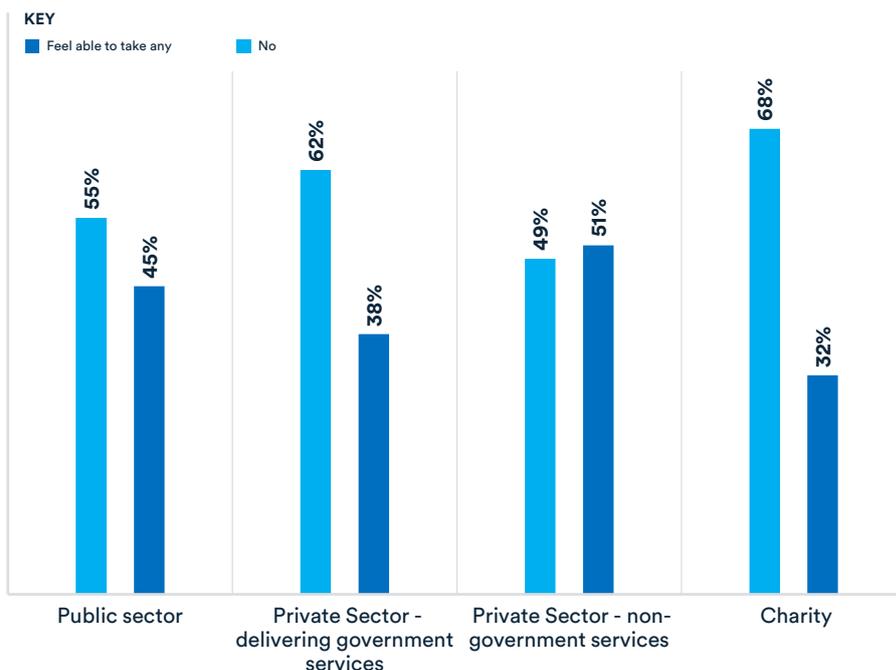


The pattern across different age groups was less consistent. Older age groups tended to cite caregiving and bereavement responsibilities as legitimate more often than younger age groups, who generally indicated that Travel/Hobby and Study as legitimate reasons for a career break in greater numbers. This is likely to be the result of what we have termed the ‘self-reference bias’, which is the likelihood for an issue to seem more legitimate if you have experienced or expect to experience it. For example, young people’s indication that they were likely to see Study as a legitimate reason for a career break in greater numbers as compared to older generations is likely to be influenced by the fact that they have recently or plan to take a career break to study. Older generations, on the other hand, who are more likely to have had children, were inclined to see

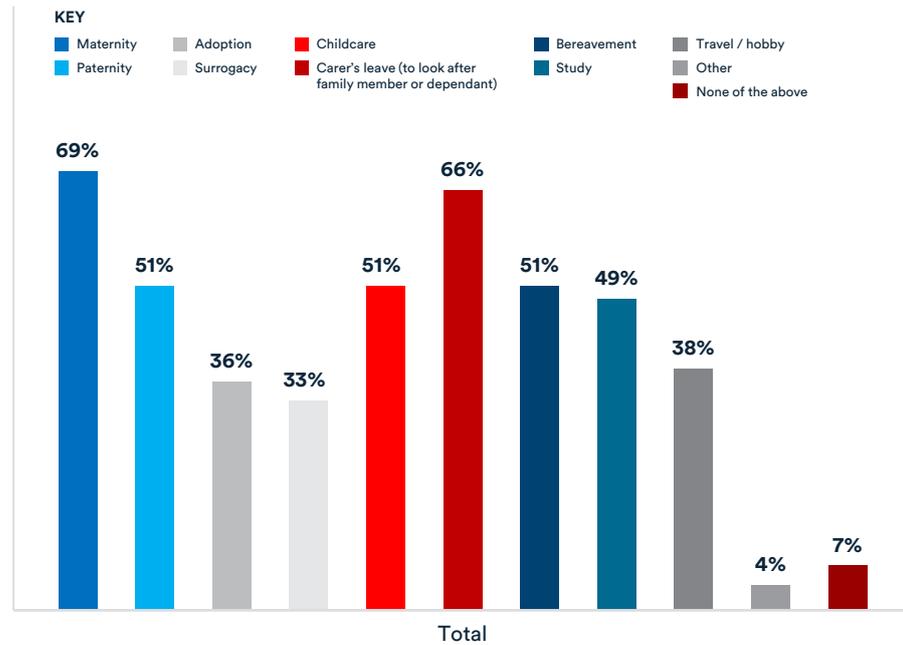
maternity and childcare-related reasons as legitimate as they themselves have experienced this, whereas younger generations are yet to.

When it comes to whether a career break was ‘legitimate’ for any particular reason, public sector workers were generally the most supportive, followed by people working in the private sector, then those in the private sector who deliver government services, and finally charity workers – however, this last grouping had a small sample size (under 100) and therefore a significant margin of error. That said, respondents who defined themselves as ‘private sector’ as compared to ‘private sector – delivering government services’ were more than twice as likely to say that there is no legitimate reason for taking a career break (7% / 3%).

Australia: By employment type – Would you feel able to take a career break



Australia: Legitimate reasons for a career break



A majority (55%) of Australians felt they could take a break from work without it impacting their career (24% strongly / 32% somewhat) with around a fifth (21%) indicated that they felt the opposite (14% somewhat / 7% strongly).

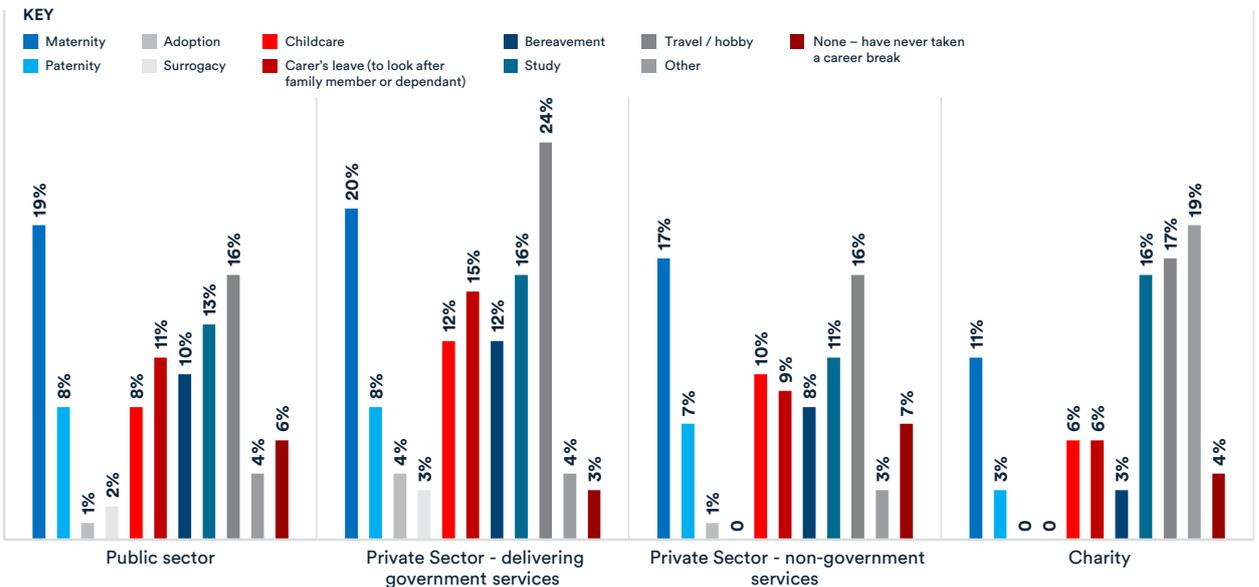
More men (60%) than women (51%) indicated that they felt that they could take a career break without any adverse impact. The same pattern was reflected when viewing the question through the reverse lens – only 17% men thought a career break would negatively impact their career, compared to 25% of women.

Furthermore, the younger a respondent was, the less likely they were to be worried that taking a career break would adversely impact their career. Again, this is a pattern we have seen in other countries and is likely to relate to the fact that younger age groups will have less responsibility and more flexibility when it comes to both their professional and private lives.

Therefore, it is perhaps counterintuitive that as 'social grade' increases, so does the number of respondents who felt able to take a career break without it negatively impacting their career. These people are the most likely to have senior roles and significant financial commitments. However, due to their seniority and financial capacity, they may also have more options in terms of future career paths – including a hiatus from paid work.

Private sector workers delivering government services were the most comfortable with taking a career break (71% agreeing somewhat or strongly that a career break would not adversely impact their career / 15% feeling it would), public sector workers were close behind (69% / 18%), private sector not delivering government services (56% / 22%) were second from bottom, however, the least confident in their ability to take a career break without it impacting their career were the charity sector, which had a very small sample size (53% / 26%). This is a pattern we have identified elsewhere (the US, for example) – whereby government contractors initially show the highest levels of confidence of any group of workers when asked about the impact of a career break on their professional life; however (as explored in the following sections), when asked about specific issues faced by those taking a career break and barriers to returning to work, they return higher levels of concern.

Australia: By employment type – Legitimate reasons for a career break



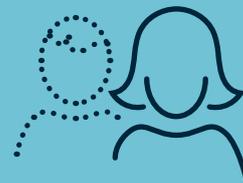
Concerns



Those employed in the public sector delivering government services were the most consistently concerned about the potential negative impact of a career break.



Financial concerns were both the net highest (88%) and the highest 'major' concern (59%) for people when considering a career break.



More men than women indicated a concern regarding the impact of a career break would have on their colleagues (men 68% / women 65%).



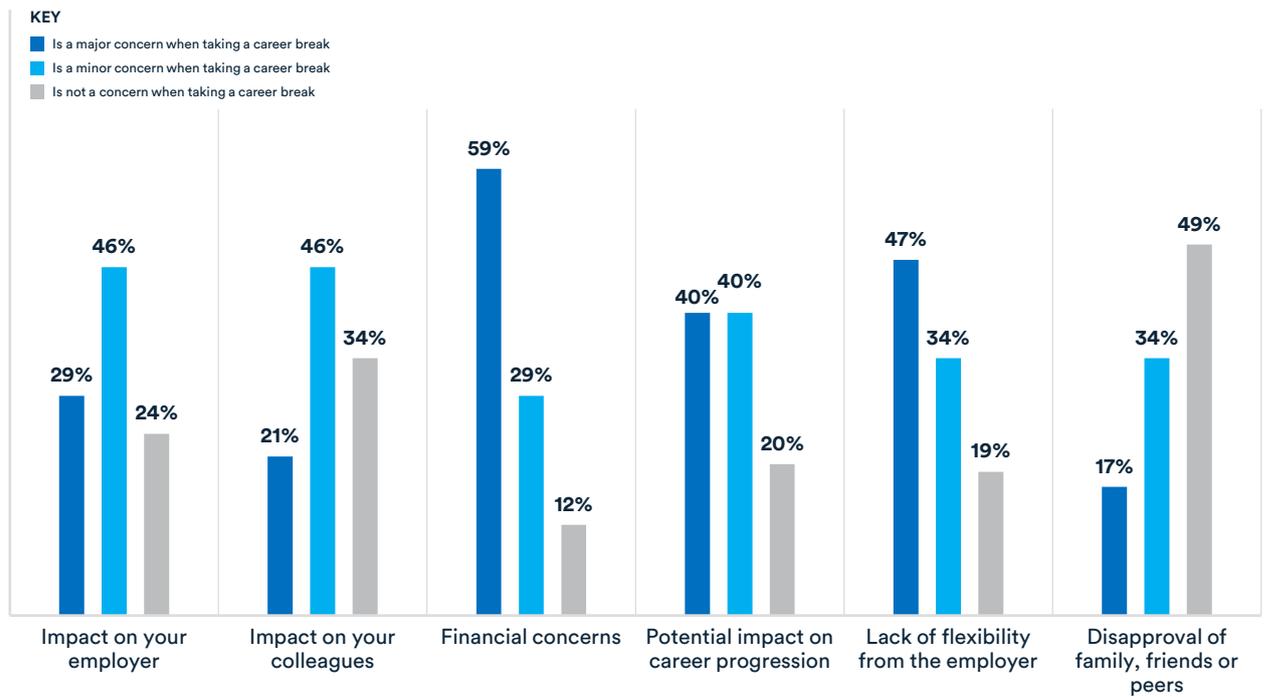
As with other countries covered by this research, there is a clear pattern that indicates an 'experience effect'. In other words, those who had taken a career break were more likely than those who had not to regard a given reason as a concern.



Across the board, younger age groups tend to be more concerned than older cohorts.



Australia: Summary of concerns



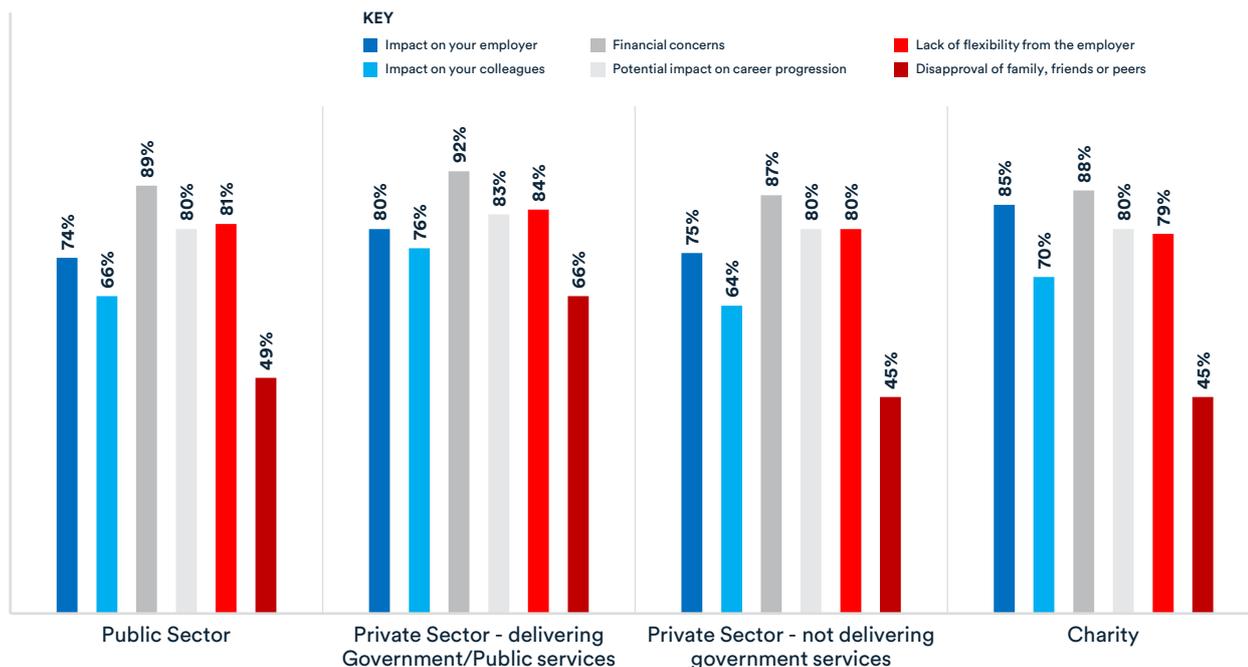
High levels of concern were reported across all six areas we polled. 'Financial concerns' were both the highest overall concern (88%) and the highest 'major' concern (59%). A 'lack of flexibility from the employer' was also a major concern to almost half of respondents (47%) and

a concern of some kind to 81%. This was followed by 'potential impact on career progression' (40% cited this as a major concern / 80% overall concern). 'Disapproval of family, friends and peers' was found by respondents to be the least concerning (Net 51%).

In all but one of the six areas we asked about, those employed in the public sector delivering government services were the most likely to cite an issue as a concern. Only in relation to the 'impact on their employers' were private sector deliverers of government services outnumbered in terms of overall level of concern, and this was by people working in the charity sector, for which there was only a small sample size. Hypotheses for why this is the case have already been outlined in other sections of the report. These include the possibility that government service deliverers in the private sector operate in a more streamlined organisational structure and therefore feel a career break might impact their colleagues to a greater degree than, for example, the public sector. As already noted, we refer to this collection of hypotheses as the government contractor squeeze.

Again, as with other countries covered by this research, there is a clear pattern that indicates an 'experience effect'. In other words, those who had taken a career break were more likely than those who had not to regard a given reason as a concern. As already noted in relation to other countries, it is a reasonable interpretation of this data that those who have had prior experience of taking a career break had encountered these factors themselves, and therefore are more likely to indicate that they felt an issue was a concern of some kind.

Australia: Summary of concerns broken down by role

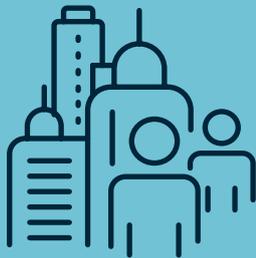


More men than women indicated a concern regarding the impact of a career break would have on their colleagues (men 68% / women 65%): however, this was within the margin of error. The 'disapproval of family or friends' (men 54% / women 48%) was a more significant concern for men as compared to women and was identified as a statistically significant difference. Women, on the other hand, were more likely to cite 'financial concerns' (89% / men 86%). Women also indicated greater levels of concern about the impact a career break would have on their career prospects and the flexibility of their employer, however, the difference between the two genders was only small and within the margin of error.

Across the board, younger age groups tended to be more concerned than older cohorts. The youngest age group (16-24) were particularly concerned by the 'disapproval of family, friends and peers' (73%) as compared to all other age groups (51% of all respondents found this to be a concern). The two oldest age groups indicated the lowest level of concern across all six areas we polled – for instance, just 30% of 55-64-year-olds were concerned about 'disapproval of family, friends and peers'.

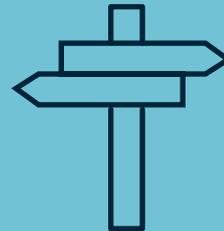
Barriers

A 'lack of flexibility & work-life balance' is seen as the barrier most widely faced by people returning from a career break.



Private sector workers delivering government services were more likely than workers in the public sector and in the non-government services private sector to identify barriers to re-employment after a career break.

Respondents who had taken a career break were more likely than those who had not to consider a given factor a barrier to returning from a career break.



Respondents aged 25-34 were the age group most likely to identify obstacles to people returning to work.

Men were more likely than women to feel that there were barriers for returners.



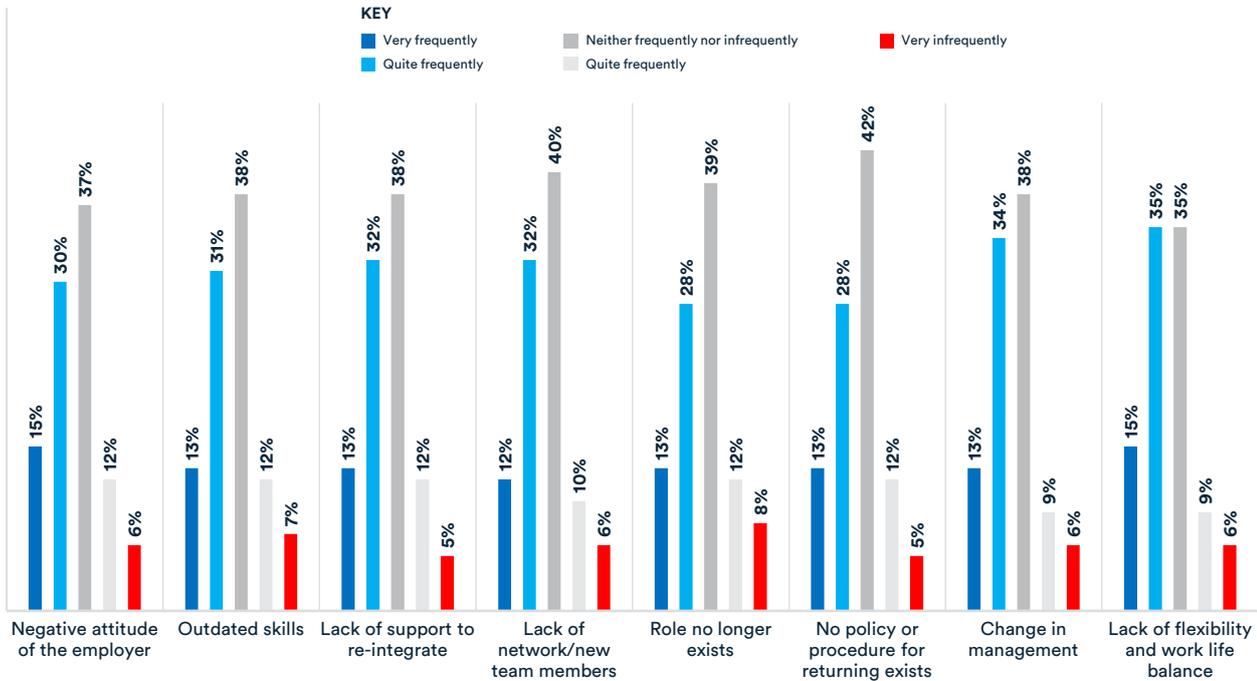


A 'lack of flexibility and work-life balance' was the most frequently cited barrier to returning to work.

A 'lack of flexibility and work-life balance' was the most frequently cited barrier to returning to work – with 50% of respondents indicating that it is very or somewhat frequently an issue. This was closely followed by a 'change in management' (47%), then a 'lack of support to re-integrate' and 'negative attitude of the employer', both on 45%.

'Outdated skills and a 'lack of network/ new team members' were close behind, 44% each. 'Role no longer exists' was the least cited issue, with 41% of people citing it as a very or quite frequent issue for people returning from a career break.

Australia: Summary of barriers faced when returning to work



It is worth noting that, as with the previous questions, in relation to every single 'barrier', people who had taken a career break were more likely to cite something as a very or quite frequent issue, as compared to those who had not taken a career break. This is further evidence that issues and barriers created by taking a career break are 'real' and not hypothetical concerns of people who have no experience of actually taking one.

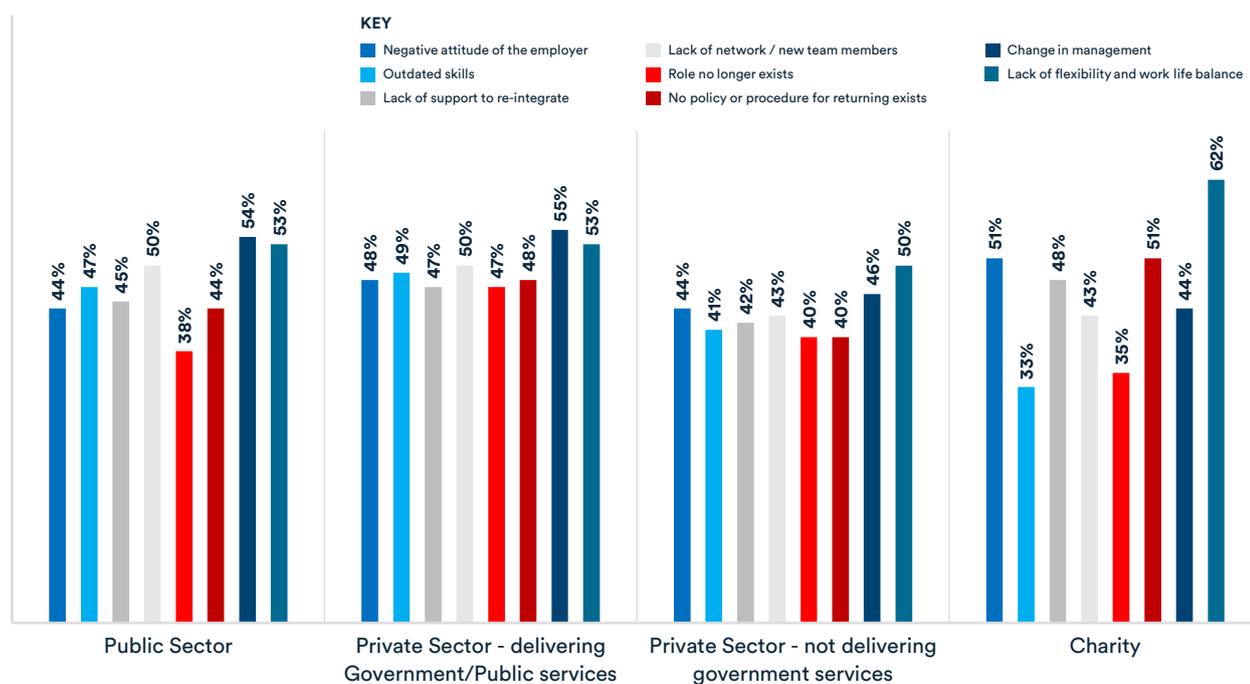
This point is further reinforced when you look at this set of questions broken down by gender. Women, who are more likely to have taken a career break, consistently say in greater numbers than men that they feel something is a barrier to them returning to work following a career break. Across all eight 'barriers' we asked about, the number of women indicating that they felt it to be a frequent barrier to returning to work outstripped the number of men. This margin was particularly significant when we asked about 'Outdated skills' (Net Frequency: Men 40% / Women 47%), 'lack of support to re-integrate' (Men 41% / Women 49%), 'lack of network/new team members' (Men 40% / Women 48%), 'change in management' (Men 45% / 50% Women), 'lack of flexibility and work-life balance' (Men 46% / Women 55%).

Again, in line with the government contractor squeeze pattern we have identified, people working in the private sector delivering public services indicated most often that they believed barriers for returning to work were 'frequent' as compared to workers in other sectors of the economy. That said, their responses were comparable to public sector employees, bar in one

area – 'Role no longer exists' – where government contractors were nine percentage points above their public sector colleagues in saying that this issue was faced somewhat or very frequently by people returning to work following a career break. Private sector workers not delivering public services were generally the least likely to identify barriers as a frequent issue for returners, whereas charity workers' responses varied significantly, but the small sample size makes this data uncertain.

Another factor at play in determining how government-contracted private sector workers view barriers could be the experience of (the experience effect) and proximity to (self-reference bias) the issue for different groups of workers – private sector workers are least likely to have taken a career break as well as least keen to take one. They are therefore less likely to have experience of a career break – and according to the data, less likely to identify something as a barrier – as well as the least likely to be concerned about the impact of an issue on their personal circumstance. Moreover, it may be that workers in this sector are more 'aggressive' in their outlook and take less issue with potential barriers for returners, due both to a more competitive mentality among private sector workers and a more competitive work culture in the sector. That said, it could simply be that the public sector and organisations in the private sector which do not deliver public services have more developed processes and cultures for people returning from career breaks.

Australia: Barriers faced when returning to work by role



As with the questions relating to what concerns people when considering a career break, when it comes to barriers for people returning to work, the older age groups were generally the least concerned. As already noted, however, it is these age groups that are the least likely to want to take a career break – 44% of 45-54-year-olds and 56% of 55-64-year-olds said they would not want to take a career break in the next 5 years, the two highest responses of all age groups in relation to this question. The younger age groups – who are most likely to want to take a career break – are the most consistently concerned about barriers for returning to work. In particular, the 25-34 age group were the most likely to indicate a barrier was a concern in five out of the eight categories we asked

about and was consistently within a few percentage points of the most concerned age group across the other three categories. This age group was the least likely to say that they did not want to take a career break in the next five years: to put it another way, this age group was the keenest to take a career break. Again, this pattern was visible in other countries and further evidences our theory that there is a ‘desirability-means’ gap – that those who most desire a career break, are the ones who feel they face the most barriers to doing so.

Overall, therefore, there is a clear pattern when examining the issue through the lens of age that those who most want to take a career break are the most likely to feel that they will face barriers when returning to work.

Reflections

A majority (55%) of Australians said that they felt they could take a break from work without it impacting their professional life. Furthermore only 17% of respondents (who had not already taken a career break) indicated that they felt unable to take a career break – the joint lowest number with the UAE. Australian legislation is undoubtedly a factor in creating an atmosphere in which career breaks are encouraged. However, despite this environment many of the key features and trends in our poll in Australia are comparable to those in the US and UK. Fundamentally four key trends we have seen elsewhere persist in the polling in Australia.

Firstly, the ‘self-reference bias’, which is the likelihood for an issue to seem more legitimate, if you have or expect to experience it, was evident in the data. Older people indicated that issues such as bereavement and care leave were legitimate reasons for a career break as compared to their younger compatriots, who instead indicated higher levels of support for Study or Travel/Hobby career breaks.

Secondly, the ‘experience effect’ – that is, if you have experienced a career break, you are more likely to see a career break as legitimate, cite a concern about taking a career break and identify something as a frequent barrier when returning to work. This would imply that people’s experiences of returning to work (or attempting to) following a career break are worse than people who have not taken one expect them to be.

Thirdly, those working within the private sector delivering government services – although marginally more likely to say that they feel a career break would not adversely impact their career – were more likely than workers in the public sector or private sector not delivering government services to cite something as a concern that could dissuade them from taking a career break, or believe they would frequently face a barrier when returning following a career break. This ‘squeeze’ effect is observed elsewhere (the US and UK). Another factor could be the experience and proximity of the issue for different groups of workers – private sector workers are the least likely to have taken a career break as well as the least keen to take one. They are therefore less likely to have experience of a career break – and according to the data, less likely to identify something as a barrier – as well as the least likely to be concerned about the impact of an issue on their personal circumstance.

Fourthly, there is a 'desirability-means' gap. This means that those who most want to take a career break feel they face the most barriers in taking one. Women are more likely to take career breaks (and want to take them in future), yet are the most concerned about their impact, and feel they face the biggest barriers in returning to work. Equally, the older age groups were generally the least likely to indicate a barrier as being 'frequently' faced when returning from a career break. As already noted, however, it is these age groups that are the least likely to want to take a career break – 44% of 45–54-year-olds and 56% of 55–64-year-olds said they would not want to take a career break in the next 5 years, the two highest responses of all age groups in relation to this question.

Despite being more encouraging of career breaks, Australian legislation does not seem to have 'solved' the issues faced by people wanting to or those who have taken extended leave from work. As noted, many of the same patterns we have seen in other countries persist in Australia.

Based on the above, we have developed a number of recommendations specific to Australia:

Reviewing Long Service Leave

Despite Australia having the most generous legislative approach to career breaks – thanks primarily to ‘Long Service Leave’ requirements – as compared to the other three countries in this study, responses relating to concerns and barriers echoed those of the other countries (particularly the US and UK). This could indicate that the legislation and workplace career break policies are not targeted effectively to meet the needs of modern Australian workers. As such, legislation (which sits mostly at the state/territory level) and company policies should be reviewed to see if they are keeping pace with current attitudes towards career breaks.

Staying the Career Break Course

That said, only 17% of Australians indicated that they felt unable to take a career break – the joint lowest number in our study alongside the UAE. This shows that comparatively, Australian residents are largely supportive of the current approach, which should not be dismantled in any significant way.

Targeting Financial Support

More could be done, however, to address the financial concerns of Australians wanting to take a career break. Organisations – both public and private – should consider creating support schemes which target financial support towards people wanting to take career breaks in an effort to increase staff wellbeing and retention.

Flexibility For All

This perception of a lack of flexibility at Australian workplaces is particularly concerning in light of the fact that, under the relatively recent (2009) Fair Work Act [46], a large number of Australians can request flexible working, which can only be refused on “reasonable business grounds”. A greater awareness of these rights amongst employers and employees could help address this barrier. However, as noted in our other recommendations, a fundamental reset in how we think about work is a more comprehensive answer to addressing the drivers behind the barriers to those re-entering the workforce following a career break. Workplaces should examine how to encourage a cultural shift to give those employees who wish to take career breaks the confidence to do so, while also seeking to reduce the association of career breaks with finality.

[46] ‘Flexible Work Arrangements’ - Australian Human Rights Commission.



Chapter 5
The United
Arab Emirates

Overview

This chapter evaluates survey data from our survey's respondents in the UAE, beginning with an analysis of UAE workers' attitudes towards career breaks and their view on reasons for taking career breaks.

We then explore the results obtained from asking respondents to identify concerns they felt would prevent career breaks. Finally, this chapter discusses the barriers UAE respondents felt those returning to work from a career break frequently encounter. Our survey results revealed some interesting insights into work culture and social attitudes in the UAE.

Key findings include:



Although there was still significant support for career breaks in principle – with almost three in four respondents indicating that they had already taken one – there was markedly lower levels of support for most of the stated reasons.



Although financial impact, flexibility of their employer and effect on career progression of a career break remained significant concerns for UAE residents, there was one area in particular where they diverged from other countries – UAE respondents showed comparatively high levels of concern regarding the disapproval of family and friends.



Although levels of concern about barriers to returning to work were similar to other countries, respondents in the UAE inverted the so-called ‘experience effect’ trend. In other words, UAE respondents who had taken a career break were less likely to say something was a barrier frequently encountered by people returning to work – this is the opposite of what was said in the three other populations surveyed.



Public sector workers were overall less likely, although not always by significant margins, to identify concerns before taking a career break and barriers for those returning to work after such a break.



Private sector workers delivering government services were the most likely group, although not always by significant margins, of workers to have concerns when taking a career break and identify barriers for returners to work.



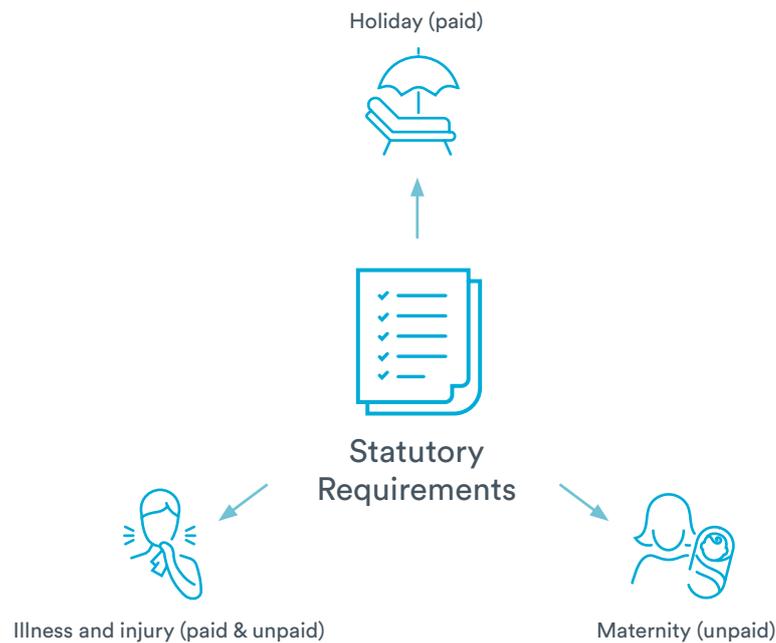
Women were more likely than men to have concerns before taking a career break and identify barriers for returners, perhaps as a consequence of feeling on a generally less secure footing than men in the sectors in which they work. That said, men, overall felt less able to take a career break – potentially due to the fact that they are typically more likely to be the main financial contributor to the household, alongside cultural norms around their roles in the family unit.



Younger respondents were somewhat more open to taking career breaks but more pessimistic about their ability to take one and to easily return to working life after taking one.

Background

There are statutory requirements in the United Arab Emirates to provide leave from work for:



Leave entitlements also vary within the UAE, between different parts of the country [47] as well as between the public and private sectors [48]. Different labour laws to the rest of the country apply within two economic zones in the UAE: the Abu Dhabi Global Market (ADGM) and the Dubai International Finance Centre (DIFC). These may alter leave entitlement and other work arrangements separately from UAE-wide regulations, with the DIFC, for instance, amending its Employment Law to introduce five days' paternity leave [49] one year before fathers across the UAE were given this right [50]. Individual emirates additionally may pass leave legislation separate from that which applies at the federal level: for instance, in 2018 the Government of Dubai passed a human resources law which increased leave entitlements for employees of the Emirate's Government [51].

With regard to the broader context of workers' rights, UAE nationals are also often afforded greater advantages relative to non-nationals, including favourable hiring quotas, guaranteed minimum salaries and protection from dismissal under certain circumstances [52]. The vast majority of Emiratis are employed by the public sector and enjoy the generous benefits associated with government jobs. There are indications, however, that this is beginning to change, with 57% of Emirati jobseekers open to working for the private sector [53], and with one of the UAE Government's top priorities to encourage UAE nationals into the private sector (Emiratisation) [54].

[47] 'Maternity and paternity leave' – UAE Government.

[48] 'Fathers working in UAE's private sector given parental leave for first time' – The National.

[49] 'The new DIFC employment law: everything you need to know' – Pinsent Masons.

[50] 'Fathers working in UAE's private sector given parental leave for first time' – The National.

[51] 'The 2018 Dubai Human Resources Law and its Impact on Government Workers' – LexisNexis.

[52] 'Employment & labour law in the UAE' – Lexology.

[53] 'Emiratis looking to private sector careers' – The National.

[54] UAE: 10% of private sector workers should be Emiratis by 2026' – Middle East Monitor.

Breakdown of Respondents

1,036 residents of the UAE responded to our online survey on career breaks. Of these, 887 were in work, with 164 employed by the public sector (19% of working respondents), 257 in the private sector delivering government services (29%), 442 in the private sector not delivering government services (50%), and 11 in the charity sector (1%). As the number of charity sector workers is below the minimum base of 30 and as such cannot offer credible data, this report will not draw any inferences based on data specifically involving charity sector employees in the UAE.

Unlike for our polls in other countries, there was a significant gender imbalance in our pool of respondents: three-quarters of respondents (775 individuals) were men, outnumbering women (261) by over 500 individuals. As such, our data regarding women in some instances used a small sample size of under 100 individuals. Where this is the case, we will duly mention this, and any inferences made about women's attitudes in these areas should not be taken as authoritative. It should be noted that when we refer to our polling in relation to overall sentiment, our data has been weighted to accurately reflect the population makeup of the UAE, a country where women made up 30.9% of the population in 2020 due to the large number of foreign male workers in the country [55]. Given this, survey results would likely always have been skewed to better reflect the opinion of men rather than women.

Furthermore, as the 16-24-year-old age cohort was comprised of a small sample size of under 100 individuals, data regarding this age group should be viewed with caution [56]. It should be reiterated that our data has been weighted to mirror the demographic composition of the UAE.

[55] 'Population, female (% of total population) – United Arab Emirates' – World Bank.

[56] For one question, which used a smaller base of respondents not in work – 'If you were to take a career break in the next five years, do you feel you would be able to for any of the following reasons?' – the sample size of 16-24-year-olds was beneath the minimum base of 30 and therefore does not offer credible data.

Attitudes towards Career Breaks



Although there was still significant support for career breaks in principle – and almost a three-quarter of respondents indicating that they had already taken one – there was markedly lower levels of support for most of the stated reasons.



Private sector workers not delivering government services felt less confident in their ability to take a career break relative to workers in other sectors.

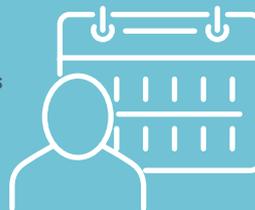
The most common reason for both having taken and wanting to take a career break was Travel/Hobby – in contrast to other countries where, taken together Maternity and Paternity was higher.



Women felt less able to take a career break without causing their professional life to suffer, but were more willing to take career breaks for reasons relating to family.



Younger age groups were considerably more willing and able than their older counterparts to take career breaks.



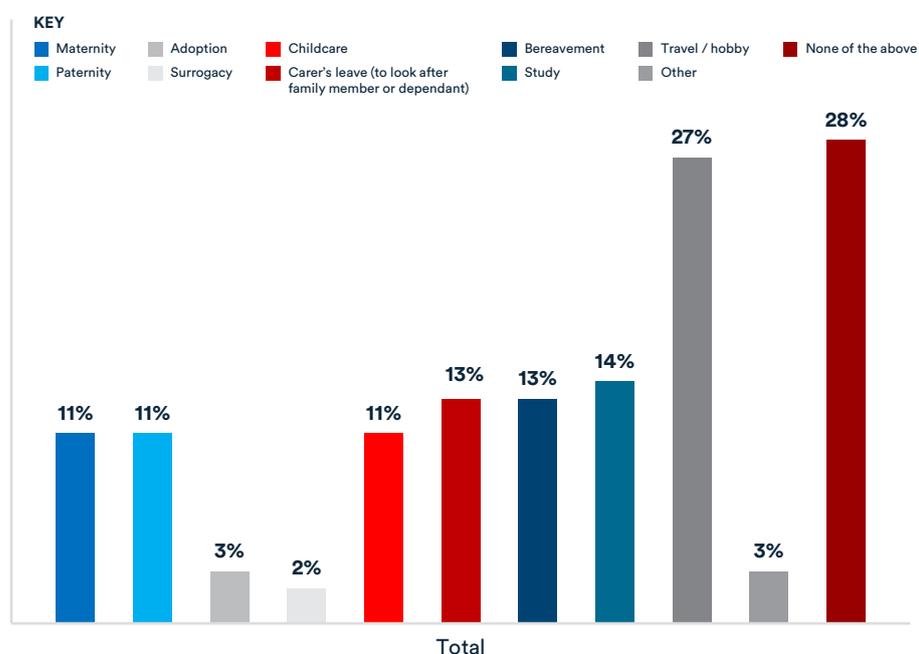


The Kafala System

The Kafala system governs labour migration to the UAE and several other Gulf states. Under this sponsorship programme, migrant workers' legal status rests with their employer, a local individual or company. There are tight restrictions on changing employers, and workers can face unfair working conditions and controls on their movement.

Markedly fewer respondents in the UAE indicated that they believed career breaks for the reasons specified in our poll were legitimate. Across eight of the nine areas we asked about (excluding 'Other' and 'None of the Above') UAE residents were the least likely to indicate that they thought a specified reason was a legitimate reason for a career break – only in relation to Travel/Hobby (32%) did they score above two other countries (UK 31% and US 28%).

UAE: Ever taken a career break



Often these differences with other countries were quite considerable. The three other countries polled indicated that 65% or more in each country thought that Maternity was a legitimate reason for a career break, whereas only 49% of UAE residents felt as such. This margin increases further when you look at Paternity, Adoption and Surrogacy, where there was a difference of between 20-30 plus percentage points between the UAE and other countries.

That said, overall, the UAE public appeared generally supportive of career breaks in principle: in fact, 72% of respondents had already taken one – the most common reason being Travel/Hobby. Interestingly, this is unlike the other three countries where Maternity and Paternity aggregated would be the most common reason for a career break. Furthermore, only 17% of respondents who had not already taken a career break indicated that they felt unable to do so – the joint lowest number with Australia. Equally, UAE respondents were the least likely to indicate that they did not want to take a career break within the next 5 years, with only 25% of people indicating as such (in contrast to the highest figure of 44% of people in the UK). Travel/Hobby was the most frequently cited reason for wanting to take a career break.

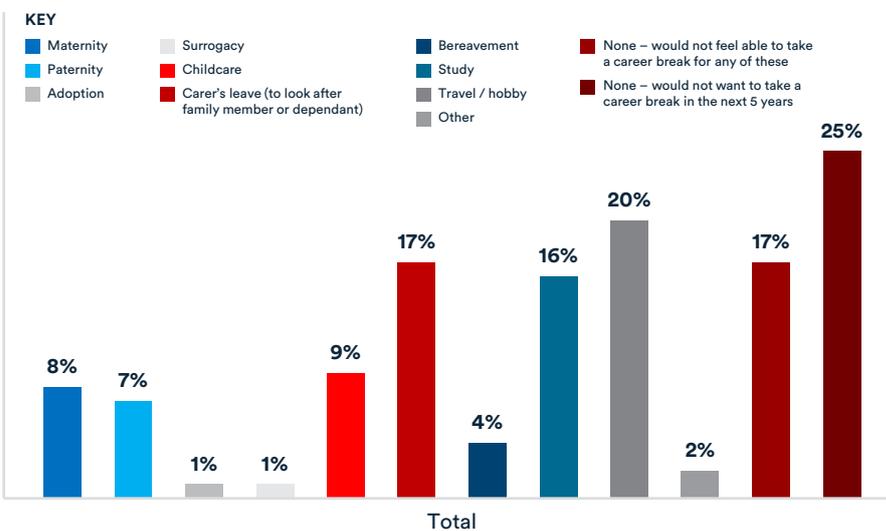
This is, at least initially, unsurprising, as foreign nationals comprise nearly nine in 10 people living in the UAE [57]. Given this, one might surmise that non-Emiratis comprised the vast majority of respondents, and that many would have already taken career breaks or switched careers in order to move to the UAE. Moreover, UAE workers are among the world's most stressed, and reportedly half of the country's working population has considered leaving their jobs [58]. A closer examination of the data, however, revealed some differences between workers in different employment sectors. Private sector workers not delivering government services appeared less secure in their ability to take a career break: although 83% agreed they could take one without a negative impact on their professional life, this was a smaller proportion than their peers in the public sector (90%) and in the private sector delivering government services (89%). Moreover, private sector workers not delivering government services were, at 33%, more likely than public sector workers (24%) and private sector workers delivering government services (19%) to never have taken a career break, and felt less able, at 58%, to take a career break in the next five years than those in the public sector (64%) and in the government services private sector (71%) [59].

[57] 'UAE Population and Demographics' – Dubai Online.

[58] 'UAE employees among the most stressed in the world' – DubaiAD.

[59] For this question – 'If you were to take a career break in the next 5 years, do you feel you would be able to for any of the following reasons?' – the sample sizes of public sector workers and of private sector workers delivering government services each numbered fewer than 100 respondents, and as such the data here should be regarded with caution.

UAE: Would you feel able to take a career break

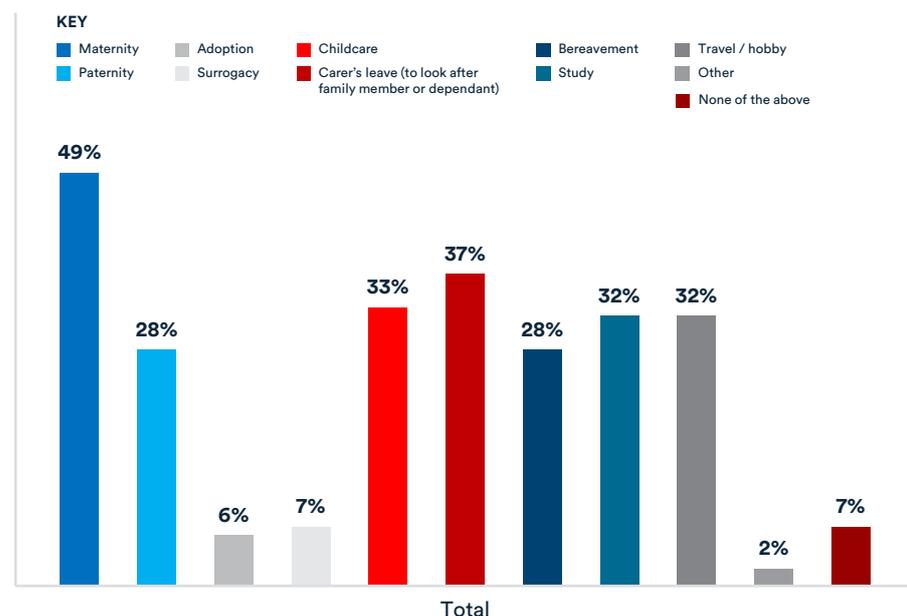


likely than women (62%) to feel they could take a career break in the next five years for any reason [61]. Our data may be indicative of enduring gender-based pressures in the UAE which make it harder for women to remain out of the home with the presumption that men continue to work. This theory is supported by unequal labour force participation rates between men and women: while 57.5% of women in the UAE were in work in 2020, the corresponding figure for men was 92% [62]. Furthermore, a 2016 study found that women in the UAE had internalised ‘cultural norms’, with women more likely than men to agree that the quality of family life would suffer if a woman were to work outside the home [63]. That said (as noted), men were less likely to indicate that they felt able to take a career break in the next five years. This may be due to the fact that they are typically the primary earners within UAE households. Furthermore, this feeling could be bolstered by the fact that men feel it less culturally acceptable to take a career break – paternity leave, for example is seen as significantly less legitimate than maternity leave in our survey.

The centrality of family to UAE women’s considerations when taking a career break is demonstrated in our data. When given a list of reasons and asked to state which ones they considered legitimate reasons for a career break, men and women generally considered the same reasons legitimate in similar proportions. Notable exceptions were Maternity, which 59% of women but only 45% of men considered a legitimate reason for a career break; and Childcare, which 46% of women and just 29% of men considered legitimate in justifying a career break. It is evident, therefore, that gender norms and expectations for women to prioritise their families persist in the UAE, and that they play a part in governing how women feel about taking career breaks.

[60] ‘Emiratisation Rate in the Private Sector’ – Vision 2021.
 [61] For this question – ‘If you were to take a career break in the next 5 years, do you feel you would be able to for any of the following reasons?’ – the sample size of female respondents was beneath 100 individuals, and the data here is therefore not authoritative.
 [62] ‘UAE: The sky is the limit for gender reform’ – World Bank.
 [63] ‘Working women in UAE supported by husbands but hindered by culture, survey finds’ – The National.

UAE: Legitimate reasons for a career break

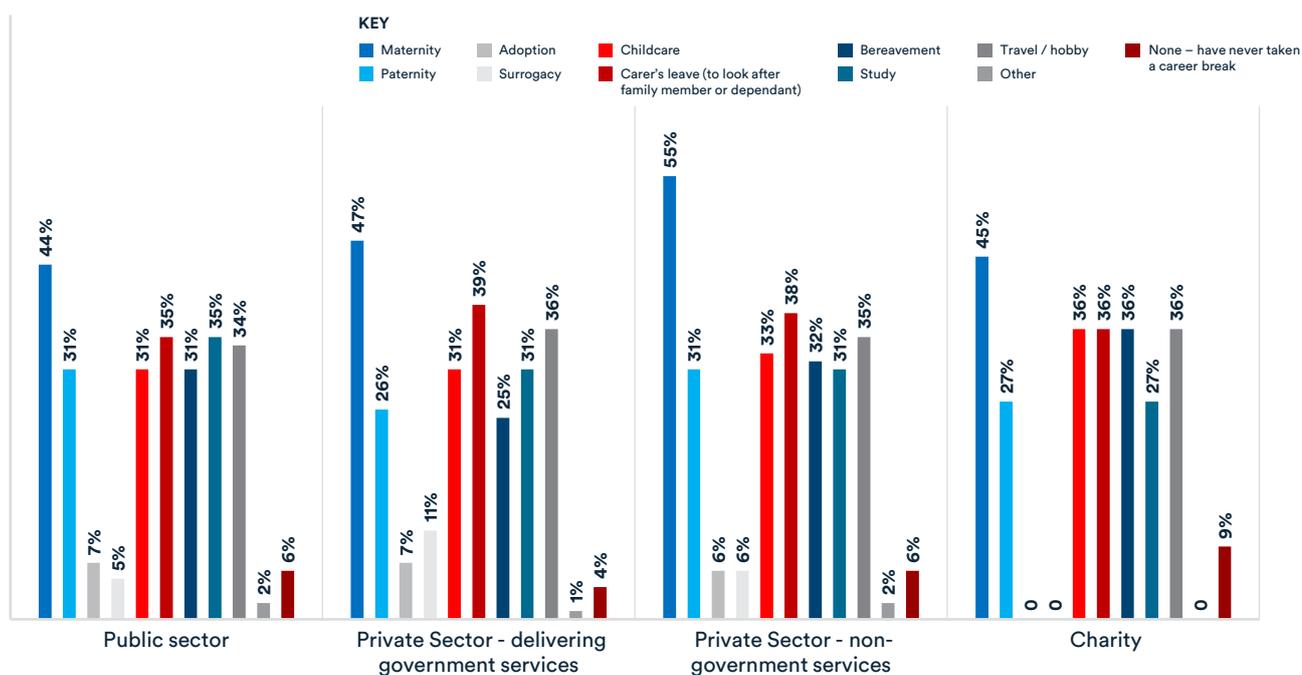


Some evidence of generational differences in respondents' views on career breaks was also visible. While respondents of different ages agreed in similarly large proportions that they felt able to take career breaks without it negatively impacting their professional life, only 21% of 25-34-year-olds and 26% of 35-44-year-olds had never taken a career break, compared to 39% of 45-54-year-olds. Additionally, just 50% of survey takers aged 45-54 felt able to take a career break in the next five years, considerably beneath the percentages of 25-34-year-olds (63%) and 35-44-year-olds (60%) who felt the same. Younger age groups were also more inclined to take a career break: just 20% of 25-34-year-olds and 22% of 35-44-year-olds said they would not want to take a break in the next five years, compared to nearly one in three (32%) respondents aged 45-54. Differing work conditions may be responsible here: according to a 2021 survey, UAE workers aged 18-34 are most likely to want to switch jobs owing to job stress [64].

Among UAE respondents as a whole, the reason seen as most 'legitimate' to want a career break (although still less than half) was Maternity: 49% of those surveyed considered this a legitimate reason for a career break. This was also the case across groups expressing greater interest in taking career breaks, with high numbers of women (59%), 25-34-year-olds (50%), 35-44-year-olds (49%) and private sector workers delivering government services (47%) agreeing that Maternity constituted a valid reason for taking a career break. Aside from this most popular reason, however, the groups diverged. Childcare was the next most legitimate reason for a career break for women (46%), while for 25-34-year-olds Travel/Hobby was second (35%). Carer's Leave was the next most popular reason for 35-44-year-olds (38%) – presumably due to many respondents in this age

[64] 'UAE employees among the most stressed in the world' – DubaiLAD.

UAE: By employment type – Legitimate reasons for a career break



group having older family relatives requiring care – and for private sector workers delivering government services (39%).

Employment sectors and demographic groups were therefore reliable predictors of attitudes towards career breaks, with certain groups, such as men, older respondents and private sector workers not delivering government services, feeling less able to take career breaks. Alternatively, other groups, including younger people and women, showed a greater desire to take career breaks, though for differing reasons.

Concerns



Public sector workers were generally less likely to perceive concerns when taking a career break, likely due to generous benefits and career break opportunities.



Women reported a greater sense of insecurity about their place at work than men, leading them to be more concerned about factors suggested by the poll when taking a career break.



Although financial impact, flexibility of their employer and effect on career progression of a career break remained significant concerns for UAE residents, there was one area in particular where they diverged from other countries – UAE respondents showed comparably high levels of concern regarding the disapproval of family and friends.



Those who had taken a career break were generally more likely to identify a suggested factor as a concern when taking a career break, although there were exceptions.

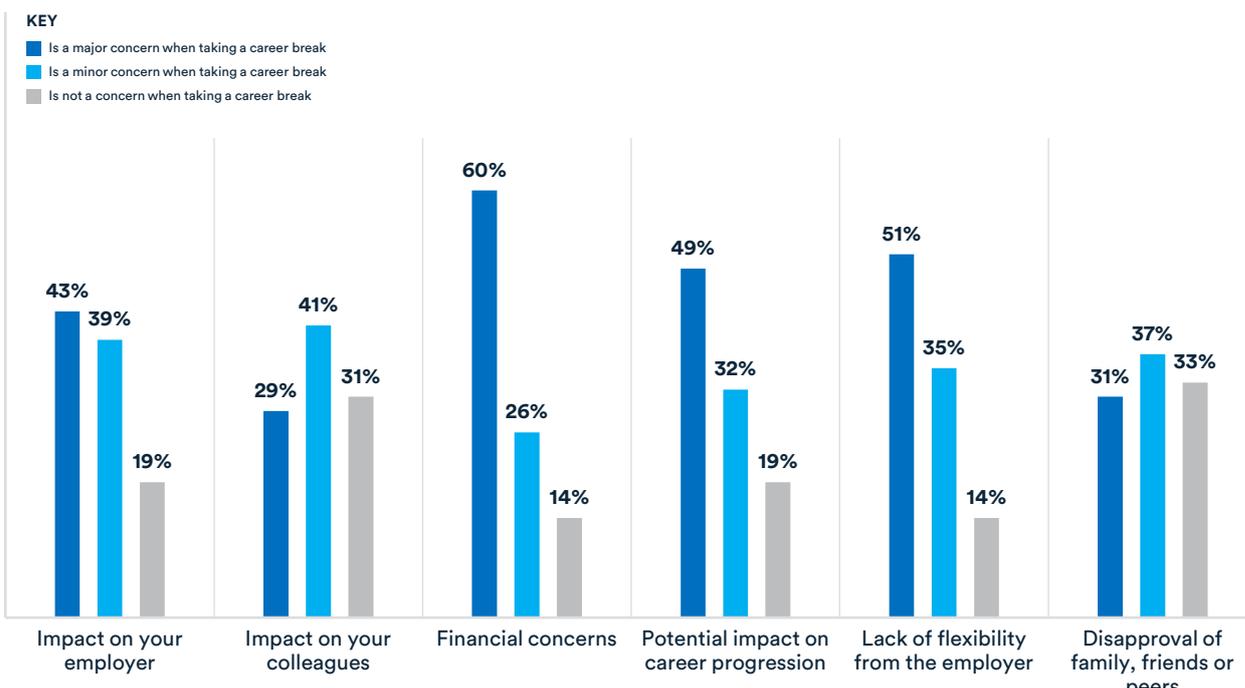




When given a list of reasons for a career break, men and women generally responded in the same way. A notable exception was Maternity, which 59% of women but only 45% of men considered a legitimate reason for a career break.

Although UAE respondents indicated similar levels of concern as compared to the other countries included in this survey regarding the financial impact, flexibility of their employer and effect on career progression of a career break, there was one area in particular where they diverged from other countries – UAE respondents showed comparably high levels of concern regarding the disapproval of family and friends. 67% of people in the UAE indicated that they would be concerned about their family or friends disapproving of a career break, a full 14 percentage points higher than the next closest country, the UK (at 53%). We posit that this marked difference is largely the result of a culture shift – in that career breaks being a newer concept to the working practices of the UAE, as compared to the other countries in the poll, means that there is less of a sense of acceptance of them overall. This is further evidenced by the fact that the oldest age group surveyed in the UAE – 45-54 – were around twice as likely as all other age groups to indicate that there was no legitimate reason for a career break.

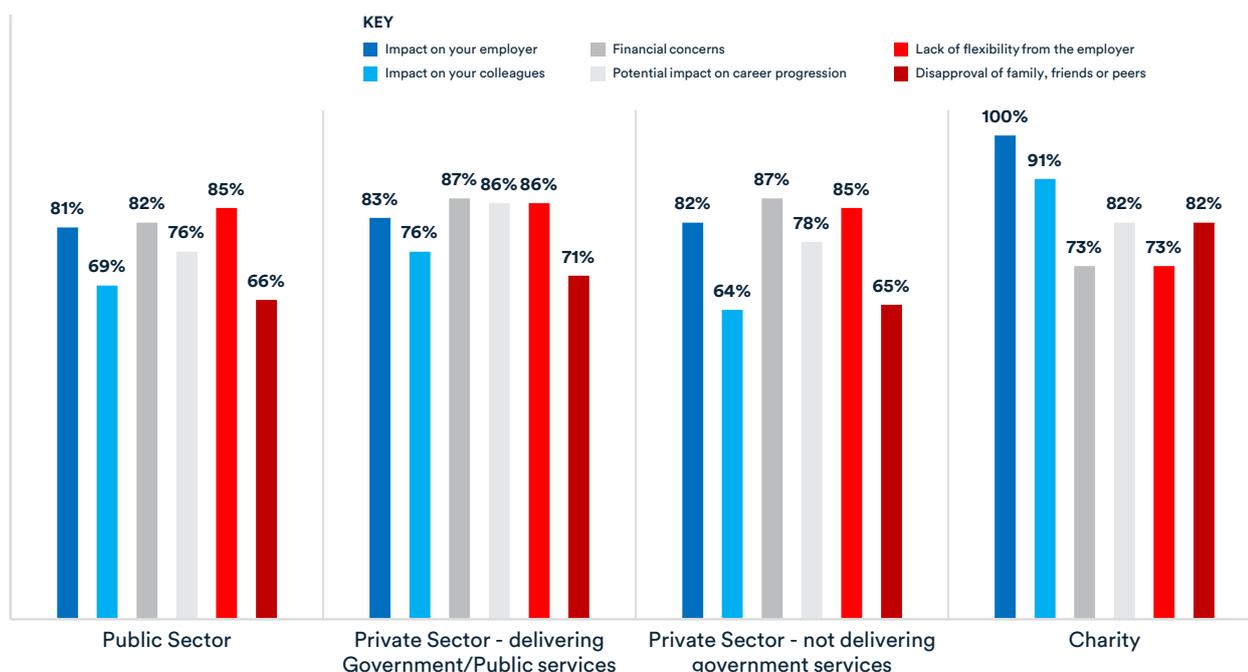
UAE: Summary of concerns



Across four of the six surveyed areas, public sector workers were the least likely group of workers (or tied for the least likely) to have concerns when taking a career break. While in some cases, such as ‘impact on your employer’, the difference between public sector workers and other workers was only one or two percentage points, in others it was more striking: 76% of public sector workers considered the ‘potential impact on career progression’ a concern when taking a career break, 10 points beneath the percentage of private sector workers delivering government services who felt this way.

This may be due to the comparatively comfortable perks enjoyed by workers in the UAE public sector, which employs nine in 10 working UAE citizens: these perks include tax-free income, long-term job security and generous government-funded retirement plans [65]. Conditions for UAE public sector workers seeking a career break are set to become still more favourable. As part of plans announced in September 2021 to encourage more Emiratis into the private sector, a new six-to-12-month ‘Start-up Break’ will be launched for Emiratis employed by the Federal Government, which will pay participants half of their salary while they are away to give them time to set up their own private sector businesses [66]. It is therefore not surprising that public sector employees proved receptive to taking a career break.

UAE: Summary of concerns broken down by role



Around three-quarters (76%) of government contractors considered ‘impact on your colleagues’ a concern (76%), compared to 69% of public sector workers and 64% of workers in the non-government private sector. Nearly nine in 10 (86%) private sector workers delivering government services saw ‘potential impact on career progression’ as a concern, this is above the proportions of public sector workers (76%) and private sector workers not delivering government services (78%). This continues to evidence the trend we have identified in all other countries polled of a ‘government contractor squeeze’.

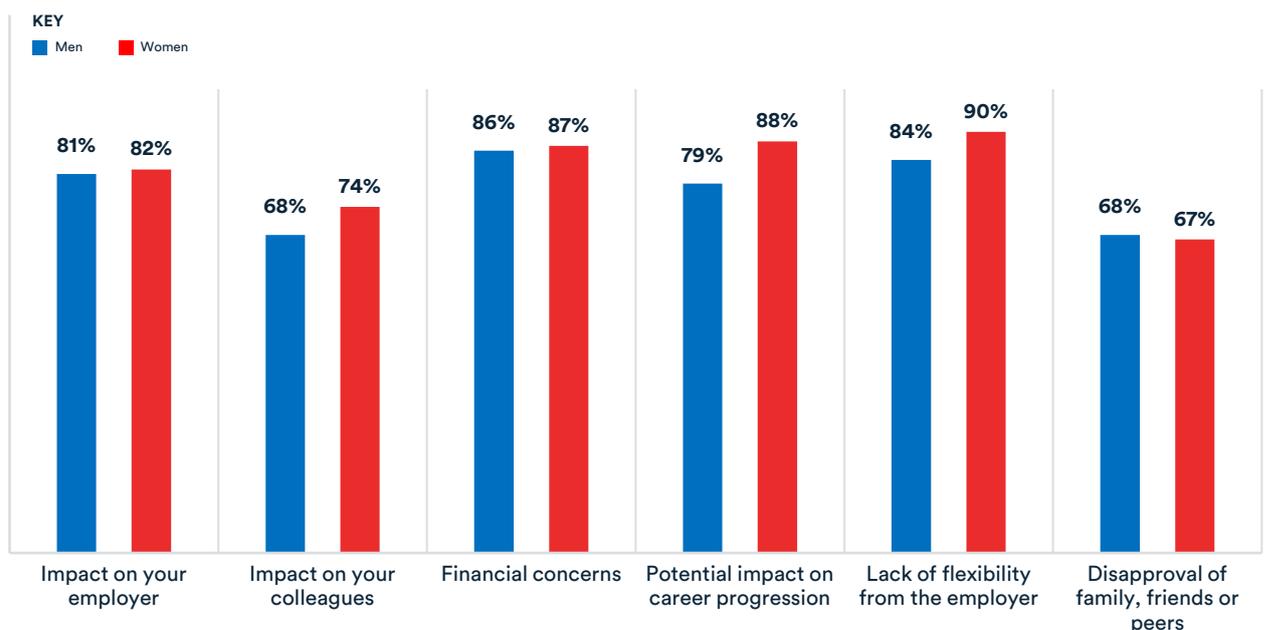
[65] ‘A lifetime of perks in UAE help cushion wealth gap’ – Al-Arabiya.

[66] ‘Projects of the 50: plan to get 75,000 Emiratis into the private sector’ – The National.

Once again, some demographic disparities were to be noted in the UAE data. Concerns over career breaks differed somewhat along age lines, with younger age groups generally more likely to regard a given factor as a concern when taking a career break. In some cases, this was probably due to older age groups likely having attained a certain degree of seniority at work: while 82% of 44-54-year-olds felt a 'lack of flexibility from the employer' would be a concern, 90% of 16-24-year-olds felt this way. However, the most self-evident patterns in our data appeared when comparing men and women's views. In some instances, such as when asked to consider 'disapproval of family, friends or peers' and 'financial concerns', men and women demonstrated little divergence in their attitudes. In others, there were much wider gaps between men and women's sentiments. For example, 88% of women considered 'potential impact on career progression' a concern when taking a career break, nine percentage points above the corresponding figure for men. Gendered attitudes held by women in work are likely at play here: a 2021 survey by LinkedIn found that both men and women working in the UAE believed women feel less entitled or deserving than men where pay rises, promotion and career progression are concerned. In the same study, nearly 30% of women believed that being granted flexible working would result in a penalty, such as a lack of or delay to career progression, and over one in three women believed that those granted flexible working were seen as less committed than those not [67], perhaps undermining their perceived ability to balance work with other commitments. This evidences a greater sense of insecurity felt by women about their place at work, and consequently may go some way to explaining their greater likelihood to identify concerns when taking a career break.

[67] 'Women make job gains in UAE, but feel less entitled in the workplace, LinkedIn survey shows' – Arabian Business.

UAE: Summary of concerns broken down by gender



Across four of the six surveyed areas, those who had taken a career break were more likely than those who had not to perceive concerns about taking extended leave – the ‘experience effect’ therefore is again identifiable in this data set. Inferences may be made from this data about UAE society: for instance, 70% of those who had taken a career break felt that the ‘disapproval of family, friends or peers’ would be a concern, eight points above the proportion of those who had not taken a career break. From this, one might surmise that those who had taken a break perhaps encountered disapproval from loved ones and acquaintances, and thus that this is a relatively common phenomenon in the UAE encountered by those who choose to take career breaks. By contrast, 88% of those who had not taken a career break felt that a ‘lack of flexibility from the employer’ would be a concern, above the percentage of past career breakers who felt this way (albeit only by three points). Taking, once again, the sentiments of respondents with prior experience of career breaks to be more credible, perhaps employers in the UAE are more flexible than those survey takers who had not taken a career break believed.

Questioning UAE respondents about potential concerns when taking career breaks therefore unearthed insights into work conditions for employees in different employment sectors, as well as social attitudes towards and held by women. Given the UAE’s shifting private sector and, according to some reports, diminishing appeal for expatriate workers [68], the advantages enjoyed by public sector workers merit closer examination, and benefits may have to be replicated in the private sector if the UAE is to retain and continue to attract foreign talent.

[68] ‘Is the UAE still a high-paid expat haven?’ – BBC Worklife.

Barriers

Although levels of concern about barriers to returning to work were similar to other countries, respondents in the UAE inverted the so-called 'experience effect' trend. In other words, UAE respondents who had taken a career break were less likely to say something was a barrier frequently encountered by people returning to work – this is the opposite of what was said in the three other populations surveyed.



Women were more likely than men to feel that they face barriers when returning to work across seven of the eight polled areas.

Private sector workers delivering government services were consistently the group of workers most likely to feel as if there were possible challenges to returning to work following a career break.



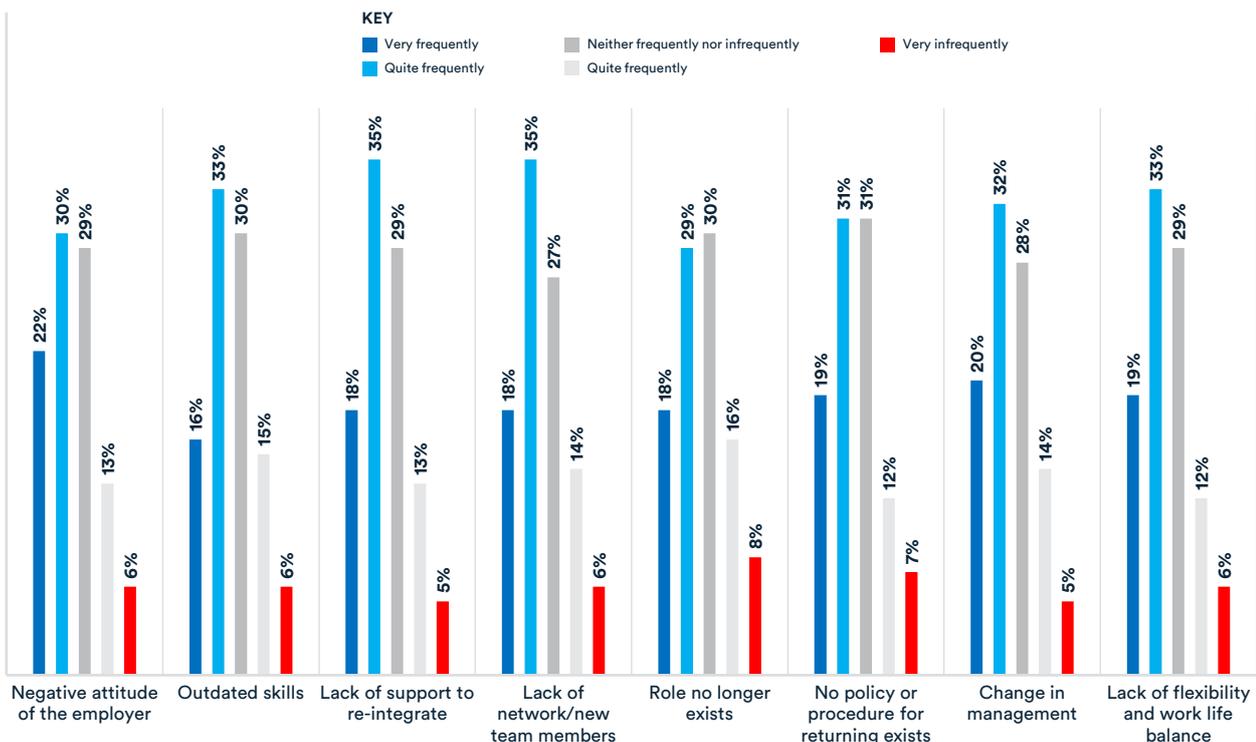
Older age groups were less likely to identify barriers for returners, perhaps due to indifference towards or unfamiliarity with issues relating to career breaks as they are less inclined to take them in the first place.

Respondents who had not taken a career break were more likely than those who had to perceive barriers for returners to work.



Across all eight barriers we asked about, around 50% of people indicated that it was an issue they thought people returning to work would encounter frequently or infrequently. This was inline with responses in the three other countries surveyed. However, unlike other countries, there was no evidence that people who had taken a career break were more likely to identify something as a frequent or very frequent barrier to returning to work. This ‘experience effect’ was – although only by generally very small margins – inverted, whereby, respondents in the Emirates were generally less likely to identify something as a frequently encountered barrier to returning to work if they had taken a career break. Across seven of the eight polled areas, those who had not taken a career break were more likely to identify barriers for returners than those who had taken a career break. For example, 57% of those with no career break experience felt that a ‘lack of support to re-integrate’ would be a frequent obstacle for those returning to work, while only 51% of past career breakers felt this way. Perhaps this suggests that UAE workers enjoy better support when re-joining the workforce than survey takers who had not taken a career break feared. We believe this is due to the concept of career breaks being less established in the UAE’s working practices, meaning people may assume that there are more barriers than there are in actuality. This is likely the result of new polices, practices and cultures emerging that are more sympathetic to career breaks in recent times. Older generations – and some younger cohorts – are less likely to be aware of these changes and therefore cite barriers that may no longer exist (or whose effects may at least have been minimised or reduced).

UAE: Summary of barriers faced when returning to work



Across all eight surveyed areas, private sector workers delivering government services were the most likely to perceive barriers to returning to work after a career break as compared to their fellow private sector workers not delivering government services and public sector workers. This may reflect both conditions in the public sector and mentalities in the private sector. For instance, 60% of private sector workers delivering government services felt a 'lack of flexibility and work-life balance' was a barrier very or quite frequently encountered by returners to work, as opposed to 49% of workers in the non-government services private sector and 50% of workers in the public sector. Private sector employees in the UAE are required to work eight hours a day while public sector employees are contracted to work just seven [69]. Furthermore, studies show UAE residents perceive government jobs to offer the best work-life balance [70]: this would explain why public sector workers are less likely to feel a 'lack of flexibility and work-life balance' would be an issue when returning to work. On the other hand, the more competitive non-government services private sector may simply be attracting (overwhelmingly foreign) workers of a certain mentality who are less concerned by factors such as flexibility and work-life balance.

In seven of the eight surveyed areas, women were more likely than men to identify barriers for those returning to work following a career break. Generally, women were only a handful of percentage points more likely than men to feel this way. The one exception was in relation to 'lack of flexibility and work-life balance'. This can be seen as evidence of persisting gender roles which see women prioritise family duties over work: a 'patriarchal social contract' continues to hold whereby most men are supportive of women working as long as this does not jeopardise commitments to their family [71]. In other instances, women may have been more ready to perceive barriers to returning due to the longer career breaks they would be more inclined to take compared to men. For instance, a woman who had previously taken a longer break to care for children might have greater reason to feel that 'outdated skills', which 52% of women and 48% of men considered a barrier, preventing her from returning to the workplace.

[69] 'Working hours' – UAE Government.

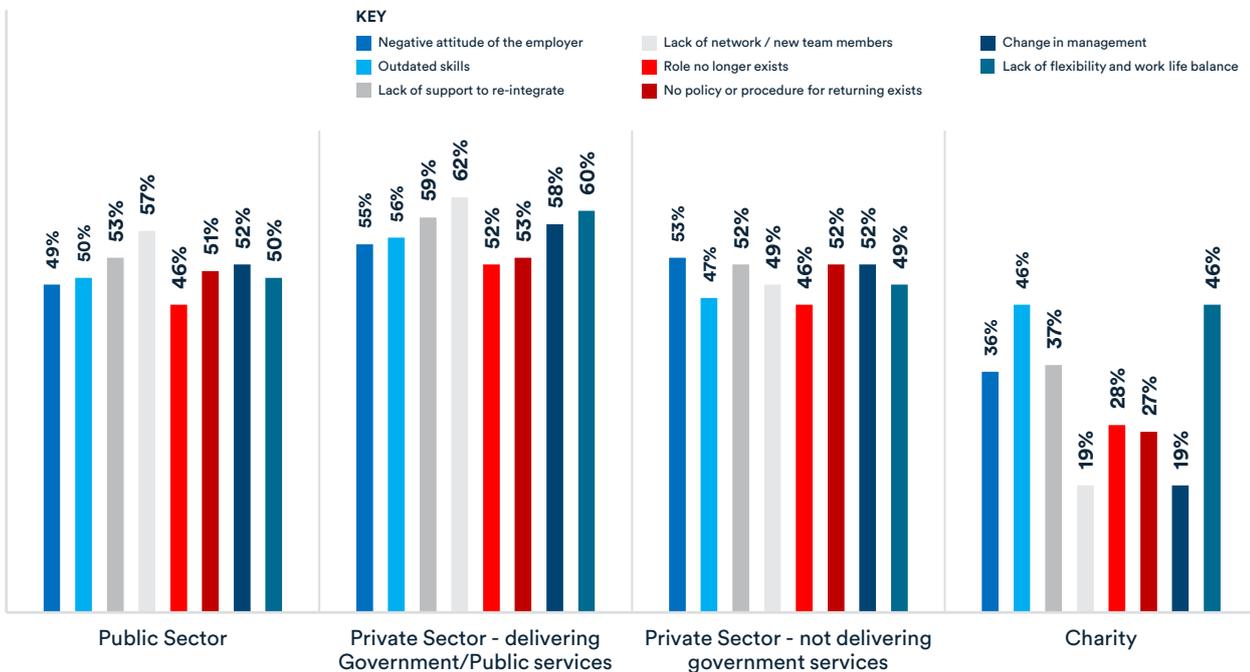
[70] 'UAE government jobs offer best work-life balance: Survey' – Khaleej Times.

[71] 'Working women in UAE supported by husbands but hindered by culture, survey finds' – The National.

With respect to age groups, the 45-54-year-old age cohort appeared less concerned about barriers for returners, in some cases by considerable margins: while 60% of 25-34-year-olds felt a 'lack of support to re-integrate' poses a barrier to those returning to work, less than half (49%) of those in the oldest age group shared their sentiments. Similarly, only 42% of respondents aged 45-54 felt 'outdated skills' would be a barrier for returners, whereas a majority in the other three age groups felt this would be a barrier. These results are unsurprising, as older respondents can be expected to have reached a more established stage in their careers where they may be less vulnerable to 'outdated skills', or less bothered about a 'lack of flexibility and work-life balance', than younger workers. Furthermore, with 45-54-year-olds being the age group most likely to have never taken a career break and to not want to take one in the next five years, respondents in this age banding may simply be unfamiliar with or unconcerned about barriers for returners to work as they do not anticipate being amongst those returning.

Our survey's questions into perceived barriers to returning to work therefore yielded interesting insights into working conditions, work culture and broader social attitudes in the UAE.

UAE: Barriers faced when returning to work by role



Reflections

Although there were many similarities with the other three countries, there were also some marked differences between the UAE and other countries included in this research. Many fewer people thought there were ‘legitimate’ reasons for taking a career break; levels of concern were different, including a much higher level of concern regarding how family and friends might perceive a career break; and the partial inversion of the ‘experience effect’ in a number of areas, whereby respondents who had taken a career break in the UAE were less likely to identify barriers for those returning to work. That said, the standard relationship with the ‘experience effect’ in relation to concerns before taking a career break prevails in the UAE as it does in other countries – in other words, you were more likely to indicate something was a concern that would hinder your ability to take a career break (rather than return following one) if you had previously taken a career break.

Furthermore, as with other countries, our UAE poll revealed that public sector workers felt more secure in their ability to take a career break without professional detriment and were less worried about concerns and barriers, such as ‘lack of flexibility and work-life balance’. This is very likely a reflection of the generous benefits, job security and even career break opportunities provided to them by the UAE public sector. By contrast, private sector workers not delivering government services seemed more cautious about career breaks, while those private sector workers delivering government services were more questioning about their ability to return to the workplace once their career had been paused. Additionally, there is evidence that the UAE – known for its generous professional packages for foreign workers – may be beginning to lose its appeal among some expatriates [72], and that greater numbers of Emiratis are considering private sector employment but expecting similar pay and benefits to the public sector [73]. The UAE’s private sector may wish to examine and adopt certain practices of the public sector, such as schemes and procedures to facilitate transitions in and out of career breaks, to retain its attractiveness.

[72] ‘Is the UAE still a high-paid expat haven?’ – BBC Worklife.

[73] ‘Emiratis looking to private sector careers’ – The National.

From our survey it is also evident that women in the UAE continue to experience employment very differently from men, and that social attitudes regarding working women continue to govern their readiness to leave work but also their perceptions of returning to the workforce. With gender equality a declared policy priority for the UAE Government [74], it is vital that these attitudes be examined and perhaps addressed through national or company policies, to enable women to feel they can take career breaks and return to work on the same basis as their male colleagues.

Respondents also demonstrated generational differences in their sentiments towards career breaks, with younger age groups feeling more able and inclined to take career breaks. This likely reflects changing attitudes towards work and careers across the globe, with younger UAE residents simply part of a broader generational shift in thinking. Older respondents, however, felt less inclined and able to take career breaks but also seemingly more indifferent towards concerns and barriers faced by those who choose career breaks. As attitudes towards work continue to change in the UAE, older workers may wish to re-examine the protocols in place at their workplaces, to better enable younger employees to take career breaks if they wish.

Employment in the UAE is changing, as authorities and free zones in the country such as the DIFC demonstrate a willingness to reform their employment regimes to compete globally with other employment markets as upholders of international best practice [75]. Employers and decision-makers alike may wish to re-examine and reform leave policy to be more accommodating of those who wish to pursue career breaks, lest the UAE's attractiveness to foreign workers begin to diminish.

[74] 'UAE: The sky is the limit for gender reform' – World Bank.

[75] 'The new DIFC employment law: everything you need to know' – Pinsent Masons.



The UAE showed the starkest difference between the attitudes of younger and older generations in terms of the acceptability and legitimacy of career breaks.



Based on the above we have developed a number of recommendations specific to the UAE:

Changing Attitudes Necessitates Changing Policies

The UAE showed the starkest difference between the attitudes of younger and older generations in terms of the acceptability and legitimacy of career breaks. If the UAE is to continue to appeal and attract to the next generation of both domestic and international talent, particularly as 72% of our UAE respondents had already taken a break, employers in the country will need to increasingly recognise the importance of career breaks. This could involve expanding non-statutory career breaks to recruit young people, many of whom take career breaks to be a given at some point in their working lives.

Increasing Social Acceptance

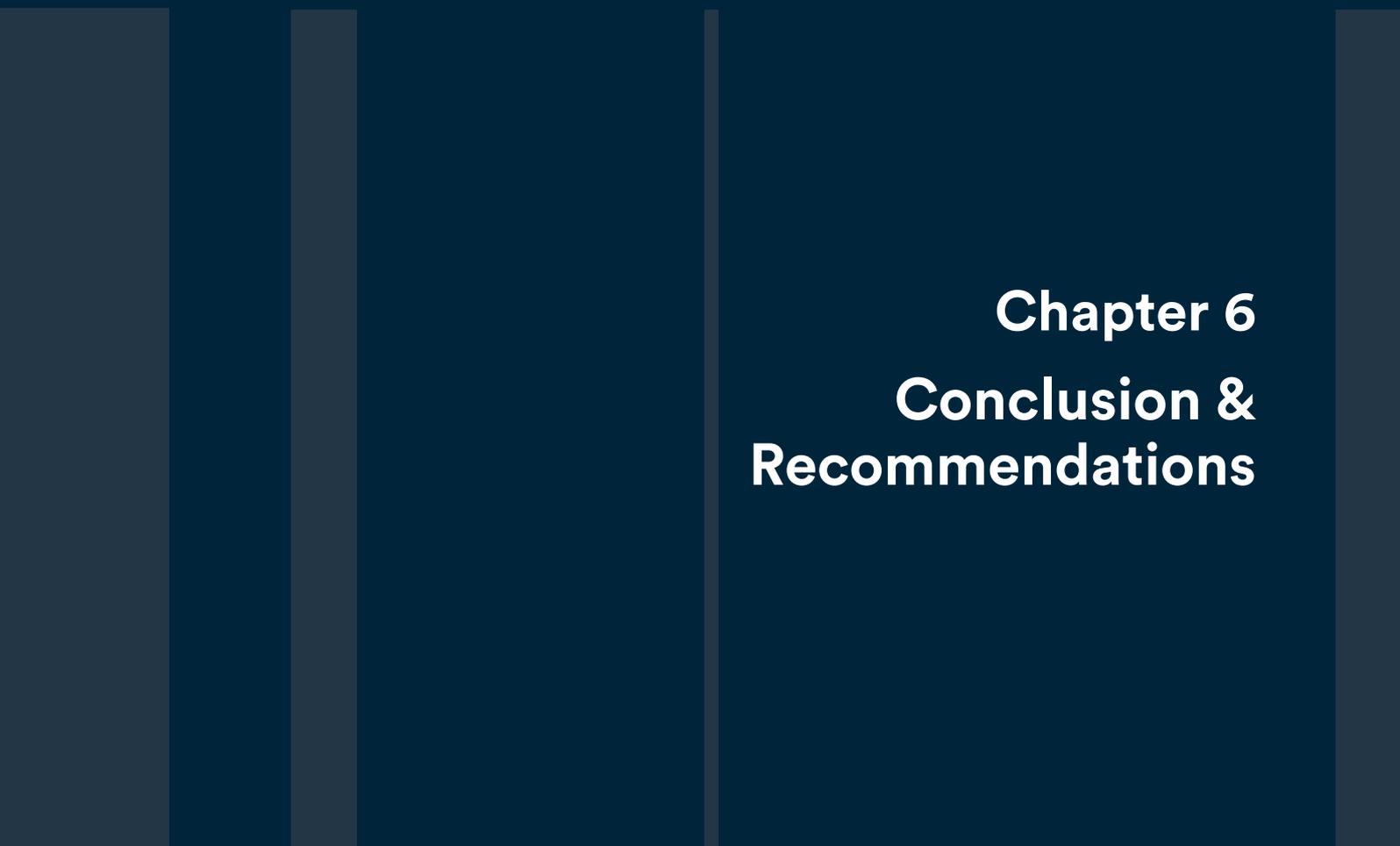
Although issues around finances and career progressions remain concerns, embedded social norms seem to have a more significant impact on people's considerations around career breaks as compared to other countries. Changing attitudes amongst younger generations, alongside the influence of international residents, will undoubtedly lead to an organic evolution in how career breaks are viewed in the UAE. That said, public and private sector organisations must continue to not only create structures which enable workers to take career breaks and allow them to return to work with confidence, but also proactively demonstrate their support for career breaks. These efforts should aim to instil greater confidence in employees, allowing them to feel they may take career breaks with full support from their employers if they so choose.

Communicating the Positive Experiences

The trends in our survey show there is increasing appetite, acceptance and improving practices when it comes to career breaks. Unlike other countries, where people who had taken a career break were more likely to have concerns or identify barriers regarding returning to work, UAE respondents who had taken a career break were by contrast less likely to highlight concerns or barriers if they had taken a career break, suggesting that the lived experience of career breaks as reported by those who have taken them is better than is assumed. This disconnect between people's perceptions and the reality of career breaks is likely the result of rapidly changing working practices in the country. As such, more should be done to communicate the improving and increasingly flexible conditions for people who want to take a career break, as this would allay some concerns and ensure there was a better understanding of how many historical barriers to returning to work have been removed. This is especially important given the nascent footing of career breaks in the UAE: communicating employees' leave entitlements as and when they become eligible to take advantage of them will help raise awareness among those who may be inclined to take career breaks.

Continuing to Create Public & Private Sector Parity

The benefits of working in the large and economically significant public sector seems to translate into a greater confidence in a person's ability to take a career break. Policies and practices in relation to career breaks should therefore be part of the UAE's well-established ambition to bring greater parity between the public and private sector, and replicating job perks in the private sector similar to those enjoyed by the UAE's public sector workers will help encourage Emirati nationals to take up private sector jobs as part of the Government's Emiratisation agenda.



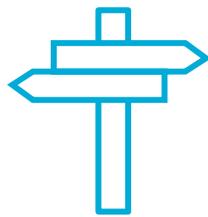
Chapter 6
Conclusion &
Recommendations

Overview

Despite clear differences, our survey on attitudes towards career breaks revealed areas of surprising commonality in four different countries. One might conclude, from these findings, that this report's main message is that workers in different countries but in the same circumstances face very similar conditions and pressures at work, so as to provide us with these clear patterns.

Overall, we were able to draw several overarching findings from our results:

The 'experience effect'
Respondents with previous experience of career breaks were more likely to identify concerns stemming from taking a career break and barriers to returning to work following one;



The 'self-reference bias'
Respondents more directly impacted by a suggested reason for a career break were more likely to consider said reason legitimate;



The 'desirable-means gap'
Those more inclined to take career breaks felt less able to do so and to return to work from one;



The 'government contractor squeeze'
Government-contracted private sector employees are more cautious about taking career breaks and returning from them compared to people in the public sector and in the non-government services private sector.



One of the most evident patterns we discovered was that government-contracted private sector workers – despite initially indicating that a career break would not impact their professional life – consistently felt they were more likely to face issues when trying to take a career break and to return from one. This trend was consistent across all four polled countries. Clearly, there is something in common shared by government contractors which impacts their perceived ability to take career breaks. We believe this is likely to be a combination of the private sector's competitive pressures and the sense of duty associated with public services. This is the abovementioned 'government contractor squeeze'. Private sector companies awarded public contracts by government bodies may wish to review their career break policies to consider the unique working culture of their employees relative to the public and non-government private sectors.

Furthermore, those respondents who had previously taken career breaks were consistently less confident than respondents who had not taken career breaks in their ability to take one and to return to work from them. This view was shared by groups of respondents such as women and younger age cohorts, who were more likely to have taken career breaks. As such we have termed this the 'experience effect'. To put this in another way, those with experience of career breaks are more pessimistic about taking them (other than in the UAE, where the reverse is true). The natural conclusion is that career breaks do present obstacles not foreseen by those who have not taken them.

Demographics also proved reliable predictors of sentiment towards career breaks. Notably – and perhaps unsurprisingly – women were generally more likely than men to have concerns about career breaks and to perceive barriers when returning to work. Although this did not always hold true, women indicated a greater readiness to leave work but also a greater perceived vulnerability to concerns such as financial issues or career progression which would undermine their ability to take career breaks without detriment to their professional lives.

Moreover, gender norms remained very much apparent in the disparities between men and women's attitudes towards reasons for career break: shockingly, while 75% of all women surveyed believed Maternity was a legitimate reason for a career break, just 54% of men felt the same. This demonstrates the 'self-reference bias', whereby respondents were more likely to perceive something as a legitimate reason for a career break if it directly impacted them. This is illustrated in the example of Maternity as women would be taking maternity leave rather than men and, given this greater proximity to the issue, women would be more likely to view it as a legitimate reason for a career break.

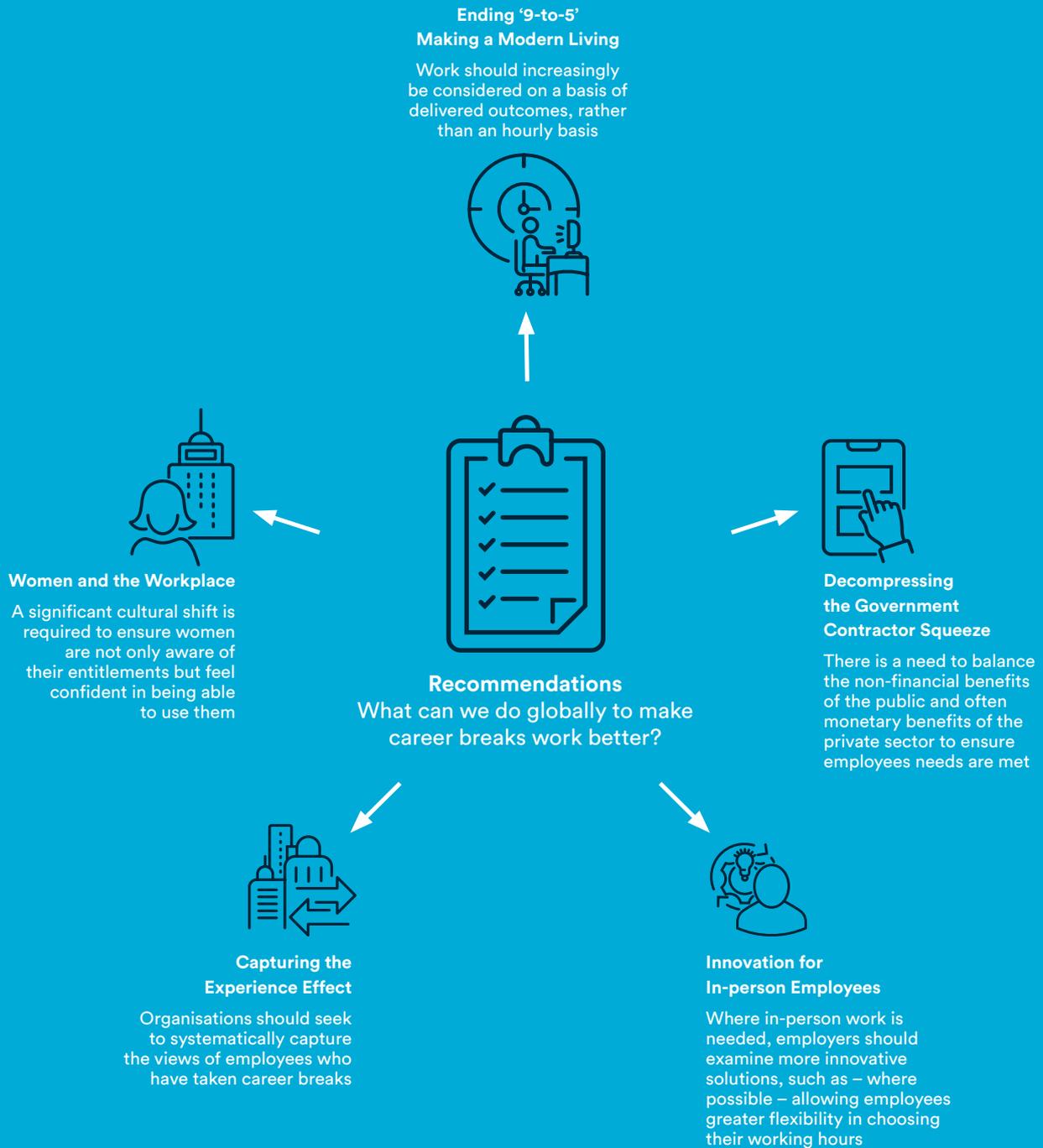
Additionally, men's greater concern relative to women about considerations such as 'disapproval of friends, family or peers' (59% of men and 49% of women considered this a concern) further evidences the continuing gender-based social expectation that men remain in work. If workplaces remain better-suited to men than to women, this situation is unlikely to be rectified. More flexible post-Covid working practices and expectations will hopefully mean women feel more confident in taking career breaks or simply participating in the workforce on an equal basis to men. However, we believe a significant change in workplace culture and employment practices is needed if society is going to make the world of work equitable to both men and women.

Respondents also exhibited evidence of generational shifts in their perceptions of work. While far greater numbers of respondents in younger age groups had taken career breaks than their 55-64-year-old counterparts, they also seemed more pessimistic about the ramifications of a break to their career, as well as their chances of returning to work following a break. What was also clear – and perhaps in some respect less surprising – was that different generations have different priorities when it comes to work: younger age groups were more likely to consider reasons related to self, such as Travel/Hobby, as legitimate in justifying career breaks.

Smaller numbers of younger age groups (49% of 25-34-year-olds) considered issues such as Carer's Leave a legitimate reason for career breaks, in contrast to the far greater numbers of older respondents (71% of 55-64-year-olds) who did – this is likely a further illustration of the 'self-reference bias', as older respondents are, having lived longer, more likely either to have provided care for someone else or to have needed it themselves.

Furthermore, while 60% of all 25-34-year-olds believed a 'lack of flexibility and work-life balance' would pose a barrier to returning, just 46% of 55-64-year-olds shared their sentiments. Shifting attitudes towards work and flexibility are clearly partly responsible for these survey trends, a process likely to have been expedited by the new work norms and practices brought about by the pandemic. Economic circumstances very different from those faced by previous generations likely also have a hand in younger respondents' pessimism about taking career breaks: a 2019 study by NerdWallet found that American university students graduating in 2015 can expect to retire at the age of 75 thanks to rising rents and student loan debt [76]. If younger people will be working till later in life, employers' schemes for career breaks should be expanded and career breaks normalised as part of working life, so as to allow today's young workers to enjoy a fulfilling, longer work life.

[76] 'Millennials are determined to retire early. Here's how they can actually pull it off' – NBC News.



Moreover, analysis of different age groups' perceived barriers to returning to work offers evidence of the 'desirability-means' gap: while over half (53%) of respondents aged 55-64 stated they did not want to take a career break in the next five years, only about half that number of 16-24-year-olds (26%) and 25-34-year-olds (25%) felt the same way. That the younger age groups expressing a greater desire to take career breaks were also more likely to identify something as a concern before taking a career break or as a barrier preventing their return to the workforce is worrying. This pattern is also evident in other groups expressing a greater inclination to take a career break, such as government-contracted private sector workers and women, suggesting that those who want to take career breaks feel less able to take them. It is perhaps undesirable that those groups more inclined to take career breaks felt less confident that they were able to do so: it is important that those who wish to do so are able or feel able to avail themselves of career break opportunities or policies.

As we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic, it is clear that the world of work is forever changed. Societies sentiments towards work-life balance, mental health and flexibility have all been markedly moved. To make the most of new mindsets brought about Covid and cement new flexible ways of working in our culture, we should accordingly adjust our conceptions of an uninterrupted career and make available opportunities for career breaks, as well as smooth paths back to the workforce, for those workers who wish to take them.

Alongside a greater understanding and willingness to listen to the views of people who have taken career breaks, radical reform of working practices is needed to accommodate the changing demands of modern life and the desires of the next generation. Reforms so far reaching that the end of the '9-to-5' workday as we know it should not be discounted.

This is not only to allow those who want to take a career break to do so and support those returning to work from a career break to more easily transition, but to stop the significant loss of talent resulting from 'enforced' career breaks. The situation – more often than not faced by women – where a career break is not something they wish to take, but a requirement due to a life event colliding with outdated workplace practices.

As such we have developed the following recommendations:

International Recommendations

Ending '9-to-5' – Making a Modern Living

Employers need to think more creatively about how they can transition employees back into work following a career break. Where flexible working is practicable organisations should increasingly seek to not only allow it but normalise it as part of general workplace culture. However, we suggest that this should be taken still further, and work should increasingly be considered on a basis of delivered outcomes, rather than an hourly basis. Many people's experience – particularly office-based workers – of the pandemic has shown the typical '9-to-5' working pattern is not a prerequisite for productivity. We believe that the five-days-a-week, 9-to-5 model is increasingly outdated, designed for a less diverse workforce, and only reinforces barriers to work – particularly for women. As such, a move to a genuinely more flexible – outcome-focussed – way of working would not only help people returning from career breaks, but reduce the need for people with no desire to take career breaks in the first place.

Innovation for In-person Employees

Where in-person work is needed, employers should examine more innovative solutions, such as – where possible – allowing employees greater flexibility in choosing their working hours, or simply requiring that people be available between two specified points of each workday but allowing them to determine their hours within and outside those hours where possible. Technologies and innovations

used in the 'gig economy' could be repurposed to assist with this change. Equally, these avenues may even be more traditional, such as paying for or even providing day care centres.

Women and the Workplace

Fundamentally a significant cultural shift is required to ensure women are not only aware of their entitlements but feel confident in being able to use them. This will require a sustained push by governments, employers and other organisations to ensure the normalisation of career breaks – particularly for family reasons. Employers should also take steps to ensure that women in their workplace are conscious of their entitlements and assured of their position upon returning to work. Such steps should include a range of measures, including improved and clearer communication targeted at women to career break policies targeted specifically at new mothers or women with ailing loved ones, such as entitling these women to more generous flexible or home working arrangements (as outlined above). Employers may also wish to explore expanding paternity and childcare leave for men (as outlined below), to combat long-held cultural assumptions that women should give up work and instead encourage men to take a more active role in caring for their families and children.

Parental Leave by Default

Given that starting a family and caring for children are key, or perhaps even the principal, motivations for many people looking to take career breaks, employers' career breaks policy should recognise the importance of these and be more explicit in setting out employees' rights to parental leave (maternity and paternity leave). As such, legislation – or organisations, in lieu of a change in law – should seek to introduce 'opt-out' maternity leave [77], with women automatically receiving an appropriate amount of leave following the birth of a child. Paternity leave should also be by default, meaning men receive an appropriate amount of leave following the birth of a child [78]. We believe these rights should also be extended to adoption and surrogacy leave.

Great Expectations of the Next Generations

Our research shows that for many young people in and entering the workforce, career breaks are not just desired, but taken to be a given. To attract and retain the best young talent, employers should pre-empt the inevitable and look to incorporate more creative career break policies into their business practices and employee contracts now. Underpinning these policies should be clear stipulations on when non-statutory career breaks are permitted – for example, after a particular length of service; for how long these career breaks are permitted; how much of an individual's salary is paid whilst they are on a career break; and finally, whether hybrid models of career breaks are practicable such as allowing an individual to take a 'part-time' career break whereby they work a certain of hours per week.

The latter may allow individuals to take a non-statutory career break, whilst ensuring employers are not overly burdened by the employees' departure. Ultimately, career breaks can and should be cast in a less 'final' way, with an 'open-door' return policy for those who decide to return to their positions.

Remaking Breaking

Employers should be more proactive in categorising different types of career breaks and developing tailored policies for each category. Maternity leave, for example, will require a significantly different policy compared to sabbaticals taken for study. Additionally, given rising interest in career breaks taken for travel, particularly among young people, employers may wish to introduce new forms of schemes for 'self-enrichment' career breaks, allowing them to travel or pursue interests outside work for a specified amount of time. A cultural shift in working people's mindsets should be encouraged so as to give those who wish to take career breaks the confidence to do so.

A Fair Framework for All

Whilst employers need to be more creative in their career break policies, they need to ensure that those employees who choose not to take a career break – the single largest cohort of employees across all four surveyed countries – are not at a disadvantage relative to those who do, whether it be on a financial or holiday basis. This could take the form of monetary compensation or more generous non-leave benefits to reward people who choose not to take career breaks upon becoming eligible.

[77] In the UK, mandatory maternity leave already exists for women, who are legally required to take two weeks (four weeks if they are employed in a factory) paid leave following the birth of a child. Although we can see the benefit of mandating parental leave, we believe this will be too great a leap for some organisations / legislatures and allowing a certain level of flexibility allows employees – as well as employers – more choice.

[78] This research does not identify what an 'appropriate' amount of time would be for parental leave. This would need further examination of existing legislation, cultural norms and employee expectations.

Capturing the Experience Effect

The experiences of previous career breakers merit particularly close attention, as these reflect the actual conditions in which people on career breaks find themselves and addressing any issues will go a long way to making career breaks easier for those who wish to take them. Organisations should seek to systematically capture the views of employees who have taken career breaks through forums or surveys, use these views to shape career breaks policy and seek to directly address the issues raised to remove barriers for returners in future.

Decompressing the Government Contractor Squeeze

People in the private sector delivering government services demonstrated a strong commitment to their duties and work, with respondents in this employment category agreeing in higher numbers that a career break's impact on their employer and co-workers would be a concern for them. We recommend two broad steps are taken to address the perceived greater challenges to taking a career break and barriers to returning to work for government contractors:

Firstly, government contractors should look to how the public sector structures career breaks for roles and sectors in which they operate. Employers should have in place effective structures and teams, allowing for processes which are not dependent on any individual's presence and for seamless succession following an employee's departure or leave of absence. Private sector employers should also ensure that the balance between generally higher wages versus increased non-financial benefits meets the expectations of the modern workforce.

Secondly, government contractors should be more proactive in promoting and communicating career breaks to their employees as an entirely valid aspect of workplace life. Much of these workers' hesitation in taking a career break may stem from their lack of awareness as to what they are entitled to, and these opportunities should be communicated and normalised to set them more at ease. Furthermore, if government-contracted workers feel hesitant to take career breaks due to a reluctance to disrupt the essential services they provide, it is important that employers communicate to them that they are able to take a career break without an impact to public service users.



Recommendations for the UK

Communicating Current Policies

In view of concerns regarding how management would react to career breaks in the UK, there should be greater or more effective communication or publicisation of workers' existing career break entitlements and opportunities: this is especially important for government-contracted private sector employees, who were more likely to view the impacts of a career break on their employer and on their co-workers as concerns prior to taking a break. Publicisation efforts should include an emphasis on how these opportunities, rather than being at the discretion of employers, have a grounding in employment law, employee contracts or in company protocols. This should also include schemes to educate Britons about existing statutory paid leave for prospective parents by adoption or surrogacy, to raise awareness of alternative families – such as same-sex couples, foster parents and opposite-sex couples struggling to conceive – and how these should be entitled to leave on similar terms as more traditional families.

Self-enrichment Career Breaks

In light of younger generations' interest in career breaks for reasons such as Travel/Hobby and in taking breaks over the course of their professional lives, employers need to consider how to facilitate these by creating 'self-enrichment' career break schemes, in order to remain competitive and attractive to these workers. Expanded opportunities for career breaks should be accompanied by clearly defined terms as to which employees are eligible for these sabbatical leave schemes and how much of their salary workers on these schemes will receive. These should be set-out in the terms of employment, making them a more commonplace part of workers' contracts. Such schemes will be greatly appealing to many younger workers who perceive breaks from work to be a non-negotiable part of working life.

Recommendations for the US

Federal Parental Leave Legislation

Given that 28% of US respondents had taken either maternity or paternity leave, Americans' evident prioritisation of family responsibilities should be mirrored in the career break opportunities available to them. Paid parental leave should be explored beyond the nine states and the District of Columbia where these benefits are already available [79]. The US is the only large economy that has no nationwide legislation granting parental leave to employees in all sectors of the economy. This is of particular importance in allowing women, who shoulder a disproportionate share of parental and childcare responsibilities in the US, to remain in work and experience job security on equal terms with men.

Increasing Flexible Working, Removing Barriers to Re-Entry

A higher proportion – 62% – of Americans who had taken a career break felt that a 'lack of flexibility and work-life balance' would be a barrier to re-entry, suggesting that this is a genuine obstacle faced by returners to work. In line with our international recommendations, flexible working/home working arrangements should be expanded and made permanent to smooth barriers to career re-entry and to allow groups such as women to remain in work while carrying out child-rearing or caregiving responsibilities. These arrangements can help instil nurture greater faith among many employees in their perceived ability to take career breaks, as the reduced number of obstacles will help smooth their path back into the workforce.

Balancing Public and Private Sector Benefits

In view of public sector workers' greater and more generous access to sabbatical leave, private sector employers should look to procedures and schemes for leave and career breaks in the public sector for inspiration when designing their own programmes. Consideration should be given as to whether the balance between typically higher wages in the private sector versus non-financial benefits in the public sector is correct. Greater efforts should also be made to communicate the availability of leave entitlements to government-contracted private sector workers, and employers should make clear to these workers that they are able to take career breaks without risking disruption to the services they provide.

[79] 'The World "Has Found a Way to Do This":
The U.S. Lags on Paid Leave'
– The New York Times.



Recommendations for Australia

Reviewing Long Service Leave

Despite Australia having the most generous legislative approach to career breaks – thanks primarily to ‘Long Service Leave’ requirements – as compared to the other three countries in this study, responses relating to concerns and barriers echoed those of the other countries (particularly the US and UK). This could indicate that the legislation and workplace career break policies are not targeted effectively to meet the needs of modern Australian workers. As such, legislation (which sits mostly at the state/territory level) and company policies should be reviewed to see if they are keeping pace with current attitudes towards career breaks.

Staying the Career Break Course

That said, only 17% of Australians indicated that they felt unable to take a career break – the joint lowest number in our study alongside the UAE. This shows that comparatively, Australian residents are largely supportive of the current approach, which should not be dismantled in any significant way.

Targeting Financial Support

More could be done, however, to address the financial concerns of Australians wanting to take a career break. Organisations – both public and private – should consider creating support schemes which target financial support towards people wanting to take career breaks in an effort to increase staff wellbeing and retention.

Flexibility For All

This perception of a lack of flexibility at Australian workplaces is particularly concerning in light of the fact that, under the relatively recent (2009) Fair Work Act [80], a large number of Australians can request flexible working, which can only be refused on “reasonable business grounds”. A greater awareness of these rights amongst employers and employees could help address this barrier. However, as noted in our other recommendations, a fundamental reset in how we think about work is a more comprehensive answer to addressing the drivers behind the barriers to those re-entering the workforce following a career break. Workplaces should examine how to encourage a cultural shift to give those employees who wish to take career breaks the confidence to do so, while also seeking to reduce the association of career breaks with finality.

[80] ‘Flexible Work Arrangements’
- Australian Human Rights Commission.

Recommendations for the UAE

Changing Attitudes Necessitates Changing Policies

The UAE showed the starkest difference between the attitudes of younger and older generations in terms of the acceptability and legitimacy of career breaks. If the UAE is to continue to appeal and attract to the next generation of both domestic and international talent, particularly as 72% of our UAE respondents had already taken a break, employers in the country will need to increasingly recognise the importance of career breaks. This could involve expanding non-statutory career breaks to recruit young people, many of whom take career breaks to be a given at some point in their working lives.

Increasing Social Acceptance

Although issues around finances and career progressions remain concerns, embedded social norms seem to have a more significant impact on people's considerations around career breaks as compared to other countries. Changing attitudes amongst younger generations, alongside the influence of international residents, will undoubtedly lead to an organic evolution in how career breaks are viewed in the UAE. That said, public and private sector organisations must continue to not only create structures which enable workers to take career breaks and allow them to return to work with confidence, but also proactively demonstrate their support for career breaks. These efforts should aim to instil greater confidence in employees, allowing them to feel they may take career breaks with full support from their employers if they so choose.

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