

Women-ReBoot: have you still got it?



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Supporting work–life balance and addressing women’s underrepresentation in the labour market: approaches and good practices in the ICT sector

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Women-ReBoot is an intensive, active programme designed, developed and implemented by Software Skillnet, an enterprise-led skills network, led by a sector federation (Technology Ireland), in partnership with technology companies.

The programme addresses the skills shortage in the tech industry by enabling already qualified women to re-enter the workforce after a career break. Women participants benefit from a combination of opportunities in updating knowledge and skills, work preparation and experience, one-to-one coaching and mentoring. At the same time, companies find experienced and valuable new employees from a cohort that is often overlooked in traditional recruitment practices because of a perceived lack of experience in their CV.

Whereas most tech companies have a written gender-equality policy, Women-ReBoot actively enabled companies to see the considerable business benefits of employing well-qualified, experienced women returners. As a measure of success, the number of participating companies and the number of recruited participants has almost doubled between the first and second rounds of Women-ReBoot. The initiative is funded by the Irish government through the Skillnets Ireland body.

Information about Ireland — policy in context

Despite robust gender equality legislation, the culturally reproduced gendered order of caring means that women remain the default carers in Irish society; family care work is shared unequally between women (70%) and men (30%).^[1] Of 27 countries in a global study on unpaid family and household work, Irish households spent the largest amount of daily time (29%) on care for household members. Related to the allotted role of women in Irish society, lack of affordable, accessible, good-quality childcare is likely to be a central factor behind the data. Similarly, the absence of good-quality state residential care facilities for elderly people means that female family members continue to experience a cultural and moral imperative to take on these onerous responsibilities.

Gender inequality and employment

Based on 2016 data, Irish women aged 25 to 34 (55.1%) are more likely to have a degree or diploma from an institution of higher education — known in Ireland as a third-level qualification — than men (42.9%) in this age group. Nonetheless, stereotypical areas of employment still prevail, with women continuing to be overrepresented in the Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences and caring professions. Figures from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2017) show that 79.3% of graduates in ICT were male. ^[2]

At a time when women's qualifications are excelling nationwide, CSO figures show the gender pay gap in Ireland is widening. In 2014, the difference between men's and women's pay was 12%, and in 2016 this had risen to 14%. This immediate discrepancy translates into lifelong gender-based economic inequalities when we look at the consequential gender-based pension gap that in Ireland stands at 37%. Ireland has the fifth highest pension gap in the EU, where the overall average is 38%. These gender- stereotypical areas of work are significant in general as well as in specific social contexts.

Flexibility in working arrangements has no legal framework in Ireland, although research has shown such arrangements to be more prevalent in the public than the private sector.[3] Part-time work, job-sharing, flexitime and other variations on flexible working are all at the discretion of individual employers and must be negotiated within the boundaries of the statutory legislation and in the context of each particular workplace.

The Irish tech industry

Women's underrepresentation in high-tech positions reflects persistent gender bias throughout the educational sectors related to science, maths and technology.[4] While there is no evidence for a gender-based difference in ability, durable and self-perpetuating gender-based performance gaps translate into increased confidence in these areas among boys compared with girls.[5] High levels of educational attainment by girls and women do not translate into relative parity in terms of employment and earnings. Women tend to have interrupted careers and to assume disproportionately more of the challenges of reconciling work and family life. This is apparently incompatible with the tech industry's particular demands and its 'bro' culture. Achieving gender balance in tech companies must, therefore, be associated with greater gender equality and the pursuit of work–life balance, as reflected in flexible working conditions for everyone and fewer gender-based expectations on the part of employers.

There is a demand in Ireland for high-level ICT skills – currently at a rate of 6,000 job openings per year. At present, women comprise on average only 25% of the technology workforce, and it is estimated that 2,000 women take time out from the industry each year, usually in response to family care demands.

Introducing work–life balance measures: good practice

Women-ReBoot was a collaborative programme that exploited a range of expertise to combat the skills shortage and persistent gender inequality in the tech industry. Key partners in Women-ReBoot were Technology Ireland, the employer association and representative body for tech industry companies in Ireland, and Skillnet Ireland, the national grant agency for enterprise training networks. Technology Ireland is an association within the Irish Business and Employers' Confederation, which represents industry's voice to Government.

The programme was free to jobseekers and offered opportunities to upgrade and enhance professional development, prepare for re-entry into the world of paid work and experience peer group support via meetings with others in a similar position.

In addition to the confidence building and awareness programme elements, participants had access to a comprehensive online learning platform through project partners Pluralsight. This enabled women to benchmark their current technology capabilities and advance their level of knowledge and skills via a number of specific technology learning paths. Together, the participants and the tech companies guided the content of each woman's training to best match industry needs and existing market opportunities. An important element of the Women-ReBoot initiative is a 3-month paid period of work-experience in participating companies. This ensured valuable support for re-entry to the workplace in an encouraging environment.

The pilot project attracted 28 women who had spent on average eight years outside the tech sector. The 40 to 49 years age group comprised 60%, 30% were aged between 50 and 59. All participants had third level qualifications in ICT – an undergraduate or postgraduate degree or post-graduate diploma. The women had prior experience in ICT that included project management, business analysis, software development, quality assurance and software testing, IT support, technical writing, user experience and data analytics.

The Women-ReBoot participants attended six group seminars and heard from 25 guest speakers. A total of 84 coaching sessions were held, and 132 individual e-learning courses were completed. In addition to work placements, the women had interviews with companies in the sector – 60 interviews were held in the programme period. The project's aim was to have 90% re-engagement by participants within six months of completion of the programme; within four months of the programme ending, 72% of the women were already re-employed in the sector.

'My eldest son is 21, and a lot of his friends are in the software space – I was afraid I was going to step into a room full of his friends! I was worried about not knowing all the buzzwords, but I learned them quickly. I thought the ship had sailed for me. I had so little confidence at the start, but meeting other women who had been through a similar experience really transformed my expectations of what was possible. My advice to any woman considering a course like this is do it – sign up, do the courses, talk to other people. You'll be amazed at what you can achieve.'^[6]

There were internal effects too, as company culture was impacted directly through participation in Women-ReBoot. Senior managers asked for company HR recruitment practices to be changed to include measures to avoid valuable potential talent being overlooked. Other significant changes have included the development of gender equality training for HR staff to ensure that company directors' commitment to equality is reflected throughout their organisation's practice.

Lessons learned from the programme structure included recommendations from the companies as well as the participants that the work experience be extended from three weeks to three months, and be paid in full by the host company. The programme has now been rolled out to 2 regions in Ireland with 45 participants in the latest programme group. New processes for 'matching participants and host companies' have been developed and specific training and certification has enhanced the process. Work placements are now 3 months paid placements in host companies.

Locating women who are often hidden from national statistics, was one of the biggest challenges facing the Women-ReBoot programme organisers. Many women do not receive state benefits while out of work and are, therefore, not accessible through any public directory – when they leave the workplace, they become effectively invisible.

The success of the programme in achieving its objectives has resulted in 50 companies, compared with the original 20, collaborating in the second round of training. Many leading international companies are now partners in the Women-ReBoot initiative, including companies like MasterCard, Microsoft, Amazon, Liberty Insurance, McAfee, Apple, Accenture, Google, SAP. The Software Skillnet has already planned an expansion of the programme model to enhance gender equality across all aspects of the tech sector.

Commenting on the programme, the Organisational Development Director of Datalex said, 'Datalex was delighted to be involved in the pilot of Women ReBoot and to have the opportunity to engage with this previously untapped pool of experienced ICT women. The participants in the programme were of a high calibre and have specific experience and skills that are directly relevant to our needs.'

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Further information

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[Five women on returning to tech industry after long career breaks](#)



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