

## THE JOURNEY BACK: EXPLORING THE PROS AND CONS OF BEING A BOOMERANG EMPLOYEE

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### Abstract

The phenomenon of boomerang employment—where individuals leave an organization and later return—has become increasingly salient in contemporary labor markets characterized by flexibility, mobility, and nonlinearity. Once considered rare, boomerang employment is now regarded as a strategic dimension of talent management, as organizations facing high turnover and skill shortages are more open to rehiring former employees. While prior research has primarily taken a quantitative lens, focusing on performance outcomes, retention rates, and predictors of rehire, limited attention has been paid to the lived experiences of returnees themselves. This study addresses this gap by examining how boomerang employees make sense of their decision to return, reconstruct their professional and organizational identity, and navigate both the opportunities and challenges of re-entry.

Adopting a qualitative, exploratory design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with 17 returnees across diverse sectors, including manufacturing, information technology, education, finance, healthcare, and professional services. Using purposive sampling, participants were selected on the basis of having voluntarily left their employer for at least six months, subsequently returned, and worked a minimum of three months in the re-employed role. Interpretive thematic analysis, guided by Creswell and Poth (2018), was used to identify recurring patterns.

Findings reveal that motives for return included career development opportunities, organizational changes, and workplace familiarity. Returnees reported benefits such as faster adjustment, enhanced career capital, and stronger belonging, but also faced challenges including stigma, unresolved structural issues, and insider–outsider tensions. The study contributes to organizational behavior and career development literature, offering practical insights for HR professionals managing re-engagement strategies for former employees.

**Keywords:** Boomerang employees, motivation, employee identity, psychological contract theory, identity reconstruction

**JEL Classification:** M12, M10, M50, M51

## GERİ DÖNÜŞ: BOOMERANG ÇALIŞAN OLMANIN ARTILARI VE EKSİLERİ

### Öz

Esneklik ve hareketlilik ile karakterize edilen çağdaş işgücü piyasalarında, bireylerin bir kuruluştan ayrılıp daha sonra geri döndüğü bumerang istihdam olgusu giderek daha belirgin hale gelmiştir. Bir zamanlar nadir görülen bir durum olarak kabul edilen boomerang istihdamı, yüksek personel devri ve beceri eksikliği yaşayan kuruluşların eski çalışanları yeniden işe almaya daha açık olması nedeniyle artık yetenek yönetiminin stratejik bir boyutu olarak görülmektedir. Önceki araştırmalar ağırlıklı olarak performans sonuçlarına, elde tutma oranlarına ve yeniden işe alım öngörücülerine odaklanarak nicel bir bakış açısı benimserken, geri dönenlerin kendi deneyimlerine sınırlı dikkat gösterilmiştir. Bu çalışma, bumerang çalışanlarının geri dönüş kararlarını nasıl anlamlandırdıklarını, profesyonel ve örgütsel kimliklerini nasıl yeniden inşa ettiklerini ve yeniden girişin hem fırsatlarını hem de zorluklarını nasıl aştıklarını inceleyerek bu boşluğu ele almaktadır.

Nitel, keşifsel bir tasarım benimseyen çalışma, imalat, bilgi teknolojisi, eğitim, finans, sağlık ve profesyonel hizmetler dahil olmak üzere çeşitli sektörlerden 17 geri dönüş yapanla yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelere dayanmaktadır. Amaçlı örnekleme kullanılarak, katılımcılar en az altı ay süreyle işverenlerinden gönüllü olarak

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ayrılmış, daha sonra geri dönmüş ve yeniden işe alındıktan sonra en az üç ay çalışmış olmaları kriterine göre seçilmiştir. Creswell ve Poth (2018) tarafından yönlendirilen yorumlayıcı tematik analiz, tekrarlayan örüntüleri belirlemek için kullanılmıştır.

Bulgular, dönüş motivasyonlarının kariyer gelişimi fırsatları, örgütsel değişiklikler ve iş yeri aşinalığını içerdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Dönerler daha hızlı uyum, gelişmiş kariyer sermayesi ve daha güçlü aidiyet gibi faydalar bildirdi, ancak damgalanma, çözülmemiş yapısal sorunlar ve içeriden-dışarıdan gerginlikleri gibi zorluklarla da karşılaştılar. Çalışma, örgütsel davranış ve kariyer gelişimi literatürüne katkıda bulunarak, eski çalışanlar için yeniden katılım stratejilerini yöneten İK profesyonellerine pratik içgörüler sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Boomerang çalışanlar, motivasyon, çalışan kimliği, psikolojik sözleşme teorisi, kimlik yeniden yapılandırması

**JEL Sınıflaması:** M12, M10, M50, M51

## 1. Introduction

Flexibility, mobility, and nonlinearity are becoming more and more characteristics of career trajectories in today's competitive and unstable labor market. The emergence of boundaryless and protean careers has put traditional ideas of linear careers—where workers join a company, progress along predetermined paths, and stay until retirement—to the test (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2004). The phenomenon of boomerang employees—people who quit a company and then return to work for the same employer—has drawn more attention from academics and professionals in this regard (Swider et al., 2017). Boomerang employment, which was once thought to be uncommon, is now a strategic factor in people management, particularly in sectors with significant employee turnover and skills shortages. Rehiring former employees offers special opportunities and problems from an organizational standpoint. On the one hand, boomerang workers frequently return with improved expertise, organizational social capital, and firm-specific knowledge from outside experiences, which can lower hiring expenses and speed up onboarding. These returning employees are already familiar with the intricacies and ins and outs of the company, as well as its culture and expectations. For several important reasons, looking to people who are already familiar with your company may give you a competitive edge in a labor market when talent competition is at an all-time high (Laker, 2022). However, managers and coworkers may view returnees with suspicion as concerns about their loyalty, suitability, and long-term commitment may surface (Molloy & Barney, 2015). In a similar vein, employees may experience both advantages—like familiarity, stability, and career advancement—and disadvantages—like identity conflicts, feeling like a "insider" and a "outsider," or running into the same unresolved problems that caused them to leave in the first place. The scholarly literature on boomerang employees is still scarce despite its increasing popularity, with the majority of it using a quantitative approach and concentrating on performance outcomes, retention rates, and rehire factors. The lived experiences of boomerang workers

themselves are less well documented, especially how they interpret their decision to return, deal with the reintegration process, and weigh the benefits and drawbacks of working for their previous company again. Given the growing significance of employee voice, meaning-making, and identity creation in modern career studies, this difference is especially noticeable. How do returnees reconstruct their professional and organizational identity? This study uses a qualitative methodology to investigate the benefits and drawbacks of being a boomerang employee in order to close this gap. The study aims to understand the reasons for returnees' return, the opportunities and challenges they face upon re-entry, and the ways in which organizations and employees navigate this special employment relationship by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with returnees in a variety of organizational contexts. By doing this, the study adds to the body of knowledge on organizational behavior, career development, and turnover while also providing useful advice to HR professionals who are entrusted with creating plans for re-engaging former workers.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Careers in the Protean and Boundaryless Era**

The emergence of protean (Hall, 2004) and boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) jobs has drastically changed how workers view their work life. Employees are increasingly navigating nonlinear career pathways, crossing organizational borders to look for opportunities that fit their talents, values, and personal goals, as opposed to following linear and organizationally prescribed trajectories. In this situation, quitting an employment is a part of a larger, self-directed professional path rather than necessarily indicating permanent separation. According to academics, this kind of mobility enables people to get a variety of experiences that could ultimately improve their employability and market value (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). Therefore, boomerang employment can be viewed as a reflection of this professional flexibility, in which leaving and then returning turns into a calculated choice rather than a retention failure. Research on organizational behavior has long placed a strong emphasis on employee turnover. According to foundational ideas (March & Simon, 1958; Mobley, 1977), turnover is a process that includes withdrawal cognitions, job discontent, and eventual exit. Recent models that describe voluntary departures place more emphasis on unfolding processes and proximal withdrawal states (Hom et al., 2017; Maertz & Campion, 2004). According to this concept, boomerang employees show that leaving is not necessarily definitive, which complicates the conventional turnover story. Shipp, Furst-Holloway, Harris, and Rosen (2014) expand the unfolding model of turnover to include returnees, emphasizing that when organizational

conditions or personal circumstances alter, leaving may be followed by re-entry. This reinterpretation implies that rather than considering leave as a final event, turnover studies should take cyclical employment relationships into consideration.

## **2.2. Boomerang Employees**

Boomerang employment has started to draw scholarly interest, despite the fact that it is still understudied. One of the earliest systematic studies is provided by Swider, Liu, Harris, and Gardner (2017), who demonstrate that returning employees frequently outperform external hires in terms of performance and voluntary turnover. The significance of organizational attachment in predicting who is likely to return is also emphasized by Shipp et al. (2014). Since returnees are already accustomed to organizational procedures and conventions, rehiring former employees can lower recruitment costs, decrease onboarding times, and improve cultural fit. However, possible disadvantages temper this hopeful outlook. Organizations may doubt returnees' loyalty and long-term commitment, according to Molloy and Barney (2015), which raises questions about whether the firm can fully realize the value created with human capital. Boomerang employment is therefore a two-edged sword: it has advantages in terms of talent acquisition and knowledge transfer, but it also carries hazards in terms of commitment and trust.

In the Turkish human resource management literature, boomerang employees are increasingly acknowledged as a strategic workforce phenomenon, presenting both benefits and challenges. Research in Turkey indicates that these personnel tend to reintegrate more rapidly owing to their existing familiarity with corporate culture, processes, and social networks, hence potentially lowering recruiting and training expenses (Karadeniz & Şentürk, 2023). Simultaneously, empirical studies demonstrate that boomerang employees often return with elevated salary expectations and modified career ambitions, potentially fostering perceptions of inequity among current staff and affecting perceptions of organizational justice (Küçük, 2019; Karadeniz & Şentürk, 2023). Sector-specific research, especially in tourism and service sectors, indicates that employees generally depart for enhanced career prospects or remuneration but prioritize job stability, organizational commitment, and superior working conditions upon their return (Çaylak et al., 2022). Moreover, Turkish research indicates that although boomerang employees contribute external expertise and varied experience that foster creativity and organizational learning, they may also present managerial issues with role expectations and workplace dynamics (Karakuş & Doğan). The literature in Turkey characterizes boomerang employees as a dual-faceted human capital asset that necessitates meticulous strategic management within contemporary HR practices.

### **2.3. Organization and Identity**

Scholars have started to look at how returning employees deal with identity and social factors in addition to performance and retention outcomes. When people renegotiate their sense of self in unfamiliar or familiar organizational environments, career transitions frequently entail identity reconstruction. As boomerang workers return to companies whose relationships and cultures may have changed while they were away, they must balance the conflict between being both "old-timers" and "newcomers." Reintegration may be hampered by this dual identity, particularly if coworkers doubt their allegiance or motivations. However, returnees frequently contribute social capital and outside expertise that could improve organizational learning and creativity. The significance of comprehending boomerang employees' lived experiences—which are still largely unexplored in the literature—is highlighted by looking at them from both organizational and identity-based lenses. Overall, the occurrence of boomerang employment defies linear notions about organizational attachment, even though turnover and career theories offer a basis for comprehending employee departures. The majority of previous research has been quantitative in nature, concentrating on performance outcomes and return determinants (Swider et al., 2017; Shipp et al., 2014). The subjective experiences of returnees, their perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of reemployment, and the ways in which organizations oversee the reintegration process are all less well understood. The current study, which takes a qualitative approach, aims to close this gap by giving boomerang employees a voice and investigating their organizational experiences, identity work, and motivations.

### **2.4. Psychological Contract Theory**

The implicit set of shared expectations, values, and responsibilities between employers and employees is known as the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995). In contrast to official employment contracts, which specify precise job responsibilities and pay, psychological contracts cover the subjective and unwritten notions of reciprocity in the work relationship. Employers may demand loyalty, commitment, and performance in exchange for these expectations, which could include career growth opportunities, equitable treatment, job stability, and organizational support (Conway & Briner, 2005). Psychological contracts promote engagement, trust, and organizational commitment when they are met; when they are broken, they frequently result in discontent, turnover, or disengagement (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994).

Employees' decisions to leave are often influenced by psychological contract violations, according to research on turnover (Zhao et al., 2007). Employees may experience withdrawal symptoms and ultimately leave a company if they believe that promises made to them have not been met, such as unjust treatment, impeded career advancement, or insufficient recognition (Bal, De Lange, Jansen, & Van der Velde, 2008). Therefore, the original act of leaving may be associated with perceived violations of the psychological contract for boomerang employees. This does not, however, indicate irreversible breakage. Employees may reevaluate their relationship with the company and become receptive to renegotiating the contract through re-employment in response to certain circumstances, such as a change in leadership, better organizational procedures, or updated employment terms.

#### **2.4.1. Psychological Contract Renewal Upon Return**

It is possible to interpret the choice to rejoin a previous workplace as an effort to reestablish and extend the psychological contract. Boomerang workers frequently return to companies with updated expectations based on their past experiences and fresh insights from outside sources. For instance, in comparison to their prior position, they might anticipate more freedom, chances for growth, or better leadership assistance. Similarly, companies could rethink expectations by considering returnees as "known quantities" who can make contributions right away, but they might also doubt their dedication and loyalty in the long run (Molloy & Barney, 2015). This renegotiation emphasizes how psychological contracts are dynamic and change as the employment relationship progresses (Rousseau, 2001).

Being both "old" and "new" to the company is a dilemma for returning employees. The perception and implementation of psychological contracts are influenced by this dualism. According to the employee, the extended contract might be a chance for reciprocity, whereby they return with greater abilities and expertise in return for better pay and recognition. However, from the employer's point of view, persistent reservations about commitment could result in a brittle contract that is open to doubt. Therefore, the psychological contract lens highlights the benefits of boomerang employment (renewal of trust, reciprocal investment, faster transition) as well as the drawbacks (more scrutiny, perceived fragility).

Examining how returnees interpret their previous contract, the violations that caused them to leave, and the renegotiated terms upon re-entry is crucial, according to the psychological contract theory applied to the study of boomerang employees. The subjective interpretations of contract fulfillment, violation, and renewal that influence employees' choices and experiences

are best revealed through a qualitative approach. By adopting this viewpoint, we can transcend outcome-based research and shed light on the complex psychological mechanisms behind the benefits and drawbacks of boomerang employment.

### 3. Methodology

A qualitative, exploratory research design is used in this study to fully comprehend boomerang employees' experiences. A qualitative approach was thought to be the most suitable for capturing the complex meanings, motivations, and perceptions connected with this career trajectory because the phenomena of leaving and then returning to a former employer is complicated and context-dependent. In accordance with Creswell and Poth's (2018) suggestions, the study uses interpretive analysis to find themes and patterns rather than testing preconceived notions.

#### 3.1. Sample

Boomerang employees—people who had previously left an organization and then returned to work for the same employer—were recruited using a purposive sampling technique. Interviews were conducted with 17 participants in total. To capture a range of viewpoints and situations, participants were selected from a number of industries, including manufacturing, information technology, education, finance, health care, and professional services. Participants had to have (a) voluntarily left their employment for at least six months, (b) returned to the same company after leaving, and (c) been reemployed for at least three months at the time of the interview in order to meet the inclusion criteria. Employees with organizational tenures ranging from two to fifteen years over both work periods were included in the sample, representing both managerial and non-managerial occupations.

**Table 1. Sample demographics**

Participants	Gender	Age Range	Departments	Position / Role
P1	Male	35–40	Human Resources Management	Senior specialist
P2	Female	50–55	Logistics & Supply Chain	Unit manager
P3	Female	45–50	Strategy	Coordinator
P4	Female	45–50	IT	Supervisor
P5	Male	55–60	Manufacturing	Team Leader

P6	Female	55–60	Human Resources Management	Team Leader
P7	Male	35–40	International Trade	Specialist
P8	Female	45–50	Marketing	Team leader
P9	Female	40–45	Project Management	Department manager
P10	Male	35–40	Finance	Specialist
P11	Male	45–50	Marketing	Manager
P12	Female	50–55	IT	Team Leader
P13	Female	55–60	IT	Manager
P14	Male	35–40	Operations	Specialist
P15	Female	40–45	Corporate Communications	Assistant manager
P16	Female	45–50	IT	Unit manager
P17	Male	50–55	Accounting	Accountant

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### 3.2. Data Collection

Depending on the availability of the participants, semi-structured interviews were performed either in-person or online (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams) to gather data. With participants' approval, audio recordings of the 45–75 minutes interviews were made. To maintain uniformity while providing room for follow-up and probing questions, an interview guide was created. The interview questions are provided in the Appendix.

The goal of the study was explained to each participant, and anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. In every transcript and subsequent report, pseudonyms were utilized.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to assess the data in an iterative and inductive manner (Krippendorff, 2018). To provide a more immersive interaction with the data and to stay close to the participant narratives, the analysis was done by hand rather than using computer-assisted software. By using a manual approach, the researcher was able to continuously reflect on new findings while meticulously tracing meanings and patterns across interviews. There were multiple phases to the analysis. First, verbatim transcriptions of every interview recording were made. After that, the researcher closely read the transcripts several times in order to become acquainted with the content and make notes on first impressions. Open coding

was used in the second step, when significant textual units, such as words, sentences, or paragraphs, were highlighted and given descriptive codes that encapsulated their main ideas. Codes were written in the margins of printed transcripts and compiled onto coding sheets for methodical comparison during this manual process. In the third step, codes were categorized according to conceptual similarity after being compared across cases. Patterns and linkages were able to infer from the data thanks to this method. The categories were then combined into four broad themes, such as ‘Motives for Return’, ‘Identity Reconstruction as a Returnee’, ‘Cons of Returning’ and ‘Pros of Returning’ which reflected the main facets of the boomerang employee experience. Several tactics were used to increase the analysis's credibility. In order to ensure that interpretations were not exclusively based on the researcher's viewpoint, peer debriefing was carried out by talking about emergent categories and themes with a fellow academic colleague who is knowledgeable with qualitative methodologies. Handwritten notes, coding sheets, and analytical memos were used to keep an audit trail that showed how codes developed into themes. In order to anchor interpretations in the empirical data and to represent the interviewees' genuine voices, illuminating verbatim quotations from participants were also kept. The analysis aimed to strike a balance between interpretive depth and systematic rigor through this manual and iterative procedure, producing insights into the benefits and drawbacks of working as a boomerang employee.

#### **4. Findings and Discussion**

The findings are organized under four main themes derived from the analysis of 17 interviews with boomerang employees across different industries. Before presenting the detailed sub-themes and participant quotations, it is important to note that these themes reflect recurring patterns in participants' experiences rather than isolated incidents. Together, they illustrate how the return process is shaped by both individual career considerations and organizational dynamics. The themes are presented in a structured manner to highlight the multifaceted nature of boomerang employment without pre-empting broader interpretations reserved for the discussion section. The resulted four themes are: *Motives for Return*, *Identity Reconstruction as a Returnee*, *Cons of Returning*, and *Pros of Returning*. Each theme is presented below with its associated sub-themes and supported by illustrative participant quotes.

#### 4.1. Motives for Return

- **Career Development and Growth Opportunities:** Many participants highlighted improved promotion prospects or access to new roles as a key reason for returning.

*“When I came back, I saw that the promotion ladder was clearer than before. This time, I felt like there was a real path for me to move upward.” (P5)*

*“When I left, I felt stuck in my role. But when I heard about a new department opening, I realized I could grow here in ways that weren’t possible before. That’s why I decided to come back.” (P7)*

- **Organizational Changes:** Shifts in leadership, management style, or work culture since their departure were identified as drivers for rejoining.

*“The new leadership team seemed more transparent and approachable, which made me reconsider returning.” (P3)*

*“The culture had shifted since I left—it felt less rigid and more collaborative, which was one of the main reasons I decided to come back.” (P8)*

- **Workplace Familiarity and Comfort:** The sense of returning to a “known environment” was frequently described as reassuring compared to entering a completely new workplace.

*“I knew the systems, the processes, and many of the people. That sense of familiarity gave me confidence and comfort compared to starting fresh somewhere else.” (P5)*

*“Walking into the building felt like coming home. I didn’t have to navigate all the unknowns that usually come with a new job.” (P11)*

The data indicate that boomerang employees typically decide to return due to a confluence of career prospects, organizational transformations, and the comfort of familiarity. Numerous individuals highlighted career advancement and growth prospects as a primary motivator.

Organizational changes, especially in leadership and workplace culture, were as significant. Employees articulated that alterations in management approach, enhanced transparency, and heightened collaboration practices cultivated a revitalized inclination to re-engage with the organization. This corresponds with research indicating that leadership reform might be a significant incentive for returnees.

Ultimately, participants characterized the comfort derived from workplace familiarity as a distinctive incentive. In contrast to joining a completely new business, returning employees may depend on familiar systems, processes, and social networks. This familiarity diminished uncertainty and mitigated the psychological hazards linked to job transfers.

#### 4.2. Identity Reconstruction as a Returnee

- **Insider-Outsider Tension:** Employees often felt like both “old-timers” (due to their prior experience) and “newcomers” (since the organization had changed).

*“I was recognized as someone who knew the ropes, but at the same time, the company had changed so much that I also felt like a newcomer.” (P2)*

*“People treated me like I knew everything because I had been here before, but in reality so much had changed. I felt like a stranger in a familiar place.” (P11)*

- **Renewed Professional Identity:** Several participants described their return as an opportunity to redefine their professional value within the organization.

*“Coming back gave me a chance to reinvent myself. I wasn’t just the person who had left—I returned with a different skill set and a stronger sense of what I could offer.” (P14)*

- **Negotiating Credibility:** While some felt their external experience increased credibility, others sensed skepticism from colleagues.

*“Some colleagues respected that I brought in outside experience, but a few seemed to question whether I was really committed this time.” (P16)*

Identity reconstruction denotes the continual process by which individuals modify, reinterpret, and reaffirm their self-concept in reaction to career changes and altered role significances. This process is frequently characterized in the extensive identity literature as dynamic, socially situated, and instigated by significant occurrences such as unemployment, role transition, or career alteration (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006). Ibarra (1999) illustrates how individuals engage with “provisional selves” when adjusting to new professional identities, whereas Ashforth (2001) underscores the significance of role transitions in transforming identity frameworks. Identity reconstruction is intricately connected to sensemaking processes, through which individuals understand prior experiences and reconcile them with developing self-concepts (Weick, 1995). Recent research emphasizes that identity is not solely independently

negotiated but is both relationally and contextually co-constructed through interactions with organizations and significant persons (Brown, 2015). Identity reconstruction in work contexts entails both continuity and transformation, as individuals strive to preserve a cohesive self-narrative while assimilating new experiences and reinterpreting previous organizational affiliations. This viewpoint offers a more analytically robust basis for comprehending how returns recontextualize their previous departure and reintegrate into organizations with altered identities and expectations.

Returning employees encountered a multifaceted process of reestablishing their professional identity. A persistent motif was the insider–outsider friction, as individuals felt acknowledged for their previous experience while also confronted by the changes that transpired during their absence.

For many, however, return engendered prospects for a revitalized professional identity. Returnees asserted their enhanced skills, introspection, and worth compared to their previous selves. In this context, departing and returning emerged as a career strategy that promoted personal and professional development. Nonetheless, the return procedure also entailed negotiating credibility. External experience was occasionally regarded as an advantage, however in certain instances, it elicited doubts over the returnee's dedication. This paradox illustrates the intricate position of returnees, who are simultaneously enriched and confronted by their experiences as outsiders.

#### 4.3. Cons of Returning

- **Lingering Stigma and Loyalty Concerns:** Some participants reported feeling that managers and colleagues questioned their long-term commitment.

*“Even though I was happy to be back, I could sense that some managers were worried I might leave again.” (P8)*

*“My manager welcomed me, but I could sense colleagues wondering if I’d leave again. There was this unspoken question of loyalty hanging over me.” (P5)*

- **Re-Encountering Unresolved Issues:** A number of returnees found that the challenges which had initially motivated their departure (e.g., bureaucracy, workload) persisted.

*“One of the reasons I left was the heavy bureaucracy. Unfortunately, that part hadn’t really changed when I returned.” (P17)*

- **Limited Advancement Opportunities:** In a few cases, employees expressed frustration that returning did not yield the career progress they anticipated.

*“I thought rejoining would open new doors for my career, but I realized that the hierarchy was still quite rigid.” (P3)*

- **Colleague Dynamics:** Some experienced subtle exclusion or envy from peers who had remained with the organization.

*“Some of my old teammates made subtle comments like, ‘Oh, you’re back again?’ It was clear not everyone welcomed my return.” (P1)*

Notwithstanding favorable incentives, several expenses associated with returning surfaced. A recurring problem was the enduring stigma and issues of allegiance. Despite being welcomed back, returnees frequently perceived lingering worries over their long-term commitment.

Some participants also faced the resurgence of unsolved concerns, notably systemic challenges such as bureaucracy or workload demands that had first motivated their exit. Regrettably, that aspect had not significantly altered upon my return. Such experiences highlight the dangers of "return illusions" wherein anticipated enhancements are not realized. In other instances, returnees expressed dissatisfaction with restricted promotion prospects, recognizing that organizational hierarchies remained inflexible. Ultimately, interactions with colleagues may become tense. Subtle exclusion or jealousy was noted. It was evident that not all were pleased with my return. These issues underscore that social reintegration is sometimes fraught and might evoke sentiments of isolation.

#### 4.4. Pros of Returning

- **Faster Adjustment and Onboarding:** Returnees generally described a shorter learning curve due to prior familiarity with organizational systems.

*“I didn’t need weeks of training—I knew the systems and processes almost immediately.” (P13)*

*“I knew the systems, the culture, the way things worked—so I didn’t waste time figuring things out. I could contribute almost immediately.” (P2)*

- **Enhanced Career Capital:** Many felt that the skills and perspectives gained externally positioned them as more valuable contributors upon their return.

*“My time outside gave me new skills, and when I came back, people noticed I could approach problems differently.” (P14)*

- **Stronger Sense of Belonging:** Several returnees reported that leaving and returning allowed them to appreciate the organization more than before.

*“Leaving made me realize how much I valued the people and culture here. Coming back, I felt more connected than before.” (P5)*

*“Coming back gave me a new appreciation for the organization. I realized the grass isn’t always greener, and now I feel more loyal than before.” (P9)*

Participants expressed numerous benefits of rejoining. Returnees predominantly reported expedited adjustment and onboarding, highlighting their capacity to participate nearly instantaneously due to previous familiarity. Returnees emphasized the augmentation of their career capital: the skills, knowledge, and perspectives acquired externally not only bolstered their confidence but also improved others' perceptions of their worth. Ultimately, numerous individuals reported an enhanced sense of belonging upon their return. After comparing the organization with alternatives, returnees cultivated a renewed appreciation for its culture and community.

Collectively, these findings indicate that the boomerang experience serves as both an opportunity and a difficulty. Returning offers expedited reintegration, enhanced professional capital, and a sense of belonging; but, it also perpetuates lingering stigma, unresolved structural issues, and societal tensions. This dichotomy highlights the necessity for organizations to effectively oversee the return process, ensuring that reintegration capitalizes on returnees' external experiences while simultaneously addressing obstacles that may impede their complete re-engagement.

Future studies should build on this work by methodically contrasting external hires with boomerang employees in terms of performance results, organizational commitment, and long-term career advancement. Furthermore, because psychological contracts and job relationships are socially ingrained and might differ between institutional and cultural contexts, cross-cultural research is necessary (Hofstede, 2001; Thomas et al., 2010). Return, for example, may be framed as restoring loyalty in collectivist cultures while being viewed as strategic career self-management in individualist cultures.

Boomerang employment should be seen as a reformed work relationship that presents chances and difficulties for both people and businesses, rather than just a throwback to the past. Understanding its dynamic and cyclical character helps us better comprehend modern employment relationships and identifies useful strategies for businesses looking to adjust in a time of changing job markets and a lack of skilled workers.

The findings coalesce around a cyclical identity-exchange dynamic of boomerang employment, rather than distinct categories. Initially, the motivations for return—career advancement, organizational transformation, and familiarity—can be perceived as catalysts for re-engagement that indicate the perceived restoration or enhancement of the psychological contract. This aligns with contemporary research that regards career choices as iterative assessments of opportunity frameworks and value congruence over time (Hom & Kiazad, 2025; Dlouhy et al., 2025). Secondly, identity reconstruction serves as the primary mediating mechanism, enabling returnees to engage in sensemaking and ‘identity work’ to reconcile past exit decisions with current re-entry, while navigating insider–outsider tensions and redefining their professional identities (Denyer & Rowson, 2024; Gleissner, 2025). The concurrent existence of advantages (e.g., expedited onboarding, augmented career capital, revitalized belonging) and disadvantages (e.g., stigma, unresolved issues, credibility challenges) illustrates the dual consequences of contract renewal, wherein re-entry produces both relational benefits and lingering strain, aligning with studies highlighting the incomplete restoration of psychological contracts and the enduring relational ambiguity (Kiazad et al., 2024; Saksida et al., 2026). These themes are theoretically synthesized as sequential and interdependent phases—re-attraction, identity reconfiguration, and relational renegotiation—that collectively demonstrate how boomerang employment transcends turnover to signify a continuous, socially embedded process of exchange and identity development throughout career episodes.

### **Demographical Analysis**

The results can also be analyzed considering the demographic traits of the individuals, which disclose numerous significant patterns. The sample mostly comprises mid- to late-career professionals, predominantly aged between 40 and 60, many of whom hold managerial or specialist positions across many areas, including IT, marketing, human resources, and operations. This distribution indicates that boomerang behavior in this study is predominantly linked to seasoned employees rather than those in the early stages of their careers. Consistent with previous studies highlighting the influence of demographic variables like age and career stage on return decisions (Snyder et al., 2021; Shipp et al., 2014), older participants in this

sample prioritized stability, organizational familiarity, and work environment, while younger participants (ages 35–40) more often emphasized career advancement and growth opportunities.

Regarding gender, while both male and female participants indicated comparable overarching themes, nuanced distinctions surfaced. Female participants, especially in managerial positions, frequently cited organizational culture, leadership style, and relational dynamics as significant influences on their decision to return, while male participants predominantly emphasized structural elements like career advancement and role clarity. Furthermore, individuals employed in technical and structured sectors (e.g., IT, finance, manufacturing) more often highlighted efficiency-related benefits such as expedited onboarding, whereas those in more relational domains (e.g., HR, marketing, corporate communications) prioritized belonging and interpersonal relationships.

These demographic patterns indicate that although the fundamental elements of boomerang employment are well recognized, the focus on particular motives, problems, and advantages may differ based on employees' age, gender, and professional setting. This underscores the significance of accounting for demographic variation in the analysis of the return experience, without limiting the conclusions exclusively to these attributes.

A further examination of the findings reveals more intricate patterns concerning departmental distribution. Participants employed in technically intensive and process-oriented departments—specifically IT (P4, P12, P13, P16), finance (P10), accounting (P17), and manufacturing (P5)—consistently highlighted the operational benefits of returning, including diminished onboarding duration, familiarity with systems, and the capacity to produce results swiftly. Mid- to senior-level IT professionals, particularly in managerial positions such as P13 and P16, emphasized that their previous organizational experience facilitated more efficient navigation of complicated organizations upon their return. Participants in financial and accounting positions emphasized the importance of clarity in task objectives and procedural consistency as significant advantages.

Conversely, personnel in more relational and externally focused roles—such as human resources (P1, P6), marketing (P8, P11), and corporate communications (P15)—prioritized organizational culture, leadership style, and interpersonal interactions to a larger extent. The participants predominantly cited alterations in management strategy, team dynamics, and cultural alignment as critical determinants in their decision to return and their subsequent experiences. HR professionals and marketing managers emphasized the significance of a more

inclusive and transparent work environment in influencing their return selections. Furthermore, disparities arise when examining job and hierarchical status. Managerial-level participants from various departments (e.g., P2 in logistics, P9 in project management, P11 in marketing, and P13 in IT) exhibited heightened sensitivity to organizational changes, strategic direction, and leadership practices, while specialists and lower-level employees (e.g., P7 in international trade, P10 in finance, P14 in operations) concentrated primarily on career development opportunities and role-specific advancement. Participants from logistics and project management roles (P2, P9) emphasized that coordination complexity and cross-functional interaction significantly influenced their reintegration, underscoring the impact of interdependence on return experiences. These trends indicate that the experience of a boomerang employee is not consistent but is influenced by the characteristics of departmental work, the extent of role responsibility, and the balance between technical and relational job orientation. This suggests that sectoral and functional contexts subtly affect the experience of return motives, identity reconstruction, and perceived benefits or problems, despite the fundamental themes being consistent throughout the sample.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This study contributes theoretical nuance to the body of current career and turnover literature by challenging linear assumptions about employee mobility and highlighting the psychological contracts that underlie leaving and returning. However, boomerang employment challenges this linearity by illustrating how employees may leave, renegotiate expectations, and then re-enter businesses. Previous research has frequently characterized turnover as a one-way process (Hom et al., 2017). The current findings propose a processual and recursive model of mobility, wherein leaving is viewed not as a conclusion but as a transitory stage within a continuous work relationship. This analysis addresses recent appeals to redefine careers as dynamic systems characterized by movement across organizational and temporal boundaries (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019; Hom & Kiazad, 2025). This viewpoint corresponds with and expands upon recent research on modern careers that highlights fluidity, discontinuity, and individual agency in managing work transitions (Richardson & McKenna, 2020). This study offers a processual perspective on mobility, emphasizing the temporal progression of professional decisions rather than viewing them as discrete occurrences. The increasing awareness that contemporary professions are defined by boundaryless and protean orientations, where people place a higher priority on personal ideals and opportunities for personal growth than on traditional corporate

loyalty, is consistent with this cyclical viewpoint (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Briscoe & Hall, 2006).

Theoretically, boomerang employment adds to the literature on psychological contracts by being framed as a process of contract breach, renegotiation, and renewal. According to Conway and Briner (2005) and Rousseau (1995), psychological contracts are dynamic by nature and can be renegotiated in reaction to perceived violations or evolving situations. According to Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005), return decisions can be seen as efforts to balance unfulfilled expectations with fresh chances for alignment, so bolstering the notion that work relationships are dynamic social exchanges. The current findings enhance psychological contract theory in three significant aspects. Initially, they contest the underlying presumption that contract violation predominantly results in the dissolution of relationships (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Zhao et al., 2007) by demonstrating that a breach may instead trigger a prolonged, cyclical exchange process that ultimately leads to re-engagement. Conversely, the current findings indicate that a violation might trigger a prolonged cycle of disengagement, contemplation, and subsequent re-engagement, so converting the psychological contract into a multi-episode exchange process. This viewpoint aligns with and expands upon previous qualitative and conceptual research emphasizing the dynamic, changing, and interpretative characteristics of psychological contracts (Kiazad et al., 2024; Saksida et al., 2026).

The findings broaden the temporal dimension of psychological contracts by illustrating that obligations and expectations endure beyond organizational departure, remaining significant during absence and influencing re-entry decisions, thus addressing recent calls to investigate the longitudinal and dynamic nature of psychological contracts (Tomprou et al., 2015; Vantilborgh et al., 2014), while also aligning with recent studies that contextualize contracts within expansive career ecosystems encompassing various job phases (Dlouhy et al., 2025). The psychological contract extends beyond active employment, evolving into a lasting cognitive and relational framework that influences subsequent interactions. The study also emphasizes the collaborative aspect of contract renewal, demonstrating how both employees and employers actively reinterpret previous violations and engage in negotiation (Guest, 2004; Schalk & Roe, 2007).

Contemporary research increasingly dismisses linear turnover models and instead conceptualizes careers as iterative, relational, and temporally prolonged activities. Recent research on boomerang employment and career mobility emphasizes nonlinear pathways, identity reformation, and continuous negotiation of psychological contracts across

organizational borders (Dlouhy et al., 2025; Grohsjean et al., 2025). Qualitative and critical studies underscore sensemaking, relational repair, and power asymmetries in contract renegotiation, indicating that departure and return are not isolated occurrences but integral components of a continuous exchange cycle within broader career ecosystems (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019; Kiazad et al., 2024).

The findings collectively provide a novel integrative perspective, conceptualizing boomerang employment as a cyclical exchange mechanism that connects turnover, career growth, and psychological contract theory. This study empirically anchors the process in the experiences of returnees, illustrating how continuity, identity, and relational significance are actively reconstituted across temporal disruptions, thus providing a more sophisticated and accurate depiction of contemporary employment relationships.

Recent developments in career and identity research substantiate the theoretical framework of this study by defining careers as continuous processes of identity formation, alteration, and negotiation across various settings and temporal dimensions. Recent qualitative research emphasizes that individuals pursuing boundaryless and protean careers actively engage in "identity work" to integrate past experiences, current roles, and future ambitions, especially during transitions like organizational departure and reintegration (Denyer & Rowson, 2024; Gleissner, 2025). From this viewpoint, boomerang employment is perceived not solely as a mobility choice but as a locus for identity reassessment and narrative reconstruction, when individuals reinterpret previous contract violations and rebuild a more cohesive self-concept in relation to the business. This corresponds with research indicating that career identities are dynamic, relational, and influenced by cumulative experiences during many employment periods, rather than being fixed within a solitary organization (Boyle, 2022; Phan et al., 2025). This study emphasizes return as a pivotal moment for both contract renegotiation and identity realignment, thereby enhancing existing literature by connecting psychological contract processes with identity-based interpretations of career behavior, and providing a more cohesive and modern understanding of how individuals manage discontinuous yet significant career paths.

### **Practical Implications**

From a practical standpoint, the results indicate that companies ought to abandon ad hoc rehiring procedures. For returnees to successfully reintegrate, handle loyalty issues, and leverage their accrued social and human capital, structured re-onboarding programs are crucial.

Due to their existing organizational expertise and lower adjustment costs, boomerang employees frequently outperform new external hires, according to recent studies. However, they may also harbor lingering concerns about fit and loyalty (Shipp et al., 2014). Therefore, in order to address these issues and use returnees' views for organizational learning and development, businesses should create clear communication strategies and dialogue opportunities.

Furthermore, boomerang employees' dual perspective—combining insider knowledge with outside experiences—is what gives them strategic potential. Therefore, they can introduce new habits while maintaining cultural familiarity, making them useful border spanners. Businesses may benefit from knowledge transfer, employee engagement, and employer branding in competitive labor markets if they integrate boomerang employment into a larger talent management strategy. The hazards should not be disregarded, either, as returnees have the potential to rekindle unsolved conflicts or establish precedents that make internal equity among employees more difficult.

This study's findings underscore the necessity of addressing various stakeholders, including employees and HRM practitioners, in the interpretation of boomerang employment. For employees, rejoining a previous organization signifies not merely a career choice but also a process of renegotiating expectations, identity, and belonging, as demonstrated by the identified opportunities (e.g., expedited adaptation, increased career capital) and challenges (e.g., stigma, loyalty issues) in the findings. From a human resource management perspective, our findings indicate that boomerang employees should not be regarded solely as cost-effective rehires but as a unique talent cohort necessitating customized management strategies. In alignment with previous studies highlighting the strategic importance of effectively managing returnees (Snyder et al., 2021; Shipp et al., 2014), organizations could gain from establishing systematic re-entry protocols, clear communication strategies, and equitable career advancement frameworks to alleviate potential conflicts with current employees. In this context, harmonizing the expectations and experiences of employees and HR practitioners is essential for optimizing the benefits of boomerang employment and mitigating its possible disadvantages.

## **5. Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of boomerang employees—people who leave a company freely and then return—in order to identify the benefits and drawbacks of working for the same company again. By conducting in-depth interviews with 17 returnees

from a variety of industries, the study shed light on the factors that motivate workers to return, the identity negotiations they go through when reentering the company, and the intricate balancing act between the advantages and difficulties they face.

The results collectively imply that boomerang employment is a complex phenomenon. A mix of personal, and professional variables encourage returning personnel. As they manage the dual status of being both insiders and strangers, identity reconstruction processes shape their experiences. Boomerang employment has several benefits, including quicker adjustment and increased career capital, but it also has drawbacks, especially when it comes to loyalty impressions and unresolved organizational issues. These observations highlight how crucial it is to view boomerang employment as a complicated organizational and career process with both advantages and disadvantages, rather than as a straightforward return.

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## Appendix.

### Interview Questions

#### Background & Career Context

1. Can you tell me a little about your career background and how long you have worked in your current organization?
  - Probe: What roles have you held during your career, both inside and outside this organization?
2. How would you describe your career goals when you first joined this organization?
  - Probe: Did these goals change before you left?

#### Departure

3. Can you walk me through the reasons that led you to leave this organization initially?

- Probe: Were these reasons related to career growth, leadership, pay, work-life balance, or other factors?

4. How did you feel about the organization at the time you left?

- Probe: Did you experience any sense of broken expectations or unmet promises?

### **Decision to Return**

5. What factors influenced your decision to return to your former employer?

- Probe: Did organizational changes, career opportunities, or personal circumstances play a role?

6. Did you consider other options before deciding to come back?

- Probe: Why did this organization seem like the right choice again?

### **Re-entry Experience**

7. How would you describe your experience of rejoining the organization?

- Probe: How did the onboarding (formal or informal) process unfold?

8. How were you received by your manager and colleagues when you returned?

- Probe: Did you feel welcomed, questioned, or treated differently?

9. Did you notice any changes in the organization compared to before you left?

- Probe: Were these changes positive, negative, or both?

### **Pros and Cons of Being a Boomerang Employee**

10. What do you see as the main benefits of returning to your former employer?

- Probe: Familiarity, reduced learning curve, stronger relationships, career opportunities.

11. What challenges or drawbacks have you faced since coming back?

- Probe: Identity tensions, skepticism, unresolved issues, career limitations.

12. How has your relationship with the organization changed since you returned?

- Probe: Do you feel more valued, or more cautious about your future here?