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W-RETURN

Women's Empowerment and Reemployment Route

W_RETURN GUIDE

A handbook for working with women returning to employment

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Erasmus+ Small-scale Partnership in Adult Education (KA210-ADU)

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1. About this guide

This guide summarises how we worked in the W-RETURN project with women who had been away from the labour market for a long time. It describes the coaching process in 16 steps, the seven methods we used and the Roadmap as a working tool. It is complemented by case examples from practice.

The guide is aimed at coaches, counsellors, adult education institutions, labour market support organisations and civil society organisations that accompany women returning to working life. It describes what we did and what proved effective – as inspiration for your own work, not as a fixed programme.

The guide is published in German, English and Turkish. All materials produced in the project are available free of charge and without registration on the project website: <https://w-return.com>. They may be used and adapted under the CC BY-SA 4.0 licence, provided the project and the Erasmus+ funding are acknowledged.

2. The W-RETURN project

W-RETURN: Women's Empowerment and Reemployment Route is a Small-scale Partnership in adult education under the Erasmus+ programme. We – RegioVision GmbH Schwerin and our Turkish partner PAYDAŞ from Zonguldak – carried out the project together from March 2025 to June 2026.

The aim of the project was to support women who had not been in employment for a long time on their way back into working life. To this end, we offered group coaching and individual counselling at both locations, held a joint international training week and developed a personal roadmap for re-entry with each participant. We reached 34 women in Schwerin and 22 in Zonguldak.

This guide grew out of that work. It is not based on a theoretical concept but on what we tested, adapted and documented with the women over 16 months.

3. Understanding the target group

W-RETURN addresses women over 30 who are neither in employment nor in education or training – usually after a longer family phase. Many of them are not registered as unemployed and therefore do not appear in any statistics. It is precisely these women that standard labour market services often fail to reach.

In our work, certain characteristics appeared again and again: the women bring professional experience and qualifications, but after years of interruption they have little confidence in themselves. Their knowledge of application channels and requirements is no longer up to date. Digital tools that are taken for granted in any job search today are unfamiliar to many. And often there is no network to ease the way back.



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In Schwerin, all participants had a migration background. Language and translation were therefore not an add-on but a precondition of the work. Anyone working with this target group should plan time and resources for this from the outset.

For the accompaniment this means: returning to work is not just a matter of application techniques. It starts with self-esteem, needs time for trust and succeeds in small, verifiable steps.



4. The coaching process in 16 steps

We developed the coaching process together with our partner and applied it at both locations. The 16 steps build on each other but are not a rigid programme: depending on a woman's starting point, one step may need more room, another less. We worked in alternation between group coaching and individual counselling; the Roadmap (chapter 6) accompanies the entire process.

Note: In earlier project materials the process is shown in 17 steps. For this guide, we merged the two steps on digital skills into a single step.

Overview

Phase A • Steps 1–8	Building trust, strengthening self-esteem, recognising and naming one's own competences
Phase B • Steps 9–14	Tools for the job search: digital basics, strategies, application documents
Phase C • Steps 15–16	Contact with the labour market: job interviews and employer communication

Phase A – Trust and competences (steps 1–8)

Step 1: Getting to know each other and building trust

It all starts with the relationship. Many women arrive doubting whether a return to work is still possible for them at all. We take time to get to know each other, clarify expectations and make the group a safe space where people can speak openly. This step cannot be shortened – everything else builds on it.

Step 2: Recognising and using the Roadmap as an accompanying tool

We introduce the Roadmap: a workbook with exercises on clarifying career goals, a self-assessment and a set of questions for job interviews. The women learn that the Roadmap accompanies them through the entire process and that their personal roadmap emerges from it step by step.

Step 3: Understanding the strengthening of self-esteem as a process

Self-esteem does not grow through encouragement alone, but through experience. We make clear that strengthening self-esteem is a process that accompanies the whole journey – and that a family phase is not a gap but a time in which competences have developed. Small successes are made visible and acknowledged.

Step 4: Recognising professional competences

Together we compile what each woman brings professionally: training, work experience, further education – including from her country of origin. Much of this the women themselves initially do not



consider worth mentioning. The task of the coaching is to uncover these experiences and take them seriously.

Step 5: Recognising personal and social competences

Alongside the professional side stand the personal strengths: patience, reliability, helpfulness, organisational talent. As a tool we use the Roadmap's self-assessment with 22 traits on a nine-point scale. It makes strengths and areas for development discussable without judging.

Step 6: Naming and communicating competences

Recognising is not enough – the women practise putting their competences into their own words and saying them out loud, first in the group. What is said aloud here for the first time will later appear in the CV and be needed in the job interview.

Step 7: The interplay of personal and professional competences

Professional and personal competences combine into an overall picture: what defines me, and which jobs does that suit? At this point career goals become more concrete – some women confirm their old profession, others discover a new direction.

Step 8: Learning to talk about oneself

The women practise a short, coherent narrative about themselves: career path, strengths, goal. This self-presentation is rehearsed and revised several times. It is the basis for job interviews – and for many, the moment when their own path is told for the first time as a story with a future.

Phase B – Tools for the application (steps 9–14)

Step 9: Building digital skills and applying them in the job search

No job search without digital basics: we work on using computers and the internet, online job portals, e-mail and digital application channels – up to AI tools that the women operate themselves. In the project, the focus for this was on the international training week and individual work; in the group coaching the topic was mainly addressed using job portals as an example.

Step 10: Job search strategies

Which paths lead to a job? We look at job portals, unsolicited applications, personal networks and regional employers. Each woman develops a strategy that fits her goal and her everyday life. This was the most frequently covered topic in our group coaching sessions.

Step 11: Preparing important documents

Certificates, records, references: we clarify which documents are needed for applications, what is missing and what has to be obtained – for foreign qualifications this includes the question of recognition.

Step 12: Creating the CV

Each woman creates or revises her CV according to current standards. The groundwork from steps 4 to 7 pays off here: the competences have already been named and only need to be put into shape.



Step 13: Motivation letter

Building on their own narrative (step 8), the motivation letter takes shape: why this job, why me? We work with real job advertisements so that the letters do not remain interchangeable.

Step 14: The application portfolio

CV, motivation letter and documents are brought together into a complete application portfolio – digitally and, where needed, on paper. With this, the women are ready to apply.

Phase C – Contact with the labour market (steps 15–16)

Step 15: Preparing for job interviews

Using the Roadmap's question catalogue – 16 typical job interview questions – the women prepare and practise in mock interviews. Dealing with nervousness is also part of this; body-oriented exercises have proved effective here. Anyone who has once answered the questions honestly for herself goes into a real interview with much more confidence.

Step 16: Employer communication

Finally, it is time for real contact: phone calls, e-mails, job interviews, following up on an application. The project generated contacts with companies; within this framework, several participants had their first job interview in years.



5. Seven coaching methods

We deliberately went beyond classic careers counselling and combined seven approaches. None of the methods stands alone – they interlock in the process and are used depending on the situation and the group.

Method 1: Systemic coaching

A solution-oriented approach that takes into account relationships, roles, dynamics and the women's environment. Working with the question of the best and the worst possible outcome has proved effective: it makes fears concrete and thus workable.

Method 2: The GROW model

GROW stands for Goal, Reality, Options, Will. The model gives conversations a clear structure and helps the women move from a vague wish to a concrete next step.

Method 3: AI-supported coaching

Digital tools using artificial intelligence give personalised feedback, for example on application documents. An unplanned but welcome side effect: because the women operate the tools themselves, their digital skills grow along the way.

Method 4: Peer coaching

The participants support each other in small groups. This approach proved particularly effective in our project: women in comparable situations accept advice from each other more readily than from a professional – and the learning experiences are more lasting.

Method 5: Design Thinking

An approach to creative problem-solving: understanding the needs of those involved, developing ideas as a team, testing them quickly and improving them. In coaching it helps to see stuck situations with fresh eyes.

Method 6: Gamified methods

Goals and progress are made visible in a playful way. This keeps motivation up over a long process and turns even small steps into recognisable successes.

Method 7: Somatic approaches

Body awareness plays a major role – tension and insecurity show physically before they are spoken. We used body-oriented exercises above all in the preparation for job interviews.



6. The Roadmap as a working tool

The Roadmap is the project's central working tool. It has been published as a separate booklet ("Templates, exercises and scripts that support a successful job search") and is available for download on the project website: <https://w-return.com>. Here we describe what it consists of and how we worked with it.

Three building blocks

- **Exercises on clarifying career goals.** Open questions about the dream job, activities that bring joy, the ideal daily routine and practical conditions such as the commute. The answers make visible where the journey is meant to go.
- **Self-assessment of 22 personal traits.** From openness through patience to reliability, the women rate on a nine-point scale how pronounced individual traits are in them. The result is not a test but a basis for conversation for working on strengths and areas for development.
- **Question catalogue for job interviews.** 16 questions typically asked in job interviews – from "Tell me about yourself" to questions about salary expectations and work-life balance. Anyone who has once answered them honestly for herself goes into real interviews prepared and more at ease.

How we worked with it

The women work through the exercises alone or together with their coach. From the results, a personal roadmap emerges for each participant: a few verifiable steps – which skills she wants to refresh, what support she needs and in which order she proceeds. The roadmaps are not a one-off document; we reviewed and updated them together regularly in the group coaching and in individual counselling.

7. Gathering and using feedback

We regularly asked the participants for feedback – in conversation and through a survey on the coaching process. The feedback was consistently positive; particularly appreciated were the individual adaptation of the Roadmap, the support with application documents and the practising of job interviews.

It was equally important to us to draw consequences from the feedback. Formats that did not prove effective were adapted or discontinued after a joint evaluation. We recommend this willingness to continuously review one's own offer to every organisation working with this target group.



8. Case examples from practice

The following two case histories from Schwerin show how the coaching process works in individual cases. Names have been changed and identifying details omitted.

Case example 1: Back into employment via a mini-job

Starting point. Ms I. came to Germany as a refugee from Ukraine. At the beginning, the focus was not on the job search but on language: the initial goal was to improve her German, take part in social life and gradually find her way in the new environment.

Course of the coaching. Ms I. attended language courses and integration programmes and was accompanied in parallel by individual coaching. There her personal needs were taken into account, career perspectives were developed and the transition into employment was prepared. An important intermediate step was marginal employment: in the mini-job she was able to apply her language skills in a real working environment, build social contacts and gain her first work experience in Germany.

Outcome. After this settling-in phase, Ms I. successfully applied to a retirement home. She works there in housekeeping and is gaining experience in a care-related working environment. Her long-term goal is a qualified job in care and support – her current position is a solid intermediate step towards it.

What this case shows: Language support, coaching and practical work experience interlock. The path did not lead directly to the desired job but via small, verifiable steps – from a mini-job to regular employment, moving towards the actual goal.

Case example 2: A permanent job through directly approaching employers and an internship

Starting point. Ms O., 33 years old, is a trained cook from Ukraine. With German at B1 level she had a clear goal: to improve her language skills and to get back on her feet professionally as quickly as possible. From the start she showed a great deal of initiative and openness to sectors other than her trained profession.

Course of the coaching. The coaching relied on two paths: directly approaching companies and clarifying the formal steps for entry. Together with her coach, Ms O. introduced herself in person at a supermarket and left her application documents. In parallel, the opportunity of an internship in a small hotel with guest house arose. The necessary steps were discussed together – Ms O. handled the documents for the Jobcenter and the application for travel costs herself.

Outcome. The internship became a springboard: Ms O. completed it successfully and was taken on part-time. Today she works in the kitchen, room service, reception and breakfast service – speaking German every day. The owner describes her as an active employee who asks questions when something is unclear. As a next project, dishes from her Ukrainian homeland are to be added to the menu together.



What this case shows: Personal initiative, directly approaching employers and an internship as an entry point can quickly lead to a permanent job. The coaching accompanied her without taking the decisions away from her – the decisive steps were taken by Ms O. herself. The business gained as well: an employee who works in several areas and brings her own professional experience.

9. Recommendations for transfer

From 16 months of project work at two locations we take away the following lessons. They are addressed to organisations wishing to adopt or adapt the approach.

- **Allow time for trust.** Building trust is not a preliminary stage but part of the work. Anyone who cuts it short loses the women before the actual topics begin.
- **Consider language from the outset.** If participants have a different first language, translation and linguistic adaptation of the materials are a precondition of the work – not an add-on. This takes time, but noticeably improves commitment and results.
- **Small, verifiable steps.** Personal roadmaps work when they consist of a few concrete steps that are regularly reviewed and updated together.
- **Use peer formats.** The exchange among women in comparable situations was one of the most effective elements of the project. Small groups with room for mutual support belong in every comparable programme.
- **Let them operate digital tools themselves.** Digital skills develop by doing. When the women use job portals and AI tools themselves, they learn the tool and the content at the same time.
- **Expect open participation.** Alongside a core of regular participants there is a larger circle that attends occasionally. Both have value – the programme should be built so that individual sessions can also stand on their own.
- **Evaluate formats regularly.** Not everything that was planned proves itself in practice. Regular joint evaluation – in the team, with the partner, with the participants – makes it possible to adjust in time.

10. Project materials

All materials are available free of charge on the project website: <https://w-return.com>

- **W_RETURN Guide** – this guide, in German, English and Turkish.
- **Roadmap** – templates, exercises and scripts for a successful job search.
- **Coaching process** – the overview of the process across the entire project.
- **Innovative coaching methods** – the brief presentation of the seven methods.
- **Documented pathways** – individual participants' accounts of their experience.



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