

Career Breaks

Recruitment and Career Development

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Overview

This section describes the British Council's career break scheme. A career break is a period of unpaid absence taken by a member of staff. Career breaks can be taken to help staff deal with family responsibilities, to accommodate a partner's working arrangements, or, exceptionally, to enable staff to undertake study or training which develops them and is of demonstrable benefit to the British Council. This section covers:

- career break implications and considerations
- managing a career break
- career break applications from staff on fixed-term contracts
- career break applications from female staff not qualifying for maternity leave
- handling a career break application.

Audience

The policy applies to UK-appointed staff on indefinite contracts. There are some differences for UK-appointed staff on fixed term contracts (see Career break applications from staff on fixed-term contracts below). It can provide good practice guidance for country/territory TACOS and/or Teaching and Exams' staff contracts, subject to local law and conditions.

Responsibilities

Members of staff contemplating a career break, and their line managers, are responsible for carrying out these procedures and for ensuring that the career break is properly managed. A record must be kept of any decision to refuse a career break, setting out the reasons.

Policy

The British Council's policy on career breaks supports the British Council's equal opportunities policy and its aim to be a good employer. A career break can be an effective alternative where other working arrangements (for example, flexible working, part-time working, annual or maternity leave) are not appropriate.

The British Council is committed, wherever possible, to:

- agreeing requests for career breaks to a maximum of five years in the following circumstances:
 - to undertake family responsibilities, for example, the care of young children, partners or elderly dependent relatives (that is, parents or grandparents)
 - to accompany a partner (whether or not a member of the British Council's staff) overseas or to a location in the UK where the British Council is unable to offer employment
 - to take unpaid leave when a member of staff does not qualify for paid maternity leave.
- considering on an individual basis requests for extensions to career breaks for up to **seven** years, for a member of staff to accompany a British Council partner on an overseas posting or to a location in the UK where the British Council cannot offer employment

considering a career break for study or training (usually a maximum of **one** year, but exceptionally a maximum of **three** years) only if it can be justified in the context of your proposals for the training and development of staff in your unit.

Guidance

Career break implications and considerations

Career breaks carry obligations on both sides which must be clearly recognised. The member of staff and line manager accept joint responsibility for maintaining contact during the career break. The member of staff, advised by the line manager, must make every effort to find a job at the end of the career break. #

Managers

- You must be aware that a career break constitutes a variation in the terms of an employment contract. The British Council makes a legal commitment that the member of staff will be able to resume his or her paid employment with the British Council. You must be sure that you will be able to honour the commitment to a job at the end of a career break. It means that, after a career break of more than 12 months, you guarantee to reabsorb the member of staff into his or her work area. For career breaks of 12 months or less, you are expected to keep the member of staff's post open for them.
- You must discuss the implications of taking a career break with the member of staff before he or she makes a formal application.
- If you are handling an enquiry about a career break, you must always consult your London or Manchester HR contact for UK staff, or the relevant Overseas HR manager or country-based HR contact, for country-appointed staff in British Council offices overseas.

Members of staff

- If you are considering applying for a career break, you must be clear that you are entering into a new contractual arrangement. First and foremost, you are making a firm commitment to return to a job in the British Council by an agreed date, or to resign from British Council employment.
- If, at the end of the career break, you have not demonstrated an active commitment to secure a job, and you are unwilling to accept the offer of a temporary or permanent job and to return to work on the agreed date, you will have to resign.

Warning

Approval to take a career break cannot be given to anyone who is in debt to the British Council (for example, a season ticket advance or other loan), unless the money is first repaid. You must check with Payroll and Pensions section in the UK or HR or Finance section in British Council offices overseas. In confirming the terms of the career break in your letter, you must specify that the career break is conditional upon the debt being repaid in full first (see Letter Granting a Request for a Career Break and Appendix to the Career Break Offer Letter).

Council publications

The line manager or HR contact must ensure that the member of staff has access to the Intranet, or, if this is not possible, send the member of staff copies of key British Council publications (for example, letters from the Director General, the Annual Report, relevant circulars, the Bulletin and so on).

Extensions

When an application for a career break meets all the criteria and is granted in principle, the British Council must agree the length of time required at the same time, whenever possible. Staff are advised to think carefully about the length of career break before applying, as the British Council cannot agree to a request to extend a career break.

Only staff who are accompanying partners on British Council postings may apply to extend their career break up to a maximum of seven years, providing the request for an extension is for the same reason.

The end of a career break is fixed, so the British Council will not ask members of staff to delay their return if they do not have a permanent job to return to.

Career break applications from staff on fixed-term contracts

Staff on fixed-term contracts may apply for a career break only within the life of their existing contract. No career break which would extend the life of their contract will be agreed. The end date of the contract will remain fixed. Renewal of the contract may be considered in the usual way. Only if a renewal of the contract has been agreed may any extension to the career break be considered. In agreeing any renewal of contract and extension of career break the manager must be in a position to guarantee to reabsorb the member of staff into his or her post or work area in the same way as for those on indefinite contracts.

It is important that this is made clear to the applicant. Use the standard letter (Letter Granting a Request for a Career Break), but ensure that an additional sentence to this effect is incorporated in the first paragraph (see Appendix to the Career Break Offer Letter). You must also take the other administrative action described in Checklist of administrative procedures in the UK below.

Career break applications from female staff not qualifying for maternity leave

When a woman is not eligible for paid maternity leave (see Maternity Leave and Annual Leave Entitlement), she is eligible to apply for a career break of up to six months.

A career break taken in these circumstances does not automatically extend the length of a fixed-term contract (see above).

For more information on maternity leave, see Maternity Leave and Annual Leave Entitlement.

Procedures

Handling a career break application

Before agreeing to support a request for a career break from a member of staff, you must consider the items in Checklist of criteria below.

Checklist of criteria

1. Does the application fit in with the British Council's policy on career breaks? For applications for full-time study/training see also Full-time study/training below.
2. Does the member of staff meet the following criteria?
 - has a consistent record of performance rated as 'successful' or better
 - can demonstrate ability in the British Council's core competencies and has the potential to do a range of jobs
 - is not undergoing any stage of a disciplinary procedure
 - has a satisfactory sickness absence record
 - will repay any outstanding loans from the British Council before starting the career break
 - is not in the first year of working for the British Council (in which case a career break should be granted only in exceptional circumstances)
 - has worked a minimum of two years following any previous career break.
3. Is there a need to reorganise the work and does this mean employing someone who takes on some or all of the duties of the absent member of staff?
4. If so, are the necessary funds available, if the funds released by the career break cannot be used for the cost of a replacement?

5. Have the relevant operational factors been taken into account (for example, the member of staff's skills, knowledge, and experience; the effect of releasing the person from the job; the business plan, and so on)?
6. Has the British Council's obligation to re-employ the member of staff been taken into account and the relevant senior manager (if the unit or department is guaranteeing to re-absorb) or SMT member (if the wider work area is guaranteeing to re-absorb) given written approval?

Full-time study/training

1. Can the case be justified in the context of your proposals for the training and development of staff in your unit?
2. Will the full-time study/training:
 - bridge a skills or experience gap in your unit
 - strengthen the British Council's overall position, and/or benefit the British Council and the member of staff?

Authorities

Refer any applications which you support for a career break, for agreement, as follows:

Duration	Refer to
Up to 12 months	The appropriate senior manager in your work area through your HR contact or the Country Director in an overseas British Council office
More than 12 months	Head Recruitment and Resourcing in HR, through your HR contact and the appropriate SMT member in your work area or the Country Director in an overseas British Council office

Checklist of administrative procedures in the UK

1. To apply for a career break, complete the Career Break Application form.
2. For career breaks of more than 12 months, get final approval from Head Recruitment and Resourcing in HR.
3. If the request for a career break is approved:
 - a. Confirm the leave position. All paid leave must be taken before the career break begins.
 - b. Confirm the terms of the career break in a letter to the applicant (see Letter Granting a Request for a Career Break).
 - c. Ask your HR contact to complete form CP8 to include expected dates of absence, a contact address and any other relevant details.
 - d. Send the form, with a copy of your letter, to Rebus, who manage British Council's payroll.
 - e. Your HR contact must also send a copy of the CP8 to Pensions Section in HR, instructing them to note any unpaid absence for pension purposes, if applicable.
 - f. Make a note of the approved career break on the Annual Leave form, and amend the leave entitlement for the year(s) affected if the career break is up to one year (see Maternity Leave, Paternity Leave, Adoptive Leave, Parental Leave and Annual Leave Entitlement).
 - g. Complete an SAP User Change Request and email it to the BSC Support Centre. You should have the e-mail account disabled for the duration of the career break and if appropriate ask for an auto-reply message to be activated for a given duration giving an alternative contact. You should also arrange for laptops, mobile phones and

any other equipment to be returned. Relevant guidance can be found under User change request process.

Managing a career break

It is essential for both the British Council and the member of staff that career breaks be properly managed. It is the responsibility of both parties to ensure that they are.

1. The line manager must complete a performance evaluation **before** the career break starts (it is impossible to complete a useful evaluation after a significant break), otherwise the individual's pay may be affected when he or she returns.
2. Identify a British Council contact. For career breaks of 12 months or less, the main British Council contact is usually the line manager, because staff normally return to their previous job. For a career break of more than 12 months, the main contact will be the relevant HR contact in London or Manchester. In British Council offices overseas, the main contact may be either the line manager, the Country Director or the local HR contact.
3. Towards the end of the career break, the member of staff must attend a return-to-work interview with his or her main contact. This meeting should ideally be face-to-face unless this is impossible, for example for staff accompanying partners on overseas postings. The meeting must take place at least two months before the date of return for staff on career breaks of 12 months or less, and at least four months before the date of return for staff on career breaks of longer than 12 months.

Make sure the meeting covers the following:

- discussing job preferences and forthcoming vacancies (unless the member of staff is returning to a previous job)
 - discussing the individual's training and development requirements, including agreeing a personal development plan
 - advising on key changes that have taken place within the British Council
 - agreeing an action plan (this is particularly relevant for staff who have yet to apply for vacancies or are in the process of doing so).
4. Members of staff who have not secured a job within about six weeks of their return date must have a job at their grade identified for them. The job is likely to be a temporary assignment and members of staff will be given support in finding a permanent post once they have returned to work, unless they have secured a job in the meantime.