



The Mid-Career Exodus

Why women leave tech — and what it would take to bring them back

Published by Akamai
April 2026

our research partners



Introduction



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Over the years, I've had the privilege of meeting hundreds of brilliant women working in technology, but I've also known many who have walked away from their careers. Their stories have stayed with me. These are not women who lacked ambition, talent or resilience. They are women who hit a wall: a culture that didn't see them, a career path that narrowed rather than opened or simply a working pattern that couldn't flex around the rest of their lives.

According to government figures, only 29% of UK tech employees, and only 21% of senior tech roles, are women. We know representation of women in tech is a long-standing problem. But what we wanted to understand better is **when** they leave, **why** they leave, and critically, **what it would take for them to come back**. That is what this research sets out to answer.

At Akamai, we founded FLAME, our UK programme dedicated to helping women nurture and mentor each other through their careers. FLAME stands for Female Learning and Mentoring Experience, and it embodies our belief that women connecting with each other, across different phases of their careers, can have a powerful positive effect. However, we know that Akamai alone cannot solve a sector-wide challenge.

That is why we commissioned this study of 1,500 women in different organisations across the UK, polling 1,000 who have left tech roles, and 500 who have returned after a career break. The findings are both sobering and hopeful. They reveal a sector that is talented at attracting women but struggling to keep them, particularly at the critical mid-career levels where many of them should be hitting their stride. Yet they also show that the door is not closed: With the right conditions, many women would consider coming back.

Read these findings with an open mind and a practical eye. Consider what they mean for your own organisation, your teams and the women within them. Making space for more voices in technology is how we will build a stronger, safer, more innovative digital world.



Research overview

This study paints a clear picture of a talent pipeline that is leaking at exactly the wrong moment. More than half of the women surveyed left the tech sector within five years of entering it, and nearly 9 in 10 departed within a decade. These are experienced professionals leaving at the mid-to-senior junction, taking hard-earned skills, institutional knowledge and leadership potential with them.

Several of the reasons behind this exodus are structural, not personal. Lack of work-life balance and meaningful opportunities for advancement were key influences for the majority, suggesting adaptations are needed to keep more women in the sector for the long term.

The exodus need not be permanent. Nearly 4 in 10 women who have left tech said they would consider returning under the right conditions. The message: This is a talent pool that is still open to the sector, provided the sector is willing to change.

Key findings at a glance



57%

of women leave
tech within 5 years



87%

leave within
10 years



70%

cite work-life
balance as major or
significant influence



39%

would consider
returning under right
conditions



52%

of returners say
higher salary
was key



Methodology

Research was conducted by Censuswide among 1,500 adult women (age 18+) across the UK. The sample comprised 1,000 women who have left a tech role — defined as either a role within a tech sector company or a tech role within a non-tech company — and 500 women who have returned to tech after a career break. Fieldwork was conducted between 26 February and 9 March 2026. Censuswide is a member of the Market Research Society and British Polling Council, and follows MRS and ESOMAR codes of conduct.

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When and why are women leaving tech?

UK tech is hemorrhaging female talent at a critical career stage. More than half (57%) of women leave tech roles within 5 years, and 87% leave within 10 years. The average tenure in the sector is just over six years, suggesting the typical woman departs before she may reach her full leadership potential.

Most women who left were not forced out. Over a third (35%) said their departure was entirely by choice, and a further 31% said it was mostly by choice. Yet the reasons they cite suggest that their choice is shaped by systemic factors rather than personal preference. Work-life balance topped the list of primary reasons for leaving (42%),

followed by burnout and mental health (19%), a desire for career change (19%) and a lack of career progression (19%). Inflexible working arrangements (15%) and pay dissatisfaction (16%) also featured prominently.

Respondents had the choice to pick a variety of factors that weren't the single primary reason, but were contributing reasons to their decision to leave. When we look at that broader range of influences on the decision to leave, the cultural dimension comes sharply into focus. Work-life balance was a major or significant influence for 67% of respondents. Flexibility in terms of remote work and hours influenced 57%. A

lack of company culture and belonging affected 52%, and gender diversity in leadership influenced 59%. Opportunities for advancement were an influence for 74% of respondents, suggesting that many women believed their careers were stalling before they chose to walk away.

The resulting brain drain is significant. Among women who have left tech, just 15% have exited the workforce entirely. The majority moved into other sectors — finance (13%), education (13%), professional services (12%) and healthcare (12%) — carrying their tech expertise with them. The sector's loss is, quite literally, another industry's gain.



57%

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5 years



74%

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their departure



86%

say work-life balance
influenced their
departure

Reasons for leaving tech

42%

Work-life balance topped the list of primary reasons for leaving

19%

Burnout and **mental health**

19%

Desire for career change

19%

Lack of career progression

15%

Inflexible working arrangements

16%

Pay dissatisfaction also featured prominently.



Knowing that many of the barriers to full female participation in the technology workforce have been structural means that we can be intentional and strategic about change; the structures that were built for yesterday can be rebuilt to fully engage and retain the entire workforce of today and tomorrow.



Khalil Smith
Vice President, Inclusion, Diversity, and Engagement at Akamai

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What would persuade them to come back?



Only 11% said nothing would make them return to the tech sector. By contrast, nearly 4 in 10 (39%) women said they would consider returning to the sector, with a further 26% saying they were neutral rather than opposed. A majority of women could be persuaded to come back, under the right conditions.

When asked what conditions would encourage a return, the answers were practical and achievable. Better salary and compensation topped the list (43%), closely followed by improved work-life balance policies (38%), hybrid working arrangements (38%) and flexible options such as part-time, compressed weeks or job shares (37%). Better management and leadership (18%), job security (17%) and

clear career progression pathways (17%) also featured.

Notably, these practical workplace changes were valued significantly more highly than visible diversity and inclusion measures: strong female representation in leadership (15%) and more diverse and inclusive culture (16%) were important but secondary to the tangible conditions of day-to-day work.

The experience of women who have already returned to tech reinforces these priorities. Among the 500 “boomerang employees” surveyed, higher salary (52%), improved work-life balance (43%) and better career progression (43%) were the factors that mattered most in their decision to come back. These returning

women also bring valuable perspective: 90% said they were likely to remain in tech for at least another two years, with nearly half (49%) saying they were very likely to stay. They have already tested the alternative and chosen to return, suggesting that the sector can win this talent back if it addresses their priorities.

What the boomerangs suggest is that the return-to-tech journey is most successful when it is supported by structural change, not just warm words. The women who came back likely did so because something meaningful had shifted: better pay, more balance, a clearer path forward. Their example should be the blueprint.



39%

of leavers would consider returning



90%

of returners likely to stay 2+ years



Factors influencing women returning to tech

52%

Higher salary

43%

Improved work-life balance

43%

Better career progression

were the factors that mattered most in their decision to come back.



The findings provide a valuable picture of what mid-career women are looking for in order to return to tech, and it's encouraging to see that the majority could be persuaded to come back under the right conditions. Progression pathways are crucial for retaining talent, but equally important is ensuring that women who want to return have clear, supported ways to reenter the sector in the first place. When employers build both return pathways and progression pathways, they create an environment where women can come back, grow and stay.



Hazel Little
CEO, Career Returners

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Spotlight on cybersecurity



Cybersecurity represents both a concentrated version of the wider tech challenge and a unique set of pressures. Of the 1,500 women surveyed, 192 identified cybersecurity as their primary tech specialism, providing a focused lens on the experiences of women in one of the sector's most critical and fastest-growing disciplines.

The picture is one of high engagement but high friction. A significant majority (75%) of women in cybersecurity said that opportunities to work on meaningful security challenges positively impacted their satisfaction, and 80% viewed access to continuous learning and certifications positively. Yet the pressures are real: 39% cited on-call or irregular hours

as having a negative impact on their satisfaction, and 25% said the high-pressure nature of security work affected them negatively.

When asked about cybersecurity-specific factors influencing their decision to leave, take a break from, or consider leaving tech, the standout finding was work-life balance disruption from security incidents and on-call requirements (40%). A lack of female role models in senior security positions was second, cited by 35%, followed by stress from constant threat monitoring (31%) and feeling isolated as a woman in a male-dominated security field (28%). Limited recognition unless things go wrong was a factor for 28%. The pattern is clear: Women in cybersecurity

are drawn to the mission, yet worn down by the culture and operational demands that surround it.

There is a particular irony in the cybersecurity retention challenge. Cybercrime is fundamentally a human issue, and diverse perspectives can have a strengthening effect. Losing women from cybersecurity does not only reduce diversity; it diminishes the industry's collective ability to protect the digital world. Addressing the specific pressures of security work — such as more predictable schedules, visible female leadership, and recognition for prevention as well as response — is not just a retention strategy but a security imperative.



75%

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80%

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28%

cite work-life
balance as major or
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Top reasons for leaving cybersecurity



35%

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40%

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We lose women from cybersecurity at the exact moment their expertise becomes most valuable. This isn't a pipeline problem; it's a leadership one. Diverse teams build stronger defences. Until organisations commit to inclusive leadership, not just diversity hiring, they are actively weakening their own security posture.

Zoe Mackenzie
President, WiCyS UK
& Ireland Affiliate



Conclusion: A call to action

This research makes one thing clear: The UK tech sector's challenge with female talent is not just one of attraction but of retention. Women enter tech with ambition, skill and commitment. They leave not because they have lost interest, but because the conditions of their working lives fail to keep pace with their needs and aspirations.

The solutions are not mysterious. They are practical, measurable, and within reach: competitive pay tied to industry benchmarks; genuine flexibility in how, when, and where work happens; career progression pathways that do not penalise those who work differently; and a culture where women see people who look like them in positions of influence.

Those in positions of leadership should audit their company's retention data by gender, and consider carefully the experiences of women in their teams. There may be clear pathways to improving the business' retention of business-critical mid-career female talent.

For women currently working in tech, remember that your voice matters, and initiatives like FLAME exist to support and advocate for you.

For the nearly 4 in 10 women who have left tech and would consider coming back: Tech needs you, and we are working to make it worthwhile to return.

The mid-career exodus is not inevitable. It is the result of choices made by companies, by leaders, and by the sector as a whole. With better choices, we can stem the tide and build a tech industry where women do not just enter, but stay, lead and thrive.

About Akamai

Akamai is the cybersecurity and cloud computing company that powers and protects business online. Our market-leading security solutions, superior threat intelligence, and global operations team provide defense in depth to safeguard enterprise data and applications everywhere. Akamai's full-stack cloud computing solutions deliver performance and affordability on the world's most distributed platform. Global enterprises trust Akamai to provide the industry-leading reliability, scale, and expertise they need to grow their business with confidence. Learn more at akamai.com and akamai.com/blog, or follow Akamai Technologies on X and LinkedIn.

About FLAME

FLAME (Female Learning and Mentoring Experience) is Akamai's UK initiative dedicated to empowering women in technology through mentorship, networking and professional development. To learn more, join the FLAME LinkedIn group.

About WiCyS UK & Ireland Affiliate

WiCyS (Women in CyberSecurity) is an international nonprofit with over 11,000 members worldwide, founded in 2012 with backing from the U.S. National Science Fund and partners. The UK & Ireland Affiliate brings that global mission home, working to recruit, retain and advance women in cybersecurity across all career stages. Entirely volunteer-run by industry professionals and allies, it is a community built by women in the field, for women in the field.

About Career Returners

Career Returners is a social impact coaching, community and consulting organisation that has been partnering with employers and professionals since 2014 to enable confident, supported returns to work after extended career breaks for caring, health or other life reasons. Their mission is to make career breaks a valued and powerful part of a lifetime career by dismantling the personal and structural barriers faced by returning professionals. As leading return-to-work specialists, they support both new hires reentering the workforce and employees returning internally after long absences, drawing on deep insight into the return-to-work journey, psychology-based coaching expertise and practical commercial understanding of successful reintegration.

