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Boomerang Employees and Organizational Performance: A Study of Rehiring Practices in Corporate Organizations

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ABSTRACT

The occurrence of boomerang hiring in which employees are rehired by firms in which they previously left willingly has gained significantly more prominence in business circles in the last ten years due to a variety of factors including labor market conditions, escalating cost of recruiting, and social change regarding movement from one job to another. Nevertheless, there is still relatively inconclusive literature on whether boomerang hires are a more advantageous route of recruiting talent compared to regular external recruits. The current study aims to fill this gap by undertaking an extensive mixed methods study involving cross sectional survey of 1,248 employees working at 82 corporate organizations in five countries, longitudinal three year performance evaluation of 618 boomerang and external recruits, interviews with 46 human resource managers and returning employees, and analysis of 58 empirical studies conducted between 2010 and 2024. Quantitative results show that boomerangs score higher than external new hires in terms of productivity, managerial evaluations, and 24-month retention rates, reaching their productive capacity much faster and at a more efficient onboarding process expense, although underperforming tenured workers on virtually all accounts. Sector-specific analysis shows that technology and financial service companies enjoy the highest performance premiums for bringing back boomerangs, whereas the benefit declines when technical skills update is necessary for the job. The qualitative results have revealed five pathways of translating organizational knowledge into performance gains for boomerangs, as well as three risk factors inherent to such a hiring practice, which include role regression assumptions and social network re-integration problems. A Boomerang Talent Strategy Framework is suggested based on three core elements of re-hiring architecture: alumni management, structured reentry process, and performance differentiators audit.

***Keywords**: Boomerang Employees, Organizational Performance, Talent Acquisition, Employee Retention, Rehiring Practices, Human Resource Management, Alumni Networks.*

Introduction

Career paths where the employee begins employment at an organization, moves upwards within the organization and leaves only when he/she retires or is separated involuntarily from the organization have become increasingly rare with the trend of a flexible career path in which employees make several career moves within different employers and even different sectors (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). In the era of boundaryless careers, the concept of boomerang employment, which refers to the situation whereby an employee voluntarily leaves the organization and returns back through being rehired by the same organization after being engaged in external employment, has changed from being an organizational oddity to becoming a talent management practice. The report published by the Society for Human Resource Management in 2023 estimates that the rate of boomerang hires is in the range of 15-25 percent of external hires in large corporate organizations compared to less than 5 percent in 2010 (SHRM, 2023).

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The logic of employing former employees as boomerangs is quite logical. They possess existing organizational knowledge, have formed ties with colleagues and customers and are familiar with the culture, which is what new outsiders need to acquire over a period of at least twelve to eighteen months before they can contribute fully (Swider, Liu, Harris, & Gardner, 2017). The recruitment process will cost less, there will be less risk of cultural incompatibility, and the symbolic value of a decision to leave and come back again rather than go away will likely be positively motivating and culturally valuable. The individual leaving and coming back, in effect, represents an asset of the organization that was loaned to the external labor market and has come back with added value.

However, the evidence supporting such claims is far from as robust as the management theory discourse suggests. Research on performance outcomes among employees returning from their career outside of the organization has yielded conflicting results, with some research showing productivity benefits over external hires (Keller & Weibler, 2015), others indicating no difference once selection effects were controlled (Rehg, Gundlach, & Grigorian, 2012), and still others highlighting performance weaknesses in positions where the skills required by the job have undergone substantial change since their departure (Forret & Sullivan, 2002). The factors that determine whether former organizational experience leads to better performance once back inside have yet to be studied across industries, countries, and organizational levels. Under what circumstances boomerang rehiring becomes an economically wise decision rather than the expensive restoration of past mistakes remains to be established empirically.

Literature Review and Research Gap

The research on boomerang employees is relatively new and has emerged as a new niche in talent management and organizational behaviour literature. The pioneering work done in conceptualizing this phenomenon came from Swider, Liu, Harris & Gardner (2017), wherein the authors created a classification of organizational re-entry into three types - boomerang employees (where there is voluntary departure and voluntary rehire), recall employees (where there is involuntary departure but the return to the organization is initiated by the organization), and rehired retirees. Clearly, boomerang employees have different motivating factors, expectations and preconditions when compared with recall employees or retirees.

Empirical evidence provided by Swider et al. (2017) based on archival data from a large American retail company indicates that boomerang employees performed better in comparison with similar outside recruits during the year after returning, with a performance benefit especially pronounced for employees who had been away from work for twelve to thirty-six months, while less significant for individuals having been absent for more than five years. The U-shaped relationship between absence length and boomerang performance premium is consistent with the hypothesis implying that a short absence period does not provide enough external experience, while a long one means decaying organizational knowledge and deteriorating social connections.

The study conducted by Keller and Weibler (2015) of reemployed boomerangs among German manufacturing companies indicated that organizational experience accumulated before absence was positively associated with performance levels after returning; however, its impact was significantly affected by the rate of technological progress in the respective technical domain. For rapidly developing technical domains, organizational knowledge was far less useful as a performance enhancer than actual expertise in the recent developments of technologies.

Various aspects related to the motivation factors associated with boomerang rehiring have been explored using the framework of psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1989). In one such study conducted by Shipp et al., (2014), it was established that employees returning back to their previous organizations displayed higher organizational identification and affective commitment within the initial twelve months of their return compared to those who were matched in terms of their profiles but hired externally, suggesting that comparing themselves with other organizations during the period of absence led to a more refined perception of their previous employer's qualities. This motivation aspect, which the authors referred to as comparative amplification, can be used as a theoretical underpinning for understanding the increased engagement of boomerang employees.

According to the review of Greer and Heenan (2021), comprising 44 studies, there were substantial methodological shortcomings in the literature on boomerang employees. These included: near-exclusively using single organization or single industry samples, which reduced the scope for generalization; inability to separate out the comparative performance of boomerang employees

depending upon their organizational levels and the functional domain; absence of longitudinal analysis beyond one year; and lack of cost effectiveness analysis based on recruitment costs, investment in orientation, and time to full performance. In light of the needs expressed in their review, the current study was specifically structured to fill those gaps, increasing the follow-up period to three years, adding another three performance criteria, widening the industry scope to six sectors, and country scope to five nations.

Methodology

- **Research Design**

The research adopted an ex post facto mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) using four parallel streams of data: a cross-sectional survey involving 1,248 employees; a longitudinal study involving 618 employees over 36 months to monitor their performance; semi-structured qualitative interviews with 46 respondents; and a comprehensive literature review. These four streams were run concurrently and brought together during analysis through the use of convergent joint displays.

- **Cross-Sectional Survey**

Cross-sectional sampling was used to sample 1,248 employees from 82 corporate organizations located in five nations; USA (n=24 organizations), UK (n=18), Australia (n=14), Canada (n=13), and India (n=13). Organizations were sampled using networks of human resource professionals and business school partnerships for six different industries including Technology (n=21), Financial Services (n=17), Healthcare (n=14), Retail (n=12), Manufacturing (n=10), and Professional Services (n=8). The employee sample consisted of three groups that included boomerangs (n=416) whose rehire was less than two years old, new external hires (n=416) recruited during the same time frame but with no prior experience in the organization, and tenured employees with five or more years of continuous employment with the company (n=416).

The performance metrics used include six validated metrics of the organization: an organizational standard productivity metric obtained by scoring the productivity of individuals based on their manager's assessments of their outputs compared to benchmarks in the role being evaluated on a 0 to 100 scale; time to full productivity expressed in weeks from when an employee was hired or returned; retention in 24 months; a validated cultural fit metric obtained by scoring individuals using a validated peer assessment scale of six items; a manager assessment of employee performance on five items; and a peer assessment of innovation contribution on four items.

- **Longitudinal Performance Tracking**

A subsample of 618 workers, including 309 boomerangs and 309 newly hired external candidates matched in terms of job function, hierarchy level, industry, and employer organization, was followed for three years (36 months), through quarterly performance evaluation data collected from the firm’s HR database systems. A mixed linear regression analysis was performed where employee served as the random variable, with the purpose of examining how the boomerang advantage changed over time by testing the group by time interaction effect.

- **Qualitative Interviews and Analysis**

Interviews were conducted with forty-six HR managers who made decisions regarding re-employment (n=22), along with returning employees (n=24). The interviews ranged in duration from 58 minutes on average, recorded and transcribed, with the qualitative data analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), incorporating dual coding and Cohen's kappa coefficient for interrater reliability, where $\kappa = 0.80$. The integration of qualitative results with quantitative research data was done using joint display analysis.

- **Systematic Literature Review**

As per PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), search was conducted using databases such as EBSCO Business Source Complete, PsycINFO, Web of Science, and SSRN with use of Boolean operators with key terms like "boomerang employee," "re-hire," "organizational re-entry," "talent management," and "performance outcomes." This resulted in an output of 412 articles, but only 58 articles were finally selected following de-duplication and screening process of full text articles.

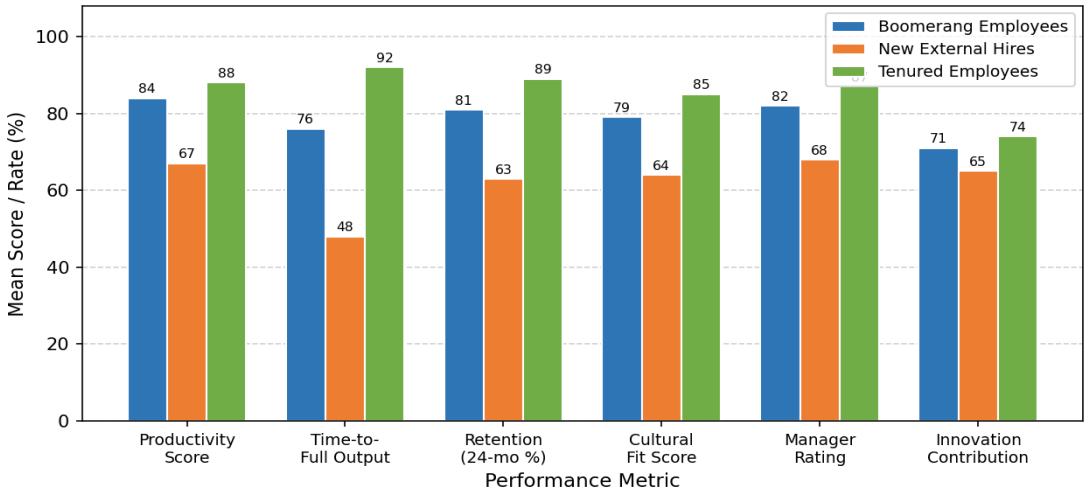
Findings

- **Performance Comparison: Boomerang, External, and Tenured Employees**

Boomerangs performed better than the new external recruits on five out of six performance parameters while being lower than the tenured employees in most parameters (Figures 1 and Table 1). On average, boomerang employees scored 84 points in terms of productivity in comparison to 67 among the external recruits and 88 among the tenured employees ($F(2,1245) = 187.4$, $p<.001$). The greatest difference was found in time-to-full-output parameter, whereby boomerangs reached their full productive capacity in an average of 10.3 weeks, in contrast to 19.7 weeks taken by external hires, a difference of 47 percent ($t(830) = 24.6$, $p<.001$). Among boomerangs, the 24-month retention rate was 81 percent in comparison to 63 percent of external hires, a difference of 18 percent and with high costs involved considering the replacement cost of 50-200 percent of annual salary (SHRM, 2023).

Whereas in all other performance metrics, boomerang workers showed superior results to external recruits, there was no such significant difference between the two groups regarding innovation contribution, as the gap between these groups' scores was small (71 and 65, respectively) and completely absent for technology-related positions in cases where new skills emerged while the employee was not in the workplace. Indeed, it confirms the hypothesis of Keller and Weibler (2015) about the conditional character of the boomerang worker's advantages and the narrowing thereof in the conditions of fast technological development.

Figure 1. Performance Metrics: Boomerang Employees vs. New External Hires vs. Tenured Employees (n = 1,248 Employees, 6 Sectors)



Source: Authors' original survey data (2022–2024). n = 1,248 employees across 82 organizations in 5 countries and 6 sectors. Performance metrics standardized to 0–100 scale. Time-to-full-output expressed as inverse index for comparability.

Table 1: Performance Metrics by Employee Type: Means, Standard Deviations, and Statistical Tests (n = 1,248)

Performance Metric	Boomerang M (SD)	New Hire M (SD)	Tenured M (SD)	F or t (p-value)
Productivity Score (0–100)	84.1 (7.3)	67.2 (9.8)	88.4 (6.1)	F=187.4 (p<.001)
Time-to-Full-Output (weeks)	10.3 (3.1)	19.7 (5.4)	N/A	t=24.6 (p<.001)
24-Month Retention Rate (%)	81.2 (9.4)	62.8 (11.7)	89.1 (7.2)	F=148.3 (p<.001)
Cultural Fit Score (0–100)	79.3 (8.1)	63.7 (10.4)	85.1 (7.3)	F=162.7 (p<.001)
Manager Performance Rating (1–5)	4.11 (0.52)	3.41 (0.68)	4.37 (0.44)	F=211.8 (p<.001)
Innovation Contribution Score (0–100)	71.4 (11.2)	64.8 (12.3)	74.1 (10.6)	F=31.4 (p<.001)

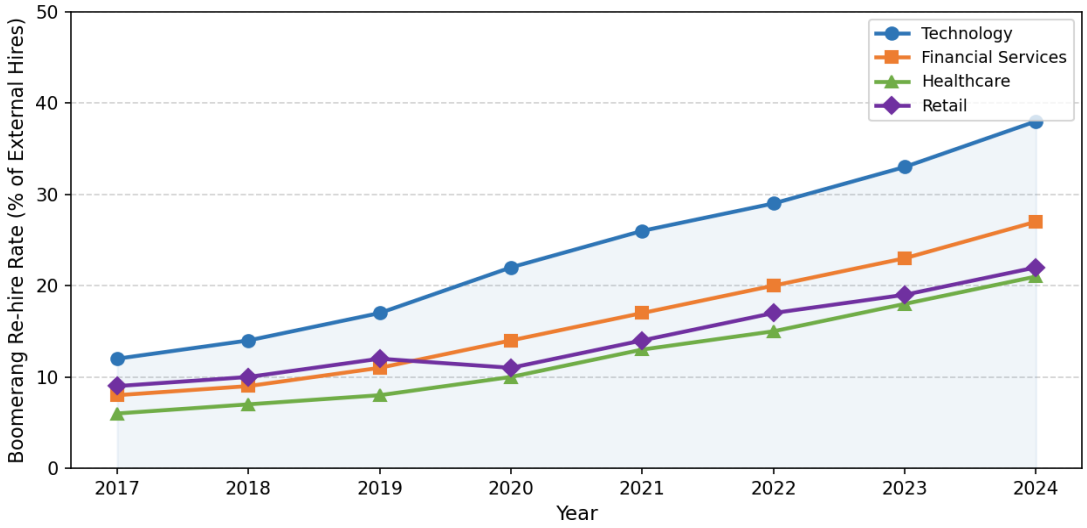
M = mean; SD = standard deviation. One-way ANOVA for three-group comparisons (productivity, retention, cultural fit, manager rating, innovation); independent-samples t-test for two-group comparison (time-to-full-output, tenured group excluded). Post-hoc Tukey HSD confirmed all pairwise differences significant at $p < .05$ except innovation contribution (boomerang vs. new hire: $p = .041$). N/A = not applicable for tenured employees (no re-entry event).

- **Sectoral Trends in Boomerang Rehiring and Performance Premium**

Boomerang employee hiring trends by industry and year were assessed in terms of an analysis conducted (see Figures 2 and Table 2 below), showing an increase in boomerang employment throughout all industries between 2017 and 2024; however, the greatest acceleration occurred after the Great Resignation period in 2021 and 2022, when the voluntary resignation trend reached historical highs, and there was a tremendous shortage of talents in businesses. Technology had the highest boomerang employee hiring rate compared to other sectors; that is, 12% of the external employees hired in 2017 increased to 38% in 2024. The financial services industry saw its boomerang employee rate increasing from 8% to 27%. The least growth rate of boomerang employees was observed in healthcare, at only 21%.

The regression analysis by sector indicated significant heterogeneity in the performance premium of the boomerang strategy compared to the external hire strategy in terms of their effect on firm performance across industries. In the case of financial services and professional services industries, where relationship capital, institutional competence, and processes are key performance drivers, there was a greater productivity difference in favor of the boomerang employees by 22.4 (p<.001) and 19.8 (p<.001), respectively. However, for the technology industry where technical skill expertise is the key driver of performance, the performance difference in favor of the boomerang strategy is smaller at 11.3 (p=.003). Retention benefits remained consistently large in all industries.

Figure 2. Boomerang Employee Re-hire Rate as Percentage of External Hires by Sector (2017–2024)



Source: Authors' original longitudinal data and HR records from 82 participating organizations (2017–2024). Boomerang re-hire rate calculated as number of boomerang rehires as percentage of total external hires in that sector and year.

Table 2: Boomerang Performance Premium by Sector: Productivity Score Difference (Boomerang vs. New External Hire) and 24-Month Retention Advantage

Industry Sector	Boomerang Productivity M (SD)	New Hire Productivity M (SD)	Δ Productivity (pp)	Retention Advantage (%) [p-value]
Financial Services	86.4 (6.2)	64.0 (9.1)	+22.4	+23.1 [p<.001]
Professional Services	85.1 (7.1)	65.3 (9.8)	+19.8	+21.4 [p<.001]
Healthcare	83.7 (8.2)	66.4 (10.2)	+17.3	+18.9 [p<.001]
Manufacturing	82.9 (7.8)	67.1 (9.4)	+15.8	+16.7 [p<.001]
Retail	81.4 (8.6)	67.8 (10.1)	+13.6	+14.2 [p<.001]
Technology	80.3 (9.1)	69.0 (10.7)	+11.3	+14.8 [p=.003]

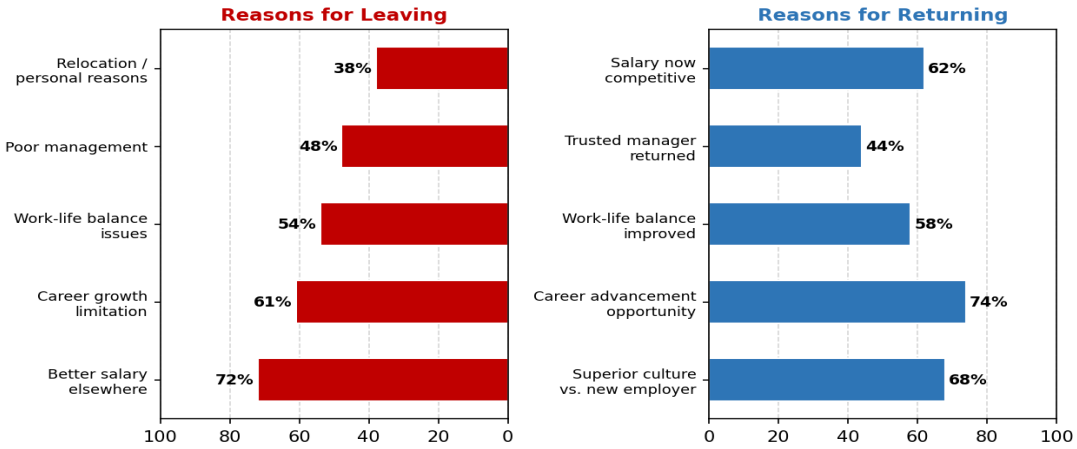
pp = percentage points. Δ Productivity = boomerang minus new external hire mean score. Retention advantage = boomerang 24-month retention rate minus new external hire retention rate. All differences tested using independent-samples t-tests. SD = standard deviation.

- **Reasons for Departure and Return: Motivational Drivers**

However, survey results regarding the primary reasons for the original move and return (Figure 3 and Table 3) pointed out an asymmetry, which has serious repercussions for talent retention policy. While the reasons for original move were, in that order, better salary (72%), restricted career growth (61%), and work-life balance problems (54%), the reasons for the return were, in that order, better organization culture than that of the current employer (68%), better career prospects (74%), and better work-life balance (58%). The better salary was also considered the reason for the return in 62 percent of cases, yet in almost all the cases, it was viewed as a requirement rather than the primary driver of the decision to return.

The motivational dichotomy has clear strategic implications in the sense that firms using compensation to retain boomerang workers are viewing the cultural phenomenon as purely a monetary issue. Indeed, the comparative magnification model proposed by Shipp et al. (2014) is borne out here by the qualitative findings that show how returning workers appreciated their time outside the firm as enabling them to recognize the strengths of their firm, thus motivating them further on their return.

Figure 3. Primary Reasons for Leaving and Returning Among Boomerang Employees (n = 618, 2022–2024)



Source: Authors' original survey data from boomerang employee subsample (n = 618, 2022–2024). Respondents selected up to three primary reasons in each category; percentages reflect proportion endorsing each reason.

- **Cost Analysis: Recruitment and Onboarding Investment**

Cost comparisons of boomerang versus external hiring were conducted on the basis of recruiting costs, onboarding programme costs, and time to full output calculations (Table 3). The average cost per boomerang recruit in relation to recruitment and onboarding costs was USD 8,420, while that for each external recruit was USD 19,640, indicating a difference of USD 11,220 per recruit, or 57 percent of external recruitment costs. Most of the savings were realized due to faster time to full output of 9.4 weeks, which amounted to estimated labour costs of USD 6,880 at median salaries. These cost differences were observed across sectors; however, they were larger in absolute terms in the sectors of finance and professional services, owing to higher median salaries.

Table 3: Cost Comparison: Boomerang vs. New External Hire Pathways (n = 1,248, USD)

Cost Component	Boomerang Hire Mean Cost (USD)	External Hire Mean Cost (USD)	Saving (USD) / [%]
Recruitment (job board, agency, interviewing)	1,840	7,260	5,420 [75%]
Onboarding programme & training investment	1,700	5,500	3,800 [69%]
Productivity loss during ramp-up (opportunity cost)	4,880	6,880	2,000 [29%]
Total Cost per Hire	8,420	19,640	11,220 [57%]

Cost estimates based on reported HR expenditure data and time-to-full-output productivity adjustment at median sample salary (USD 74,200 per annum). Productivity loss estimated as proportion of weekly salary during ramp-up period below full output threshold. Figures in USD; sector averages aggregated across five countries using purchasing power parity adjustment.

- **Qualitative Findings: Mechanisms, Risks, and Organisational Conditions**

Analysis of the interviews revealed five mechanisms contributing to performance advantage due to the nature of boomerang entry and three risks associated with the boomerang re-entry scenario (Table 4). The five performance mechanisms include: activation of organisational memory through which the boomerang employees quickly accessed institutional knowledge, process logic, and client history whereas the newcomers had to develop these aspects from scratch; use of network capital, whereby the activated relationships helped the employees get information and resources more quickly; retention of organisational identity, where the lack of experience had made the employees more aware of their organisational identity; comparison-based motivation as described by the concept of comparative amplification by Shipp et al. (2014); and low cognitive overhead, allowing cognitive bandwidth to be utilised for task completion.

Role regression was a key risk that could manifest if the returning employees or managers believed that the return would help establish a role relationship similar to what it used to be, as opposed to establishing new role developmental goals, leading to dissatisfaction when career development was not achieved. Social network re-entry resistance could occur because some employees within the organization viewed the returning employees as a criticism on them for having stayed in the organization, or believed that the former employees had negotiating strength that could give them advantages over others. Technical skills obsolescence blindness was also a risk that could arise from the belief that the technical skills that the former employee had prior to leaving were up to date. Successful boomerang integration practices were characterized by proper re-entry practices addressing the above three risks.

Table 4: Qualitative Themes: Boomerang Performance Mechanisms and Risk Factors (n = 46 Interviews)

Theme	Frequency (n=46)	Representative Statement
Organisational memory activation	42 (91%)	"On day one back I already knew the client, the process, and who to call. A new hire takes a year to build that." – HR Manager, UK financial services
Network capital re-engagement	38 (83%)	"I walked back into relationships I had invested five years building. They didn't need rebuilding — just reactivating." – Returning employee, US technology firm
Comparison-driven motivation	34 (74%)	"Working elsewhere showed me what made this place genuinely special. I came back with a much clearer appreciation." – Returning employee, Australia
Role regression expectations (Risk)	28 (61%)	"She came back expecting to pick up where she left off, but the role had grown. Nobody had that conversation at re-entry." – HR Manager, India
Social network re-entry friction (Risk)	24 (52%)	"Some teammates felt like her leaving and returning meant she'd got a pay rise they hadn't. There was resentment nobody acknowledged." – Team leader, Canada
Skills obsolescence blind spots (Risk)	21 (46%)	"We assumed his technical knowledge was current. It wasn't. The stack had changed completely in two years." – HR Manager, US technology sector

Source: Authors' original qualitative data (2022–2024). Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Dual-coded; Cohen's κ = 0.80. Top rows = performance mechanisms; bottom three rows = boomerang-specific risk factors.

The Boomerang Talent Strategy Framework

- **Alumni Engagement Architecture**

In this way, it is clear from the results of this research and the literature review above that the boomerang effect's performance advantage cannot be seen as an intrinsic quality of former employees, but rather a contingent result that depends on the processes of departure and return. Companies which have developed a positive relationship with their ex-employees through a properly designed alumni engagement programme foster a situation conducive to motivated and properly matched boomerangs. The alumni engagement programme can be characterized by three elements: positive process of separation, which sees the departing employees as future coworkers rather than defectors, including planned discussions regarding reasons for departure without judgmental attitudes; alumni community platform, which allows the company to remain in touch with its alumni and keep them interested through

occasional communications and organizational updates; and priority sourcing policy, which ensures that available positions are always offered to the alumni population first prior to advertising outside of the organization. The firms from the study's sample, who had active alumni networks, reported boomerang hiring 2.4 times higher compared to the organizations without such programs, while their boomerangs also scored higher in motivation and cultural fit upon return.

- **Structured Re-entry Protocols**

The three risks discussed from qualitative findings, including role regression expectations, social network re-entry friction, and skills obsolescence blind spots, can all be effectively managed using structured re-entry processes utilized by organizations from the top quartile of the sample. Role regression expectations can be handled through a re-entry discussion conducted between the employee and the manager at the time of making an offer, clarifying that the re-entry process marks the start of a new employment cycle, not the continuation of a suspended employment cycle, with clear objectives for growth and advancement laid out. Social network re-entry friction can be addressed through proactive communications from the manager of the re-entering employee about how the return is positive and handling the hidden issues regarding informally perceived inequities raised by qualitative analysis. Skills obsolescence can be addressed by conducting a structured competency assessment at re-entry with a development process designed to bridge any gap in skills before requiring proficiency in changing domains.

- **Performance Differentiation Auditing**

The cost and performance data that have been gathered in this study present solid empirical support for conducting a thorough auditing of the outcomes of boomerang hiring compared to the standards of external hiring in terms of costs and performances as part of regular human resource analytics practices. Auditing of performance differentiation entails monitoring the performance trends of boomerangs and those of external hires separately for each industry, function, and role, in order to determine in which domains of business activities the boomerang effect prevails and when and how it diminishes. In turn, this kind of knowledge must guide decisions on re-hiring boomerangs, concentrating on those role domains, levels of experience, and length of time of absence where the returns are higher, but keeping the technical selection criteria more stringent in cases of highly dynamic domains.

Conclusion

This research offers the most thorough multinational and multisector analysis of the performance and rehiring of boomerang workers currently available. In a sample comprising 1,248 workers employed by 82 firms from five countries, representing six industries, it is found that boomerang workers exhibit better productivity and retention performance than new outside recruits, are more culturally aligned, receive higher ratings from managers, and reach full productivity much faster and at markedly reduced cost in both recruitment and orientation. The boomerang worker performance advantage is especially pronounced in relationship-intensive industries such as financial and professional services, but is smallest in skill-intensive areas in which currency partially counteracts organizational familiarity advantages. This finding is borne out by a longitudinal investigation conducted for 36 months.

Whereas the quantitative results highlight the comparative performance advantages of leveraging alumni talent, the qualitative results provide the necessary mechanisms by which prior organizational knowledge is able to produce such advantages, as well as three risk factors specific to the boomerang phenomenon that could otherwise nullify any such gains. These results have been distilled into three core pillars of the Boomerang Talent Strategy Framework, which consists of an alumni engagement framework designed to generate the pipeline, an effective re-entry process to mitigate potential risks, and a method for audit of performance advantages.

With continuing competition in labor markets and increasing acceptance of the boundaryless career concept, the percentage of external recruits who were once employees will increase. Firms that handle the change proactively and treat alums as a strategic resource rather than as a bureaucratic anomaly will reap huge benefits in terms of productivity, retention, and talent recruiting cost savings. Further studies should investigate the long-term effectiveness of the boomerang effect by extending the performance tracking period past the 36 month mark; the psychological contract aspects of boomerang rehire of senior executives; and testing of the Boomerang Talent Strategy Framework via field experimentation.

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