



2020

Policies and Practices through the Prism of Working Parenthood

An analysis of factors that help and hinder the
engagement and retention of returning talent
post parental leave

Executive Summary

By Jane Moffett and Nicki Seignot



Introduction

It goes without saying in an increasingly competitive environment, businesses and organisations need to attract, develop and retain the very best talent. Yet as parents and professionals working in this space, it is evident that the point at which careers meet parenthood often represents a hiatus in the relationship between employee and employer. Talented, experienced individuals find themselves navigating huge personal change during which a major psychological shift occurs that often results in a change of values and priorities.^{2,3}

The last ten years have seen a surge in specialist providers and resources in an effort to raise awareness of the impact of parenthood (personally and professionally) and position employer support for working parents as an essential element in creating more diverse and inclusive organisations. In 2019 for example, the Equality and Human Rights Commission's [Working Forward](#) group acknowledged the progress its employer members had made to improve workplace practices in relation to pregnancy, maternity and paternity specifically.⁴

While progress is being made by many employers, as professional coaches and members of the House of Commons' All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Women and Work, we continue to hear devastating accounts of careers - typically women's careers - derailed by poor practices and inflexible cultures. Notwithstanding often enhanced policies for pay and time off, few returners quote company policy when telling the story of their return to work. Typically the journey is a personal account of emotional highs and lows, dips in confidence and self belief, concerns with knowledge and capacity - all set in the context of a line relationship that may (or may not) be motivated to embrace their return and offer them what they need to thrive. These accounts, and the growth of communities such as [Pregnant then Screwed](#)⁵ which give voice to parents at the sharp end of discrimination, are a timely reminder that there is still much work to do and a need for focused and sustained effort - particularly on the part of employers - to invest in their returning talent.

Our aims for this research were to:

- Gain a diverse, cross-sector perspective of current returns to work post parental leave* (*maternity and paternity)
- Identify examples of good practice for employers
- Evidence the impact of employer practices and development solutions on work and career choices
- Make recommendations for employers and government based on our findings

We want to thank all our survey respondents who took time to share their experiences and learning in such detail. The level of disclosure and volume of insights (over 2700 individual comments) encouraged us to position their words throughout this report in a spirit of 'telling their story' while staying true to the overarching themes and collective narrative. Our subsequent analysis of the data has renewed our belief that this is a conversation to keep having across industries and employers both today, and for tomorrow's working parents. Our report highlights those things that are missing and need to change, but also offers practical ideas for interventions that employers can implement. For organisations that strive to make a difference, the rewards will be evident in the short term with more engaged and effective employees, and longer term with a stronger, more balanced pipeline which delivers talent for the future success of the business.

Jane Moffett
Nicki Seignot

“ British employers are 'living in the dark ages' and have worrying attitudes towards unlawful behaviour when it comes to recruiting women. ”

1 <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/our-work/news/employers-dark-ages-over-recruitment-pregnant-women-and-new-mothers> (accessed 30.8.19)

2 Stern D, Bruschwelner-Stern N 'The Birth of a Mother. How motherhood changes you forever' (Bloomsbury, 1998)

3 Millward L 'The transition to motherhood in an organizational context: An interpretative phenomenological analysis', (Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology 79, pp315-333, 2006)

4 <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/working-forward> (accessed 30.8.19)

5 <https://pregnantthenscrewed.com> (accessed 17.10.19)

Key Research Data



423

Survey respondents



23

Industry sectors



2778

Individual comments / insights

Respondents by gender



98%



2%









Key factors that helped and hindered returns to work and career














// Most helpful was the flexibility and the friendliness of colleagues, which helped rebuild my confidence while adjusting to becoming a parent. //

Helped

-  **49%** Flexible working
-  **16%** Supportive, helpful managers
-  **15%** Supportive team, mentors, peer working parents
-  **9%** KIT days and timely communication
-  **4%** Onboarding and handovers
-  **3%** Support for breastfeeding

With 4% as Other

Hindered

-  **23%** No planned re-introduction / onboarding
-  **15%** Lack of communication
-  **10%** Expectations to be up and running from Day 1
-  **9%** Unhelpful, unsupportive Line Managers
-  **9%** Isolated
-  **6%** Lack of flexibility
-  **6%** IT issues
-  **5%** Unrealistic workloads
-  **5%** Being made redundant / demoted
-  **4%** No provision for breastfeeding
-  **2%** Refused KIT days

With 6% as Other

// I was demoted to a job I didn't want and my maternity cover took my job. (I) was not updated on how things had changed or on-boarded again. My new manager was a bully. //

The financial cost of lost talent

65 parents didn't return to their previous job for reasons that were preventable:

Cost of replacing these 65 =*

£1.95m

59 parents were back at work but disengaged and considering leaving their employer:

Cost of replacing these 59 =*

£1.77m

From this survey of just 423 people the potential total cost of lost talent equates to:

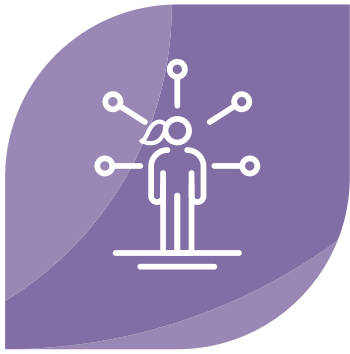
£3.72m

* calculations based on £30K per person as defined by ACAS (2019)

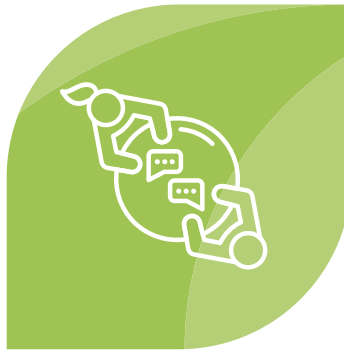
Key Themes

Irrespective of whether people did or did not return to work, a series of recurrent themes emerged around this transition point in people's lives and careers.

The six themes that emerged as having most impact, were concerned with:



Flexible Working



**Communication -
keeping in touch**



**Onboarding and getting
back up to speed**



**Line Managers - as
gatekeepers for returns**



**Careers in the
context of parenting**



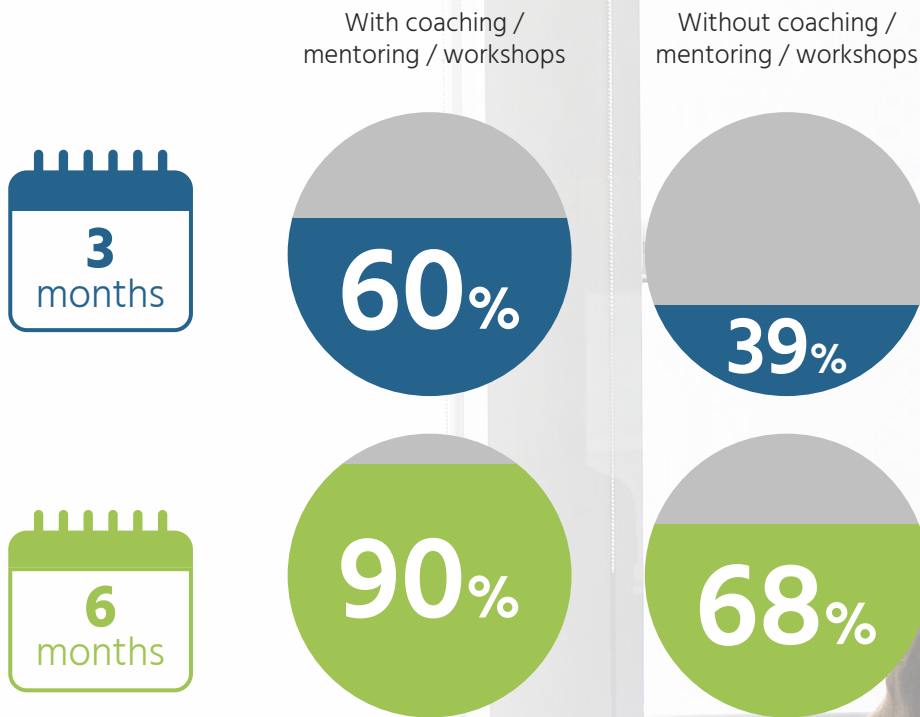
Breastfeeding

Coaching and Mentoring

Only 10% of our respondents had received coaching, mentoring or support from networks, and a key finding was that it had helped them to feel fully back at work a lot faster than those that hadn't received it. They also found that it increased their confidence in asking for what they needed in order to be happy on their return, that it validated their experience, giving them a greater connection with other working parents and that it helped with the transitions of leaving and returning to work.

**Of those that didn't
receive coaching
or mentoring, 83%
wished that they had!**

Time needed to feel truly back at work



Of those that didn't receive coaching and mentoring, **83% wished that they had!**

Action: Consider commissioning external coaching and / or workshops. Use your internal resource to offer coaching or mentoring for returning parents. Galvanise support from your existing working parents to set up a working parents' network.

On the basis of our analysis we offer a number of practical recommendations and actions for employers. It is our belief that progress is accelerated when employers and organisations take a constellation approach. In other words, there is no single best idea and no fast track solution. In our experience, sustaining change means implementing a range of activities, working across disciplines, drawing on your community of working parents to share ownership, not billing this as purely an HR initiative, appointing champions and having clear measures. It is about a conversation the business should be having with itself, recognising the commercial imperative for investing in returning talent – both for the good of the individual and the future success of the organisation.

Recommendations

1. Get clarity on the stats

Action: Get clarity on the impact of parenthood across your talent pipeline. Use management information (MI) to capture trends and set your baseline

2. Take a long hard look at the company culture

Action: Host focus groups with returners to bring the numbers to life and discover the reality of your policies in practice.

3. Take a proactive approach to flexible working

Action: Conduct an audit of your flexible working policies in action. Celebrate and highlight your pioneers, those role models – men and women - who evidence the art of the possible for others to follow.

4. Set returners up for success

Action: Establish what good looks like for communication before, during and after a parental break. Have ready examples of effective use of KIT days. Ensure a good handover when someone returns. Design and implement a Returners' Induction Programme with some recent returners – what would they recommend?

5. Invest in Line Managers

Action: Make investment in training and support for managers part of your strategic approach to returning talent. Get some managers together and ask them how they experience managing maternity / parental leave? What are the assumptions, challenges, recurrent themes? Ask your HR team what the repeat issues are that find their way to the case files for resolution.

6. Make appropriate provision for breastfeeding

Action: Consider the probable reality that some women returners will want to express breastmilk for their babies. What can you do to raise awareness of this? Look to provide a clean private space with designated storage for expressed breastmilk.

About the Authors



Jane Moffett is a coach, facilitator and writer who has 20 year's experience of working with new parents, supporting them during this time of transition. She is director of KANGAROO Coaching, a company that specialises in running coaching and training programmes for working parents and their organisations. Jane is a regular contributor to the BACP journal 'Workplace', authoring the series 'Better Conversations at Work' and is also the lead assessor at the Henley Centre for Coaching.

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An established coach, mentor and working parent, Nicki Seignot is the co-author of the first business book on parental mentoring '[Mentoring New Parents at Work](#)' published by Routledge (2017). She is also the founder of The Parent Mentor, an independent consultancy which works within organisations to develop internal mentoring programmes in support of returning talent.

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Both Nicki and Jane are members of the House of Commons All Party Parliamentary Group for Women and Work, which is where they met and were inspired to complete this research.

**Full a copy of the full report,
please email Jane or Nicki**