

# When *mothers* return to work

Coach **Jane Moffett** works with women as they become a mother and adapt to their new world and identity. She shares her research on the value of maternity coaching programmes, both for women and their employers



**Jane Moffett** (*MSc Coaching and Behavioural Change*) is a coach and facilitator. She has 20 years' experience of working with new mothers, supporting them with the transition to motherhood, and runs parental returner coaching programmes within organisations, to ease the transition back to work after parental leave. Her research interests also include the area of perinatal mental health. [jane@kangaroo coaching.net](mailto:jane@kangaroo coaching.net)

**P**regnancy and motherhood can have a powerful impact on how working mothers see themselves, often causing them to experience conflict between their pre- and post-baby identities. I am privileged to have worked for over 20 years supporting women at this incredible, important and life-changing time. I often hear them talking about how they feel about themselves, their work and their careers. My role involves listening carefully to what they say, asking questions and presenting alternatives to enable them to look at things from different perspectives, and supporting them to make the decisions that are right for them and their families.

Having completed a Master's in Coaching and Behavioural Change at Henley Business School, I was drawn to combining elements of this training with my previous experience and now run parental returner coaching programmes within organisations, to ease the transition back to work after parental leave. These programmes include workshops and coaching for the women and training for their managers.

## **Becoming a mother**

Becoming a mother is a major life transition that can affect a woman's self-identity and wellbeing. In *The Birth of a Mother*, Stern and Bruschiweiler-Stern describe the

psychological change that happens for women at this time as the development of the 'motherhood mindset', and discuss the 'psychological turbulence' that occurs.<sup>1</sup> In the case of working women, they identify three phases that make up the birth of a mother – pregnancy, early motherhood and returning to work.

During the first phase, many women experience a change in emphasis towards their non-work identity, in preparation for the seismic shift that comes with impending motherhood.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, they may be seen to focus on maintaining a 'viable employee identity'<sup>3</sup> in order to guarantee the validity of their work identity just before they have an extended period of time away from work.

While on maternity leave, so much changes for women. As well as the practical aspects of caring for an infant, lack of structure to their days and being out of the workforce and in a different social environment, the psychological shift they experience



often leads to a reassessment of personal worldviews, priorities, values and attitudes. Cognitive dissonance often occurs, with clashes of pre- and post-baby attitudes and behaviours.<sup>4</sup> A new identity develops that helps the woman to navigate her way through this intense time of change and feeling of responsibility for the wellbeing of her baby.

Once back at work, women may need to be helped to psychologically reintegrate into the workplace. This third phase of the birth of a mother is a time when the woman balances and merges her various identities, re-establishing her 'viable employee identity', which is often linked to being seen to be committed to work, and re-validating herself as both an employee and as a mother.

### Why invest in women at this time?

For many years, the UK Government and the private sector have recognised that women constitute an important and integral part of the UK workforce, which has resulted in a range of policies and recommendations.<sup>5,6</sup> With the realisation that diversity can increase an organisation's productivity, there are moves to encourage women to stay at work and to have equal access to work at the highest levels. A report published by Lloyd's in 2016, found that for every woman on the board, the assets of the company increased by eight per cent and that companies that are highly rated for gender diversity are 15 per cent more likely to have above average returns for their industry.<sup>7</sup> At this current time, the spotlight is also being shone on the gender pay gap, with reporting compulsory for organisations who have more than 250 employees.<sup>8</sup> In order for women to be able to have

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- 50 per cent that it had increased the likelihood that they would stay working with the firm in the longer term"



similar career outcomes to men, thus reducing the gender pay gap and having the opportunity to reach board level, there needs to be a way of successfully combining work with motherhood, as it has been shown that this is one of the crunch points for women, often resulting in them leaving the workforce.<sup>9</sup>

### The role of coaching

One of the main aims of coaching is to facilitate behavioural change in the person being coached. Through opening up an arena whereby the client can increase her self-awareness, discover alternative perspectives and gain personal insight, solutions to dilemmas can be found and behaviour can be understood and, when appropriate, changed.<sup>10</sup> Maternity coaching is coaching that takes place around the time of maternity leave – typically, before the exit from work, during maternity leave itself and once the woman has returned to work. It is well established in certain sectors – namely, law and professional services – with documented results of increasing employee engagement and retention. For example, following the introduction of a maternity coaching programme at professional services firm Ernst and Young, the company's retention rates one year after returning to work had increased by five per cent to 95 per cent, with 75 per cent saying that they felt valued by the firm, 61 per cent saying that it had increased their engagement with work and 50 per cent that it had increased the likelihood that they would stay working for Ernst and Young in the longer term.<sup>11</sup>

Research indicates that there are a variety of reasons why engagement and retention rates have been seen

to increase if a maternity coaching programme is introduced in an organisation. First, one of the fundamental outcomes of coaching is that the coachee makes links between her values and beliefs and is enabled to keep her core values consistent. If a woman is able to consistently maintain these core values once back at work, then her motivation to stay is increased.<sup>12</sup> Second, if the woman's internal perception about the support she will receive around this time is positive, her approach to returning to work and her commitment to her job are also likely to be positive.<sup>9</sup> Third, maternity coaching can help the woman to manage negotiations, both before she goes on maternity leave and on her return. Finally, coaching can help with career re-engagement because it provides an opportunity to plan for her future, articulating career visions.<sup>13</sup>

I recently conducted a piece of qualitative research that examined the relationship between maternity coaching and women's transition back to work after maternity leave. As becoming a mother is a time of identity change, I was interested in exploring how coaching had helped women to align their values, beliefs and behaviour at work, with their new identity as a mother. In a long-hours culture, where women in positions of power remain in the minority, these two areas of identity can often come into conflict. Is it possible that maternity coaching can help at this

time by bringing things into alignment and enabling women to determine the right course of action for themselves?

All of the women I interviewed (11 in total) had returned from maternity leave within the previous two years and all had a very strong work identity. For all the women, it was important that this strong work identity was maintained when they returned to work and that they were taken seriously as the highly trained professionals that they were. This strong work identity was inextricably linked with their self-esteem. For many women, the coach had helped them to think of ways to raise their profile, to ensure that they were

connecting with the right people, to negotiate their desired role when they returned to work and to find the work/life blend that was right for them. All the women had equally strong identities as mothers and desired to combine motherhood and working, aspiring to achieve a balance between their two identities. This was described as 'adjusting to the new normal'.

My analysis also showed that the outcomes of the coaching were often broader and deeper than the issues that the women initially brought to coaching. Many of them wanted practical, logistical input from the coach, which they received, but they discovered that a lot more often emerged during the coaching sessions, and they reported being surprised to discover that the original presenting issue was not the 'real'

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issue, but something else entirely. Several interviewees mentioned the benefit of having time and space to focus on themselves and likened the coach to an objective sounding board. This focused time enabled the women to achieve greater clarity about what they wanted, helped them to view their situations from other perspectives and increased their self-awareness. In many instances, the coaching had quite clearly encouraged self-kindness and given them 'permission' to negotiate the length of their maternity leave, for instance. The coaching also enabled some of the women to develop a more positive mindset about their job, which impacted on how they were perceived at work. On being asked what was the single most useful thing about having received maternity coaching, the women spoke of being able to make the best out of all the different situations you can find yourself in.

When I am working with a woman as part of a maternity returners support programme, I encourage her to spend some time thinking about her strengths as an employee and as a parent and to articulate her values. Asking questions and gently challenging her assumptions and responses can result in an increase in self-awareness. Before going on maternity leave, we might use a coaching exercise to provide an opportunity for her to write down her current skills and motivations; these can be revisited prior to her return as a reminder of how she had viewed her place in her organisation, what she gave to her role and what was important to her. I would also encourage her to determine how much structure she thinks she needs in order to be happy so that she can identify whether or not she needs to plan

things for the first part of her maternity leave – before she has the baby.

Prior to her return to work, we will talk through whatever is most pressing for the woman – it could include a discussion about working hours, combining work with motherhood, career plans, how to feel more confident (to name just a few). Once back at work, coaching often centres around the reality of being back at work, career aspirations and finding that right balance and compromise between career and motherhood. Encouraging the woman to also view things from the perspective of the organisation can often result in a situation that is best for both parties – this can be pertinent at all stages of the coaching.

### And what about employers?

My research showed that the importance of the role that the organisation plays at this time, cannot be overstated. Policies and procedures that are flexible and family-friendly need to not only be in place but be understood and put into action at every level. It's not unusual for women to describe their company's external-facing language and internal-facing action; the discrepancy between the two can result in women not feeling supported by their employer and may become a factor in questioning whether or not to move to a different company. Ensuring that there is a strong support network, consisting of other working parents and senior role models, also helps employees to feel valued and not at odds with the company culture. Some companies have a family network where guest speakers are invited to facilitate lunchtime sessions on relevant topics. These sessions have the dual purpose

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of providing networking opportunities and of delivering useful and relevant information.

The role of managers is also key in supporting parents who are taking parental leave. Ensuring that channels of communication are kept open at each stage can help to ensure clarity, reduce stress and increase feelings of being valued and listened to. Career plans can be discussed, and agreements can be reached about how often and when the person on leave might want communication with their manager when they are off – deciding on who initiates and arranges this is also useful. When the woman is off on leave, discussing how both she and the organisation can most benefit from her 10 keeping-in-touch (KIT) days is important. Knowing that these days can also be used for training, meetings and attending conferences can ensure maximum benefit is gained.

On return from leave it can be important to acknowledge that something of fundamental importance has happened in the woman's life – she hasn't just been away on a long holiday. Simple things like ensuring that a woman has a desk to work at and that the rest of the team know her return date are essential to her feeling valued. Also of importance is having meaningful work; women can be left feeling: 'why am I in the office? Someone else is looking after my baby and I'm here'. In a culture where the fact that a woman now has a baby is not referred to, the result can be added strain. This

feeling of there being a secret that nobody mentions can lead to a perception that there is a lack of understanding

of people's individual situations, which, in turn, can cause women to consider whether or not to stay with their current employer.

Training for managers where all of these aspects are discussed can be extremely productive. Group briefings where information is given and ideas of best practice are exchanged can really strengthen the work that an organisation does to support women at this life transition.

For workplace counsellors, carrying an understanding into their work of the various factors that make up the transition to motherhood, and how these can impact on women's dilemmas, self-concept and potential conflict between their identities of being a mother and being a professional working woman, are important. Encouraging women to be proactive and to have open communication with their managers and normalising their experiences to help them feel less isolated, is all part of the work. It helps to reassure women that, finding the right blend between work and home that is right for them, may take a little while to achieve. ●

### Your feedback please

If you have thoughts about any of the issues raised in this article or would like to write an article of your own, we would like to hear from you. Please email the editor: [workplaceeditor@bACP.co.uk](mailto:workplaceeditor@bACP.co.uk)

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