

HOW CAN MATERNITY COACHING INFLUENCE WOMEN'S RE-ENGAGEMENT WITH THEIR CAREER DEVELOPMENT - A CASE STUDY OF PRIVATE LAW FIRMS

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Executive summary

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ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION

In recent years the average length of maternity leave has increased and the Equality Act was introduced. The issues of career penalties for child-related breaks and the lack of women at partner level in law firms have been identified in previous research. Re-engaging with their careers after maternity leave is critical for women to receive fair compensation, to be able to continue their careers, as well as to maximise their career development opportunities. This case study increases the understanding of how maternity coaching is supporting women's re-engagement with their career development.

A single case study on a maternity coaching programme in law firms took place and qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews in three firms. Central to the research design was the intrinsic triangulation of the data by interviewing three perspectives: the coachee, the coaching buyer and the coach. The research found the understanding of mutual obligations for career development between firms and women remain the same, but the mutual expectations changed which requires a renewed psychological contract. Three career re-engagement factors were identified: 'work', 'relationships' and 'role models'. Maternity coaching was found to influence these factors by preparing women for their return to work at an emotional level, a practical level and through long-term career development reflections. The findings could be relevant in other sectors when working with coachees in organisations that follow the partnership model, offer linear career paths, have a long-hours culture and work across multiple time zones. Some of the findings can inform coaching programmes for professional parents regardless of their gender, e.g. paternity coaching.

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS 1:

SLOWING DOWN AND GEARING UP - THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT ON CAREER DEVELOPMENT

I adopted the definition of the psychological contract as the understanding of mutual obligations between the woman and her employer (Rousseau and Schalk, 2000). Perceived promises are seen as critical to understanding the psychological contract (Conway and Briner, 2005). Therefore the research explored whether women's understanding of mutual obligations and their expectations for their career development have changed after maternity leave.

Mutual Obligations

When reviewing the data for changes in the psychological contract after maternity leave, it appears that the understanding of mutual obligations has not changed. The women feel their obligation to the firm is to develop themselves and to pursue the partnership career path. The firms feel obliged to continue offering equal career development opportunities leading to partnership to all employees, regardless of their gender or personal situation. However, when reviewing expectations for career development, a different picture emerges that indicates the requirement on the women's side for a changed psychological contract.

Changed Expectations

Women expect to be able to balance work and home life and temporarily slow their careers down. The findings of this study indicate a mismatch between the linear career path law firms offer and the flexible career paths women expect. Employees are seen as the ultimate owner of their career development but some women in the study found that in reality there is little scope to do so due to the prescribed nature of their career path.

Alternative career paths

Law firms have taken initial steps to offer alternative career paths to accommodate the changed needs of working mothers, however these were reported by the women in the study as being an end to the partnership

prospect. Law firms could support women's career re-engagement after maternity leave through partnership and alternative career paths that allow individuals to transfer both ways between these paths. Further, interruptions and slower progress on the partnership path need to be factored in. Further research would be required to evaluate if flexible career paths increase employee loyalty. The importance of alternative career paths appeared to increase with seniority, however as this study interviewed a small sample this could be another area for further research.

Previous research with legal firms has concluded that a greater transparency on flexible working policies and alternative career paths is required, so employees can assess the impact of these choices on their careers (Working Families, 2008). For returning women this means they need to be aware whether their firms support slower career development or if they have an 'up or out' policy.

Equal Opportunities versus Diversity

It appears from the study that the firms approach career development by wanting to offer equal opportunities. The obligations and expectations the firms feel they have towards women don't change after maternity leave. However, this situation results in concerns for women as they are treated as if their post-qualified experience continues during their leave of absence. So in effect, by treating women equally, their career development is accelerated which is contrary to their wishes and can negatively affect their career re-engagement. Approaching career development after maternity leave as a diversity rather than an equal opportunity issue, could accommodate women's wishes to slow their career temporarily down after maternity leave.

Career Success

The firms' and women's definitions of career success were found to be in discord. Women understand career success as a holistic concept that changes during their career and is not limited to their current job. Law firms were reported to measure career success based on input-based measures. Input-based reward systems can be discriminatory and rarely fit with the reality of women's careers (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). This was confirmed by the study that indicated increased productivity of working mothers and their frustration with the hours based system. It impacts negatively on their career

re-engagement as they don't feel fairly rewarded. Previous research has called for the move from input to output and productivity performance measures (The Law Society, 2011a; Working Families, 2008).

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS 2:

THE KEY FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE WOMEN'S RE-ENGAGEMENT WITH THEIR CAREER DEVELOPMENT

To assess how maternity coaching can influence women's re-engagement with their career development, it is important to understand which factors hinder or enable career re-engagement. The key factors 'work', 'relationships' and 'role models' have been identified during the data analysis process.

1. THE CAREER RE-ENGAGEMENT FACTOR 'WORK'

The quality, nature and volume of the work that women return to were stated by the interviewees as influential on their career re-engagement. As the experience gained through work is the basis for career development prospects gaining appropriate work is highly important. This was influenced by women's **availability** and **pro-activity**.

Flexible working is seen as both helpful and a hindrance for women to re-engage with their careers. It is helpful by allowing women to balance home and work life. On the other hand, flexible working appeared as a factor that can hinder career re-engagement if it results in women not getting work appropriate to their experience level. Another reason for being sidelined was being pregnant with another child. Not getting appropriate work has an effect on women's experience and career development opportunities, but can also affect their motivation.

When looking at how women pro-actively searched for work, again a contrast became apparent between junior and senior lawyers. Senior lawyers were more able to be prescriptive about the kind of work they wanted to do and pro-actively generate work for themselves with external clients. Junior lawyers

tended to be more reliant on partners to source work for them as they have yet to develop an external network.

2. THE CAREER RE-ENGAGEMENT FACTOR 'RELATIONSHIPS'

Relationships were another central factor in enabling or hindering women with their career re-engagement. The relationships with partners, peers and clients were reported to have an impact.

Partners

The relationship with partners is central as it impacts on sourcing appropriate work but also influences the relationships with clients and peers. The data suggests that partners appear to perceive women returning from maternity leave as less career focussed. Further, flexible working, falling pregnant again and having more than one child causes partners to think that women are less interested in their careers. The data indicates that women can have a renewed focus on career development when they consider their family complete. This implies that addressing misperceptions with partners is important to support women's re-engagement with their careers. Therefore involving partners in the maternity coaching programme should be considered. A limitation of this discussion is that it is based on reports of the behaviour and perception of the partners. Future research should involve partners to allow conclusions based on evidence drawn from partners.

In addition there is an emotional impact partners can have on how the returning women feel about their career. Aspects women mentioned as influential to their career re-engagement were:

- Feeling supported at crisis point with an ill child
- Feeling valued
- Feeling an effort is made to integrate them back into the team

The reluctance of some partners to talk about personal issues, a lack of empathy with returning mothers and lack of planning a workload for women's return was mentioned by several participants as a hindrance to re-integrating back into work.

Peers

The attitude of peers to returning women had an effect on how women in the study integrated back into their careers. Some felt that working part-time, taking time off for a family crisis and leaving on time was perceived negatively by their peers even if their managing partner was supportive.

Clients

The relationship with peers is further strained by the competition for clients. One woman compared the effect of having to work with new clients to being a new employee again which slowed down her career re-engagement. A recent study in the legal sector included clients as research participants. It reported frequent over-delivery and a 'marked inconsistency between perceived and actual needs of the client', and therefore called for further research into client needs (The Law Society, 2011a).

3. THE CAREER RE-ENGAGEMENT FACTOR 'ROLE MODELS'

The low number of female partners as role models in law firms is generally acknowledged. Observing female partners had both a negative and positive impact on the women's ambitions to continue their career in the partnership track. Women know that becoming a partner is a possibility, but seeing the sacrifices they and their families would have to make has a negative influence on pursuing the partnership path.

4. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SENIOR AND JUNIOR WOMEN

Differences by seniority appeared in the following areas during the research project. As the study was interviewing only a small sample, further research would be required to confirm these findings.

	Junior women	Senior Women
Revisit partner career goal	Low need	High need
Alternative career paths	Low interest	High interest
Ability to source work	Low	High
Influence of role models	Flexible working is possible	'Adapted role models' have negative influence

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS 3:

HOW DOES MATERNITY COACHING INFLUENCE HOW WOMEN RE-ENGAGE WITH THEIR CAREER DEVELOPMENT AFTER MATERNITY LEAVE?

The benefits of the maternity coaching programme contribute to all career re-engagement factors that were identified in this study. It achieves this by having an impact at an emotional (feeling valued, confidence, role models), practical (working pattern decision, sourcing work) and long-term (career reflection) level.

Making women feel valued

The provision of maternity coaching had a positive effect on keeping the psychological contract intact, as women felt the firm is investing in them although they are less available.

Increased confidence

The women reported that the coaching made them more confident during their return to work which helped career re-engagement in various ways. Multiple concerns seemed to surface at the point of return. Women feel guilty about their lower availability, concerned about being a year senior without having had the actual experience, worry about changes during their absence and how they will balance home and work life. Several women mentioned that hearing from the coaches how other working mothers managed their transitions back to work was helpful in addressing these concerns, anticipating challenges and increasing their confidence. Role models were identified previously as one of the career re-engagement factors. The data suggests it is an area where the maternity coaching programme is supporting women with their career re-engagement by referring to **realistic** and **positive role models** from other organisations.

Career reflection

Maternity coaching was reported to provide a space for women to reflect on their careers which impacted positively on women's re-engagement with their

career development. This included reflecting on the decision to return to work, considering alternative careers and reviewing career aspirations. It became apparent that being able to reflect on their careers in a wider context can help to retain women who found the return to work challenging and consider leaving. This confirms the previous research finding that maternity coaching can contribute to the retention of women who return from maternity leave (Bussell, 2008).

Further, maternity coaching can help women to think more long-term about their careers despite planning a second child which can result in increased motivation and performance.

Decision on working patterns

The coaching company takes a non-directive approach and supports women with finding their individual solution, in particularly women who consider resigning. Maternity coaching helps the different parties involved in the process of requesting flexible working to achieve a better outcome that is long-term and commercially viable. This can be a contribution to mothers' career re-engagement, as it allows them to re-engage positively with their careers without compromising the needs of their home life.

What support the women expected from the coaches ranged from discussing the general approach to the process of requesting flexible working to help with filling out firm specific forms. Coaches being knowledgeable of firm specific policies on flexible working was found helpful by some women. Talking about her rights during the coaching helped one woman to return to her previous role and another one to arrange flexible working. A third woman would have liked to have had more information on her rights as part of the coaching. This suggestion requires further debate as it would expand the scope of the coach's role. It would need to be carefully discussed and contracted between the firm and the coaching providers.

Sourcing work

The data suggests that maternity coaching supports women in sourcing work by influencing how women communicate with the partners that manage them and their peers. This starts as early as in the session before the maternity

leave by encouraging women to agree with their partners how to communicate during maternity leave. As was the case for several women, when there are major changes in their department during their absence, having a communication agreement can be a foundation for accelerating the sourcing of work after their return.

Maternity coaching appears to help with keeping the psychological contract intact by prompting women to communicate their expectations. This can contribute to change misperceptions the partners might hold about working mothers' low career interest.

Maternity coaching can support women in finding the right quality and quantity of work appropriate for their experience and availability by helping women to set themselves objectives and goals for their return to work. This is an important foundation for achieving work-life balance, in particular for women who work part-time, but also for faster re-engaging with career development.

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS 4

HOW CAN MATERNITY COACHING BE IMPROVED?

This was one of the research and interview questions. All research participants were asked for their suggestions and what could be removed from the maternity coaching programme. The data suggests nothing needs to be removed from the programme.

Areas for improvements are:

- **Involvement of partners.** This would have an impact on other key relationships with clients and peers. Moreover, it could benefit the sourcing of appropriate work and the change of the misperception that working mothers have a lower focus on their careers.
- **An additional session** 6 months after return with a career focus.
- **Complementary interventions** like networking, mentoring, sponsoring and ongoing career coaching could continue after the maternity coaching programme has been completed, and contribute to preventing women from leaving after their initial return to work.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In summary, the research provided insights into how maternity coaching can influence women's re-engagement with their career development. Law firms could benefit from a better understanding of how women's expectations change after maternity leave and how the psychological contract on career development should be renewed. The coaching profession could make use of the deepened understanding of what is effective in supporting clients with career re-engagement after leave of absence. Maternity coaching companies can improve their programmes and paternity coaching companies can investigate whether the findings of this study have relevance in their emerging field.

Modern careers are increasingly owned and managed by employees and a new generation of graduates is entering the workforce with different values and attitudes to employer loyalty. The compulsory retirement age has been abolished and this, combined with frequent organisational restructuring due to globalisation and market requirements, can lead I believe to an increase of longer and non-linear careers that include extended career breaks. Therefore coaching for both genders after extended leave of absence, and research on variants of this kind of coaching, could become increasingly important in the future.

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