

Creating Inclusive Workplaces for Maternity Returners in STEM



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March 2022

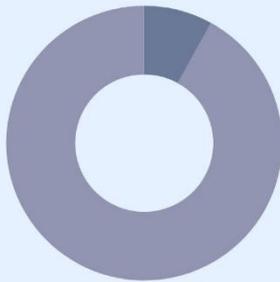
Maternity Returners in STEM

Women in scientific, technical engineering and maths (STEM) roles are facing real and significant barriers to continuing their career pathways when they become parents.

Firms that understand these challenges and support their female employees through the maternity transition have the opportunity to create much stronger female talent pipelines. Without acknowledging these issues, it's unlikely the STEM sector will ever achieve its diversity targets and close its gender pay gaps.

Engineering

A report by the Royal Academy of Engineers found that only 8% of engineers in the upper pay quartile are women.



In the STEM sector in the UK, the workforce is 75% male¹ and in recent years, organisations have invested in encouraging more girls and women to study and work in STEM, to bring about more gender-balanced workplaces.

These outreach programmes have had some success, with the proportion of women in STEM occupations rising from 21% to 24% between 2016 and 2019.

However, the number of women studying STEM courses has stalled at 26%.

Organisations will find it impossible to further increase female participation and address gender pay gaps if they rely on hiring more and more women at entry level. The growth in women choosing STEM careers just isn't there.

What the sector can do, right now, is be much effective in retaining and developing the women it currently has in STEM roles.

This is a pressing issue. The Royal Academy of Engineering reported in 2018 that only 17% of women remain on its engineering register at the age of 45, in contrast to 57% of men.²

“ My previous manager assumed I might want to quit or go part time. I feel like they wrote off my career. My current manager is very supportive of my wanting to build a career whilst being a mum. ”

Maternity Returners Survey 2022

In November 2021 the Office for National Statistics published research showing that the gender pay gap *quadruples* for women in their 40s, due to parenthood.³

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Working mum's careers are at risk. They are not rising up in organisations, taking on the higher-paid roles.

Mid-career women are facing barriers to full participation, with too many leaving STEM roles entirely – why?

Consider what it's like to be a woman with children, or who may be thinking of starting a family, working in a male-

dominated environment. While it's vital to encourage more women into STEM roles, the culture they find themselves in isn't always a comfortable fit.

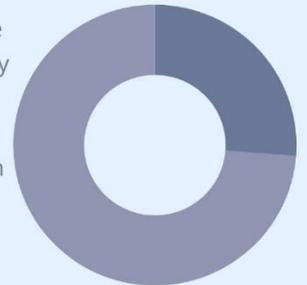
When they become mums, they are very much in the minority, often with a manager who has little personal experience of pregnancy and birth, or who may not have managed women going through the maternity transition before.

This means women can experience a lack of empathy and understanding. The prevalent organisational culture, as well as stereotypes and a lack of training, means that women encounter barriers that prevent them continuing on their career pathways.

This is impacting right now, in 2022, on female retention and career progression across the UK.

Construction

Data collected by **Building** found the median gender pay gap across the industry's biggest firms was **26.2%** in 2020.



“ [It was a] difficult pregnancy and my boss did not want to discuss any concerns I had. I worked with younger men who were just clueless. ”

Maternity Returners Survey 2022

This Whitepaper explores the lived experiences of returning mums in STEM roles today. It draws on the results of our Maternity Returners Survey 2022, which gave voice to over 80 women, who came forward to share their experiences in the workplace as expectant and returning mums.

In November 2021, the **Office for National Statistics** published research showing that the gender pay gap **quadruples** for women in their 40s, due to parenthood



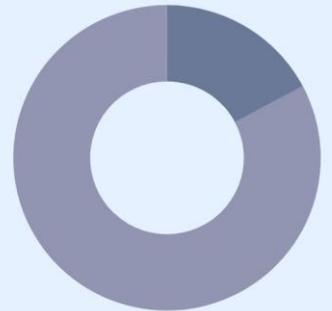
The Whitepaper also gives insights into the initiatives that are underway in organisations to create cultural shifts that are welcoming and supportive of women going through the maternity transition.

This is important and necessary work, because employers are increasingly understanding the benefits of a more gender diverse workforce, and the need to welcome more women into senior roles. McKinsey & Company report that women are hugely under-represented in senior roles, with Women in the Workplace 2021 finding that while nearly 50% of roles are filled by women at entry level, only 5% of C-suite jobs are held by females⁴.

Organisations will only succeed in their aspirations if they create a culture where maternity returners feel like they are in a place where they can stay and thrive. Those employers will be successful in sustaining strong female talent pipelines after maternity. They will protect and build gender diversity at all levels and finally bring an end to their gender pay gaps.

Pharma

Figures published by the **Royal Pharmaceutical Society** show the gender pay gap increased by 2.5 percentage points in 2021, to **17.2%**.



Over **half** of the women we surveyed said that they **struggled with mental load** on their return to work following maternity leave

Inclusion Barriers

This Whitepaper explores the role of maternity on career pathways, drawing on the results of the Maternity Returners Survey 2022, in which over 80 expectant and returning mums shared their experiences.

“ I do admittedly feel like my career has gone backwards and that I won't have the opportunity to apply into a more senior role again until I return from maternity leave. ”

Maternity Returners Survey 2022

The survey respondents were highly qualified women, with over half having a postgraduate degree. They were predominantly aged 30-39 and a fifth were in management roles. It is vital that organisations retain and develop this demographic to have any chance of closing their gender pay gaps.

We wanted to understand:

- What choices will women make about their employer if they don't see other women in their workplace successfully blending family and professional lives?
- When women leave because they don't feel confident about becoming a parent in their working environment, what will be the consequences for the organisation's reputation?
- How can organisations increase gender diversity at senior levels and close their gender pay gaps if women are facing barriers to career progression when they become parents?
- What can organisations do to create a workplace culture when expectant and returning mums feel supported and welcome, and are able to continue on their career pathways?

Principle Themes

What did the research highlight? The employee experience is varied, even within an organisation, and can be radically different depending on the employee's role or the competency of their manager.

- The employee journey is all too often not supported and unclear, resulting in negative experiences, with an inconsistency of approach from both HR and managers. This is stressful and demoralizing for staff. It makes them feel like they are 'a nuisance' and reinforces a feeling of difference.

- Managers, particularly in male-dominated environments, do not consistently and confidently know how to support pregnant and returning mums. This leads to women feeling undervalued, with a sense of being 'out of sight out of mind'. Women are often overlooked or stereotyped as having other priorities, or being more of a risky pair of hands, meaning that they miss out on training and promotion opportunities.
- Women talk about the significant emotional and logistical challenge of leaving their baby to come back to work. They experience this when they are feeling most vulnerable and often try to cover it up, rather than seek out support. This is heightened when managers are not empathetic, or inflexible when it comes to working patterns and location.

“

The lady who is in charge of maternity leave was new and didn't know the policy very well. I am also a first-time mum, so it was a learning curve for the both of us. In a time of uncertainty I just wanted to have someone confident in what they are doing.

”

Maternity Returners Survey 2022

“

I was very grateful that my company respected my wishes for 'radio silence' unless I reached out during maternity leave so that I could spend the nine months focusing on and embracing being a mother.

”

Maternity Returners Survey 2022

These are the key challenges that make the return to work difficult and unsuccessful.

When women did feel positive, they mentioned themes such as flexible working, having a supportive manager and continued career progression:

“My workplace has been completely flexible with the hours I have worked as I returned to work. Every time I have

requested a change to accommodate childcare they have agreed without question. They have actively promoted me and offered me more senior positions.”

“Somehow the pandemic helped me as the remote work options allowed me to stay home with my child for longer than expected; the hybrid working model is also giving me the right level of autonomy to manage unexpected events.”

However, some women did report that remote working makes them feel invisible.

Organisational Consequences

Women are experiencing wellbeing issues, productivity dips and sometimes employees choose to leave, often a year or two after their return to work, to seek out a more family friendly employer. Some women decide to leave before they start a family, because if they can't see working mothers in more senior roles the organisation, they assume that they will not be able to progress either.

Women all too often face barriers to taking up developmental opportunities. Promotion can be very difficult due to maternity bias. In the worse-case, when managers and HR do not have adequate awareness and training, it can lead to grievances being raised.



One third of the women we surveyed reported a **negative experience at work** both during their pregnancy or on their return to work after maternity leave

All this creates a perfect storm that means that unless organisations make significant cultural shifts where returning mums feel valued and supported, women in early career roles will choose to move to more family friendly employers, or find that their careers stall.

As a consequence, it will be impossible to increase gender diversity and close gender pay gaps, as the maternity transition will prove just too big a barrier.

Key Points

The results of the Maternity Returners Survey 2022 highlighted three areas where organisations need to do more to create an inclusive environment for expectant and returning mums:

1) Employee journey

A third of women said they had a negative experience at work both in pregnancy and when they returned after leave. Women reported an inconsistency of approach from both HR and managers. While some women had very positive experiences that made them feel supported and understood, that was not always the case. There was a lack of consistency and knowledge that made forward planning difficult and stressful. Women report having to proactively seek guidance and clarification.

“The lady who is in charge of maternity leave was new and didn’t know the policy very well. I am also a first-time mum, so it was a learning curve for the both of us. In a time of uncertainty I just wanted to have someone confident in what they are doing.”

“They advise meetings but don’t enforce them. So I have no idea what is happening with my leave/when I come back, etc.”

“[I was] left feeling the need to apologise for wanting to take maternity leave for the entire entitlement of one year.”

Maternity consultancy

We partner with organisations who want to successfully re-engage with their women returners. Using a tried-and-tested framework, we work with HR, EDI professionals, leaders and returners to understand the current experience for maternity returners and establish what is working well and what can be improved.

Using our framework we advise organisations on what they need to do to create a cultural shift in their workplace and help them to implement the changes, so their organisation pivots to being a place where women feel understood and supported, and want to return and continue to their career development.

Following this analysis, we offer training solutions that really shift the dial in organisations, so that line managers develop a confident and consistent, human approach. This means expectant and new mums continue to feel connected and valued, even while on maternity leave, and make a successful return to work.

Our new web-based Returners Toolkit is a self-directed training resource containing everything you need to help your managers, HR staff and returning mums - all in one place.

It comprises: a step-by-step framework of best practice for when people take parental leave, a communication plan, a re-orientation plan and advice on enhancing the wellbeing of returners – the impact of mental load.

The modules provide a bite-size, blended learning experience with pre-recorded video, pdfs and checklists. Colleagues access guidance in the way that best works for them, when they need it.

1:1 coaching for managers and parental returners

We are currently partnering with an engineering and technology company to help them create a best-practice experience for parental returners through coaching for parents and their managers

All pregnant employees are offered six 1:1 coaching sessions through their parental transition. Their managers are also given 1:1 sessions to use as and when required.

Objectives

The HR Director approached us because she was looking for a solution to improve gender inclusion and balance in this predominantly male organisation. The programme needed to upskill managers in empathy and competence, so they were able to confidently and consistently support pregnant team members and new parents. The firm wanted to support new mums in their career development, so that they were able to go on to take senior roles, to reduce the 30% gender pay gap.

We partnered to devise an intensive 1:1 coaching programme to support parental returners from pregnancy through to the return to work. Alongside sessions for parents, we offered their managers intensive 1:1 sessions, which they could access when they needed assistance.

Results

The firm was delighted with the impact of the coaching programme, receiving good feedback from both parents and their managers. Parents felt more positive and greatly valued the investment the company was making in them. Managers were vocal with peers about the value of the sessions. The business was also able to benefit from organisational learnings, due to the themes emerging during the coaching programmes.

Some women expressed what they felt had gone well when they were on leave:

“I was very grateful that my company respected my wishes for 'radio silence' unless I reached out during maternity leave so that I could spend the nine months focusing on and embracing being a mother.”

“My work have been supportive and only got in contact if I asked them to.”

Establishing what level of contact women want and having a plan in place to follow through seems to be key. There is clearly more to be done to support female employees coming back after maternity leave.

2) Manager skills

It is important the managers are trained not just on process, but also on developing empathy. Women report a lack of appropriate, confident, compassionate interactions with their line managers in the run-up to their maternity leave:

“I was made to feel like I was leaving work undone when going away and made to feel very stressed and guilty.”

Women reported inconsistency from their employers regarding keeping in touch during their maternity leave. Our survey found that the most challenging time was during maternity leave, with only 37% of women saying they were happy with the level of interaction they had with their employer while on maternity leave.

“I’m not involved in the return to the office as I am pregnant and the company is making those in the office not feel not part of company.”

Feelings of exclusion and lack of involvement are also expressed. Women can feel overlooked when they are pregnant or on leave, especially at the current time when there is an increase in remote working.

A lack of appropriate return-to-work support was also reported, with half of women said that they struggled with mental load on their return to work and half also said they felt thrown in at the deep end. Improvements also need to be made regarding the good use of KIT days:

“It was actually good to stay in touch, but because it was never discussed ahead of time, I would suddenly get emails needing immediate response and then afterward a month of silence.”

“[I was] left feeling the need to apologise for wanting to take maternity leave for the entire entitlement of one year.”

3) Progression ceiling

We can see from data from the Office for National Statistics that the gender pay gap quadruples when women have children⁵. This shows that they are unable to continue their career progression and get left behind compared to men.

In our survey, we asked women if the maternity transition was impacting on their careers:

“I was unable to return to the first line manager role on a part-time basis, so moved to a lower grade role on a lower salary.”

The impact of allyship

We recently partnered with an organisation that wanted to create awareness among all its employees of the impact of having children on women going through the maternity transition.

We partnered with the organisation to host a Lunch & Learn on the impact of maternity on careers, creating awareness and a sense of allyship among employees. We then introduced a maternity coaching programme where women receive six 1:1 sessions to support them during the maternity transition.

Objectives

The organisation wanted to create a more inclusive environment for women returners, where colleagues had more empathy and understanding, and where women felt supported, understood and valued, as they go through this significant life change.

The organisation's aim was to enable women to successfully return and keep their careers on track, strengthening the female talent pipeline. A longer-term objective is to keep more returners in the organisation past the mid-career point and improve gender diversity at senior levels.

Results

The Lunch & Learn was well-attended and succeeded in igniting the conversation around the impact of careers on maternity in the organisation. The feedback from participants was very positive, with women in particular saying how good it was that the organisation understood the importance of talking about the professional impact of maternity on women. Following the discussion and the themes raised, the organisation decided to invest in maternity coaching and the pilot programme is now underway.

“I had to give up my shorter week to get a promotion then I had to give up that role to go back to a shorter week to accommodate child care.”

“I do admittedly feel like my career has gone backwards and that I won't have the opportunity to apply into a more senior role again until I return from maternity leave.”



37%

Only **37% of women** we surveyed said they were **happy with the level of interaction** they had with their employer while on maternity leave.

When women have to step down during parenthood, this means organisations lose experienced employees from their talent pipeline, which ultimately prevents increasing gender diversity at senior levels.

The attitude of the manager is often very influential as to whether women continue on their carer pathway:

“My previous manager assumed I might want to quit or go part time. I feel like they wrote off my career. My current manager is very supportive of my wanting to build a career whilst being a mum.”

Taking action

We can see from the first-hand lived experiences shared by women in our Maternity Returners Survey 2022 that there are significant challenges faced by women during pregnancy and upon their return to work after maternity leave.

There is a genuine risk that they will become disengaged, miss out on promotion and development, and without the right support in place will ultimately decide to leave their organisations and wider professions.

Proactive organisations recognise this and are taking action; take a look at pages 8-10 to see how they are taking steps to tackle this issue.

Organisations are investing in vital initiatives such as:

- 1:1 maternity coaching programmes to re-engage returners and ensure they come back to work feeling confident, valued and ready to continue their career progression.



“ My workplace has been completely flexible with the hours I have worked as I returned to work. Every time I have requested a change to accommodate childcare they have agreed without question. They have actively promoted me and offered me more senior positions. ”

Maternity Returners Survey 2022

- Coaching for managers to upskill them in empathy and competence, to allow them to confidently and consistently support pregnant team members and new parents.
- Webinars and events to create awareness among employees of the impact of maternity on careers and foster a sense of allyship.
- Consultancy to understand the current experience for maternity returners and establish what is working well and what can be improved.
- Engaging, online training resources to help managers understand the impact of maternity leave, show them how to help returners ease back in positively and successfully, and create a best-practice experience for maternity returners.

If this sounds like where you'd like your organisation to be in 2022, get in touch to arrange a free scoping call to discuss how Emma Waltham can help your organisation attract, retain and develop women returners.

Biography

Emma specialises in supporting organisations to help them re-engage their parental returners, through coaching, training and return-to-work consultancy. Emma started her career in STEM and has a chemistry PhD. Before taking a maternity break, Emma worked as a director in a variety of sectors. She has extensive, first-hand expertise in business transformation and leadership. Following her maternity break, Emma gained a Certificate in Coaching with the University of Cambridge. She has worked as a consultant, trainer and executive coach since 2015. Emma's experience in successfully climbing the corporate ladder and being a working mum, gives her a 360-degree perspective on both the needs of returners and the organisations they work for.

Organisations Emma is working with include BAM Nuttall, EMCOR UK, General Dental Council, Frazer Nash Consultancy, GE Healthcare, Wellcome Sanger Institute, STEM Returners, UK Atomic Energy Authority and UK Power Networks.

Get in touch

To discuss how Emma Waltham can help your organisation attract, retain and develop women returners, please get in touch to arrange a free scoping call.



The contact information is presented in a light blue rectangular box. It contains three rows of information, each with an icon on the left and text on the right. The first row features a red and white envelope icon followed by the email address **emma@emmawaltham.com**. The second row features a blue LinkedIn 'in' logo followed by the URL **www.linkedin.com/in/emmawaltham**. The third row features a white speech bubble icon containing the text 'http://' and a black mouse cursor icon pointing towards the URL **www.emmawaltham.com**.

References

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Quotations

Woman returner quotes are from my 2022 Maternity Returners Survey. Thank you to all the women returners who gave their time to tell us about their experiences in their own words. Your help has been invaluable and is very much appreciated.