

Engaging Women in the Workplace after Maternity



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Introduction

There is a huge, untapped talent pool of women who are experienced and qualified, but who find it impossible after taking maternity leave to return to a role that fits their level of expertise.

It is estimated that there are 2 million women in the UK who are currently economically inactive, due to caring commitments.¹ Many have professional/managerial experience and qualifications.² In a survey of 25,000 people undertaken by PwC, 93% said that it was hard to combine a successful career with caring/childcare responsibilities.³

The impact of this is that a substantial number of highly educated and experienced women are in work, but have occupationally downgraded, in order to be able to work more flexibly.¹ The Resolution Foundation and Netmums⁴ found in 2012 that 42% of degree holders felt they had to take a lower-skilled job in order to be able to work part time.

When surveyed, 76% of women said they would like to return to professional roles but face significant barriers in doing so.¹ While 74% of women on maternity leave intend to return to the same employer only 24% actually do when they have spent more than one year away from work.⁵

Organisations are therefore losing talented women when they become mothers. Businesses that are not effectively engaging with this group are putting themselves at a disadvantage compared to competitors who are able to re-engage women after maternity.

Recruiting and retaining women returners positively impacts on:

- The female talent pipeline
- Age and gender diversity
- Productivity
- The gender pay gap
- Employee churn
- Skills gaps
- Creating a family-friendly culture.

This whitepaper reviews the current situation regarding women returners and explores how businesses can deal with this group differently in order to re-engage them and get them on a career fast track.

Who are Women Returners?

Women returners are those who have taken a break from their career but are now looking to go back into a professional role. Three-quarters of professional women on career breaks say they eventually want to return to work.¹ PwC estimates this to be a group of nearly half a million women.¹ This figure does not include women on maternity leave or those who have returned to lower-skilled employment.

In practice mothers find going back to professional work very difficult, if not impossible. Many remain unemployed or occupationally downgrade, that is they step off the career ladder and take on a role that doesn't match their qualifications and experience. This group is a huge, untapped talent pool.

52% changed industry or profession to find a more family-friendly employer⁵

Women returners are hindered in their aspiration to return to professional roles because they face significant barriers to re-entry:

The perception of the employment gap—recruiters often have a bias against those with career breaks, as they do not value past experience as much as experience gained more recently.

There is a lack of high-skilled flexible and part-time roles—79% say finding a more flexible job is a priority.⁵ However, Timewise⁶ found that only 10% of roles with a salary of more than £20,000 were advertised on a flexible basis. The situation is much worse for roles over £100,000, with only 2% being advertised as flexible.

87% consider a reputation for inclusive hiring and flexible working a top priority in a potential employer⁵

The financial implications of becoming a parent—a 2019 UNICEF report⁷ found that the UK was one of the worst places in Europe for paid parental leave and affordable quality childcare. This makes it simply impossible for many families to afford full-time childcare.

Cultural biases—societal norms that assume the mother will take on the majority of childcare responsibilities impact on the choices women make on becoming parents. Families often do not realise that if the mother takes a break to care for children it is likely to have a profound and long-term effect on career progression.

The mother load—the mental strain of juggling a career role with family life, while working in organisations that are not set up to support parents, deters women from going back into a professional role.

Non-linear careers—women who take a break or occupationally downgrade end up with a non-linear career path. Recruiters tend to be biased against applicants who have this type of ‘squiggly’ work experience, preferring more traditional career progression.

Ambition bias—employers often incorrectly assume that working mothers who want to work part time do not have the same levels of ambition or commitment as those seeking full-time work. It is common therefore for part-time workers to find that their careers stall due to lack of promotion and/or training opportunities. Between 52–66% of working mums (the percentage depends on whether they are working part time, full time, flexibly or are self-employed) say they feel they have ‘fallen behind with their careers and would like to get back on track’.⁶

The result of this myriad of barriers means that three-fifths¹ of women returners take up lower-skilled roles, where flexible jobs are more accessible. There is a high financial penalty levied for this. Connolly and Gregory⁸ discovered in 2009 that the ‘full-time to part-time’ earning penalty for working mums was:

- 12% if they stayed with the same employer
- 32% if they moved to a new employer.

Manning and Petrongolo⁹ similarly found in 2008 that female graduates who had previously worked full time and then returned to work part time suffered a pay penalty of 21%.

PwC¹ estimates the economic benefit of addressing this career-break penalty is that women would collectively earn an extra £1.1 billion. Bringing this groups’ skills and experience back into the workforce would generate an additional economic output of £178 billion annually.¹⁰

These barriers and thwarted aspirations no longer just apply to women. Social changes are taking place in men and women’s lives. Fathers want to be supported at work to take a more equal share of childcare when their children are young.¹¹ In a survey carried out by the Modern Families Index¹² in 2017, 76% of younger fathers said they would assess their childcare needs before taking a job or promotion.

The priorities of millennials and the generation Zs entering the workforce are also relevant to acknowledge. These groups do not have some of the cultural biases against parenting roles that other groups have, and they value flexibility and balance.¹³

Fathers taking greater responsibility for childcare and thus enabling women to re-join the workforce will ultimately contribute to reducing the gender pay gap and create a level-playing field so women can participate on equal terms. It is therefore in companies’ interests to support all parents.

Why Business Needs Women Returners

Women returners are an experienced, ambitious group of professionals who face barriers returning to career roles. Businesses are missing out on an experienced talent pool that could make a hugely positive impact on their organisation.

Re-engaging, retaining and developing women returners would:

- Build and sustain a female talent pipeline, enabling more women to reach senior levels in your organisation.
- Broaden the age and gender diversity of your organisation, which is known to give commercial advantage.¹⁴
- Send out a signal that this is a family-friendly employer.
- Increase productivity, which improves when parents are well-supported and able to effectively juggle home and work.
- Reduce the gender pay gap, as women become better able to progress in the organisation.
- Save money, as when female workers are able to stay in your organisation for longer this reduces recruitment costs and improves productivity.
- Address skills gaps, as so many highly qualified women dip out of the workforce following maternity and their expertise is not being utilised.

How could your organisation address these issues and realise these benefits?

Current Practice

Businesses are losing professional women, as over 400,000 females with professional/managerial expertise are on a career break and want to return to work.¹ Many thousands more women are in work, but find themselves trapped in roles that are lower skilled than they are qualified for, in order to be able to work part time. These groups comprise a vast, untapped talent pool for organisations.

Companies are not attracting and retaining these women for a variety of reasons:

Recruitment

- Flexible working is a key requirement for the majority of women returners, yet only one in ten roles with a salary over £20,000 are advertised as such.
- Women returners may not have applied for jobs for a long time and this deters them from entering into a recruitment process.
- There are biases against women recruiters when they do apply. Their past experience is not rated as highly as more current expertise and they are often perceived as not committed if they request flexibility or part-time hours.

“How can I inspire my daughter if I cannot go back to work?” Woman returner

Retention

- Women say that the mental load of juggling work and family life can just be too much. This is exacerbated when line managers and teams are unsupportive.
- There is often insufficient support when they do return to help them with the legal, business or technical changes that have occurred in the business while they were away.
- Low uptake of paternity leave and shared parental leave, due to the financial impact and cultural biases, means women disproportionality carry the childcare burden and are more likely to leave.

“Being well-prepared and up-to-date with the demands of the job would help me return to work successfully” Woman returner

“The mindset of individual line managers has a huge impact on retention of women after maternity. Having structured processes in place also helps, as does keeping women on maternity leave informed of changes” HR manager, food sector

“You feel vulnerable when someone else is doing your job and you’re not there” Woman returner

Development

- When there is a lack of diversity at board level there is unlikely to be a role model demonstrating how family and work life can be blended successfully.
- The female talent pipeline runs dry as women leave the business or are occupationally downgraded in order to work part time.
- Only 2% of roles paying more than £100,000 are advertised as flexible.
- Working mothers are often perceived as unambitious and are not seriously considered for promotion, due to biases against them.

“I need to leave at certain pre-defined times but that doesn’t make me less committed” Woman returner

“I am disappointed at not being able to do what I spent so many years training for” Woman returner

My Recommendations

Simple changes can make a huge difference to re-engaging women returners and supporting them so they become part of your organisation's talent pipeline.

Recruitment strategies

Flexibility – Include positive messages in your job adverts about your organisation being supportive of flexible working. When GoCompare and Zurich Insurance made this change to their adverts, it had a rapid and significant impact on the numbers of women returners applying for their roles.

Language – Use gender-neutral language in your advertising.¹⁵ Words such as 'assertive', 'self-reliant' and 'ambitious' can put off women from applying. Language like 'co-operative', 'interpersonal' or 'committed', is more likely to resonate with female applicants.

Simplify the process – Keep the process simple, be clear in advance what is required and why, and keep any assessments very straightforward. Be prepared to talk about flexibility during the interview process. Women returners may not have applied for jobs for a long time and can feel particularly intimidated by the recruitment process.

Look for transferable skills – Value the strengths and transferable skills of women returners, rather than focusing on what they are doing in their current role. The most recent work experience of women returners often isn't indicative of their potential.

PR – If your organisation offers returnships or a supported-hire programme, highlight this in your recruitment materials. Enter awards and publicise these initiatives on social media. Make sure women are hearing about the support you can offer them as working parents.

Marketing – Reach women returners by using agencies, job boards and Facebook groups that specialise in flexible working. The women I have helped to return to work often turn to their network to find roles, rather than applying through traditional channels, because they feel they will need a referral in order to be able to be taken seriously.

“I love being a mum. I love work too. I need the diversity of work and family goals” Woman returner

“I used to have so much confidence but now I'm worried I will not be good enough” Woman returner

CASE STUDIES – INCREASED APPLICATIONS

- When GoCompare made it clear in 2019 that they were open to flexible working, applications from women increased by 18%.
- Zurich Insurance started advertising senior vacancies in 2019 as a potential part-time, job share or flexible working opportunity, and applications soared by a staggering 45% in just three months. Using gender-neutral language in Zurich Insurance's advert also helped improve their application rate from females, according to the company.

Retention strategies

Enhanced maternity benefits – Offer maternity pay that is above statutory minimum and return-to-work bonuses, to make it more affordable for women to return after maternity. This helps families cope with the UK's high childcare costs. Enhanced shared parental and paternity leave provision also helps, because without it, women disproportionately carry the childcare burden and are more likely to leave the workplace.

Supported hire/returnship schemes – Set up returnships or supported hire schemes that give women returners the training, mentoring and coaching they need as they re-enter the workforce. The women returners I have worked with are very concerned about how they will cope with a career role on top of their career. Programmes like this give them confidence that an employer understands their challenges and needs.

Offer flexibility for all – Give working parents flexibility so that they have more autonomy over how to organise their lives, and watch productivity and engagement increase. Opening up flexibility to all brings even greater benefits to organisations, giving businesses an edge when it comes to sourcing top talent.

Engage leaders – Provide guidance in the form of frameworks, policies and flexible-working examples to managers. In my conversations with working mums, the impact of the attitude of individual line managers is raised time and time again. For a company to successfully re-engage women returners, the managerial and leadership teams must understand the business case, and feel motivated and confident in how they can support women returners.

CASE STUDY – HEALTHCARE BUSINESS

Almost all women return to this organisation after maternity leave, and usually to the same role. The HR manager attributes this very high retention rate to the enhanced maternity package the company offers, including a return-to-work bonus, along with the flexible-working culture of the organisation. This combination of factors means that women can afford to come back to work, and feel able to balance their career and family commitments.

CASE STUDY – SMALL BUSINESS

Southpaw is a creative agency with around 40 employees and is a good example of how a small organisation can achieve a high retention rate after maternity leave. The HR Manager, Naomi Saxon, says the flexible working culture that extends throughout the organisation is one reason why women return to work, 'It's the norm that people work flexibly and that includes the senior management team, whether it's working part time, or from home.'

Naomi also credits the very strong interpersonal relationships within the organisation with an impact. Women still feel a part of Southpaw, even when they are on maternity leave. While on leave, women are invited to social events, offered keep-in-touch days and given updates on the business. How much they engage is left to them.

Development strategies

Training opportunities – Ensure that part-time and full-time workers are offered the same training. Give those with caring responsibilities more notice, so they have time to arrange cover. They may need help to meet extra childcare costs. Consider if the training can be offered by webinar, for example, rather than on-site.

Transparency – Make the criteria and process for promotion open, so that women returners know what they need to be able to demonstrate to progress. Do not allow promotions to be the result of gaining a sponsor, as senior people in the business may have an unconscious bias against working mums.

“All the hard work and qualifications have been wasted” Woman returner

Transferable skills – Judge potential on strengths, past achievements and experience, rather than on the current role or level of responsibility, as professional women often take a lower-skilled role in order to work part time.

Mentoring – Set up a mentoring scheme to give women returners access to successful, senior women in the organisation who are parents, providing them with a role model who appreciates their particular challenges.

Coaching – Offer women 1:1 coaching so that they receive the support they need during the maternity transition, to enable them to sustain their performance and take a long-term view of their career. Coaching helps women understand their priorities and to develop effective strategies for balancing their careers and caring responsibilities. The women I coached as part of Oxfam’s Future Skills programme, said it had significantly increased their confidence in what they had to offer employers and what they would be able to achieve in the workplace.

CASE STUDY – 1:1 COACHING

Compass set up a Leadership Accelerator Programme for women returners to give them the skills and experience they need to progress into senior roles. Director Amanda Scott says that the women on the programme particularly value the 1:1 executive coaching they receive from an external coach. The opportunity to access this support was the key reason women applied.

CASE STUDY – PROMOTION FRAMEWORK

Liz Ince is a Managing Solution Architect at Capgemini and praises its transparency around grades and promotion, saying that the open and transparent policies give all a level-playing field. The promotion process is documented online and anyone can apply having compared skills and job requirements against published tables. ‘It is a clearly documented process and doesn’t involve dodgy handshakes and being members of the same golf club,’ says Liz.

Conclusion

Women with professional and managerial expertise remain ambitious after becoming parents, and want to continue to progress their careers, but are unwilling to sacrifice time spent parenting their young children. As a result, after maternity, women often feel there is no option but to leave the workforce entirely or take a lower skilled job, to be able to work around their family.

Three-quarters of women in this position say they would like to return to a professional role but they face significant barriers. This means businesses are missing out on valuable talent. The impact is significant – on the female talent pipeline, gender diversity at senior levels and the gender pay gap. It increases recruitment costs as businesses try to replace the talent that they lose.

Currently, companies are not doing enough to engage this group of experienced women. They can change this by implementing simple strategies that will enable their business to attract, retain and develop women returners.

In bringing these women back into the workplace and giving them the support they need to thrive, both working mums and businesses will reap the benefits. Women will be able to once again use the skills and knowledge they have worked so hard for. Businesses in turn will gain expertise, and productive and engaged staff. This will lead to more diversity at senior levels, and reduce the gender pay gap, recruitment costs and absenteeism.

Biography

Emma Waltham specialises in working with organisations to improve the experience of women returning to work after maternity, through consultancy and coaching.

Prior to taking a maternity break, Emma Waltham worked as a client services director in the recruitment and media sectors, including at executive-board level. She gained extensive, first-hand business expertise in business transformation and leadership.

Following her break Emma gained a Certificate in Coaching with the University of Cambridge.

Her combination of personal and professional expertise in successfully climbing the corporate ladder and returning to work after becoming a parent, gives her an insightful and valuable perspective on both the needs of women returners and the organisations they work for.

Organisations Emma has worked with include the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, Hobsons plc, HSBC, Group GTI, MyKindaFuture, Oxfam and the UK Atomic Energy Authority.

To discuss how Emma Waltham can help your organisation engage and develop women returners, please email emma@emmawaltham.com.

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Woman returner quotes are from my conversations with 1:1 clients.

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