

# How can Maternity Coaching influence Women's Re-engagement with their Career Development: a Case Study of a Maternity Coaching Programme in UK-Based Private Law Firms

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## Abstract

This article explores the influence maternity coaching has on how women re-engage with their career development after maternity leave. The study addresses the lack of understanding of the long-term influence of maternity coaching. It is based on a case study of maternity coaching in three UK based private law firms. Three key career re-engagement factors were identified: 'work', 'relationships' and 'role models'. Maternity coaching was found to influence these factors by supporting women during the return to work phase at an emotional level, a practical level and through long-term career development reflections. The findings could be relevant in other sectors with similar working conditions, for coaching after career breaks, and could inform coaching programmes for professional parents regardless of their gender.

**Keywords:** Maternity coaching, career coaching, women's career development, career breaks, return to work.

## Introduction

A lack of women in senior management positions and the negative impact of this on an organisation's financial and organisational performance, as well as on the wider economy and society, have been identified (Desvaux et al., 2008; Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2008). The length of maternity leave in the UK has increased in recent years to currently up to 52 weeks of statutory leave. However, career penalties for child-related absences in the workplace have been identified (Brown, 2010; Metz, 2005; McDonald et al., 2008; Arun et al., 2004).

One method that addresses the changes that support equal career development opportunities for women is maternity coaching. It has been in existence in the UK only since about 2005 (Sparrow, 2008) and programmes typically comprise 3-5 coaching sessions to support women before their maternity leave and during the return-to-work transition. However, with the introduction of the Equality Act in October 2010 in the UK, which covers gender equality, the demand for maternity coaching is expected to rise (Hall, 2009). Maternity coaching is a fairly new coaching genre and it is not yet understood how it impacts long-term and specifically on women's re-engagement with their career development.

Available literature in relation to maternity coaching is mainly aimed at practitioners and a literature review shows a focus on the benefits for the employer and the transition back to work (Harrison, 2008; Freeman 2008; Sparrow, 2009; Sparrow, 2008, Sparrow, 2006; Griffiths, 2006). Existing academic studies had a focus on retention (Bussell, 2008; O'Donoghue, 2008). In addition,

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research on the experience of women being coached in general is limited and the literature on coaching women is dominated by coaching as a solution to develop female leaders (Adler, 2006; Carr, 2002; Cormier, 2007; ILM, 2011; Leimon *et al.*, 2011; Peltier, 2010). For these reasons and the fact that it is important for women to re-engage with their career development quickly after maternity leave to compensate for career penalties, further investigation of the long-term impact of maternity coaching on women's re-engagement with their career development is warranted.

### ***Research objectives and context***

'Career development re-engagement' is not an established term in the careers field. It is thus necessary to identify the key factors that influence women's re-engagement with their career development after maternity leave to allow a subsequent analysis of how maternity coaching influences this process. Therefore the two objectives of the study discussed in this article are:

- To increase the understanding of the factors that influence how women re-engage with their career development: How do women who made a positive choice to return to work re-engage with their career development? What helps and hinders this process?
- To increase the understanding of how maternity coaching supports women with their career development re-engagement after maternity leave: What aspects of maternity coaching do women experience as helpful for the re-engagement with their careers and career development?

A single case study of a maternity coaching programme in UK based private law firms was undertaken. This sector was chosen because law firms were early adopters of maternity coaching and the legal profession has recognised the lack of women in senior positions and the issue of the exodus of women mid-career (The Law Society, 2007).

### **Methodology**

As many factors, including non-work related ones, could impact on how women re-engage with their career development, a case study approach allowed exploration of the facets of a complex problem and process in its natural setting within a bounded system (Creswell, 2007; Hartley, 2004). At the same time, the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context in the study were not clear. It is not clear how maternity coaching impacts on career re-engagement within the context of other factors, for example women's personal situations and their support network. This study was mainly interested in the work context, but it seemed unrealistic to be able to isolate other factors from the wider context. Case study has been identified as a suitable methodology for this situation and further has been found to provide a valid approach when researching female careers (McDonald *et al.*, 2008; Yin, 2009).

A single case study of a maternity coaching programme took place and data was collected in three embedded units of analysis (three UK based medium sized law firms) by semi-structured interviews (Yin, 2009). Central to the research design was the intrinsic triangulation of the data by obtaining three different organisational perspectives. This strengthened the construct validity (Yin, 2009) of the research design as multiple methods of data collection (e.g. document analysis) were not possible due to the confidentiality concerns of the participating firms. The following groups of participants were interviewed: coachees (two women per firm who had completed the coaching programme 6-12 months ago), the coaching buyer of each of the law firms (two HR and one Learning and Development Manager) and two maternity coaches who had delivered the coaching programmes in the participating law firms. The maternity coaches had both delivered maternity coaching programmes in other law firms and organisations in other sectors for several years. Initially it was

planned to interview the managers of the returning women (typically partners in the law firm) but due to access restrictions this was not feasible.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

Data was collected through one semi-structured interview per participant and subsequently transcribed by the researcher. The transcripts were analysed using Template Analysis, a data analysis method particularly suitable to comparing multiple perspectives in a specific context (King, 2004). A template consists of a list of codes that are pre-set and adapted as data is collected and analysed (Saunders et al., 2007). Treating the same case differently can allow conclusions from different perspectives (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Therefore three steps of data clustering were undertaken once the final coding template had been used to analyse the data:-

- by law firm
- by participant perspective (women, coach, buyer)
- by women with few and many years post-qualified experience

Further, the data was analysed to answer the question of whether the coaching sessions had an impact on women's re-engagement with their career development. It was not possible to link all of the data to individual sessions. However, this exercise confirmed that each session had elements that were experienced by the women and observed by the other two perspectives to be supportive of re-engaging with career development.

### **Findings**

A number of key factors were identified that influence women's re-engagement with career development:

#### ***Work***

The quality, nature and volume of the work and kind of clients that women returned to after maternity leave were considered influential on women's career re-engagement by the interviewees. Experience gained through work is the basis for career development prospects in private law firms, and consequently gaining appropriate work and clients is highly important. Women's availability and their level of pro-activity in sourcing work appeared to be the key influence over what kind of quality and quantity of work women returned to at the end of their maternity leave. When looking at how women pro-actively searched for work, 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 in this study were reliant on partners to source work for them as they had yet to develop an external network.

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 and to continue their careers without lengthy breaks. In the case of one woman the option to reduce her hours changed her plan to investigate alternative careers so in effect helped with retention, which confirms the findings of a previous study on the retention benefit of maternity coaching (Bussell, 2008). On the other hand, flexible working can sometimes hinder career re-engagement when it leads to women not getting work appropriate to their experience level, which could be due to the lack of transparency around flexible working policies that has been found in some cases in law firms (Working Families, 2008).

A circumstance particular to the case study is the high expectation of private law firms for employees' to be available out of office hours. So in effect, working full time but leaving on time or

working from home is seen as being less available. Usually working mothers can attend fewer networking and business development activities in the evenings than their colleagues which can have a negative effect on their career development prospects and in women feeling side-lined. Another reason identified in the study for feeling side-lined and experiencing low workflow was being pregnant again and having more than one child. In summary, not getting appropriate work has an effect on women's experience levels and career development opportunities, and can also affect their motivation.

However, some of the women had positive experiences of their work being tailored to their availability. This was due to their own pro-activity in sourcing work, working with amenable partners and the nature of the work they do. The data suggests that women miss out on getting appropriate work if the nature of their area of law is transactional and involves working on deals (e.g. company mergers).

### ***Relationships***

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

*Partners* - The partner relationships are central as they impact the relationships with clients and peers. One woman described the positive experience of working with a partner who facilitated access to clients. Partners' attitude to flexible working and a woman's changed availability can facilitate a positive or negative career re-engagement. The behaviour and comments of some of the partners reported in the study indicate that they could perceive returning mothers as being 'on the mommy track' (Quesenberry et al., 2006) and less interested in careers. This can hinder women's re-engagement with their career development as partners are the key source of work and decide who is promoted to partnership. This implies that addressing this misperception with partners is important in order to support women's re-engagement with their careers. The opportunity to develop careers is one of the factors that positively influences women's decision to return, but more importantly, also to remain at work (Bussell, 2008).

In addition there is an emotional impact partners can have on how the returning women feel about their careers. The 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 partners to talk about personal issues, the lack of empathy with returning mothers and lack of planning an appropriate workload for their return was mentioned by several participants as a hindrance to re-integrating back into work. A general lack of people management skills in law firms has been identified by recent research (The Law Society, 2011). The data demonstrates how important it is to address this so partners can better support women who return to work after maternity leave, in particular junior women who are less able to source work themselves. For these reasons involving partners in maternity coaching programmes should be considered.

*Peers* - The attitude of peers to returning women also had an effect on how women in the study integrated back into their careers. For example they felt that working part-time, taking time off for a family crisis or leaving on time were all perceived negatively by their peers. One woman, who herself experienced the partner that heads her department as very supportive of her reduced availability, described how some peers were less understanding.

The relationship with peers is further strained by the competition for clients, which was described by interviewees from all three perspectives. Women who are on flexible working contracts designed their working hours around their client needs. In some cases this meant women working flexibly were not offered to work with their previous clients even though this was agreed before their maternity leave.

*Clients* - Continued service to clients was mentioned as one of the reasons why women who work flexibly lose out on working with their previous clients and getting work appropriate to their experience level. 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. Speed is one of the dimensions of a transitional career model (Nicholson and West, 1989) and having to start with new clients resulted in slowing down the transition back to work and career re-engagement. Maternity coaching could help women to manage this situation by raising the issue of returning to previous clients in the first session before women go on maternity leave. While it will not always be practical for women to return to their old clients, communicating their wish to do so to the partners could prepare the reverse handover at the end of the maternity leave. A study in the legal sector reported frequent over-delivery and a discrepancy between perceived and actual needs of clients (The Law Society, 2011) and one woman felt that clients would accept limited availability of their solicitor if the partners would be supportive.

From the buyers view the coaching results in more realistic flexible working requests. Thus 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 a working mother's career re-engagement, as it allows a positive re-engagement without compromising the needs of home life, but also by maintaining positive relationships at work with partners, peers and clients.

### ***Role Models***

All women referred to role models when reflecting on their career development and observing female partners was seen as having both a negative and positive impact on the women's ambitions to continue their career in the partnership track. Some described how seeing the sacrifices female partners have to make made them question their own pursuit of the partnership track. The negative influence of role models has been explained as the rejection of 'adapted' role models through social and gender role theory (Sealy and Singh, 2009). The low number of female partners as role models in law firms was identified by two of the coaching buyers. This is an issue for the sector as hearing about positive role models can be instrumental in the retention of women:

It is particularly critical for women in the earlier career phases to have access to successful female role models and to see concrete evidence that organizations are supportive of their desires for career and life success (O'Neil and Bilimoria, 2005, p186).

The need for role models was confirmed in the study by the experience of one woman who found herself being a role model for flexible working that influenced her colleagues' decision processes whether to leave private practice before they had children. A research report on careers in the legal sector recommends the promotion of role models of women in law who have achieved work life balance (Working Families, 2008). The report proposed that these role models could support the culture change that encourages women to seek work-life balance without fear of repercussions on their career. The symbolic and behavioural benefits of role models has been discussed in the literature, but more in-depth research of these benefits and their influence on work identity development and career success is required (Sealy and Singh, 2009). This implies that it could be

beneficial for maternity coaching to communicate positive role models in particular to junior women during the decision phase on which working pattern to return to. Therefore it would be beneficial for maternity coaches to follow future research on role models. This would enable them to work with role models in the best way to support women's re-engagement with their career development.

### ***The influence of maternity coaching on how women re-engage with their career development after maternity leave***

Maternity coaching was found to influence the career re-engagement factors at an emotional and practical level, and also through long-term career reflections. This is in line with the benefits the practitioner literature has identified (Harrison, 2008; Freeman 2008; Sparrow, 2008, Sparrow, 2006; Griffiths, 2006). The contribution of this study is the increased knowledge of *how* maternity coaching is achieving this.

*Emotional influence* - The fact that the firm is prepared to pay for maternity coaching despite her working part-time and being less available to the firm, was an example how a woman felt valued and encouraged. Several women reported that the coaching made them more confident during their return to work which helped multiple career re-engagement factors. 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 about how other working mothers managed their transitions back to work was helpful in addressing these concerns and increasing their confidence. Further, the coaching made women confident to request flexible working and be better prepared for the challenges of returning to work. The positive influence of maternity coaching on women's confidence when they return to work has also been reported in the practitioner literature (Harrison, 2008). Lowered confidence could be generally an issue for employees returning after other forms of extended leave of absence. Preparing the coachee for challenges in the transition back to work could be beneficial to build the coachee's confidence in these situations.

*Long-term career reflection* - Career researchers and theorists have argued that careers are gender specific (O'Neil and Bilimoria, 2005; O'Neil et al., 2008; Gallos, 1989) and have developed career theories dedicated to professional women. In the study maternity coaching was reported to provide a space for women to reflect on their careers and gender specific aspects, and that impacted positively on their re-engagement with their career development. This included reflecting on the decision to return to work, considering alternative careers and reviewing career aspirations. The data suggests 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 confirms previous research findings that maternity coaching can contribute to the retention of women who return from maternity leave (Bussell, 2008).

Several women described how the coaching and long-term career reflection helped them with the decision of which working pattern to return to. One woman found the coaching helpful to confirm that her decision to return full-time was right for her and her family. Another woman was not sure if flexible working would be available for her and had negative feelings about returning to work. This is in accord with the finding that whether flexible policies are supported by the organisation's culture has an impact on women's career decision (Brown, 2010). Maternity coaching helped in this example to negotiate flexible working successfully, which the woman found helpful to re-engage with her career development.

The coaches observed that women who consider their family complete have a renewed interest in career development. In contrast, planning further children was mentioned by two women as a hindrance to their career re-engagement. One woman portrayed how maternity coaching helped her to

think about her career more positively and long-term despite planning a second child. This resulted in increased motivation and performance and affected her re-engagement with her career development. Having a career vision is a positive factor in women's decisions not just to return to work after maternity leave, but also to stay in employment long-term (Bussell, 2008; Liston-Smith, 2010; The Law Society, 2007). Due to the non-linear nature of their careers, 'women need to take long-term time perspectives toward careers' (Gallo, 1989, p. 127). This indicates that career reflections during maternity coaching could contribute to women's re-engagement with their long-term career development.

The use of women's career theory to look at careers long-term and to illustrate the gender differences was reported as useful for the career reflection process by both the women and coaches. Therefore maternity coaches and any coaches working with professional mothers could benefit from general knowledge of women's career theory, and should continue to stay current on women's career theory developments. This is supported by publications on the subject of coaching women leaders who have proposed that the environment and challenges executive clients face varies by gender (Ruderman and Ohlott, 2005; Ludeman, 2009). Consequently coaches of executive women need to have knowledge of women's physiological and psychological capability, their specific development needs (Ruderman and Ohlott, 2005); and the micro-inequalities they encounter (Ludeman, 2009). This is relevant for maternity coaching as it is usually offered to senior and executive women in organisations.

*Practical influence* - Several women described how the coaching helped them with the decision of which working pattern to return to. 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 role. It would need to be carefully discussed and contracted between the firm and the coaching providers to protect the coaching provider from litigation.

From the buyers view the coaching resulted in more realistic flexible working requests that helped the different parties involved to achieve a better outcome that is long-term and commercially viable. This could be a contribution to mothers' career re-engagement, as it allows them to re-engage positively with their careers and build relationships without compromising the needs of their home life.

The data suggests that maternity coaching supported the women in the study in their sourcing of work by influencing how women communicate with the partners that manage them and their peers. Maternity coaching supported women to be pro-active in finding work by helping women to set themselves objectives and goals for their return to work. This was particularly useful for one woman who, on returning to work after her first child, was already planning a second child. Through maternity coaching and objective setting she was able to change her attitude to re-engage with her career and to be pro-active to find better quality work. For one woman making a list of objectives helped her to be explicit in her communication about which areas she did and did not want to work in, which was respected by the partners and helped consequently to speed up her career re-engagement and career development.

Maternity coaching also seemed to contribute to change misperceptions women hold about partners' workload decisions by looking at the wider context. For example, one woman thought the low quality work she was given related to her coming back from maternity leave and working part-time. Through the coaching she was able to see the wider context of the difficult economic climate and was able to communicate positively with the partner and discuss ways of finding work of appropriate quality for her in the future.

## Conclusion

In summary, the maternity coaching programme in this study supported women in finding the right quality and quantity of work appropriate for their experience and availability. 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.

The women experienced having a coach who is a mother and having a similar personality as helpful during the coaching. Further, one woman proposed that having a coach with sector experience could be beneficial. However, it has been proposed that the evidence for the benefit of matching coaching relationships by personality is insubstantial, that there are disadvantages to matching by sector (Cox and Wycherley, 2008). Therefore the impact on the effectiveness of maternity coaching relationships of matching coach and coachee by sector, being a mother and matching personality could be an area for further research. This knowledge would also be useful for the emerging market of paternity coaching.

*Limitations* - The research took place in the UK offices of three private law firms. This is an advantage in making the results more meaningful for this sector. However, this limits the applicability of the findings to other sectors and industries that have less prescribed career paths. Previous research on maternity coaching (e.g. Bussell, 2008) also took place in legal firms in the UK, meaning that the body of knowledge on maternity coaching in other sectors and geographies is limited. However, the findings could be relevant to sectors that follow the partnership model, e.g. accountancy and management consulting. Although the sample was small, this was alleviated by interviewing maternity coaches who had for several years coached women from other law firms and organisations in different sectors.

Interviewing partners would have been valuable to add the perspective of the line manager and owners of the firm. In addition, collecting different types of data through document analysis would have increased the validity by triangulating the information. Both activities were not possible due to access restrictions. Also, due to their restricted availability the interaction with the research participants was limited to the interviews. This did not allow for the participants to be involved in checking transcripts and interpretations which could have further increased the reliability of the findings.

*Value for the coaching profession and further research* - Although the study was set in private law firms and the sample was small, knowledge about women's career re-engagement factors can be relevant to anybody coaching professional mothers in any sector. The value to the maternity coaching market is an increased understanding of what clients experience as useful in support of their re-engagement with their career development. This aids the business development for maternity coaching as the benefits beyond the initial transition back to work can now be articulated to potential clients based on research. 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. Further, the findings could be of value when working with clients in organisations that offer linear career paths, have a long-hours culture and work across multiple time zones.

The research contributes to two areas of debate in the coaching profession which would require further research due to the small sample of the study: firstly, whether the matching of coach and coachee is beneficial to the coaching outcome and secondly, whether the coach has a role in informing clients about their rights and the impact of this on contracting in an organisational setting.

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 increasing costs for eldercare, could lead to an increase of longer and non-linear careers that include multiple 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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