What elements of maternity coaching, from the perspective of the coachee, impact the return-to-work transitions of experienced, professional women?

Researcher: Jennifer North

Summary of Research Paper for Master of Business Coaching 2014

Institute: Sydney Business School, University of Wollongong

Objective

The main objective of this study is to fill a gap within the existing knowledge base of maternity coaching from the perspective of the coachee. In the UK and more recently in Australia, some employer’s are recognising that becoming a mother is a transformative experience and offer maternity coaching to support women’s transitions in and out of the workplace and improve retention rates following childbirth (Parke & Bingham, 2012; Chivers, 2011). Maternity coaching generally involves confidential one-to-one sessions covering practical, emotional and longer-term career issues to support women prior to, during maternity leave and after their transition back to work (Filsinger, 2012; Chivers, 2011; Maitland, 2007). This study aims to gather information through interviews with selected women regarding the specific elements of maternity coaching that impacted their return-to-work transition.

The literature review identified four key themes:

Return-to-work transition themes - Millward’s (2006) study of women’s return-to-work transitions identified two master themes: identity changes, involving revalidation as both a valued employee and mother, and changed psychological contracts following an exchange of expectations regarding the employment relationship. Additionally, with many women choosing to return part-time, there is ongoing debate regarding the quality of work and the financial and career sacrifices part-time work entails (Tannous & Smith, 2013).

Women in the boardroom - despite some improvements in the last ten years, women continue to be under-represented at senior levels within organisations (Catalyst, 2013). Coaching during transition points in women’s careers, including maternity leave, may enable employer’s to support women’s career development needs and stem the loss of women from the workforce thus securing the future pipeline of talent available for senior roles (Parke & Bingham, 2012; Bussell, 2008; Filsinger, 2012; Chivers, 2011).

Gendered organisational cultures - evidence suggests that, even where flexible work practices exist, male-dominated organisational cultures in which long working hours, flexible time boundaries and the side-lining of women on part-time hours to lower status roles still persist thus contributing to a working mothers’ decision to leave the workforce (Cahusac & Kanji, 2013).

Women’s career development - in researching the career development patterns of women, O’Neill and Bilimoria (2005) identified three key phases linked to age as shown in Table 1. Similarly, Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) promoted the “kaleidoscope model”
after identifying that the importance of authenticity, balance and challenge alternate depending on women’s career and personal life situation thus helping to explain the “opt-out” or interrupted career phenomenon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career Phases:</th>
<th>Kaleidoscope Career:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early career</td>
<td>Idealistic achievement; age 24-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-career</td>
<td>Pragmatic endurance, doing what it takes; age 36-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late career</td>
<td>Reinventive contribution to families, communities and organisations; age 46-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goal achievement and challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Balance and family/relational demands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authenticity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Comparison - Development of Women’s Careers

As the research and statistics demonstrate there is a need to improve workplace practices to increase the proportion of women returning to work after maternity leave and enable them to maintain job satisfaction, career momentum and a life/work balance.

Research Methodology

One-to-one interviews were conducted with seven women selected from four different private-sector organisations with the aim of representing the different experiences of women’s return-to-work transitions. Semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions enabled the participant’s individual experiences of maternity coaching to emerge. Analysis of the coded transcripts identified a number of key themes.

Return to work transition themes

The return-to-work transition issues experienced by the women included the importance of flexible working arrangements, the financial and career sacrifices of working part-time, the impact on confidence levels, and changes to priorities, professional identity and psychological contracts. The women’s observations that flexible working negotiations were a two-way process demonstrated an awareness not often referenced in the literature. The importance of manager or supervisor support in return-to-work transitions was clearly evidenced in the findings. Several studies have also identified the dissonance between an organisation’s family-friendly policies and actual practices at the individual management level (Bussell 2008; Liu & Buzzanell 2004).

Consistent with the findings of this study, the literature notes that many women decide to return to work following childbirth for non-financially motivated reasons as they value their education, careers and professional identity and, even when women took “off-ramps”, the majority intended to return to work.
Maternity coaching and impact on return-to-work transitions

Based on the interviews, the participants identified the following elements of coaching that impacted their return-to-work transitions as summarised below.

Coachee-led but solution-focused

All seven women interviewed found the maternity coaching to be beneficial as they discussed topics regarding their personal situation, specifically in relation to flexible work requests, rather than following a prescribed one-size-fits-all programme.

Felt supported by the coach and valued by the organisation

The coaching support made several women feel valued as an employee, which reinforced the commitment of some women to remain with their current employer.

Increased confidence and focus impacts productivity

During maternity leave, rapid organisational change and skill depletion can occur. Five women expressed a loss of confidence, nervousness or uncertainty about returning to work where much had changed during the period of their maternity leave, with some women returning to a new role, manager or team. In these situations the coach helped restore confidence by working with them to develop solutions and a return-to-work action plan that eased the transition period and enabled them to be more productive on their return.

Independent third party support and confidentiality

A key theme noted by four of the women was that an independent third party, with no agenda, conducted the coaching. As a result they felt able to express any concerns in a safe and confidential environment and, having addressed any negative personal emotions, were then supported by the coach to structure an action plan in a professional way.

Communication and timing of coaching important

Initially, some women had not planned to take up the maternity coaching as they did not think it was relevant for them, or the offer arrived after maternity leave had commenced and they had insufficient time to focus on it. Two women felt it would have been helpful to have the coaching while they were on maternity leave.

Overall, the findings demonstrated that maternity coaching positively impacted the women’s return-to-work transitions by providing them with the support of a coach who was able to take a non-directive approach by asking questions, listening to understand, enabling them to identify options and develop a plan to move forward, specifically in preparing for discussions with their manager regarding flexible working arrangements. The benefits of communicating with an independent third party allowed them to express concerns in a safe and confidential environment and return to work with increased levels of confidence, focus and commitment to the organisation. Much of the coaching literature highlights the positive impact of maternity coaching (Chivers, 2011; Filsinger, 2012; Fullerton, 2013; Liston-Smith, 2010; Maitland, 2007; Sparrow, 2008; Teraiya, 2013) and, although Maitland (2007) argues that “coaching does not come with any guarantees
that women will stay” the results of this study demonstrated that the first step of ensuring women return to work after maternity leave was achieved with maternity coaching having a positive impact on many of the return-to-work transition issues.

**Recommendations**

For organisations seeking to improve return-to-work transitions through the introduction of maternity coaching programmes, the following suggestions are offered:

*Coaching*: should be offered to women prior to commencing maternity leave with the coachee able to set the agenda for confidential discussions. Ideally, three coaching sessions should be offered with one session before maternity leave, one immediately prior to their return to work, and one three to six months after their return for the purpose of ensuring issues are addressed in a timely manner and that women feel supported throughout this transformative period.

*Manager training*: line manager support in maternity leave transitions and flexible working requests is critical therefore training will enable managers to better handle these issues.

*Timely, open and honest communication*: ongoing communication before, during and after maternity leave provides the organisation with an opportunity to facilitate discussions around expectations of both the employer and employee to ensure a balanced exchange of views.

**Conclusion**

It is well established that women are under-represented in the workforce with many women opting out following maternity leave. In many cases, women do not return, or resign shortly after maternity leave due to transition issues, a trend which has financial and career implications for women and productivity and cost implications for organisations. Organisations, in recognising that maternity leave is a transformative experience for women, need to actively manage both the practical and emotional aspects. The introduction of maternity coaching programmes aims to ensure higher rates of return to the workforce, a smoother transition and better communication and understanding between employer and employee.

Maternity coaching represents a valuable new dimension of business coaching through the application of core coaching competencies. From an employer’s perspective, they receive an immediate and tangible return on the cost of maternity coaching as experienced and motivated employee’s return to their workforce.

For enquiries please contact Jennifer North via email: jennylnorth@yahoo.co.uk

© Jennifer North 2014

This article may not be reproduced without the permission of Jennifer North
References

Bussell, J 2008, ‘Great Expectations: Can Maternity Coaching affect the Retention of Professional Women?’, International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring, Special Issue No.2, pp14-26


Maitland, A 2007, ‘Make ready for the mother of all job changes’, *FT.com*, accessed 16 February 2014, FT.com website


Parke, C & Bingham, L 2012, ‘Maternity coaching - Ernst & Young employees share their experiences: Short case studies and research papers that demonstrate best practice in rewards’, *Strategic HR Review*, Vol. 11, No. 4, pp239-241

