

Great Expectations: Can Maternity Coaching affect the Retention of Professional Women?

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Abstract

The last thirty years have seen significantly more women reaching senior professional positions and a corresponding increase in women returning to work after having children. However, studies reveal that employers often lose highly qualified women, who choose not to return. The economic costs and implications of this 'brain drain' are significant. This research involved interviewing ten women, three coaches, and one purchaser of coaching, in order to study at the specific issues facing women returning to work and whether coaching can affect retention. The emerging issues that affected retention are: career development paths, the need for flexible working, corporate culture, and the need for work/life balance. Seven stages of transitional perspectives of work are proposed which reflect altering attitudes to work and which offer a relevant starting point for coaching support and interventions. As an external framework, coaching can support women effectively, in the short and long term, to meet the challenge of re-aligning work expectations and priorities.

Key Words: Coaching; retention; women; maternity leave; transition

Introduction

"There is nothing so private yet also so public as motherhood in Western society with many (often conflicting) cultural prescriptions for how to be good mother" (Millward, 2006, p236).

The last thirty years has seen significantly more women reaching senior professional positions and a corresponding increase in women returning to work after having children. However, studies reveal that employers often lose highly qualified women, who choose not to return. Research by American economist Hewlett addresses the realities of being a woman in the 'having it all' generation and the economic implications for society of losing highly qualified women at the peak of their careers. Hewlett (2005) highlights research showing that one in three white women with an MBA are not working; the statistic for men is one in twenty.

The implications of this 'brain drain' are: the economic impact of losing highly qualified and experienced employees, including the costs associated with replacing or retraining senior employees (loss of expertise and experience has a direct impact on company performance) and the impact on employees who choose less challenging roles to accommodate a more sustainable work/life balance.

This study looked at high-achieving professional women with children and explored their experience of work and having children. The research thus focused on a major life transition and its implications for professional women, "Becoming a mother represents an important transition

for a woman when a number of significant personal, social and biological changes coincide” (Smith, 1999, p.281). This paper discusses the complex issues facing women returning to work and asks whether coaching can support this transition and influence the factors that can affect women’s decisions to leave the workplace.

Literature review

In the absence of literature linking coaching to the retention of women, this review has examined literature surrounding this area. This includes current research on women in the workplace, their career development phases, transitional issues, as well as retention and the organisational factors that affect retention of women in the workplace.

Hewlett (2005) focuses on why women leave the workforce and how to retain highly qualified women or help them return to the workforce, addressing the realities of being a woman in the ‘having it all’ generation and the economic implications for society of losing highly qualified women at the peak of their careers. Hewlett interviewed 2,443 women and 653 men in what appears to be the biggest, recent research in this area and describes women in the 41-55 age-group as the “sandwich” generation, positioned between growing children and aging parents and discusses ‘pull’ factors (external) and ‘push’ factors (work factors): when women feel hemmed in by rigid policies or a glass ceiling, for example, they are much more likely to respond to the pull of the family (Hewlett 2005).

Mainiero & Sullivan (2005) argue that exit interviews which look at reasons for women ‘opting out’ are too simplistic. They suggest three reasons for this ‘opt-out’: generational differences and shifts in work values, work-family balance issues and discrimination against women in the workplace. Whilst the assumption made by corporate and government organisations is that women leave primarily to care for family, Mainiero and Sullivan’s research suggests that women actually leave for the same reasons as their male counterparts; lack of opportunity, job dissatisfaction and lack of organisational commitment. These arguments are important because they recognise, as indicated by this research, that women’s reasons for opting out are very complex.

In asserting that women’s career paths are different, Mainiero & Sullivan (2005, p. 111) suggest that they are non-linear and “relational” to accommodate work-family balance. “Each action taken by a woman in her career is viewed as having profound and long lasting effects on others around her.” Mainiero & Sullivan (2005) argue that women make career decisions through “a lens of relationalism” (p.111) and factor in the needs of children, spouse, ageing parents even friends and colleagues. This is contrasted with men who tend to separate career and family life and make linear career decisions based on professional goals.

O’Neil and Bilimoria (2005) look at women’s career development and propose three phases:

- Idealism - early career (25-35) when women are highly career-focused.
- Endurance - mid-career (36-45) where external issues intrude such as family but identity remains attached to professional status.
- Reinvention - late-career (46-60) when more altruistic factors may influence career choices.

O’Neil and Bilimoria’s discussion of the middle phase proposes that this “may be reflective of the confluence of pressing career and personal concerns likely to occur during the transitional mid-life period between ages 40-45” (2005 p. 187). Levinson (1996) highlights the myth of the

successful career woman "colliding with other realities", these may include childlessness and parent care. Both O'Neil and Bilimoria and Levinson assert that, at this point, women find themselves in careers that are not satisfying but stay in recognition of other more demanding aspects of their lives. Levinson considers that that women adhere closely to gender issues – family, work, relationships and emotional states – which makes their career development very different from that of men.

With coaching practice firmly rooted in both adult learning and psychology, Smith's (1999) research was backed up by Millward's more recent and in-depth analysis of women returning to work (2006). Millward describes the creation of a mother identity as a contributing factor to the sense of 'guilt' experienced by all but one participant in this study. For Millward this translated into participants working harder to iron out any bumps and lessen any impact their maternity leave may have on the organisation. In line with current maternity coaching practice, which advocates the close involvement of the woman with plans for her maternity leave period, Millward argues for the employee being allowed to manage the terms of the ongoing contact with the organisation throughout maternity leave, recommending that management should "facilitate an open discussion about expectations both during pregnancy and on return and also to provide systematic support at the interface between leave and return" (p.329).

Recent research carried out by a major city law firm which has been offering maternity coaching since 2006, reports an increase in retention (Freeman, 2008). From 1999-2005, 74% of women returned to work following maternity leave, from 2006 that has increased to 77%. This is a small increase and is not statistically significant. However of the women returning to work between 1999 and 2005, 22% had subsequently exited in the first twelve months and a further 8% exited in the 12-24 months following return. After the introduction of coaching only 10% left within the first twelve months and only 1% left in the 12-24 months following their return. These figures are based on 43% of eligible employees taking up maternity coaching.

The statistics indicate that whilst maternity coaching has a positive effect on retention, the particular benefit appears to be supporting women to remain at work following their return to work. In contrast, factors that contribute to keeping women in the workplace are: a clear sense of career development or progression, challenging interesting work; ability to negotiate truly flexible working that is accepted into the organisation – culturally as well as structurally. The research did not consider other potential benefits such as better continuity and greater productivity due to better management of maternity leave.

Whilst there is a great deal written about developmental issues, apart from anecdotal press articles, little has been written from a coaching perspective, indeed the most significant work in the context of this study is the psychological paper by Millward (2006). Much of the focus is on the initial return to work rather than the ongoing experiences of working women. Key academic and business research to date focuses on career development and the experience of women returning to work with recommendations for improving organisational culture (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005 and O'Neil and Bilimoria, 2005).

Methodology

The research reported here focused on the implications for coaching. The experience and perspectives of coaches working in the field added a rich and concentrated dimension to the data. This served to validate the experiences of the women interviewed and contributed to the discussion of the implications for coaching practice.

The methodological approach used was grounded theory. This reflects the fact that the research was occurring in a new and emerging field of coaching: where there is little existing research,

grounded theory allows for the tentative formation of theory (Robson 2002, Charnaz 2006). The data collection allows for multiple sources and perspectives. The analysis is iterative and allows the development and comparison of categories throughout data collection, with the possibility of developing an emergent theory, one that is grounded by returning to the data and validating it.

The research is modelled on a theoretical perspective proposed by Charnaz (2006) of a society, reality and the self that is constructed through “interaction, implying that interaction is inherently dynamic and interpretive and addresses how people create, enact and change meanings and actions”(2006, p.7).

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten women who had returned to work following childbirth. Five had not received coaching and five had taken part in coaching following their return to work. Three executive coaches who were providers of maternity coaching were also interviewed, as well as one Diversity Manager (responsible for purchasing maternity coaching). Coached women (CW) were interviewed 12-24 months following their return to work. The non-coached women (NCW) were interviewed across a much wider timeframe, this ranged from 12 months to 15 years following return to work.

It was important to triangulate the data by using multiple sources, in particular the perspective of coaches as well as one of the stakeholders, the employer.

Data analysis

The data, derived from in-depth semi-structured interviews, was analysed through the strategies of grounded theory. Charnaz (2006, p.45) describes the coding used in grounded theory as generating “the bones of your analysis”.

The sampling was aimed at representing experiences of returning to work. Given limited data, I would advocate caution in applying deductions to rest of the female population. The aim of the study was to provide indicative results which, with current research, create a starting point for a more in-depth look at coaching women returners. Results based on small samples are often not representative of the population as a whole but may be representative of particular sectors.

Bias appears inescapable but it is important to recognise and acknowledge its presence and influence. Specific areas of bias are highlighted, including: my own experience of returning to work after the births of both children and recruiting the coached women from a single consultancy (it would have been preferable to recruit women that had worked with a variety of coaches and consultancies but time did not allow this).

Key research findings

To answer the research question it is important to contextualise and understand the nature of this major transition and the context in which it occurs.

Life and Career Development

It is important to consider both the context and the experience of women returning to work. This research has been implemented during the ‘mid-phase’ of women’s careers (defined by many researchers as between the ages of 35-50) at a point that has been described as pragmatic endurance and focusing on balance (O’Neill & Bilimoria, 2005 and Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). It is a phase that for some women is punctuated by a major life transition – childbirth.

In common with other times of transition, the data reveals that it can be a turbulent period in an individual's life. All three coaches interviewed, describe this as a time of 'reflection' and 'weighing up options'. As Cox (2006) points out "it is important for the coach to have an understanding of life phases and adult life course development, since, as Levinson (1978) demonstrates, the phase is often linked to the realisation of particular goals." For women during their middle phase, their career development goals may be informed by their need for balance or flexibility.

Coaching provides effective support in during transitions, including preparing individuals for new posts and developing leadership skills. Maternity coaching can play a role in supporting women returning to work in a new dual role. Women variously described this transition as the "biggest most fundamental change I have ever experienced" and that "it has had a major effect on both my personal and professional lives". Where once women successfully managed and maintained separate work and home lives, maternity appears to make it more difficult to separate the effects of one upon the other.

A complex and long term transition

The transition from working woman to working mother is complex and longer-lasting than current assumptions acknowledge. This transition does not start with pregnancy and end with a return to work, rather it is a process that continues and evolves with the needs of children, ending when the child becomes independent. Requiring varying levels of support and flexibility, the pressures and demands on a working mother evolve. For example, whilst the assumption that time constraints will improve once the child is in full time education persists, research and exit interviews indicate that the opposite is true.

This is highly relevant to retention because employers perceive the 'danger period' for losing valuable women to be immediately following their maternity leave. In reality the danger period appears to be later on, following return to work and after the coaching support has stopped. It is then that a time of questioning and reflection begins and continues as the needs of their children shift and change. This is supported by the need for high levels of pragmatic endurance described by O'Neill and Bilimoria, (2005).

What is the experience of women generally?

The research participants all returned to work following childbirth, with half of the participants having some maternity coaching. Whilst it was important to understand the impact of coaching, it is also important to understand the experience of women in general. The experience, for most, was one of altering perspectives. In describing women's career development and perspectives, Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) liken the changing perspectives to a kaleidoscope, with shifting shapes and patterns. This research reflected many shifting perspectives towards work during the course of this transition.

This study tries to understand how the perceptions and priorities of high-achieving professional women can change. In mapping out the evolving career paths of each of the women taking part in this research, certain patterns emerged, but the most vivid and lucid pattern to emerge was that women experienced shifting perspectives towards their work.

Seven transitional perspectives and their implications

Seven different stages were identified. These are described as 'transitional' because they are not necessarily linear and not all women follow this sequence, they may remain at number 2 or stick

at number 4. The seven perspectives aim to highlight the possible presence of different stages of transition for coaching.

1. **Career is the primary focus:** The first phase, typically before birth, for some women after birth too, links strongly to the first phase of career development described as aspirational or challenging (O'Neill & Bilimoria, 2005, Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005).
2. **Career remains primary focus:** Following childbirth work may continue as the primary focus, where women take on a stereotypical expression of the high achieving male: continuing to work long hours with few concessions whilst staying firmly on career ladder. For many women, they report difficulty in sustaining this for long periods and found it "*an uncomfortable place to be*" (NCW3).
3. **Working Contortionists:** This is closely related to re-entry to the workplace and urgent efforts at re-validation, Women make every effort to behave exactly as before the birth:

"I really thought that if I did opt for (flexible working) that I would definitely be perceived as a woman who was not interested in future career progression."(CW2)

4. The fourth phase is described as **Realistic Pragmatism:** This involves trying to balance work and home correlates with the pragmatic and balancing element of middle stage career development described by O'Neill and Bilimoria (2003) and Mainiero & Sullivan (2005) when women recognise the need to impose firm boundaries on time and working practices.

"I feel deadlines are much harder for me to manage at the moment, I don't have a huge amount of time, I don't have the flexibility in terms of when I can do things. If things blow up at work I can't say I have time to spare at the weekend to do it, whereas in the past I could spend all day Saturday which meant everything was done"(CW3).

5. **Realisation that the professional brakes have been applied:** This is the point at which women are feeling that their career has been sidelined. This perspective is a critical one for employers seeking to retain women, when coaching can provide objective, safe reflective space for employees:

"I just knew what effect it would have on the career. It is pretty much suicidal to have a child here if you want to climb the ladder" (CW2).

6. The sixth phase is **disengagement and disenchantment:** When neither the work nor the prospects are rewarding, it is at this point that the woman begins to question whether the cost of juggling and the impact on their life as a whole is worth it. This is a further danger point identified by Millward (2006, p.326). Where women perceived that they had not completely re-integrated within the organisation this can lead to "some withdrawal of organisational investment on the part of some new mothers."

"Now having been back for a bit and just absorbing the environment more and to see the way it is, I decided it's utterly hopeless, so I may as well do 4 days a week because it's hopeless doing 5 days a week" (CW3).

"As time has gone on I would definitely agree it has become more complicated. It is not something I would have expected either, I would have thought once you are bedded in and on top of everything, it would be OK. But I feel I have become much more

questioning. My expectations of my job are just higher, so I don't feel they are being met in every respect....It would be helpful to feel more satisfaction.”(CW4)

7. The final phase is **reflection and re-invention**: This is the phase when women reflect on their lives and whether their work is sufficiently worthwhile to balance the pressures of being a working mother. Responses to this phase can include; taking a career break, setting up a new enterprise, a change of career or retraining. The change is in response to a need for fulfilment and balance and corresponds to the mid and late phases of career development, balance and authenticity, pragmatism and reinvention.

Zeus and Skiffington (2005, p.97) identify that many transitions can affect performance and can 'derail' executives and that although their source is external, the effects are "not extraneous to executive coaching." The implications for the coaching intervention at any of these stages can be critical, whether it is providing support for women to pursue their career goals in the context of being a mother, and incorporate leadership and other development issues within the coaching support, providing a framework in which to identify the right work/family balance for the individual or facilitating a supportive and challenging environment in which women can take stock and reflect on their current position and set goals and discuss how to achieve and sustain those goals (Rogers, 2004).

The experience of women being coached

What emerged from the interviews was a clear picture that the participants valued their careers and their professional identities. This was demonstrated by the fact all the women returned to work but none had a financial motive. However the re-aligning of their expectations and priorities at work demanded the marrying of pragmatism with shifting career aspirations. Particular issues and challenges emerged from the research and were highlighted by both participants and the coaches interviewed. They included;

Challenging assumptions: A key benefit of coaching is providing a safe framework within which to challenge assumptions. A key feature of leaving and returning to a working environment was that women experienced a need to re-affirm their contribution and value at work. As described above, many women become contortionists at work: every effort is made to behave exactly as prior to giving birth, even avoiding talking about their child at work due to perceived cultural pressures (Millward, 2006). This may also include working part-time yet doing a full workload.

“It reminded me that I am only paid for 3 days a week so it would be the equivalent of someone else working weekends. If you choose to do things outside your 3 days – it is your choice” (CW4).

In particular, women valued being challenged about their perceptions and assumptions about working flexibly. Two women described the “very useful” coaching sessions which challenged them to think about their workload and set goals related to areas such as planning, being creative and delegating. It facilitated clear and open discussions with their line managers about how it was working.

Managing re-entry, managing dual roles: Participants valued the forum that coaching provided to acknowledge the different framework they were now operating from:

“It made me change my attitude, I don't know if anything changed practically but I just felt more comfortable thinking that if I couldn't do something on a certain day – that was OK. It was not that anyone was expecting me to do things. It was me” (CW3).

In many cases, women unfavourably compared their previous performance (sometimes working 60 hours a week) with their current one, where they could work few hours and had less flexibility. Coaching challenged their own expectations of how they were working.

“She (the coach) obviously cottoned onto the fact that I was just trying to prove all these things and be better than everyone else and just said ‘I can see you feel the need to establish yourself and that’s why you are doing xyz at the moment. Let’s talk about how you’re going to reach a point where you feel you’ve done that and then - how do you want things to be going forward in terms of the hours you are working’ and that sort of thing. It was a relief to set limits,” (CW3).

Changed Perceptions: The participants experienced changed perceptions:

“In a work context, yes, I feel resentful that I perceive that other people see me differently...I worry that in everyone else’s eyes I am seen differently but the perception I care about is the bosses. Coaching helped identify that”(CW5).

Coaching facilitates the understanding and empowerment of choices:

“It made me feel more comfortable in myself about the decisions I’d made and in the working pattern I was doing. You are your own worse critic and it was a validation of my choices. Also not have too many expectations of yourself,” (CW2).

Professional development in the context of being a working mother: Many women experienced a renewed sense of focus on their career on their return to work. At the same time, women were particularly conscious of their new working constraints; this included less flexible working hours or a perception that working flexibly equated to stepping off the career ladder. Coaching encouraged clarity, which in turn enabled clear goal setting.

“I identified what I wanted to work on. One of the main things was that I had all this energy and drive and wanted to channel it into something positive, rather than feel resentful and get bitter and twisted about the way it is (perceived lack of career path) and find some way of accepting it to some extent and then working on other things that you can influence” (CW4).

Objective external support: During a time of personal and professional transition, women particularly valued the external confidential support:

“It was a relief to set limits, just talking to someone sane really. I’ve got lots of friends here but you can’t treat it as being completely confidential – they’ve all got agendas – any conversation like that has got to be give and take. It’s the objectivity that I valued.” (CW3)

Through challenging assumptions and motivation, as well as looking at longer term professional goals, women were able to re-focus on their careers:

“I can say I feel positive now, and I didn’t before, so it must have contributed” (CW3).

One participant described coaching as *“Help in seeing the wood for the trees” (CW5).*

What did the research show about the effectiveness of coaching on retention?

To understand how coaching can effectively improve retention of women, it is important to understand the factors that influenced women to leave the workplace and how coaching can affect these factors.

Whilst this sample may be too small to capture all the reasons women may leave there are many interrelated factors to consider. For committed professional women, the issue is keeping women in the workplace in the long term. The literature review and wider research indicate that the decisions regarding return to work, short, medium and long term commitment to work and career development have to be examined in the broader context of the attitudes and values of the individual, the family, society and the organisation (Still, 2006). "People lose motivation when they become severed from their values," (McIntosh, 2003, p.189). An essential element of the coach's role is to help clients identify and be consistent with their core values. Key factors that influence a decision to resign include;

A. Organisational Culture: Half of the 22 factors identified by Bussell (2007) suggested that departure decisions relate to organisational issues so it is important to highlight the role of the employer in retaining women. Peltier (2001) states "Business organizations are typically male led and dominated by male culture and assumptions", (p.192). Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) and Still (2005) argue that organisational culture should be the prime focus in avoiding unnecessary opt out requires focusing on the working culture present in organisations. Still (2006) believes that organisations make three mistakes; assume men and women value the same thing; that managers are without bias and that 'policies' are sufficient to retain women. Still highlights a significant factor that emerges from the data: even though many companies are genuinely engaged in seeking to retain valuable women there remains a gap between the policies expressed by the company as a whole and the attitudes and culture communicated by individuals. Several participants experienced this 'gap' and I would concur with Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) and Still (2005) that the real challenge is to get organisations to change their culture

B. Negative perceptions of flexible working and part time roles: Reinforced by extant literature, most participants had a negative perception of working part-time, believing that it impacted their ability to remain on the career ladder. There is a perception amongst participants that they would not get a more senior role part-time, justifying that "the glass ceiling is partly self-imposed but at the same time I am keen to keep developing" (CW2) In addition, this perception was confirmed by the culture communicated in certain organisations. Belief, whether perceived or actual, acts as a significant barrier to women viewing a clear career path. Some women reflect that they have decided to 'live with it' and others find it difficult to accept and are considering alternate options. The belief that "part-time work equates to jumping off the career ladder" (NCW4) combined with a non-linear career path can contribute "push" factors that can lead to a period of opting out.

C. Crisis points and critical support in first 12-24 months: One point was made by every coach interviewed: they all identified a "very critical period" 9 – 12 months following return to work:

"There is a crunch point or crisis with women after they come back to work, 9-12 months down the line when they need more coaching".

Particularly after their second child when they are asking – '*what am I doing?*' (Coach 2). This highlights the critical value of coaching after the initial return to work, when a crisis (either internal or external) can lead to periods of reflection which in turn cause women to question their role in the workplace.

D. Fifth and Sixth transitional phases - key exit points: The fifth and sixth transitional phases offer key indicators of growing dissatisfaction at work. This can be further compounded by a crisis or reflection point, a second or third pregnancy, school entry or a negative work culture.

Conclusions

Recent legislative changes mean that more senior women are taking longer periods of maternity leave (typically 9-12 months) which has increased the challenge to employers to actively re-engage these women on their return. Through working with women before maternity leave, coaches can support women through reviewing their working strengths and helping them to 'hit the ground running' on their return.

The transitional perspectives proposed offer a framework for coaching women through different stages that they may shift through, as well as facilitating continued career development objectives and goals. In doing so, coaching can help women to remain firmly on the career ladder.

In the light of the impending and widely forecast demographic skills shortage, organisations cannot afford to lose women unnecessarily. Whilst both research and literature provide evidence that this transition (at various stages) offers an exit point for women, this does not appear to be the aim of the professional women in this study. This research reflects that the current generation of working mothers have invested in and are committed to their professional career whilst trying to balance their dual roles. Both the research data and literature point to coaching being well placed to provide appropriate and time-sensitive support for this major transition.

In proposing seven transitional perspectives, I have sought to make apparent the ongoing nature of this transition and the way in which this can influence or affect women's decisions to remain or leave the workplace.

Particular attention should be paid by organisations in some sectors that strive to value women through their working policies but have embedded negative cultures that undermine their efforts retain valuable experienced professionals. The critical point that has emerged from this research is that if employers are to support women through the shifting phases of this transition, they need to put in place measures that can support them. In particular, a need for ongoing coaching support at intervals through their careers can underpin this period of pragmatic endurance and enable women to fulfil their potential as professionals and as mothers. Coaching offers an appropriate and objective framework for women returning to meet the challenge of re-aligning work expectations and priorities. For women this may demand the marrying of pragmatism with shifting career aspirations.

Returning to the original question, can coaching affect the retention of women? The issues that affect retention are; clear career development paths for women, the need for flexible working, corporate culture, transitional issues and the acknowledgement of the need for 'pragmatism' and 'balance'. As a valuable, external framework coaching can effectively support women in identifying and achieving their professional and life goals in an environment in which challenge, balance and authenticity are paramount. However, in isolation, where organisational culture and inflexible work policies prevail, maternity coaching can only offer a 'sticking plaster'. But where organisation are seeking to retain, nurture and develop women at the height of their professional lives, coaching - both maternity coaching in the short-term and executive coaching in the long term - offer a solution to the 'brain drain' of female professional talent.

Summary

- All transitions bring a risk of failure. Giving birth is a transition on both a personal and professional level and often occurs in the mid-phase of a woman's career, frequently near the peak of her professional life. Coaching is already used as an effective support for other types of transition: maternity coaching can provide 'expert' support in combining career aspirations

with the need for pragmatic endurance and balance, thereby avoiding disengagement and resignation.

- The seven transitional perspectives demonstrate that it is easy for women to become disengaged with work due to a combination of both 'push' and 'pull' factors. Maternity coaching allows open discussion of the pressures and conflicts embedded in the transition back to work, enabling returners to understand and address these issues.
- Childbirth is a point when a woman's own career aspirations can become subsumed by more practical realities. Women do make career decisions based on "complex and interrelated sets of factors, including job challenge and opportunities for advancement." (Still, 2006, p324) Coaching can be crucial for women understanding their core values in order to make authentic decisions.
- The research shows that women's decisions to exit are influenced by a complex range of factors, many of which can be addressed through coaching. Shifting perspectives and priorities often present particular challenges and maternity coaching can provide much-needed clarity and support. "I can say I feel positive now, and I didn't before, so it (coaching) must have contributed" (CW3).
- Recent evidence shows that maternity coaching is improving retention. In particular, coaching supporting women following their return to work seems to result in significantly fewer women exiting during the 12-24 months following their return from maternity leave (Freeman, 2008).

Research Limitations

A significant shortcoming of this research has been the absence of participants with the experience of three or more maternity coaching sessions. Whilst this is a function of MC being in its infancy, it has meant that this research only provided an indication of the potential benefit of coaching support for this transition.

It is important to be careful in making statements which are true for each or some of the cases or indeed to flag up the exception. The theorising is still only about ten women and it cannot make definitive claims beyond that, although it is reinforced by the distilled experience of three coaches working with hundreds of women in this field. Whilst it is important, as indicated in the methodology, to acknowledge the potential commercial bias of coaches practising in this field, they do offer an important concentration of experience across hundreds of clients.

This study is not claiming to represent all experiences of the transition to motherhood, indeed the range of participants included only white, high-earning senior professional women. Further work could include groups of different women to expand and develop the work. In addition, the non-coached women were self-selecting – as they were willing and motivated to discuss their experiences. Other women may have been reluctant to engage in such a degree reflection.

Further research

- There is an absence of research examining the ongoing challenges of being a working mother, from birth, through school entry and beyond. In particular the evolving needs of children during teenage years.

- A better understanding of retention issues could be served by research into longer term studies of women's career paths, in particular the ongoing potential for further disruption to career development.
- A review of the impact of maternity coaching as it becomes more established.

Recommendations

To improve retention, this research, supported by O'Neill & Bilimoria (2005), Mainiero & Sullivan (2005), Still (2006) and Millward (2006) points to the importance of psychological and practical support for women experiencing this transition. The research highlights the critical role that coaching can play in responding to the demands placed on women at this time. The challenge is to retain women in both the short and long term. This is best achieved through:

- **Communication:** Data in this study confirms that where companies engage in positive and open communication about maternity leave and return, this encourages a more positive response and greater motivation to return and remain in their role following birth.
- **Long term and objective goal-oriented support for women:** This research indicates that coaching support is important not just before and after maternity leave but over a much longer period, reflecting and tracking the ongoing changes and demands on working mothers.
- **Recognition of this transition and the need for flexibility:** Where employers wish to retain valuable, experienced women they need to acknowledge the ongoing nature of the transition and offer clear career paths that reflect the non-linear career development of women. Otherwise women will opt out, either using their experience to start new businesses or taking their skills to organisations that offer them the flexibility and recognition that they need.
- **Cultural change in certain sectors:** cultural attitudes can have a direct effect on retention of women. Flexible policies need to be consistent with management behaviours and attitudes. Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) highlight that employers must be "truly committed to work/life programs and not use them solely for the purpose of publicity. If organisations have work/life policies but foster a hostile culture that makes use of these programs unacceptable then policies will be useless and fail to produce intended outcomes" (p.116).
- **Organisations need to recognise the non-linear nature of women's career development:** O'Neill & Bilimoria (2005), Mainiero & Sullivan (2005) and Still (2006) all argue that employers need to view women's career progression differently. This includes creating more senior part-time roles, incorporating career breaks into corporate structure and - where client-facing jobs pose difficulties for part time employees - creating alternative senior consultancy roles. Coaching can provide a robust framework for career development both linear and non-linear.

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