‘Balancing Act’

How can organisations support the engagement of female employees post maternity leave?

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endeavours.
Abstract

Title: How can organisations support the engagement of female employees post maternity leave?

The research aims to:

1. Provide rich, evidence-based data and inform organisational decision-making in relation to the re-engagement of female employees post maternity leave.
2. Highlight the potential of engagement to enable the organisation to reach its potential through female employees fulfilling theirs.
3. Propose to outline a ‘checklist’ for employers to support female employee’s maternity leave.

The research employed a qualitative research approach using an online questionnaire as part of the exploratory phase. The research sample involved female employees from 3 large high performance organisations. These participants completed an online survey, a sample group of senior level managers in one of the organisations participated in a focus group and a sample from each organisation participated in in-depth interviews to provide ‘rich data’ in relation to the research question. The study revealed key themes in the area of reasons why women returned to work, how organisations managed the transition, impact on career progression and the emotional response experienced. Recommendations from the study include a checklist for managers to consider before, during and after maternity leave.
Chapter 1: Introduction

‘Employers are legally obliged to provide maternity leave and a job for mothers to return to. As key assets, all staff should be treated positively so that they can return to work under arrangements and within a work-place culture that works for them, supports their needs as a parent, and meets the organisational interests of their employer.’

Source: NCT Report ‘The experiences of women returning to work after maternity leave in the UK’

This quote encapsulates the essence of this study; the topic of re-engagement of female employees post maternity leave. The research aims to:

- Provide rich, evidence-based data and inform future people management strategies and organisational decision-making in relation to the re-engagement of female employees post maternity leave.
- Highlight the potential of engagement to enable the organisation to reach its potential through female employees fulfilling theirs.
- Propose to outline a ‘checklist’ for employers to support the reintegration of female employees post maternity leave.

1.1 Trends in Maternal Employment

For a variety of social, economic and cultural reasons, women’s participation in the paid labour market has risen substantially both in Ireland and internationally over the last number of decades.

As a consequence, pregnancy in the workplace has become a much more common occurrence.
The majority of mothers with young children and women of childbearing age are now in the workforce and their treatment during and after pregnancy has become increasingly relevant over time.

Three quarters of all women of peak childbearing age (20-44 years) are active in the labour market, as are 60% of mothers of pre-school children (Equality Authority: Pregnancy & Employment Report 2011). There has been a long-term increase in employment among women in Ireland over recent decades. For women of peak childbearing age (20 to 44 years) employment grew from 62% to 70% in the ten years from 1997 to 2007 during the economic boom, although a drop in the employment rate was observed in 2009 with the impact of the economic recession.

1.2 Main Theories of Employee Engagement

This study is primarily concerned with the concept of ‘employee engagement’ specifically; the re-engagement of women post maternity leave.

For decades, organisation leaders and managers have attempted to understand why some employees invest more of their personal energies in pursuit of organisational goals in an effort to identify the conditions that replicate superior employee performance.

Classic ‘employee need’ models such as Hertzberg’s (1959) two-factor theory, Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs, Alderfer’s (1972) ERG theory, Adams’s (1963) equity theory, and Vroom’s (1964) expectancy theory remain cornerstone explanations for superior employee performance and still guide organisational leaders today.
However, since the concept of engagement was first introduced by Kahn in 1990, it has been lauded by both academics and professionals (Gruman and Saks 2011; Ketter 2008) and it is increasingly viewed as a more persuasive and accurate explanation of the motivations driving employees to willingly invest greater amounts of their personal energies towards their current roles.

Individuals seek opportunities for fulfilment and self-expression in their life activities (Shuck, Rocco and Albornoz 2010, p.320) and both self-employment and self-expression are central to engagement. Engaged employees might comparatively work longer with greater intensity, but engagement is not just simply working hard (Kahn 2010, p.21).

Employees are seen to be engaged when they "exhibit attentiveness and mental absorption in their work and display a deep emotional connection toward their workplace" (Shuck, Rocco and Albornoz 2011, pp.300-301).

When engaged, employees express their authentic or preferred selves, at work, accessing their complete personality and using the full extent of their cognitive, emotional and physical energies to pursue organisational goals. Conversely, disengaged employees choose to defend or withdraw [their authentic self] from view (Kahn 2010, p.21) and prefer to go through the motions when completing work tasks.

Through engagement, employees can "work up to their professional capacity" (Chalofsky and Krishna 2009 p.39) while progressing towards organisational goals. Research has consistently found employees to enjoy being engaged. Engaged employees view their roles as an opportunity to reflect their own personal qualities, their authentic selves. Employees who consistently use their authentic selves imbue a distinctive quality, related to their personally-held values and standards, to their role and the outputs of their work.
Viewing their work as a reflection of themselves, engaged employees are more likely to invest greater levels of their personal selves for organisational goals.

Engagement-conducive workplaces encourage employees to access their authentic selves and consequently employees demonstrate greater commitment ‘to go the extra mile’ not because they are paid to be committed, but because they choose to be committed (Shuck, Rocco and Albornoz 2011, p.320).
1.3 Definitions of Engagement

Existing literature reviews on engagement (Kular et al 2008; Simpson 2008; Wollard and Shuck 2011) highlight that the concept was introduced by Kahn (1990). Since then, several different frameworks offer unique and different perspectives (Shuck and Herd 2012, p.160) of what engagement entails and how it emerges.

Five of the more popular approaches to engagement are summarised in the table below:

Table 1: Conceptualisations of engagement (Simpson 2009; Shuck and Wollard 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Conceptualisation of Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kahn 1990</td>
<td>Needs-analysis approach</td>
<td>Engagement emerges from the employee's perception of the organisation culture through three psychological states: meaningfulness, safety and availability. These determine the level to which employees use their full personal energy in work roles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter (2001)</td>
<td>Burnout-antithesis approach</td>
<td>Engagement was seen as the positive opposite of employee burnout.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schaufeli et al (2002)</td>
<td>Work engagement</td>
<td>Engagement is a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind and is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harter, Schmidt and Hayes (2002)</td>
<td>Satisfaction-engagement approach</td>
<td>Engagement includes job satisfaction and sees employee well-being as critical to its emergence in organisations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saks (2006)</td>
<td>Multi-dimensional approach</td>
<td>Engagement emerges from the social exchange model, where employees bestowed engagement in return for supportive employment conditions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.4 Criticisms of Engagement

The current literature demonstrates how persuasive engagement has been viewed by both academics and professionals at explaining superior employee performance. However, some researchers question whether engagement represents anything new (Joseph, Newman and Hulin 2010; Newman and Harrison 2008) and view the lofty claims made by engagement proponents sceptically.

For instance, when Macey and Schneider (2008, p.10) labelled engagement as a “new blend of old wines with distinctive characteristics and feel” this was rebutted by Newman and Harrison (2008) who illustrated how “almost every item from an engagement scale endorsed by Macey and Schneider [the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES)]... is paralleled by a nearly identical item from a well-known measure of job satisfaction, job involvement, positive affect, or organizational commitment“ (Newman and Harrison 2008, p.32).

Newman and Harrison (2008) concluded that engagement can be inferred from positive work behaviours, but should not be viewed as a new concept explaining superior performance.
1.5 Why Organisations Care About Engagement

Having defined engagement, the question still remains: why should organisations show concern whether employees bring their authentic selves to their roles?

The literature broadly highlights three reasons why organisational leaders are increasingly prioritising engagement programmes (Shuck and Herd 2012; Kruse 2012).

- **Proven Organisational Benefits**

"The research seems clear; developing high levels of engaged employees provides significant organizational benefit in almost every conceivable organizational metric" (Shuck and Herd 2012, p.158).

Research overwhelmingly confirms the belief of a connection between elevated employee engagement and increased business results, ſat a magnitude that is important to many organisations (Kular et al 2008, p.6).

Engaged employees are ſmore productive, profitable, safer, healthier, less likely to turnover, less likely to be absent (Shuck and Wollard 2010 p.90) and empirical evidence also suggests that employee engagement enhances ſjob performance, task performance and organizational citizenship behaviours, productivity, discretionary effort, affective commitment, continuance commitment, levels of psychological climate and customer service (Wollard and Shuck 2011, p.430).

Studies have also linked increased employee engagement to higher levels of customer loyalty and business growth (The Gallup Organisation 2006), organisational profit (Czarnowsky 2008), revenue (Shuck and Wollard 2010) and earnings per share in publicly quoted companies (Ott 2007).
As the organisational benefits associated with engagement multiply, the development of an engaged workforce is increasingly viewed as a priority for many organisational leaders (Ketter, 2008; Attridge 2009; The Ken Blanchard Corporation 2011). The research seems clear, employee engagement matters (Wollard and Shuck 2011, p.430).

- **Source of Competitive Advantage**

Despite the benefits that engaged workforces provide organisations, the research reports that most employees going to work every day are not engaged (Harter et al 2002; Shuck and Herd 2012).

Both academic research and studies completed by consulting groups have "conservatively estimated that <30 per cent of the global workforce is engaged" (Shuck, Rocco and Albornoz 2011, p.301) and "Gallup has estimated that disengaged workers cost U.S. companies between $250 and $350 billion a year" (Attridge 2009, p.387). Towers Perrin's (2007) worldwide survey of 90,000 workers showed that only 21 per cent of employees felt engaged at work. These levels have been replicated in different studies in various work environments completed worldwide, with levels of engagement in Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand and Singapore being "18 per cent, 12 per cent, 9 per cent, 17 per cent and 9 per cent respectively" (Kular et al 2008, p.8). Huckerby (2002 cited in Pech and Slade, 2006) suggested that 20 per cent of UK employees have 'mentally quit' while continuing to stay with their company.

In a global environment where organisations are generally staffed by employees who do not enjoy going to work and gain little meaning from what they do for a living" (Kular et al 2008, p.18), workforces that are engaged "not because they are paid to be committed, but because they choose to be committed" (Shuck, Rocco and Albornoz 2011 p.320) contribute towards sustaining a meaningful competitive advantage for their organisations (Shuck and Reio 2011).
Unleashing the Human Spirit

There are also humanistic reasons why managers are concerned with engagement (May, Gilson and Harter 2004). The concept of employee engagement can be viewed as promising a win-win situation for both organisation leaders and employees (Shuck and Wollard 2010). While the business results emerging from an engaged workforce are persuasive, most researchers also note that from the employee’s perspective engagement is a positive experience in itself (Schaufeli et al. 2002, cited in Sonnentag 2003, p.518).

When engaged, individuals use their roles as a channel to willingly employ and express their authentic self while striving for organisational goals (Rich, Lepine and Crawford 2010). Employees "desire the experience of engagement...seek[ing] the opportunity of fulfilment and authentic self-expression in their life activities" (Shuck, Rocco and Albornoz 2011, p.320)

Engaged organisations are looking to avail of the full personalities, energies, talents and potential of its employees, or as May, Gilson and Harter (2004, p. 12) summarised, engaged organisations are looking to "unleash the human spirit in organisations". Through a focus on engagement, it is possible that the work environments of the future will be viewed far differently to those of the past (Shuck and Wollard 2010).
1.5 Measuring Engagement

Having detailed why the engagement concept is so attractive to organisation leaders and employees alike, the challenge of how to effectively raise engagement levels organisationally remains.

Those leaders adapting their organisational environments to increase engagement levels are presented with “a challenging and robust task” (Shuck, Rocco and Albornoz 2011 p.320) but Shuck and Wollard (2011, p.442) asked organisational leaders to “consider the benefits of raising engagement levels...by only 5% or 10%; the implications could be enormous for an organizational life cycle and the overall well-being of the workforce”.

Competing Measurement Standards

Before devising informed strategies aimed at increasing engagement, the organisation needs to accurately measure employee engagement levels (Rich, Lepine and Crawford 2010). The research on measuring engagement currently lacks clarity. With several competing conceptualisations of the concept, the existing literature on engagement consequently fails to establish a universally accepted method of measurement (Shuck and Reio, 2011).

Competing consulting companies use proprietary survey tools and add to an already confused landscape, but four of the most popular survey tools used to measure engagement are summarised in Table 2.
### Table 2: Popular Engagement Measurement Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Measurement Tool</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter (2001)</td>
<td>Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)</td>
<td>This measures the three dimensions of burnout – exhaustion, cynicism and lack of professional efficacy. Engagement is the positive antithesis of these factors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schaufeli et al (2001)</td>
<td>Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES)</td>
<td>This is a 17 item questionnaire that measures levels of vigour, dedication and absorption.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harter, Schmidt and Hayes (2002)</td>
<td>Gallup Workplace Audit (GWA)</td>
<td>This is the 12 item questionnaire that focuses on employee well-being from conducting a workplace audit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich, Lepine and Crawford (2010)</td>
<td>Job Engagement Scale</td>
<td>This is a 15 item questionnaire that measures the cognitive, emotional and physical engagement of employees, based on Kahn's (1990) conceptualisation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This study will employ a mixed-methods approach using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale as part of an online survey for the first phase of the research. The second, more in-depth research phase will consists of focus groups and in-depth interviews to capture the richness from the shared experience of female recently back in the workforce post maternity leave.
Chapter 2: Methods

This chapter will cover the following areas;

- A description and rationale for methodology and research design employed. This will address methodological concerns in relation to quantitative and qualitative research approaches and current thinking on the merging of the two approaches.
- The rationale for the choice of data collection and analysis methods.
- Participant profiles
- Reliability and validity of the study

Table 3 outlines the fundamental differences between quantitative and qualitative research strategies. This study employs a predominantly qualitative approach given the nature of the study i.e. attempting to uncover rich, experiential data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fundamental differences between quantitative and qualitative research strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal orientation to the role of theory in relation to research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemological orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontological orientation</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3– Fundamental Differences in Research Strategies
2.1 Qualitative Research

The naturalistic paradigm of inquiry (upon which qualitative research is based) focuses on subjective elements and a constructed world, on critical thinking, on interpretive attributes and on political issues that reject the notion of taking the world for granted (Sarantakos, 1993). In contrast to the quantitative approach, the goal of the qualitative research paradigm is to provide a research methodology for "understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (Schwandt, cited by Bailey, 1997 p.18). Denzin and Lincoln (1994: p 4) define qualitative research, as follows:

The word qualitative implies an emphasis on process and meanings that are not rigorously examined, or measure (if measured at all), in terms of quantity, amount intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning.

Characteristics inherent in qualitative research design are:

- occurs in natural settings, where human behaviour and events occur
- it is inductive - theory or hypotheses are not established a priori
- researcher is primary instrument in data collection
- descriptive data emerge
- data are interpreted in regard to particulars rather than generalisations of a case
- emergent design in its negotiated outcomes - subjects realities are reconstructed
• uses tacit knowledge.

These characteristics reflect the advantages of qualitative research, which allow greater flexibility and lead to a deeper understanding of the respondent’s world. However, problems of reliability caused by extreme subjectivity can arise, it can be time consuming and problems of generalisability and ethics can arise.

As McCracken (1998) highlights;

‘Qualitative research does not survey the terrain, it mines it. It is in other words, more intensive than extensive.’ Qualitative methods have a long history and tradition within management research. Early ethnographies of managerial work have led to significant insights into managerial experience and practice e.g. Dalton (1959) and Mintzberg (1973).
2.2 Merging Paradigms

In general research many researchers currently combine the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Reichardt & Rallis (1994) argue that there is more compatibility that incompatibility between the methods. Miles & Huberman (1994) believe the quantitative-qualitative argument is essentially unproductive. They refer to Howe’s analysis (1985, 1988), which show the two methods are inextricably intertwined.

Rossman & Wilson (1991) suggest three broad reasons for linking the data:

1. to enable confirmation or corroboration of each other via triangulation
2. to elaborate or develop analysis, providing richer detail
3. to initiate new lines of thinking through attention to surprises or paradoxes, turning ideas around, providing fresh insight.
2.3 The Role of the Researcher in Qualitative Inquiry

It is important that the qualitative researcher adopts the stance suggested by the characteristics of the naturalist paradigm. Second, the researcher must develop the level of skill appropriate for a human instrument, or the vehicle through which data will be collected and interpreted.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer to what they call the "theoretical sensitivity" of the researcher. This is a useful concept with which to evaluate a researcher's skill and readiness to attempt a qualitative inquiry.

Theoretical sensitivity refers to a personal quality of the researcher. It indicates an awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data. Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 42) describe it as "having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn't."

Strauss and Corbin believe that theoretical sensitivity comes from a number of sources, including professional literature, professional experiences, and personal experiences. The credibility of a qualitative research report relies heavily on the confidence readers have in the researcher's ability to be sensitive to the data and to make appropriate decisions in the field (Patton, 1990). Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify the characteristics that make humans the "instrument of choice" for naturalistic inquiry. Humans are responsive to environmental cues, and able to interact with the situation; they have the ability to collect information at multiple levels simultaneously; they are able to perceive situations holistically; they are able to process data as soon as they become available; they can provide immediate feedback and request verification of data; and they can explore atypical or unexpected responses.
2.4 Research Sample

The researcher has partnered with 3 organisations with a keen interest in the topic of supporting women in leadership and hence supporting re-engagement post maternity leave. Surveys were distributed to all women who have been on maternity leave within the last 2 years in each of these organisations. The following is an overview of the organisations involved:

- Organisation A is an international telecoms business with a high performance office based in Dublin.
- Organisation B is an Irish based media/PR business witnessing significant growth presently.
- Organisation C is a globally successful professional services firm with a high performance office in Dublin.

All 3 organisations are successful, high performing and have a focus on retaining female talent.
2.5 Data Collection

Figure 1 outlines the research trail for this study. It is not a suitable topic to be analysed solely through a survey, as it requires probing and exploration in the in-depth interviews to understand and flesh out the issues involved for the female population involved.

Figure 1 – Sequence of the Research
I have chosen a qualitative approach to my research using the following data collection methods:

- **Online Survey:** an online survey was shared with all women who have returned from maternity leave within the last two years in all three participating organisations. The response rate was 63% (48 out of 76 potential respondents). The online survey questions are available in Appendix X. The Utrecht Work Engagement Survey (UWES) was part of this online survey and included in the final section.

- **Focus Groups:** a focus group with 8 participants hosted by one of the organisations took place to flesh out some of the emerging themes from the survey.

- **In-depth Interviews:** the final phase of the study was a series of in-depth interviews to explore the key emerging themes of the study. 6 semi-structured interviews took place (2 women in each of the participating organisations). Each of the interviewees volunteered to participate in the interview stage of the process by leaving their contact details at the end of the online survey. They were each within 2 years of returning to senior management positions in high performing organisations. All 6 were qualified professionals in their field. Below is a profile on each, kept at a high level to protect confidentiality:

  - **Interviewee A1:** Interviewee A1 is a senior professional working in the telecoms sector for the last 7 years. She has had 2 maternity leaves and is currently pregnant with her third child.
- **Interviewee A2**: Interviewee A2 is a senior IT manager in the telecoms sector. She has returned from her first maternity leave 4 months ago.

- **Interviewee B1**: Interviewee B2 is a senior commercial manager in the media sector. She has had 2 back to back maternity leaves and returned 14 months ago.

- **Interviewee B2**: Interviewee B2 is a senior accounts director in a media organisation. She returned from maternity leave 8 months ago and has recently found out she is pregnant again but has not disclosed this to the organization.

- **Interviewee C1**: Interviewee C1 is a HR manager in a professional services firm. She has returned from second maternity leave 6 months ago.

- **Interviewee C2**: Interviewee C2 is a senior marketing manager in the telecoms sector. She returned from her second maternity leave 18 months ago.
2.5.1 Focus Groups

It was decided to take a qualitative approach to the data collection. This was primarily due to the fact that the issues were of a personal nature. Powell and Single (1996 p.499) define focus groups as ‘a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research’.

Limitations of Focus Groups

Many of the limitations of focus groups can be avoided through careful planning. However, there are still some unavoidable limitations to this research method:

- Robinson (1999) describes how the number of questions covered in the discussion may be limited as the response time will vary between participants.
- This leads on to another challenge ‘discussed in detail by Kreuger & Casey (2000) referring to the dominant member of the focus group who can prevent the shyer participants from expressing their views.
- Jackson (1998) refers to the point that the moderator is less in control than one-to-one interviewing.
Focus Group Data Analysis: Constant Comparative Method

After reviewing the focus group notes, meaning was put on the data using the constant comparative method of data analysis. Glaser and Strauss (cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985) described the constant comparison method as following four distinct stages:

1. comparing incidents applicable to each category,
2. integrating categories and their properties,
3. delimiting the theory, and
4. writing the theory.

My analysis followed these guidelines closely. With the use of coloured markers I initially coded the output in a search for common themes. According to Goetz and LeCompte (1981) this method combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all social incidents observed. As social phenomena are recorded and classified, they are also compared across categories. Thus, hypothesis generation (relationship discovery) begins with the analysis of initial observations. This process undergoes continuous refinement throughout the data collection and analysis process, continuously feeding back into the process of category coding. As events are constantly compared with previous events, new topological dimension, as well as new relationships, may be discovered (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981, p.81).

This method worked extremely well as key distinct themes emerged from an early stage in the data collection. The focus group analysis formed the basis of areas to explore in the online survey in conjunction with the current literature in the field.
2.5.2 Online Survey

I employed an on-line questionnaire powered by www.surveymonkey.com (see Appendix 1). Online surveys have many advantages, they are efficient to set up, easy to complete as long as the respondents have internet access, and analysis is straightforward as most have built in packages to analyse the data and prepare charts.

Criticism of online surveys

Fullerton and Kandola (1999, p.87) outline some disadvantages of surveys:

- Adequate sampling and response rate are difficult to ensure,
- You only get answers to questions you ask therefore possibly missing some important points,
- Time taken to design and pilot questionnaire could be considerable, and
- Technical knowledge is necessary for survey design.

I found the survey to be an excellent method to get responses from a large sample to highlight the key issues that were probed and fleshed out in the interviews that followed.

2.5.3 In-depth Interviews

The interviews were semi-structured meaning that the interviewer was guided by a list of questions, but the interviewee was free, and encouraged, to interject and discuss any relevant topic (see Appendix 3).
Webb (1992) defines in-depth interviews as:

*unstructured free-flowing discussions on a one-to-one basis intended to generate data which is deep and rich and which are conducted in an interview free of peer-pressure and the need to conform to social norms.*

The personal interview allows for in-depth and detailed information to be obtained. It also allows the interviewer to seek clarification on issues, ask follow-up questions and observe facial expressions. The flexibility of the approach encourages the development of a rapport between the interviewer and respondent. This can facilitate the free flow of information and thus help validate results.

Disadvantages when using the interview include costs in terms of time and money as well as being restricted to smaller samples. However, McCracken (1988) suggests that it is more important to work longer, and with greater care, with a few people than more superficially with many of them. Another disadvantage of this technique is that both the interviewer and the interviewee can introduce an element of bias into the interview procedure.
2.6 Data Analysis - Content Thematic Analysis

My choice of data analysis for the main aspect of the study, the in-depth interviews, is Burnard’s (1991) model of Content Thematic Analysis. Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to a mass of collected data (Marshall and Rossman, 1995, p.111). More specifically, Bogdan and Taylor’s (1979, cited in Tesch 1990, p.90) define it as a process which:

- entails an effort to formally identify themes and to construct hypotheses (ideas) as they are suggested by data and an attempt to demonstrate support for those themes and hypotheses. By hypotheses we mean nothing more than propositional statements.

The aim of content thematic analysis is to produce a detailed and systematic recording of the themes and issues addressed in the interviews, online survey and the focus groups and to link these together under a reasonably exhaustive category system (Burnard, 1991). Thematic analysis was conducted when all the data had been collected and the interviews transcribed. However, as Tesch (1990 p.5) points out data analysis is "not the last phase in the research process; it is concurrent with data collection or cyclic." Following each interview, I made notes in my diary concerning the topics covered and allowed these topics to emerge, if appropriate, during the following interview. This corresponds to Miles and Huberman’s (1994, p. 63) view that data collection and analysis "inform or drive each other."

Burnard developed the method of Content Thematic Analysis from Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) "grounded theory" approach and from various works on content analysis (Babbie, 1979; Berg 1989; Fox 1982; Glaser & Strauss 1967).
2.7 Reliability and Validity

Traditionally, reliability and validity are canons against which research is measured. Qualitative research has been criticised (Morse, 1994; Leninger, 1994) for difficulty in establishing reliability and validity, due to:

- status position of researcher
- informant choices
- social context in which data is gathered
- methods of data gathering and analysis
- credibility of the researcher and the study itself
- generalisability of results

While the qualitative analyst has few guidelines for protection against self-delusion, let alone against unreliable or invalid conclusions generally (Miles, 1979), nevertheless the results of the study must be authenticated. Streubert and Carpenter (1995) refer to this as the term used to describe the mechanism by which the qualitative researcher ensures that the findings of the study are real, true or authentic.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) reject the traditional labels of reliability and validity and replace them with indicators of scientific rigour to establish "trustworthiness" as follows:

- Truth value: occurs when the researcher is confident that the research findings are credible i.e. that they present a true and accurate representation of the participants' description and interpretation of their experiences and that the participants themselves would recognise it from those descriptions and interpretations as their own. A total description of the context is also given.
- **Applicability**: occurs when the results have \( \text{transferability} \) to other contexts. Although the readers of the research findings must judge whether transferability exists, nevertheless the researcher must provide sufficient descriptive data to make such judgements possible.

- **Consistency**: occurs when replication of the findings is made with the same subjects in the same context. Guba & Lincoln advocate an \( \text{audit trail} \) to describe, explain and justify every step of research.

- **Neutrality**: occurs when the findings of the study are determined by the subjects of the research and the conditions of inquiry and not by the biases, motivations and interests of the researcher.
Chapter 3: Research Findings & Analysis

The results chapter will look at some of the descriptive statistics arising from the online survey. Emerging collated themes from the survey, focus group and in-depth interviews will then be examined.

3.1 Profile of Respondent Group

Figure 2 – Grade of Respondent Group (48 in total)

Figure 3 – Working Arrangements
Figure 4: Are you the Primary or Secondary Earner in the Household?

Figure 5: Work-Life Focus

Figure 6 – Number of Maternity Leaves
Figures 1-6 outline the profile of the respondents to the research. The majority were at management grade in their organisations. Most participants (48%) had 2 maternity leaves to date. 72% were working full-time, although this was not always an ideal choice as described by one interviewee:

‘working less than full-time is not an option in this place, there may be policies on parental leave, flexible working etc. but the reality is it is ‘career suicide’ to express an interest in this.’

Figure 4 is of note, half of the respondents are the primary earners in their households, and this has significant implications for the level of responsibility they have to manage in their lives in and outside of work. Also of note is that 88% of respondents describe themselves as both ‘career and home’ centred. This was one of the main discussion points in the study – how to successful manage and integrate both.
3.2. Emerging Themes

The following themes emerged in relation to the study and will be examined;

- Reasons for returning to work
- How the organisation managed the transition
- Main challenge
- Impact on Career
- Emotional Response

3.2.1 Reasons to Return to Work

Figure 7 – Reasons to Return to Work

Figure 7 outlines the diversity in responses on why the women in the study decided to return to work. For one quarter of them, it was for financial reasons but 'intellectual stimulation' and 'career progression' also featured as key reasons to return. Interviewee C1 said;

*I could never be a SAHM (stay at home mum), I got bored at home and was very ready to return to work.*
3.2.2 How the organisation managed the transition

Figure 8: How well was your maternity leave transition back to work handled

Figure 8 represents responses in relation to how well the organisation managed the return to work post maternity leave. 39% rated this average to poor which represents an opportunity for the participating organisations to work on this and make it a much more positive experience.

3.2.3 Main Challenge

Figure 9: Main Challenge Returning to Work
Figure 9 presents the main challenge women faced returning to work. It is clear that ‘Integration of Home and Work Responsibilities’ is the key challenge. This was particularly the case for first time mums, summed up by the comments Interviewee A2;

‘By far the greatest challenge was trying to balance work and home responsibilities. My husband works for an international firm and travels so the majority of home responsibilities rest on my shoulders. Crèche picks up are a nightmare as often meetings are arranged for 6pm in the evening, I have to rely on the goodwill of friends and family, I don’t know how much longer I can do this for...’

3.2.4 Impact on Career

![Pie chart showing impact on promotion opportunities]

Figure 10: Impact on Promotion Opportunities
Figure 10 represents a significant theme in the research – the impact on career and in particular promotion opportunities. 64% of respondents felt their promotion opportunities were impacted by their maternity leave. There was a mix of views on the fairness of this, some interview respondents felt it was a ‘trade off’ while others, like interviewee A1 described how;

‘taking maternity leave in this organisation is career suicide.’

Interviewee B1 described how;

‘For me it felt like a continuation of service but my line manager made me feel like I’d had a break in service. I wanted to have a robust discussion about my career progression but this never happened. I had to prove myself all over again.’

The notion of ‘having to prove yourself again came up time and time again. Respondents felt this was unjust in the main but there was some dissent on this in the focus group, one respondent felt;

‘Women need to take control of their careers, if they make a choice to exit the workforce for 10 or 12 months, they need to accept the consequences of that decision.’

3.2.5 Emotions on Returning to Work

A significant theme from the qualitative study was the sense of heightened emotions on returning to work from maternity leave. Respondents were expressive in the level of mixed emotions. Figure X is a sample of some of the main feelings referred to in the study. This area is encapsulated by Interviewee C2;
‘The emotions were so mixed on returning to work. An overwhelming one was the guilt of leaving your baby in someone else’s care. It is quite a harrowing experience, almost like a grieving process. On the other hand, I was getting quite bored at home and was missing the social interaction, it was a confusing time…’

Lack of confidence was another key trend as identified by in the qualitative study, interviewee A1 describes how;

‘Having a baby knocks the confidence out of you, it is hard to articulate words when you’re sleep deprived… On my first day back, I had a meeting with the GM, I remember I could barely string a sentence together and my clothes didn’t fit me properly…’

Figure 11 - Words describing feelings/emotions upon return
3.3 Utrecht Work Engagement Survey (UWES)

The UWES was included as part of the online survey to measure current engagement levels. This data was used to inform the qualitative study. Figure X is an overall of the scoring. The 3 subscales of Vigour, Dedication and Absorption are well represented by the respondent group. In particular, the vigour scale suggests the respondent group are highly resilient and show perseverance in challenging times. This concurs with the qualitative data, particularly the comments from the focus group of senior level woman, one stated:

"You have to be very mentally resilient here to survive the challenge of working in a very dynamic environment and also multi-tasking on the home front."

![THE FOLLOWING 17 STATEMENTS ARE ABOUT HOW YOU FEEL AT WORK](image-url)
Figure 12 – UWES Charts
Chapter 4: Discussion

4.1 Organisation Support at each Phase

This chapter will outline key findings and recommendations in relation to the emerging themes from the research results. This section will be analysed by looking at the findings and recommendations in relation to organisational support before, during and on return from maternity leave. The researcher commenced the study with a focus on the point of return for women on maternity leave but the qualitative study revealed that how a woman returns is very much determined by how she is treated before and during her maternity leave. Table 4 provides an overview of recommendations arising from the study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before</th>
<th>During</th>
<th>After</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Have a robust discussion with the employee on career aspirations.</td>
<td>- Acknowledge the birth, send flowers/gift</td>
<td>- Day 1 is critical, ensure a warm welcome, and acknowledge concerns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Discuss contact during maternity leave, is this something that is welcomed or not.</td>
<td>- Stick to the agreed communication contract.</td>
<td>- Consider an induction type schedule for the first 2 weeks to allow for re-integration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Involve women right up until they leave but be mindful of the impending life transition for them.</td>
<td>- Consider work options to prepare for the return.</td>
<td>- Consider a phased return to work option.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Complete a performance review before the women finishes.</td>
<td>- Arrange to meet the women with the baby if she so wishes.</td>
<td>- Consider providing an external coach/mentor to support the transition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Start a discussion on flexible work options if appropriate</td>
<td>- Share communication on key conferences, strategic meetings, training etc. to allow the choice to attend. Ensure there are no implied repercussions if the woman decides not to participate.</td>
<td>- Discuss career development for high potential females.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Arrange a meeting a week before the return date to discuss any issues or concerns and share a business update.</td>
<td>- Be open and transparent about flexible work options.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Regular reassurance and revalidation is important.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2 Recommendation 1: Interest in Personal Career Path

Taking an interest in the women’s personal career path is vitally important to maintain their motivation and performance levels. It is about creating an environment where they feel someone is looking out for me. They are clearly a highly confident, ambitious group, career progression remains important to them despite the new family reality. The career discussion should happen before, during (if welcomed) and importantly on return from maternity leave.

4.3 Recommendation 2: Attentive Management

Another key recommendation for organisations based on the study is well described by Spiro (2006 p.19) ’personalised motivation’. She describes this as a method of profiling employees to determine how each individual prefers to be managed. This approach can enable employees to give managers information on the best ways to motivate them and therefore maximise their potential.

This was a consistent trend from the interviews – women did appreciate the personal touch, their line manager taking a genuine interest in them, in terms of their ambitions, values and in essence tapping into their value systems and understanding what is most important to them in life generally and in the workplace. Managers who are success at this will generate high loyalty and trust with their staff.
Goleman’s (1998) ground breaking work is this field is based on the four central domains to emotional intelligence theory:

1. Emotional self-awareness

This refers to understanding one’s own emotions, knowing one’s strengths and limits and having self-confidence. In a large scale study Goleman conducted of CEO’s globally, this was the top trait of the most successful leaders; this success was not just financial but also related to success in the areas of health, emotional well-being, and relationships. Interestingly, when a gender analysis was undertaken, women CEOs scored significantly higher than their male counterparts.

2. Self-management

This essential is the managing one’s emotions; keeping disruptive emotions and impulses under control. Leaders who practice self-management tend to be optimistic in nature.

3. Social awareness

This dimension of emotional intelligence centres on showing empathy to others and servicing follower, client or customer needs.

4. Relationship Management

The final dimension in emotionally intelligent leadership refers to the leader’s ability to inspire, guide and motivate with a compelling vision. It also refers to developing others through feedback and guidance.
4.4 Recommendation 3: – Balancing work & life

The main challenge outlined in the study was the integration of work and life. This is a key area for organisations to be mindful of if they wish to retain their female talent. It is important that meetings are arranged during core working hours. Flexible work options should be available and encouraged. As one respondent summed it up (Interviewee C1):

‘If you give a woman an inch, she will give back a mile’.

Scase (2007) states the importance of breaking down the barriers between work and non-work. In a world where people want remote working, where people want flexible working the agile organisation will be successful if it gives people the opportunity to work as they want, where they want, how they want as long as they deliver the results.

Organisations will need to be much more flexible in their work practices and encourage remote working, flexible working hours and other innovative practices.

Flexibility has been frequently identified as a key human resource policy goal or outcome, along with strategic intention, quality, and employee commitment, ensuring an adaptable organisation structure (Guest 1995). Armstrong (2006) recommends that organisations should take steps to improve work-life balance by developing policies including flexible working to recognise the needs of employees outside of work. Lanigan (2008) agrees with Armstrong (2006) and believes that employers that offer flexible working arrangements and that encourage the promotion of a work-life balance ethic can be very attractive to employees and potential employees.
The notion of having ‘adult conversations’ with women was a trend. Treat women as independent, rational thinkers when having discussions around flexibility. The result in not doing this will result in talented women exiting the organisation. As Interviewee C2 explained;

‘I felt so ‘let down’ by the inflexible approach, I had no choice but to leave, I was amazed at the business decision to let that investment ‘walk out the door’. I have since been replaced by 2 people’.
4.5 Recommendation 4: Maternity Coaching

The International Coaching Forum (Russell, 2008) highlighted research as instrumental in advancing coaching as an evidence-based discipline that 'can pave the way toward a future for coaching as a powerful force for positive individual and societal change' (Russell, 2008, p 4). One method that addresses the issues presented above and contributes to the changes that support equal career development opportunities for women, is maternity coaching. Programmes typically comprise 3-4 coaching sessions to support women before their maternity leave and during their return to work. Maternity coaching is a fairly new coaching genre and is growing in popularity, particularly among multi-national organisations. Using an external provider allows for an objective and non-judgemental approach for the women using the service.

As well as a formal maternity coaching approach, the study also recommends organisations focus on development internal peer-coaching arrangements. One suggestion was to form a maternity returners group to meet to discuss pertinent issues.
4.6 Limitations of Study

1. The study is limited by the rapid changes currently evolving in the environmental context. This case study is a "snapshot of how a situation was at a particular point in time. At the same time, current conditions are likely to remain in place for the foreseeable future, at least the next 5/10 years.

2. The sampling procedure of the organisations decreases the generalisability of the findings. The study, while a useful source of information is not generalisable to all maternity returners in the workforce. Certain elements will be relevant, it will be up to the reader to make a judgement call based on their own context.

3. I acknowledge my limited experience as a researcher may have influenced the interview process.

4. Limitations concerning data collection methods are recognised. For example, as the questionnaires were completed anonymously, participant validity could not be achieved.
4.7 Further Research

It is recommended that further research continue in this area, in particular as the children of the women involved in this study exit formal childcare arrangements and start school. It is recommended that research is conducted looking at that new challenge for this cohort. Also, it would be recommended to revisit the same research population in the future to see how their career has been impacted or not by their family decisions.
References


Appendix 1 – Online Survey Questions

Many thanks for your participation in this study, please note that all responses will be treated in the strictest confidence. Please contact me if you wish to discuss any aspect of the study or if you are interested in taking part in a focus group or interview on this topic.

Mary Collins
maryedelcollins@gmail.com
0879 482547

Section I

Q1. What level best describes your role?
   a. Senior Manager
   b. Middle Manager
   c. Below Manager
   d. Other__________________

Q2. Are your current work arrangements:
   a. Full-time
   b. Part-time
   c. Other _________________

Q3. In your household, are you:
   a. Primary earner
b. Secondary earner

Q4. Would you describe yourself as:
   a. Career centred
   b. Home centred
   c. Both career and home centred

Q5. Are you currently on maternity leave? If no, please go to Q 11
   a. Yes
   b. No

Q6. If yes, how many maternity leaves have you had?
   a. This is my first maternity leave
   b. This is my second maternity leave
   c. This is my third maternity leave
   d. Other (please state)

Q7. How do you feel your transition to maternity leave was handled by your line manager?
   a. Very well
   b. Well
   c. Average
   d. Poorly

Please explain why?

Q8. How do you feel your transition to maternity leave was handled by the organisation overall?
a. Very well
b. Well
c. Average
d. Poorly

Please explain why?

Q9. How are you feeling about returning to work post maternity leave?
   a. Very positive
   b. Positive
   c. Neutral
   d. Negative
   e. Very negative

Please explain why?

Q10. What support would you like to be offered on your return to work? Please rank according to your preference.

- Maternity coaching
- Flexible work time arrangements
- Reduced working week
- Phased return to work
- Maternity coaching
- E-working
- Other?
Q11. Has your line manager been in contact with you during your maternity leave?

a. Yes
b. No
c. Comment Box

Q.12. How important do you believe it is to have communication from your line manager during maternity leave?

a. Very important
b. Quite important
c. Indifferent
d. Not important

Why? Comments

Q13. What further support would be beneficial to you on maternity leave?

Free text answer

Section II – Respondents who have returned from maternity leave in the last 2 years

Q14. How many maternity leaves have you had?

a. One
b. Two
c. Three
d. Three plus
Q.15. What factors influenced your decision to return to work?

a. Intellectual stimulation
b. Career progression
c. Social contact
d. Financial security
e. Personal development
f. Passion for my work
g. Other please comment

Q16. How do you feel your return to work post maternity leave was handled by your line manager?

a. Very well
b. Well
c. Average
d. Poorly
e. N/A

Comments

Q17. How do you feel your return to work post maternity leave was handled by the organisation overall?

a. Very well
b. Well
c. Average
d. Poorly
e. N/A
Comments

Q 18. Were you offered any of the following?

a. Maternity coaching
b. Line manager contact before your return date
c. Options around flexible working
d. Phased return to work
e. Reduced working hours
f. Other ____________

Q 19. What worked best to help with your integration back to work post maternity leave?

Q. 20. What suggestions do you have to improve re-integration back to work post maternity leave?

Comments

Q21. What has been most challenging about returning to work post maternity leave?

1. Reverse handover of your work
2. Managing the workload
3. Integration home and work responsibilities
4. Childcare arrangements
5. Financial worries
6. Personal anxiety (e.g. leaving your child, body image, confidence levels etc.)
7. Working hours
8. Changed perception in the workplace now you are a parent
9. Other?____________________

Comments

Q 22. How long do you envisage staying with your current employer?

a. Currently seeking employment elsewhere
b. 12 – 18 months
c. 18 – 24 months
d. 2 – 5 years
e. For long term career

Q 23. Do you think your promotion opportunities have been impacted by maternity leave?

a. Yes
b. No

Q 24. Do you think your career development opportunities have been impacted by maternity leave?

a. Yes
b. No

Q25. How are you feeling about work post maternity leave?

a. Very positive
b. Positive
c. Neutral
d. Negative
e. Very negative
Please explain why?

Q 26. What further support would have been beneficial to you upon return from maternity leave?

___________________________________________________________________

Section III – Current Engagement Levels at Work

(Based on Work & Well-being Survey (UWES))

The following 17 statements are about how you feel at work. Please read each statement carefully and decide if you ever feel this way about your job. If you have never had this feeling, cross the “0” (zero) in the space after the statement. If you have had this feeling, indicate how often you feel it by crossing the number (from 1 to 6) that best describes how frequently you feel that way.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Almost never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Very often</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. ________ At my work, I feel bursting with energy
2. ________ I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose
3. ________ Time flies when I'm working
4. ________ At my job, I feel strong and vigorous
5. ________ I am enthusiastic about my job
6. ________ When I am working, I forget everything else around me
7. ________ My job inspires me
8. ________ When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work
9. ________ I feel happy when I am working intensely
10. ________ I am proud of the work that I do
11. ________ I am immersed in my work
12. ________ I can continue working for very long periods at a time
13. ________ To me, my job is challenging
14. ________ I get carried away when I am working
15. ________ At my job, I am very resilient, mentally
16. ________ It is difficult to detach myself from my job
17. ________ At my work I always persevere, even when things do not go well

Many thanks for completing this survey, if you would be interested in participating in a focus group please share your contact details here:
Appendix 2 – Interview Consent Form

Interview Consent Form

Mary Collins has explained to me what the study is about. I have read the information sheet and understand it. I had a chance to ask questions about the study and know that I can contact Mary later on if I have any concerns or further questions about the research. I know that taking part is voluntary and I can decide not to take part at any stage and if I do any recorded information will be destroyed.

I know that these interviews are confidential unless there is reason to believe that either I or someone else may be in danger.¹ I also know that the information will be stored securely and that one year after the project is completed all data will be destroyed.

By signing this form I understand that I consent to take part in the study and I give my permission to take part and have my interviews recorded.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ________________

Researcher’s signature: _______________________________

¹ In line with Exception to Confidentiality set down by the Research Ethics Committee of the IPS.
1. Reflecting back on the time before you returned from maternity leave, can you think of 3 words to describe how you were feeling?

2. How do you think your organisation managed your maternity leave experience overall? Please describe.

3. What worked well to help you integrate back to work after maternity leave?

4. On reflection, what would have been helpful during this transition?

5. How could organisations better support women before, during and after maternity leave?

6. Do you believe your career prospects have been impacted by your maternity leave?