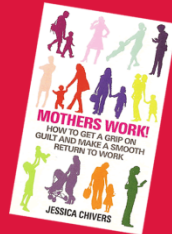




## A Compelling Case for Maternity Comeback Coaching

**MOTHERS WORK!**

By *Jessica Chivers*



**Before becoming parents** men and women are equally likely to be employed but afterwards 57% of mothers of under fives are in paid work compared with 90% of fathers (Fawcett Society, 2009). However, this is not a reflection of women’s desire to work. Researchers at Aston Business School asked mothers to define their ideal family scenario and only 5% said they would prefer for their partners to work whilst they ran the home. 61% of women in the survey said they would work even if there was no financial necessity.

As a career transition coach and author of *Mothers Work! How to Get a Grip on Guilt and Make a Smooth Return to Work* it is clear to me that the majority of women want to work and they value contact with and support from their employer during the transition into working motherhood.

**This paper sets out a business case for investing in maternity comeback coaching and an innovative, inexpensive approach to engaging and supporting maternity leavers across your organisation.**



*“I get a buzz from being back at work, seeing my team so happy and keen and eager to please and help me.”*

## A Compelling Case for Maternity Comeback Coaching

### Retention



*“I think employers get a fantastic deal out of working mothers: we’re focussed, usually really want to be there and enjoy our professional identity.”*

As the average age of motherhood rises it becomes ever more relevant to consider ways to retain maternity leavers who are likely to have accrued a significant amount of organisational and industry knowledge, as well as invaluable firm-specific capital. In 2008 nearly half of babies (47%) were born to women over 30, with 20% of babies being born to women over 35. (Office for National Statistics, 2009). Whilst it’s possible to put an estimated financial cost on the recruitment process itself, the loss of this capital may be invaluable, particularly for women in senior posts.

In her paper published in the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* in 2006, Lynne Millward states that lack of perceived organisational support (both explicitly from managers and immediate colleagues, and implicitly from unspoken prejudice against using family friendly work initiatives) is a pivotal reason why those who do return to work may resign after a short period.

Research from a city law firm, Clifford Chance, which has been offering maternity coaching since 2006 reports an increase in retention in the two years since maternity coaching was introduced compared to the preceding six years (Freeman, 2008). More specifically this study reports a significant decrease in the number of

maternity returners exiting the company within the first 12 months of their return (down from 22% to 10%) and in the 12-24 month period after their return (down from 8% to 1%).

We could conclude that maternity coaching has a valuable role to play in retention and also supporting women to remain in the workplace after the ‘honeymoon period’ of her return.

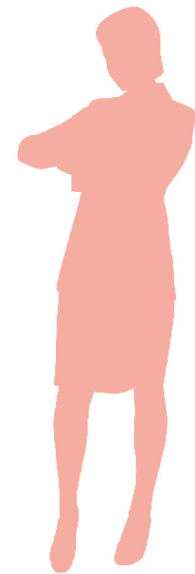
## Engagement and Performance

68% of women return to work within eleven months of giving birth and 80% within 17 months (Government Department for Business, 2005). There is no doubt that returning to the workplace after this lengthy period of mental and physical absence involves a period of readjustment and re-engagement. Psychologists (e.g. see Adams, Hayes & Hopson, 1976) studying how people cope with the impact of (simultaneous) significant life events find that a ‘crisis point’ comes between three to nine months after impact regardless of whether the life event was viewed as positive or negative, wanted or unwanted - meaning support for maternity returners is needed beyond the first few weeks of their return. If a woman returns to work after a particularly short maternity leave (for instance less than three months after birth) she is likely to still be adjusting to the impact of becoming a mother for the first or subsequent time.

A third of women report feeling ‘terrified’ about the prospect of returning to work<sup>1</sup> and cite depleted confidence from lack of skill usage and contact with their organisation as key factors. In a survey I conducted of 168 women in 2009 about the emotions they experienced in the weeks surrounding their return to work, nearly half experienced a sense of dread, two thirds described feeling anxious and three quarters experienced guilt.

Psychologists and authors of *Coaching Women to Lead* recommend coaching as a way to restore a woman’s confidence and get her back into the mindset to perform: *“The first 100 days back at work after maternity leave are almost as important to women as the first 100 days for a new CEO...Confidence and self-esteem is a huge need at this point – both in everyday life and at work – because having a baby is a life-changing event.”*

By providing a maternity coaching programme that gives maternity leavers and recent returners the opportunity to come together for coaching workshops - on subjects centred around the transition into working parenthood – it is likely engagement and ‘warmth’ towards the organisation will be higher than if she were completely out of touch. Informal contact with immediate colleagues could also be afforded by such onsite workshops and this is likely to reduce the fear associated with returning to work which may inhibit performance.



*“I want reassurance that I’m doing my job right. Working full time and bringing up a toddler can be mentally and physically exhausting and to know my efforts at work are appreciated is a much needed confidence boost.”*

## Progressing Women's Careers

Research conducted by Opportunity Now and Bank of America Merrill Lynch shows that women believe that the barriers to them progressing their careers have not diminished in the five years 2005-2010. The single biggest barrier cited by the 857 male and female managers in this study is 'women having to balance work and family responsibilities.'



*"I think you have to put yourself forward, make new suggestions to your boss, propose solutions, get the wider perspective right...but I could only do this because they made me feel confident about coming back."*

Helping women rebalance domestic roles and retune their identity - particularly high achieving women who take to showing the world they can handle the so-called 'triple burden' standing on their heads - is a key part of maternity coaching. Providing women space to discuss their concerns about having 'it all' and indeed to challenge assumptions about what 'all' is and what she needs to do to attain it, is particularly relevant if women are to progress their careers.

A 19 year study in the US (Adler 2001) makes it clear as to why we should want to get more women onto UK boards: profitability. His research shows that "...the 25 Fortune 500 firms with the best record of promoting women to high positions are between 18 and 69 percent more profitable than the median Fortune 500 firms in their industries."

Lord Davies of Abersoch's report *Women on Boards* commissioned by the Government (2011) has stimulated much debate around whether quotas for women on boards should be imposed in the UK. In 2010 of FTSE 100 executive directorships, 94.5% were men and 5.5% female. Lord Davies states that "the rate of change is too slow" and "FTSE 100 boards should aim to have 25% female representation by 2015."

Putting aside the thoughtful arguments from men and women on both sides of the quota debate, it is clear that if we continue to leak women from the talent pipeline at the rate we currently do it will be very difficult to change the gender balance of UK boards. One estimate is that it will take 70 years to achieve gender balance at the current rate of change (Equality & Human Rights Commission, 2008, cited in *Women on Boards*). *Women on Boards* concludes that the two key issues running throughout the consultation responses are:

- A lack of flexibility around work/life balance particularly around maternity leave and young families
- The perception of a traditional male cultural environment, the old boys' network and a lack of networking opportunities for women

## Barriers and Enablers for a Smooth Return

BARRIERS	ENABLERS
<p><b>Feeling ‘in the wilderness’ on maternity leave</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussions with line manager before maternity leave about amount and type of contact preferred with her team during maternity leave</li> <li>• Opportunities to meet and talk to maternity leavers in same organisation/industry throughout maternity leave</li> <li>• Participating in 1:1 coaching/group coaching workshops focussing on becoming confident about and making a positive choice to be a working parent</li> <li>• Participating in a parental buddying scheme before and after her return</li> <li>• Regular, structured contact with line manager and colleagues via ‘Keep In Touch’ (KIT)<sup>ii</sup> days – opportunity to stay in the loop with business activities if desired</li> </ul>
<p><b>Decreased professional confidence, questioning personal &amp; professional identity</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunities to meet and talk to women returners within the organisation/industry via a well publicised and inclusive comeback programme</li> <li>• Participating in group coaching workshops focussing on personal skills, strengths and solutions</li> <li>• Participating in a parental buddying scheme</li> <li>• Regular, structured contact with line manager and colleagues via Keep In Touch (KIT) days</li> <li>• 1:1 coaching to air these concerns and build a values and strengths-based career plan</li> </ul>
<p><b>The ‘triple bind’* and systemic guilt surrounding of working motherhood</b></p> <p>*Work + Caring for a young family + Domestic responsibilities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality Part Time roles at middle and senior levels</li> <li>• Senior male and female role models managing work <i>and</i> visibly prioritising their young family</li> <li>• A copy of <i>Mothers Work! How to Get a Grip on Guilt and Make a Smooth Return to Work</i> gifted to each maternity leaver</li> <li>• Bitesize lunch time workshops specifically addressing this issue based on content from <i>Mothers Work!</i></li> <li>• Shifting to a culture of flexible/agile working for everyone, not just working parents</li> <li>• Encouraging mothers and fathers to get home for family time each several evenings a week</li> <li>• Impromptu flexible working if childcare problems arise and understanding if children are ill</li> <li>• Encouraging male colleagues with young families to get home and take up some of the ‘triple burden’</li> </ul>

## The Comeback Programme

Developed and delivered by a team of first rate coaches including Jessica Chivers, author of *Mothers Work! How to Get a Grip on Guilt and Make a Smooth Return to Work* our Comeback Programme is uniquely positioned to retain and engage female talent during this significant life and career transition.

Aimed at women currently on maternity leave and women who have returned to work within the last 24 months, our pioneering **Comeback Programme** has been developed from quantitative and qualitative research and is tailored to the needs and budget of your organisation.

The Comeback Programme addresses many of the issues women identify as a barrier to a smooth return to work. As a rolling programme with events scheduled at regular intervals, it's well placed to service the needs and build a supportive community within and between women at all levels of the organisation. We see the programme as voluntary, with women (and men who may have taken extended paternity leave) opting into what suits them.

We provide a blend of diagnostic consultancy, interactive workshops, workbooks, networking events, online resources and 1:1 coaching to support and engage women before, during and after maternity leave.



*“Maternity coaching made me feel that my company genuinely wanted me back. It made me think ‘yes, I can do this – I want to do this.’ Practically and emotionally it was powerful and gave my confidence a tremendous boost.”*

## Comeback Programme Components

The following components can be tailored to fit with any existing maternity support activities that are currently working well:

- **Initial survey of women currently on maternity leave and recent returners in your organisation and diagnostic report**
- **Ongoing surveying to capture views of new maternity leavers/returners with intermittent reports to track the impact of the Comeback Programme over time**
- **Copy of *Mothers Work!* for all maternity leavers/new returners on the programme**
- **Creation of parental buddying programme**
- **Development of mentoring programme between female ‘talent’ and male ‘sponsor’**

- **One day *Comeback Camp* held on or off site before women return, covering the following themes in an interactive format with materials to take away:**
  - Finding your identity as a working mother
  - Clarifying your ideal work scenario: what, when, how, why?
  - Re-igniting your career confidence
  - How to negotiate your ideal scenario and make it work for your team
  - Ensuring a smooth handover from your maternity cover
  - Finding childcare that fits your family and how to cope if it fails
  - Preparing for a smooth return
  - How to thrive as a working parent
  
- **2 hour monthly workshops on site including a ‘colleague connection’ element for women to meet informally with their team – find out what’s going on and keep in the loop. Sample workshop titles:**
  - Making Flexible and Part Time Working Work for You and Your Team
  - How to Get a Grip on Guilt and Get On at Work
  - Going for Good Enough on the Domestic Front
  - Elevate Your Career and Still Be Home for Bath Time
  - Effective Home Working (How to Ignore a Messy Kitchen)
  - Time Out! From Surviving for Thriving
  
- **Continuous content by e-mail – invitations, event reminders, timely tips**
  
- **1:1 coaching from team of coaches**
  
- **Production of promotional film for internal use**
  
- **Development of PR opportunities with your communications team for external recognition – Twitter, Facebook, You Tube, Industry magazines/journals, popular press coverage**

## **The Comeback Team**

### **Jessica Chivers, Founder and Director**

Jessica Chivers, The Thinking Woman’s Coach, speaker and author of *Mothers Work!* has seven years 1:1 coaching and group facilitation experience with brands such as The Mind Gym, M&S, BBC, Vodafone, Veolia, RBS and AOL. As a media contact for the British Psychological Society Jessica is often heard on the radio, TV and seen in popular magazines. Previously in Learning & Development at Barclays and currently exploring possible PhD themes around gender equality and female leadership.

### **Allison Mitchell, Associate**

Allison Mitchell ([www.manicmums.com](http://www.manicmums.com)) entrepreneur, speaker and author of *Time Management for Manic Mums*, *The Manic Mum's Guide to Magnificent Parenting* and co-author of *Making It*. Previously at Accenture and the least manic mum we know.

**A team of hand-picked coaches with different industry expertise and all with a flair for maternity coaching make up the rest of the team – see [www.jessicachivers.com](http://www.jessicachivers.com) for biographies.**

## **From The Mouths of Mums**

A survey we ran asking working mothers<sup>iii</sup> “*what one thing could your employer do, or do better, to make being a working parent easier?*” revealed three key themes:

- 1) Support maternity leaver’s return to help performance
- 2) Make agile working part of the culture and value the role of Part Time employees
- 3) Understand and appreciate the difference being a parent makes



### **“Support my return to help me perform”**

- *“I think KIT days are brilliant - but not many people know about them. For both my maternity leaves I was offered the opportunity to come in and keep in touch whilst I was off. However, getting childcare was really difficult for me, so I had to turn these days down. Although, yes, you get paid for them - it's not about the money.”*
- *“Line managers should make women feel relaxed about coming back to work and understand things will take time to come back to you. A great thing my employer did was arrange for my maternity cover to stay longer than anticipated meaning I had more time to get back in the swing of things.”*
- *“I want reassurance that I’m doing my job right. Working full time and bringing up a toddler can be mentally and physically exhausting and to know my efforts at work are appreciated is a much needed confidence boost.”*
- *“I get a buzz from being back at work, seeing my team so happy and keen and eager to please and help me. I think you have to put yourself forward, make new suggestions to your boss, propose solutions, get the wider perspective right....but I could only do this because they made me feel confident about coming back.”*

### **“Make agile working a part of the culture and value the contribution of PT Employees”**

- *“We need a culture where it is more socially acceptable to work part-time, rather than be regarded as a second-rate part-timer. We’re no less committed and probably a lot more efficient and productive.”*
- *“Employers need to go beyond the clichés of standard working hours and realise flexibility does not affect productivity.”*

- “I think the culture of presenteeism is the hardest obstacle. I put in 8 hours in the office and often 2-3 more at home each day, and so the fact that I leave at 5pm each day should not be a factor.”
- “I work a lot of o hours in the evenings mostly because I feel the need to prove myself just that extra bit because I’m part time. If they could help ease the guilt and value roles like mine more in the organisation then that would help.”

### “Understand and appreciate the difference being a parent makes”

- “I find myself having to change my working days a lot and I have no childcare outwith my booked days that I should be working and my employer does not see that as their problem. When I’m flexible I’m not given any credit for it even though I may have moved heaven and earth to make it happen.”
- “Be non-judgemental when you have to take time off to look after sick little ones. Also asking about my children and taking an interest has helped my return.”
- Being a bit more flexible with childcare emergencies and sickness as I feel as though it is frowned upon. Also less prejudice is recruitment, I’ve always felt it necessary to keep quiet about the fact that I am a mum.”

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## Let's Talk

If you think we're onto something and would like to talk about how we can do great things with you and your maternity leavers please contact Jessica Chivers in the first instance on 01727 856169 or drop a line to [jc@jessicachivers.com](mailto:jc@jessicachivers.com).



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<sup>i</sup> Survey of 3000 women reported in The Daily Telegraph, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2011

<sup>ii</sup> KIT Days allow maternity leavers to do up to 10 days work during maternity leave without bringing maternity leave to an end or losing Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP). KIT days can only take place if both the maternity leaver and her employer want them to. There is nothing in the current legislation about how much an employee should be paid, although it is common practise for employers to top up SMP to the usual level of pay for each day worked. Participation in **Mothers Work! The Comeback Programme** should be optional and the decision to make it paid or unpaid lies with the organisation.

<sup>iii</sup> Part of an online survey by Jessica Chivers completed by 200 working mothers/maternity leavers, 2010.

