

# How can maternity-return coaching complement structural organisational benefits?

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## Abstract

This article presents findings from an action research study into how maternity-return coaching can complement organisational maternity benefits in order to facilitate career re-engagement. In an initial step, mothers and managers of two multinationals were interviewed. Based on the findings a coaching programme was developed, mothers were coached, provided feedback and the programme was refined. The research indicates that maternity-return coaching can complement organisational benefits by supporting mothers on an individual level. This can be achieved by developing strategies to use the organisations' existing framework optimally, or by clarifying and communicating expectations. These findings could be relevant in other business sectors or similar return scenarios.

**Key Words:** Maternity coaching, organisational maternity benefits, transition, workplace return, complementary intervention.

## Introduction

Demographic changes, globalisation and lifestyle changes have led to an increased number of women in the workforce of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Roberson, 2006) and, over the last decade, the positive influence of such a gender-diverse workforce has become increasingly apparent. Research suggests for example, that it is directly related to improved organisational and financial performance (Stout-Rostron, 2013; McKinsey, 2015; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS), 2015; Mercer, 2016).

Nonetheless, women worldwide are still underrepresented in senior positions in social, economic and political areas (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2015; Mercer 2016). Reasons for this are multifaceted and can range from hostile organisational cultures and masculine leadership traits (Ludeman, 2009; Stout-Rostron, 2013; Cahusac and Kanji, 2014) to maternity penalties or a 'glass ceiling' (Hewlett and Buck-Luce, 2005; O'Neil *et al.*, 2008; Sullivan and Mainiero, 2008). However, even if organisations subscribe to diversity targets, they still need to be embedded in the organisational culture, as otherwise, policies become futile and employees can feel discouraged from using the benefits offered (Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007).

Research carried out by Talking Talent (2012) in the UK found that 45% of women participating in the study view the transition to motherhood as a key pinch point in their career and the lack of support during this transition as a main contributor to narrowing the female talent pipeline. Maternity coaching can assist women in re-engaging with their career and further professional development while building smart ways of balancing work-life needs (Liston-Smith, 2011; Filsinger, 2012; Brown and Kelan, 2013). Over the last decade, coaching has advanced from being an exclusive intervention accessible to small senior populations mainly in the professional services sector to a more widespread intervention across business sectors and managerial levels.

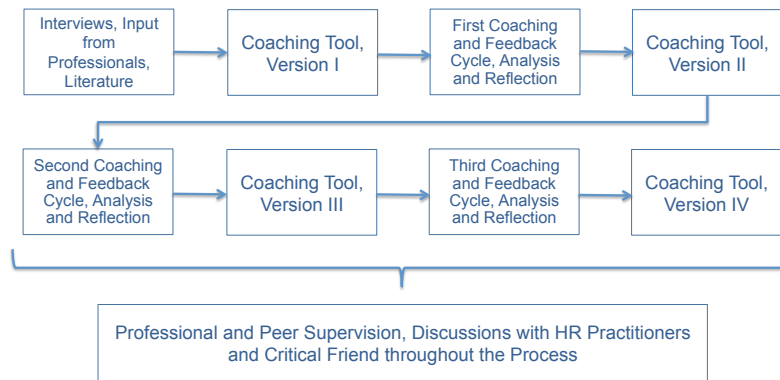
However, there is a paucity of research that considers maternity coaching in this context. And while there are calls in the literature requesting research on *how maternity coaching can be employed together with other change initiatives that might focus more on structural changes in organisations* (Brown and Kelan, 2013, p. 16), no research could be found to date. This is surprising given the surge of interest in the effects of coaching in general during the last decade. Understanding the complexity of support measures and their interrelation is a crucial aspect in providing systematic improvement in good practices to retain women. This study contributes to expanding this understanding by researching maternity-return coaching in two multinational organisations operating in the UK, India and Germany across various managerial-levels.

Maternity-*return* coaching, unlike maternity coaching that is usually employed before, during and after maternity leave, concentrates on the return to work period only. Its intention is to provide support for women who have made the conscious decision to return to work and to use the momentum of this transitional period to facilitate career re-engagement and reconciliation of the dual responsibilities of parent and employee. As the study focuses on mothers only, the term maternity-return coaching is used rather than the term parental-return coaching.

## Methodology

The main intention of the study was to enact positive change for returning mothers through the development, testing and refining of a maternity-return coaching programme, including a maternity-return coaching tool. Thus, action research was identified as the most appropriate approach (Lewis and McNaughton Nicholls, 2014). Action research is a juxtaposition of action and research, practice and theory. It is a methodology committed to finding solutions or improving situations through understanding, mutual involvement and initiating change and as such a pragmatic, solution-driven research approach (Kidd and Kral, 2005). It is carried out *by* or *with* the researched but never *to* or *on* them. This corresponds not only to my epistemological belief of co-creating knowledge but also to my coaching philosophy of a balance of power and collaboration between coach and client.

The research was conducted in two international organisations operating in the telecommunications and manufacturing sector. It was carried out mainly in the UK and Germany but also in India. In a first step, Human Resources (HR) and coaching practitioners provided information regarding the organisational settings and coaching approaches respectively. This contextual knowledge was expanded through interviews with managers and mothers of the partaking organisations. Names of participants in this article have been changed to protect their anonymity and assure nothing is attributable to an individual, causing potential repercussions. To further ensure anonymity, no table with individual information regarding age, management level or country is provided. In total, 15 mothers and 5 managers across various managerial levels were interviewed. Subsequently, 12 mothers received two hours of coaching each in three action-reflection cycles (McNiff, 2015). Upon completion of each coaching session, a brief verbal feedback was given. A detailed transcribed feedback at the end of the programme completed the intervention. Additional input from my reflective journal as well as peers and professionals further assisted to develop, test and refine the coaching programme as shown in Figure 1. This form of collection of data from different sources, a poly-angulation, was key element to the research design and contributed to overcome bias and ensured the study's validity (Blaikie, 1991).



**Figure 1 – Evolution of the coaching programme**

While the development of the coaching programme was a continuous process, a more extensive reflection and refinement period took place upon completion of each coaching cycle. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) a method for identifying, analysing and reporting themes relevant to the research question, has been used to analyse interviews and feedback.

## Findings

In order to understand the development and evolution of the coaching programme, including the coaching tool, and how coaching can thus complement structural organisational benefits, awareness of the complexity of women’s return context is essential. The following section summarises the main interview findings such as the importance of a supportive organisational culture, career planning, guilt, perceived lack of confidence and management of expectations and personal boundaries.

### **Organisational Culture**

All interviewees showed an appreciation of family-friendly policies, allowing for more flexibility or financial incentives. This chimes with Hewlett and Buck-Luce’s (2005) findings that highlight the importance of flexibility in working patterns. However, the extent to which the implementation of family-friendly policies depends on a line manager’s discretion and interpretation was surprising. In one case, the lack of support and encouragement to use the policies offered led to Karen leaving the organisation soon after the interview. She said:

*[The manager] pays lip service to diversity and inclusion policies [...] so in the right audience [the manager] says the right things, but what [the manager] does to support these policies is quite the opposite. Whilst [the company] appears to be doing the right thing with this policy, unless it is loved, lived and breathed throughout the organisation, it is not going to work.*

This finding is consistent with the literature (Brown, 2010; Cabrera, 2009; Sullivan and Mainiero, 2008), stating that family-friendly policies, as adequate as they might be, become futile if they are not lived in the organisation. It can be inferred that managers play a fundamental role in establishing and maintaining family-friendly organisational cultures.

### **Career Planning**

While it often was often the mother’s choice to slow her career down temporarily, the prospect of working in an appropriate position with scope for development was a determining factor in the decision to return to work. However, as Gabrielle put it:

*I would be lying to say that working a two-day week has no effect on the career development. Flexibility or not, managers ought to have a regular attendance in the office in order to lead their team successfully.*

This study therewith substantiates Guillaume and Pochic's (2007) research by confirming a direct link between availability and career progression. It also highlights a mismatch between the flexible working patterns organisations offer, including part-time leadership roles, and the actual demands of such roles that often require availability beyond the contracted hours. This finding suggests that organisations should align their career development paths with their family-friendly policies and adjust the demands of roles accordingly.

The analysis of interviews further shows that it is generally accepted and expected of the individual to be responsible for negotiating appropriate working patterns and career development paths. Becky, for example, commented: *"It's my career and it's my life, so it's my responsibility."* This trend of protean careers has been given a reasonable amount of attention in the literature (Baruch, 2004; Briscoe and Hall, 2006 and Brown and Kelan, 2013). While there seems to be a general acceptance of the individual's responsibility, this finding raises intriguing questions that require further research regarding the responsibility of line-managers to provide the right framework, support and opportunities for such development, as they might feel absolved of their duties.

### ***Guilt***

The majority of mothers reported feeling guilty for leaving their children in care. This response was irrespective of managerial level or country and particularly prominent directly after the return to work. Surprisingly, hardly any participants experienced strong feelings of guilt towards their work. There was a general recognition that *"you just haven't got the time to do the job as well as you would have done without children"* (Nina). However, this was not linked to any feelings of guilt but rather perceived as an issue of personal standing and communication.

### ***Perceived lack of confidence***

During the interview stage, lack of confidence was identified as a theme that severely impacts on the maternity return experience. The majority of women attributed it to the period of absence, a changed work environment, unsupportive managers or new working patterns. As a result, women often felt an inability to communicate their concerns and state their needs. Maria said:

*I lost more confidence than I thought I would and cannot appreciate the success I had. I should have had more courage to say what I need [...] but I didn't and I didn't listen to my inner voice.*

This concurs with the literature in relation to the lack of confidence in returning mothers (Liston-Smith, 2011) and professional women in general (Clarke, 2011). Even very senior managers with outstanding ratings suffered from a reduced sense of confidence. This is an issue that, according to practitioner research (Cotter, 2014), is frequently brought up in maternity coaching sessions.

### ***Management of expectations***

The management of expectations proved to be a crucial aspect in the return-experience and mismanagement resulted in what Bussell (2008) refers to as 'brain-drain' as one woman left the organisation and another one applied for new roles. Nina commented: *"I have lower expectations after the second child and that helped me not to get disappointed again"*. A possible explanation for this result may be their previous investment in their careers and the importance of this facet of their lives, which they were not prepared to forfeit. Literature on Gen Y (Clarke and Patrickson, 2008) suggests that employability is more important than long-term employment for workers of this generation and employees are more likely to leave organisations if conditions are perceived unfavourable. This finding highlights the risk of losing employees due to poorly managed and

divergent expectations. Practitioner research (Sparrow, 2009) suggests that resolving the divergence of expectations between mothers and managers is a key benefit of maternity coaching.

**Development of a maternity-return coaching programme and tool**

The insights and understanding gained from the interviews and their analysis provided the input for the development of the maternity-return coaching programme.

Having spoken with various maternity coaching professionals, peers, practitioners and HR professionals, it became evident that a rather directive coaching approach is required to fully utilize the short period of two coaching sessions and produce tangible outcomes. This chimes with Cotter’s (2014) research that locates elements of mentoring approaches in maternity-coaching programmes. Hence, I chose to develop and use a coaching tool as part of the programme (Figure 2) that would facilitate this more directive approach. As described above, recurrent themes were identified during the interview analysis and, in order to facilitate the goal-finding process and encourage participants to talk about potentially hidden themes, these recurring themes were depicted in the tool.

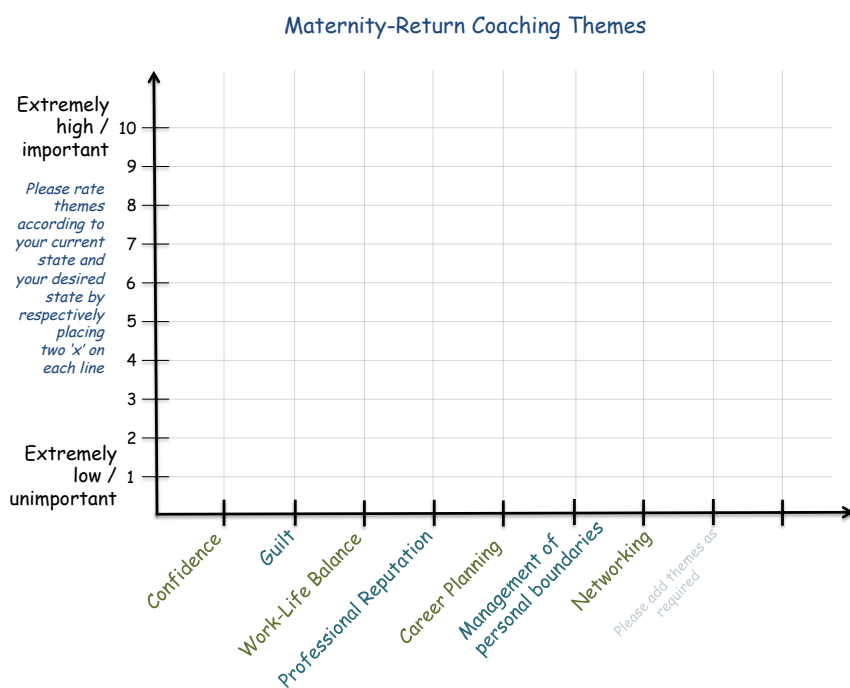


Figure 2 – Maternity-Return Coaching Tool

All participants received this tool via email prior to their first coaching session to trigger their thought process and define their goals. Based on their feedback and my own reflection notes, the tool was refined after each action-reflection cycle. It provided a means to measure the coaching success and evaluate the process at the end of the programme. However, the actual coaching sessions were individually tailored to the clients’ needs, as coaching should never strictly follow a fixed pattern but is an individual process in which the coach should be *with* the clients, skilled and responsive in order to follow their agenda. These findings demonstrate the complexity of coaching assignments and the need for a skilled coach. They also chime with Rogers (2012) who argues that coaches should learn various techniques in order to bypass them and respond to their clients’ needs and thus enable true learning.

### ***Evaluation of the coaching programme***

Participants were asked to evaluate the coaching programme in a recorded and transcribed feedback at the end of the coaching sessions. Taken together, their main arguments can be summarized as follows:

- Challenging questions and enabling a change of perspective

Consistent with the coaching literature (for example Liston-Smith, 2011; Cox *et al.*, 2014), this research found that participants valued the focussed, purposeful and partially challenging questions throughout the coaching sessions. As Becky stated:

*It sounds simplistic but challenging me to change my perspective and look at the situation from left and right, top and bottom made me look at things in a different light. Solutions became a lot more apparent and new ways of handling the situation seemed to just emerge.*

- Secure and personal space

Talking to an external professional and knowing that no judgement will be made and everything will be kept confidential allowed for open and honest conversations that would not be possible in the same way in a different setting. Heather valued the “*secure space that forces you to speak and not bottle things up*”. Coaching literature (Wasylyshyn, 2003; Sue-Chan and Latham, 2004) confirms that employing external coaches rather than internal coaches has the advantage of facilitating a secure atmosphere of trust, confidentiality and credibility in which effective collaboration is stimulated.

- Tools

In addition to the maternity-return coaching tool, various other coaching tools were used as part of the programme. Maria said: “*The tools make up for the short time we have for the conversations. I can fall back on them in a few months’ time should I be in a similar situation.*”

- Importance of coach-client match

Liston-Smith (2011) suggests that a maternity coach who has gone through the transition herself is a good basis for genuine empathy. This has been confirmed by all research participants and could be explained by their need to talk to someone who “*has been there*” in order to feel better understood (Liston-Smith, 2011). The coach-client relationship can be responsible for success or failure of the intervention. For example, Hannah commented:

*[The success of the intervention] depends on who does the coaching. I don’t think it works in just any relationship. It’s a question of how good the coachee-coach relationship is.*

- Timing and length of coaching

While coaching, as part of this research, was limited to two one-hour coaching sessions within a short space of time, the majority of participants agreed that it would be beneficial to have a further coaching session about three to four months following the completion of the first two sessions. This could help “*to increase and sustain changes because there is a check-point in your diary and you have the responsibility to deal with your issues before every-day-life takes over again*” as Paula commented. Although the two coaching sessions were perceived as a springboard and trigger for reflection, it can be argued that the often-employed agenda of maternity coaching sessions before, during and after maternity leave provides greater continuity and prompting (Liston-Smith, 2011) than two sessions can provide.



In summary, maternity-return coaching can improve the return experience by providing a secure and personal space in which perspectives can be challenged and issues discussed by drawing on a variety of individually applied tools and techniques.

### ***Maternity-return coaching as complementary means***

The following section turns to gaps in the provision of organisational support and the way maternity-return coaching can partially fill and complement these gaps. It furthermore demonstrates how a combination of individual and organisational measures can lead from ad-hoc interventions to a continuous improvement of good practice to enhance the return situation for mothers and retain female talent.

As previously mentioned, this study confirms that all research participants value the organisations' efforts to implement structural benefits. What is surprising though is that some mothers desist from using the benefits offered. This suggests that they are either not aware of their entitlements or they have no clarity on how to optimally utilize them. In concurrence with the literature, for example Mainiero and Sullivan (2005), another explanation could be a hostile organisational culture, in which using the benefits offered is regarded unacceptable. According to these data, it can be inferred that, even if structural organisational benefits are offered, individual support might be required to use these benefits appropriately. As Becky said:

*Yes, these structural support measures are there. But I do observe a lot of people, especially women, who have an inhibition to use them [...] and I think that coaching is a means for women to develop an individual perspective: how would I like to handle the situation, where are my priorities, what do I consciously give up, what am I not willing to give up, how do I shape my family life and how do I use the options available to successfully implement what I want for my family as well as my professional life.*

This is an important finding not only for mothers, who might be in need of such support but also for organisations, which might have to address the way benefits are implemented. There is a scarcity of literature on the potential need to support the utilisation of structural benefits. Maternity-return coaching can be a means to provide this individual support for mothers by raising awareness to their wants and needs and developing strategies to communicate them clearly to all stakeholders involved.

Although it can be noted that advances in organisational support have been made over the past decade, this research accords with findings suggesting that significant roadblocks remain and additional programmes, for instance sponsored child-care or shared parental leave incentives, need to be implemented in order to support women in the workforce and ensure equity (Sullivan and Mainiero, 2008; Clarke, 2015; Mercer, 2016).

While these kind of support measures can be instigated by organisations, there are various individual aspects that cannot be addressed through such measures yet they deeply impact on the maternity return experience and the quality and speed by which returning mothers reintegrate. Having completed the coaching sessions, the view was echoed that it was extremely valuable to have a "*sounding board outside of work to help in terms of easing me back into work and thinking about issues that haven't really affected me before*" (Hannah). There was a general recognition that this could only be achieved by talking to someone independently "*off-record and away from employers*" (Gabrielle). It was suggested that having an independent person to talk to creates a sense of security as sensitive issues and difficulties remain within the setting and are not reported to the line-manager.

Furthermore, there was a sense amongst participants that the depth and quality of the coaching sessions differed immensely to any other form of conversation they had about their transition back to

work. While the majority of participants did talk about their issues with friends and family members to some extent, they appreciated the focus and outcome. Becky reported how:

*Neither management nor HR or friends can trigger this kind of self-reflection [...]. They are simply not qualified and there is a huge difference between a HR practitioner and a trained coach.*

The findings of this research additionally indicate that women value a certain form of exchange to share their experiences. A common view amongst most participants was, as Hannah mentioned, that “learning about the themes for other women from the tool and talking through them as well as feeling a little bit like perhaps there are others that might have been thinking and feeling like me” generated a feeling of connectedness, which resulted in a sense of reassurance. While some mothers suggested that “organisations could implement a forum, in which such exchange can take place” (Michelle), others were reluctant to share their experiences in an open forum and preferred reflecting on their experiences and challenges in a 1:1 environment in order to guarantee confidentiality and talk openly. This two-way approach has been taken up by large companies, for instance Ernst & Young (2013), who offer group maternity coaching for junior women and 1:1 maternity coaching for senior managers, directors and partners.

While it might be financially more viable for organisations to promptly re-integrate senior managers, junior managers could experience the different treatment as a form of injustice and thus feel unacknowledged by their employer, at worst even look for employment elsewhere. Literature on Gen Y (Clarke, 2015) and protean careers (Baruch, 2004; Briscoe and Hall, 2006) confirms the trend of leaving the employer to seek more favourable professional opportunities elsewhere. As this trend would have serious effects on organisations’ talent pipelines, such different approaches should be carefully considered before their implementation.

Heather used a metaphor in her feedback that was further developed in discussion with a critical friend. It summarizes and illustrates how maternity-return coaching can act as complementary means to structural organisational benefits: If a successful return to work is depicted as a well-positioned picture in a frame, the organisation provides this frame in the form of structural support measures. However, if not held together and supported by the line manager the frame falls apart and becomes useless. If stable, it is mothers’ responsibility to position the picture within that frame. While some mothers might know exactly what to do, others might not even know how to use a frame, let alone position a picture. A coach can provide the necessary tools to facilitate the use of the frame and the positioning of the picture. While a short coaching intervention can enable placing the picture in the right spot, gravity might pull it down and further coaching sessions might be required to readjust it. Over time, however, women should have the necessary tools and knowledge to keep the picture in the best possible position, provided of course the frame still exists and is stable.

It is important to note, however, that a successful coaching intervention is highly dependent on the client’s commitment, a trained coach and a robust coach-client relationship. Nevertheless, the combination of structural and individual support could provide a powerful amalgamation of measures that can improve the transition back to work and thus enable women to balance work-life needs while at the same time re-engage with their career. Additionally, it can improve organisations’ reputation and is not only an indicator of their commitment to gender diversity but also a sign for returning mothers that their contribution is appreciated and valued. In concurrence with the literature, it should, however, be noted that maternity-return coaching can only offer a sticking plaster if employed as an isolated means in a hostile organisational environment where inflexible work policies prevail (Bussell, 2008). Furthermore, coaching does not absolve organisations from their responsibilities by individualizing structural issues and placing the responsibility for success or failure on the individual



(Brown, 2010). Only an interplay of support measures and the organisations' sincere commitment to gender diversity can result in an improvement of the transition back to work and ultimately the retention of mothers.

In summary, the study highlighted that, while structural organisational benefits prepare the ground for a successful transition back to the workplace, they are not sufficient to address the breadth of challenges women face during this transition. Based on this study's data, Table 1 draws together how maternity-return coaching as a complementary means to structural organisational benefits can expand the range of themes covered.

Description of support measure	Structural organisational benefit	Maternity-return coaching
Flexible working environment (e.g. part time, home office etc.)	X	
Financial incentives	X	
Sponsored child-care	X	
Holistic family-friendly framework	X	X
Platform for parental exchange	X	X
Promote family-friendly organisational culture	X	X
Facilitate personal development	X	X
Increase productivity	X	X
Plan professional development	X	X
Plan personal development		X
Provide individual support		X
Allow for personal reflection		X
Clarify expectations of employer and employee		X
Provide objective, independent sounding board		X
Reduce inhibition to use structural organisational benefits offered		X
Facilitate quicker career re-engagement		X
Facilitate clear communication with management and team		X
Support with leadership / perception issues		X

**Table 1 – Comparison of support measures**

## Conclusion

This study furthers the understanding of the transition back to work after maternity leave and how maternity-return coaching can impact this experience. Additionally, it elucidates the scope of structural support measures, such as flexible working schemes in comparison to individual support measures, such as maternity-return coaching. By doing so, the research question how maternity-return coaching can complement structural organisational benefits can be answered.

First and foremost, mothers, who received the coaching as part of the study benefited from the programme. It allowed them to discuss their partially suppressed issues in an open and honest atmosphere without being judged. Coaching provided them with tools enabling them to challenge their perspectives, gain clarity with regards to their expectations and values, overcome feelings of guilt or reduced confidence or provided strategies to clearly communicate with their managers and team. In summary, it eased their transition back to work after maternity leave and allowed for a prompt re-engagement with their career and working life. Being offered this type of support from the organisation was seen as an interest in their contribution as employee and increased their loyalty towards the organisation.

The value of the study for coaching providers lies in a better understanding of how maternity-return coaching can complement structural organisational benefits. They can gain insights into the interplay of support measures (see Table 1). Additionally, the study provides them with a case for business opportunities. They can further benefit from evidence based maternity-return coaching that not only allows for a better measurability of the intervention, but also opens conversations and facilitates the goal finding process as well as encourages talking about suppressed topics.

The organisations participating in this study can benefit from the findings as they provide a better understanding on the impact of their support measures. They point to the fact that the transition back to work is too complex to be covered by general measures and additional support on an individual level is required if the array of issues is to be addressed and solved. The research emphasises the significance of including line-managers either in the coaching process or any other form of training to ensure they fully support the policies. Maternity-return coaching in organisations can be a powerful means to effectively use the organisational framework and provide individual support that only a trained professional can provide. Maternity-return coaching increases career re-engagement and thereby helps fill the talent pipeline, it fosters retention and gender-diversity and increases the organisations' reputation. This is particularly important when attracting talent as family-friendly benefits are considered a hygiene factor, especially for Gen Y employees.

Maternity-coaching in general is an under-researched coaching genre. This study is the first of its kind as the complementary aspect and the value of combining structural and individual support measures has been neglected in the coaching research so far. By conducting research in the UK, existing knowledge of the field is confirmed and the study provides further evidence on the benefits of maternity-return coaching. However, maternity-return coaching in Germany is not yet as established an intervention as it is in the UK. Conducting the study in this country extends the existing knowledge and demonstrates how maternity-return coaching can be re-applied. Due to the poor participation in India, it is difficult to draw conclusions here. However, this could suggest that Western cultures might be more receptive to such interventions. Nevertheless, the research potentially opens new markets. Moving away from the professional services sector to other business areas increases the range of maternity-return coaching applications to areas where it is not yet a conventional intervention. Additionally, both organisations participating in this research are well known, operate globally and have confirmed an interest in piloting the maternity-return coaching programme upon completion of this study. As both organisations operate in different sectors, the more traditional manufacturing

industry and the fast growing telecommunications industry, re-applicability across sectors is demonstrated. The maternity-return coaching programme is an evidence-based programme that is re-applicable to organisations with similar settings and, with some adjustments, could be used for general career-break coaching.

### ***Limitations and further research***

While this study took place in less researched business sectors and thus expanded the knowledge of the field, limitations can be seen in the small scale of this project, the poor participation of line managers, their exclusion from the coaching sessions and the fact that all participants were part of the organisations' talent pool with a certain mind-set, thus not a true representation of the entire staff.

This research has brought up numerous questions in need of further investigation in relation to the coaching profession and organisational research:

- How many coaching sessions should maternity-return programmes include, when should they start and how long should they continue?
- Is maternity-return coaching only suited to Western cultures? What types of adaptations need to be made to raise interest and gain value in other cultures?
- What are the benefits and risks of 1:1 versus group maternity coaching? Who is better suited for what?
- What can organisations do to ensure their policies are embedded in the organisational culture?
- What are the consequences of boundaryless careers and Gen Y employees for organisations? What do they have to offer to attract and retain talent?
- How can general career planning for mothers be improved?

This study demonstrates how maternity-return coaching can complement structural organisational benefits by addressing individual issues that cannot be attended to otherwise. It contributes to the knowledge of the field by making explicit what maternity-return coaching programmes should contain in order to facilitate effective use of standard frameworks provided by organisations, thus improving the transition back to work. Both, structural organisational and individual support measures as isolated interventions can only provide parts of the solution. However, a combination of both can offer a holistic approach in which the return to work can be managed effectively and root causes and symptoms of transitional issues can be addressed. Considering that both organisations participating in this research are interested in piloting the maternity-return coaching programme, it can be hypothesised that the value of combining support measures has been recognized and will be even more so in the future. This study provides an evidence-based maternity-return coaching programme that complements each organisation's benefits and can be re-applied in similar settings.

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