Re-Engaging Talent Post-Maternity Leave: Enablers and Barriers to Positive Reintegration

Research Report
Re-Engaging Talent
Post- Maternity Leave: Enablers and Barriers to Positive Reintegration

DCU Business School
In association with HR Search

Researched & Authored by
Dr. Yseult Freeney, Dr. Lisa van der Werff, and Professor David Collings

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This research, sponsored by HR Search, in conjunction with the Leadership and Talent Institute at DCU Business School, was conducted to address this gap. The limited research on the return to work post maternity leave has focused on the sole perspective of mothers and has almost exclusively considered the challenges of negotiating identity shifts. This research adopts a novel approach by drawing on the multiple perspectives of the various stakeholders in the return to work after maternity leave: the mother; her line manager; and the HR Director. Consisting of in-depth interviews with staff across 28 industry leading firms and drawing on survey data from over 300 women returning to work, this first of its kind research will benefit both women and practitioners to manage this transition more effectively.

Data drawn from the interviews paints a very rich picture of how the experience of returning to work post-maternity leave significantly impacted on a returnee’s views of her organisation and significantly shaped her future career aspirations. Ultimately, the period of readjustment to work, or ‘resocialisation’ is a critical period that warrants the same level of investment as onboarding/orientation programmes for newcomers/graduate recruits. Our findings illustrate that the return experience is fundamentally shaped by managerial perspectives of maternity leave – as either a major disruption or as a brief interlude – and that the latter approach typically leads to much more positive resocialisation experiences, in turn, leading to a reinforced relationship with the line manager and the organisation. As depicted in Figure 1, negative experiences are characterised by career derailment; unconscious bias; and professional relationship challenges while positive experiences were dominated by renewed focus; value signals and professional relationship enrichment.

The report first presents a strategic overview, highlighting why it is so important that organisations get the return to work post-maternity leave right. We present the method, the findings, which then inform the best practice recommendations for HR as well as noting some pitfalls to avoid.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While considerable attention is paid to the underrepresentation of women at senior levels of organisations, little or no research examines the impact of maternity leave on potential disengagement from career progression.
Figure 1. Findings Map

Managerial Perspective

- Major Disruption
  - Career Derailment
  - Unconscious Bias
  - Professional Relationship Challenges

- Brief Interlude
  - Renewed Focus
  - Value Signals
  - Professional Relationship Enrichment
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Being responsive to the needs of people, organisations, economies and societies is at the heart of all of our programmes and research
Yseult Freeney is an Associate Professor in Organisational Psychology in Dublin City University Business School and completed her PhD in Psychology in University College Dublin as a UCD Scholar. Yseult was awarded an IRC Postdoctoral Research Fellowship in 2009 to join Trinity College Dublin. She joined DCU in 2011 where her research, teaching and executive development continues to centre on work engagement, the creation of positive, fulfilling work experiences and the management of engagement and well-being through transitions in people’s lives. Yseult’s publications to date include Human Relations, Human Resource Management Journal and the British Educational Research Journal.

Lisa van der Werff is an organisational psychologist and Assistant Professor in Human Resource Management and Organisational Psychology at Dublin City University Business School. Her research interests lie in the areas of trust, positive working relationships and managing workplace transitions. Lisa has worked with organisations across a variety of industries with a focus on building positive relationships within and between organisations and on managing new employee socialisation processes. Her work has been published in journals including the Academy of Management Journal, Journal of Management and Journal of Applied Social Psychology. Prior to joining academia, Lisa was a Human Resources professional and learning and development specialist working in the professional services firm sector.

David Collings is a Professor of Human Resource Management at Dublin City University where he is Co-Director of the Leadership and Talent Institute. He formerly held faculty positions at NUI Galway & the University of Sheffield and held visiting positions at King’s College London, Nanyang Business School Singapore and Cornell University as a Fulbright Scholar. His research and consulting interests are in the areas of global mobility and talent management. He has edited 10 books and his work has appeared in leading international journals. He is joint Editor in Chief at the Journal of World Business. He has HR Magazine as one of the Most Influential International Thinkers in HRM for four consecutive years from 2014-2017 and in 2017 Silicon Republic named him as one of 14 global leaders influencing the discussion on the future of work.
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HR Search are delighted to have been involved in such a significant body of research in Ireland. As an ally to the HR market we get the opportunity to get a bird’s eye view of both a company’s and candidates perspective on maternity leave and a women’s return to the workplace. As we endeavour to build long lasting relationships with our network often we get an insight beyond the practicalities of an employee contract or maternity policy and truly get an honest and often emotional account on the struggles and wins for women returning to work. We see first-hand the true ramifications on retention levels, longevity in a firm, job satisfaction, employee wellbeing as well as the effect on the psychological contract with management and peers. These factors can swing both positively and negatively depending on the experience of the returning mother.

This partnership was a passion project for us and ties into our core value of supporting the HR community. A massive thanks to Yseult, David and Lisa for their expertise, research and dedication to this project. The DCU team are and continue to be a pleasure to partner with.
Over the past number of decades, the talent agenda has become one of the most pressing challenges for organisational and HR leaders alike. There has been an increasing realisation that building effective talent pipelines is central to the delivery of the strategic agendas of organisations. However, there is little evidence that organisations have been successful in building these talent pipelines. For example, PwC’s annual CEO pulse surveys identify the lack of availability of key skills as a key constraint on firms’ ability to deliver on their strategic agenda year on year. Indeed, a 2016 report by Mercer reported that 85 per cent of organisations felt their talent management programmes needed a complete overhaul.

Ineffectiveness in building diverse talent pipelines has been a particular failure of traditional talent management programmes. From a gender perspective, females continue to be significantly underrepresented in corporate talent pipelines. This is despite the fact that building diverse talent pipelines was the number one priority of respondents to the Mercer study referenced earlier. While we have witnessed progress in terms of the basic building blocks of increasing diversity in talent pools, including organisations developing the business case for gender diversity, tracking gender representation across the workforce, and developing training, flexibility, and networking programs for female talent, many barriers remain in developing gender diverse talent pipelines.

Academic research has established that parental responsibilities have a significant impact on female career progression. In contrast, the top performing companies in McKinsey’s research on Women in the Workplace have targeted interventions to facilitate parents in the workplace. They are more than twice as likely as those at the bottom of the distribution to offer emergency backup childcare services; three times as likely to offer on-site childcare; and more likely to offer extended maternity and paternity leave, as well as programs to smooth the transition to and from extended leave. We identified the return to work after maternity leave as a key transition point which can derail the careers of high potential female talent. The results presented in the current report speak directly to this question.

Our report presents the summary findings from our interviews in 28 organisations from the public and private sector. In each organisation our focus was on understanding the HR strategy around maternity leave and high potential talent, while also understanding the experience of these females on return to work and their line managers’ views on the transition.
STRATEGIC OVERVIEW

Context and Rationale
While there is considerable attention paid to the underrepresentation of women at senior levels of organisations, little or no research examines the impact of maternity leave on potential disengagement from career progression.

Preliminary research suggests that the transition back to work after maternity leave is a major juncture in a woman’s career. Not only are they challenged in navigating the competing demands of childcare and work, many mothers also face career derailment. While some may decide to leave the workforce altogether, more often, women face a work environment that fails to offer them the same career opportunities as before. However, this transition is poorly understood and there is little research to inform the design of initiatives aimed at making it a more positive, enriching experience that ultimately supports women's careers.

Our research is the first study of its kind in Ireland to explore the return to work following maternity leave from the multiple perspectives of mothers, managers and the organisation. Further, we evaluate some of the best practice initiatives that exist in industry to bridge this transition and to support key talent in the organisation.

Background
An employee returning to work after maternity leave is often questioning of who she is and how effective she can be as a mother and working professional. As a first step in this programme of research, we surveyed 300 women while they were on maternity leave as they approached the return to work. Overall, the picture that emerged was one of mixed emotions, unsurprisingly. However, before women went back to work, the dominant negative emotions were focused on leaving their children while they were often excited by the prospect of returning to work, to the routine and to their colleagues. Some of the key findings from this are reported below, while Figure 2 depicts the dominant feelings women reported about the return to work. While on leave, women are feeling fairly positive but it is important to note the rather significant decline in positive emotions on the first day back.
Figure 2. How do women feel about returning to work?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>While on Leave</th>
<th>End of First Day Back</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determined</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excited</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspired</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alert</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“...What I found in relation to returning to work is that the advice is all about practicalities, advice like fill your freezer, batch cook, get clothes ready, get things in place, but not advice about you readjusting into work.”

- Professional Services Firm Returner
OUR APPROACH

The research outlined in this report draws on semi-structured interview data from 28 organisations across a variety of industry sectors (see Table below). In each of the companies we interviewed three key stakeholders:

— A woman who is identified as talent and/or high potential and returned to work in the previous six months
— Her line manager
— The organisation’s HR Director or a HR Senior Manager

The interviews with returning women covered challenges faced during the transition back to work and useful supports; relationships with line managers and how her return was managed; how the returning woman felt about herself (professional identity, job, organisation) since returning; how long it took women to settle back in and finally, any measures organisations could take to ensure an effective reintegration into the work environment.

The interviews with line managers and HR representatives explored the process of identifying these women as Talent, supports available to returning women; challenges faced in the reintegration process and their views on the importance of family-friendly initiatives in retaining talented women in their organisations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sectors of the Participating Organisations</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banking, Finance &amp; Insurance</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Service Firms</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology &amp; Telecommunications</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmaceutical &amp; Healthcare</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Sector/Semi-State Organisations</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aviation and Logistics</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>28</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Our research revealed that one of the critical factors in determining how women experienced the transition back into work after maternity leave was the perspective management had on maternity leave and this transition in a woman’s career. We saw many positive examples where line managers and/or the organisation viewed their maternity leave as a brief interlude in the individual’s long-term career. In these organisations the females often reported a positive transition back after leave. In contrast, in organisations where management viewed maternity leave as a major disruption, negative experiences were more common.

“I think the first thing is he [the line manager] didn’t treat the maternity leave as a big drama. It was the most critical conversation I’ve ever had to have with anyone. I was nearly 18 weeks pregnant before I told anybody… but I was just dreading that. But he didn’t make a deal about it and he always behaved as if it was a short window… He took a longer term view, didn’t overreact, always behaved like I was coming back. I never had any fear that things would change, and he supported me in the approach that I wanted to take and kept good counsel.”

- Aviation and Logistics Returner

“We are kind of saying both for men and women but obviously far more for women that family absences are seen as separate to careers. So, you step away from your career and you go on maternity leave, whereas what we are trying to reinforce is that actually it is just part of normal life, it is a part of your career. You build it into your career plan.”

- Banking, Finance and Insurance HR

“It’s still traditional and I would say there are people at that leadership level that probably do focus too much on the short term, ‘oh that person is going to be gone, that’s going to be too much hassle.’”

- Banking Finance and Insurance Line Manager

“I said, ‘In that period that you are talking about, I may want to, start my family,’ and he said, ‘No problem. We will support you through that.’”

- Professional Service Firm Returner

“This is one year out of a possibly 30-40 year career and that is what we are trying to build a culture around.”

- Public Sector/Semi-State HR
NEGATIVE TRANSITION EXPERIENCES

Unfortunately, in many cases females reported a much more difficult transition back into the work place. Despite the fact that the women involved in our research had all been identified as high potential or talented employees, we encountered many stories of women for whom the experience had been very negative.

In particular, three issues were highlighted: career derailment, unconscious biases amongst colleagues and a deterioration of professional relationships. In each case, these issues seemed to be compounded by a lack of open and transparent communication between the returner and their line manager.

Career Derailment
Many participants in the study felt that their career progression had halted as a result of maternity leave. In the majority of cases they perceived their career derailment as a result of how the organisation now saw them and assumptions that were made about their priorities and ambition. However, in a small number of cases this derailment seemed to stem from their own lack of confidence and ability to manage on their return to work.
“For me it’s a little different because of my role change. I really enjoyed the actual work [of the former role], but the hours, and the timings, and the demands just did not fit in with the role. So, when I moved to a [new] role, it felt very strange to me for a long time, because I kind of felt at the start that I’d sacrificed the enjoyment of the job.”

- Professional Service Firm Returner

“I just thought, “Well, that’s what they think of me now. I will pretty much just put myself into a box” and I just said, “Well, I either look elsewhere outside of the company to progress in my career or I keep my head down and I just do what I am doing.” As far as I am concerned, I have gone back, and I feel that, “Are you punishing me because I went out of the business to have a baby?”

- Pharmaceuticals and Healthcare Returner

“Basically when I came back there was a vacancy and I had the opportunity to take the role. I decided against it because I decided it wasn’t the right move for me. I worried that I wouldn’t actually be able for it coming back from maternity leave.”

- Banking, Finance and Insurance Returner

Some women also felt that while their career may have “survived” one maternity leave, another period of leave would be detrimental:

“I have to face the reality that if I’m very lucky I might be able to get out for another maternity leave. So, I suppose that will be somewhat of a death knell for my career in here and it may be the case that I have to move after that, I don’t know.”

- Banking, Finance and Insurance Returner
Unconscious Bias
A second issue that was typical in the negative experiences we encountered was the idea of unconscious biases about women returning to work. A large number of these focused on issues such as time and availability or a change in priorities and interest in work as a result of being a parent. In some organisations, this issue was highlighted across all three participants as a key feature of the experience. For instance, in one organisation:

“We call it unconscious benevolence as opposed to unconscious bias, so they make an assumption that you are pregnant, you are fragile and…….you want to take the foot off the accelerator for the couple of months while you are pregnant and when you come back there’s the assumptions ‘oh they will have baby brain and they’ll want time to…..’”

- Banking, Finance and Insurance HR

“So people do - when they hear somebody is starting to have a family - they tend to write them off.”

- Banking, Finance and Insurance Line Manager

“I’m just wondering if somebody went looking for me now asking ‘what’s X working on?’ would they be like ‘she’s just had a baby, yeah, she might have another one’ is that like a red dot on my face there.”

- Banking, Finance and Insurance Returner

“A lot of the time when you come back after your first, people have some sort of unconscious bias that you’ll probably go off and have a second at some point.”

- Professional Service Firm Returner

“I think when you come back from maternity leave you’re trying to prove yourself a little bit again – “no I am up for it, I am” - because I think there is a bit of an assumption that you’ve had a baby and you’re on the go slow, which is not true.. I might only be here eight to five but I work hard in those times… you’re probably trying to re-establish yourself, put your best foot forward, and show them that you are as good. When you come back there’s not the assumption that you are the same person who left before you had the baby.”

-Banking, Finance and Insurance Returner
In the majority of cases, however, awareness of unconscious bias was restricted to HR professionals and of course the women on the receiving end of them.

“I mean, the mantra in HR is, ‘A pregnant woman, do not touch, you walk away’”
- Public Sector/Semi-State HR

“Well, certainly when you’ve had one kid, the expectation is that: ‘she’s going to be going on maternity leave again’, that’s just from the female perspective. I feel like there is an element of: ‘she’s definitely going to have another, at some point she’s going to be coming in here telling us she’s out for another nine months’, So there are some things where I feel like work wise you may be not given as juicy work, because there is a concern that you may be going on maternity leave soon. …. I think that can impact on your own professional identity as well, because you almost feel like you’re not being taken as seriously as say a male counterpart for those periods.”
- Professional Service Firm Returner

“What really bugs me is my peers. You are in a meeting and they are talking about maybe working late or coming in early to do a particular task to get over the line and you have your peers sitting there who don’t have kids and who say, “Oh well, now such-and-such has kids, so they may not be [able] to come in for that time.” And I am like, “Don’t speak for me. I will manage my home life with my husband.”
- Pharmaceuticals and Healthcare Returner

“When I came back, I got several little rubs about, ‘gosh, we didn’t notice you were gone, such and such was doing your work, she did a great job’, or, ‘oh, sorry, what’s your name again?’”
- Banking, Finance and Insurance Returner

“It definitely impacts on your work because people, you know, can perceive it in many different ways, you not being present, so it can be seen as a lack of motivation, a lack of interest.”
- Professional Service Firm Returner
NEGATIVE TRANSITION EXPERIENCES

Professional Relationship Challenges
For the majority of women, their relationship with their line manager and close colleagues was very significant in influencing their return to work experience. In speaking to the women in our study who had negative experiences, it was clear that relational shifts with the line manager were often at the heart of this. In a number of these cases, women spoke about feeling let down by their employers, having devoted so many years of their career to the organisation in advance of their maternity leave.

“I certainly felt in my role that I was forgotten about. Maybe rightly so, you’re gone out of the office for six months, but what shocked me was when I came back people had forgotten what I had done prior to my maternity leave.”
- Professional Service Firm Returner

“For me, everything had changed, and I didn’t have anybody to talk to about that and I found that very, very, very difficult because in my headspace, I was like, “Is nobody going to ask me how I feel since I came back?” ... I think it is important that there is an avenue for you to turn down to talk to somebody who will pay heed……I feel that you are very alone around here … There is a bit of a bitterness there and I just feel, “Well, why would I bother?”……And it’s sad because it’s a company that I actually, like, I am here 10 years and I have worked really hard. I have proven myself.”
- Pharmaceuticals and Healthcare Returner

“I suppose I probably should have been conscious that it was just any port in a storm and if I was gone they had no particular loyalty to me. I’d worked hard now, with a few of them, and had their backs a lot, and I did feel a little bit let down.”
- Banking, Finance, Insurance Returner

“I had to recover my reputation internally. I just had to. My view was I’m just going to work with this, because if I come out the other end of it and they say: “you’re out” then so be it. I’d rather that and go out with my head up but, I had been working seven days a week, ridiculous hours…. for five years trying to deliver out of my socks everywhere and all of that fell away, it was like none of it ever existed.”
- Aviation and Logistics Returner
POSITIVE TRANSITION EXPERIENCES

As noted, there were a lot of encouraging stories shared also. Although we met a lot of women who found the transition back to work difficult, we also encountered some very positive stories. Not only did some women find reintegrating into their workplace to be a positive experience, they often reported feeling that the positive transition had enriched their professional relationships, given them a sense that they were really valued in their organisation and provided them with a renewed focus in their work.

Feeling Valued/ Supportive Signals
A positive experience of the return to work was often preceded by a signal from the organisation or the line manager that the employee concerned was valued. This was so impactful for employees that some line managers (i.e. not the recent returner) even reflected on how this had been influential in their own previous experiences.

“When I was on maternity leave he was in a different role and he reached out to me to say ‘this opportunity is coming up and I think you should really go for it’ and there were 500 people and I’d absolutely no experience in it, and there was absolutely no way I would apply for that if he hadn’t said. So he had the confidence to say this is there for you if you compete, not saying it’s there for you, but I think you are well able to compete for it. So I think that is the tipping point and we don’t do enough of it.”
- Banking, Finance and Insurance Line Manager

“One thing I found that I would miss if I wasn’t working is someone actually wanting to know your opinion on something and you actually having an opinion on it. Someone values what you’re saying…..It’s a real light bulb moment, you think: “god, I really like the people I work with”…. it makes you feel like you’re a part of a family, especially when you’re here for a long time, there are people who are genuinely interested in how you got on…..I certainly got the sense that they were really excited to have me back, and there’s loads they wanted me to help with, and kind of feeling valued, and feeling important.”
- Professional Service Firm Returner

“I was very happy that I was successful, particularly given everything that was going on in my headspace. In a way, in terms of how I felt about coming back, I was excited about the opportunity, but really mixed emotions; excited, nervous about the new role, and X was new to the organisation. I think we overlapped by about a month but I never met him before I arrived back, so, the first time I met X was during the interview….it was a big leap of faith for him as well. First of all, holding off until I came back but also that he didn’t really know me. So, I was going to have a new boss as well, that I had no experience with before……the fact that the position was being held for me was very positive for me and for other women going on maternity leave. So, fair play to X and the company for that opportunities that they deserve.
- Public Sector/Semi-State Returner
POSITIVE TRANSITION EXPERIENCES

“I had gotten a call a couple of weeks before I was due to come back and they had processed my promotion while I had been on maternity leave and they had identified the people management opportunity that I had looked for before I had left. I had been in such shock that I had been out but they had still considered [me] when this opportunity came up and they waited for a couple of months until I had come back rather than giving it to somebody else…. So it’s been hugely positively where, they are looking at the business but they are also looking at the individuals and they are ensuring that the individuals are getting the development that they need and the opportunities that they deserve.”

- Pharmaceuticals and Healthcare Returner

Professional Relationship Enrichment
In many cases, positive experiences of this transition enriched the relationships women had with their line managers and the organisation itself.

“I definitely think because it has been so positive that it would improve my loyalty. I would think very favourably about it and if someone said ‘would you recommend X?’, I definitely would.”

- Banking, Finance and Insurance Returner

“That did speak volumes to me about him holding open the role for somebody he didn’t know. I knew I had a boss that was supportive of the fact that I had been on mat leave, he knows I’m coming back and that I have small children. So, I would say he’s very supportive from that perspective. I need to work from home occasionally and he would encourage me to do more hours at home... So, I think he’s been a fundamental support.”

- Public Sector/Semi-State Returner

“Yeah, so I feel very loyal to X and also to the individual who helped me navigate my career, so I wouldn’t be going anywhere.”

- Professional Services Firm Returner

“I can still remember him saying to me, ‘don’t worry, we’ll sort that out’. It was tremendous because, for me, it took a lot of insecurity and fear out of coping with my parental leave running out and that kind of thing. I suppose, with my line manager it’s probably more trust. I could talk to him about things, but I half think it was more belief too. Like, I never had to feel anything in terms of getting up and leaving at half five because he knew if there was work to be done, I’d be doing it later. It was kind of implied, we didn’t have to speak about it.”

- Banking, Finance and Insurance Returner
Renewed Focus

We also noted that women who had a positive return to work experience spoke of feeling a renewed sense of focus and determination to contribute to the organisation and progress their careers.

“I think I genuinely do appreciate being able to come in and have a voice and a role and actually give value. I feel now that I’m making a decision to come to work, when I’m in work I’m conscious that I want to get the best out of it.”

- Banking, Finance and Insurance Returner

“To be honest, I came back and I feel I want to work really hard and get to the next level. I said to the partner, ‘I want to send my energy in the right direction, I know it’s not going to be from one day to another that I move to the next level but I want to know how to get there, and to get there what do I need to do?’”

- Professional Service Firm Returner

Positive experiences of returning to work include receiving a sense of support, developing an enrichment of professional relationships, and renewed focus.
While most organisations spend heavily on sophisticated on-boarding programmes for newcomers and graduate recruits, we found that almost none pay the same level of attention to resocialisation post-maternity leave. This is a lost opportunity to support talent in whom they have already invested.

There were notable exceptions, however, with or two excellent programmes in place and some women reported very positive experiences and continued access to career advancement opportunities. Drawing on insights from returners, managers and HR, we have identified the following key practice recommendations:

**Long Term View**
- Establish cultural view of maternity leave as a brief interlude, not a major disruption

**Line Manager Training**
- Fundamental to shaping positive return. See Figure 3

**Role Models**
- Partner women returning with more senior role models; visibility of primary caregivers
- Group coaching for returning peers
- Buddy systems

**Time Signals**
- Goes beyond flexible practices to focus on output rather than input
- Flexible and agile practices are for all, not just mothers
- Timing of meetings to be inclusive

**Phased Return**
- Keeping in touch days
- Ramping it up from 3 days to 4 days to FT

**The Returner Voice**
- Challenge assumptions by starting career conversations
- Planning and preparing yourself in advance of leave
**Figure 3. Recommended key components to line manager training**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open Dialogue</th>
<th>Supportive Transition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>— Initiating conversations early as soon as pregnancy is disclosed</td>
<td>— Awareness of emotive aspects of the return to work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Career conversations should take place in approach to leave, approaching</td>
<td>— Signalling support through career chats and asking ‘how are you settling back?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>return and during settling in period</td>
<td>— Awareness of crèche adjustment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Create a psychologically safe place</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planning Early</th>
<th>Unconscious Bias</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>— Plan early for the transition and handover if backfilling</td>
<td>— Not making assumptions about career/family priorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Work with employee from early on to support seamless transition before and</td>
<td>— Being aware of ruthless prioritisation: less time in office does not indicate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>after leave</td>
<td>reduced motivation or productivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Do not make promises you can’t keep!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“*If X came to me and asked me could she do that as long as I was sure that the work would be done I would be open to it. Has she asked me if she could do that? No. Will I go to her and offer that to her? No. Come to me and ask me because … I’m very much being measured against her output*”

- Aviation and Logistics Manager

“One thing that stood out to me that I found very beneficial was the fact that I had an initial, very informal, over coffee, first meeting with my manager and she said, ‘well, what needs to change? Is there anything that you want to tell me or highlight?’, and it opened the door for me to say, ‘look, actually yeah, I need to come in early and I need to leave early’, and I was dying to say it, but she actually just gave me that opportunity.”

- Technology and Telecommunications Returner
PITFALLS TO AVOID

Assumptions
— Assuming returners don’t have the same ambition or career priorities... or assuming that they do!
— Assuming they don’t want to be contacted during leave: 92% women surveyed in our research kept in touch during ML

Unconscious Bias/Benevolence
— Pregnant women and returners are delicate beings!
— New mothers don’t have career aspirations
— Shorter hours equates to less productivity

Curtailing Opportunities
— Loss of clients
— Not considering returners for demanding or overseas roles
— Not keeping them up to speed on role opportunities during leave

Breaking Promises
— Enticing women to come back and not following through on promises
— Not picking up on performance management where it was left off

Neglecting the Logistics
— The return needs to be seamless; make sure desk, email, systems access are fully restored before Day 1

Invisibility & Isolation
— Forgetting about women on leave
— Failing to connect returners with each other
— Not making parenting role models visible
FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Yseult, Lisa and Dave have a continued interest in workplace transitions and the experiences of returning to work after a period of leave or expatriate assignments, employees starting new jobs or talent programmes for high potential females.

In addition, we have expertise in the areas of employee well-being, trust and workplace relationships, and talent management. If you or your organisation is interested in exploring opportunities for research we would be delighted to hear from you.

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HR Search are passionate about all things HR and would be delighted to assist anyone looking for a role in HR, looking for some HR advice or looking to hire a HR professional for your team.

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“I didn’t expect it to be as bad as it was. My then boss literally as soon as I was out the door he was, not that he didn’t support, not that he wasn’t very positive about me, but he saw me not being there as an opportunity to do things with the team that I might not have agreed with. So, I was literally out the door and... he was already moving against me.... but he just didn’t see that it was the wrong thing to do...he didn’t think of his own behaviour as being like that... so there’s an unconscious bias here and there’s plenty of senior managers here, I would say, who would not employ a woman simply because they go on maternity leave... He was completely focused on his own career and what he needed to do, and so I left Venus and I came back to Mars.”

- Aviation and Logistics Returner
Re-Engaging Talent: Post-Maternity Leave