

# Maternity coaching: The business case

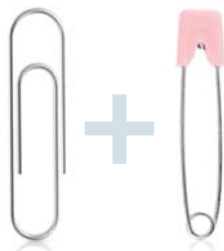
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*September 2010*

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Jennifer Liston-Smith, My Family Care's Head of Coaching Development, explores the business case for supporting new mothers and fathers through the transition to parenthood. She observes that: new parents are more likely to be lost from the workforce during that transition; they bring valuable skills for leadership; and responding to the needs of this group also makes organisations fitter for the demands of a changing workforce and 21st Century models of business.

In the last half-decade, maternity coaching - and then specific support for working dads - has become established practice for leading employers. Adopted early in financial and professional services, these solutions then took hold in SET, FMCG, telecomms and media and even some public sector settings. At first, some investment banks held back until they saw competitors ready to act (so proving the case), then moved ahead quickly, seeking their own more award-winning programme, built to retain talent through the parent transition.

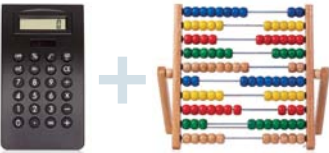
Recent economic changes have not stopped the trend, but refined it. Heads of Diversity and HR are keener than ever to explore what can be done; though more often now with internal resources: developing internal coaches, establishing parents' networks and buddying schemes, identifying clearer role models and champions.

But, whether external or internal, what's the business imperative?

At one level, it was captured by an HR manager observing a group maternity coaching programme a few days ago. Beaming by the end of it, she told me: "I think it's fab; amazing. I can totally see how it makes our company a better place to work and really gives confidence to see that we can make things better for ourselves."

Yes. But is that more than a nice-to-have?

There's a short-term argument, a longer one and a wider one.



## 1. The immediate retention issue

It makes sense to support your female employees through this most major life change and lengthy time out, because:

- The cost of losing a competent, skilled employee is always high. Pregnancy and early parenthood are recognised as times when a woman reviews her career options. The last time the CIPD put a figure to employee turnover costs (recruitment / selection / cover / administration and induction) they were estimated at £8,200 per employee, rising to £12,000 for more senior managers (CIPD, 2006). More than one investment bank I've worked with says it costs them around £250K to train someone up to Associate level so losing a working parent at that point, especially when they go to a more family-friendly competitor, is not an option
- Coaching that properly acknowledges the parent transition, then focuses on being influential, communicating and prioritising strategically, planning and paying attention to onward career vision, and making smart, value-based decisions about work-life balance, can make the difference between returning to stay or leaving again
- Women report that they struggle with issues of "invisibility" in the workplace while pregnant and a need to "revalidate" themselves as a valued employee on return (Millward, 2006; also Morris, 2009). A woman who takes charge of this need will have more confidence and focus from day one of her return, hence repaying the coaching investment through her performance, as well as her loyalty.

*"The stock market would not allow the waste of capital in the way we tolerate the waste of female talent and ability". Lord Myners, in his keynote speech at the Report of the Gender & Productivity Summit, 11 Downing Street, October 2004*

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*"These findings suggest that motherhood ... holds great potential and is an example of accelerated learning". Margaret Chapman quoted in Coaching at Work, Research News section article: "Female leaders are discovering that the 'mothering' skills they acquire on maternity leave are also distinctly new talents critical to successful leadership".*  
**Liston-Smith and Chapman (2009)**

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Managers and colleagues struggle with communication, uncertainty over whether or when a woman will return to work and issues relating to cover such as workload increase for other staff, training new staff and planning (ICAS 2007; Netmums & EOC, 2007). Coaching – especially when coupled with strategic input for managers – can help more effective planning and communication. The individual woman, given the space, structure and supportive challenge of coaching is more likely to take the initiative and open up win-win conversations, with both manager and team.

When women leave their jobs, employers assume it is primarily to care for family, but Mainiero and Sullivan's (2005) research brings a different nuance to this, suggesting women leave for the same reasons as men do: lack of opportunity, job dissatisfaction and lack of organisational commitment. It is when those obstacles hold fast that family life wins out: "when women feel blocked by rigid policies or the glass ceiling, they are much more likely to respond to the 'pull' of the family" (Hewlett, 2005).

So, it is both the issue of balancing life and the issue of overcoming side-lining through unchallenged assumptions that need to be addressed. Coaching at this transition can begin that process.

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## 2. The women in leadership issue

As Avivah Wittenberg-Cox (2010) has pointed out in a compelling array of data:

- Companies with a higher proportion of women on their leadership teams were found in a Catalyst study to achieve 112%-plus greater return on investment capital than companies with the lowest number of women: (Joy et al, 2007)
- The Pepperdine University study (Adler and Conlin, 2009) concluded that companies identified as being the best at promoting women outperformed the industry median on all three profitability measures (sales, revenue and assets)
- The McKinsey (2008) Women Matter 2 study, concluded that "Some leadership behaviours, which are more frequently applied by women than by men in management teams, prove to enhance corporate performance and will be a key factor in meeting tomorrow's business challenges. Hence, promoting gender diversity and leadership variety is of strategic importance for companies." (McKinsey, 2008; p1)

The McKinsey 2 study highlighted that women adopted five of nine key leadership behaviours more frequently than men (while men adopted two of them – Control and Corrective action and Individualistic Decision-making – more often). Women excelled in:

- Participative decision making (building a team atmosphere for this)
- Being a Role model (focusing on building respect and considering the ethical consequences of decisions)
- Inspiration (compelling vision that inspires optimism for its implementation)
- Expectations and rewards (defining expectations and rewarding achievement of targets)
- People development (directly spending teaching, mentoring, listening to support this)

So, it makes business sense to apply effort to retaining this profit-making group through what Sylvia Ann Hewlett (2005) describes as the most likely 'off-ramping' period of their careers.

Going further perhaps, is it also true that motherhood itself enhances leadership skills, releasing more potential for those enabling behaviours noted in McKinsey Women Matter 2 (above)? Some of those leadership behaviours look a lot like high quality parenting.

When independent researcher and psychologist Margaret Chapman observed a group maternity coaching programme, she noted that although the women spoke of a loss of confidence and, potentially, competence in their work roles during maternity leave; they reported feeling empowered as women through the transition, in a way that simply didn't seem to have found its voice in their working presence. (Liston-Smith and Chapman, 2008).

Perhaps, too, fathers have their own version of what Margaret Chapman and I came to call 'maternal leadership' (Liston-Smith, 2009) enabling more of those collaborative leadership skills once life is brought into perspective by becoming a Dad? If so, accommodating and supporting their work-life balance needs would be part of the same leadership imperative.

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*"We're still going to need female leaders when all this shakes out, so of course we've got to carry on doing this. Women feel they have more choices during a recession and if we let them go at motherhood we'll never get them back and further up the organisation into senior roles."*  
**Head of Diversity in a global firm, underlining her commitment to their maternity coaching programme in the eye of the 2008 economic storm (which had hit them hard)**

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*"Today, I definitely see gender balance as a strategic issue. I am in my management position to deliver performance, not to be a nice guy! ... What are the leadership skills I need from my top people? I believe the situation requires different leadership skills from people who can change the way we are driving companies. [Women] would utilise a more team-based, collaborative way of thinking; not a top down approach. ... My key driver is to improve performance. And to do so, we need to have more women."*  
**Laurent Blanchard, VP, CISCO Europe, DG, CISCO France. Interview on www.20-first.com, 2009**

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*"There are indications that this period of economic turmoil may prove a watershed in terms of both trust and agility [smart new ways working]. There are reports of shaken trust as organisations go through periods of painful downsizing and of a reversion to traditional models of "command and control" management and presenteeism. There are also contrary indications that some organisations are turning to agility as a route to a more flexible and cost effective use of human resources and real estate and as a way of maintaining employee engagement through a difficult period."*

**Out of Office':**

**Opportunity Now, 2010.**

### 3. The changing nature of work issue

So, new parents are in danger of leaving as they redefine career aims and possibilities during this transition, yet they possess potentially business-critical leadership skills. So the short-term focus is on retaining talented new parents, the longer term one is on supporting more of this 'maternal leadership' potential across the board.

The wider argument relates to the ripple effect (for other staff and for business models generally) of attending to these issues. What happens when employers do this and why is it so relevant to our times?

Already by June 2007, the statutory investigation into the 'Transformation of Work' (EOC, 2007) had revealed that half the workforce (52% of men and 48% of women) wanted to work more flexible hours than they currently did. The report pointed out that by 2010 fewer than 20% of workforce would be made up of white, non-disabled men under 45 in full-time work. "Forward-thinking organisations need to look at flexibility in a different way, in order to attract people to work for them. Men and women are now looking for a new relationship with work that supports successful careers and caring and lifestyle choices."

And this holds, whether or not there will be mass take-up of the radical offering of Additional Statutory Paternity Leave from April 2011.

The former Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC, 2005) had earlier reported that: "Employers who have learned to successfully manage pregnancy describe it as an integral part of a long-term business strategy, a key investment that is returned through:

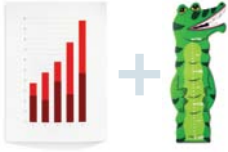
- Improved talent, skills and knowledge retention
- Lower absenteeism and better morale
- A constantly developing and more productive workforce

This suggests something wider than the immediate target group. Employers who are doing what this group needs, are shaping a workplace fit for a new generation more broadly. This is something far beyond taking care of those who possess 'protected characteristics' under the Equality Act 2010. It moves into finding the best, most agile way of doing business in the 21st Century climate.

Take one area that is highly valued by parents: flexible working. The April 2008 conference and research, *Measuring Up – The Impact of Flexible Working Practices on Performance* (Working Families / Cranfield, 2008) reviewed the effects of flexible working in seven major organisations: Centrica; Citi; KPMG; Lehman Brothers; Microsoft; Pfizer; and the Defence Aerospace business of Rolls-Royce. The study suggests flexible working has a positive impact on productivity and that flexible workers were found to have higher levels of organisational commitment, and in some cases higher levels of job satisfaction. Flexible working was also seen as part of the cultural shift in which people's lives are allowed to be considered as a whole, and talked about in that way at work.

In our experience, moving flexible working up the agenda is significantly helped by coaching support that encourages a laser focus on the business case for a new working pattern in each case, rather than asking for it as a favour or a perk.

Different ways of working, and focused support for target groups or specific transitions, started life as a quest to reduce stress, and later became viewed as benefits to enable a fulfilling, balanced life. More recently, we have finally chipped away at the notion that family-friendly working practices are an employee benefit. Rather they represent the most business-headed way of harnessing the potential of talented people in a generation for whom meaningful work needs to fit in with the individual's many other roles.



#### 4. The way forward

So, the business case for maternity coaching is not simply about 'supporting' new parents; it is about enabling their continued contribution and their leadership potential. And addressing these challenges is not just about parents, it is about the expectations of a new workforce and the demands of a new business environment.

Strategically, all this needs an integrated approach that makes sense as a way of doing business. Rather than providing coaching in a vacuum, employers who want to make a real difference will address services for parents at three levels: the organisation, the managers, the individuals. This can begin with a round-table on talent retention through maternity and parenting for HR and Diversity teams. Existing policies and practice are weighed up for their strategic impact and possible solutions are identified by the teams to fill any gaps.

Maternity and parent coaching, managers' briefings, lunchtime seminars, parents' networks, internal buddying and coaching support offer more return on investment benefit when set within this kind of overview and context. Often the teams can identify how to use internal resources to better effect. Usually there are at least a few no- or low- cost solutions. And there is almost always a realisation that if these approaches are addressed in the most imaginative, inclusive way, they will benefit all staff and enable a business more fit for the future.

Jennifer Liston-Smith, My Family Care 2010



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