

Foreword from David Clutterbuck

I first encountered maternity mentoring in the early 1990s, when Prudential Insurance launched its programme in London. It was an immediate success and it seemed obvious that there would be a flood of other employers following suit, but it didn't happen. Having shared the idea with thousands of companies, at last, in 2011, retailers Asda (part of the Walmart group) grasped it with enthusiasm. Nicki Seignot took on the role of designing and managing the programme, with support as needed from my veteran gender-based mentoring colleague, Lis Merrick.

In the intervening years, we have seen the rise of maternity coaching, which uses externally resourced coaches to help returning mothers think about the transition back into the workplace. While these coaches (at least those with appropriate training) can provide a valuable resource for some of the practical and emotional preparation that returners need, they usually lack some of the other key ingredients that make maternity mentoring so powerful and effective. Maternity mentors bring both coaching skills and a current understanding of the realities of transitioning back into the specific organisation – with all its politics, cultural assumptions and quirky ways of working.

One of the most underestimated challenges facing the returning mother is the creation of her new workplace identity. Especially if the child is her first, she will not be the same person as the one who left all those months ago. Just as she has changed, so has the organisation; there are subtle and not so subtle differences everywhere and expectations of her and her role will have changed. It's almost impossible for an outsider to help with this process of adjustment, other than at a broad or generic level. But a mentor, who is in the system and attuned to it, can offer frequent, often small insights that give the returning mother what she needs: contextual awareness, self-confidence, and a sense of how to re-align what she has to offer with what the organisation now needs.

Professor David Clutterbuck