

Foreword from Rachel Ellison

Many of us are familiar with the ‘parents-at-work’ shorthand for feeling on the edge of coping – or not quite coping; the juggling, the tiredness, relentless sleepless nights and the challenge of managing work commitments when the baby or the childminder are sick. Unless you have helpful, local family support or can afford a live-in nanny and head of laundry, parenting is a seven day a week job. There are no weekends or holidays. This new job usually comes on top of another job – the job you used to think made you tired!

Some parents gladly come to work ‘for a break’; an escape from tripping over toys and wiping bottoms and worktops. It’s a chance to have a cup of coffee, while it’s actually still hot. For other parents, the thought of balancing working and home life, can feel utterly overwhelming. Coming back from paternity or maternity leave brings up career concerns, issues of self-identity, and worries about family finances.

In my case, I had my first baby at 38 years old and then another when I was 40. If I’d been a PAYE employee, I would never have had the freedom to self-schedule work in the way I do, as someone running their own business. I had more control and freedom than I expected, but I didn’t have a caring manager to encourage me, nor the automatic salary switch, to flick back on. I feared my clients would forget me. I really feared forgetting my skills. I worried about forgetting how to pitch for work – the knack of confidently articulating what I do at point of sale. It was a call from a client – coincidentally an Asda client – to book me for some paid work, which gave me self-belief. She genuinely walked the talk of her company’s supportiveness to new mums. That made the psychological as well as financial difference, between sitting at home worrying (as the childcare meter clocked up costs), versus feeling positively ‘back in business’.

Return to work coaching and mentoring, can be transformative at an individual level. I’ve seen employees come back feeling self-conscious and under confident, not quite able to squeeze back into their best work trousers. I’ve seen whole careers saved, because the HR Director had the foresight to send in an Executive Coach before the employee left on maternity leave and again, before she returned to work.

I believe that investing in support for new parents is vital for families and imperative for organisations too. It’s part of a long-term approach to developing and retaining talent. I would also argue it’s part of a societal mindset around parenthood.

Today's parents are raising tomorrow's leaders and tax payers. They're also role modelling how successful parenting can combine with having a successful career.

Not every organisation is concerned with the long term. Many are struggling with immediate concerns in order to survive at all. But the potential for lost business and the costs associated with re-recruiting, would seem far more expensive and wasteful of resources, than looking after the talented people you already have.

There may be temporary compromises for individuals, their managers and organisations. Or could supporting parents of young children appropriately, actually be seen as sound business investing? It may be true that on return from maternity/paternity leave, parents don't want to stay late in the office and many don't want to travel, but I see evidence of the benefits of these apparently less flexible, more boundaried employees. Parents of young children claim to be – at once – more distracted and more focused than before they had offspring. The working parent offers concise value and intensive output. They are incisive. They challenge the length of meetings and the circularity of discussions to reach a decision. Some claim to see different solutions, faster. They are less likely to lose the thread, if someone interrupts the flow in a board meeting. The post-partum parent is used to distraction and noise. They don't want to waste a moment in the office. Supposed part-time employees, belt through work that might take others a whole week. They are highly motivated.

Working parents might wince at the thought of after work networking drinks. They'd rather be home in time to read stories to their children. In my personal experience, this radical shift in presence from spreadsheets to bathsheets, from reading exec. summaries to turning the pages of *Handa's Surprise* or *Paddington Bear*, deeply refreshes thinking. Time off work tasks, generates more ideas when you swing back into the office. Incidentally, if you know those two children's stories, then you'll see that the after-hours exec at home, is in fact thinking through unanticipated events and global logistics. They're engaged in diversity and difference, nutrition and self care; they're thinking about community and collaborative action.

All this must be tempered with the cultural expectations companies may put on, or appear to put on employees, to respond to the flash of a Blackberry, or compulsively check their email late at night. Everybody's behaviours need to reflect any official policy to support parents of young children and parents returning to work after paternity/maternity leave. By creating a systemic, supportive approach, companies are likely to keep their best workers, and have them working at their best.

The week before I was asked to write this foreword, every client I coached happened to be in a same sex marriage. All of them are in the process of having babies in a multitude of ways – from adoption, to IVE from surrogacy to woman-to-woman egg transfer. I'm glad Seignot and Clutterbuck offer case studies relating to families in different formats.

Whether it's with a colleague, a People Director, childminder or teacher, I hear myself repeatedly saying:

Just as I feel I'm getting the hang of this parenting thing, something new crops up. Once again, I feel I'm new in the job...

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This unsettling feeling, may indeed allow us to argue, that parents of young children are constantly challenged to refine their resourcefulness, increase their resilience and to keep on learning. That's what this book is asking organisations and the people running them, to do too.

Rachel Ellison MBE¹

¹ Rachel Ellison was a BBC news correspondent and international project manager working in the UK, Europe and Central Asia. She was awarded an MBE for 'the promotion of human rights and the self empowerment of women in Afghanistan'. Her team won BBC Team of the Year, in recognition of her coaching style of leadership.

Rachel trained as an internal coach at the BBC, before launching her own business. She works with clients in the commercial, public and NGO sectors. Rachel is a trustee for TAG international, a development aid charity and volunteer parent visitor at the Whittington Hospital neonatal intensive care ward. She is married with two children aged 4 and 6 years old.