

THE PARENTING FACTOR



Nicki Seignot on how mentoring
can repair a critical leak in
your talent pipeline

In an increasingly complex and competitive environment, businesses need to attract, develop and retain the very best talent at all levels in order to succeed. The very best talent being one which is diverse and inclusive as well as offering essential skills and experience. With this as a given, many organisations take a proactive approach to talent development connecting 'people' as a strategic resource with the business's ambitions for the future. Internal development strategies typically incorporate a range of activities including:

- ▶ Appraisal and performance reviews (reviewing individual performance against goals, objectives and behavioural measures).
- ▶ Department and functional reviews (senior level meetings evaluating the strength and diversity of the talent pipeline, taking a big-picture approach in the light of business imperatives and opportunities).
- ▶ Behavioural development programmes (addressing collective themes and development needs identified through appraisal reviews such as leadership development, managing change, managing performance, coaching and mentoring, diversity and inclusion).
- ▶ Bespoke programmes for specific needs and diverse groups (such as executive coaching, high potentials' programmes, women in leadership, graduate schemes and internal mentoring).

Despite investing considerable time and money, there can often be persistent leaks and blockages in the talent pipeline; people disengage, get stuck, leave and, in some circumstances, take learning away and join the competition. The challenge is the extent to which organisations have an appetite to a) see a leak, b) acknowledge there is an issue, and c) agree to do something about it.

A gaping hole in the strategy

The transition from career to parenthood and then overlaying these demanding and often conflicting identities is dramatic. Without appropriate support, navigating a return to work after extended leave (be that maternity, shared parental leave, or adoption leave) can be a rollercoaster of a journey, standing in marked contrast to pre-baby certainty and expectations of how life and work would turn out.



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Notwithstanding often enhanced policies for pay and time off, few individuals cite company policy when telling the story of their return to work (see the Working Forward panel, p14). Typically, the journey is a personal account of emotional highs and lows, dips in confidence and self-belief, concerns with currency of knowledge and skillsets and 'big' conversations with HR and line managers at a time when someone is perhaps feeling at their most vulnerable and unsure.

Frequently, people express their return in terms of 'luck'; 'I had a lucky return', or 'I'm lucky to work on flexible hours' or even 'I'm lucky to have a really supportive manager'. Luck doesn't make for a strategic approach. There are sound business reasons¹ to invest in returning talent with evidence showing top performing companies for gender diversity are 15 per cent more likely to perform better financially than the average. The surprise is that, despite having invested so much prior to this point, many employers simply fail to invest in their returning talent, working on the assumption of 'self-help' with all the risk that this entails.

▶ A CASE STUDY

Seema is about to be offered a senior level promotion. Recruited seven years ago on the graduate programme, she has fast-tracked through a series of different departments, been mentored by one of the directors, is herself a mentor to others, has led complex projects and is a current participant on the Future Leaders Programme. Focused, ambitious and a positive advocate for the business, Seema is widely regarded as 'one to watch' for the future.

Fast forward to today and the point where this career path intersects with becoming a parent for the first time. Change is on the horizon. It goes without saying that she is committed to returning and the business will want to have her back, so what's the plan to make that happen?

If this were someone in your talent pipeline, what is in place today to continue the investment, and support Seema at this pivotal point in her career and personal life?

Note: This example is an illustrative case study based on our experience of working with different organisations and industries. It is not intended to be an accurate reflection of any one particular employer

A national trend

Women in the UK are having babies later in life.² Figures from the latest ONS 2015 survey, for example, indicate:

- ▶ The average age of mothers increased to 30.3 years of age.
- ▶ The fertility rate for women aged 40 and over, rose above the rate for women aged under 20 for the first time since 1947.

It follows that leaving it later to start a family increases the likelihood of having achieved a level of seniority, gained depth of experience and much organisational know-how. Hand in hand with this are often expectations of life; a self-image, a lifestyle, a level of income, and the central role of work and career. There is much to give up and, for many, a resolute belief that becoming a parent will simply be an addition to – not a replacement for – work and career. The reality of this can be a tough transition, →



with consequences for the individual and the organisation where focused support is not made available.

Diagnostics

Get clarity on the impact of parenthood across your talent pipeline. Use management information to capture trends and host focus groups with returners to bring the figures to life in the light of existing policies and practices. What are the insights and questions? What’s working well? What are the themes, concerns, points for action? There are some key areas to examine in this process.

The numbers

- ▶ How many employees take maternity/extended parental/adoption leave each year?
- ▶ At what job levels does the volume of maternity/parental leave typically occur?
- ▶ How many do not return to work after maternity/extended parental/adoption leave?
- ▶ What are the attrition rates for employees who leave after having returned to work?

The talent pipeline

- ▶ What is the gender balance across the spectrum of job levels?
- ▶ What are the notable points of divergence?
- ▶ To what extent are people’s

▶ WORKING FORWARD

Awareness of this as a UK-wide issue was highlighted in September 2016, when the Equalities and Human Rights Commission launched Working Forward, a national campaign led by British business with the express aim of leading the way on making workplaces the best they can be for pregnant women and new mothers. The EHRC’s research identified a chasm between 84 per cent of British businesses who say they support pregnant women and women on maternity leave, and the 77 per cent of mothers who report negative or discriminatory experiences in the workplace.

For more information on employer-led best practice and to sign up to the Working Forward forum, visit <http://bit.ly/2ieUSsd>

career trajectories being maintained following maternity/parental/adoption leave?

- ▶ What is evident when comparing promotions and talent ratings for employees pre- and post-leave?

The narrative

- ▶ What are the stories associated with returns to work?
- ▶ What are the cultural factors which help/hinder returns?
- ▶ What are the expectations and practices relating to flexible/agile working?
- ▶ How do line managers experience managing maternity/parental leave?

Take a proactive approach

While each individual’s circumstances are different, this is a well-worn path. An understanding of the themes and patterns associated with the



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journey to working parenthood, and planned support to address these makes the difference. Our experience indicates better returns (both for employees and on your investment in future talent) where there is a constellation of measures in place:

Workshops for line managers

Striving to maintain the business agenda and at the sharp end of legally sensitive and sometimes emotional conversations, managers are the implementers of policy. They are also the deal breakers for returns to meaningful work, for flexibility and future careers. It’s in everyone’s interest that managers demonstrate empathy, are supportive, and confident they have the knowledge and tools they need when they need them. Workshops are an opportunity to build consistency and set out good practice.

External coaching for new parents

One-to-one maternity and parental coaching is an option most likely to be offered to senior director and

executive level employees. Constraints on budgets can mean this specialist support may not be available to mid- and early-senior level employees. The challenge is that these level of roles are most likely to be where the volume of maternity occurs, which in turn often coincides with a shift in the gender balance at a crucial point in the talent pipeline.

Internal mentoring programmes for new parents

Internal, peer-to-peer mentoring programmes are a cost effective and sustainable way of supporting returning talent on an 'open to all' basis. The expertise is in your workplace. Parental mentoring programmes connect parents-to-be with fellow working parents who've made the journey back to work themselves and who understand the unique culture and context of the organisation from within. With appropriate preparation, these offline relationships can offer timely one-to-one support and a safe conversation space. They are also an opportunity to pay it forward – as someone is helped in turn; they help future generations of talent.

Workshops for returners

Small group workshops are a useful way to bring together employees pre-leave, on leave and post-return for practical tools and tips, as well as to share learning and support. They are also invaluable as an on-going source of commentary on the policies and process end to end.

Informal networks and forums

These can be helpful sources of support, either online or alternatively as informal social groups that get together for individuals on leave or who have already returned to work. For someone struggling to feel back, it can be hugely helpful to connect with others to exchange ideas and discover the issues they are grappling with are probably not in isolation.

Accessible and confidential sources of guidance

Where possible, people welcome a personal contact for advice and questions relating to pay, benefits health and wellbeing.

Online resources

Employees need a defined space for accessing policies, company documents, FAQs, maternity/paternity/adoption timelines. Ideally these resources should be accessible both within and external to the organisation for employees on leave.

Invest in returning talent

The opportunity to make a difference to the long-term health of your talent pipeline is in front of you right now, with the individual who has just



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announced her pregnancy, the new father requesting shared parental leave or the colleague on the point of returning to work. Bridge the gap between policy and experience by extending your investment in talent through this critical time, supporting employees personally and professionally as they make the transition to working parenthood. Central to this is enabling individuals to embrace their new identity, to set them up for a smooth return to work and, when ready, to get their career on track.

For organisations that strive to make a difference, the rewards will be evident in the short term, with more engaged and effective employees, and longer term, with a stronger, more balanced pipeline which delivers talent for the future success of the business. **TJ**

Nicki Seignot is the lead consultant and founder of The Parent Mentor and co-author, with David Clutterbuck, of Mentoring New Parents at Work (Routledge, 2016). Visit www.theparentmentor.co.uk

References

1. <http://bit.ly/2dlFiXk>
2. <http://bit.ly/2hNOKsy>

