'Adjusting to that new norm': How and why maternity coaching can help with the transition back to work after maternity leave

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Objectives: *Maternity coaching is delivered in certain sectors, with the aim of retaining women after maternity leave. Enabling women to stay in the workforce is a current focus of both government and industry in the UK. The objectives of this research were to determine if there are any key elements that are common to successful maternity coaching programmes which could inform recommendations for maternity coaching programmes across a variety of employment sectors.*

Design: *Semi-structured interviews were used. Eleven participants from five different participating organisations were recruited. Participants had all returned to work after receiving maternity leave.*

Methods: *The interviews were coded and analysed to identify themes. They were also analysed with relation to the Schlossberg 4S Transition Model, Stern's Transition to Motherhood theory and Dilts' logical levels tool.*

Results: *With this cohort of high-performing women, we found that coaching was influential in enabling them to engage on a deep level, developing increased self-awareness and finding ways to navigate their way back into the workplace at this time of major transition. The relationship with the coach, and the breadth and depth of the outcomes of coaching were key findings.*

Conclusions: *Coaching at this time appears to enable a re-adjustment on a deep personal level, helping with the return to work after maternity leave.*

Keywords: *Maternity coaching; maternity leave; Dilts' logical levels; transition coaching; coaching outcomes.*

RETAINING women in the workforce is a key UK government priority. A Women and Work All Party Parliamentary Group was established in January 2016 to investigate the main barriers to women staying in the workforce. Their work builds on previous government reports; for example, Prosser 2009, the Department of Trade and Industry Survey and Stevens et al., 2004 (cited in Gallhofer et al., 2011). The benefit of retaining women is also recognised by industry, with research from Lloyd's showing that for every female board member, assets are increased by on average eight per cent (2016). With the current focus on the UK gender pay gap, various factors are being investigated that have an impact on this, including leaving the workforce or working part-time as a result of starting a family (Felfe, 2012; Sumer et al., 2008).

Transition theory

When considering the transitions of leaving work to go on maternity leave and returning from this leave to re-integrate into the workplace, it is relevant to look at transition theory. Schlossberg's transition theory (1981) identifies four factors that have an impact on how someone perceives and copes with transition; factors concerned with: (i) the situation; (ii)) the self; (iii) the

support available; and (iv) strategies to help with coping.

These are labelled as the 4Ss in Schlossberg Model (McManus, 2013). The elements within Situation are the trigger (in this case, getting pregnant), whether the change is permanent or temporary (permanent), whether it involves a role change (it does) and whether the change is positive, negative or neutral (this would vary according to the individual's circumstances). Thus, we can see that becoming a mother is a significant transition. In fact, it has been identified as a major life transition that affects women's self-identity and wellbeing (Altsveit et al., 2011; Houston & Marks, 2003; Millward, 2006; Smith, J., 1999; Stern & Bruschweiler-Stern, 1998). In light of this shift in identity, Dilts' theory of Logical Levels is also of interest (2014). The Logical Levels model is made up of six levels (from bottom to top): environment; behaviour; skills and abilities; values and beliefs; identity; and purpose. The model is based on the concept that a change at one level may effect changes at other levels. The higher up the level at which change occurs, the greater that change may have on other levels. Thus, a change occurring at the Identity level is profound and will have an impact on many other levels.

The transition to motherhood

Stern and Bruschweiler-Stern label the psychological change that occurs at this time as the development of the 'motherhood mindset' (1998, p.28) and describe becoming a mother as a time of 'psychological turbulence' (1998, p.37) which occurs over three stages:

(i) the pregnancy, when the woman is imagining her unborn baby and thinking about what her life might be like and how it might change;
(ii) adjusting to motherhood once the baby is born; and
(iii) returning to work and integrating the new psychological mindset with the previous pre-pregnancy mindset.

These 'profoundly transformative experiences for women' (Millward, 2006, p.317) can result in a shift in values and priorities. This change, along with a shift in self-identity, can have an impact on a woman's ability and motivation to re-integrate into the workplace after maternity leave. Combined with the lack of implementation of organisational policies and practices, this can result in the decision to leave their organisation (Cabrera, 2007).

The decisions around returning to work are complex for women when they become mothers and many authors note the feelings of guilt and being judged that are associated with this time (Millward, 2006; Stern & Bruschweiler-Stern, 1998; Sumer et al., 2008). Stern and Bruschweiler-Stern write 'adjusting the motherhood mindset to the realities of working again is a major task in the third phase of the birth of a mother' (1998, p.179). They see this as a time when the woman balances her various identities and makes decisions that are right for her at that time. As a continuation of women maintaining their valid status as an employee, on return after maternity leave, women strive to re-establish their 'viable employee identity' (Millward, 2006, p.324). There is a desire to revalidate themselves, both as an employee and as a mother.

Support for women returning to work and the role of coaching

This unique transitional phase is highlighted by Altsveit et al., who describe this as a time when 'first-time mothers readjust their lives in terms of the tension between work and motherhood' (2011, p.2157). Support for the woman returning from maternity leave is identified as key (Houston & Marks, 2003; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005) and the benefits of coaching as part of this support is highlighted by many authors. As well as helping women to plan their return to work, maternity coaching can help with other practical aspects of embarking on and returning from maternity leave; for example, preparing for discussions and negotiations (Millward, 2006) and managing

dual roles (Bussell, 2008). Filsinger's research (2012) showed the link between maternity coaching and career re-engagement, which was particularly noticeable in women who did not plan to have any more children.

The whole premise of coaching is to facilitate desired change in the coachee by creating a situation where perspectives can be discovered, personal insight can be gained and self-awareness raised (Hardingham et al., 2004; O'Connor & Lages, 2004). Through the use of active listening, reframing to offer alternative perspectives, coaching tools and techniques, and questions that appeal to both the analytical and creative parts of the brain, the client is encouraged and enabled to discover their own answers to their dilemma or situation, allowing them to achieve their goals in a solution-focused way (Hardingham et al., 2004; Kline, 1999). To allow the above to be effective, the coach needs to create a safe environment by being non-judgemental, to accept and value the coachee and to have the ability to form a good rapport (Hardingham et al., 2004; O'Connor & Lages, 2004).

By having an understanding of the transition to motherhood and transition theory, coaches can help women with the transition back to work and enable them to articulate their new identity and bring their behaviour at work into alignment with this identity (Bussell, 2008). Previous research also shows that maternity coaches can additionally take on the role of mentor (Cotter, 2015; Liston-Smith, 2011), forming part of a new mother's 'affirming matrix' – a phrase adopted by Stern and Bruschweiler-Stern (1998). A typical maternity coaching programme would include coaching at three key points: before, during and after maternity leave. Although maternity coaching was introduced in the UK in about 2005, mainly in large law firms, there are still only a few industries that provide maternity coaching as part of their maternity package – or indeed, have actually heard of it. Encouraging professions other than in the legal and professional services sectors to invest in this effective intervention is thus key.

Objectives of the research

The research began with the assumption, based on literature (Ernst & Young, 2012; Filsinger & Worth, 2012; Harrison, 2008; My Family Care, 2016; Talking Talent, 2016) that maternity coaching is a successful intervention in helping to retain professional women when they have a family. The aim of the research was to try and determine if there were any common themes or elements inherent in the coaching that were found to be helpful. Although there is practitioner literature and company marketing that cites the success of maternity coaching programmes in terms of retention, increasing morale and improving commitment to the workplace, there is very little written about which aspects of the coaching bring about these results. By determining this through qualitative research, there would be a research basis for making recommendations for future maternity coaching programmes, and a model could be developed that could be adopted by a greater variety of organisations at different budget levels. In addition, with the increased uptake of shared parental leave that is expected over the coming years, there is the potential for this research to contribute to our understanding of parent transition programmes designed for both women and men.

Method

A qualitative approach was taken to the research and inductive reasoning was used so that an understanding and interpretation of different themes and findings could emerge (Hair et al., 2007). The approach to coding was emergent so that links could be made between 'topics, themes, concepts, ideas and other higher order abstractions' (Hair et al., 2007, p.292). The advantage of this approach is that as new ideas and themes arise there is the flexibility to include them in the coding; the disadvantage is that scripts that have been read earlier need to be re-read with the new codes in mind. The interviews were transcribed

by the researcher and various themes and potential points of interest were noted during the process of transcription. Once all the interviews were transcribed, coding was further developed, primarily focusing on themes, phrases and words.

The interviews were semi-structured in that there were three main subject areas that that the interviewer asked about:

(i) the topics, issues, dilemmas that were taken to coaching;
(ii) what the coach actually did during the coaching that was helpful to the women; and
(iii) whether there was anything else that the women had found supportive in their return to work.

At some point during the interview, each woman was also asked: 'If I had to get you to pinpoint one thing that was most useful or helpful about the maternity coaching as a whole, what would that be?'. Also, at the end of the interview, all the women were asked: 'Is there anything you would like to ask and is there anything you wished I had asked you?'.

Eleven women who had received maternity coaching agreed to take part in the research project. Ten of these semi-structured interviews were face to face in the work premises of the respondents; one was conducted by telephone. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The interviewer spent some time at the beginning of each interview giving some information about her background as a coach and her long-term experience of working with new parents and building rapport. Through mention of her work experience she showed that she had an understanding of the various challenges and dilemmas that can arise in early parenthood. She was aware that everyone has different experiences of parenthood and makes different choices about combining work and parenthood, and she was able to suspend judgement and treat all the interviewees with unconditional positive regard.

During the interviews the researcher summarised, clarified and paraphrased to check for meaning and to enable the women to reiterate points, which often resulted in them going into greater depth about their own experiences. Her use of open questions, half-formed questions, repetition of the same questions and asking: 'Anything else?' drew the women out, so that they went into more detail and were able to elaborate on their ideas and come to new realisations. Also, she would summarise what had been said and use this to lead on to other, more probing questions that included a word or phrase that the woman had used. She was responsive to what the interviewees said and was not constrained by any set order of questions. At times, by using minimal prompts and just sitting and actively listening, she was able to give the women the space to talk at length and to develop their ideas.

Analysis of the data

As maternity coaching is an intervention that is used during a time of a number of transitions in a woman's life – going on maternity leave, becoming a mother and returning to work after maternity leave – the data was analysed from a variety of angles to:

(i) explore the ways in which coaching affected these transitions; and
(ii) explore how coaching could aid in aligning behaviour with identity change.

This was done by:

(i) coding the transcripts and analysing any themes that appeared;
(ii) using the Schlossberg 4S Transition Model (McManus, 2013) as a framework to interpret the data and determine how effective different elements were in relation to supporting these transitions; and
(iii) plotting change of identity with adaptation of behaviour and determining if the coach had helped to bring the behaviour into alignment with the new identity.

Table 1: The 4S tool.

Situation (Sit)	Self	Support (Sup)	Strategies – Coping responses (Strat)
The trigger	Feeling in control of your responses to the transition	Getting what you need – affect, affirmation, aid	Ones that modify the situation – action/ inaction
Permanent or temporary	Belief that your efforts will affect the outcomes of a particular course of action	Range of types of support – colleagues, co-workers, partner, friends	Ones that control the meaning of the threat, cognitively neutralising it – reframing
Involves a role change	Sense of meaning/ purpose	Is the support system for the transition a high or low resource?	Ones that help to manage stress – self-care
Is it positive, negative or neutral?	Optimistic outlook/ high self-efficacy	Supportive institution	

Table 2: What was taken to coaching.

Topics	When?	Numbers	Total*	Coaching
Profile-raising/ networking/ arrangements for keeping in touch	Pre-mat leave During mat leave	4 2	5	Strat 1
Planning the return	Pre-mat leave During mat leave	6 8	9	Strat 1
Career planning	Pre-mat leave During mat leave Post-mat leave	1 3 2	5	Strat 1
Setting boundaries	Pre-mat leave During mat leave	2 1	2	Strat 1
Getting yourself heard/ negotiating role/ how you are perceived	Pre-mat leave During-mat leave Post-mat leave	2 3 2	5	Strat 1
Guilt connected with children	Pre-mat leave During mat leave	1 2	3	Strat 2
Relationship with partner/sharing the load at home	During mat leave	2	2	Strat 1

* Number of women in total – some women took the same topic to coaching sessions at different stages.

Table 3: Coaching outcomes.

Outcomes of coaching	Total (number of women)	Coaching positively affected these 4S factors
Time and space to focus on yourself	3	Strat 3
Enabling behavioural change	6	Self 2
Enabling greater clarity	4	Strat 1
Increased confidence and self-belief	4	Self 4
A change in perspective	5	Strat 2
Re-framing the situation	3	Strat 2
Developing greater self-awareness	2	Self 2
Managing work and being a mum	2	Strat 1
Practical tips regarding home life	2	Strat 1
Permission given to do things differently this time	2	Strat 1
Reduced stress/increased wellbeing	2	Strat 3
Setting priorities and useful tasks	3	Strat 1

Stage 1: Coding

An emergent approach to coding was taken. Initially, a series of codes was developed (*a priori* codes). There were three main overarching topics that codes were designed for, before the transcripts were analysed:

- the coaching itself, encompassing the relationship with the coach, the coach's approach, any tools, techniques or exercises that were used;
- organisational issues that might have been supportive during this time of transition, or that were unsupportive; and
- work/life balance.

Through reading the first and second transcripts, the following overarching topics were added to the previous three:

- what people brought to coaching; and
- coaching outcomes.

Within these five broad topics, up to 11 subsets were developed. An additional code was added to denote when behavioural change had occurred, and further codes were then added to shows links with the Schlossberg 4S Transition Model. In total, there were 58 codes. Each transcript was read and coded accordingly. Once the coding had been completed, themes within each broad topic were identified and collated.

Stage 2: The 4S Transition Model

As the research was focused on coaching with relation to times of transition, the 4S Transition Model was chosen as a framework as an additional way to analyse the data. For this, a simple tool was developed by the researcher to link the findings with the theory (see Table 1). This tool was used to

explore aspects of the coaching by linking these aspects to the factors that this model conclude are helpful with transitions and adding a column to several tables, showing these results (see Tables 2, 3 and 4).

Stage 3: Aligning behaviour with change in identity

Because previous research has shown that becoming a mother is transformative, involving a deep psychological shift, the scripts were also analysed from the perspective of Dilts' Logical Levels (Dilts, 2014). The research sought to identify elements of the coaching that might have helped to facilitate a change in behaviour to bring it into alignment with the woman's new internal identity. The researcher examined the transcripts of the interviews, noting down any time the women alluded to their identities as a professional and as a mother, of times when they wanted or needed to adapt their behaviour to fit their new identity as a working mother, and how the coaching had helped to affect the change that had brought their behaviour at work into alignment with this new identity. This was collated into a table (see Table 5).

Results

The coach and the coaching

Of the 11 women interviewed, seven emphasised the importance of the fact that the coach was external, neutral and objective. The quality of the relationships that they had had with their coach was referred to by

Table 4: Answer to key question: 'If I had to get you to pinpoint one thing that was most useful or helpful about the maternity coaching as a whole, what would that be?'

In vivo answers	Link with 4S model
The two things are earmarking that time and coming away from that time with some actions	Strat 1
Having someone to take a step back and give you that perspective that you can still make it work	Self 2
Definitely the face-to-face meetings	
We did almost like a kind of roleplay of the conversation that we would have	Strat 2
I'll do 2... I would say the practical advice – kind of logistics... and being kind to myself	Strat 1 Self 1
I think being given time to think	Self 2/Strat 3
Preparing the conversations around my working arrangements	Strat 2
I think maybe that it is the point that it is about you and that 'What is it that you want'?	Self 2
Being given the tools and asking the questions to enable me to actually work out my priorities and how everything fits together	Self 2
I think it's action plans	Strat 1
How to make the best out of all the different situations you can find yourself in	Strat 1

five of the participants, with trust identified as a key element of the relationship. One of the participants said that, until she fully believed that the coach was not affiliated to her organisation, she was 'on message'; once she came to the realisation that her coach really was neutral and objective, she gained a lot more from the coaching. The role of the coach also being that of a mentor was mentioned by five of the participants.

There were a variety of topics that women took to coaching, often dependent on when the coaching was – before, during or after maternity leave (see Table 2). These contrast to the outcomes that the women said they had got out of coaching (see Table 3). Both sets of outcomes have been analysed according to the model displayed in Table 1 and show that, although the women took practical and logistical issues to coaching (defined as Strat 1), the outcomes of coaching were both broader and deeper.

In the interviews, all of the women were asked the key question: 'If I had to get you to pinpoint one thing that was most useful or helpful about the maternity coaching as a whole, what would that be?' (see Table 4). When analysed with the 4S tool, it can be seen that strategies that modify the situation and the belief that their efforts will affect the outcomes of the situation were most commonly identified. The next part of this Results section will be structured around the main themes of the answers to the key question.

Work preparations

Some of the main issues that the women focused on during coaching were factors relating to their working arrangements. These could be in the form of action plans or thinking about logistics, but must notable was the opportunity to discuss significant conversations that they needed to have. The important place that work held for all of the women was reflected in the desire to devote time to raising their profile and plan their return, so that they could ensure that they were fully integrated back into the workplace. Preparation – and at times, roleplay – for their return to work conversations was an important feature of coaching for several of the women. As Chloe said: 'I had clarity of thought' (line 198) gained from preparing for the conversation and being able to have it in a positive, articulate way.

These conversations were often described as 'key' or 'difficult' because the women felt

Table 5: Identity and behaviour.

Identity	The role of coaching in enabling change in identity to be reflected in change of behaviour	Behaviour
Self-esteem tied up with job – work identity very strong	Focused on negotiating the right role for her on her return to work	Successful combination of work and motherhood
Strong professional and motherhood identities – reclaiming work identity was important Feelings of loss and of life having fundamentally changed	Focus of a coaching session – what she needed to reclaim work identity Gave permission for these feelings and encouraged self-kindness	Connected with the most important people – raised profile Regularly practised self-kindness
Strong identities of being a professional and a mother	Encouraged strict boundary setting	Movement from being too focused on work, to being stricter about boundaries.

that they were asking something of their employer, as they were not going to be returning to exactly the same work patterns as prior to going off on maternity leave. They were concerned that they were going to be viewed differently in terms of their professionalism and commitment to work. In many situations, the coach encouraged them to be confident in their abilities and to reinforce their feelings of self-worth – as Linda said, coaching resulted in her 'believing that I have a right to be here without having to prove it' (lines 327–328). Maria also felt that the coaching enabled her to see 'how to get the best out of whichever situation you are in' (lines 243–244). The coach also helped the women view the situation from the perspective of their employer, trying to ensure that what they were asking for was reasonable and made good business sense, as well as aligning with what the women wanted. In many cases, this resulted in the discussions being as productive as possible for both sides.

Navigating the two identities of being a mother and being a professional working woman

Being on maternity leave

For some of the women the transition to motherhood had been difficult. By adopting an active listening stance, asking about their feelings, and drawing on and referring to her many years of experience of working with women in this period, the researcher was able to encourage the women to go into some detail about how this transition had been for them. The change in lifestyle, sense of lack of personal attainment and cognitive functioning was captured by Martine: 'Going from someone who speaks at conferences to someone who's pleased if they've had a shower by one o'clock' (lines 72–73), and Rachel: 'It's incredibly hard work and… there's nobody to say thank you to you and that you're doing a good job' (lines 209–210) and 'I don't think I was quite ready for how much your brain seems to change when you have a child… I felt like my brain way dying' (lines 81–83). For these two women, the coaching session they received before they returned to work was focused on how they could reconnect with their very strong professional identities. Ensuring that they re-entered work assertively and had the opportunity to have challenging work was fundamentally important.

For some of the others, they identified that when they were off on maternity leave they just 'wanted to get into sort of "mummy mindset"' (Chloe, line 49), so that they could focus on their baby. They saw their maternity leave as a completely different experience, and work as being 'unrelated to the world I was in' (Sally, line 202). For some, this had an impact on the coaching session that they had whilst on maternity leave, because they were unable to bridge the distance between their current state and their future state at work. The resulting feeling about this session for these women was one of dissatisfaction – of all the sessions in their maternity coaching programmes, this was seen to be the one that was of least value. For others, however, this session was extremely timely and helped them to focus on what they wanted from their return to work.

Approaching the time of returning to work

Of the six women who talked about the time of returning to work, some used extremely poignant language. As Sally put it: 'I'd say that I was… heartbroken… I feel I was grieving lots. I was grieving for the loss of the maternity, for the relationship that we'd had for none months, that was never going to be the same again' (lines 372–374).

Jane said: 'The thought of going back to work and leaving my little baby was so terrible' (lines 68–69) and she admitted to being very tearful during the telephone session that she had with her coach at this time. This followed through to the next coaching session, once she was back at work, with her analysing the issues of how she had felt about work during her maternity leave and how she was trying to adjust to being back. When she became pregnant again, her coach helped

her to plan her exit from and return to work in a different way, so that there were fewer issues raised for her.

The point about not being the full-time carer any more was highlighted by several of the women, with Rachel saying that if there is little work to do on return from maternity leave women can feel: 'Why am I in the office? Someone else is looking after my baby and I'm here' (lines 323–324). This was echoed by Chloe when she said: 'When I am busy on stuff that I love doing, even though the hours are a bit mental, I'm really enjoying it and so then that helps it to work' (lines 427–428). Sally also reiterated this point; returning to work at a particularly quiet time after her first baby was difficult for her as she had had plenty of time to think about how much she was missing her baby. Not wanting this to happen the next time, she was determined to ensure that she was busy when she returned, and this was something that she worked on with her coach. She wanted to return with energy and accelerate her career, and working with her coach enabled her to come up with a plan of how to do this.

Finding the way forward

Returning to work was identified as a time of stress and under-confidence. Chloe articulated this when she said: 'People underestimate how vulnerable you can feel when you come back' (lines 272–273). The lack of understanding of the impact of becoming a parent was a cause of distress for some of the women. Chloe's statement that 'your life has dramatically changed' (line 298) was also conveyed by Sally who was frustrated by a work colleague's behaviour: 'And I wanted to scream at him "My life has fundamentally changed – can you acknowledge it!"' (lines 389–390). Sarah spoke of her experience of 'you almost have to pretend that you don't have a child' (line 340) which she found difficult.

Finding their own way of combining work and motherhood was a feature of the coaching for several of the women. Linda said: 'I had to make it work for my family and I was not going to change the system' (line 122) and Rachel encapsulated the issue in her words: 'How to achieve that kind of Mecca of, how do you do a job like this and have a partner who does a job like this and have some form of – well, how do you balance both things well?' (lines 104–106). With her coach, she worked on what she could to achieve the best balance for her in terms of her workload, the time she spent with her baby and sharing of the household duties. Martine acknowledged that, although she had good childcare in place, she still wanted to be more involved with the day-to-day care of the children, including putting them to bed and taking them shopping. She described her situation as 'making the peace with what is good enough' (line 146). At one point, Pauline could not see how she could make things work and described how her coach 'asked quite probing questions… what do you want to achieve? What are your priorities? (lines 190–194), 'Could you make it work in your favour to make this work? Because, you know, you sound really happy in your job.' (lines 216–217). Her coach helped her to identify that she needed to see her son every day in order to be happy and then they worked on a plan to achieve that, whilst still putting in enough hours to do her job well. She really appreciated 'having someone to take a step back and give you that perspective that you can still make it work' (lines 365–367).

Interestingly, half of the women who had described their deep sense of sadness about leaving their babies also identified that they would not be happy being a full-time mother, and Jane spoke of how she felt her relationship with her children was enhanced by the fact that she worked: 'I've also come to the realisation that actually having my time at work makes my relationship with them, when I see them, much better' (lines 575–577). It would seem that time needs to be given to accept these changes and come to new realisations; Pauline acknowledged that it took a couple of months 'adjusting to that new norm' (lines 496–497). Coaching

gave the women the opportunity to be able to acknowledge their feelings, to help work through them and articulate what was important to them going forward.

As can be seen when looking at Tables 2, 3 and 4, with relation to the 4S Transition Model (2013), the coaching helped the women work on the levels of self, support and strategies, increasing their feelings of self-efficacy in terms of managing the changes within the workplace that had come about because of their new status as a mother.

Having time, space and focus

At the life stage of being a working mother with young children, when there is little opportunity to focus on yourself, 'time to think' (Anita, line 36) was identified as an important factor in the maternity coaching. As Linda said: 'It is about you and that "What is it that you want?"' (lines 355–356). Jane described how her thoughts would be all 'jumbled up' (line 565) and that coaching gave her the time and the direction to start to unravel this jumble and make sense of things. As she said: 'I came out with this incredible, all these great realisations that I had just not thought' (line 117). One of these realisations was that she could view her situation from a different perspective – that of viewing the decision to stay at her current workplace as positive, rather than negative. The resulting change in her view of work was translated into much more positive behaviour, which was noticed and commented on at work. Another realisation was that she did not need to make all her life decisions at the same time and that there was a range of factors that she could adjust at different times. She describes this as 'giving me the tools and asking the questions to enable me to actually work out my priorities and how everything fits together' (lines 429–430). This new way of thinking gave her greater freedom in her approach to work, motherhood and life generally.

This theme of the coach encouraging thinking about other alternatives ran through many of the interviews. Linda talked about, 'and not more, what the firm can be doing differently, but what about I can do differently?' (lines 284–285) and she appreciated the time that coaching gave her to really reflect on herself, her views and her aspirations. Pauline found it helpful that her preconceptions on many things were challenged by the coach and Anita said that being asked: 'Have you thought about doing it differently?' (line 36) really allowed her to explore different possibilities and identify what she needed to do at that time regarding length of maternity leave. This exploration helped her 'to deal with the guilt' (line 139) of doing something different from what she had planned, and from what she had done with her previous children.

The time, space and focus that was devoted to the women during the coaching sessions resulted in them being able to reflect on themselves and their situations, allowing insights and behavioural change. It also enabled them to explore some of the deep feelings surrounding grief and emotional health.

Aligning behaviour with a new identity

As new motherhood is a time of change in identity – from working woman, to working woman who is also a mother – the data was also analysed from the perspective of Dilts' Logical Levels (2014). In several cases it was possible to identify times when the coaching enabled the women to articulate what was important to them in their changed state and then to examine the implications of this with respect to how they were at work. That could be in terms of being clearer about their work boundaries or finding the best way for them to balance their time in their roles of professional and mother. The coaches had done this by asking probing questions and challenging the womens' perceptions of their current situation. This encouraged them to think about what was really important to them (their values and beliefs) and how this fitted with their new identity as a mother and their identity as a professional.

At times, changes in behaviour were necessary to bring these two identities into alignment (see Table 5).

Discussion

Trust and time to think

The importance of the trust that the women had in their coach is a key finding of this research, which concurs with much writing about the nature of relationships within a coaching context (Hardingam et al., 2004). For three of the five women who had maternity coaching for more than one baby, the nature of their relationship with their coach was such that they asked for the same coach the second time.

It was important that the coach was external to the organisation that the women worked for, and was neutral and objective. Although many organisations have internal coaches, Hardingham et al. (2004) emphasise the need for coaches to be viewed as not being biased. As Millward (2006) identifies, the time of becoming a mother can result in a shift of values and priorities which may have an impact on how the woman views her relationship with work. Having complete confidence in the neutrality of the coach is therefore of fundamental importance. The participants in this research study identified this to be key and concluded that this neutrality enabled conversations in which it was easier to open up, as they saw the coach as an 'objective sounding board'.

The feeling of time and space, and the opportunity to focus on themselves was another important feature for the women. According to the literature, the focus of any coaching should be the coachee, and the coach should also provide challenge so that the coachee examines their own preconceptions and models of the world (Hardingham et al., 2004; O'Connor & Lages, 2004). This can then result in an understanding of alternative perceptions, increased self-awareness, personal insights and realisations. This was certainly the case for the women involved in this study, who, as a result of the coaching, came to have a much greater understanding of themselves and what was important to them, what they wanted their futures to look like and how to work with their employers so that they could achieve this within their work contexts.

Coaching and the transition to motherhood

As is shown in the literature, the women had needs that were specific to this particular period of their lives. Both before returning to work, and once they had returned to work there was a desire to re-validate their employee identity, as highlighted by Millward (2006). Several of the women identified that the coaching sessions were extremely helpful for preparing for important conversations and raising their profiles.

In line with Stern and Brushweiller-Stern's (1998) theory of the three stages of the transition to motherhood, it can be seen that the women took different things to coaching at these three stages. Their gradual adjustment from working woman to working woman who is also a mother, and the stages of change that they went through to go from one to the other, is evident from what they recalled about their experiences. The coaching was often career-focused – enabling the women to leave work positively and return positively, successfully re-integrating back into the workplace, which adds to the evidence of other researchers (Filsinger, 2012). Several of the women appreciated that their coach had also been in a similar position and had knowledge of the sector that they were working in. As is noted by Liston-Smith (2011), maternity coaches often also perform the role of a mentor.

As well as finding the optimum way of being back at work, the women also worked on finding the right way for themselves of combining work with motherhood. As the literature suggests, several of them felt guilty about leaving their baby (Millward, 2006; Stern & Bruschweiler-Stern, 1998; Sumer et al., 2008). Needing to be busy and have interesting, worthwhile work eased this

guilt and formed part of them establishing their 'viable employee identity' (Millward, 2006, p.324). Whilst noting the tension that existed between their two roles, the coaching encouraged them to articulate their values and priorities and find the solutions for themselves about the balance that seemed the best one for them.

As women's behaviours at work might well change due to their new role and identity, it is important for coaches to be able to put these changes within the context of what has happened and to help the new mother who is also a professional woman align her behaviour to her new identity, values and beliefs.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is that all of the participants were from similar high pressured and high status professions, thus working in the same type of work environments. Therefore, further research focusing on the effect of maternity coaching on women from a variety of work environments and working patterns is recommended in order to assess whether the findings from this research can be generalised to other places of work. Finally, as a few coaches were involved there was not the same consistency of coaching as if only one coach had been employed.

Implications

The purpose of analysing this aspect of the women's experiences was to further inform maternity coaches and to provide evidence to help organisations comprehend the significance of this time of change. Time needs to be given to accept these changes and come to new realisations; as one of the women said, it took a couple of months to adjust to the new way that things were. Thus, this evidence suggests that line managers need to be aware that this time of return is one of vulnerability – and potentially grief – and have support systems in place to ease this transition.

As a result of this piece of research, there are a few key recommendations to be made. As having a baby is a major transition which involves a change in identity, coaches working with women at this time need to embed their coaching within a deep understanding of the transition to motherhood and real-

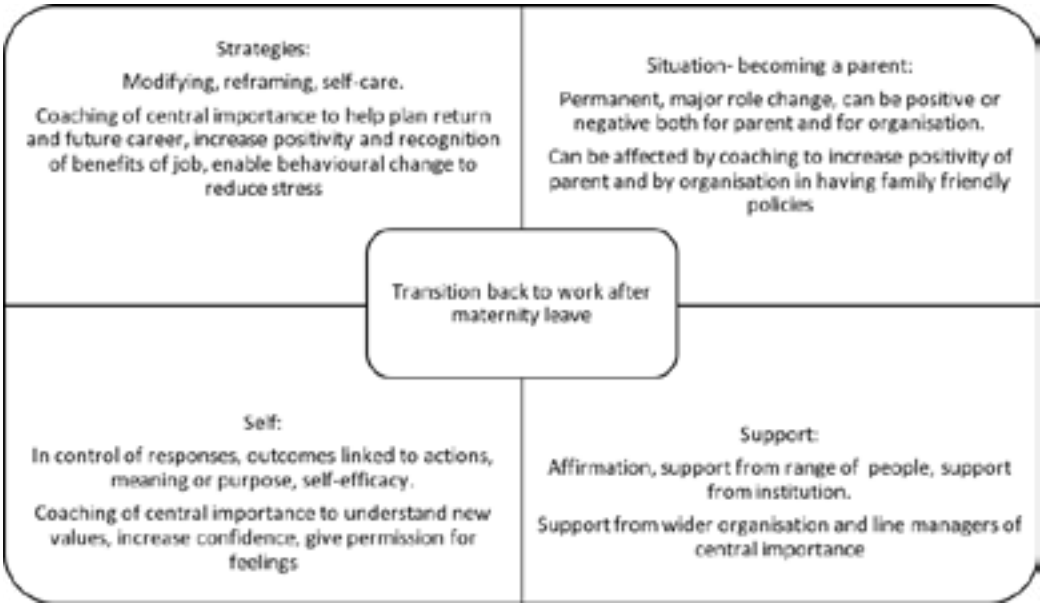

Figure 1: The 4S Parent Returner Model.

ise that the coaching helps with the transitions on different levels. Preparation for the return to work to enable the woman to reassert herself and her identity is an integral part of coaching at this time and there is a role in helping the women to align their behaviour with the change in their identity.

The neutrality and objectivity of the coach is important and needs to be clearly stated at various points in the contracting by the organisation, the coaching provider and the coach.

The coach needs to build trust and to gently challenge the woman and the assumptions that she has made about herself, the way she works and structures her life, and the people around her.

Building on these recommendations, the researcher has designed the 4S Parent Returner Model, based on current thinking and the findings of her research, constructed within the framework of the 4S Transition Model (see Figure 1). This model could be used to determine the different roles of coaching and organisational policies and support when considering implementing a parental returner programme, in line with one of the objectives of this research.

Conclusion

This research shows why investing in maternity coaching can ease the transition back to work after maternity leave and increase retention and job satisfaction. Whilst there is no single common element that women found to be most useful, it is a combination of various factors that result in the re-adjustment on a deep personal level that is needed at this time. The coaching relationship and approach, combined with knowledge of transition theory and the understanding of the transition to motherhood can result in the coach enabling the woman to work on a deeper level than just a practical one and to come to an understanding of what her new identity as a mother in the workplace means and how this can be reflected in her behaviour.

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Author's note

All names have been changed to protect anonymity.

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