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Training and development for employees returning to work after parental leave

Overview of the field

Formal training and development for employees returning to work after parental leave appears varied in content and delivery. Despite such large numbers of parents returning to work following parental leave every day, evidence on the prevalence and impact of practices employed by organisations is sparse. Support for returning parents often places a focus on the practicalities of return. A recent report by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development UK (CIPD, 2016) noted that organisations primarily focus on flexible working provision (offered by 30% of organisations), flexible working to support drop offs/pickups (25%), mentoring or counselling (20%), and other practical supports such as childcare support. While guidance in the form of online fact sheets, webinars, podcasts and discussion groups is plentiful (e.g., Working Families), and training is available for those who are overseeing parental leave (e.g., HR, management, or administration) to better understand the largely legal obligations of employers (e.g., CIPD Maternity and Parental Leave Short Course), training for returning employees appears to be largely focused on the process of return (e.g., keep-in-touch days, access to flexible working) and career coaching or mentoring.

Business in the Community (2019), a UK business network, synthesised ideals for best practice in return to work. Their report calls for organisations to offer development for managers to help them better understand the psychological and emotional changes during parental leave and tailored induction programmes for returners. Employers are also encouraged to consider the location, timing and delivery mode of the training to ease additional childcare demands. Recommended learning modules focus on confidence building, team building, communication, work-life balance, and stereotyping in the workplace. The

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extent to which these practices are embedded are unknown. Furthermore, there is little mention of factors within the home, which considering the wealth of research relating to identity and spillover between family and work noted later in this chapter, may present an important gap in current provisions for returning parents.

Returnship programmes developed for those who have been out of the workforce for an extended period of time are increasingly popular among organisations and returning employees alike, and place a focus on building confidence and technical skills. Again, little systematic research is available to guide our understanding of what works, however that research that does exist provides useful learnings. For instance, a recent study by Herman, Gracia, Macniven, Clark and Doyle (2018) noted that a blended learning approach to return, including networking, webinars, and career coaching, enabled women to successful return to a range of STEM roles. Importantly, they call for an integrated approach that incorporates different life course stages. This is echoed in a report by Rieger, Bird, and Farrer (2018) who interviewed professionals leading the schemes and found that line manager buy-in and support, flexibility of support, involving successful returners, and striking a balance between specific and general skills were important components of returnship programmes.

It is important to note that men and women across the globe have different experiences of returning to work, and different needs, that require consideration in any training and development programme. Policy contexts drive decisions made by parents and have implications for training and development needs, specifically around technical skills. For example, the duration of paid leave varies widely and for many the month of return is determined by financial drivers. Furthermore, there is a disconnect between policy and practice. The Institute of Leadership and Management (2014) noted that fewer than 10% of

UK fathers took two weeks of parental leave available to them, while a quarter of new fathers take no parental leave, often for fear of reprise or workload demands. Interestingly, a report by Bright Horizons and Working Families (2017) describes how men are less likely to disclose their family issues at work and are afraid to request flexible working. These findings have important implications for the content of future training and development offered to new fathers, and those who are working with them.

In the following, we discuss two relevant aspects in research and practice to highlight what trainings to assist returning parents should focus on. These involve the changes in behaviour, attitudes, and identity because of becoming a parent as well as spillover experiences between family and work. Then, we turn to the literature on sickness absence to see how models developed to support employees after long-term sickness absence may be helpful in guiding return-to-work programmes after parental leave. We conclude with practical recommendations and lay out a journey to navigate employees' training and development before, during, and after parental leave.

Key debates in research and practice

Changes in gender-typical behaviours, gender role attitudes, and gendered identity facets
Research about changes in individual attributes examined gender-typical behaviours (stereotypically feminine and stereotypically masculine, e.g., Endendijk, Derks, & Mesman, 2018), gender role attitudes (endorsement of traditional gender roles, e.g., Katz-Wise, Priess, & Hyde, 2010) as well as gendered identity facets (parent role and professional role: e.g., Hodges & Park, 2013). Two main mechanisms have been suggested to explain such changes. Changes in gender-typical behaviours may be seen as a response to demands associated with

the new parent role (e.g., Katz-Wise et al. , 2010). Resources, such as time, energy, and money (Hobfoll, 1989) might be shifted between life domains, in an attempt to reinstate a balance between demands and resources needed to cope with these demands (Thoits, 1992). For example, a fairly gender egalitarian couple transitioning to parenthood may decide that both should engage equally in childcare. Accordingly, both parents would be likely to engage more in stereotypically feminine behaviours after becoming parents, indicating a shift of resources to the parent role.

A second mechanism also describes recalibration after transitioning to parenthood, but here the focus is on changes in gender role attitudes and gendered identity facets, in order to reconcile changed behaviours with attitudes and identity, thereby reducing cognitive dissonance (e.g., Schober & Scott, 2012), and reorganising identity (e.g., Kaźmierczak & Karasiewicz, 2018). For example, another fairly gender egalitarian couple may decide that, due to economic pressures, the mother should focus on childcare, whereas the father should engage more with paid labour outside the home. Under these circumstances, both parents engage more in traditionally gender-typed behaviours, which is likely to be perceived as inconsistent with their egalitarian gender role attitudes. In an attempt to restore consistency between behaviour and attitudes, these parents may then develop more traditional attitudes (e.g., Endendijk et al. , 2018). The latter process may also apply to gendered identity facets, in that these parents might attach increased importance to life roles that are consistent with stereotypical expectations about mothers and fathers (e.g., Kaźmierczak & Karasiewicz, 2018).

Research findings suggest that after becoming parents, women engage more in stereotypically feminine behaviours (i.e., caring), whereas men demonstrate more

stereotypically masculine behaviours (i.e., assertive). This pattern emerged examining parents from the USA (e.g., Katz-Wise et al., 2010), but also with parents from the Netherlands - a country generally seen as relatively gender egalitarian (Endendijk et al., 2018). These changes in gender-typical behaviours go along with corresponding changes in gender role attitudes as well as gendered identity facets. After transitioning to parenthood, people reported more traditional gender role attitudes (e.g., Baxter, Buchler, Perales, & Western, 2015). Gender role attitudes, however, may also shift in the opposite direction after the transition to parenthood (Schober & Scott, 2012), or may remain unchanged (Endendijk et al., 2018), depending on the extent of mothers' labour market participation, formal childcare arrangements, and egalitarian task division at home.

With regards to gendered identity facets, on the other hand, research findings indicate that the importance of the parent role increased in both women and men after transitioning to parenthood. However, parent role importance was higher in mothers than in fathers, whereas professional role importance was higher in fathers than in mothers (Kaźmierczak & Karasiewicz, 2018), especially when comparing stay-at-home mothers with breadwinning fathers (Gaunt & Scott, 2016). Slightly, and temporarily, reduced professional role importance was also found in a sample of mothers from Sweden - a country that is not only considered as rather gender egalitarian, but also as "the archetype of the women-friendly welfare state" (Evertsson, 2013, p. 143). Importantly, working mothers may "assume the bigger share of family duties" (Mayrhofer, Meyer, Schiffinger, & Schmidt, 2008, p. 312) voluntarily, or due to not successfully negotiating greater father involvement with family responsibilities (Bulanda, 2004). Therefore, we recommend that "parents to be" openly discuss with their partner how much they would like to take on and what they expect from their partner to contribute and to come to an agreement on each other's responsibilities.

Further empirical evidence suggests that mothers, but not fathers, changed the importance attached to professional role and parent role, depending on situational context (Hodges & Park, 2013). This finding may indicate that women are still expected to make themselves more available to their families than men (e.g., Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999), and that they experience these two roles and associated expectations not to easily match together (Özbiler & Beidoğlu, 2018). Working fathers may not experience similar conflicting expectations, but can focus on their professional role (for a discussion of an emerging folk model of parenthood as "gender-neutral engineering", on the other hand, see Kaplan & Knoll, 2018). Working mothers' identity shifts between professional role and parent role may lead to negative mental health outcomes (e.g., fragmented sense of the self, lower self-esteem, greater depression: Hodges & Park, 2013). Furthermore, family responsibilities are associated with less claims for career advancement (Luekemann & Abendroth, 2018), which can negatively affect women's career success.

Spillover between life domains and informal training

Changes in behaviour, attitudes, and work and family role importance typically occur at the transition to parenthood. Role importance, again, changes once employees return to work. Moreover, a major concern of many employees returning to work after parental leave is the presumed inability of balancing their work and family demands (e.g., Buzzanell & Liu, 2007; see also Chapter 4: "New parents navigating the workplace: Pregnancy, stereotype threat, and work-family conflict"). From a training and development perspective, however, the new role as mothers and fathers can also be understood as continuous informal training. As such, parenthood offers opportunities to learn and develop skills, which are desired by employers (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). These skills include conflict management, communication, and

multitasking, but also leadership skills, such as strategic planning or achieving goals through others (e.g., Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, & King, 2002). Moreover, parents are more patient and more resilient than childfree employees. Parents more often have plans after work (such as to pick up their child at a specific time), which helps them being more absorbed at work (Dumas & Perry-Smith, 2018). Being absorbed at work means to be fully immersed in one's job and to experience that time flies while at work. To fully concentrate on one's work tasks is particularly important when working on complex issues (Quinn, 2005).

Some employers have recognised the potential of their employees' parental role to positively affect their work role, and use this potential in training and developing their employees. As a starting point, these organisations may map the skills their employees learn in their parental role to the skills they desire in these employees' work role. Doing so, some working parents may particularly benefit from their social skills, whereas others may find their leadership skills more beneficial for their jobs. In a next step, employers may reward having these additional skills due to one's parental role. Some organisations have, for instance, implemented relevant parental experiences as a module in their leadership development programmes. Employees with parental obligations may use these instead of attending a formal training on the respective topic.

From a training and development perspective, the most efficient trainings are informal rather than formal trainings (Cerasoli et al., 2018; OECD, 2019). Informal training happens without a specific curriculum, without a formal trainer, and typically in such a way that individuals are not really aware that they are in a training situation. An example for an informal training situation would be a parent, who wants his or her child to get dressed in the morning and who has to decide on the most promising way to achieve this. Through trial-and-error, the parent

develops this way, but would typically not refer to this situation as a training. At work, a discussion about a specific issue would be an example of informal learning. Through the discussion, every member learns new aspects, arguments, and perspectives to approach the problem, which help them in developing their view on the issue. To increase the efficiency of such informal training situations, it is important that employees reflect on their experiences (e.g., Boyd & Fales, 1983): What did I learn in this situation? How can I use these learning experiences? Where could this be helpful? Accordingly, employees and employers should raise awareness of these training situations. One way to do so could be an App (such as the be:able App: Work-Family Institute, 2018), which supports employees in describing their informal training situations at home and to map them onto specific skills, which can be transferred to the workplace (in the above example, these could be remaining patient in the situation, and understanding the child's needs, to come up with a good solution).

Thus far, we have focused our discussion in this chapter on the individual working parent and highlighted changes in behaviour, attitudes, and identity because of parenthood as well as positive spillover experiences from family to work as relevant training and development aspects. Next, we turn to how employers manage the return to work of employees after long-term sickness absence to relate the processes typically used to re-board these employees to their potential usage to manage the return to work after parental leave.

Lessons to consider from research on return to work experiences following sickness absence
Research within the field of return to work following sickness absence has aimed to elucidate the contributors to successful returns. Moving beyond policies, the consideration of contextual and process factors have been found to be pivotal in the returning employee's journey. These include the importance of maintaining contact during sickness absence and

the value of line manager communications (Munir, Yarker, Hicks, & Donaldson-Feilder, 2012), implementing work adjustments such as job re-design (Williams-Whitt et al., 2016), and considering integrated systemic approaches (e.g., IGLOO: Nielsen, Yarker, Munir, & Bültmann, 2018).

Developing an integrated framework, considering resources available to the individual within the workplace and at home, Nielsen et al. (2018) introduced the IGLOO model and proposed that **I**ndividual, **G**roup, **L**eader, **O**rganisational, and the **O**verarching resources work together to promote sustainable return to work following sickness absence. This framework is readily transferable to the context of returning to work after parental leave. In a practical sense, at the **I**ndividual level, a returning mother may have more or less confidence in her ability to do the job on her return, or may be struggling to reconcile her new identity as a working parent. The benefits of group level social support at work and home are well established (Pluut, Ilies, Curseu, & Liu, 2018), and examined further in Chapter 2 ("Building a parents' support network: At work and outside"), while comments from colleagues such as 'Thank you for coming' or 'Oh, you are only working part-time today?', when a returning father leaves at 4.30 pm to get home to pick his child up from nursery, present a **G**roup level barrier. At the **L**eader level, a manager who has been trained to confidently hold challenging conversations and manage flexible teams may be better able to support a returning father hoping to work flexibly to enable him to return home for bath time. At the **O**rganisational level, clear policies and procedures to obtain flexible working practices are important, while **O**verarching resources will differ between organisations and countries, such as childcare provisions and benefits.

Drawing from the diverse research and practice presented in this chapter a framework for future practices in training and development following parental leave is presented in Figure 1.

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Practical Recommendations

Extrapolating learnings from the fields of gendered attributes, spillover between life domains, and sickness absence, we propose that future training and development programmes to support parents returning to work consider the following content and contextual features:

Content considerations:

- Awareness of policies and practices such as flexible working, breastfeeding, and childcare support

- Development of essential skills, such as confidence building and communication skills, to enable returnees to hold potentially challenging conversations with managers and peers

- Development of personal awareness in relation to gender-typical behaviour and identity, supported by frameworks to explore the impact of the changing demands and identity at home and work, and the tools to engage in conversations about demands, resources and identity at work and at home

- Encouragement of mapping and recognition of informal learning and development, both in and outside of the work environment

- Tailor content for non-parents by adopting an inclusive approach to include all employees with changing individual circumstances or caring responsibilities (e.g., illness or caring for older relatives)

Contextual considerations:

- Early intervention: Equipping employees with the skills and knowledge to navigate the return process is essential, preferably starting before the employee exits the workplace.

- Move beyond awareness and knowledge: Awareness and knowledge of policies and practices are important, however, awareness does not suffice. To fully realise the benefits of these policies, there is a need to move beyond *what* to do, and also provide guidance on *how* to do it.

- Move beyond one-off training events towards an ongoing programme of continuous development throughout the stages of preparation before, adaption during, and re-focusing following parental leave.

- Develop line manager skills: Line managers play a pivotal role in the returning employee's re-integration into the workplace. There is need to extend training and development to equip those, who manage returning employees, to provide effective support.

- Adopt a whole systems approach: Parents' return to work into a complex social system, where colleagues can provide an important source of support, but may also, perhaps unintentionally, impose barriers to successful returns. We propose that a whole organisation approach to training and development is adopted, whereby colleagues and managers are equipped with an understanding of policies and practices, as well as an understanding of the likely experiences of parents returning to work, and the skills and know-how to support the return.

- Evaluate to inform practice: We would encourage employers to partner with academics to develop the evidence base in this important area. Longitudinal studies examining the impact of specific activities over time, fine-grained analyses of identity facets, and life roles, and their intersections, as well as examining the implications for

non-traditional parents (e.g., single parents, caring fathers) are all areas that require further exploration.

Conclusions

Despite the significant numbers of parents returning to work each week following parental leave, there is a dearth of evidence to guide practice. In this chapter, we have brought together research that could usefully inform the content and design of training programmes to support those returning to work following parental leave, and those who work alongside them. There is need for over time evaluations of the return process and the benefits that different training and development interventions afford the individual and organisation. This is an area that requires urgent attention, if we are to support returning parents to achieve a successful balance between work and life, as they navigate their new journey. Importantly, according to a report by the UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission (2018), three quarters of working mothers experience a negative or discriminatory experience during pregnancy, maternity leave, and/or on their return form maternity leave. This points to the need for a whole organisation approach to training and development to support returning parents.

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