

# Moving on from maternity

## Whitepaper

Why businesses in Ireland need better support for working parents.

June 2015

# Introduction

**Improving the gender balance within an organisation has been proven to increase performance and profits. However, in Ireland today – as in the rest of Europe – men and women are still not equally represented in senior positions. At all organisational levels female talent is draining away, with the transition to parenthood being the major pinch point at which women decide to leave, or find their career stalling.**

Businesses have begun to recognise that there's a powerful commercial imperative to nurture not only talented women but all working parents, by proactively targeting the transition to maternity and paternity leave, and then back to work, with coaching-based support.

Five years ago the resources simply weren't available to invest in providing this kind of initiative, and structured coaching programmes in particular have struggled to gain traction. But as Ireland's economy strengthens, we're finding that many organisations are beginning the journey towards better support for women and working parents – understanding the benefits, exploring the options, and putting grassroots initiatives in place. It's a complex transition, and every business is in a slightly different position in terms of the areas they're most concerned with, and the resources they have available.

In this Talking Talent insight guide we share some of the solutions, activities and programmes that organisations in Ireland are currently putting in place around this complex transition, and look ahead to how these could be built on in the coming months.

“As well as giving first class support to all our working parents, our work with Talking Talent engages our managers to ensure progress is sustainable and wide reaching.”

**Head of D&I,  
Barclays Wealth  
& Investment  
Management**

## 2. Making the case

**There's a very powerful business case for improving gender diversity within an organisation by retaining women and working parents, and creating an inclusive environment in which they can contribute fully.**

A diverse leadership is proven to deliver better financial results: companies with three or more women in top management functions deliver 10% better return on equity, achieve 16% higher return on sales and 26% higher return on invested capital.

This happens because greater gender diversity results in a healthy range of perspectives, and more balanced decision-making. Women also display the leadership traits and behaviours required to help a company become more adaptable, collaborative, innovative and responsive.

It's not only about building a diverse pipeline of talent to the top. Having a mix of different styles and ways of working at every level of a business reduces risk by preventing blind-spots, generating fresh approaches and creativity, and often bringing a greater understanding of the needs of customers.

Ultimately, to improve its performance and profitability an organisation needs to get the best from all of its people, all of the time. Both men and women face the same challenges when they become parents, and both mums and dads need support. Coaching-based initiatives can help prevent performance dropping during the parental transition, and also keep working parents engaged, energised and productive for the long-term.

The organisations we work with that have implemented structured support for women and working parents have seen retention and promotion rates rise and engagement levels improve. There has been a direct impact on the targets and the bottom line: EY saved £16m in attrition costs in 18 months as they improved their maternity returner rate to well over 90%.

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### 3. Grassroots upwards

**Buddy systems – both formal and informal – are now common within organisations, where a new parent is matched with someone who has been through the transition themselves. Having been supported with training on relevant policies and how to ask coaching questions, the ‘buddy’ is able to offer advice and share what worked and what didn’t for them. The pairing needs to be carefully considered, as a mismatch between individuals or a subjective approach can have an adverse effect on the returnee’s experience.**

‘Lunch and learn’ sessions have also become popular. These involve bringing in experts to talk on topics related to the parental transition. Encouraging attendees to prioritise these sessions in their diaries can be a challenge, but if they’re communicated in the right way, from the right part of the business, people will register and turn up – even when their day-to-day workload is intense. It’s also worth thinking about linking the sessions into employees’ and managers’ personal development plans.

Some organisations have found that identifying and boosting the visibility of role models who can share their experiences is inspiring for other working parents, and helps them to feel less alone. If people see senior executives dropping their kids off at school, or leaving early or on time, for instance, this helps to set the tone for a culture that is more inclusive for working parents. Creating platforms for role models to tell their story and share their ways of working has also been hugely popular.

Structured coaching programmes that provide practical support at critical points in the transition are just beginning to gain traction in Ireland. Coaching gives women and working parents a ‘space’ in which they can explore beliefs and challenges, address issues, build skills and develop strategies for managing life as a working parent. The ‘gold standard’ in support around the transition to parenthood, coaching offers the most sustainable way of keeping people engaged – not just at the ‘pinch point’, but years down the line.

Coaching can be delivered in groups, via webinars, in one-on-one individual sessions for top talent, and also through online portals. We’re currently seeing a lot of investment being directed towards coaching portals, which allow employees across an organisation to access support 24/7, wherever they are – at their desks, or on the couch with their iPad while the baby sleeps.

When parents return to your organisation after maternity or paternity leave are they able to quickly adapt and work effectively, or are they just getting by?

## 4. Parental leave support

**Pre and during leave:** It's important at this stage to sustain the energy of the employee and the team, to minimise the impact of the employee's absence on the wider business, and to set the scene for a smooth return to work in a few months. Each individual will need and want something different, and have different hopes and fears about the transition.

Coaching at this stage allows the participant to organise their thoughts, as well as discussing their expectations and ambitions and the way they might want to work when they come back. This also helps the line manager to balance the expectations of the individual, the team and the business.

**Topics could include:**

- Communicating with colleagues and clients, and managing their expectations
- Planning the handover
- Balancing different roles
- Health and wellbeing
- Setting goals and establishing boundaries.

**Return to work:** Providing support for new working parents will help them to re-integrate into the workplace – an environment which will have changed since they went on leave – and settle into a new routine. Coaching at this point can help an employee feel confident and valued, and comfortable that they've made the right decision to come back.

Sharing practical advice that helps working parents to integrate their new professional and personal roles, manage their careers and achieve a healthywork/life balance will ensure that they fully re-engage with the organisation.

**Topics could include:**

- Ensuring visibility
- Developing a sustainable approach to being a working parent
- Long term career paths and development
- Strategic networking and creating a profile
- Adapting to changes at different milestones.

Once a new parent has returned to work, it's easy for them to end up in 'survival mode' – keeping their head down and doing what's needed, and not investing in their future careers. It's also easy for their line manager to assume that's what they want. This is where people can become disengaged and demotivated – they may decide to leave five years down the line, but the seeds are sown in the first few months after their return. Coaching provides a platform for having that conversation about the future, and also creating a career path for the individual.

Is support available for dads as well as mums in your business – and do they know? Is it easy for them to have conversations about their options, including flexible working?

# 5. Changing the culture

**Line managers are responsible for many of the factors that lead to a successful transition – including managing the impact on the team, resourcing and allocating work, following the correct procedures, keeping in touch during leave and maintaining engagement.**

Many organisations in Ireland now provide unconscious bias training, and it's proving effective at breaking down the assumptions that could influence managers' decision-making. The line managers we speak to are certainly more thoughtful about where they are, and their approach and leadership style. This could be taken further, however.

Coaching for line managers as a formal part of all programmes for women and working parents will enable them to give sustained, high quality support. It will help them to understand their role in the transition and the needs of individuals, allay any fears and overcome perceived blockers.

If rolled out successfully, it will play its part in helping to build the inclusive culture that will allow women and working parents to succeed. Line managers play an important role in influencing culture, within the team and also organisationally, so the shift in behaviour should start with them.

An improved return rate is only the start of a successfully managed transition. What happens to working parents after three years back?

**Coaching for line managers could include:**

- Organising and managing cover
- Managing stakeholders' expectations
- Sustaining team dynamics and performance
- Keeping ambitions alive, whatever the speed of their career path
- The motivations and drivers for agile working.

It could also be worthwhile involving HR business partners in this coaching, as they're the main point of contact for many employees.

## BEST PRACTICE CASE STUDY: ESB INTERNATIONAL

ESB's commitment to working towards a diverse and inclusive workplace is supported by a number of initiatives including:

### Positive Parenting Programme:

Open to all parents – from new mums and dads up to parents of exam year and university students – this initiative has been very positively received. ESB developed the programme a number of years ago, working closely with an external coach, in response to its understanding of the challenges facing working parents in the organisation and putting a support in place that would allow working parents to bring their 'best self' to work.

The programme involves coaching-led 'lunch and learns' on a wide range of topics, including building confidence and self-esteem, dealing with teenagers, parents of exam year students, developing a parenting style, understanding millennials, creating a dynamic balance between work and family, positive discipline for children under 5, communication and conflict resolution, and managing change. Participants can also take away supporting material developed by the coach.

The objective of the programme is to support working parents in a realistic way – providing them with tips, tools and information for their role as parents.

### Maternity Positive Programme:

As part of the Maternity Positive Programme, ESB piloted group coaching sessions on 'Successfully Managing the Maternity Transition' with employees who were either at pre/during or post maternity leave stage. This programme also includes a Line Manager training session. It was important to gain a better understanding of what may or may not be working well, and explore what improvements can be made – e.g availability of information, communications, understanding impact for individual, having the conversations.

To make the support sustainable ESB links the programme back into other coaching and mentoring that happens across the company, as well as its health and wellbeing programme.

While ESB's workforce is male-dominated, traditionally more women attend the Positive Parenting seminars than men. Internal research to understand the experiences of working fathers of young children revealed that they faced similar challenges, pressures and worries, as working mothers and needed the same flexibility and supports. Specific actions to make them aware of the programme has resulted in a higher number of men attending.

"These programmes have been really successful. We get so much back from the programme, in terms of positive engagement in the workplace. Participants tell us 'I really needed to have that conversation!'"

**Bernie O'Connor,**  
**Equality and**  
**Diversity Officer,**  
**ESB Group**

## 6. Set up for success

For support around the maternity and paternity transitions to land well and achieve its objectives, an organisation needs to:

**Get the right backing:** Momentum can only be sustained if support is championed and driven by senior stakeholders in the business, otherwise lack of time, heavy workloads and 'business as usual' will see it tumbling down the priority list. Engaging leaders, both male and female, will make providing support a crucial business issue rather than an HR issue. Get them to think about the long term payoff – diversity in the leadership team resulting in better decision-making, for example – using the risk agenda as the trigger for action.

**Communicate the 'why' – putting the business case at the heart of communication:** Engaging the whole organisation in the programme is critical, not only to get 'bums on seats' for an initiative, or to demonstrate to leaders why it should be a priority for the business. The way a programme is positioned will positively influence perceptions of this kind of support, countering objections and helping to activate company-wide shifts towards more inclusive behaviour. Moving it away from just being about 'women' and 'maternity' can be helpful – making it clear the support is about flexibility of approach in order to meet individuals' needs and sustain their performance.

**Evaluate and measure success against objectives – then share it:** Targets or goals (not quotas) could be good triggers for leaders in the business. No-one wants to be seen as biased, after all, and targets make the benefits more tangible. Programme evaluation should include reviews and assessment, and recommendations for improvement.

**Link in with other initiatives:** Joining the dots will help create a structured programme and plan of support that extends beyond the parental transition and into broader career progression initiatives. Talking Talent always looks to integrate its maternity, progression and executive coaching programmes into the wider organisational talent strategy.

**Open minds to more flexible career paths:** If the organisation is aware of – and comfortable with – the possibility of career paths that may look more like jungle gyms than ladders, this will help make life as a working parent more sustainable for employees. Coaching will provide a platform for working parents to talk to line managers about pacing, and help line managers understand that just because an employee wants to tread a more flexible or steady path for a while doesn't mean they're not interested in a strong future career.



## 7. The difference it makes

**It's the beginning of the journey for many organisations in Ireland, but those that have invested in structured support for working parents are reporting that the business impact of the transition has been minimised, and the performance levels of working parents are sustained.**

They find that offering quality support at a challenging time engenders loyalty and engagement. Employees feel valued – even making sure their desk, phone and logins are ready for them when they return from leave sends positive messages to an individual. They are then investing this energy back into the organisation: the business has helped them achieve what they need to, so they'll do the same in return.

Savings in attrition costs are expected as a result. Women and working parents stay with the organisation, and make a full contribution, because they're able to manage their careers, feel more satisfied and fulfilled, and have a clear future vision and a strategy for getting there. Companies also tell us that their reputation and visibility has improved, both internally and externally. Being known as a great place to work, or winning a 'Top employer for working parents' award strengthens the brand and helps attract fresh talent.

As Ireland's economy improves, new career opportunities and choices are emerging and talented people have begun to look around. Businesses need to make a proactive effort to hold on to – and get the best from – their talented people. Providing support around the maternity and paternity transition is a point of difference that organisations can grab on to right now. Being an early mover will give them a competitive edge as the battle for talent continues.



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