

# Return-to-work experiences of female employees following maternity leave

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## Abstract

*Corporate culture seemingly does not encourage talented women to return to the workplace or continue to operate effectively in the workplace, while managing their domestic responsibilities. This has a direct influence on the progression of talented women to senior positions and their retention in those positions (Baggallay 2011).*

*While the above statement may be a narrow view, considering shifts in many companies' policies which aim to support work-family balance, there are still many underlying concerns regarding working mothers.*

*The primary purpose of this study is to identify common themes arising from the return-to-work experiences of female employees following maternity leave in South Africa.*

*The results of this study revealed that despite viewing work positively, the participants in the study found the return-to-work experience after childbirth difficult. A significant change in the attitudes of the participants towards their careers after childbirth was also identified. This change is not necessarily negative and should not be interpreted as an indication of loss of interest by the employees in their careers. It does, however, highlight the need for adequate management of the whole process from "workplace pregnancy" to return to work of female employees.*

*Employers open to the evolution of best practice for maternity leave will attract and retain high-calibre female talent.*

**Key words:** *work experience, female employee, maternity leave*

## 1 Introduction

Belkin (2003) mentions that many women never get near the glass ceiling, because they are stopped long before by the maternal wall.

In previous decades, the most topical of all female workplace issues was that of "the glass ceiling" and the unwritten rules established by a male-dominated environment, which largely prohibited or limited women's membership of the "men only" executive lounge. With a shift towards workplace equality, the burning issue for our generation has less to do with the challenges facing women and more to do with the challenges facing mothers.

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With workplace equality comes a shift in the social panorama, as women are faced with questions such as: When is the least disruptive time to have children (if at all)? How soon do I return to work and will this affect my child's development?, and How do I maintain the balance between pursuing a successful career and meeting maternal/family obligations?

Even though research on career women, women in positions of leadership, multiple roles, coping strategies and mechanisms and role conflict has gained more prominence (Booyesen 2000; Brink & De la Rey 2001), there are still major misconceptions pertaining to mothers in the workplace. The influence of these misconceptions is evident from the number of companies reducing their expectations of hiring working mothers. In South Africa companies have reduced this expectation since 2010 (Regus 2011).

This study intends to shed light on the issues facing South African working mothers returning to the workplace after the birth of their first child and aims to identify relevant trends by tracking the individual factors which influence a mother's choice to return to work, the ideal length of maternity leave, the level of support from their employer and the way cultural nuances within the South African context define the experience.

The cost of losing a competent, skilled employee is always high and pregnancy is recognised as a time when a woman may reevaluate her career options (Regus 2011). Previous research indicates that despite strengthened legislation and in some cases enhanced organisational benefits, one in three women find it difficult or very difficult to return to work after maternity leave for various reasons (Morris 2008). These reasons include: concerns about childcare, missing their child, their child's missing them, financial issues, concerns about their ability to balance work-family relationships, attitude of supervisor and other employees upon return, and ability to perform optimally in both roles.

From an organisational point of view, one of the most damaging stereotypes is the belief that the pregnant employee is no longer committed to her job and may not return to work after childbirth (Halpert, Wilson & Hickman 1993). These beliefs are not limited to lower level employees. Hughes (1991:B1) notes that: "the biggest fear among many employers is that a once assertive woman executive will ease up on the job, then take paid maternity leave and never return". Such stereotypes are harmful to the extent that managers and supervisors act on them as though they represent the norm, leading to possible unfair discrimination against women who do not fit the stereotype.

In South Africa, women make up 51% of the population and 45% of the workforce (Baggallay 2011). Nearly 80% of South African women between the ages of 20 and 50 are mothers (Baggallay 2011).

Given these numbers, it is surprising that there is not more research regarding pregnant employees. There is an increasing need for organisations to better understand and accommodate the way professional women integrate motherhood and career breaks into their working lives. These career breaks (such as maternity leave) will need to be accommodated in order to make maximum use of the investment in the training and development of female employees (Gerber 2000).

Although women make up the majority of the global and South African workforce, when one looks at statistics of women in senior management, the numbers are not representative (Regus 2011). Corporate culture does not allow talented women to return to the workplace or continue to operate effectively in the workplace, while managing their domestic responsibilities and this is directly influencing the progression

of talented women to senior positions and their retention in those positions (Baggallay 2011; Seiger & Wiese 2008).

Consequently there is a need for a better understanding of the challenges facing female employees who are returning to work after maternity leave.

## **2 Problem statement**

Researchers have investigated the challenges facing pregnant employees and their experiences following maternity leave in developed countries such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom (Barrow 1998; Morris 2008). In emerging countries like South Africa there has been little research on this subject.

As companies begin to overcome the restrictions imposed by the economic downturn and strive for growth, there is an increasing need to repopulate affected positions with skilled staff. Working mothers can bring experience and invaluable skills to the organisation.

Some companies still have concerns about hiring working mothers, specifically that they may leave to have another baby, offer less commitment and present out-of-date skills (Regus 2011).

Globally, companies are becoming accustomed to the notion that flexible working practices are less expensive, leaner and better adapted to growth. This will probably lead to increased use of flexible working practices, resulting in the attraction of more working mothers to the workforce (Lyness, Thompson & Francesco 1999).

Locally, however, despite the work of researchers in South Africa (Gerber 2000; Riekert 2005) there are still considerable gaps in knowledge in this area. Corporate South Africa could benefit from being more aware of the changing needs and lifestyles of their talented female employees and attempting to create environments that are flexible and adaptable enough to accommodate/create capacity for diversity and new ways of conducting business (Baggallay 2011). A family-friendly work environment is rapidly moving from a nice-to-have to an essential benefit.

What is evident from the literature review is the difficulties working mothers are faced with on their return to work following maternity leave. These difficulties stem from a variety of areas. Not only are they concerned about the needs of their new infant, their own physical and mental wellness, readiness to return to work and increased financial responsibilities, they are also faced with the changing attitudes of their colleagues and managers on their return. Despite best practice and forward-thinking companies, there are still many misconceptions and stereotypes which make the return and reintegration of working mothers into the workforce after maternity leave difficult.

## **3 Purpose and objectives of the study**

The purpose of the study is to identify common themes arising from the return-to-work experiences of some female employees working in South Africa, following maternity leave.

If working mothers are to be fully utilised in employment in terms of their potential and value as a resource, an understanding of their lived experiences, with resultant recommendations, is needed to alter the negative perceptions of managers and colleagues. This could contribute to the framing of guidelines to aid the more effective reintegration of mothers into the workforce.

Thus the objectives of the study are to determine the following in respect of the female participants:

- the influence of childbirth on female employees' attitudes towards their careers/jobs;
- reasons female employees decide to return or not to return to employment following childbirth;
- the ideal length of maternity leave ensuring optimal readiness of the female employee;
- the main concerns of female employees upon returning to work after maternity leave; and
- the nature of the experiences of female employees upon returning to work from maternity leave.

## **4 Methodology**

The research was conducted in natural settings where the social perspectives of the specific context (experiences of women returning to work after giving birth) were investigated. A qualitative research approach was used. In qualitative research, the researcher's role is to describe the phenomenon as it appears, rather than focusing on a pre-determined framework. This study is inductive in nature, as the study does not apply an existing theory or hypothesis, but takes the natural setting as its point of departure and describes the events as they unfold (Babbie & Mouton 2006).

This research approach was in line with the scientific beliefs or ontology of the researchers regarding the nature of social phenomena. The researchers support a social constructionist point of view, in terms of which they believe that perceptions of experiences of returning to work after maternity leave are created by the participants as actors within the specific situation.

Regarding the epistemology of the researchers, they aimed to gain an understanding of the experiences mentioned by the female participants by using unstructured, flexible methods (Burden 2006). A relatively unstructured and flexible research approach of this nature was deemed appropriate because of its naturalistic perspective and its focus on an interpretive understanding of human experience (Schurink 2005).

### **4.1 Research setting and sample**

During 2011, seven female employees whose eldest child is two years old or less were selected with the aid of convenience sampling. The participants considered for selection were those who were working for an employer (that is, not self-employed) while pregnant with their first child and when they went on maternity leave.

Quantitative studies using this sample could be subject to bias. It would then be difficult to make generalisations regarding the experiences of female employees who returned to work after childbirth, as the study only focused on seven such employees. However, this was a qualitative study that aimed to determine female employees' perspectives on their experiences related to returning to work after the birth of their first child. The resulting conceptual framework should be tested in a quantitative study with a larger sample.

Table 1 contains biographical details of the sample group.

**Table 1**  
**Sample group information**

Race	Age	Marital status	Child age	Highest qualification	Occupation
White	27	Married	24 months	BCom (Hons)	Wealth manager
White	35	Married	20 months	Matric	Call centre agent
White	31	Married	6 months	BCom	Senior credit controller
Black	26	Married	12 months	BCom (Hons)	Human resources partner
White	27	Married	10 months	Certificate	Senior account executive
Black	27	Single	11 months	Diploma	Administrative assistant
White	26	Married	24 months	BCom (Hons)	School teacher

#### **4.2 Data collection procedure**

Data were collected by means of a combination of semi-structured, in-depth interviews and follow-up interviews. The interviews were recorded to facilitate better data capturing as well as interpretation of the data (the data were transcribed immediately after every session). Other methods of data capture such as research notes were also used. The interviews were semi-structured, with a set of predetermined questions that defined the line of inquiry. Questions were designed to elicit information that highlighted a holistic understanding of the participant's return-to-work experiences following maternity leave. The interviews included a range of open-ended questions (to elicit a description of the situation), closed questions (to elicit specific information) and probing questions (to explore a particular focus of direction or significance to the research area).

Individual follow-up interviews were also held with all the participants. The follow-up interviews were conducted telephonically and notes were taken. This allowed the researcher the opportunity to further explore emerging concepts.

The combination of the interviews and follow-up interviews had the added benefit of allowing for continuous enrichment of the data collected within the sample.

The interview guide consisted of the following questions:

- How has childbirth influenced your attitude towards your career and/or job?
- What would be the ideal length of time after childbirth to return to employment, from your perspective/experience?
- What reasons would you cite if you decided not to return to employment following childbirth?
- What are your main concerns upon returning to work after maternity leave?
- How are you experiencing work after returning from maternity leave?

#### **4.3 Recording, managing and analysing the data**

A grounded theory approach was used in the data analysis. The focus was on both introducing order and structure to the data and on interpretation. The interview data were recorded and transcribed. Data analysis followed, and new ideas and facts that emerged during the analysis were added. For the purpose of the study, the researcher used coding to analyse the data. The initial mass of data was reduced by means of open coding thematic content analysis (Strauss & Corbin 2007). This was followed by the use of axial coding (procedures to put data together in new ways by making connections between categories) and selective coding (the selection of core categories, systematically relating them to other categories, validating relationships and identifying categories needing further refinement and development) (Strauss & Corbin 2007).

#### 4.4 Data quality

Qualitative research does not evaluate reliability and validity in the same manner as quantitative research, but is more concerned with the notion of trustworthiness, which can generally be measured through the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

A number of strategies were utilised to enhance the research quality of the study in line with the criteria mentioned. These were: (1) the use of initial and further follow-up interviews with participants to enhance data triangulation, (2) continuation of the data collection process until it was decided that a saturation point had been reached, (3) keeping of field and methodological notes—consisting of code notes, actual coding products, and theoretical notes to explore the inductive reasoning behind the category formation, (4) the use of a peer debriefing process, where an initial draft of this report was submitted to two independent researchers who are well versed in qualitative data analysis and whose suggestions were incorporated into the final document, and (5) regular discussions between the two researchers conducting this study to discuss the strategy, execution and progress of this research.

Through the use of both purposive sampling methods and “thick” detailed descriptions of the research setting, context and process, the criterion of transferability was addressed (Babbie & Mouton 2006). A confirmability audit trail was established through the storage of all data, as well as all field, methodological and theoretical notes in a systematic hard copy file (Babbie & Mouton 2006).

## 5 Results

The results of the data analysis through the thematic coding process utilised are depicted in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Results derived from the thematic coding process**

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
Love job Very good Enjoy work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attitude before</li> <li>• Attitude after</li> <li>• Reasons for change</li> </ul>	JOB ATTITUDE
Not as good as before Distracted/unfocused Hate job		
Relationship with baby Family first priority No change		
Ideal family situation Work commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Views about work and family</li> <li>• Employer commitment</li> <li>• Career satisfaction</li> </ul>	WORK ORIENTATION
Changed positions after birth Remained with current employer: - “Company too far; too much time away from baby” - “Temporary to accommodate family”		
Month of return Company policy Maternity leave sufficient Ideal maternity leave Benefit of longer maternity leave	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time planning</li> <li>• Health/personal</li> <li>• Readiness to work</li> </ul>	ENVIRONMENTAL AND HEALTH ASPECTS
Healthy (mental and physical) Mentally well, physically not well Physically well; mentally not well		
Readiness to return		

continued/

Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding
Financial enjoyment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reasons for return</li> <li>• Concerns</li> <li>• Stress</li> </ul>	PERSONAL EXPERIENCE
Personal concerns: Good support structure; bond with baby; health; baby's adjustment		
Professional concerns: Performance; insecurity		
Guilt Concern Don't want to go back	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experience</li> <li>• Challenges</li> <li>• Treatment</li> </ul>	RETURN EXPERIENCE
Experience upon return Difficulty		
None Breast milk Concentration		
Management efforts Suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reintegration</li> <li>• Contact</li> <li>• Special arrangements</li> </ul>	ORGANISATIONAL ASPECTS
Time Sick children		

The coding process led to the identification of six major selective coding themes, namely: Job attitude; Work orientation; Environmental and health aspects; Personal experience; Return experience; Organisational aspects. Each of these themes is discussed in relation to its corresponding axial and open coding themes.

### 5.1 Job attitude

Within this theme two axial coding subthemes were identified, namely: Attitude before childbirth and Attitude after childbirth.

#### *Attitude before childbirth*

This subtheme relates to the attitudes of the female employees towards their jobs before childbirth. The overall theme showed positive results, with all seven participants indicating a positive attitude towards their jobs.

Combining the above produced the first axial code, which represented the attitudes of the female employees before childbirth as positive.

#### *Attitude after childbirth*

This subtheme relates to the attitudes of the female employees towards their jobs after the birth of their first child. A significant change was identified within this theme, with four of the participants indicating a change in their attitudes towards their jobs.

The second axial code discussed above identified a change in the attitudes of the female employees towards their jobs following the birth of their first child.

Further investigation led to the identification of a third subtheme (reason for change), which is concerned with the reasons for the changes in attitude. The following open codes related to this theme were identified: relationship with baby, family first priority, and no change.

### 5.2 Work orientation

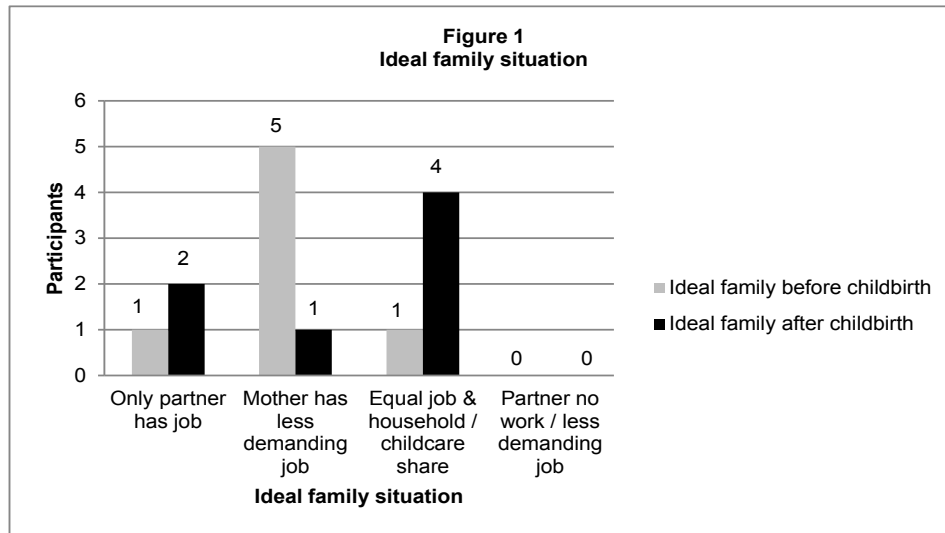
This theme relates to the overall orientation of the participants to work. Three axial coding subthemes were identified within this theme, namely: views about work and family, employer commitment and career satisfaction.

### Views about work and family

This subtheme comprises two open coding themes: ideal family situation and work commitment.

- Ideal family situation

This theme relates to the participants' ideal family situation before and after childbirth. The participants' ideal family situations before and after childbirth are depicted in Figure 1.



Before birth the majority of participants indicated that their ideal family situation would be for the mother to have a less demanding job and a larger share of household and childcare duties. After childbirth the trend changed to a preference for equal job responsibilities and shared household and childcare duties.

Reasons for the changes include: Job flexibility, Family/child first priority, Shared responsibility (workload and two incomes).

- Work commitment

The participants showed a slight orientation towards not working after becoming mothers, with four participants indicating that they would not work if they did not need to for financial reasons. Three participants indicated that they would like to continue working.

### Employer commitment

This theme relates to the commitment/loyalty of the participants towards their current employer. The following open codes were combined to create the Employer commitment subthemes: Changed positions after birth and Remained with current employer.

- Changed positions after birth

Four participants did not change positions. Two participants changed positions because of promotions within the same company and one participant changed employers as a result of the company's refusal to accommodate her family situation.



- Remained with current employer

Four participants indicated that they had no intention of changing their employer. Three participants indicated that they intended to change employers, in two cases for reasons related to their baby/familial situations.

#### *Career satisfaction*

This theme considers the satisfaction of the participants with their career choice.

Five participants indicated they are still very satisfied with their current career choices. Two participants indicated they were no longer satisfied with their career choices, but the change in career satisfaction of only one of these two participants was related to the birth of her child.

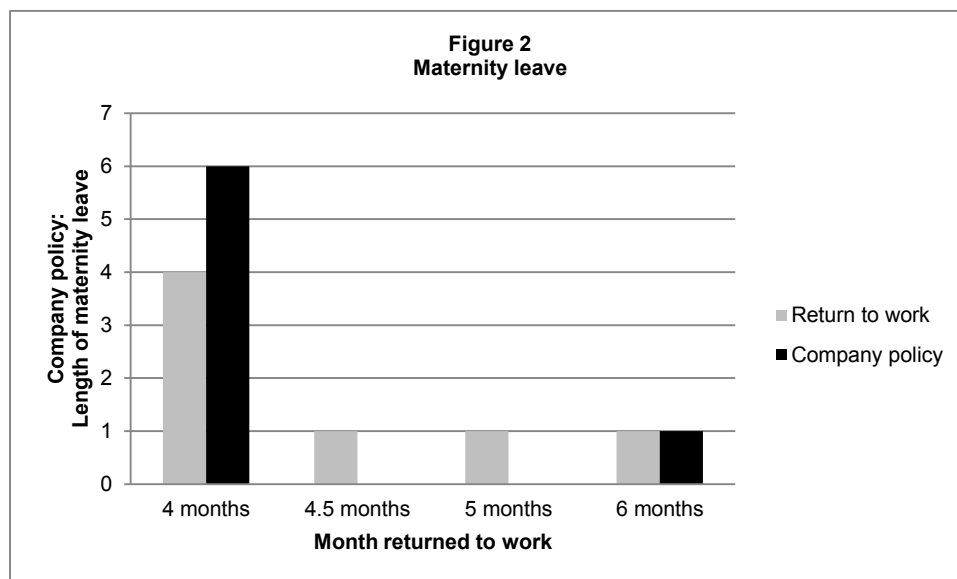
### **5.3 Environmental and health aspects**

This selective coding theme investigated aspects relating to the working environmental and health of the participants that affected their time planning with regard to returning to work and their health and readiness to return to work after giving birth. Three axial coding subthemes were identified within this theme, namely time planning, health and readiness to work.

#### *Time planning*

The open codes identified to create this axial code include: month of return, company policy and ideal maternity leave.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of those returning to work by the month in which they returned, as well as the length of maternity leave prescribed by company policy.



- Company policy

Most of the companies comply with the prescribed minimum of three months' maternity leave in terms of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, with the exception of one company, which offers six months' maternity leave. With regard to salary during

maternity leave, four participants received no salary or benefits and needed to claim from the Unemployment Insurance Fund. One of the participants who were unpaid received subsidies from her company for her pension and medical aid. These were still paid by the company while she was on maternity leave, but upon her return she had six months to repay these amounts to the company. One participant received 75% of her salary for the duration of her four months of maternity leave and had the option of taking a further one month's unpaid maternity leave. One participant received 33% of her salary while on maternity leave and claimed the rest from UIF, and the last participant received her full pay during her four months of maternity leave (she also had the option to apply for a further six months' unpaid maternity leave).

- Month of return

Four participants returned after four months, when their prescribed maternity leave was over. One participant returned after six months, which was the period of her prescribed maternity leave. Two participants extended their leave using holiday leave that they had accumulated, returning at four-and-a-half months and five months.

- Maternity leave sufficient

When asked whether maternity leave was sufficient, five participants replied that it was not enough and two participants replied that it was enough.

- Ideal maternity leave

Five participants indicated that the prescribed maternity leave was not sufficient. Table 5 shows the ideal length of maternity leave according to the participants.

**Table 3**  
**Ideal maternity leave**

Ideal length of maternity leave	Number of participants
6 months	5
6–8 months	1
7–8 months	1

All the participants indicated that the ideal length of maternity leave would be at least six months. Reasons for selecting this period can be categorised as follows: baby bigger, better bonding and awareness, baby starting to eat solids and able to breastfeed for longer.

- Benefit of longer maternity leave

Two participants said they would not have benefited from longer maternity leave, whereas four participants indicated that they and their baby would have benefited from longer maternity leave. One participant was indifferent about the benefits of a longer period of maternity leave.

Among the reasons for benefiting from a longer maternity leave, the following themes emerged: breastfeeding and mother's care for baby.

### *Health*

This theme explored the health of the female employees upon return from maternity leave. The overall response was positive, with five of the participants being in good health, both mentally and physically. One participant indicated that she was mentally well, but not physically. One participant indicated that she was physically well, but not mentally.

### *Readiness*

This theme looked at the readiness of the participants to return to work following maternity leave.

Four of the participants indicated that they were not ready to return to work because they wanted to be with their babies. Three participants indicated they were ready to return to work, two of whom cited good support as their reason for being ready to return to work.

## **5.4 Personal experience**

The discussion of reasons for returning to work after the birth of a baby, together with concerns and stress regarding work, gave rise to the fourth selective coding theme: Personal experience. Three axial coding subthemes were identified, namely: Reasons for return, Concerns and Stress.

### *Reasons for return*

Two open code subthemes were identified within the theme of reasons for returning to work: Financial and Enjoyment of job.

### *Concerns*

Participants were asked to indicate all their concerns about returning to work. Two open code categories of concerns emerged: *Personal concerns* and *Professional concerns*.

- Personal concerns

Two participants indicated that they had no concerns. Both of these indicated a “Good support structure” as the reason they were not concerned.

Among the five participants who had personal concerns, a number of open code themes were identified: Bond with baby, Health and Baby's adjustment to school/caregiver.

- Professional concerns

Three participants indicated that they had no concerns. One of these participants experienced no professional concerns because her mind was occupied with her baby (and she felt she was on the verge of resigning within the first week).

Four participants had professional concerns. Two open code themes were identified, namely: Performance and Insecurity.

### *Stress*

The participants were asked whether they had experienced any work-related stress while on maternity leave: four participants denied doing so and three acknowledged this.

The reasons for experiencing stress while on maternity leave were indicated as: feeling guilty about not working, being concerned about whether they were being missed and not wanting to go back.

## **5.5 Return experience**

This selective coding theme relates to three axial coding subthemes that were identified, namely: Experience, Challenges and Treatment.

### *Experience*

This theme relates to the identified open coding subthemes of how the female employees experienced their work upon return from maternity leave and how they rated

their return in terms of how difficult they found it to return to work.

- Experience of work on return

The overall theme was relatively positive, with four participants experiencing their work in a positive light and three participants having a negative experience.

- Difficulty

Despite experiencing their work in a positive light upon return, the majority rated the overall return to work as difficult. Four participants found the experience difficult, but for three of these the difficulty didn't last long and after the first month their experiences improved. Three participants did not find the experience difficult.

### *Challenges*

This theme conveys the challenges involved in adjusting to work after maternity leave.

Three participants said they experienced no challenges in adjusting to their work. One participant said she had lost interest and did not care and therefore did not experience any challenges. Three participants did experience challenges in adjusting to work.

The open code themes relating to these challenges were: Expressing milk, Concentration, and Time.

### *Treatment*

This theme relates to whether the female participants were treated differently upon their return to work. Four participants said they were not treated differently. Three participants said they were treated differently. One of these three participants responded that she was not treated differently, and the other two said that they were treated differently but in a positive way.

## **5.6 Organisational aspects**

This selective coding theme relates to three axial coding subthemes, namely: Reintegration, Contact and Special arrangements.

### *Reintegration*

This theme relates to the identified open coding subthemes of efforts of management to reintegrate the employee into the workplace after maternity leave (Management efforts), as well as the employees' opinions/suggestions on how the organisation could have improved on what was done to make reintegration after maternity leave easier (Improvement).

- Management efforts

The overall experience of this aspect was negative, as five participants indicated that management had made no effort to reintegrate them into the workplace. Two participants had a more positive experience in this regard.

- Improvement

Four participants said there was nothing that could have been done by management to improve their return-to-work experience. Despite a significant negative response from five participants to the question on the previous aspect, only three of these participants had suggestions on how management could have done more to improve their return-to-work experience.

### *Contact*

Four participants indicated that they were not contacted by their employer while on maternity leave. One participant indicated that there was no contact, but she did receive flowers while in hospital. Three participants indicated that they were contacted by their employers while on maternity leave.

Of the three participants who were contacted by their employers, two said that this contact related to the employer's establishing whether the birth had gone well and whether the return date would still be as agreed. One participant indicated that the employer's contact only related to a job opportunity within the organisation.

### *Special arrangements*

Three participants indicated that no special working arrangements to accommodate their families have been made for them. Four participants indicated that they do have special working arrangements.

With regard to special arrangements, two open coding themes were identified, relating to time and sick children.

## **6 Discussion of results**

The results of this study will be discussed in accordance with the research objectives and the stated questions, and the corresponding selective and axial coding themes for each objective, as identified through the data analysis coding process.

### **6.1 *The influence of childbirth on the participants' attitude towards their careers/jobs***

Selective code: Job attitude

Axial codes:

#### *Attitude before childbirth and Attitude after childbirth*

According to the results, there was a significant change in the attitudes of the participants towards their careers/jobs after giving birth to their first child. Before childbirth all the participants were positive and optimistic about their jobs.

The attitudes of the participants changed after childbirth, but they were not necessarily negative towards their jobs (with a few exceptions). These changes may be due to the role conflict experienced by the participants who are new to the many roles of working mothers. Most of the participants reported being distracted and unfocused. This may be due to the difficulty experienced by the new mother in stepping out of the maternal role and into the role of employee.

The participants ascribed their changes in attitude to the new relationship with their babies and the realisation that family is their first priority. Two participants experienced no change in attitude towards their jobs after childbirth. One participant said she experienced no change because her job offered enough flexibility to accommodate her family, whereas the other participant simply experienced no change in her attitude owing to her love for her job.

The distinction made by Schwartz (in Gerber 2000) between career-primary women and career-and-family women was discussed in the literature review. The participants who experienced no change are likely to be career-primary women, whereas the participants who did experience change are most likely career-and-family women or just family women who are forced to work for financial reasons.

Riekert and Taute (2009) found that the role conflicts experienced by mothers could create dissatisfaction and frustration.

The participants who experienced no change in their attitudes towards their jobs or were still positive about their jobs after childbirth despite being distracted, had a generally positive outlook on their work-life situation. This supports the findings of Working Mother (2010) that the way women view their employment situation has an enormous implication for their attitudes about work and life.

## **6.2 Participants' reasons for returning or not returning to employment following childbirth**

Selective code: Work orientation

Axial codes:

### *Views about work and family*

A significant tendency identified was that before childbirth the trend was towards the mother's having a less demanding job and after childbirth the trend changed to both partners' having an equally demanding job and share of household and childcare responsibilities, or the mother having no job at all. These results are similar to the findings of Morris (2008), in which 55% of working mothers from the particular research sample indicated that their ideal family situation was an equal job and share of childcare and 38% indicated a preference for the mother having a less demanding job and a larger share of childcare.

There were a number of reasons for the change in the participants' ideal family situations: the flexibility offered by certain employers, thereby making the marriage of a working mother's roles possible; the realisation of the importance of family and the desire to make it the first priority and to the main reason was shared responsibility. The shift towards both partners having equal jobs was mostly due to the need for shared responsibility. It appears that the economic climate has influenced these opinions, as a child brings new costs and in the current economic climate both salaries are needed to make ends meet or to maintain a certain standard of living (Gerber 2000; Riekert & Taute 2009).

Furthermore, it seems likely that the women have developed a "taste" for employment and the elements that accompany working, namely financial, social and emotional independence (Gerber 2000; Riekert & Taute 2009; Spiteri & Xuereb 2012). This situation relates to the women's satisfying their underlying needs as working mothers while at the same time they are able to progress through, for example, Maslow's hierarchy of needs in terms of their working career.

### *Employer commitment and career satisfaction*

According to Desai and Waite (1991), work commitment refers to the importance of work in an individual's life and may predict a woman's employment. Work commitment can also influence certain occupational characteristics, that is, compared to women with lower work commitment, women with strong work commitment may be less responsive to the characteristics of occupations that make it easy (or hard) to combine work with childrearing (Desai & Waite 1991).

The participants in this study showed that they are committed to their employers, with only one participant changing employers upon returning from maternity leave. The same participant also plans to leave her current employer. A further two participants

intend to change employers in the future. Two participants also changed positions (with the same employer) upon their return to work.

According to Gerber (2000), the effects of maternity leave on a female employee's career are potentially devastating with, at best, maternity leave representing temporary career stagnation. This was not confirmed in the case of the two participants who changed positions upon their return from maternity leave, as the change was due to promotion. One participant was in the process of being promoted before she left on maternity leave and the other was informed, while on maternity leave, that there was an opportunity for promotion and was asked whether she was interested.

Among mothers returning to work, those who change employers soon after returning often do so for higher pay and/or reduced working hours (Henderson 2006). The latter is true of the participant who changed employers upon her return from maternity leave. The participant was employed in the hospitality industry. This industry, however, requires its employees to work long hours and do shift work, which means working at irregular times.

The participant's baby was born prematurely and upon her return she asked her employer if she could work day shifts only, for the first month. The employer refused and the participant resigned.

Perhaps the employer in this case felt that the request was a sign of a change in attitude and organisational commitment on the part of the participant. According to Gerber (2000), organisations view career adjustments as indicative of a dramatic change in organisational commitment, which most women feel is not true.

The participant's resignation was due to her employer's refusal to accommodate her new role as a working mother. The participant has left the hospitality industry (saying that she is dissatisfied with her career choice as it does not accommodate this new phase of her life) and has taken a job as a receptionist, which allows her more flexibility to accommodate her child. She maintains that this is a temporary situation until she can find another job that she is more passionate about, but that will also accommodate her role as a mother. She intends leaving her current employer within the next year. Belkin (2003) found that although not all mothers leave completely, they tend to scale down or redefine their roles in the crucial career-building years (25 to 44), thus affecting their future career prospects.

With regard to the other two participants who intend changing employers in future, one of these participants wants to change employers for career reasons (including increased income) and the other wants to change employers because of changes at work (which affect the time she spends away from her baby).

Although the majority of the participants (five out of seven) expressed satisfaction with their current career choices, the former participant is no longer satisfied with her career choice as she feels she should have chosen a better paid career. The latter participant is committed to her employer and grateful for their accommodation of her new role as a working mother, but the employer moved premises soon after her return and is now too far from her home. Because the new premises are far away she is spending more time travelling and less with her child. This is the reason why she intends changing employers. Again, this supports the findings of Henderson (2006), that among mothers returning to work those who move to a different employer often do so for higher pay and/or reduced hours.

### **6.3 Ideal length of maternity leave ensuring optimal readiness of the participants**

Selective code: Environmental and health aspects

Axial codes:

#### *Time planning*

Six of the seven participants were given the prescribed minimum maternity benefit in terms of length of maternity leave (i.e. four months) and one participant was given six months' maternity leave.

In a study conducted in the United Kingdom, Morris (2008) found that 57% of participants received more than their statutory maternity pay, but the amount of pay in addition to the statutory maternity benefit was not found to influence the length of maternity leave. Similarly, in this study the amount of pay was not found to affect the length of maternity leave. However, with regard to pay only 42% of the participants (3 participants) in this study received compensation during the maternity leave period. Four participants had unpaid leave and the onus was on them to claim from the Unemployment Insurance Fund.

With regard to the companies that offered compensation, only one participant received her full monthly salary for the duration of her four-month maternity leave (she also had the option to apply for a further six months' unpaid maternity leave). The other two participants received a portion of their monthly salaries. One participant received 75% of her salary and had the option of taking a further one month's unpaid maternity leave and the other participant received 33% of her salary and claimed the rest from UIF.

Four participants returned to work after their maternity leave had ended at four months and two participants extended their maternity leave, making use of accrued vacation leave and returning to work after four-and-a-half months and five months. The participant who was offered six months' maternity leave returned to work at the end of the six-month period.

These findings correspond with the findings of Morris (2008), indicating that the majority of participants' return to work corresponded with the end of their paid leave, while other participants extended their maternity leave using accrued vacation leave, which explains the lag in the reported month of return of some participants.

Morris (2008) found that the amount of maternity leave taken by participants varied significantly between organisations employing 50–500 people and those employing 5000 or more people, with the latter offering on average four weeks more than the former.

None of the participants in this study chose to return to work before her maternity leave had ended. In fact, five participants indicated that four months' maternity leave was not sufficient and that they would have benefited from a longer period of maternity leave. (Two mothers specifically would have benefited from a longer maternity leave owing to complications experienced during their pregnancies and their babies being born prematurely.)

All the participants consider the ideal length of maternity leave to be at least six months. Reasons for this choice include: the size of the baby and the baby's readiness for solid foods, the baby's having achieved more milestones at this stage (including sitting), being able to bond better with the baby because of increased awareness and



concerns over not being able to continue breastfeeding after returning to work. Two mothers said they tried to continue breastfeeding upon their return to work but needed to supplement with formula because of a drop in milk supply caused by not having their baby to stimulate milk production during the day.

#### *Health and readiness to work*

The majority of participants indicated that they were not ready to return to work at the end of their maternity leave. This was not necessarily related to the participants' health, as three of the respondents were mentally and physically well, with only two participants indicating that they were not very well, one participant saying she was not well mentally and one participant saying she was not well physically. Morris (2008) similarly found that only 10% of participants indicated that they felt ill, exhausted, tired and uncomfortable at the end of maternity leave.

The primary reason cited for not being ready to return to work was the need/desire of the participants to be with their babies for longer.

Three participants indicated that they were ready to return to work, two of whom attributed their readiness to good support at home and one participant saying she just really wanted to get back to work. She is possibly a career-primary woman as defined by Schwartz (in Gerber 2000).

### **6.4 Main concerns of participants upon returning to work after maternity leave**

Selective code: Personal experience

Axial codes:

#### *Reasons for return*

Four participants returned to work purely for financial reasons, two participants returned because of their love/enjoyment of their jobs as well as for financial reasons and one due to personal satisfaction and love of working.

Morris (2008) arrived at similar research findings, namely that the most common reasons for returning to work are financial necessity (68%), desire for intellectual stimulation (48%) and desire for social contact with other adults (35%).

A study by Riekert and Taute (2009) identified the reasons of South African women for pursuing paid work outside the home. These reasons include: financial, socialisation, recognition and technological development. All the motivations for taking paid work outside the home make the working mother financially, emotionally and socially more independent.

Riekert and Taute (2009) and Gerber (2000) found that the financial reasons for working are not only financial pressures but also the desire to maintain a higher standard of living and provide for children's needs. Young women have also developed a "taste" for employment.

#### *Personal and professional concerns/Stress experienced*

Two participants indicated no personal concerns about returning to work. These participants also felt ready to return to work, as mentioned previously. Both these participants indicated that they had good support structures in terms of childcare at home.

Childcare seems to be the greatest concern for working mothers, with four participants citing childcare as a concern upon their return to work. Other concerns

include losing the bond with their babies and their babies' health. These findings support those of Morris (2008), who identified the most common concern about returning to work as being related to childcare.

Two participants had no professional concerns at all and one participant said she had no professional concerns, but this was because her thoughts were with her baby to such an extent that she almost resigned within the first week of returning to work. This participant is, however, committed to her employer and does not intend to leave in the near future.

The research findings of Morris (2008) indicated that 21% of women had worries about managing multiple responsibilities and having enough time to do everything upon their return. Another 33% were concerned about the attitude of their boss and their colleagues, and 10% were concerned about job availability. The findings of this study confirm these concerns. Three participants were concerned about their ability to perform and meet their obligations in the light of becoming mothers and two participants were concerned that their employers did not "miss" them and that they would no longer have a job. These concerns were experienced as stressful while the participants were still on maternity leave.

### **6.5 Insight gained into the experiences of participants upon returning to work from maternity leave**

Selective code: Return experience

Axial codes:

#### *Experience and challenges*

Four participants in this study experienced their work as positive upon return, whereas three experienced their work negatively. Despite experiencing their work in a positive light upon return, the majority rated the overall return-to-work experience as difficult, which supports the research findings of Morris (2008) in which 39% of participants rated their return to work as "difficult" or "very difficult".

Morris (2008) found that 20% of participants had no problem adjusting to work again and 34% of participants had a hard time adjusting because they missed their child. Similarly, three participants (43%) in this study experienced no challenges in adjusting to work. However, another three participants (43%) did experience challenges and these challenges were probably the reason why they found the return to work "difficult".

Challenges experienced related to concerns regarding breastfeeding and managing multiple roles. With regard to breastfeeding, only one of the employers linked to this study provided a facility specifically for breastfeeding/expressing of milk, but this was just for one month (the participant was allowed to bring her baby to work for one month and she was given a special office in which to feed the baby and do her work). The participants who continued to breastfeed upon their return to work expressed milk in the ladies' room.

#### *Treatment*

Four participants felt that they were not treated differently upon their return to work. One participant felt she was treated differently and that she needed to prove that she was able to handle both roles. As mentioned in the literature study, it is unfair for female employees to be put in a position where they need to or feel that they need to re-prove themselves in a position which they have already occupied successfully.

According to Stoner and Hartman (1990), 80% of a sample of 633 women managers felt that their careers had suffered as a result of home and family responsibilities.

Two participants felt that they were treated differently but in a positive way. They welcomed this because although their commitment to their jobs has not changed, they themselves have changed and need to approach their work differently. According to Gerber (2000), the effects of pregnancy on an employee's career do not end with maternity leave, as women with children have to adjust their lofty career ideals and adapt their careers to their family responsibilities. As long as employers acknowledge that their employees need to change, the participants can continue to perform, but do so differently. Each individual, pregnancy and situation is unique and needs to be treated as such by employers.

Besides the results obtained and discussed in the above section in relation to the stated research objectives and the corresponding codes that were identified, an additional selective code and corresponding axial codes were identified through the data analysis process. These will also be discussed:

## **6.6 Organisational aspects relating to the return to work experience after maternity leave**

Selective code: Organisational aspects

Axial codes:

### *Reintegration and contact*

The results show a significant lack of real effort by management to reintegrate the returning employee into the workplace. Morris (2008) identified the process of returning to work as being equivalent to a workplace transition so that there is a need for proper integration in a similar way to on-boarding a new employee, inducting a new team member or rehabilitating an employee from long-term sick leave. Only about 11% of organisations have a formal support or coach/counsellor service available to women upon their return to work following maternity leave (Morris 2008).

Apart from an identified lack of effort by management to reintegrate an employee returning to the workplace from maternity leave, the majority of participants were seldom or never contacted by their employers while on maternity leave. This may have added to the difficulties experienced by participants upon their return to work.

Uncertainty over whether or when women will return to work is perceived to be one of the most difficult issues when dealing with pregnancy in the workplace (Regus 2011). Yet this problem could be alleviated by an effort on the part of employers and some communication during maternity leave.

Suggestions by the participants to improve reintegration include: considering requests for work flexibility (at least for a few months after the employee has returned to work), acknowledgement by managers that the female employee's circumstances have changed and the provision of day care facilities at work (participants are willing to pay for this service). A day care facility at work would allow for continued breastfeeding.

### *Special arrangements*

Four participants have special working arrangements. These special arrangements are related to time off and sick leave.

With regard to time off, arrangements include: mothers leaving work at 16:30; flexible working arrangements (if longer hours are worked participant can take time off work at

a later stage); working hours changed to accommodate the nanny employed by the participant.

Two participants have special arrangements for times when their babies are ill. Their employer allows them to bring their baby to work and gives them time off to take the baby to the doctor. (This specific arrangement has resulted in increased employee commitment and these two participants would not consider leaving their employer.

The way in which requests for changes in working arrangements are managed affects how individuals feel about their relationship with their employer (Morris 2008). This is evident from two different scenarios. Two participants gave birth to premature babies and upon their return to work both of these participants requested special arrangements.

One participant requested a further month of maternity leave because of her baby's health problems. The employer declined but allowed the participant to bring her baby to work for one month. She was provided with a special office and was able to care for and feed her baby while she was at work. This participant has remained with her employer.

The other participant asked to be allowed to work morning shifts only for the first month so that she could care for her baby in the afternoons. The employer declined and had no alternative suggestions. The participant resigned immediately.

Desai and Waite (1991) identified several useful pointers on how to retain women employees, namely: positive attitude, focus on opportunities and not difficulties, cooperation and good communication between employee and employer, development of a joint plan and regular reviews. The results of this study support these findings as it was indicated that communication would have improved the experience of returning to work for the participants and for the employers. A proper plan for managing the return to work of female employees after giving birth would alleviate many stressors for employees and employers.

## **7 Conclusions**

The following general conclusions can be drawn from this study:

The results indicated a significant change in the attitudes of the participants towards their careers after childbirth. For the most part this change seems to have an effect on how employees view their careers (specifically for career-and-family women). There were participants who experienced no significant change in attitude and these individuals can possibly be perceived as more career-oriented women.

The change in attitude is not necessarily negative and should not be interpreted as an indication of loss of interest on the part of the employees in their career. It does, however, seem to influence how an employee approaches her work. More effective ways of working are necessary in order for the employee to maximise her time at work and reduce the likelihood of having to take work home.

The management of the change in attitude is crucial, as proper management and coaching assistance could mean the difference between retaining an otherwise dedicated and hard-working employee or losing the employee either to another employer or from the workforce altogether.

The results indicated that the ideal amount of time off for the birth of a child from the participants' perspective is six months.

The study identified three reasons for returning to work after childbirth. The first is financial only. The second reason is enjoyment of work as well as a financial motive and the third reason is enjoyment and satisfaction.

The financial argument for working is probably the result of the present harsh economic times and increased expenses, but the argument for work for personal satisfaction is also compelling. Women have developed a taste for employment and the motivations that accompany it, namely socialisation, recognition and financial independence.

The arguments against returning to employment given by the participants were: wanting to be with the baby, missing the baby, feeling guilty about being away from the baby, concern for the baby's health/development/wellbeing and not wanting to miss important milestones and moments in the baby's life.

None of the participants in this study left employment after childbirth. The researcher is of the opinion that only one of them was in a position to choose to stop working. None of the participants is higher than middle management nor are their husbands/partners earning substantial salaries and therefore none of the participants has a real choice with regard to leaving employment to be with her baby.

At the same time none of the employees is earning so little that she cannot afford proper childcare and has to stay at home to care for the baby, which would increase the financial pressures.

Childcare and a good support system that ensures that the baby is cared for seem to be the main concern of the participants. The other concerns for working mothers are: their babies' health and fear of losing the bond with their babies. These are personal concerns but certain professional concerns were also voiced.

The main professional concern experienced by female employees after returning to the workplace has to do with their ability to perform and discharge their obligations. Other concerns include: anxiety about whether they were missed by their employers and job security or availability of work upon their return.

Just over half of the participants in this study viewed their actual work in a positive light upon return from maternity leave, but this did not make the experience of returning to work any easier and the majority of participants found their overall return-to-work experience difficult.

The challenges encountered could explain why the participants found returning to work difficult. These challenges include: concerns regarding breastfeeding and managing multiple roles.

In general the participants did not feel that they were treated differently upon their return to work, but this was not necessarily viewed positively. Most employers did not communicate with the participants at all while they were on maternity leave nor did they acknowledge the change in the participants' circumstances. Acknowledgement of and sensitivity to the changes in the participants' lives would have made the overall return-to-work experience more positive.

## **8 Practical recommendations**

In relation to the findings of this study, the following practical recommendations, which would also be useful to employment relations practitioners or managers, are suggested:

As women are progressively starting to outnumber men in the workforce, employers need to respond to their desire for equitable opportunities to reach the upper ranks, if

they want to. Sheer demographics make this a simple reality and business results have proved its value (Working Mother 2010).

The first step in effectively managing working mothers and other employees is recognising that each individual and her situation is unique and that people have different talents, priorities and motivations. Furthermore, each pregnancy is unique and this needs to be taken into account.

Proper guidelines, workplace plans and programs for employers and employees alike need to be created to ensure a successful return to work and reintegration after maternity leave. Training and the effects of training (i.e. information) will reduce unfair discrimination and increase the success of programs. This view is supported by companies like IBM and Johnson & Johnson, both of which are leaders in the field of innovative work and family policies (Working Mother 2010).

Return-to-work training programs such as the *Returning to work guide for parents and employers* (Morris 2009) are useful. Such work guides need to include checklists for employers and employees relating to the steps to follow from the moment the employee informs the employer of the pregnancy. The aspects covered should include: planning a smooth transition, identifying key dates such as the due date and the dates of antenatal appointments, maternity leave and return to work and determining how these will be accommodated. Full information on company maternity policy and flexible working policies and handover plan and a back-to-work plan should be included in the guide.

The guide needs to be thorough but flexible enough to cater for unforeseen circumstances and events such as still births, difficult pregnancies and premature babies.

The provision of facilities such as lactation rooms and daycare will also help working mothers to balance their multiple roles. Other recommendations suggested by Gerber (2000) include less expensive forms of support such as the provision of a childcare room for use during school holidays, relaxation of telephone policies and the introduction of routine work breaks for parents to telephone home and check on children after school.

Family-friendly policies such as flexible working arrangements and work-scheduling changes can help to minimise the negative impact of work-family dynamics and could significantly improve the wellbeing of the working mother.

With solutions readily available on the market, there is no excuse for companies that understand the value that returning mothers can bring to the organisation to fail to reach out to them with family-friendly flexible work strategies (Regus 2011). These strategies will also contribute positively towards establishing trust in the workplace, honouring the psychological contract and effectively managing equity and fairness.

## **9 Limitations of the study**

The researchers' experience gained during this study led to the identification of a few limitations.

The sample size used for this study was quite small and although the participants were from various industries and companies, the researchers are of the opinion that a study conducted on a larger, more diverse group in terms of background, culture, race, socio-economic status, age and marital status would provide a better reflection of the situation in South Africa. Such a study would possibly identify additional variables considered by working mothers that ultimately affect their careers.

Another limitation is concerned with time, as the interviews were of a once-off nature with follow-up questions. A study conducted over a longer period would possibly have yielded more conclusive results.

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