



Special report: 5 key concerns for women returning to work

Tackling the concerns of women returning to work provides employers with an opportunity to increase the retention and engagement of women in the workplace using practical and innovative strategies. This latest research outlines those concerns.

Jen Brice of Akira Coaching recently asked women a series of questions in an online survey about their experience of returning to work after children. The research highlighted that although circumstances vary, women have very similar concerns when they return to work. 196 women responded to the survey and a substantial majority (78%) indicated that they were returning to work for financial reasons. The two other top reasons women return to work are adult interaction and career progression.

Returning to work then is a choice people make for a multitude of reasons, usually other than the joy of being at work. Compromises need to be made, pressure increases and the juggle of work and family life begins. For women, this often means being in the position of questioning priorities, making difficult decisions and re-evaluating how work fits into daily life.

The 5 key concerns for women that were highlighted in the return to work research are:

1. **Concerns about child care**

Child care was the most frequently reported, significant concern women identified in their return to work. The difficulty of finding care and being happy with the quality of care provided was reported by 66% of the women surveyed.

Some women identified the pressure of weighing up the financial and emotional costs of child care, questioning - is returning to work worth it? Other important considerations included - guilt about "doing the right thing", feeling sad about missing out on a special time, and worry about children being happy and looked after.

2. **Workplace flexibility**

For many women the very practical concerns of being able to pick up a child from daycare on time, being able to respond when a child is sick or being able to work part time or from home are important factors when they return to work. Women want their employers to understand that their children are the higher priority and for flexibility in the workplace to reflect that.

Many respondents also noted the need for personal and family flexibility. This dual work and family flexibility suggests the need for the boundaries between work and home life to be more fluid and accommodating of individual circumstances. In addition, the workplace must become more innovative if it is to retain and engage women in a meaningful way.

3. **Juggling the balance of work and family life**

The third most commonly identified concern for women returning to work was juggling what is often referred to as work/life balance. Contemplating past experiences of heavy workloads and long hours leave women wondering how they will meet the new demands of a young family. Women want to be available for the needs of young children, enjoy family life, spend time with their partner and squeeze in some personal time. However, women also have a strong commitment to achieving great outcomes in their work and progressing in their careers. Career progression was the third most common reason women give for returning to work.

The theme of many of the comments suggests that "balancing" work and family life is a significant challenge. As one woman comments, *"How will I make it all fit in – I am super organised and yet I still run out of time"*

4. Fulfilling expectations in the workplace

It was clear in the research responses, that women are committed to their work and want to meet the expectations of their employers, their colleagues, their clients and themselves. They are concerned about being up to date in their skills, fitting a demanding role into part time hours and achieving great outcomes. The inability to work back late or commit the same number of hours as they did prior to having a child is a concern for women.

The impact these factors could have on career progression was mentioned by 42 women as a significant concern. 31% of women surveyed returned to work to be able to progress in their careers, yet the options for progression seem to be limited by a perception of their reduced ability as well as a reduced capacity.

A couple of comments from the research: *"I'm concerned that I will not be given the same opportunities at work because I can no longer do 12 hour days without advance planning"* and *"I'm concerned about not being taken seriously and just being seen as a part time worker/mother"*.

5. Personal and family wellbeing

The impact of returning to work is experienced by women, their partners and their children. Tiredness, stress, pressure in relationships, worries about the emotional impact on children were commonly identified concerns.

Work/life balance is more than fitting everything in, the women responding to the research want quality time with family, healthy relationships and time to maintain their own optimum levels of health. A high level of self care was ranked as either important or very important by 92% of the respondents as a factor that improves the transition back to work. Women want and need to feel physically and psychologically well to be able to fulfill the responsibilities both at work and at home.

Lack of confidence is also an important factor mentioned by several women. This was further evident in comments about brain function, lack of sleep and being capable of fulfilling the work role. As one woman questions *"Can I have an intelligent conversation with someone after 8 months singing nursery rhymes?"*

These 5 concerns are clearly interconnected and stem from women wanting a workplace that is both flexible and understanding of their needs. Women want to minimize the impact of the return to work choice and maximize the value of that choice in terms of their career and their experience of work as a meaningful part of life. Women are committed to their families and their wellbeing but the research shows they are also committed to their work.

Consideration of these factors provides a foundation for understanding the concerns for women when they return to work. This data presents an opportunity for employers to maximize the value of women returning to work by incorporating their understanding in the development of innovative transition strategies. Both women and their employers benefit from thoughtful, practical approaches that optimize the experience of mothers in the workplace.

***To discuss focused strategies to suit your workplace,
or to learn about workshops or coaching programs,
contact Jen Brice on 0438 120 697 or email jen@akiracoaching.com.au.***

The full report will be available in August 2008