

Original Article

Bridging the Gap: Effective Management Practices for Women Returning to Work After Extended Child-Rearing Leave

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Abstract - A notable one million women in America remain absent from the labor force post-pandemic, highlighting a critical need to support women's return to work. The pandemic underscored long-standing challenges for working mothers, necessitating intentional organizational strategies to aid their career reintegration. Women exiting the workforce for motherhood represent a significant untapped resource, with their absence translating to a \$30 billion loss in potential earnings. Organizations around the globe, recognizing this, have initiated "returnship" programs to facilitate women's reentry into the workforce, with about 28% of global employers adopting such formal programs. This qualitative study, conducted through in-depth interviews and a focus group, captures the experiences and elevates the voices of women returning to the workforce after extended child-rearing leaves. Thematic analysis revealed that returning mothers face significant difficulties, including self-doubt and imposter syndrome, exacerbated by the perceived irrelevance of their past work experiences. Participants emphasized the critical role of mentorship, with effective mentors often being managers who understood the unique challenges faced by returning mothers. The study highlights that organizational support, empathy, and understanding from management are pivotal in ensuring these women not only reintegrate but thrive. Intentional strategies include realistic workload expectations, career development opportunities, and fostering an inclusive work environment. Managers' ability to offer practical resources and emotional support significantly impacts the success and well-being of returning mothers. By adopting strategic management practices, organizations can harness the full potential of this valuable talent pool, driving overall productivity and fostering a more inclusive workplace.

Keywords - Workforce reentry, Working mothers, Organizational support, Management support, Mentorship, Imposter syndrome.

1. Introduction

The United States Chamber of Commerce reports that there are over ten million job openings, yet only six million unemployed workers. Labor force participation has not recovered since the pandemic, with approximately one million women absent from the labor force compared to pre-pandemic levels (Ferguson & Lucy, 2022). Beyond the statistics, it is crucial to focus on supporting women in rebuilding their careers to prevent a generational setback in women's workplace progress. Intentional efforts to assist women returning to the workforce benefit both individuals and organizations. Women who leave the workforce for motherhood and later seek to return may represent a significant untapped resource for corporate America (Lipman, 2019). Their absence results in an estimated \$30 billion in lost wages and potential earnings (Robinson, 2016). The pandemic has illuminated the longstanding challenges faced by working mothers, compelling organizations to reevaluate their support structures. The loss of female talent and insufficient support for women aspiring to senior roles result in significant

organizational deficits extending beyond financial costs. Increasing the proportion of women in leadership positions introduces diverse perspectives and innovative ideas, as homogeneity in decision-making stifles creativity. Research indicates that women who temporarily exit the workforce often cultivate high levels of empathy, compassion, advanced multitasking abilities, and increased efficiency, all of which are valuable assets in the workplace (Albertini-Bennett, 2018). As employers assess both the losses incurred and the potential benefits of reintegrating returning women, intentional preparation is crucial. Organizations have developed various responses to the phenomenon of mothers exiting the workforce. For instance, Goldman Sachs, an American multinational investment bank and financial services company, trademarked the term "returnship" (Cohen, 2012). Following this, other companies across different industries, including Morgan Stanley, Barclays, and MasterCard in the financial services sector, have implemented similar programs. Notably, twenty-eight percent of global employers have



adopted formal returning programs to attract and provide opportunities for women reentering the workforce (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2017). By institutionalizing these programs and welcoming women back, the employment gap discussion is mitigated, thereby enhancing their confidence (Gefsky & Delo, 2019).

Organizations can significantly benefit by recognizing and understanding the experiences of mothers, both personally and historically. Acknowledging the historical roles women have played in the fight for liberation, equality, and education is crucial to comprehending contemporary issues of discrimination, unequal pay, and the challenges of motherhood in the workplace (Albertini-Bennett, 2018). Significant life changes often prompt individuals to reassess their sense of self, as identity is fluid and continuously shaped throughout adulthood (Levinson, 1978; Gibson, 2003).

By understanding the unique challenges and needs of mothers reentering the workforce after an extended leave, employers can better provide the necessary support. This understanding is essential not only for facilitating the reentry of women but also for businesses that stand to benefit from their contributions (Albertini-Bennett, 2018). Developing an organizational response grounded in data can foster a culture of understanding and support, enhancing the recruitment and retention of women in the workforce.

Despite significant changes in work and career environments for women since the second wave of feminism in the 1970s (Ngo, Peacock, & McKenzie, 2012), balancing work and personal life becomes increasingly complex for professional women when they begin having children (Guc, 2017). Extensive research has highlighted the challenges faced by working mothers during this transition (Albertini-Bennett, 2018; Duarte & Goncalves, 2012; Feldman, Sussman, & Zigler, 2004; Lipman, 2019; Wiese & Ritter, 2012). For mothers seeking to reenter the workforce and for employers aiming to retain this valuable talent pool, a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of mothers reentering the workforce is crucial (Albertini-Bennett, 2018; Gu, 2017).

While extensive research exists on the benefits of mentorship programs in fields such as public accounting, business education, higher education, nursing, and management (Bynum, 2015; Kogovsek & Ograjsek, 2019; Scalise et al., 2019; Seeber, 2015; Washington, 2010), there remains a need for further exploration in diverse industries. This includes the financial services sector, where insights can enhance the generalizability of findings and provide actionable data for organizations seeking to support mothers returning to work. Specifically, this study addresses the gap in

the literature by examining the experiences of mothers reintegrating into the financial services industry after extended child-rearing breaks.

It uniquely focuses on how mentorship influences their sense of identity and self-efficacy—key aspects highlighted by Levinson (1978) as critical during periods of significant life transitions. Moreover, by extending the focus beyond standard maternity leave to include longer absences, this study offers valuable insights into the distinct challenges and support needs of returning mothers. Throughout 2021, this study conducted one-on-one semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten qualifying women and an extensive focus group discussion with three additional qualifying women.

The study employed a qualitative descriptive research methodology to capture detailed experiences and insights from each participant. All participants were working full-time after an extended absence due to child-rearing. As illustrated in Figure 1, the duration of absence from the workforce ranged from one year to over ten years, encompassing both those who left before and during the pandemic. Figure 2 indicates that the number of children per participant ranged from one to four. Participants were from five different states across the U.S., as shown in Figure 3.

The financial services sector was specifically chosen for this study because historically male-dominated industries present unique challenges for working mothers. Figure 4 highlights that participants represented five distinct industries within the financial services sector. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps for thematic analysis were employed to analyze the qualitative descriptive data obtained from the one-on-one semi-structured interviews and the focus group discussion.

This six-step approach provided an accessible, systematic, and rigorous method for coding and theme development (Howitt & Cramer, 2010), facilitating the identification of meaningful patterns in the data. The data from both the interviews and the focus group discussion were analyzed to identify themes that offered a rich and complex account of the participants' experiences (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). Although the steps of thematic analysis appear linear, the inductive process was multifaceted, involving multiple reviews, analyses, coding, and theming of the data. Initial codes generated through manual coding were reviewed repeatedly to identify categories, with frequency used to confirm emerging patterns and ensure consistency.

MAXQDA, a software program for computer-assisted qualitative and mixed methods data analysis, was used to support the manual coding process and refine the codes and categories.

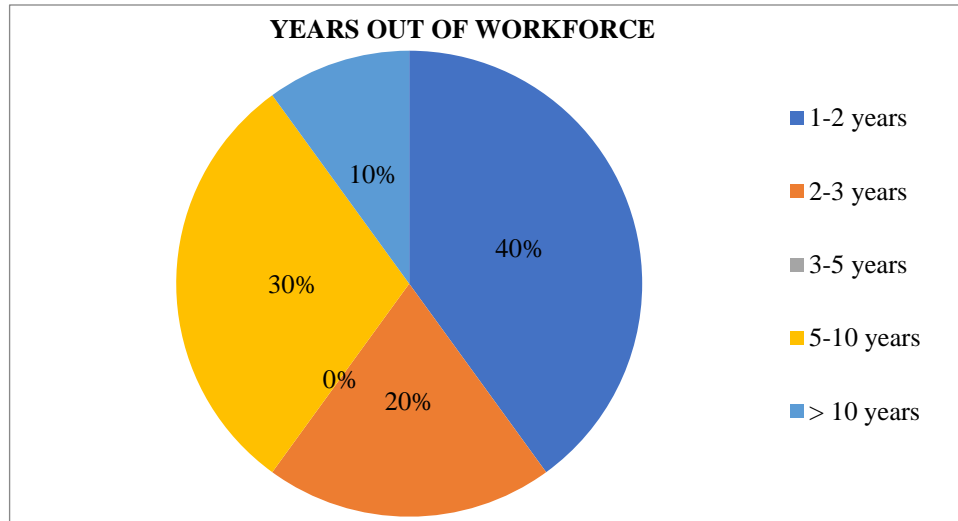


Fig. 1 Interview informants' years out of workforce due to child-rearing

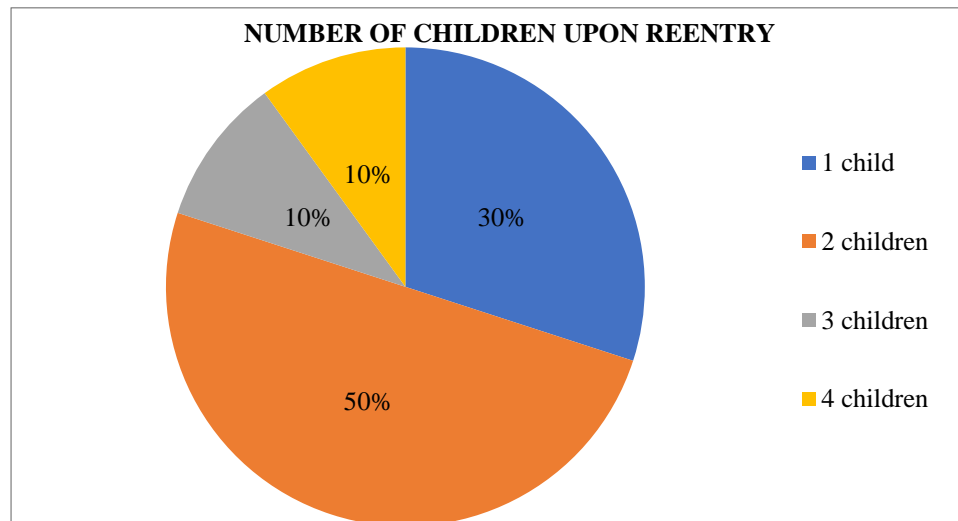


Fig. 2 Interview informants' number of children upon reentry

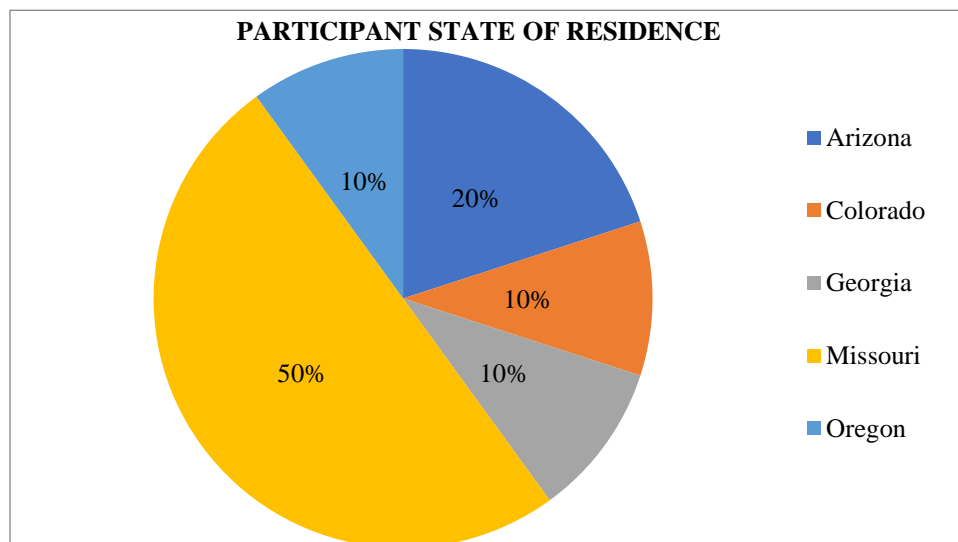


Fig. 3 Interview informants' State of residence

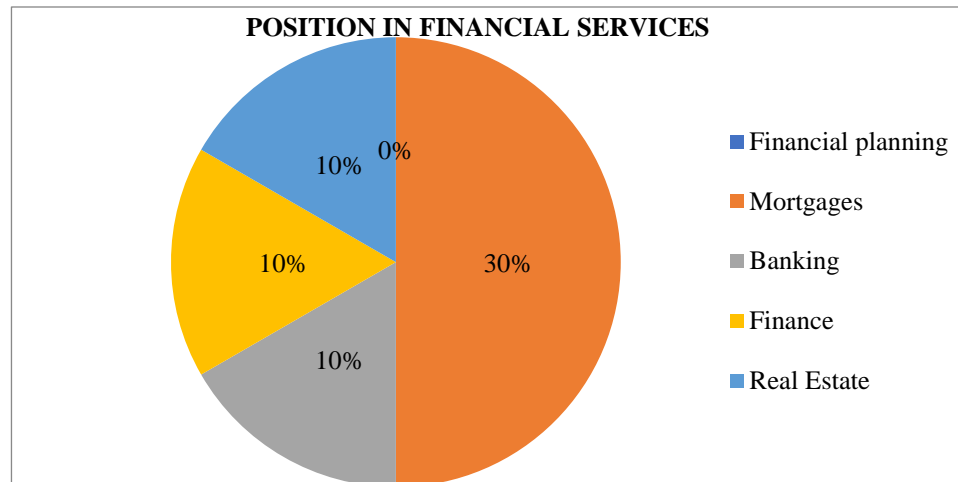


Fig. 4 Interview informants' Sector in financial service industry

2. Data Analysis Procedures

To initiate the data analysis process, all audio recordings from individual interviews and the focus group discussion were transcribed using temi.com, a professional transcription service, after securing a non-disclosure agreement with the service provider. Each transcript underwent a rigorous verification process where the researcher compared it against the original audio to ensure accuracy. During this verification, the researcher also incorporated observations from the interviews and focus group sessions, noting non-verbal cues and other contextual details not captured in the transcripts. Subsequently, edited transcripts were shared with participants for member checking, allowing them to review and provide feedback to ensure the fidelity of their contributions. Member checking played a crucial role in affirming the accuracy and credibility of the transcripts. Participants were given the opportunity to verify the transcripts; in cases where no feedback was received, it was assumed that participants agreed with the accuracy of their transcripts. None of the participants requested changes to their transcripts. Researcher notes from each session were transcribed into Word documents and paired with the respective transcripts for comprehensive analysis. Finally, the raw data was prepared for further analysis.

3. Analyzing the Data

This study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method to identify themes and address research questions systematically. The six steps of thematic analysis—familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up the results—were meticulously followed. Initially, data analysis involved manual coding to categorize and organize the data. Subsequently, the data was imported into MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, to facilitate further analysis and refinement of themes. The process began with familiarization with the data through repeated readings of individual interviews and focus group

transcripts. Each transcript was scrutinized to identify key phrases, concepts, and recurring themes, documented in an Excel spreadsheet during the pre-coding phase. This immersive reading approach enabled the researcher to gain a deep understanding of the data and lay the groundwork for subsequent analysis. Integration of data from both interview and focus group sources occurred after separate reviews, continuing until saturation was reached after the eighth interview transcript; no new codes emerged during the focus group discussion. Coding was carried out in two stages: initial manual coding followed by further categorization in MAXQDA. Initial codes were derived through an iterative process of identifying meaningful segments in the data, aligning with Saldana's (2015) approach to descriptive coding. These codes were then organized into categories within MAXQDA, facilitating a more nuanced analysis and eventual theme identification. The integration of MAXQDA in this process served to enhance the rigor and consistency of coding, mitigating potential biases associated with manual coding methods (Feng & Behar-Horenstein, 2019; Woods, Macklin, & Lewis, 2006). Throughout, the researcher ensured alignment between manually identified codes and those generated through MAXQDA, confirming the reliability and robustness of the coding process. As detailed in Figure 5, all participants reported that returning to work after an extended leave was more challenging than they had anticipated.

For example, Participant 2 described the process of reentering the workforce as "pretty devastating," while Participant 5 referred to it as "a struggle." Participant 10 felt "overwhelmed," and Participant 3 felt "completely unprepared." Additionally, all ten participants experienced unrealistic pressure to meet all expectations, both at home and at work. Participant 1 mentioned that even after four years back in the workforce, "everyone was used to me doing everything all the time, and that has not changed much." Participant 4, reflecting on balancing work and parenthood, stated, "I was very confident about it when I first went back, and then very quickly, I was not confident at all."

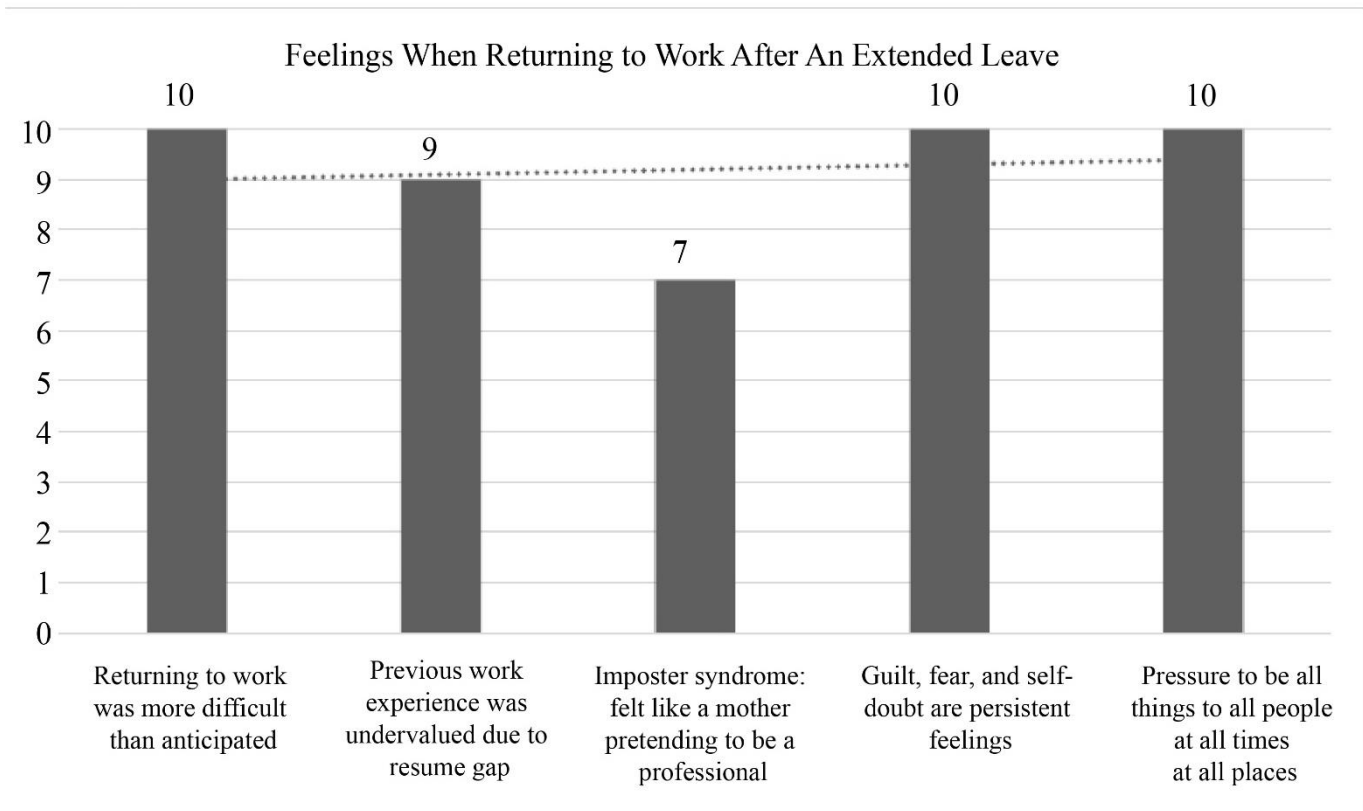


Fig. 5 Interview informants' feelings when returning to work after an extended child-rearing leave

Participants expressed significant fears and doubts about their ability to return to work after an extended leave successfully. Participant 10 described feelings of inadequacy, stating, "I did not feel like I was enough, like I was not smart anymore," and questioned her ability to reenter the workforce successfully. Participant 5 likened the experience to "finding my footing again as I started to figure out who I was as a person and as an employee while also being a mom. I was worried I could not do it." Adding to these feelings of self-doubt, 90% of the informants felt that their past work experience was no longer relevant after their extended leave. Participant 3 noted, "People viewed me as if I were just starting my career. My experience of six years as a financial advisor had no merit at all. They viewed me only as a mother, not a colleague." Similarly, Participant 2, who had engaged in "sophisticated volunteer activities" during her 15 years at home raising children, felt that her contributions were undervalued upon her return to work, stating, "It meant nothing to them. They did not value my time at home at all."

Participants reported that perceived doubts from others amplified their own self-doubt, with 70% describing their experience as imposter syndrome. This psychological pattern, rooted in individual doubts and fear of being exposed to fraud, was coined by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978. It describes individuals who doubt their skills, talents, or accomplishments and have a persistent fear of being exposed as undeserving (Crawford, 2020). Participant 1

admitted, "I had a little bit of imposter syndrome. I am not sure what I am doing. I felt intimidated by that."

Similarly, Participant 5 noted, "I was questioning every move I made," and Participant 9 described her experience as "Sometimes I felt like a mom pretending to be a professional." While minor feelings of inadequacy can foster perseverance and a desire to enhance competency, imposter syndrome can significantly hinder an individual's ability to perform at their highest level (Crawford, 2020). Such psychological experiences can lead to reduced motivation, performance, and engagement, thereby exacerbating gender inequality in the workplace (Cortland, 2019). We know that recruiting, supporting, and retaining working mothers is critical to organizational success. We know that returning to the workforce can be incredibly challenging for working mothers. So, what can management do to ensure that women returning to the workforce after an extended child-rearing leave not just survive but thrive? It is important to note that 100% of the one-on-one interview participants and 100% of the focus group participants reported that mentorship had positively impacted their return to the workforce.

This includes formal and informal mentorship as well as both female and male mentors. It is important to note that 80% of the participants noted that their mentor was a manager who would likely not label themselves as a mentor. These results prove the importance of the management role in supporting

and retaining this valuable resource pool. Therefore, in the data presented in this study, it is important to equate the term “mentor” with the term “manager.” Per Figure 6 below, 100% of the participants felt that mentors needed to understand the unique value that women and mothers bring to organizations. In addition, 100% of the participants felt that it was critical for

mentors to acknowledge that getting off and on the corporate ladder is challenging. These results indicate that it is the personal connection, understanding, and respect that are most effective when managing returning mothers. Also noted in Figure 6 below, trust and confidence are also critical for returning women to feel safe and supported.

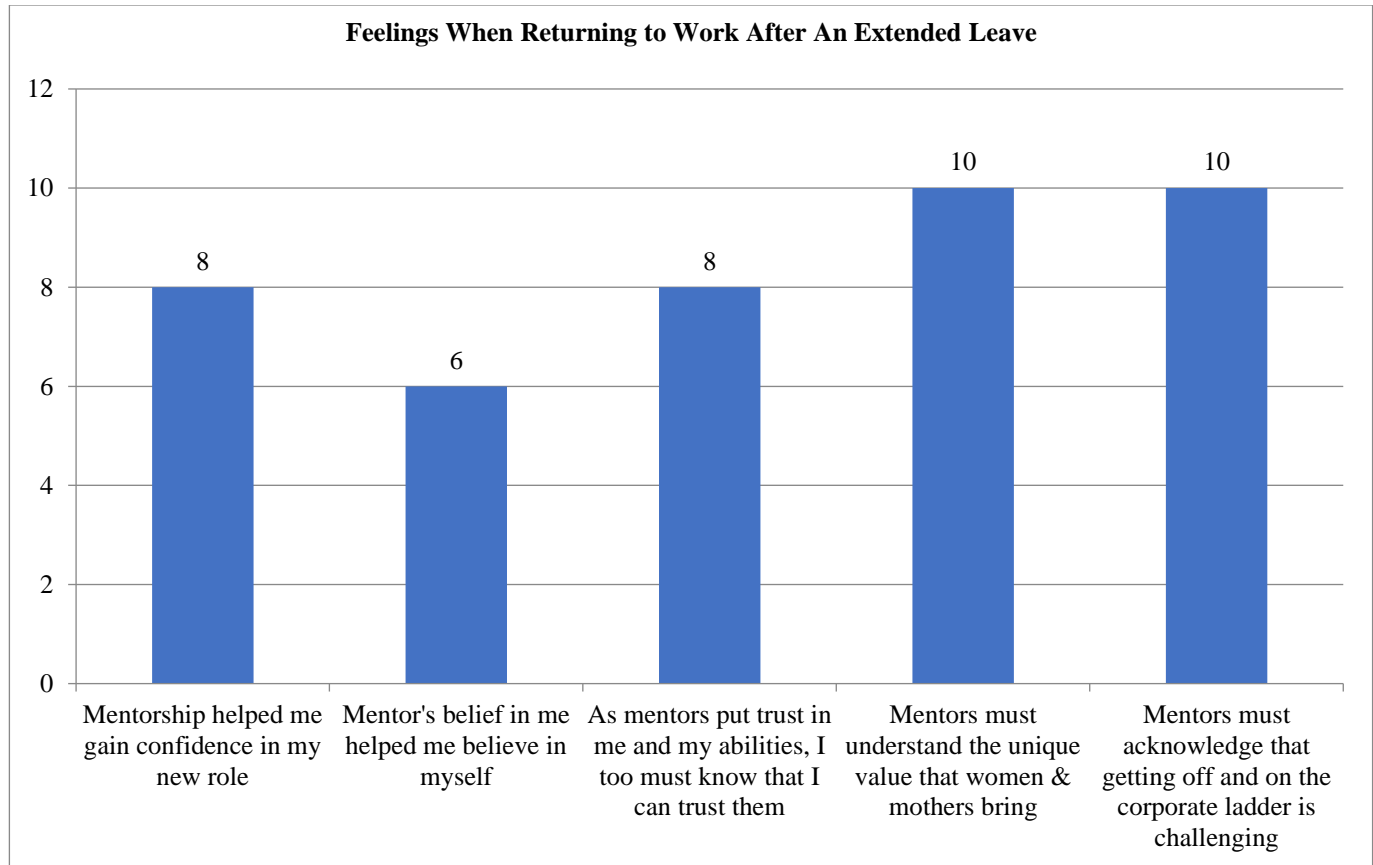


Fig. 6 Interview informants' feelings of Self-Efficacy when returning to work after an extended child-rearing leave and the influence of mentorship

Participant 2 has re-entered the professional domain for two decades following a two-year hiatus for childcare responsibilities. Reflecting on her evolution from mentee to mentor, she emphasizes a supportive approach: “I initiate a welcoming lunch on their return to gauge their well-being and assure them of my support. Monthly one-on-one sessions follow, where we discuss career aspirations and personal comfort levels. It is crucial to understand their needs to facilitate their career advancement without constraints. They dictate their readiness and ambitions.” Participant 7, drawing from her own return to work experience, empathizes deeply: “I relate to their emotions profoundly, especially new mothers. They require personalized guidance for their career journey. Effective communication is key; they must articulate their requirements. I offer step-by-step support to ensure their success both professionally and personally.” These seasoned managers exemplify the findings advocating tailored support for mothers re-entering the workforce. Relatedness and the value of shared experiences were a consistent theme

throughout the data. Through shared experiences, participants felt empowered to have important conversations regarding expectations, goals, balance, and an intentional path. Informant Participant 10 explained that “A mentor needs to show understanding, compassion, and trust. The mentor needs to trust that we will show up for our job every day. Moreover, we need to know that they are going to show up for us every day.” One focus group participant noted, “I went back to work the way I had gone back to work before I had kids – career-driven, ready to take the next step, ready to do everything that I need to do to move up in my career. I did not want to be stagnant. I would ask for meetings with my manager and ask all the questions – What do I need to do? What steps do I need to take? How am I doing? What can I do to better myself?”.

Intentionality and organizational support were themes throughout the data when discussing what mothers experience when returning to work after an extended childrearing leave and what they need from organizations and mentors/managers

upon their return to work. “Companies need to have this on their priority list of intentional actions that they are going to take and have people in mind, in line, and be very proactive about it. It should not just happen by accident. It should not only happen to the people who speak up and ask for a mentor. Companies and the industry need to step up, take intentional actions and have mentors available. Companies must take ownership because leadership sets the tone.” Participant 7 noted that throughout her 25-year career, she has seen a persistent lack of communication. “There is no discussion about how I should mentor my employees coming back as new mothers. There is nothing out there that says I should be meeting with them weekly instead of bi-weekly or monthly or the conversations we should be having. If I were not a mother, I would have no idea what questions to ask. I would not know the feelings that they are having right now. I would not know all the hats that they are wearing, the challenges that they are facing, the uncertainty. I only know because I have gone through it. Organizations are not preparing managers to support returning mothers.”

During the focus group discussion, a participant who had been absent from the workforce for 15 years proposed, “Upon reentering, it would be beneficial for mentors to conduct a thorough debriefing: review prior professional experiences, identify transferrable skills, and outline areas for development.” Another participant concurred, emphasizing the importance of prioritization: “Mentors should guide returnees on distinguishing between crucial and less important aspects of life, thereby setting realistic expectations and fostering a balanced approach to work and personal life. Mentors must provide guidance on available work-life balance resources to reassure returnees they are not navigating this transition alone.” Another participant shared her experience, expressing a desire for more support from management: “When I returned, I lacked the backing I needed. I believe it is crucial for managers to engage in regular check-ins, understanding the unique challenges facing new parents returning to work. Establishing consistent one-on-one sessions, whether weekly or monthly, ensures alignment and support tailored to their needs.” She highlighted the need for structured organizational programs: “Structured programs benefiting all parents, not just mothers, are essential. These programs must be intentional and consistent to support employees’ work-life balance effectively. Organizations should provide the necessary tools and demonstrate their commitment to supporting employees’ personal and professional growth.” Another participant echoed the call for structured programs, emphasizing their importance for sustaining support: “Organizations should implement structured programs that are inclusive and consistently applied. This ensures employees receive the necessary support to thrive both at work and at home, aligning with organizational values of work-life balance and employee well-being.” Managers are pivotal in creating a supportive and accommodating work environment for working mothers

returning from extended leave. Their ability to provide emotional support, facilitate work-life balance, promote career development, ensure fair workload distribution, address bias, offer practical resources, and build a supportive culture significantly impacts the success and well-being of these employees. By fostering a positive and inclusive workplace, managers can help working mothers thrive both professionally and personally.

- Managers can offer mentorship and guidance to help working mothers navigate career advancement and professional growth after their leave.
- Providing access to training programs and career development opportunities helps returning mothers update their skills and reintegrate smoothly into their roles.
- Managers who set realistic expectations and provide appropriate workloads can prevent burnout and ensure that working mothers do not feel overwhelmed upon their return.
- Effective delegation and fostering a supportive team environment can help distribute work evenly and encourage teamwork.
- Managers can actively work to create an inclusive work environment that combats stereotypes and biases against working mothers.
- By advocating for equal opportunities and fair treatment, managers can help working mothers feel respected and integral to the organization.
- Managers play a key role in shaping the workplace culture to be supportive and understanding of the challenges faced by working mothers.
- Promoting a culture where colleagues support each other can help working mothers feel part of a community that values their contributions.
- Managers who show empathy and understanding can help working mothers feel valued and supported during their transition back to work.
- Maintaining open lines of communication allows working mothers to voice their concerns and receive reassurance, which can alleviate anxiety and build confidence.
- Providing resources such as reintegration programs, workshops, and support groups can facilitate a smoother transition back to work.

Intentional and strategic management of returning mothers is essential not only for the individual well-being of these employees but also for the overall health and productivity of the organization. When managers deliberately implement strategies that support returning mothers, they foster a more inclusive and diverse workforce, which can lead to improved team dynamics, creativity, and innovation. Moreover, strategic management helps in retaining valuable talent, reducing turnover costs, and enhancing the organization’s reputation as a supportive and equitable

employer. By being proactive and thoughtful in their approach, managers can ensure that returning mothers are not just accommodated but empowered to reach their full potential, thereby driving organizational success and setting a standard for best practices in workforce management.

4. Main Conclusion

Strategic support for returning mothers enhances organizational success, leverages untapped talent, fosters diversity, and addresses the workforce gap, benefiting both the employees and the overall productivity of companies.

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