



**The experiences of women
returning to work after
maternity leave in the UK**

A summary of survey results



Contents

Executive summary	3
1. Methodology	4
2. Respondent profile	5
3. Survey results	7
Views about work and family	7
Reasons for returning to work	7
Concerns about returning to work	8
Return to work experiences	9
Adjusting to work	9
Factors that affect a mothers return to work	10
Relationship with boss	10
Organisational culture	11
Work place process or formal support	11
Informal and social support for returning mothers	11
Health at the end of maternity leave	11
Changes to work on return and flexible working	11
Breastfeeding and working	12
Keeping in touch during maternity leave	13
Mothers' perceptions of work-life balance	14
Working mothers and organisation citizenship behaviour	14
Conclusion	15

Executive summary

This survey seeks to understand the experiences of mothers returning to work following maternity leave. The survey will look at the following areas:

- What are the common themes arising from the experiences of mothers returning to work after maternity leave?
- What organisational support is used during this transition, their availability and effectiveness?

No judgment is made about whether or not women return to paid employment and the principle of choice is supported.

Women currently make up 46% of the labour force in the UK (Office of National Statistics 2006), accounting for approximately 80% of employment growth since 1995 (Equal Opportunities Commission 2004) and it is estimated that between 80%-85% of the female workforce will become pregnant during employment¹. Those employed women with a due date of on or after 1 April 2007 now enjoy the strongest ever statutory right to work, and many larger organisations provide considerably enhanced benefits in order to attract and retain employees.

Yet despite the strengthened legislation and often enhanced benefits, this survey has found that one in three women (39%) find it difficult or very difficult to return to work after maternity leave. The cost of a difficult transition back to work is not only personal it also affects the team and organisation for which they work.

This survey was completed as part of a Master degree by Liz Morris (HR researcher) studying at Aston Business School.

¹ Lyness, KS, Thompson, CA, Francesco, AM and Judiesch, MK, 1999 "Work and pregnancy: individual and organisational factors influencing organisational commitment, timing of maternity leave and return to work" *sex Roles*, 1999, 41 458-508

1

Methodology

A web-based survey was used to research womens' experiences of returning to work after taking maternity leave. Respondents were invited to participate via the NCT email newsletter "eGen" and NCT hardcopy publications, as well as web posting on relevant commercial, community and charity websites. These included Working Families charity website and viral email marketing through personal contact lists and networking sites such as LinkedIn, Plaxo and Facebook and leaflet and poster campaign to various UK day nurseries.

The survey was made available online from 1 September till 31 November 2008.

2

Respondent profile

In total 1541 mums participated in the online survey. Of these:

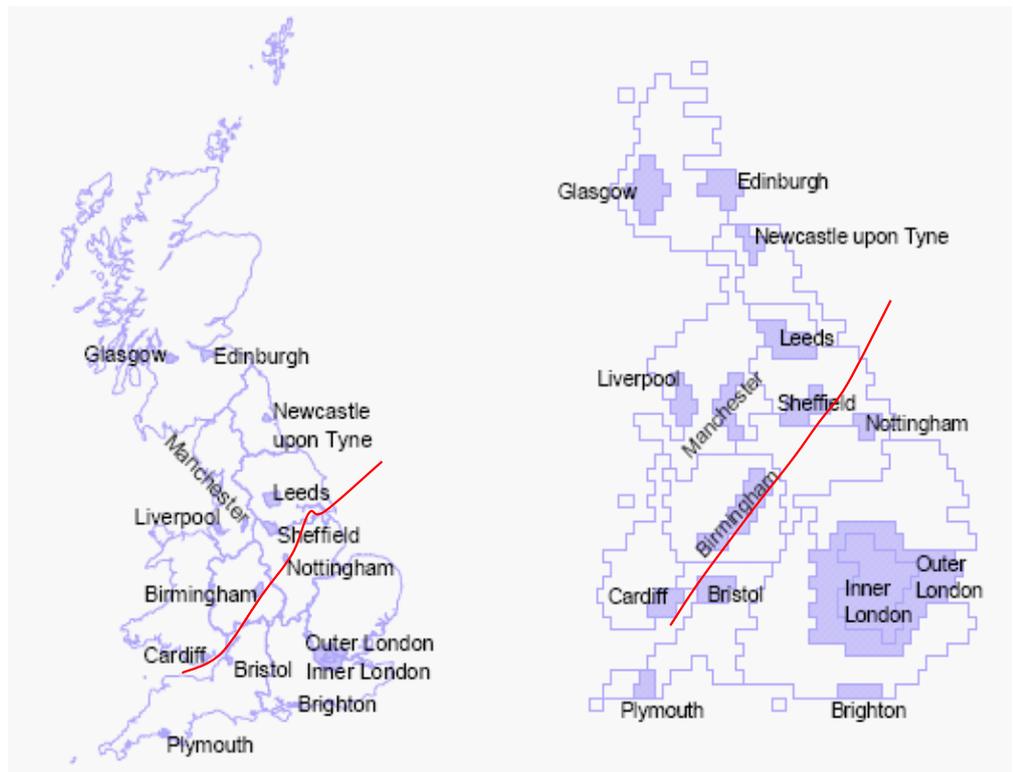
- 95% were married or living as married
- 64% were first time mothers
- 60% worked part-time
- 22% were the primary earner in their household
- 8% were self employed during their last maternity leave

The scope of this survey was employed women, therefore those who were self-employed were excluded from the analysis.

The sample was found to be geographically representative with approximately one third of the sample population from the counties in the North and two thirds from those from the South of the UK – see figure 1.

Analysis showed that there was no significant difference between the return to work ratings of those in the North compared to those in the South.

Figure 1. North-south divide



Two thirds of the women surveyed either held a professional or managerial role within their workplace (see table 1). Table 2 shows how the sample distribution breaks down by sector; 17% work in education, 14% work in health and 13% work in banking & finance.

Table 1. Distribution by work type

Work type	
Manual or trade	1%
Personal or community services	3%
Sales/customer service	4%
Clerical/administrative	13%
Professional	38%
Managerial	41%

Table 2. Distribution by sector

Sector	
Legal	2%
Construction, property and engineering	3%
Leisure & tourism	4%
Support services	5%
Manufacturing	5%
Other	5%
Retail & consumer goods	6%
Media & publishing	6%
Voluntary/charity	6%
Technology	6%
Local & central government	8%
Banking & finance	13%
Health	14%
Education	17%

A proportion of respondents (18%) were single parents, the majority (81%) were living with a partner. Table 3 shows how the sample distribution breaks down by marital status and compares this to a 2007 survey by the Department of Work and Pensions. There is a bias in this sample towards married couples.

Table 3. Marital status

Marital status	Sample	DWP survey 2007
Legally single	18.5%	39%
Married	81.0%	57%
Separated	0.5%	7%
Widowed	0%	5%

3

Survey results

Views about work and family

The survey asked respondents about their ideal family and work orientation (see figures 2 and 3).

- 55% said their ideal family had both partners with equal jobs and equal share of house work and childcare
- 61% said they would work even if they did not need to financially

Respondents to the survey showed a high orientation towards work with 5 percent having an ideal family where the mother did not work and 24% claiming that they would not work if they did not have to financially

Figure 2. My ideal family

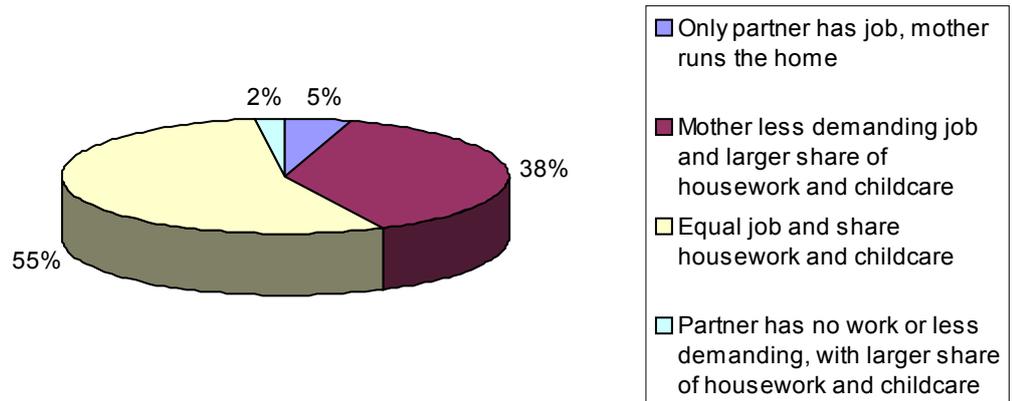
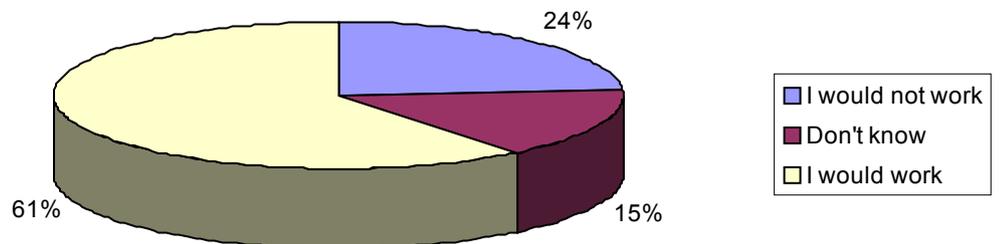


Figure 3. Work orientation



Reasons for returning to work

Respondents were asked to select all their reasons for returning to work; the results are shown in the table 4. The most common reasons were financial necessity (68%), a desire for intellectual stimulus (48%) and a desire for social contact with other adults (35%).

Some respondents (15%) said that they had ended their maternity leave earlier than planned because of the recession. In addition two percent commented that they returned in order to maintain their professional qualifications or keep long-term career prospects open.

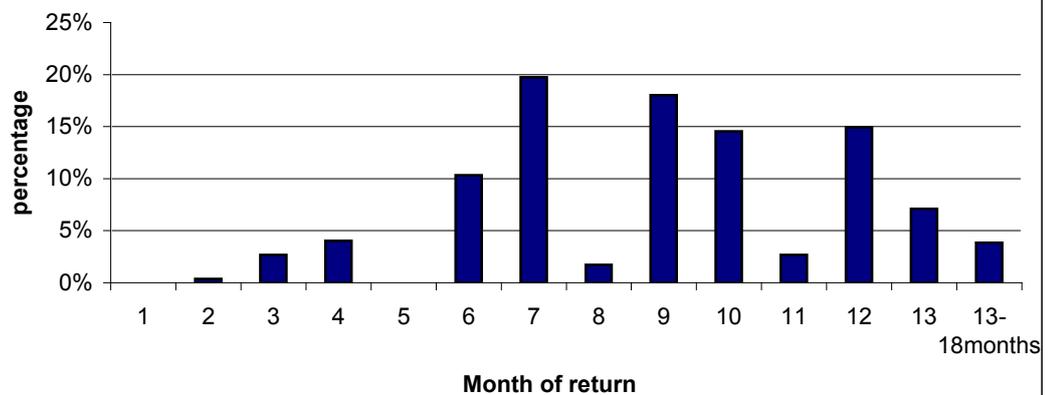
Table 4. Reason for returning to work

Return reasons	
Financial	68%
Keep my brain alive	48%
Social contact with adults	35%
Assumed I always would	24%
Belief in vocation	22%
Feeling valued	20%
Time away from children	19%

Figure 4 shows the distribution of those returning to work by the month in which they returned to work. The amount of leave taken in this sample was found to vary significantly between organisations employing 50-500 and those employing 5000 or more. The results for this sample showed that the average leave in organisations employing 50-500 was 4 weeks less than for those employing 5000 or more.

The peaks around 3-4 months, 6-7 months, 9-10 months and 12-13 months, correspond to the length of paid leave (95% significance) echoing the findings from previous studies. Comments in the free text answers that indicated mothers often extended their leave using the holiday accrued during leave which could explain the lag in the reported month of return.

Figure 4. Percentage returns by month



Just over half of respondents (57%) received more than their Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) or Maternity Allowance (MA). The amount of pay in addition to SMP or MA was not found to influence the length of maternity leave in this sample.

Concerns about returning to work

Respondents were asked to indicate all their concerns about returning to work (see table 5). The most common concern related to childcare (60%). Over half of the women were worried about their child missing them (53%), a third felt that their child’s development might be affected by them going back to work (32%) and 15% felt that it might be tricky to continue breastfeeding after their return to employment

Alongside concerns about their child, women had worries about managing multiple responsibilities and having enough time to do everything (21%). There were also specifically work-related concerns. A third reported concern about the attitude of their boss and/or their colleagues (33%); and one in ten were concerned about job availability.

Table 5. Concerns about returning to work

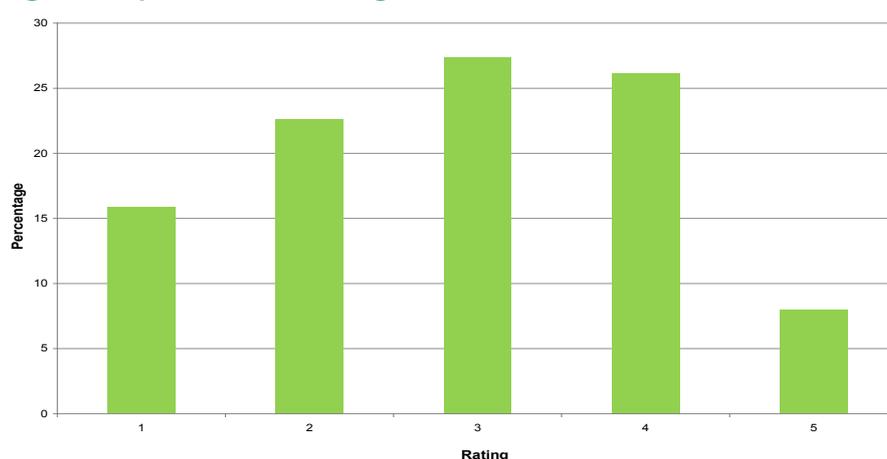
Childcare	60%
Time to do everything	57%
Missing my child	56%
My child missing me	53%
Ability to be a good mother	47%
Adversely impacting my child's development	32%
Money	32%
Ability to remember things	31%
Ability to be a good employee	28%
Attitude of boss and or colleagues	33%
Ability to do parts of the job	21%
Ability to concentrate	20%
Ability to continue breastfeeding	15%
Job availability	10%
Loss of social life	8%
Ability to balance different identities	3%

Return to work experiences

Mothers were asked to provide an overall rating for their most recent return to work on a 5-point scale (1="Very difficult" and 5="Very easy"). Figure 5 illustrates the findings.

- 39% rated their return to work as "difficult" or "very difficult"
- 11% changed employer or became self employed on or shortly after returning to work

Figure 5. Experience of returning to work



Adjusting to work

We asked mothers to tell us about their adjustment to returning to work.

- 20% said they had no problems adjusting back into work
- 34% said it was difficult because they missed their child

Table 6 shows the challenges mothers faced in adjusting to work. Missing their child and making the emotional adjustment to the transition back to paid employment were the most often mentioned challenges.

Table 6. Return adjustment

Difficult as I missed my child	34%
Emotional to begin with then got used to it	26%
Difficulty concentrating	18%
Increased workload/exhaustion	10%
Isolation/loneliness	9%
Difficulty remaining in one place for a long time	8%
Bored	7%
Difficult as I missed my friends	4%

Factors that affect a mothers return to work

Several factors influenced how women rated their experience of returning to work. These can be clustered into two groups; those things that relate to women as an individual and those that related to the organisation employing them.

Organisational factors related to the return to work ratings

- Relationship with boss/line manager
- Organisational culture (purpose driven organisation and target driven team)
- Work place process support e.g. induction program
- Work place social support

Individual factors related to return to work ratings

- Work preference
- The number of reasons to return to work
- Health at the end of maternity leave
- Confidence about ability to return effectively and do the job

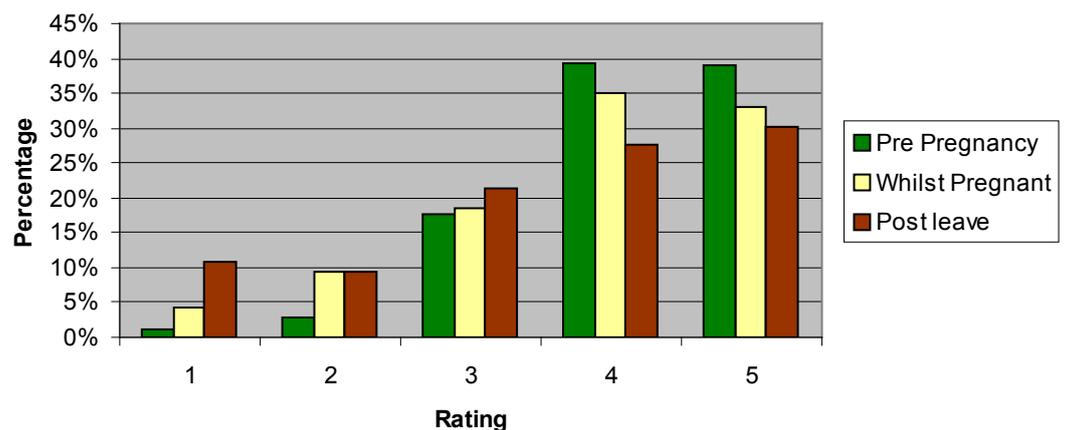
Relationship with boss

The survey found:

- 31% of mothers felt that the relationship with their boss had deteriorated since becoming pregnant and returning to work
- 22% felt this decline had happened after announcing pregnancy
- 15% felt that this had started or declined further on return to work.

The distribution of ratings are shown in figure 6, with a rating of 1 being very poor and a rating of 5 being very good. The sample size used for the analysis was 560 respondents.

Figure 6. Rating of relationship with boss



Organisational culture

Organisational culture was measured using two factors: sociability and solidarity. These consider the friendliness of the organisation and also the understanding of a common purpose.

- 66% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their team had a strong sense of purpose
- 51% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there was a culture of friendliness at work in which colleagues felt comfortable to confide in each other

Work place process or formal support e.g. induction program

- 10% of respondents had formal support from their employers e.g. re-induction program or phased start
- 1% of respondent had the support of a coach or counsellor

Returning to work after maternity leave in some organisations is treated as a work place transition, in a similar way to on-boarding a new starter, inducting a new team member, rehabilitating an employee from long term sick.

Informal and social support for returning mothers

Mothers were asked which sources of support they found helpful during their reintegration into the work place. Table 7 illustrates this.

Table 7. Sources of support

Support from friends, family and partner	42%
Supportive boss	37%
Having close friends at work	30%
Other colleagues who had recently gone through the same	26%
Other*	6%
Support from the HR department	5%
Pleasant and secure place to breastfeed	3%

*The other category included partners taking time off during the first few months of returning to work, creating a phased start using accrued holiday days and good, reliable childcare. Those who created a phased start all said that their return to work was easy or very easy. The comments also showed how difficult lack of support can be.

Health at the end of maternity leave

We asked respondents to rate their health at the end of maternity leave.

- 10% said they felt very ill, exhausted or tired and uncomfortable

Changes to work on return and flexible working

Almost three quarters of respondents experienced some changes in the work they did on return to work (74%). This ranged from changes in shift patterns and hours to changes in their grade and pay:

- 58% of respondents are working fewer hours (60% of first time mothers and 56% of mothers with one or more previous children)
- 13% had reduced seniority
- 7% had higher seniority
- 23% had a different role on return
- 20% had the same role with reduced responsibilities

- 19% had a lower pro-rata salary
- 32% felt that promotional prospects had been reduced

A large majority of respondents said they wanted to work flexibly on their return to work (88%). However, some women did not request flexible working or felt they had to work full-time:

- 79% requested flexible working
- 10% of respondents shelved their plans for flexible working due to the recession
- 4% said they felt a request would be turned down

Of those that requested flexible working:

- 16% had no change in their work patterns
- 7% changed employer (two thirds of these were first time mothers)

Free text comments suggested that the way in which change requests were managed affects how an individual feels about their relationship with their employer.

“Unfortunately work caused problems, I was really concerned about work on maternity leave and I had a lot of contact with HR to discuss flexible working options, I no longer feel good about this organisation “

Breastfeeding and working

Figure 7 shows the different methods of feeding during maternity leave respondents used.

- 55% of mothers exclusively breastfeed during maternity leave of which 48% continued to feed after returning to work and 47% were not breastfeeding immediately before starting work
- 27% of mothers used both formula and breastfed during maternity leave, of which 20% continued to breastfeed after returning to work and 76% were not breastfeeding immediately before starting work.

Figure 7. Methods of feeding

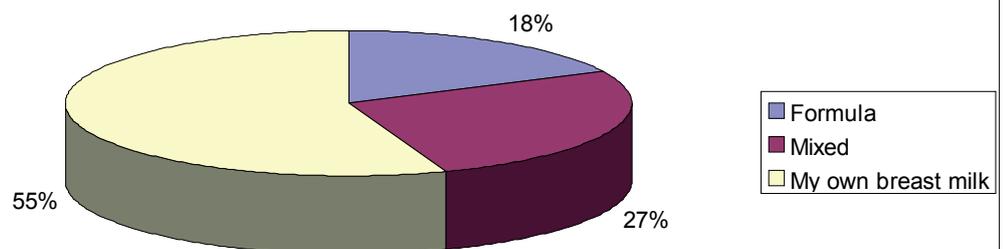


Figure 8 shows the distribution of respondents by the number of months they continued breastfeeding by the type of feeding method used whilst on maternity leave.

Figure 8. Number of month's breastfeeding continued after return to work

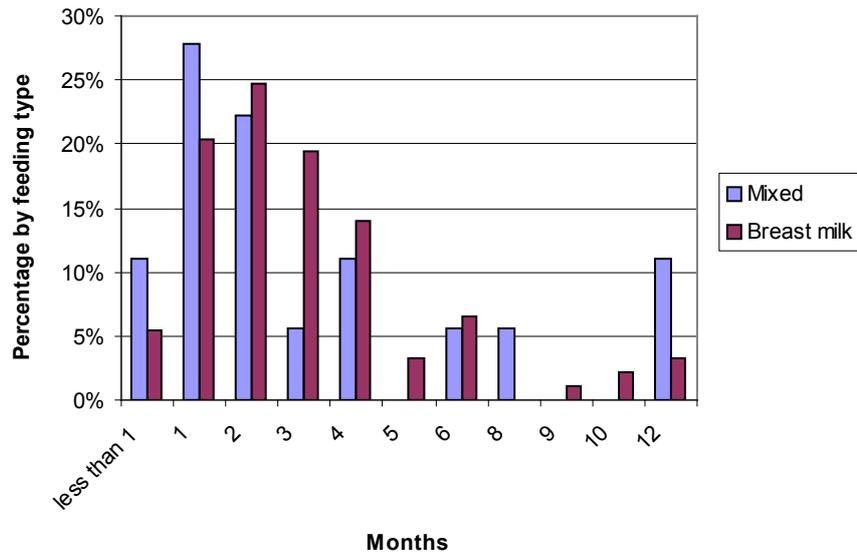


Table 8 shows how mothers perceive the support and facilities available for breastfeeding or expressing in their workplace. For the majority of women no mention was made that they could breastfeed or express (31%) and under a third did not have any facilities available to them (21%). Only 16% of women were supported and provided with facilities for breastfeeding or expressing.

Table 8. Facilities for breastfeeding or expressing

No one mentioned the possibility/didn't ask	31%
There are no facilities	21%
Breastfeeding is supported and facilities provided	16%
I could have pushed for it if I wanted	13%
There is token support but no one does it	13%
Not required, breastfeed morning/night, baby had formula while I was at work	2%
Breastfeeding is supported and facilities provided (ladies loo)	2%
Breastfeeding is supported and facilities provided (sick room)	1%
Breastfeeding is supported and facilities provided but no time	1%
It is actively discouraged	1%
I work from home.	1%

Keeping in touch during maternity leave

The amount of activity to keep in touch (KIT days) during maternity leave in this sample was mixed.

- 32% contacted their employer only to confirm return date
- 54% kept in touch with friends at work
- 22% attended KIT days
- 37% maintained contact with work through friends, KIT days and other means

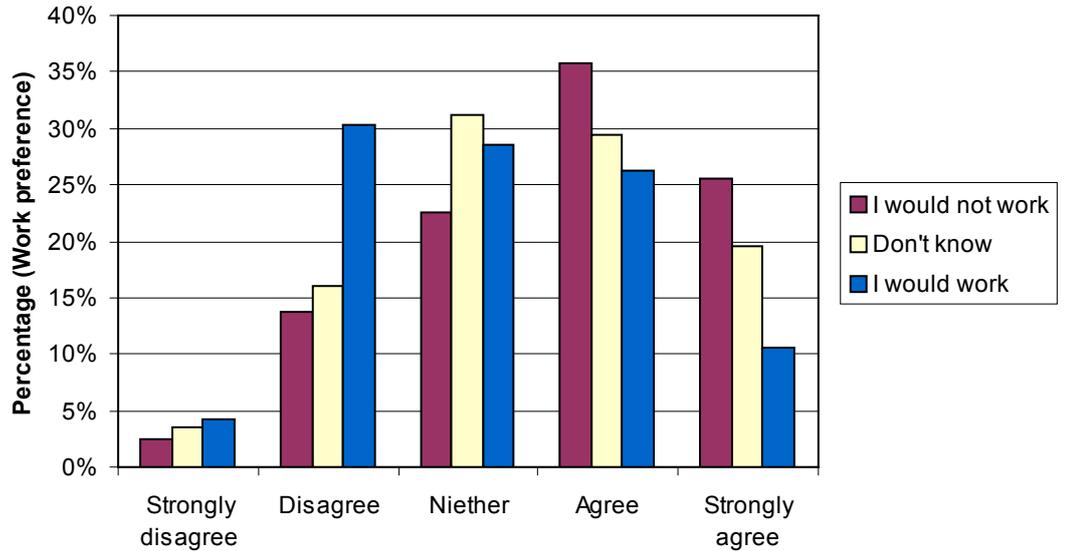
Other forms of keeping in touch ranged from “popping in to show off my beautiful baby” to responding to emails on a daily basis, weekly or monthly phone calls with boss, reading electronic notice boards and preparing departmental budgets.

Some of the comments suggested that because the cost of childcare was not covered during KIT days, some mothers were disinclined to attend. However, answers to later survey questions indicated that some mothers wished they had made more effort to keep in touch.

Mothers' perceptions of work-life balance

- 55% wanted to allocated their time differently since becoming a parent
- 44% of mothers agreed that there was some impact of work on home life
- 36% of mothers felt that their life was more in balance than ever
- 23% of mothers felt that home commitments affected their work
- 6% felt that parenthood had not changed their work-life-balance

Figure 9. Work Preference



Working mothers and organisation citizenship behaviour

Organisation Citizenship behaviour (OCB) is a term used to describe working over and above one's job description. It is related to feelings of loyalty, motivation and overall performance. Despite the fact that becoming a mother is a life-changing experience and 60% of mothers reporting that work was less important than before, a high proportion of respondents still report high levels of OCB:

- 50% would sometimes work late, 32% would often work late
- 45% would often help others, 53% would sometimes help others
- 43% felt guilty about taking breaks from work

4

Conclusion

This survey has found that mothers are not given enough support in returning to work after maternity leave. A poorly managed reintegration back into the workplace and lack of support often have a detrimental effect on women's well-being. Findings show that the attitudes and relationship between employee and line manager are pivotal in determining a smooth return to work.

Changes in legislation mean that in most circumstances employers are legally obliged to provide maternity leave and a job for mothers to return to. As key assets, all staff should be treated positively so that they can return to work under arrangements and within a work-place culture that works for them, supports their needs as a parent, and meets the organisational interests of their employer.

NCT

Alexandra House
Oldham Terrace
London W3 6NH
Registered Charity No. 801395

Enquiries service **0300 330 0770**

Office & admin **0844 243 6000**

Fax **0844 243 6001**

www.nct.org.uk