



Ernst & Young's maternity coaching improves retention of talented women

Ernst & Young launched a programme of maternity coaching in 2011 in an attempt to reduce the number of talented female employees leaving the firm within two years of returning from maternity leave. The programme comprises four coaching sessions held before, during and after maternity leave, designed to help new mothers prepare themselves in a number of practical ways. The coaching is provided one-to-one for senior managers, directors and partners and in small group sessions for more junior employees. The firm also requires all managers with responsibility for someone who is taking maternity leave to attend two group coaching sessions. The purpose of these sessions is to improve managers' confidence in handling the maternity transition and to discuss best practice.



Profile: Ernst & Young

Ernst & Young is a global accountancy firm specialising in assurance, tax, transaction and advisory services. The organisation is made up of member firms in more than 140 countries. Its headquarters are in London, and the firm employs over 10,000 staff in the UK.

Addressing female retention rates

Like many organisations, Ernst & Young is looking at measures to help improve retention rates amongst female employees. Although the firm recruits broadly equal numbers of male and female staff at entry level, there is a lack of women occupying the more senior positions. “Our female partner representation is at 18 per cent, which I believe is higher than our competitors, but it is too low compared to our 60/40 female to male junior employee representation,” says Sally Bucknell, Director, Diversity & Inclusiveness.

A particular pinch point that the firm has identified is that it loses a number of women following maternity leave. “Whilst around 90 per cent of women returned from maternity leave, we were seeing a drop off of up to a further 20 per cent within two years of their return,” says Bucknell. “The firm has targets for gender balance at the top of the firm, with 30 per cent of all new partner admission to be female, so we knew we needed to embark on a programme of culture change to build the pipeline that would help us achieve this goal.”

The firm has also had to manage a small number of grievances raised by women returning to work following maternity leave. The issues brought up tended to be about the quality of work and clients that were assigned to them on their return to work. “There were concerns about whether these women were still seen by their managers as having high potential because of general assumptions about their capacity to handle a heavy workload following maternity leave,” says Bucknell. “Anecdotally, through our women’s network, we were also hearing that the firm wasn’t always perceived as a place where women could balance work and family. Some people said we were dreadful and others thought we were great. We realised we needed to be more consistent.”



Improving flexible working at Ernst & Young

Ernst & Young has many areas where flexible working is already part of the way its employees work. However, in 2011 it acknowledged that there were parts of the business where flexible working was considered counter-cultural because of the nature of the work in that division or because of perceived perceptions from clients. The firm has been looking at ways of increasing flexibility; not as a 'one size fits all' model to be imposed across the organisation but to encourage flexible working where it makes good business sense.

The business case

A cross-functional team from business operations, IT, facilities, and HR presented a business case to the firm's UK and Ireland leadership team in 2011 to show how further promoting a flexible working culture across the organisation would be a key element in retaining and attracting top talent in the future. The submission showed evidence of:

- ▶ A financial link between the teams at the firm recording the highest engagement scores and their business performance, in terms of improved retention, higher revenue per person and brand awareness in their markets. A key component of the engagement measure was having the ability to choose how work is delivered. The HR case put forward was that enabling flexible working would help the firm achieve a more engaged workforce, leading to competitive advantage and improved client relationships.
- ▶ Increased retention of the firm's talent working flexibly, particularly of women at senior levels.
- ▶ 'Generation Y', and 'Generation Z' preferring flexible working practices. The firm predicts that globally, more than 50 per cent of its employees will be of these generations that have grown up with, and expect, more virtual working, greater collaborative space and increased flexibility.

- ▶ Flexible working reducing the amount of time employees spend travelling, reducing the firm's carbon footprint and costs. More flexible working would allow the firm to accommodate future growth without increasing its real estate costs.
- ▶ Flexible workers being more productive and healthy. The firm anticipates a 1 to 4 per cent productivity increase for those working flexibly in the short-to medium-term.

The business case concluded that all of the evidence suggested that increasing flexible working at the firm would lead to increased profitability, which would continue to fund the investment needed to create a truly flexible working environment and culture.

A structured programme of detailed change management has been implemented to support the firm in achieving flexible working. Central communications is spearheaded by the firm's business leaders, including the managing partner, Steve Varley, who advocates the firm's flexible working vision and business case. The multi-faceted communications plan continues to reinforce culture change through video messaging, role models, change stories, guidance and information. "Getting buy-in from senior management is crucial," says Bucknell.

To encourage flexible working, the firm is now more focused on encouraging managers to explore new, innovative ways of working with their employees. Both men and women are offered the opportunity to take up a variety of both formal and informal flexible working options, such as part-time working, career breaks, job-shares, term-time working, working from home and working beyond normal retirement age. Around 10 per cent of employees have taken up a formal flexible working arrangement and many more make use of informal arrangements.



Understanding the issues

The firm's engagement team set up focus groups in June 2010 to try to understand more from women about the issues that concerned them when returning to work following maternity leave. There were groups of between six and 20 women from each of the firm's regions, facilitated by each office's People Forum (volunteer groups set up to support local engagement activity).

"Our initial assumption was that all women would prefer one-to-one coaching to support them in and out of the workplace to discuss the particular professional, personal and practical challenges that they faced," says Bucknell. "However, some groups of staff were keen to connect with others in the firm to just share their experience. These women were typically at an earlier stage in their career where there were fewer working mothers at the same level."

Working with an external partner

In September 2010, Bucknell received sign-off from the leadership team for budget to use an external partner to offer maternity coaching for all staff. "We already offer internal coaching for senior women, but we knew we didn't have the capacity to offer this to all of our employees," says Bucknell. "Outsourcing the maternity coaching meant we could support all women at all levels of the organisation."

Ernst & Young selected Talking Talent as its provider, as the company specialises in maternity coaching and had strong credentials from existing relationships with other professional services and financial services organisations. The firm worked with the supplier to ensure that its work had an 'Ernst & Young feel' by using appropriate branding and language.

Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, the firm agreed that employees from graduate to manager level would have access to small group coaching sessions, whereas those at senior management level upwards would receive one-to-one coaching. The firm also chose to include mandatory 'counselling' training designed for managers who have someone in their team going on or returning from maternity leave.



One-to-one coaching for senior women

Women who are senior managers, directors and partners at the firm are offered one-on-one coaching sessions with trained coaches from Talking Talent. The sessions are structured as above and look at more or less the same topics covered in the group sessions, but are more focused on the individual's circumstances. "For example, maternity leave may coincide with a woman's promotion track to partner and she may want to consider the realities of continuing apace and how to get the support she needs," says Bucknell. "The coaches have all come from professional services backgrounds, so have a good understanding of what individuals are going through."

Quarterly feedback

The discussions raised during the group and one-to-one coaching sessions are kept confidential between participants and coaches. However, the consultants provide anonymous feedback to the firm on a quarterly basis. "The feedback ranges from the practical – such as 'there is confusion over whether holiday can be added to maternity leave' – to more cultural issues, like 'there is still some concern about how to balance family commitments with transaction work'," says Bucknell. "We also receive feedback on what we are doing well, such as: 'the e-mail circulated to offer greater work rotation was viewed very positively' and the sessions have 'given me motivation to put more effort into my career'."

Mandatory manager training

All managers who have responsibility for a pregnant employee are required to attend a webinar before that person's maternity leave, and a further webinar on the employee's return-to-work. Webinars are seen as the most appropriate method of delivering the coaching because of the flexibility they allow managers to dial in, irrespective of their location. And Bucknell believes managers are more likely to talk openly on the phone than in person. "These sessions are only an hour and a half long, so we need to make sure that we deliver as much as possible in the available time," she says. "In fact, the sessions are really successful because managers end up holding each other to account, and peer review works well in this environment."



The manager sessions cover the reasons women leave the firm; consider how confident managers are in handling the maternity transition; and discuss best practice. “For example, managers are encouraged to consider whether they position the maternity leave as an interruption to the team and the business that creates additional pressure, or as an exciting team development that provides opportunities for others to work with different clients and to step up for a time,” says Bucknell. “It is the manager’s attitude that determines the response of the team.”

Managers are shown video clips of women from the firm explaining real life good and bad experiences and are then asked to give their reactions. “The scenarios in the videos are real and decisions are often made with the best of intent,” says Bucknell. “The clips help challenge unconscious bias and demonstrate the impact of good management.”

Employee feedback

Since the maternity coaching courses began in 2011, the firm has offered coaching to just under 900 employees. “Just over 100 people decided not to have coaching, mostly because they were too busy or already had children,” says Bucknell.

Out of the 600 or so participants who attended the group sessions, the average feedback score has been four and half out of five and the 300 women receiving one-to-one coaching rated it similarly. “Overall, the feedback was hugely positive. The only negative was that the sessions were too popular! We chose to run two coaching sessions for pre-, during-and post-maternity leave each month, and sometimes the places are backed up.”

Qualitative feedback from women who have received one-to-one coaching demonstrates how highly regarded the maternity initiative has been:

- ▶ “I do think Ernst & Young benefitted from me having this coaching almost as much as I did. I honestly think my transition back into the business and up to director have all been quicker and smoother because of the time spent on coaching.”
- ▶ “Having access to personal coaching after your life has been turned upside down by the arrival of a tot has played an enormous part in me keeping my sanity and being successful at work since my return.”

- ▶ “The coaching made me think about what I wanted from life when I returned to work – things you perhaps wouldn’t usually focus on during a maternity leave.”

Around 600 managers have been through the mandatory manager coaching sessions. Participants have given the course an average satisfaction rating of four out of five. “Comments have ranged from ‘I’ve been here 20 years and I’ve never needed training before,’ to ‘it’s the best training I’ve ever attended,’” says Bucknell. “Even the EMEA Head of L&D said it made her stop in her tracks and think about how she might handle subsequent maternity leave cases.”

Bucknell believes the coaching has been welcomed because it is not what might be classified as ‘typical’ training. “Our maternity coaching isn’t about informing staff about our corporate policies. It’s about getting people to think about their attitudes towards maternity leave and look at situations from someone else’s perspective,” she says. “The sessions allow people to consider lots of different ways of dealing with an issue and to learn about the impact of their conversations on others. The coaching is very skilfully facilitated and the group discussion sits well with our managers.”

Measuring the return on investment

The firm’s retention rate for women returning to work following maternity leave has increased by five percentage points to 95 per cent since 2011. Furthermore, based on recent figures, around 77 per cent of those who return from maternity leave retain the same performance management grade or improve it.

“This suggests more women are hitting the ground running and are better equipped when returning to work, although we haven’t got comparative figures to prove this,” says Bucknell.

Time will tell whether the maternity coaching provisions have helped improve retention past the two year point following maternity leave. “Due to the time lag of the maternity period, those who started the maternity coaching in February 2011 have generally only been back at work for a year,” says Bucknell. “Our next step is to monitor their retention over the coming year and beyond, as well as continue to offer them support and development.”

The firm surveyed the group and one-to-one coaching participants in November 2012. Results showed that 75 per cent of all employees who received maternity coaching felt valued by the firm; 65 per cent said the course helped them to deal with personal challenges to do their job; 61 per cent agreed coaching had helped with their engagement, as well as with maintaining stakeholder relationships; and more than half said it had increased the likelihood that they would remain with the firm in the future.

In addition to a positive reception by employees, the firm has received external recognition for the work it has done on gender diversity. The firm is benchmarked as a top ten organisation by Opportunity Now, an organisation that campaigns for gender diversity. It was also listed in The Times Top 50 Employers for Women in 2012.

Planning for the future

The firm is constantly reviewing the maternity coaching offering to improve its reach and impact. As it increasingly moves more of its training to virtual learning and the tools and technology develop, Bucknell believes there will be an opportunity for the firm to deliver more maternity support virtually. "However, the in-person coaching is a key part of the success of the coaching and this is not going to be removed," she says. "The firm has a well-established internal coaching team and one of the discussions we are having at the moment is whether the same benefits can be achieved using internal coaches. Some women value the independence and distance of an external coach, whilst others have suggested they would benefit from someone who has greater knowledge of the way Ernst & Young works culturally as well as the detail of its policies."

Bucknell has set up a working group to consider all these issues. The group comprises employees from the HR and diversity and inclusion teams: six senior women who have had individual coaching; and six women who have participated in the group sessions. "As an organisation, we are constantly trying to improve all the time so it's important we get this right," says Bucknell.

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