Career development after parenthood: choices, challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

Work is central to many of our lives, but when children come along, our priorities shift and life becomes a lot more complicated. Working out how your career can fit into your new lifestyle is not easy. In this chapter we examine the different ways that parents' careers develop, the struggles they face and the creative solutions they find. The options are illustrated with vignettes from a range of inspiring mothers and fathers who have found ways to make their choices work for themselves, their partners, their employers and their children, and the chapter ends with some ideas for making the options work, and a few thoughts about the role that society and employers can play to ensure that parents in the future find the compromises that they face easier to resolve.

Learnings

- Although policy and legislation now offer more family friendly options for working parents, the cultural shift is lagging behind, and whilst most fathers continue in work full time, mothers are still likely to take a career break, return to work part time or in a lower level job
- Taking time out to look after children is detrimental for parents' careers and the parenting pay gap never goes away
- Women are often surprised by the barriers they face when returning to the workplace after a career break, finding that employers are not always very flexible, suitable childcare is difficult to come by, and their work confidence is significantly diminished
- Yet, despite these challenges, it seems that whatever decisions they make, parents in general end up being happy about their choices

Recommendations

- Employers need to be educated to understand the real value of part time staff and working mothers, and should be incentivised to be more creative in their approach to flexible work for parents
- Investing in coaching could help those returning from parental leave or a longer career break to identify and evidence the work-relevant transferable skills that they have developed
- The government needs to support the provision of more, high quality, affordable childcare
- Society as a whole needs to be less rigid in its social norms, acknowledging that successful mothers, fathers and workers can come in all shapes and sizes

Introduction

Changes in policy and legislation promoting family flexible working have brought new opportunities to those wanting to combine parenthood with paid work, but the cultural shift needed to allow these policy changes to have a real impact is lagging behind (Haas & Hwang, 2009). Working parents rarely feel that the perfect option is on the table, and each set of choices comes with a certain degree of compromise (Kanji & Cahusac, 2015).

The proportion of mothers working has increased over the last twenty years, and looking at the careers of women who have dependent-aged children in the UK, we see that it splits fairly neatly into three equal groups, with a third of mothers working full-time, a third working part-time, and a third not engaged in paid work outside the home (ONS, 2017). In contrast, the proportion of fathers in work has been relatively stable over the last twenty years, with about 93% of fathers of dependent-aged children in the UK working full-time. But whilst fathers are much less likely than mothers to opt for part-time work after the birth of a child, they do often take advantage of flexible working practices, for example starting their working day later, to enable them to drop the children at childcare.

The figures for the UK are fairly close to the overall EU average (OECD, 2017), but the picture varies considerably from one country to another, and the availability of public childcare, family friendly policies, and the prevalent social norms all have an impact on the options that mothers choose. In Italy, for example, a social family bias and a rigid labour market has led to a smaller proportion, around half, of mothers working full or part time, whereas the Swedish commitment to egalitarian ideals, high quality childcare provision and their political goal of full employment mean that over 80% of mothers work outside the home (Anxo et al., 2007; OECD, 2017). In contrast to this variation in the employment status for mothers across the developed work, the picture for fathers is fairly consistent, with the vast majority of fathers of dependent aged children working full time across all European countries, North America and Australia and New Zealand (Lewis, Campbell & Huerta, 2008)

What are the options?

After parental leave or a career break, decisions need to be made. Parents can choose whether or not to continue in the same job, and whether to stick with a full-time schedule, or to return to work on reduced or more flexible hours. These two decisions lead to four options: same role and same conditions; same role but different conditions; new career – a wholesale reinvention; or a new family friendly job.

Same role, same conditions

Work offers a range of practical and psychological benefits, bringing purpose, identity, social connections and of course the joys of a regular salary. Continuing in your previous role, just as before, is the most straightforward way to ensure that becoming a parent has a minimal impact on your career path, earnings potential and professional identity. Evidence indicates too that full-time working parents have greater life satisfaction than part-time workers or stay at home parents, so it seems that the social networks, salary and status associated with a full-time role make a difference (Berger, 2013).

Alongside these positive reasons, some parents return to their roles full-time because they have to, finding that their hands are tied as a consequence of the type of role or organisation they are working in. The economic imperative in some families too will mean that a return to work is inevitable as family finances depend on a full-time salary.

One final reason to opt to carry on as before, is that you can. As we will see later on, finding a new job after a career break can be challenging. If you know that you want to go back to the same kind of position, then long term it can make sense to stick with it from the start.

For those who return to their role full-time, there are of course practical challenges to deal with. For some, the financial benefits of full-time work make the logistics more straightforward, but for most, coping with a full-time job and taking care of one child or more will require military precision, creative problem solving and some self-compassion, to be administered liberally when things don't quite go to plan.

Johnston and Swanson (2006) explored the experiences of a range of mothers, asking them about their working patterns and how they felt about their choices. The full-time working mothers in their study felt that their children were happier because they, as mothers, felt fulfilled in their work, observing that a happy mother leads to a happy child. But whilst they were generally very positive about the choices they had made, they did regret not being more physically available to their children.

Case study

Sarah, full-time production manager

Sarah had worked in advertising since she left university. She had put her heart and soul into her career and for ten years lived and breathed the advertising industry, working long hours and socialising every evening. Sarah had always known that she would have to go back to work full-time after she had children. Her job was better paid than her husband's so it made economic sense for her to be the main breadwinner, and this had never troubled her because she enjoyed her work.

When Sarah returned to work after nine months on maternity leave, she was delighted to be back. She had missed the routine of a regular job, felt that her world had narrowed too much whilst she had been at home, and she enjoyed having her own professional identity back. She was, however, surprised to find that her attitude to work had shifted: her priority was now to her family and whilst work was still important to her, her life no longer revolved around it. Paradoxically, she found that this actually made her better at her job. She was no longer as anxious about her work projects as she used to be, and this new laid back attitude seemed to make things run more smoothly at work. Sarah felt that she was just as productive as she had been before children. She worked shorter hours – now tearing out at 5pm on the dot to get home to her children, but found that this made her more productive whilst was in the office. One big change was the amount of socialising that she did with work. In her pre-children days, Sarah had partied hard, going out with colleagues and clients in Soho most evenings, but now work outings are restricted to the occasional leaving do and the Christmas party. But Sarah doesn't mind – she is keen to rush back from work to see her children, and doesn't resent the new regime at all.

Looking back she has no regrets. Sarah continues to enjoy the role, and loves the organisation she works for. In an ideal world she thinks that she might have reduced her hours to perhaps four days a week. She wonders what life would be like if she were a bit more involved with her daughters' school – dropping off and picking up every day, getting involved in the PTFA, and developing closer relationships with the other mothers. But she is clear that whilst these things might have made her feel more involved with her children, they would have made only a minimal difference to her children.

Same role, different conditions

Working part-time is a popular choice amongst mothers (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012), and the benefits are apparent to a number of fathers too. For many, it seems to strike the ideal balance, in which people feel that they can be the involved parent they want to be, without losing the benefits that work brings.

Some employers are enormously supportive when it comes to accommodating a request for a change in conditions, helping employees work from home, offering condensed hours, or even trying

to find some extra support staff to accommodate the parent's new circumstances. Part-time workers can be a great asset to employers, as they can be keen to prove that their part-time status does not come with a loss of commitment or a reduction in standards. But employers are not always aware of the benefits of the opportunity they are being offered and sometimes, however compelling the case is, the employer just can't see how it could work, and is not prepared to take the risk. One option that can appeal to parents who are looking for more control over their work schedule is working freelance. Employers who are against a part time contract are sometimes happy to re-employ staff as freelancers or associates, doing more or less the same work, but with more built-in flexibility for both parties.

Many part-time working parents struggle on a personal level with the sense that they are not fulfilling either role well enough. They are trying to be the ideal, available and committed worker and the ideal, available and committed parent, and these two things can be difficult to squeeze into the same day. On balance though, part-time working mothers tend to feel quite satisfied with their choices, finding that time away from their child is valuable for both child and mother, and reporting higher levels of job satisfaction than full-time working mothers (Gregory & Connolly, 2008; Zou, 2016).

Case Study

Duncan, freelance sports consultant

At the age of 30, before children were even on the horizon, Duncan took the unusual step of getting a job that would allow him to work from home. He applied to head up the London office of a national sports association and it turned out that that office was to be his living room, and he was to be the sole employee. This suited him well. He was perfectly happy to be away from office politics and free from the daily commute; he liked the peace and convenience of working in his own flat, and felt that he had plenty of contact with colleagues at the head office in Birmingham, and with clients all over the country if he needed company. Seven years on, the chief executive of the organisation told Duncan that he was planning to leave and set up a consultancy of his own, and offered Duncan the chance to join him. The two of them had talked about this possibility off and on over the years, and Duncan had always been drawn to the idea of working more independently. But now it was crunch time. Two other factors had an impact on his decision. His first child was due to be born just a few months down the line, and Duncan's wife was a high-flying commercial solicitor. She loved her job and knew that it wasn't going to be possible to cut down her hours, or work more flexibly: if one of them was going to be available to attend school nativity productions, or look after a sickly child, she couldn't, hand on heart, promise that it would be her. So Duncan seized the day and decided to go freelance.

The new set up worked well. It was the run up to the London Olympics, 2012, and there was plenty of work for two well networked and experienced sports consultants. Their business thrived. Duncan worked hard, but the work was flexible. His daughter, and then his two sons when they came along, were enrolled at a local nursery, so Duncan could usually work his full complement of hours, but when he needed to, he could make different arrangements. He could take the afternoon off and work till late at night, and could make up at the weekends what he missed during the week.

Duncan is happy with how things have worked for him. His doesn't feel that his career has suffered – he has worked more flexibly, but no less hard, and his consultancy has been successful. He wonders where his career would be now, had he made different choices. He would certainly have had more opportunities to gain promotions and pay rises (he notes that since the heady days of the Olympics, his salary hasn't increased at all), but would he have had a more fulfilling journey? He doubts it. His career has been full of great collaborators, interesting and varied projects and he has had a lot of fun, and he is not at all sure that a more conventional path would have offered him as much. Added to that he thinks he has been a better and more fulfilled father as a result of his choices. He sees that he has been able to be more present and more involved than many of his peers and he feels that this has been of benefit to everyone in the family.

A New Career

We have traditionally thought of career paths as being linear (onwards and upwards) and have judged career success by external factors such as pay and promotion, but it is becoming more common to think about careers in terms of subjective constructs such as job satisfaction and fulfilment (Ng & Feldman, 2014). Parental leave or a longer career break can provide some time to reflect on life and career ambitious, and this leads many people to consider new career avenues.

For some parents (particularly women), this opportunity to reinvent themselves steers them towards a more values-driven career (Hewett & Luce, 2005). Women sometimes find that their time away from the workplace can lead them to reassess their career goals, as they look up the career ladder and decide that they don't like what they see. Combining re-training with caring responsibilities can work well for parents, as universities and other training providers often offer flexible learning options, with classes in the evening and at weekends, and options for on-line learning. With a bit of forward planning, an individual can emerge from a career break well-equipped to start something new.

Whilst it can be fairly obvious that your old job didn't make you happy, working out what to do next can be more of challenge. The first hurdle is identifying the range of possible options, and the second is trying to narrow the possibilities down to a shortlist of viable options, which might suit your skills, values and lifestyle. A career change in mid-life can feel particularly pressured as it involves giving something up as well as starting something new. Evidence suggests that it takes on average two years to make a career decision (Murtagh, Lopes & Lyons, 2011), so it is important not to put pressure on yourself to make a quick decision. A career change is always going to involve some element of risk, and it is a good idea both to give yourself some time to make sure you are ready, and to start laying the ground work – perhaps developing a local network, taking a few relevant training courses, or offering some work for free, both to build your confidence and your credibility.

There are plenty of self-help books and websites which can give you a starting point and evidence suggests that talking your ideas through with family and friends can help you to clarify your thoughts (Amundsen et al., 2010). Professional career coaches too can offer some valuable support; have a look at the professional registers of career coaches on professional body websites (such as the Career Development Institute) to make sure that you are getting someone suitably qualified.

Re-thinking your career altogether can often mean going back in at the bottom of the career ladder. This can be frustrating for experienced and successful professionals, who have already proved themselves in one field, and it can be galling to find that your previous experience and achievements are not valued in the way they perhaps should be. Starting back at the bottom can be difficult from a financial perspective too, but long term, prospects can be more encouraging - mature entrants into a new career are often able to progress unusually quickly through the ranks of their new field, as their more transferable professional or managerial skills come into their own, and evidence supports the idea that career changers end up more satisfied with their jobs than those who stayed put (Carless & Arnup, 2013).

Case Study

Ranj, full-time park ranger

Ranj graduated with a degree in politics, and after a few years of trying various different options, she found her way into marketing. She was a creative thinker and working in the health sector, she felt that she might be able to provide an important service to the public. Ranj worked in this field for ten years, rose up the ranks but became very jaded about the industry and questioned the real value of the work she did.

The birth of her first child coincided with a move to the midlands to be nearer to her parents. Ranj resigned from her job and embraced the life of a full-time mother, sorting out their new house and developing a new life for the family. Seven years later, when her younger child started school, Ranj decided that she needed to re-engage with her career. She had toyed with a number of alternative careers since over the years, but the one she kept coming back to was working in conservation. It was a completely new field for her, but Ranj found that she would be able to do a Masters course in conservation at a local university, part distance learning and part weekend lectures. It would take some years to qualify, but Ranj was in no hurry – she wasn't quite ready to embrace a full-time role and she still wanted to be very available for her children. Still, the logistics of managing the course were difficult for the family. Ranj's partner was very supportive but found the additional childcare he needed to do at the weekends draining, on top of his full time job and the whole family found that they missed out on the family time that had been so precious to them.

But Ranj persevered. She enjoyed the course itself, and if the truth be told, quite liked having some time away from the family, where she could find her own identity again and gradually re-build her confidence.

Finding a job in this new field was more tricky than Ranj had expected and it became clear that she would need to start at the bottom again, working for free. This was a blow. They had just about managed living on one salary for the past few years, but with the debt from her MSc now to re-pay, their family finances were tight. She found herself a part-time voluntary job with the national parks and the family muddled along. Ranj loved the work, enjoyed being part of a team and appreciated being able to put her new-found knowledge to good use, but it wasn't easy for the family and she kept wondering whether she should just go back to her old field of marketing. After six months working without a salary, her department was awarded a grant, and as part of that, they were able to hire Ranj to work part-time for six months. The money wasn't great, but at least she was finally earning. And more than that, she felt that she was now on the right track. When the contract finished, the organisation found a way to keep her salary going, and her hours gradually inched their way up. Three years down the line, Ranj applied for a more senior ranger's job and was offered the role full-time and permanently.

For Ranj it has all worked out well, but there were moments when she felt that she had let everyone down, and feared that she would never make it. She is earning less now than she was when she gave up her marketing role, but in terms of job satisfaction, it is incomparable.

New family friendly job

In many cases, the primary requirement of a new career after parenthood is one that fits in with the new family. There are some career areas which are not readily compatible with hands-on parenting, and the impetus to find a new career can be driven largely by the need to find something flexible. One sector which is appealing to many parents looking for a family friendly option is education. The school hours and holidays are attractive to parents of school-age children, and it is a field which offers a range of different roles and is quite used to accommodating part-time hours. Other industries too are increasingly seeing the benefits of offering flexible working. The NHS has a great tradition of even very senior roles being available part-time, and within the technology sector employers are actively campaigning for mothers to re-train as coders, promising flexible hours and the chance to work from home.

Freelance roles can come into their own too in this category, as parents can take their existing interests or talents and work out ways to use them to make money. Parents make a living through applying a vast range of skills from admin to yoga-teaching, but making your living as a freelancer is not an easy option. Many successful parent-freelancers make it work through a lot of hard graft, and some find that their success comes at too high a price. But if you are looking for an option where you can be in control, this might be worth considering.

One big draw-back with part-time family-friendly roles is that they tend to be more likely to be low-skilled and low-status. There are of course exceptions, but it is certainly true that primary schools are filled with over-qualified teaching assistants, office staff and exam invigilators as mothers (and it does tend to be mothers) are prioritising the part-time nature of the work over personal challenge, salary and status. Overall, there is a significant mismatch between the number of interesting, challenging part-time jobs and the number of highly-skilled parents looking for part-time work. It is frustrating that organisations are so reluctant to organise their work so that employees could work from 10am – 2pm, term time only, reserving this kind of working pattern almost exclusively for low level jobs. There are a number of organisations who are trying to promote a more flexible culture in the labour market (such as the employment agencies *2 to 3 Days* and *Women Like Us*) and some larger organisations are now focusing on offering flexible work or additional support for returning parents. The culture is changing but more needs to be done to allow the economy to take advantage of this pool of talent, and to allow parents to put their skills to good use without sacrificing their family time.

Case Study,

Juley, part-time teaching assistant

Juley trained as a graphic designer and worked for 14 years in a publishing company, designing and producing corporate brochures. She had significant responsibility, dealing with a substantial budget and managing complex projects and teams. For the first ten years or so, she loved it – the fast pace, the chance to use her creative skills and her like-minded colleagues. Over the years, Juley's enthusiasm for her job waned a little, but after the birth of her first child, she decided to go back to her job, part-time. She appreciated the flexibility her employer offered her and felt that she had built up some trust over the years which could prove particularly useful now. It was also great being in a job that she knew well, so that any spare energy could be channelled towards her family. But with the birth of her second child, and her son's move to the shorter days of nursery school, Juley felt that it was time to leave, seeing her more complicated family life as an excuse to pull the plug on the career that no-longer captured her imagination.

Juley spent a few happy years as a stay at home mum, but once her daughter was settled at school, she started to think about going back to work. She had no interest in returning to her former role, and she needed something part-time and local - her first priority was to her family. Casting around to see what options might be open to her, she first applied for a job working in the office at her children's primary school, but was told that the job was only possible on a full-time basis. The office manager at the school hinted that there would be a vacancy coming up soon as a part-time teaching assistant, and wondered if that might suit Juley better. Teaching had been an idea Juley had toyed with years ago, and decided now that this role was worth a shot. She had not worked in the field before, but over the last few years had been very involved in the school as a mother, helping in the classrooms one morning each week, and chairing the PTFA for a year. The selection process was more gruelling than she imagined, but Juley was delighted to be offered a job, two days a week.

Three years on, it is working out very well. She enjoys being around the children, and loves the fact that the school hours and holidays allow her to be the mother she wants to be. She wonders what her life would have been like had she been more enthusiastic about her previous job and had she made the decision to stick with it. She worries that her world has shrunk down to her narrow local community in and around the school, and occasionally reflects on her husband's life, wondering if she would have like a bit more of his identity and status. And she thinks about the future. She worries about what kind of role model she is for her daughter, and whether she will be a teaching assistant until retirement. But if she had her time again she wouldn't change anything. She feels enormously privileged to have been able to make the choices that she made. She has been the mother she wanted to be, and doing that job well seems much more important than any status or salary that a glitzy job in the city could have given her.

Making it work

Each of the options outlined above has its plus points, but many parents find that their situation is not perfect, as they struggle to be both the worker they want to be and the parent they feel their child deserves (Kanji & Cahusac, 2015). A successful new arrangement relies on three key factors: a supportive employer, a supportive family, and available childcare provision (Woolnough and Redshaw, 2016). The employer needs to understand the new parents' constraints and there is a need for an organisational culture in which there is no stigma attached to flexible working; a partner needs to share the domestic responsibilities, and together the parents need to ensure that both careers are valued at home; and childcare needs to be high-quality, affordable and accessible.

One of the biggest challenges that parents face as they return to work after a career break is a reduced level of confidence. Work confers identity, status and financial independence, all of which can dissipate swiftly as soon as you give up your full-time role. Add to that, the simple fact that being out of the workplace, even for a relatively short spell, will mean that you are not up to speed on the most recent developments and trends, and that some of your skills might be a little rusty, and it is no wonder that parents returning to work after parental leave or a career break can feel a little unsure of themselves (Stout & Chaker 2004).

But the evidence is clear. Time away from the workplace in caring roles enhances your professional skills (Ruderman et al., 2002). When you return to the workplace after a year or more of looking after your children, you will have improved your interpersonal skills, you will have developed your psychological resources and you will have further honed your time management skills. Sadly, it is also clear that hiring managers do not tend to understand the value of this year-long immersive training programme (Woolhough & Redshaw, 2016), but it is important that you know it yourself and can sell your newly developed skills with confidence. Time spent reflecting on your skills, either on your own, or with a coach, can help you to prepare for a conversation with a future employer (see chapter X).

A second challenge new parents face is the influence of gender norms. Across most of Europe (with the exception of the Nordic countries), North America and Australia and New Zealand, society generally assumes that fathers will continue with their full-time jobs, and focus on their careers as a way to best provide for their families. It is then assumed that mothers' careers will take a back seat as their priority becomes caring for their children. These women may go back to work part-time, as long as their part-time hours allow them to be the primary carer for the children and don't jeopardise their partner's career.

In reality, many, many families do things differently, but these gender norms are powerful and have a significant impact on the decisions parents make, their subsequent experiences, and how they view their own choices. Flouting gender norms comes at a price. It can be harder for fathers to become integrated with the local community and some men report social isolation, mixed reactions from family and friends, and instances of feeling stigmatised (Lee & Lee, 2018). Mothers who return to work full-time may find it easy to be self-critical of their behaviour as a mother, questioning their own maternal instincts or being concerned that others will judge them for their choices. But recent evidence brings hope to families making non-traditional choices. Rushing and Powell's study of working mothers and stay at home fathers (2015) suggested that this arrangement worked very well for these families, with parents both reporting great relationships with their children and with each other.

Conclusion

Bringing a child into the world and raising it to independence is quite a task in itself, and managing this on top of the increasing demands of the workplace, and the societal requirements to be the ideal mother, father and worker, is a tall order. If you are a working parent and you are finding your situation challenging, that's because it is. If you are wondering whether there is a better or easier option out there, well there may be; but it is quite possible that there is not. Being a working parent is always a process of compromise and trade-offs. Families make all manner of career solutions work for them, and whilst there is rarely a right answer, there is also rarely a wrong answer. Working parents are resourceful, hard working and creative – they have to be. But they can also be satisfied and fulfilled, both at home and at work, and whilst this generation is having to fight, negotiate and compromise, these efforts are making a difference and the cultural norms are slowly shifting.

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