

THE IMPACT OF REINTEGRATION INTO THE PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT AFTER PARENTAL LEAVE ON THE PERFORMANCE OF EMPLOYEES IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

Ensuring performance at work for people returning from parental leave is an important and sensitive topic for both employees and employers. Reintegrating into work after an extended absence can be challenging, but there are strategies and practices that can facilitate this process. The topic of this research is particularly relevant in the current context, given the importance of increasing the balance between personal and professional life of employees and ensuring an efficient reintegration into the work environment after a break period.

Human resources motivation is a fundamental aspect for any organisation, as it is proven that motivated employees are more engaged and have higher productivity at work. Employees who return to work after a period of absence may be exposed to a series of challenges, such as adapting to changes in the work environment, finding a balance between parenting and professional responsibilities and further resuming the previous work rhythm. It is therefore essential to identify how HR motivation can be supported and encouraged at this stage. Positive intelligence is, in fact, the ability to identify opportunities and solutions, and to have a positive attitude in the face of challenges.

The results of this research are intended to be transformed into valuable information for both managers and human resources professionals, but also for employees who return to work after the end of parental leave. By understanding this reintegration process more deeply and identifying effective practices, organisations can create a more supportive work environment and support employees in achieving professional and personal success.

Keywords: *work performance, parental leave, motivation, responsibilities, reintegration, positive intelligence.*

1. Introduction

Human resource motivation, positive intelligence and performance at work are complex and interconnected topics that have captured the interest of researchers in the field of human resource management. Motivating human resources is essential to ensure the presence of engaged and productive employees. Theories of motivation, such as Maslow's theory of basic needs, Vroom's theory of expectations, and self-determination theory, laid the foundation for a better understanding of motivation at work. These theories highlight the importance of meeting employee needs, expectations of effort and performance, and personal autonomy and competence in achieving job satisfaction and performance. When it comes to people returning to work after parental leave, motivational factors can vary and can be influenced by changes in personal and professional life.

The methodology for this research includes steps as review of the literature, data collection and in the end analysis of data. Review of the literature, involves conducting an extensive study of the specialised literature, related to human resources motivation, positive intelligence, performance at work and reintegration of employees after parental leave. This study in the literature is the theoretical basis of the research.

The second stage of research is data collection. At this stage I will use several methods of data collection, such as questionnaires, interviews, and observations.

For this study I collected quantitative and qualitative data from employees returning to work after parental leave, managers, and representatives of human resources departments. The aim is to gain a detailed understanding of the experiences, perceptions and needs of these employees in the reintegration process.

The third stage of the research is represented by the analysis of data and their interpretation, for identifying patterns, trends, and relationships between variables relevant to the topic of the study.

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The study aims to use mixed research methods, both qualitative and quantitative, for developing an action plan, to improve communication between employee and manager, and at the same time to identify ways of motivation, depending on the characteristics of each category of employees, ensuring performance at work.

Regarding the objectives, an important objective is to identify specific strategies and interventions from both the employee, organisations, and the government side, which can support and encourage motivation and performance at work. This paper aims to focus on organisational needs, personal development programs or policies for reconciling work and personal life that can be effective in promoting motivation and performance of these employees.

2. Implications of the process of reintegration and performance at work

The idea of self-improvement moved from the extremes of management theory and human resources cultivation, managing to occupy a central position today. The phenomenon is largely due to a reorientation from „control” strategies to „engagement” strategies in the management of organisations. This radical change has given rise to a wide range of methods of self-improvement¹. Positive motivation is how managers lead with the vision of the future, not that of the past; they focus their attention on actions not just analysis; they see solutions not just problems, they are in control and less controlled². Work-life balance is often disrupted in terms of allocating time for work versus family or other personal projects. While a more balanced allocation of time is always helpful, you can instantly improve your work-life balance using the Positive Intelligence Quotient, Brain³. Positive intelligence is identified by the ability to see opportunities, have a positive attitude, and develop resources needed to face challenges. It can play a determining role in the process of employees' reintegration into the workplace after completion of parental leave. The positive approach and ability to find creative solutions can help to adapt quickly to changes in the work environment and maintain high performance. Specialised studies show that professional success does not depend on academic training and claim that it is based on that emotional capacity, called emotional intelligence⁴. Emotional intelligence was analysed from two perspectives: the hereditary perspective and the acquired perspective. There are people who throughout their lives need to train and develop their emotional intelligence. Academic intelligence does not change throughout life, but emotional intelligence can be acquired through training and practice⁵.

Positive intelligence is a branch of positive psychology that focuses on the positive aspects of the individual and the human experience. It deals with the development of human qualities such as optimism, resilience, gratitude, empathy, and altruism. Returning to work after parental leave ends can be a complex and challenging time for employees. Research on this topic has highlighted the importance of psychological support and coping resources to facilitate effective reintegration and ensure a smooth and successful transition to the work environment for employees. Another important aspect of positive motivation is creating a work environment where employees feel engaged and have a strong emotional connection to the goals and values⁶ of the organisation. This can be achieved by clarifying and communicating the mission, vision, and organisational values and by involving employees in decision-making processes. When employees feel connected to a larger purpose and understand the positive impact of their work, it can be a powerful source of motivation.

Also, inspirational leadership and the example set by leadership are essential in positive motivation. When leaders are role models and demonstrate a positive attitude, dedication, and engagement, they can influence and motivate employees to do the same. Leaders should provide and support employees' personal and professional development, providing opportunities for learning and growth⁷. The basic idea of leadership is that it means influence. If you want to lead, you will need to convince your team to work with you⁸.

In Romania, performance management is based on a series of approaches and tools, which may vary depending on the size and sector of activity of the organisation. Some of the common aspects of performance management in Romanian organisations: setting clear goals (SMART), planning, monitoring, and evaluating

¹ See Molden, J. Maxwell, *Good leaders ask extraordinary questions*, Amaltea Publishing House, Bucharest, 2016.

² See J. Owen, *How to Lead*, Pearson Publishing House, USA, 2017.

³ See S. Chamine, *Positive Intelligence*, Curtea Veche Publishing House, Bucharest, 2012.

⁴ See I. Dumitru, *Emotional intelligence and irrational beliefs*, Sitech Publishing House, Craiova, 2016.

⁵ See D. Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000.

⁶ See B. Tracy, *Motivation*, The Brian Tracy Success Library, USA, 2013.

⁷ See N. Drake-Knight, *Continue and Begin Fast Coaching*, UK, 2019.

⁸ See Molden, J. Maxwell, *op. cit.*, *loc. cit.*

performance, feedback and development, rewards and recognition, communication, and engagement. Many executives complain about the same phenomenon when it comes to their attempts to improve individual or team performance through advising, sustained feedback on the performance-evaluation relationship, conflict resolution and stabilisation, skills development workshops and team-buildings. People show resilience to change, even when they seem to think they want it⁹. Daniel Goleman, author of „Emotional Intelligence”, returns to readers' attention with an original perspective on one of the resources improperly exploited today: attention, as a secret ingredient of performance. In an age where distractions lurk everywhere and are impossible to remove, Daniel Goleman demonstrates that, more than ever, we need ever sharper attention to face adversity and thrive¹⁰. A good reintegration of employees returning from parental leave can bring many benefits to the organisation, such as talent retention and development, improved employee morale and increased productivity.

The analysis of the applicability of the requirements of employees on parental leave, for a successful reintegration, from the employer's perspective, involves adapting policies, providing the necessary support, effective communication and cultivating a family-friendly work environment. By implementing these measures, the employer can support a smooth and successful transition of employees in their professional activity after the leave period.

Our mind and cognitive processes have a significant influence on our personality and how we make decisions. Personality is a unique structure built around our interpretations of the world and how we process and assign meaning to our events and experiences¹¹.

2.1. Intended purpose and expected results

The main purpose of this study is to identify the best methods by which each manager can motivate his employees, having in mind the characteristics of each category of employees. At the same time, this paper proposes a thorough analysis of how the reintegration in the working market of people who have a period of absence of up to 2 years, due to maternity leave and parental leave, and the construction of a new model of motivational management based on these results. The research will use the opinions of the two parties involved, namely, employee and employer, and aims to meet them, with a well-structured plan for a successful reintegration, in terms of lower costs, aiming at motivating performance.

Regarding the population's participation in economic activity, the latest data of the National Institute of Statistics show that, out of the total employed population, women accounted for 42.6%.¹² These data are part of the archive of the National Institute of Statistics and belong to studies from 2020. Also from this source, we learn that approximately 52.4% of the number of live births have salaried mothers. Therefore, we are talking about a high percentage of women who need support to return to work and continue their careers. In the paper „Reconciliation of professional and family life”, published by the National Institute of Statistics of Romania, the following situation is brought to our attention: most people stayed at home between 1 and 2 years, the highest share being registered among people aged 25-34 years.¹³ It turns out that 76.7% of those who temporarily interrupted their activity to care for children, the interruption was in the form of parental leave.

The results of research on the proposed topic show that few things are more important to the leader-subordinate relationship than connection. One of the most important aspects for employees is trust and a sense that the manager cares, and that their work is appreciated.

Motivating employees who return to work, after a period of absence of up to 2 years, is a long process that requires effort from both parties involved, and at the same time involves adopting a courageous attitude in front of the fear of failure. Making a complete radiography of this situation and proposing viable solutions is the purpose of this research. It is a complex approach to reduce prejudices on the Romanian working market to a minimum, and to get rid of business decisions made through less good calculations. At the same time, it also aims to open the employee in connection with a possible preparation for leaving the working market, for a determined period.

⁹ See S. Chamine, *op. cit., loc. cit.*

¹⁰ See D. Goleman, *Focus*, Curtea Veche Publishing, Bucharest, 2014.

¹¹ See Oliver et al, *The Handbook of Personality: Theory and Research*, The Guilford Press, USA, 2021.

¹² See *Reconciliation of work and family life*, National Institute of Statistics, Bucharest, Romania, <https://insse.ro/cms/ro/content/reconcilierea-vietii-profesionale-cu-cea-familiala>, last time consulted on 01.04.2024.

¹³ *Ibidem.*

Each person faces at some point in his career a lot of problems, obstacles, barriers. Some of them let these things defeat them because they fail to think creatively, and because they do not find the strength to fight hardships, or they lack self-confidence. Employees can be motivated by a leader with vision, a man who knows how to objectively evaluate himself and see beyond appearances. The manager's support for continuing their career, from the same point they were in, before entering parental leave is the main requirement for 66% of the total 877 people surveyed. At the same time, 70% of these people worry about performance at work after the period of absence. Regarding the process of readjusting to work, 37% said it was difficult. Regarding how this process is managed by management, 52.3% said that poor management contributes to the decision to change jobs, followed by 43.9% who named the manager's lack of motivation and coach capacity as a determining element in making this decision. Regarding the determining aspects in the employee's motivation process towards performance, 95.4% of the 877 people surveyed named the work environment, the atmosphere at the office, job security and the relationship with superiors as priority factors.

2.2. Practical suggestions that can help in the process of motivating staff who return to work after a period of absence of up to 2 years, due to Parental Leave

- Flexible Hours - Schedule flexibility: Introducing flexible working hours or the option of working from home (teleworking) can be very helpful. This allows parents to adjust their working hours according to the needs of the family;
- Adaptation period and more specifically gradual reintroduction: An adaptation period, during which the employee returns to work with an initial part-time schedule, can facilitate the transition;
- Training and Development: Training programs: Updating professional knowledge and skills through courses or trainings can help people returning from parental leave feel more prepared and confident in their abilities;
- Psychological Support: Advising and support: Providing access to everyday feedback or coaching services can help employees better manage stress and improve their work-life balance;
- Effective Communication - Open Dialogue: Maintaining open communication between employee and manager/HR is crucial. Regular discussions about mutual expectations, performance feedback and any concerns about reintegration are essential;
- Flexibility in Performance Appraisal - Adapting objectives: It is important that performance targets are realistic and adapted to the employee's new situation. This includes recognising that the period immediately following returning from leave may require a readjustment of expectations;
- Creating an Inclusive Environment: Family friendly policies: Developing an organisational culture that supports work-life balance is beneficial for all employees.

By implementing these strategies, organisations can ensure that the transition back to work after parental leave is as smooth as possible for employees, thereby helping to maintain a high level of job satisfaction and performance. These practices not only support employees at this important stage, but also help create a positive and productive work environment for all team members.

The above results were obtained after processing a questionnaire, to which a total of 877 people responded.

The purpose of this questionnaire is to identify the needs, perceptions, and expectations of people returning to work after a period of absence of up to 2 years. We want to identify viable future solutions to better manage these situations on the labour market.

2.2.1. Questionnaire presentation conducted on a homogeneous sample with 877 respondents

The questionnaire consists of 17 questions, of which, 2 open questions, for identifying the objective point of view of the interviewed persons, and to have a multitude of diversified answers, 6 dichotomous questions and 9 questions with answers of choice.

Table 1. The field of activity in which the interviewees work

Sales/Customer Support	203	23.14%
Administrative	144	16.4%
Management	117	13.34%

IT	42	4.79%
Independent	17	1.94%
Medicine	44	5.01%
Accounting	15	1.71%
Finance	20	2.28%
Human resources	8	0.91%
Engineering	14	1.59%
Legal	11	1.25%
Marketing	5	0.57%
Research	8	1.6%
Construction	5	0.57%
Pharmaceuticals	11	1.25%
Others	213	24.29%

Source: Questionnaire with 877 respondents conducted by the author

According to the data exemplified in the table above, we can see the diversity of the fields of activity in which the interviewed persons work. There is a share of 23.14% of sales/customer service staff, an area that requires more attention, in terms of how each day is organised, and ways of motivation with direct impact, on both material performance and customer satisfaction.

Table 2. Determining reasons in the process of returning to work, before or at the end of Parental Leave

Finance	363	41.3%
Financial, Social, Career	119	13.5%
Finance, Social	94	10.72%
Financial, Career	85	9.7%
Career	60	6.84%
Social	42	4.78%
Employer requirement	19	2.17%
Social, Career	18	2.05%
Financial, Employer Requirement	11	1.25%
Finance, Social,	11	1.25%
Financial Employer Requirement	5	0.57%
Financial, Employer Requirement	4	0.46%
Career, Employer requirement	4	0.46%
Social, Employer requirement	2	0.22%
Others	40	4.56%

Source: Questionnaire with 877 respondents conducted by the author

Regarding the reasons behind the decision to return to work, before the end of the parental leave, respectively at its end, we find especially the financial reason with 41.3%, Career with 6.84% and Social with 4.78%. It is worth mentioning that, for most of the people surveyed, these 3 elements are priorities, being mentioned together most of the time.

Table 3. Concerns about returning to work after completion of parental leave.

Caring about separation from the child	581	66.9%
Employer/management attitude	148	17%
Changes within your company that you haven't been informed about	176	20.3%
Reduced workload and time due to family responsibilities	537	61.8%

Source: Questionnaire with 877 respondents conducted by the author

Regarding concerns about returning to work after completing parental leave, 66.9% said "Worry about separation from the child", 61.8% - "Reduced workload and time due to responsibilities to the family, followed by changes within the company, about which they were not informed, for 20.3% and "Employer/management attitude" for 17%. With these elements, we can identify viable solutions to reduce these potential factors with direct influence on workplace performance.

Table 4. Accommodation, needs and flexibility

We discussed and received the necessary support	269	32.2%
We discussed, but nothing could be done about it	66	7.9%
I didn't think there could be these possibilities	200	23.9%
I didn't think about that	249	29.8%

Source: Questionnaire with 877 respondents conducted by the author

Regarding the integration of people who are absent from the working market, for a period of up to 2 years, for parental leave, it can be seen from the table above, that 29.8% did not try to discuss with the employer about things such as accommodation, needs, flexibility. A percentage of 32.2% discussed and received the necessary support, 23.9% are not informed about the existence of these possibilities, and for 7.9% nothing could be done in this regard, following the discussion with the management of the company where they operate.

Table 5. What would make you change your job after the end of Parental Leave?

Lack of support from employer/management	434	52.3%
Lack of motivation manager and coach capacity	364	43.9%
Changes that have taken place and were brought to your attention too late	138	16.6%
Changing professional perceptions	121	14.6%

Source: Questionnaire with 877 respondents conducted by the author

It happens extremely often to hear about people who choose to change jobs after the end of parental leave.

This is due, according to the respondents' statement, mainly to the lack of support from the employer/management, for a percentage of 52.3%. At the same time, the manager's lack of motivation and coach capacity is a problem for 43.9%, followed by the changes that took place, about which they received no information for 16.6%, and the change in professional perceptions for 14.6%. Regarding the management of the process of returning to work, 37% said it was a difficult process, 5.3% said it was a very difficult process, followed by 14.5% who said everything went great, and 10.3% chose to change jobs. Given this statistic, I believe that the manager plays an extremely important role in the process of reintegration at work, of this category of people. An easier reintegration involves a reassessment of the employee with everything that means priorities, skills, plans and potential, for establishing a reintegration plan, motivating the employee towards performance.

Table 6. What is the first question you think about the process of returning to work?

Will I still have the same position within the company?	191	22.5%
Who will be my manager?	83	9.8%
Will I need new skills and knowledge?	263	30.9%
Will I still perform the same?	600	70%

Source: Questionnaire with 877 respondents conducted by the author

According to the above statistics, 70% of the people surveyed question their performance at work after the period of absence due to parental leave. At the same time, uncertainty about skills and knowledge is a concern for 30.9% of them. It seems, however, that there are also people who question the existence of their job or rather

the position they occupied, and here we are talking about a percentage of 22.5%. There is also a relatively small percentage of people who think that management has changed during this period, but have not been informed, 9.8%.

Table 7. Do you consider that you have the manager's support for continuing your career, from the same point where you were before entering parental leave?

Yes	556	66%
No	232	27.6%
I don't know	89	10.14%

Source: Questionnaire with 877 respondents conducted by the author

Regarding the continuation of their career from the same point where they were before the period of absence, 66% say they receive the manager's support in this regard, 27.6% consider that they will not benefit from this support, and for 10.14% there is still uncertainty. Career can be an extremely important stimulus in the development process of each person. This is a good opportunity for a manager with leadership skills to meet even the hardest challenges to which the company may be subjected, while helping the employee to evolve. The ability of a manager to identify the employee's need, and to use everyone's potential, is a key element in the motivation process.

Table 8. What is your perception of the current Manager?

My manager always shows interest in my career	139	15.85%
I have total confidence in my manager; he/she has always been honest with me	158	18.01%
I have always been rewarded and appreciated for my work/performance	211	24.06%
None of the above	369	42.07%

Source: Questionnaire with 877 respondents conducted by the author

The way the manager is perceived is very important in strengthening a healthy manager-employee relationship. For finding out the perception of the interviewed persons, we proposed four characteristics of a manager, for analysis, namely: „My manager always shows interest in my career”, „I have total confidence in my manager; he/she has always been honest with me”, I have always been rewarded and appreciated for my work/performance. Most, namely 42.07% say they cannot attribute these characteristics to their manager.

Table 9. What aspects do you consider decisive in the employee's motivation process at work?

Working environment	19	2.1%
Socialization	16	1.82%
Job security	25	2.85%
Relationship with superiors	5	0.57%
All listed above	837	95.4%

Source: Questionnaire with 877 respondents conducted by the author

We proposed for analysis 4 key elements of the motivational process at work, for achieving performance. The work environment, the atmosphere at the office, safety at work, the relationship with superiors, were agreed by a percentage of 95.4%.

Question 1: What expectations do you have from your employer for an easier readjustment to work?

In most of the completed questionnaires, aspects such as understanding, patience, support, communication, trust, constructive feedback, transparency, encouragement, attention to the needs and necessities of each person, flexibility and realistic expectations could be identified. As a summary of the answers, I quote:

- „Employment in the same position, and possibly training to refresh knowledge.”
- „Discussions about the new position, in advance, so that I can process the information and prepare if necessary.”
- „Support in integration, through early connection (not at the last minute).”

- „To be able to set realistic goals together, and a plan for learning/adapting to new requirements or technologies.”
- „Training as for a new employee, presenting current projects and changes.”
- „Offering equal opportunities compared to other colleagues, keeping your career path, keeping your position.”
- „Access to training and coaching/mentoring to keep me up to date with changes during my absence, timely feedback and active guidance.”
- „Support and motivation to achieve performance.”

Question 2: How do you think your employer could motivate you to regain confidence in your capabilities?

The answers of those surveyed include a total of defining aspects of a leader. We have seen a successive repetition of statements such as:

- „Giving tasks with difficulty level gradually. Appreciation for things done well and feedback where there are things to improve.”
- „Granting the same post.”
- „Treat me the same as they did before I went on parental leave; If I were assigned lighter projects, it is clear that he does not trust my capabilities.”
- „Real feedback on performance.”
- „Taking on the same role, receiving new projects and trusting employees.”
- „Courses/assessments, responsibilities commensurate with potential, performance bonuses if I achieve my goals.”
- „Through appreciation and validation.”
- „Regular feedback, openness to communication, patience and empathy, encouragement throughout progress and when successes occur.”
- „The manager can motivate me through behaviour, adapted to my professional needs.”
- „Objective evaluations/feedback (based on facts and examples) and confidence that they can lead or be part of high-impact projects.”

In addition to these statements, we also frequently state: support, patience, encouragement, communication, support of ideas, autonomy, independence, appreciation of work, recognition, training, pleasant atmosphere at work, positive attitude.

In conclusion, I would like to express a point of view of a Human Resources Manager, within a Romanian Courier Company, regarding the return of an employee to work, after a period of absence of up to 2 years, due to parental leave.

2.2.2. Interview - Human Resources Manager Romania

How does business influence a mother's return to work? - is not influenced in any way. During parental leave, the employment contract is suspended, and the position is temporarily replaced. Consequently, in terms of costs, the business is not influenced. It can be, just taking into consideration that an experienced person leaves, and another comes who does not know the business (or maybe knows) depends.

- **Question no. 1:** What are the key factors for a successful reintegration?

There can be many: - granting all rights, which are rightful in the company, on the respective position updated (e.g., during the CIC period salary increases were granted).

When the employee returns, his salary must be updated to the level of the other employees in the department, or to the percentage with which the rest have been updated. Any internal regulations contain regulations vis-à-vis maternity protection at work: hours worked, whether the returning mother is breastfeeding or not, working position, breaks, etc.

- **Question no. 2:** How important is motivation for this category of employees?

I would say it is a key factor, considering that the period spent at home with the child, in most cases demotivates the mother, she no longer feels a person who can perform, be aware of changes, be competitive, etc.

- **Question no. 3:** How long does it take to achieve performance at work, after a period of absenteeism, due to maternity/parental leave?

It depends on a case-by-case basis. It can be in a month, or it may not be at all. It depends a lot on the person, on the conditions in the family, if there are problems vis-à-vis the child (he does not go to kindergarten, he is sickly). I would say between 3 months and 1 year. From experience, most of the time it is the maximum time option, *e.g.*, 1 year.

- **Question no. 4:** How do you evaluate the costs of reintegrating a mother versus hiring another person in the same position?

They can sometimes be a little higher, given the sound in the company, compared to a new employee, overall, the difference is not significant. There are pluses and minuses that ultimately compensate.

3. Conclusions

The reintegration of employees into the workforce after parental leave is a critical stage in their career development and in maintaining organisational performance. Human resource motivation and positive intelligence play a key role in this process and can significantly influence employee performance. Therefore, my aim is to investigate how these factors can be optimised to encourage successful reintegration and high performance at work.

As I mentioned, I chose to take a mixed approach to data collected and combine both qualitative and quantitative methods. Interviews with employees who returned to work after parental leave provided a better understanding of their experiences, as well as the challenges faced, and strategies used to motivate themselves and improve their performance.

Based on the results and conclusions obtained in my research, I developed practical recommendations and strategies for organisations in managing the reintegration of employees after parental leave such as flexible hours, adaptation period and more specifically gradual reintroduction, updating professional knowledge and skills through courses or trainings, access to feedback or coaching services, effective communication, and flexibility in performance appraisal. It is important that performance targets are realistic and adapted to the employee's new situation. This includes recognising that the period immediately following returning from leave may require a readjustment of expectations and Creating an Inclusive Environment.

These recommendations aim at motivating human resources, integrating the notion of positive intelligence and performance at work in this specific situation. It is also vital that organisations adopt effective measures to support employees in their return to work, and to maximise results at individual and organisational level.

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