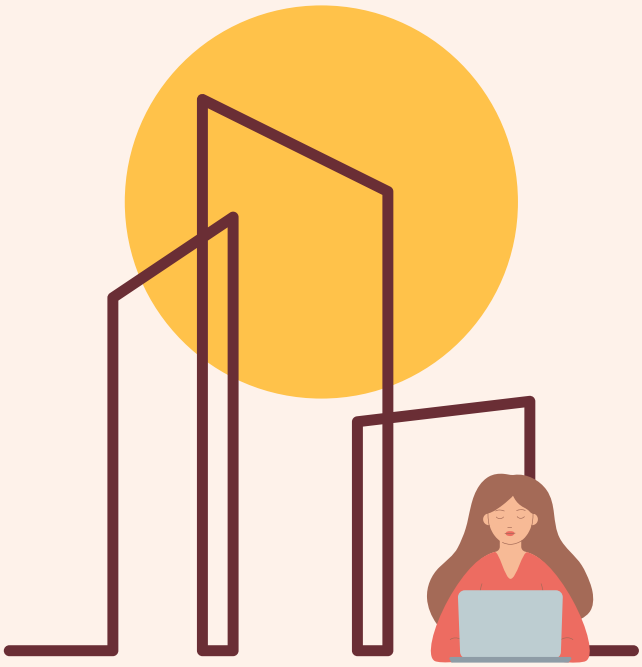
THE UNTOLD STORY OF POSTPARTUM AT WORK



This paper explores the postpartum experience **through the voices of new mothers and HR professionals**, shedding light on the realities of recovery, workplace return, highlighting what employers can do to **create meaningful, sustainable support** for parents.

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SETTING THE SCENE

Becoming a parent is one of the most profound identity shifts a person can experience. A **positive postnatal journey depends on how well women can adapt** to a new identity, build confidence as mothers, and find support in their workplaces and communities (1,2).

Yet despite decades of progress in women's rights, the transition to **motherhood remains under-supported**. The US is the only high-income country without guaranteed paid parental leave, and even in Europe—where policies are stronger—many women still **struggle to return to work with confidence, health, and equal opportunity** (3–5). The consequences are clear: 77% of women report a negative workplace experience during this period (6), and **85% leave the full-time workforce within three years of having children** (7). Insufficient postpartum support has been linked to higher rates of postpartum depression, long-term career penalties, and increased attrition of female talent (5,8).

At the same time, the landscape is shifting. More **fathers are taking parental leave**, reflecting a shift in cultural expectations around caregiving (4,9), and **mothers are increasingly driving their families' financial futures**, with 45% of US mothers now serving as the primary breadwinner (10). Yet despite these changes, many still face challenges with only 39% of mothers reporting that they feel prepared for their return to work (11). The demand for equitable, family-friendly workplace policies has never been stronger.

If you are ready to improve maternity transitions, we are ready to help.

Book a Consultation

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To better understand these experiences and gaps, we spoke with women and their workplaces across the US and EMEA. Our survey was structured in three parts, and respondents could answer any section for which they were eligible:

Part I

Women who had **given birth in the past two years** shared their postpartum experiences—mentally, physically, and emotionally—including the most challenging aspects and the types of support they found most helpful.

Part II

Women **employed during their maternity leave** provided details on the length and types of leave they used, the support they received at work and the challenges they faced.

Part III

Male and female HR professionals, managers, and leaders **who support employees through maternity transitions** shared insights via survey and interviews on current practices, desired improvements, and the barriers they face in offering effective support.

Sources: 1) Finlayson K et al. "What matters to women in the postnatal period: A meta-synthesis of qualitative studies." 2) World Health Organization, 2022. "WHO recommendations on maternal and newborn care for a positive postnatal experience." 3) Bipartisan Policy Center, 2022. "Paid Family Leave Across OECD Countries." 4) OECD, 2023. "Paid parental leave: Big differences for mothers and fathers." 5) DeLoitte, 2024. "Women@Work 2024: A Global Outlook." 6) Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2016. "Pregnancy and Maternity-Related Discrimination and Disadvantage: Experience of Mothers." 7) Careers After Babies, 2023. "Careers After Babies: The Uncomfortable Truth." 8) Karl M et al. BMC Public Health, 2020. "Precarious working conditions and psychosocial work stress act as a risk factor for symptoms of postpartum depression during maternity leave: results from a longitudinal cohort study." 9) Destatis, 2023. "Persons on parental leave." 10) Center for American Progress, 2025. "Breadwinning Women Are a Lifeline for Their Families and the Economy." 11) Carrot, 2024. "Maternal Health in the Workplace."

This research continues with our 2026 study, Designing a New Way to Work and Parent, which explored the perspectives of father's and managers on parental leave and return to work, see page 13 for more.

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THE PLOT UNFOLDS

The postpartum and return-to-work experience has a profound impact not only on women's health and wellbeing but also on talent retention, engagement, and performance.

MAIN THEMES

Postpartum is under-supported

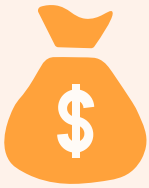
Sleep deprivation, isolation, and return-to-work stress were the top difficulties cited by new mothers. Above all, women expressed a need for stronger employer support—often more urgently than for longer leave or medical care.

Read more in Part I:
- *Stress, Support & Survival, page 5*
- *Care & Connection for a Confident Comeback, page 6*

Back to Work, But at What Cost?

Women valued re-engaging with their careers and colleagues but felt torn by guilt, fatigue, and childcare challenges. Only 36% reported a fully positive return-to-work experience, with many saying it took between 6 months and 2 years to feel fully capable again.

See Part II:
- *Patchwork Support & Mixed Emotions, page 7*
- *Reintegration Roadblocks, page 8*



The Business Case for Support

While 50% of HR professionals want to provide return-to-work coaching and 45% want manager training, most organizations offer only ad-hoc or no formal support for maternity transitions. Budget, leadership buy-in, and limited HR capacity are the biggest barriers.

Explore Part III:
- *Desire vs. Dollars, page 9*
- *Support that Sticks, page 10*
- *Off the Script, page 11*
- *Playing Your Part, page 12*

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

Supporting women through postpartum and their return to work is not a "nice-to-have." It is a **strategic investment in workforce resilience**, gender equity, and organizational success. Companies that **take postpartum and return-to-work seriously can unlock significant ROI**. Evidence shows that structured support reduces attrition, strengthens employee loyalty, and enhances productivity (1,2).

By providing **flexibility, coaching, and wellbeing programs**, organizations can retain top talent, particularly women at mid-career—the very stage where attrition is highest (3).

Sources: 1) World Economic Forum, 2024. "Closing the Women's Health Gap: A $1 Trillion Opportunity to Improve Lives and Economies." 2) DeLoitte, 2024. Women@Work 2024: A Global Outlook. 3) Careers After Babies, 2023. "Careers After Babies: The Uncomfortable Truth.

MEET THE CAST

In May 2025, we collected 160 anonymous online survey responses from men and women across the United States and Europe. The survey included three sections, completed based on eligibility (see page 1). The demographics below show the full survey sample, as well as a breakdown for the women respondents.

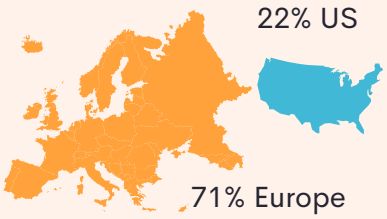
ALL RESPONDENTS

Part I *n= 52*

Part II *n= 76*

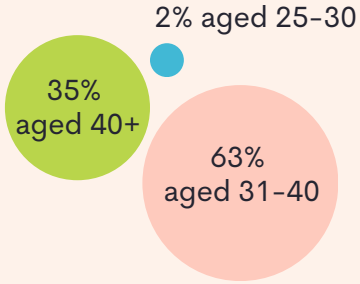
Part III *n= 34*

Where do you live?



7% Other / No response

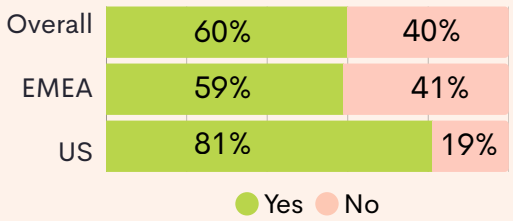
How old are you?



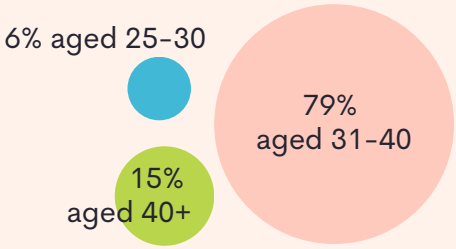
Part I

NEW MOMS

Did you go back to work after having your baby?



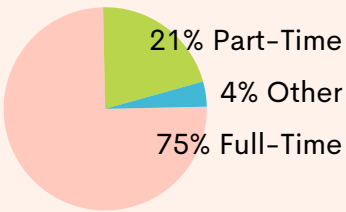
How old are you?



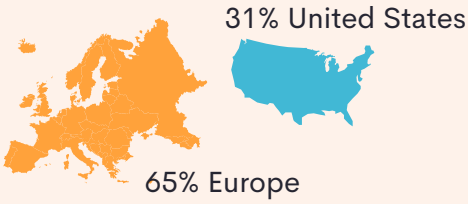
Part II

WOMEN AT WORK

What best describes your employement type?



Where do you live?



4% Other / No response

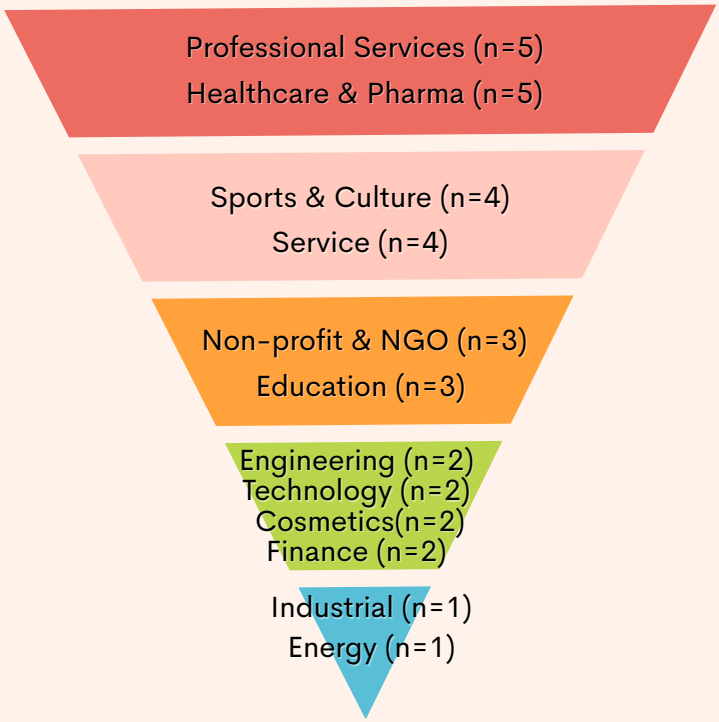
MEET THE DIRECTORS

In addition to the anonymous survey, where we heard from 21 HR professionals, leaders, and managers, we also conducted one-on-one interviews with 13 HR leaders. The demographics below represent both the survey and interview participants combined.

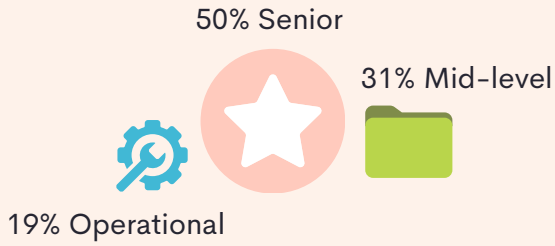
Part III

HR PROFESSIONALS, LEADERS & MANAGERS

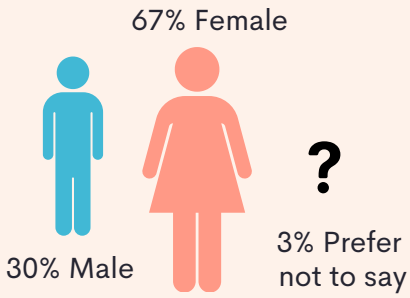
What is your industry?



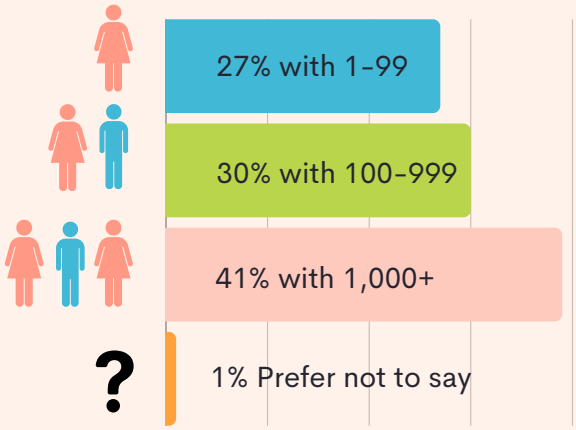
What is your role?



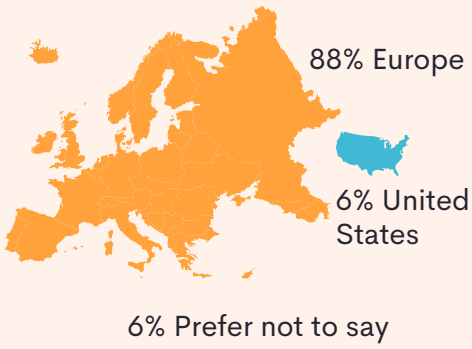
What is your gender?



How many employees are in your company?



Where do you live?



Part I

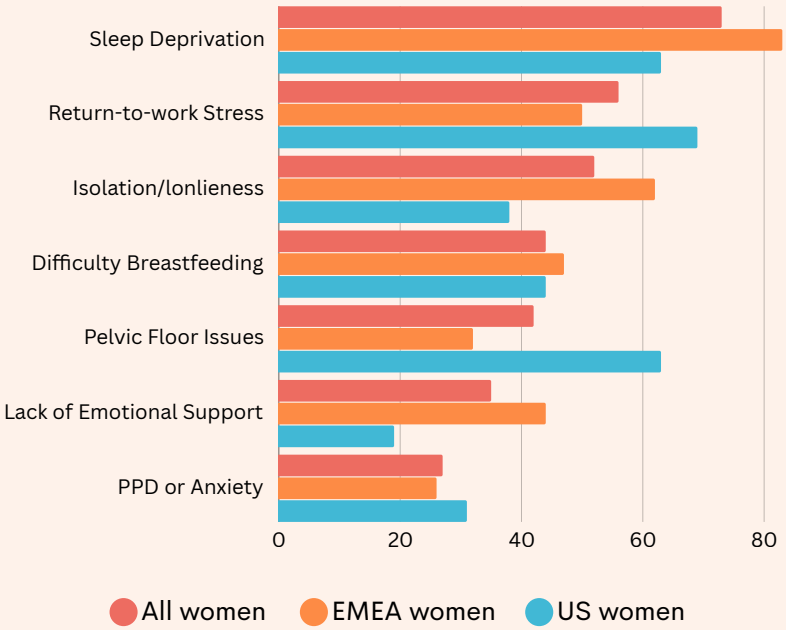
STRESS, SUPPORT & SURVIVAL

Postpartum mothers everywhere faced **sleep deprivation and return-to-work stress**, with both physical and mental health support rated as only moderate. Yet more than improved mental health support, physical reeducation, or even a longer maternity leave, **women wanted better employer support** during this period.

CHALLENGES

While **sleep deprivation and return-to-work stress were the top challenges overall**, **US women ranked pelvic floor issues** as their second biggest struggle, and **EMEA women ranked isolation/loneliness** second.

Percentage of women who experienced this challenge



Postpartum challenges were dominated by mental health issues, exhaustion, and work pressures. Given that only 60% of respondents went back to work, the **prominence of job-related stress** is particularly striking.

Every resource I found when I was **having a really hard time returning to work** seemed to be European parents who would talk about their struggles, but at 8-12 months postpartum, it just made me **more angry going back at 3 months** and it kept me from digesting useful tips.

- US mom

Better employer support. Its like **they pretended it never happened**.

- EMEA mom

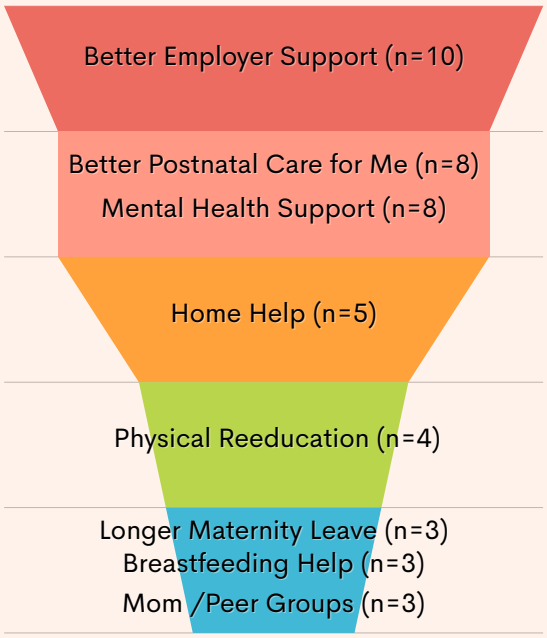
SUPPORT

US women reported feeling less supported in their physical recovery than EMEA women, though both groups rated support for their **mental & emotional health equally, as moderate**. This gap may stem from shorter hospital stays and limited postpartum care and pelvic floor reeducation in the US.

Rank (1-5) how supported you felt in ...

#1 response for, "What kind of support do you wish had been available to you postpartum?" was ***Better employer support***

Free text responses categorized and ranked



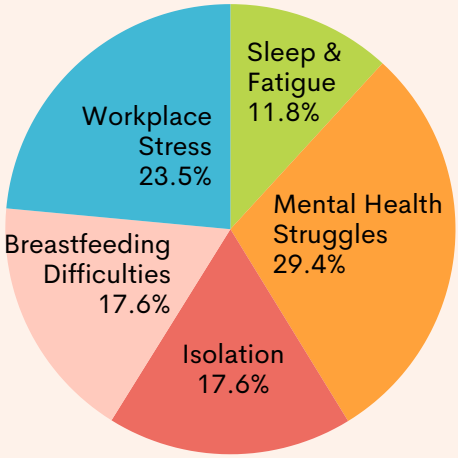
Part I

CARE & CONNECTION FOR A CONFIDENT COMEBACK

The following are **categorized free text responses** to "Do you have anything else to share from your postpartum recovery that was particularly challenging or insanely helpful?"

DIFFICULTIES

The most significant obstacles identified were struggles with mental health and insufficient support in the workplace. These areas point to **critical gaps where greater investment and systemic improvements** are needed in healthcare and workplaces.



Switzerland is **not set up for working mums**. How are you supposed to do this without additional help at home?

– EMEA mom

More books or **resources I could digest on my own time** that's not instagram and I can trust.

– US mom

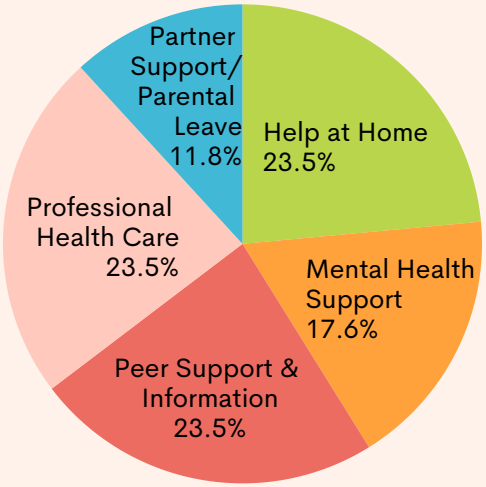
Wish I had support to help me understand it was **okay to ask for help**.

– EMEA mom

52 women who had a baby in the past 2 years completed Part I. Of these women, 79% were aged 31-40; 15% were 40+ and 6% were 25-30 years old. The majority of women (65%) lived in the EMEA, 31% lived in the US, and 4% did not reply. Of these women, 60% also went back to work (and completed Part II) and 8% of them work in HR/leadership (and completed Part III).

SOLUTIONS

The most valuable forms of support for new moms were peer support, access to reliable information, mental & physical healthcare and practical assistance at home. These types of support highlight the **need for emotional connection** and professional healthcare during this huge identity shift.



Mental health emerged as both the greatest challenge for new parents and, when support was available, one of the most valuable forms of help, alongside **peer connections and practical assistance** at home.

Leave the house alone for at least five minutes a day.

– EMEA mom

Having a **partner that could take paid parental leave** was extremely helpful.

– US mom

Exchange with moms is the best, it's scary to ask for things at work if there are no family policies implemented.

– EMEA mom

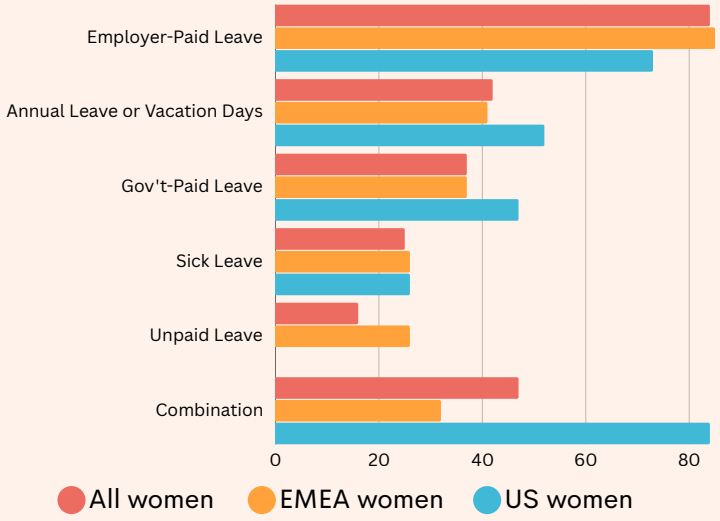
Part II

PATCHWORK SUPPORT & MIXED EMOTIONS

While the type and length of leave varied greatly for women in the same countries and across the ocean, **most parents valued aspects of returning to work** even though the transition was often emotionally and logistically challenging. Emotional ambivalence was common: many valued career engagement & adult interaction but **struggled with guilt, fatigue**, and separation from their baby.

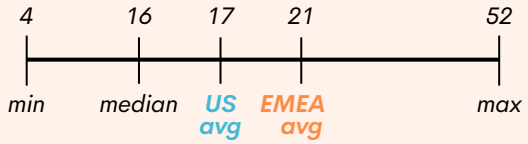
The majority of women (75%) were full-time employees, and **most relied on employer-paid maternity leave** (84%). However, **US women were far more likely to depend on annual or government leave** than their EMEA counterparts—and **US women were three times more likely to piece together multiple types of leave** (84% vs. 32%). Notably, **only EMEA women reported using unpaid leave**, underscoring both regional disparities and gaps in parental leave coverage.

Types of Leave Taken

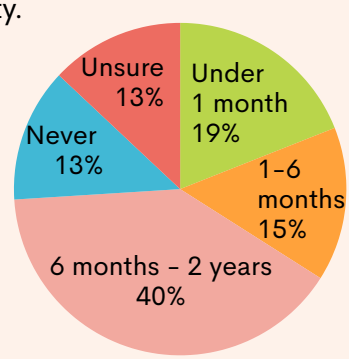


Length of leave varied widely, with **some taking less than 2 months and others nearly a year**. While the median was 16 weeks, **US women averaged 17 weeks** and **EMEA women 21 weeks**.

How long was your leave (in weeks)?



Most women felt it took **6 months to 2 years to feel** back to full professional capacity.



Mental health and **emotional readiness are pivotal**: the return-to-work period is **marked by mixed emotions**, with positive professional identity gains often overshadowed by guilt, exhaustion, and mental health struggles.

It was really nice getting out of the house and **using my brain/talking to adults**. Also missed my baby so much + **pumping at work sucks**.

- US mom

It was too short, it was very difficult to leave my babies, I was tired and **wasn't fit for work**. On the other hand it was also good to be back to work and **considered as an individual** outside of the mother role

- EMEA mom

Fewer than 4 in 10 had a fully positive return-to-work experience. **Women valued professional identity, but struggled** with guilt, fatigue, & readiness.

Was your return to work a positive experieince?

Part II

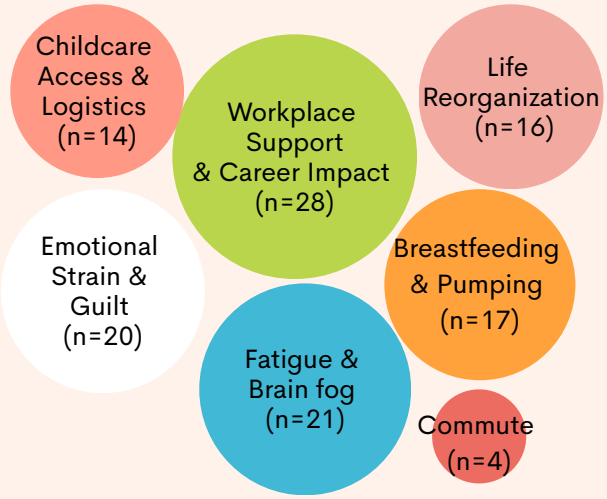
REINTEGRATION ROADBLOCKS

Overall, workplace structures and policies remain insufficient: lack of flexibility, inadequate planning, and **limited systemic supports create avoidable stressors**, contributing to attrition or stalled careers. These support gaps are clearest after leave when **ongoing postpartum and workplace reintegration support is minimal**, especially for mental health and career planning.

CHALLENGES

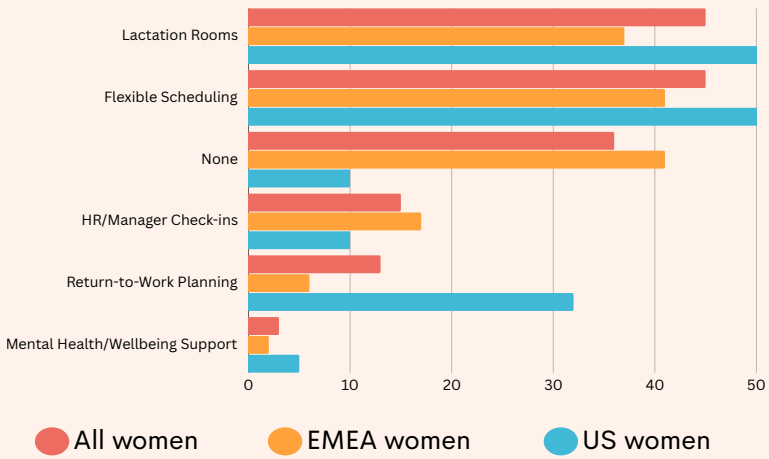
Workplace flexibility and career impact were the most frequently cited difficulties, often tied to **limited remote work, lost responsibilities, or stalled career progression**. Emotional strain, fatigue, brain fog, and breastfeeding/pumping logistics were also major barriers. Childcare access and logistical pressures compounded the transition back.

Free text responses categorized and ranked to, "What was your biggest challenge returning to work?



More than ⅓ of women received no employer support during and after leave. **More US women had access to lactation rooms and flexible scheduling** – the top 2 resources offered – as compared to **EMEA women, who were more likely to have no support at all**.

Were you offered any resources by your employer during or after maternity leave?



SUPPORT

Ratings of company support dropped progressively from before leave (3.5) to during leave (3.0) to after leave (2.9), **showing support fades over time**.

Rank (1-5) how supported you felt ...

Systemic changes—like flexible leave, structured return-to-work plans, mental health support, and stronger culture—are needed to ease transitions and **reduce career penalties** for parents.

Management making assumptions on what I can and can't do now after being a mum.

– EMEA mom

Returning to work and **scheduling meetings and calls around pumping** was very challenging.

– US mom

I was happy to return to my **job which I loved,** but I had very little support to manage the transition.

– EMEA mom

76 women who were employed during their maternity leave completed Part II. Of these women, 62% were aged 31-40; 35% were 40+ and 6% were 25-30 years old. The majority of women (70%) live in the EMEA, 25% live in the US, and 5% did not reply.

Part III

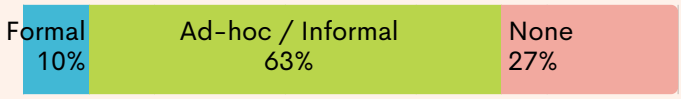
DESIRE VS. DOLLARS

Findings indicate that formal training for managers on maternity leave transitions is rare, yet there is **strong interest particularly in return-to-work coaching and manager training**. However, implementation is constrained primarily by **budget limitations and competing responsibilities**.

SITUATION

Most companies (63%) provide ad-hoc or informal guidance to managers who handle maternity transitions with a **significant proportion of companies offering no training (27%)**. The companies that offered **formal training were small,** with under 100 employees.

What support or training is available for managers in your company to handle maternity leave transitions?

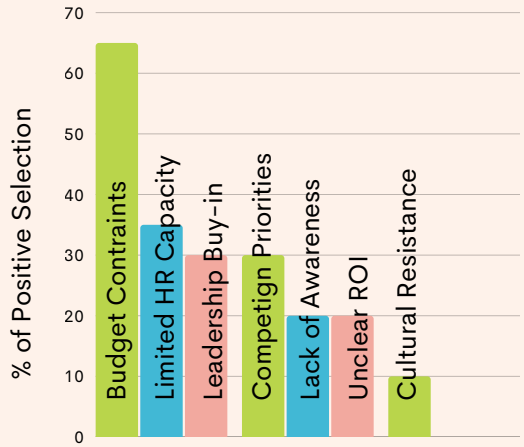


Companies have a clear opportunity to **better prepare managers** and provide **structured support for employees** returning from maternity leave—while **tracking outcomes to show the real ROI** of their policies

BARRIERS

Budget constraints are the primary barrier to program implementation, while limited resources, competing priorities, and lack of leadership buy-in present moderate challenges.

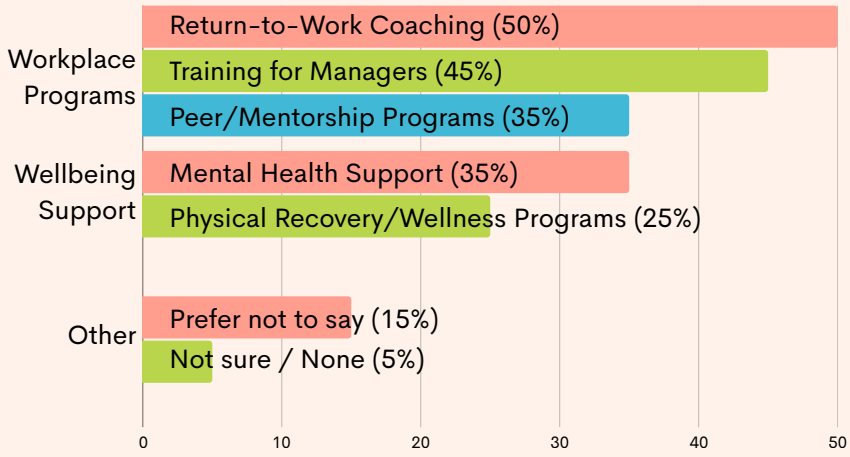
What are the biggest barriers to implementing support systems for maternity transitions in your organization?



INTERESTS

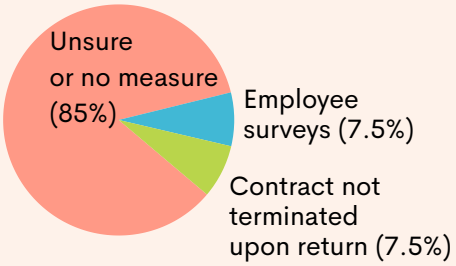
Organizations are eager to improve maternity transitions, **with the top priorities being return-to-work coaching for women and manager training.**

Which of the following would you be interested in offering or improving?



The majority (85%) of companies are not currently tracking outcomes, **limiting their ability to demonstrate ROI** or adjust policies effectively.

How does your company currently measure the success or impact of maternity leave policies?



21 male and female HR professionals, managers or leaders who support employees through maternity transitions completed Part III. 17 were female, 3 male, and 1 preferred not to say. 38% of respondents were aged 31-40 and 62% were 40+ years old. The majority (76%) lived in the EMEA (n=12 in Switzerland, n=4 in France, n=2 in the US, n=2 outside of EMEA and US).

Part III

SUPPORT THAT STICKS

From thirteen conversations with HR leaders, one message stood out: supporting mothers returning from maternity leave works best through **practical, people-first approaches**. While policies differ across sectors and countries, the companies that view **parental wellbeing as a long-term investment** in talent achieve the strongest results.

THE SITUATION

Structural Gaps Persist

Switzerland trails Northern Europe in paid leave and childcare, with **expat families facing extra hurdles** of language, permits and cultural integration. The country's **high weekly working hours** further increase the strain on working parents.

HR Under Pressure

HR leaders described being **time-poor and overloaded with admin**, leaving little room for the "human" side of maternity support. **External coaching or programs** can bridge this gap during transitions.

> Now I **lead with more softness**. Not because I'm weaker, but because I know strength can look different.
>
> *- HR Professional & Mother*

In addition to the quantitive data (presented on p. 9) we also conducted 13 interviews with HR professionals (presented on p. 10 & 11).

THE ROI OF SUPPORT

Backing parents isn't charity—it **drives productivity, retention, and wellbeing**. Companies that ignore this risk losing top talent in a competitive market. Even modest, low-cost measures send a **clear signal of care** and strengthen loyalty.

> Parents don't need perfection—they need **flexibility, empathy, and time to adapt**. Companies that integrate these into everyday HR practices are rewarded with a **resilient, loyal, and productive workforce**.

THE PATH TO SUCCESS

Flexibility is the Cornerstone

Options such as part-time work and phased returns, with **plans developed collaboratively** from the outset and **revisited regularly** are essential. When managers position these **arrangements as a strategic approach** to retaining talent, they build trust and loyalty.

Conversations Make it or Break it

Honest conversations often unlock the effective solutions. Line **managers are generally supportive and** reintegration succeeds when **expectations are clear** on timing, workload percentage, and role adjustments.

Parenthood is an Identity Shift

Becoming a parent changes everything; some **women return with clear plans** and thrive, while others face unexpected obstacles. **Recognizing this variability** ensures practices remain relevant.

Culture Counts

Practical accommodations—like **lactation rooms or staggered start dates**—matters most when paired with a culture where managers check in regularly and openly discuss parenthood.

Part III

OFF THE SCRIPT

In each of our 1:1 interviews, we asked one final question: *"What's the **one piece of advice** you'd give to a new parent returning to work that isn't covered in any HR handbook?"* The answers were heartfelt and practical, with two key themes emerging: the importance of open communication and prioritizing personal time.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

"It's **always worth discussing** and asking. Very often, we are very open and quite happy to facilitate any situation. But **people are just scared to ask, scared to disappoint the employer**, or to put themselves in a tricky situation, and so they don't even ask."

- HR Leader in Sports Industry

"I'm not someone who gives advice, but I have three children so I know what it is. I would say **everyone has the right to be tired. Everyone has the right to have a bad day**. Don't worry. In a few years you will remember that period with a smile. So, I'm just here to help. If you need anything, **come to me** and we will find a solution."

- HR Leader in Engineering

"Prepare for the return. Today, the mental load is so high that people often completely disconnect from work during leave. But I really advocate for **staying in touch**. It's a long break, and without contact, it's tough. I appreciate when someone on maternity leave calls to check in, ask about their position, and what might change. That **allows me to plan with the team and make their return smoother**."

- HR Leader in Professional Services

"Have a really **formal discussion with your partner** before the baby arrives. Who takes care of what. I thought it would be more natural—but it wasn't."

- HR Leader in Education

"Communicate, catch up and **plan with your manager and team** often – and with your partner! Most importantly, don't forget to take time for yourself and recharge even with simple things that you enjoy."

- HR Leader in Professional Services

PRIORITIZE YOUR PERSONAL LIFE

"**Take more time** for your personal life."

- HR Leader in Commodities Trading

"Never miss; a school function, a birthday, **never miss it**. Because **these moments cannot be paid with money** and cannot be returned. And this is what really matters at the end. You can have a great salary, great position, but it leads you nowhere."

- HR Leader in Professional Services

"**Take your time.** Some people underestimate the change that has come within this short period. The company hasn't changed that much, but their **personal circumstances have changed** and that makes a great impact on their thinking and **you go differently into the world**."

- HR Leader in Engineering

"The organization is the key. **It's impossible not to think about the baby** while you are at work. It's not realistic, but it's important to **trust the people** who take care of your child so that **you can then focus** on what you have to do at work."

- HR Leader in Professional Services

"When going back to work, **choose an organization that respects time off or parental leave** and that gives a buffer or transition. Because if they're going to be seen as a deserter, if they're going to be seen as just a birth giver — and that's looked down upon — then let them not waste any time working in that kind of environment. **Life's too short**."

- HR Leader in Global Health

PLAYING YOUR PART

The message from our research is clear: women want to return to work with confidence, health, and support—but the **structures around them too often fall short**. HR leaders, too, recognize both the gaps and the opportunity to do better. Here's a practical checklist to make changes in your workplace, today.

Before Leave

- Provide clear, written guidelines on maternity and parental leave policies.
- Hold a pre-leave planning conversation to discuss workload handover, coverage, return timelines, and working preferences.
- Offer employees the choice to outline how (and if) they'd like to stay connected during leave.
- Train managers on what to say (and what not to say) before leave — with a focus on being empathetic listeners

During Leave

- Maintain optional (employee-led) touchpoints—updates about team news, invitations to social events, or check-ins.
- Ensure benefits, healthcare access, and HR resources are clear and accessible.
- Respect boundaries: never pressure employees to return early or engage beyond what they've requested.

Return-to-Work Transition

- Offer phased return options (e.g. reduced hours, part-time, or remote work) for a 4–6 week adaptation period.
- Hold structured return-to-work meetings — once upon return and again a few weeks later — to revisit workload, expectations, and support needs.
- Ensure practical accommodations such as private lactation spaces, flexible pumping schedules, and childcare-friendly meeting times.
- Provide access to coaching or peer mentoring to help parents navigate the transition with confidence.

Ongoing Support

- Schedule regular manager check-ins that prioritize wellbeing and recognize the skills, strengths, and perspectives employees bring after becoming parents — rather than focusing solely on performance metrics.
- Normalize open conversations about parenthood and mental health so they're part of everyday team culture, not hidden topics.
- Gather 1:1 feedback from employees returning from leave to understand their experience and use it to review and refine policies annually.
- Track outcomes over time — retention, promotion, and engagement of new parents — alongside direct feedback, to measure impact and ensure policies evolve with employee needs.

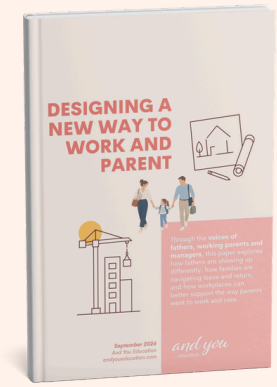
Beyond the Transition

- Pair returning parents with a "buddy" who has been through the transition.
- Create a resource hub with trusted materials on postpartum recovery, childcare, and workplace rights.
- Encourage leaders to model family-friendly behaviors (leaving on time, not emailing in the evening, respecting boundaries).

THE DESIGN BRIEF

From our 2026 Research

Fathers want to play an **active role at home**, and increasingly want their working lives to reflect it. But **offering leave is only the beginning and how managers turn policy into individual support** shapes the transition that follows. Here's a practical checklist to make changes in your workplace today.

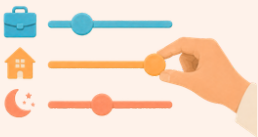


Before Leave

- Schedule a pre-leave planning meeting. Cover leave dates, priorities, workload, handover and return timing.
- Create a written coverage plan. List what will pause, what will continue, who owns each responsibility and who handles urgent issues.
- Agree a communication plan in writing that includes the frequency, channel and type of information communicated.
- Give managers a standard pre-leave conversation guide so the basics don't depend on who the manager is.

During Leave

- Follow the communication agreement.
- Nominate one person to manage coverage questions so work does not quietly flow back to the employee on leave.
- Protect access to leave. Leaders should take their own parental leave and visibly use flexibility rather than only endorsing it in policy.
- Give managers an HR contact for all leave & return transition questions.
- Prepare a return-to-work brief before the employee returns, compiling key team, project and organizational updates, decisions and changes so they can get up to speed without working through months of emails.



After Return

- Hold a return-to-work meeting in the first week. Review the brief together, clarify priorities and agree what needs attention now, later, or not at all.
- Use a 4 to 6 week adaptation period. Adjust workload, hours, travel and WFH as possible; do not expect full capacity on day one.
- Match workload to working time. If someone returns at 60%, 80% or reduced days, reduce the work accordingly, and keep in mind a gradual return.
- Schedule a check-in 3 to 4 weeks later. Revisit workload, WFH and hours alongside childcare realities, and discuss whether parenthood has changed their priorities, career goals or how they want to work..

Keep it Working

- Don't make career decisions based on leave. Keep employees in conversations about projects, development and progression; ask before assuming their ambitions or availability have changed.
- Give every manager the same core transition tools: a timeline, pre-leave conversation guide, coverage-plan template, communication agreement and return checklist.
- Review the transition at 3 months. Ask the employee what worked, what didn't and what would have helped, and feed that back into the process.
- Track leave uptake by gender. If fathers are entitled to leave but aren't taking it, investigate what is getting in the way.

Want the research behind the recommendations?

Read Designing a New Way to Work and Parent

AND YOU EDUCATION

We turn insights into action, partnering with organizations to write the next chapter—one where parents thrive, managers feel equipped, and companies attract and retain talent.

Hi, I'm Erica—a neuroscientist, medical writer, mother of 3, and founder of And You.

I founded And You to bring science and real human experience into the way workplaces are designed.

Together with a multidisciplinary team of experts, we turn evidence into practical solutions that help organizations navigate life transitions, equip managers and create cultures where people want to stay and grow.

LET'S TALK

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WHAT WE OFFER

PLAY, Parental Leave And You: An end-to-end SaaS platform that brings parental leave and return into one structured workflow, guiding employees, managers and HR through clear timelines, responsibilities, conversations and resources.

Coaching & Wellbeing: 1:1 coaching and wellbeing sessions that support health, manage stress, strengthen focus and prevent burnout as employees navigate life and work transitions.

Workshops & Educational Seminars: Interactive, science-led learning for employees and leaders on parenthood, workplace transitions, menopause, healthy aging and cognitive performance.

When we empower women, we elevate teams.

Supporting maternity transitions is not only good for employees—it **strengthens loyalty, reduces turnover, and builds a culture** where people want to stay and grow.

We believe **every parent deserves** the chance to return to work with dignity, and every organization deserves to **unlock the full potential** of its people.