Achieving a harmonious work life balance: myth or reality? Experiences of women returning to work in science engineering and technology in the UK

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Abstract

“A balanced life is one where we spread our energy and effort - emotional, intellectual, imaginative, spiritual and physical – between key areas of importance. The neglect of one or more areas, or anchor points, may threaten the vitality of the whole.”

(www.worklifebalancecentre.org)

Achieving a harmonious work life balance is one of the biggest challenges facing women returning to work after a career break. This is especially true in occupations and industries where there are few opportunities for part-time or flexible working and where long working hours are the norm such as in the IT industry. As a result many qualified women in the UK are choosing to work in other sectors at a lower skilled level and for lower wages in order to achieve a better work life balance. This paper will explore some of the issues facing women scientists, engineers and technologists when they return to work after a career break.

In order to support and encourage women to return to SET careers, the Open University in the UK, has developed a short online course in partnership with the UK Resource Centre for Women in SET. The course is aimed at women graduates who have been away from the workplace for at least a year or are working in a job that does not use their skills or qualifications. The course takes them through a series of personal development planning activities in order to prepare for a return to work and includes stories of nine women who have successfully returned after a career break.

One of the key activities on the course requires them to focus on work life balance issues and identify what factors they will need to consider in order to successfully return to work and devise an action plan to tackle these.

Based on evidence from evaluations and online conference contributions of two groups of students, this paper will discuss the range of issues that women in the course encountered. Despite a high female participation rate in the UK labour market, traditional gender role expectations still appear to be strongly entrenched in terms of primary responsibility for home and family life. Many women had chosen to prioritise the needs of their families over their careers so had been under-employed (i.e. highly qualified yet working in low skilled and low paid jobs that fitted around their other commitments) - in their plans to return to work many were looking for employment near to where they lived and would not consider relocating, (although several had already moved area or country due to their husband or partners’ career) - those with young children were often seeking part time and flexible working hours, few of which were available in the sectors they were qualified to work in.
Background

In 2002 the Maximising Returns report produced by the UK government highlighted the problems faced by graduate women returning to employment in science, engineering and technology (SET) after a career break (People, Science and Policy Ltd 2002) The research showed that women returners face a particular set of problems and difficulties and that these are more pronounced for those trying to get back into the SET sectors (1). As well as personal issues such as lack of confidence and out of date skills, structural factors (for example long working hours and geographical location) and cultural norms within these industries can make it more difficult for women, especially those with dependent children, to find suitable work. Indeed many women returners are under-employed, i.e. they tend to find work in lower grade jobs than they are qualified for and therefore under utilise their skills and qualifications as well as receiving lower wages - this is particularly true for those in the SET sectors (Tomlinson 2005, Prosser 2006). Two key questions were raised by the Maximising Returns report - why do some women choose not to use their SET qualifications at work and go back to work in other sectors and how can these choices be influenced to encourage more women to come back to SET jobs? Women returning to SET occupations appear to face additional problems compared to women returning to other graduate occupations. Reasons suggested included the belief that skills will be out of date plus lack of part time work in SET occupations.

In response to the report, a national strategy was developed, with funding from the UK Dept of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the European Social Fund ‘Equal’ Programme, to address the issues highlighted. A new UK Resource Centre for Women in SET was established in 2004 and a national campaign to support returners launched. One of the key parts of the strategy was the creation of an online course by the Open University (OU) aimed at supporting and empowering women who were returning to employment in SET after a break. The OU was chosen as the best institution to provide a national UK wide course through its supported online and distance learning methodology. The course has been accompanied by a range of other support activities such as a mentoring scheme, work placements, plus individual advice and guidance, provided by a network of regional organisations across the UK.

The target group for the course (women returning to SET professions after a career break) were well defined and known to have particular needs as well as particular skills. Although they were all women with a professional qualification, at least to degree level or equivalent, many were out of touch with paid work and with employment opportunities in particular sectors where they might return. In common with other women returners, many lacked confidence in their employment skills and would benefit from support in getting back to work (Tomlinson 2005, Shaw 1999). There was a need to help the women recognise and value their transferable skills acquired both in paid and voluntary work, as well as identify where they needed to update skills.

The Maximising Returns report indicates that there is a greater problem within the SET industries for women returners. This is attributed to structural factors within the SET industries (for example lack of part time work opportunities or flexible work options). This is particularly true in the technology sector (DTI 2004). Other research

1 Women returners have been defined as those who have been out of the workforce caring for children or other dependants and now wish to return to paid work (Tomlinson 2005)
indicates that women are making choices about working in SET based on evaluation of their work life balance. In a study about the lives and careers of women IT technicians most were found to have put family considerations first and therefore actively limited their own career progression (Herman & Ellen, 2004, 2005). While we should be wary of blaming women for a self imposed glass ceiling (Cross and Linehan 2006) it is important to consider the reality of women’s lives – while men have become more involved in childcare and housework, women still bear the brunt of unpaid domestic labour (Hurrell & Davies 2005) and this can have a continuing impact on their professional careers.

**Returners and Career Breaks**

The traditional view of career, particularly in scientific and technical professions and certainly among academic researchers, assumes a linear path in which the aim is to get as high up the hierarchy as possible. There are certain milestones and achievements which must be accomplished along the way and any deviation from this is seem as a problem or disadvantage that needs to be overcome. The notion of career break reiterates this, for example the UK Institute of Physics defines a Career Break as “a period of absence from someone’s main career. Its duration can range from a few months away on maternity leave to several years while looking after children or elderly relatives. It may also include periods of paid work, which the person on the break does not consider to be on their main career track.” (IOP 2004)

This assumes a traditionally (male) career trajectory so that the ‘absence’ from a career is seen as an aberration from the ‘main career track’. In reality many women (and men) who leave a career in SET for one reason or another, do not return to work in this sector. The Maximising Returns report) found that about 24,000 women who are SET graduates returned to employment in 2000 but only about a third of those returned to SET occupations. The UK government's interest in women returners has been focused on this group of highly qualified professional women who fail to return to the SET workforce. Women with SET degrees and children are less likely to be employed than women with children and other degrees. In particular women with SET degrees and older children are less economically active than their non-SET counterparts. This is despite the fact that women SET graduates enter a far wider variety of occupations than male SET graduates. (People, Science and Policy 2002)

**Work Life Balance**

While a key issue identified for the retention of women has been encouraging employers to change their working practices to accommodate more flexible working policies (People, Science and Policy 2002), there is a danger of focusing entirely on working hours as a way to improve work life balance. Clearly working hours are an important factor, but there are a number of other issues which need to be considered. The term Work Life Balance has entered everyday discourse as a way to articulate the conflicts and dilemmas raised by changing work patterns and life choices. For those who are contemplating returning to full time or part time paid work after a period away from the labour market, the achievement of a balance between the demands of their working life and those of their other commitments becomes of paramount concern. Considerations are not just practical but also emotional and raise fundamental issues about women’s roles as well as personal priorities and ambitions.

An important factor particularly in the Science, Engineering and Technology sectors is geographical mobility, something which is particularly difficult for women with children. There is an expectation of mobility for most scientific careers, particularly academic careers – evidence suggests that young single women are just as likely to
take up these opportunities abroad as their male colleagues, but once women have partners and children they are less likely to do this (Ackers 2004) – moreover women scientists are more likely than men to be in relationships with other scientists whose careers will also require mobility – in such cases it is more often the women in these so called “dual career” relationships who decide not to take up opportunities that require moving abroad, especially when there are children involved. These women are thus more likely to follow their male partners in ‘tied migration’ than vice versa. (Ackers 2004).

Not all have career breaks for raising children - others take time to study, to travel, to look after elderly parents, or due to their own ill heath. However, the overwhelming majority of women returners have taken breaks in order to look after young children and therefore most ‘returners’ have at some point taken a decision to prioritise family life over paid work – those who have taken a long career break (rather than just the statutory maternity leave) might be assumed to have chosen not to prioritise their career during their absence from the labour market. While much of her writing takes an anti-feminist position, Hakim’s preference theory has been put forward as an explanation of women’s continued under representation in the labour market. She categorises women as either home or work centred with a third group somewhere in the middle where most UK women are located who are ‘adaptive’ i.e. they want both and therefore adapt at different times of their lives. Yet whilst acknowledging women’s agency in their own career trajectories Hakim’s essentialist view does not take into account structural inequalities including economic and social influences on women’s choices and at different stages in their lives. (Hakim 2000). Choices are not made in a vacuum but in the context of patriarchal societal values, and in the case of the Science, Engineering and Technology industries, within the context of masculine work ethics and cultural norms.

The experience of motherhood and childcare may also be important in determining and changing attitudes towards work. Marks and Houston maintain that traditional and egalitarian views about career/family life can co-exist – people may hold conflicting or ambivalent beliefs simultaneously(Marks and Houston, 2002). Measuring women’s ‘work commitment’ using attitudinal scale questionnaires they found that women who were not in work had less strong commitment to work. “it’s difficult for women who are not working to maintain high levels of work commitment because they have relinquished their personal identity as a worker. This may be part of the barrier women face when they consider returning to paid employment” (Marks & Houston 2002 p532) Women who were working (part time or fulltime) regarded motherhood in more negative terms ( egg boring, exhausting, stressful and socially isolating) than those who were full time mothers. Healy (Healy 1999) examines this notion of work commitment further and argues that women’s commitments change during their life time – the commitment of returners is therefore determined by their choices within the context of structural conditions including the labour market.

Thus women returners, not only face practical issues and constraints when they decide to return to work, but they are also faced with a change in their identities and orientation towards work and motherhood. Their own work life balance is under challenge - the views that felt congruent with their own situation are in need of review and a process of adjustment is required. . A study of the impact of attending courses for women returners found that women’s experience of success is different from traditional career success which emphasises upward mobility or salary increase (Shaw 1999). The vast majority felt happy with their return to work regardless of the salary or sector – despite the fact that over 40% were working at a lower skills level and over half were working in a different sector/occupation to the one they had originally left. In common with other projects and initiatives for women returners, the
Open University T160 course recognises the need to support women through this transition period rather than simply provide practical help and advice. By allowing women the time and space to review their lives and reflect on their own experiences, courses such as T160 which support individuals during periods of transition (Williams, 1999) enable them to cope with changes ahead and to make decisions about the work life balance they aspire to.

Methodology

The course which was launched in October 2005 is entitled ‘Science, Engineering and Technology: A Course for Women Returners’ (course code T160) and nearly 400 women have now participated in the programme. Throughout the 10 week period over which each course presentation runs, participants study web-based course materials and engage in a series of online activities and discussions which are designed to take them through a process of personal/professional development planning

A major aim of the course is to help women to identify, assess and demonstrate competencies achieved through activities outside as well as inside work, culminating in the production of a CV and an action plan for a return to professional employment. This process is built on a four stage careers advice model – “know yourself, explore opportunities, decide where you want to go, take steps to get there” (OU Careers Service 2006).

Approximately 200 women have completed the course, starting either in October 2005 or February 2006. Another group of 175 students are currently participating in the course and will complete in December 2006. The data for this study was collected from students participating in the first presentation of the course (Oct – Dec 2005). All of the women were graduates in a science, engineering or technology subject area and were either out of the labour force or working in a job where they did not use their SET skills or qualifications (i.e. they were underemployed). All of them by definition of joining the course, could be considered to be wanting to return to work.

In the third week of the course, students are asked to consider the issue of work-life balance. There are a number of readings and activities for them to complete and the week’s work is completed by a reflective exercise in which the students work in pairs to identify the key issues facing them in terms of work life balance. The website materials for the course include audio clips of 9 women who have successfully returned to work after a career break, and who talk about how they tackled particular issues including working time, location, childcare, and other activities. The concept of work life balance is introduced to the students as something for which they will need to find an individual solution – so the role models, although now all working, have been through a range of experiences themselves. Work life balance is thus framed as a holistic concept, not simply about juggling work and childcare

In order to gain a more in depth understanding of how women perceive and deal with the range of issues loosely labelled under the heading ‘work life balance’ we analysed the women’s responses to this activity and their views on Work Life Balance in the context of returning to a career in SET. Qualitative data came from two sources - messages posted to online discussion boards or ‘conferences’ by students during their participation on the course, and a set of 10 telephone interviews. Further data on ‘outcomes’ came from an online survey carried out after the completion of the course (approximately 9 months after the course had ended)
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<thead>
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<th>Mobility issues</th>
<th>Childcare issues</th>
<th>Identity transition</th>
<th>SET specific issues</th>
<th>Economic issues</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impact on past career</strong></td>
<td>Tied migration – followed their partners career</td>
<td>Childcare is most common reason for career break – but generally no plan for returning</td>
<td>Relationships/family prioritised over career</td>
<td>Long hours culture in IT industry</td>
<td>Male partner earns more – &quot;multiplier effect&quot; means his job will take priority</td>
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<td><strong>Impact on future career</strong></td>
<td>Unwilling to consider moving their family</td>
<td>Different levels of partner involvement – are more men willing to do childcare?</td>
<td>Need to shift focus from home to work</td>
<td>Lack of SET employment in local geographical area</td>
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<td><strong>Impact on current situation</strong></td>
<td>Work options are limited to low pay/low skilled</td>
<td>Need for quality childcare</td>
<td>Confusion– many finding this phase difficult – they are not ready yet</td>
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<td>Underemployment – poor use of skills and qualifications</td>
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<td><strong>Work life balance</strong></td>
<td>Want to work locally with minimal commuting time</td>
<td>Want to work part time and locally in order to be able to combine with childcare</td>
<td>Want to retain identity of mother and return to identity as career woman</td>
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<td>Often no financial imperative to work</td>
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*Table 2 : examples of Work Life Balance issues raised by students in narrative emails and conference postings:*
Results

The online end of course survey revealed a similar set of outcomes to those found in previous studies of women returners (Shaw 1999, Tomlinson 2005), including significant levels of underemployment. Of those who had found employment after the course, 46% were working at a lower level than before their career break and just under half were not working in a Science, Engineering or Technology occupation i.e. they had gone back to work in another sector. The main reasons they gave for this decision are shown in Table 1. (note: some gave more than one reason).

<table>
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<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>Couldn’t find work near home</td>
<td>54%</td>
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<tr>
<td>No part time work available</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couldn’t find work that suited family</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsibilities</td>
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Table 1: Reasons for not working in a SET occupation

The interviews and conference messages suggested a range of interrelated themes which are summarised in Table 2

A number of women mentioned issues related to geographical mobility – this included wanting to work locally in order to be able to take children to and from school etc. Another recurring issue was the effect of ‘tied migration’ (Acker 2004) – several had moved abroad to follow their partner/husbands job and consequently had given up their own career or at least put it on hold, taking other lower paid and lower skilled employment. One woman who had moved several times to follow her husband’s job was once more facing this issue:

“My future career plans are affected by changes that have occurred in my husband’s employment. He already spends quite a lot of time in the US (the reason that I gave up my career 8 years ago) but a change in the structure of his company means that he will be spending approx 50% of his time in US—mainly California. […] Whatever happens I am likely to be spending quite a lot of time out of the country which will make working in the UK difficult.”

[Student D]

Some women feel less entitled and are less willing to uproot their families in order to progress their careers:

“as much as I would LOVE to return to laboratory work, I could not imagine asking the family to move away from [this area] so that I could pursue my middling-pay, dream career “

[Student E]

Another issue related to mobility was the lack of suitable jobs within a commutable distance from their current home. Many of the women, especially those living in rural areas, had searched for jobs in their locality but found there were no suitable employment opportunities at the level they required in their sector. It was particularly frustrating that there were no SET employers in their local area. Student G for example is unable to find opportunities in the biotech field in her local area and therefore contemplates on the prospect of ‘underemployment’ working in a local supermarket which offers part time work that would fit around her other commitments:

“During T160 the on-line and off-line searching for suitable biotechnical jobs locally was very demoralising. There simply aren’t many opportunities in [my local area], that would mean I
could work part-time hours in a research/medical related biotech field. Whilst not completely
given up I'm probably 90% certain that a return to SET will be impossible and at my lowest
 ebbs I have visions of a first-class honours degree graduate in a supposedly useful subject
and with lab experience will actually end up stacking shelves in ASDA simply because there
are part-time opportunities for women there who want to combine work with home life! Sad
isn't it" [Student G]

Finding suitable childcare was of course a major consideration for many of the
women. However this was not just a case of finding a nursery (kindergarten) place or
a childminder/babysitter for a pre-school child. For many these issues stretched out
for several years with different considerations as children grew older. For example
Student F needed to be more flexible once her child started school, while student H
had to think about after school and school holidays, as well as considering at what
age the children could be left alone.

“Our 5 year old had just starting school and this meant having to be at the end of the phone
just in case I was needed in school to help and support him and he wasn’t full-time straight
away. I had also just got the youngest one into pre-school for 5 x 2.75 hour sessions a week.
All of this meant that I wasn’t available to take up a full time job.”
[Student F]

“For the children aspect - it is the usual - childcare costs a fortune. There is also very little
childcare in our area. I have partially solved this. The older 2 (14 & 12) are OK during term-
time. The main problem is the youngest at 8 after school - friends may be able to help here.
Husband works shifts so we may be able to work around it. Holidays are another problem.
Not sure if I would leave eldest in charge for long periods of time. What do others think? Is 14
old enough to be left in charge of a 12 year old and an 8 year old?”
[Student H]

Some of the women articulated clearly the identity transition that they were facing
and the need to embark on a process of change. For example Student A feels she is
ready to return to work now that her children are older.

“I have always chosen to work part-time, school hours, within 10 minute drive, to be able to
pick the children from school and be around for them. But that meant that I had to sacrifice on
the work and the career side of it. It suited me at the time whilst they were young, but now as
they are old enough I feel that I am ready for a change, to take some more courses and do
more studying to pursue a career. (Hope it is not too late)”
[Student A]

There are some issues which are specific to the Science, Engineering and
Technology industries – it was noted earlier that scientific research often requires
relocation. More specifically the long hours culture in the IT sector is well known (DTI
2004, Herman & Ellen 2004) and makes it very difficult for women to sustain a career
once they have children.

“I worked for a company that always spouted how it was committed to WLB (Work Life
Balance), but […] they always expected work commitments to come before family/social life.
Unfortunately, WLB is just another buzz word that employers like to use, but personally I
haven't yet worked for a company that has really meant it ! Then again, I worked in IT and its
expected that you will be on standby, work weekends, stay late to fix problems, etc.”
[Student C]

Conclusion
The experiences and reflections of women about to make the transition back into
work after a career break, offer a rich and in depth picture of the complex personal
issues women must negotiate in balancing work and family life. Work life balance
debates are often focussed on employment rights (e.g., flexible working/ part time work etc). However in this study many of the issues that women raised were about the domestic aspects of work life balance which would have to be negotiated between partners/family members. Issues they raised like geographical isolation and need for flexible and part time working hours were generally discussed with the assumption that as women would continue to bear the main responsibility for collecting children from school, preparing evening meals and so on. Women who have taken career breaks (and who have partners/husbands and/or dependent children) are faced with having to make changes not only to their own lives but also with the impact that their changes will have on those around them. Even when there is a strong economic imperative, many of the women find this a difficult transition. There are a few exceptions where men are taking on main responsibility for childcare but what comes over clearly is that despite their high level qualifications and potential for career success, gender roles and expectations are still strongly entrenched within this group even among women without dependent children. This is hardly surprising given that the group consists primarily of women who have made a choice to take a break from their main careers and give priority to other areas of their lives. This research study has drawn on a small sample of women in transition who are exploring work life balance issues for themselves. A number of them have agreed to be part of a longitudinal study which will follow their career paths over several years and which it is hoped will offer further insight into a complex issue. The development of a public discourse around work life balance has provided a context for individual choice, and legislation in the UK is now directing employers to offer flexible working. These measures have gone some way to improve the opportunities of women returning to careers in Science, Engineering and Technology. However it is in the lived experiences of those facing transition in their roles and identities, those negotiating the careful balance between work and family life that we can understand more fully the impact of these policies and inform future developments.

References


