



# Value of professional reintegration for the economy

Project report for SBB

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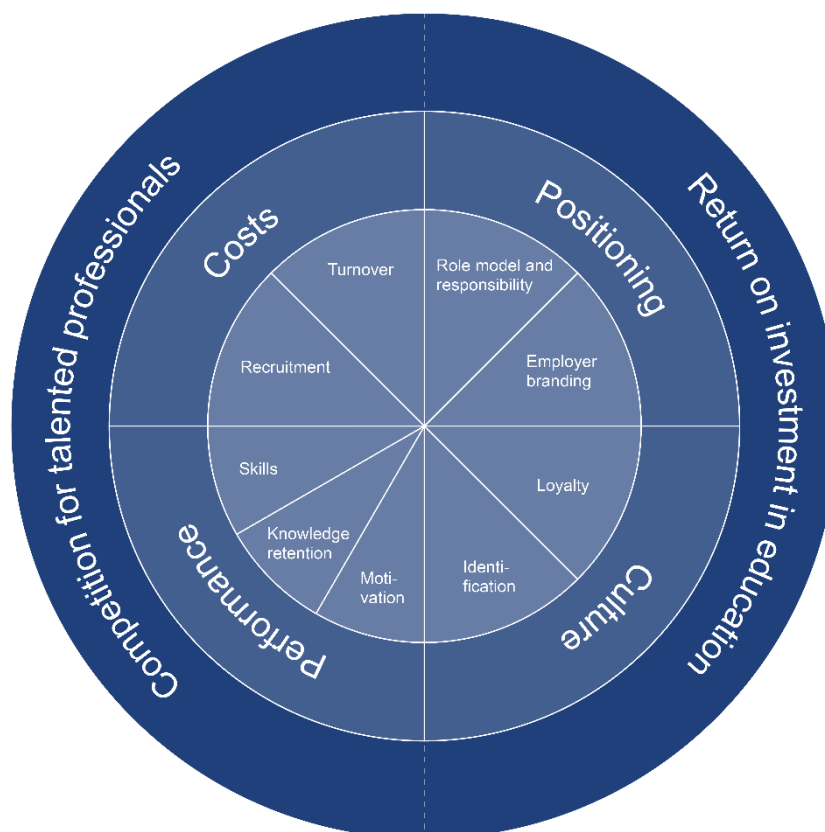
# 1 Abstract

## Aim of the study and approach

The aim of this study is to explore mothers' **return to professional life** following maternity leave or an extended break from different points of view. The study also looks at fathers who take a break in their career or reduce their workload for family reasons. It focuses on the **advantages for employers** when the return of mothers, fathers and others to professional life is organised successfully and supported with the appropriate measures. The challenges mothers, fathers and the companies face are also discussed. Finally, **recommendations for companies** as to how to tackle the challenges identified are made. To develop these recommendations, an online questionnaire with a total of 806 mothers and fathers and 30 interviews with managers from Swiss businesses was carried out.

## Advantages for companies

Analysis of the data showed that professional reintegration offers **numerous advantages** for companies according to the mothers, fathers and managers from Swiss businesses interviewed. Companies can use professional reintegration to position themselves as socially responsible and attractive employers and to establish a company culture which increases staff loyalty and their identification with the company. Moreover, support provided for professional reintegration can be used to improve performance, as mothers and fathers bring a high level of motivation and useful skills to the company. Finally, supporting professional reintegration decreases costs arising from employee fluctuation and the recruitment of new staff in the mid-term. These factors are also important from a broad societal perspective, as professional reintegration correlates closely with competition for talent and qualified staff and the return on investment in education. The following graphic gives an oversight of the advantages.



## Recommendations for tackling challenges

The organisation of childcare and the resulting double load and conflicts between work and family present key challenges for mothers and fathers. In companies, the co-ordination of work teams and the organisation of workloads present particular challenges. The following **recommendations** can help companies to tackle the challenges identified:

- Support involvement of fathers in their families, e.g. superiors should also allow and encourage fathers to reduce their working hours and make use of flexible work models
- Enable flexibility, e.g. by offering flexible working models and dealing flexibly with the high demands of certain situations in family life
- Ensure reciprocity to generate a dynamic of give and take between staff and the company
- Increase awareness of the relevance of the topic and understanding of the situation of mothers and fathers throughout the company
- Create and establish a supportive company culture with professional reintegration firmly established as part of this
- Promote open communication between the parties affected (i.e. mothers or fathers, superiors, team colleagues).
- Plan professional reintegration together and take the parents' and work team's requirements into account
- Enable and promote contact between mothers and fathers in a similar situation

## Conclusion

In short, this study shows that professional reintegration offers numerous advantages for mothers, fathers and companies in Switzerland. This is particularly relevant from a broad societal perspective given the lack of specialists and investment in education. Even if it poses certain challenges, promoting the professional reintegration of mothers with appropriate measures is worthwhile in the long term. Companies should promote the involvement of fathers in the family, ensure flexibility and provide a supportive company culture. Promoting the professional reintegration of mothers is therefore a particularly important task which involves the whole of society.

## 2 Background and aim of the study

The birth of a child is a life-shaping moment for mothers and fathers which does not only change their personal and family situation but also has a strong influence on their professional activity and career. For mothers in particular, ceasing work due to childbirth and the **professional reintegration** which follows are often a significant challenge. Mothers are sometimes unable to return to their original job following childbirth for a wide variety of reasons or professional reintegration cannot be organised in a satisfactory way.

Although the **employment rate** of women aged 25 to 39 in Switzerland has risen in recent decades to almost 90% and so a large majority of women are employed, women are still less likely to be employed than men and more frequently work part-time<sup>1</sup>. This can be explained to an extent by the fact that in many Swiss families women still do most of the unpaid work, for example by providing childcare. That means that these women's **potential is not being used to its full extent** on the labour market. In times of demographic change and shortages of specialists, this can have disastrous effects not just for the women affected, but also for **employers** and the entire **Swiss economy**. Supporting and successfully shaping the professional reintegration of mothers following childbirth is therefore a key challenge for society as a whole.

Previous studies primarily documented **mothers' views** of their professional reintegration. A study by the University of Zurich investigated for example which factors can contribute to successful professional reintegration from the perspective of mothers. That showed both personal factors concerning the mothers themselves (e.g. high confidence in their own abilities) and features of the working environment (e.g. a family-friendly company culture) contribute to successful reintegration.

Alongside the perspectives of the fathers and mothers affected, this study aims to also document the views of companies in Switzerland. The primary focus of the study is on the **advantages** for companies if they promote and support the professional reintegration of mothers using appropriate measures. **Recommendations** for tackling challenges are also laid down. The study investigates the following **questions**:

1. How can companies in Switzerland benefit from the professional reintegration of mothers following childbirth?
2. What challenges does professional reintegration pose from companies' point of view?
3. What factors make it easier to successfully overcome these challenges?

To answer these questions, a **two-part study** was carried out in which different attitudes to professional reintegration were documented. Firstly, mothers and fathers were asked to answer an **online questionnaire** about their professional reintegration, changes in their job after childbirth and work-family balance. Following this, 30 semi-structured **interviews** were carried out with managers from different Swiss businesses to provide more detailed insights into the advantages and challenges of professional reintegration from the point of view of employers. The results of the online questionnaire and the interviews are presented and discussed as follows. On the basis of these results, conclusions are drawn as to the questions listed above.

<sup>1</sup> Source: Arbeitsmarktindikatoren 2019 ("Labour Market Indicators", in German and French), published by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office

# 3 Online questionnaire for mothers and fathers

## 3.1 Method and participants

To obtain the widest possible overview of the situation affecting mothers and fathers in Switzerland, Swiss staff from different sectors and professions were asked to fill in an online questionnaire. The participants were recruited in German, Italian and French-speaking Switzerland by polling institute GFS. In order to collect different points of view on the topic, three groups were targeted:

1. Mothers who are currently on maternity leave or have ceased work to provide childcare
2. Mothers who returned to work within the last three years following maternity leave or a break from employment to provide childcare
3. Fathers in employment who have at least one child aged under eight

Figure 1 gives an overview of the individuals surveyed. The questionnaire was created by ETH Zurich and contains both general information about the situation of the staff members (e.g. duration of maternity leave, age of the youngest child etc.) and questions about their motivation to return to working life after childbirth, and the advantages professional reintegration offers the company. Moreover, the participants were asked about potential conflicts between work and family. The survey was mostly based on established and validated questionnaires.

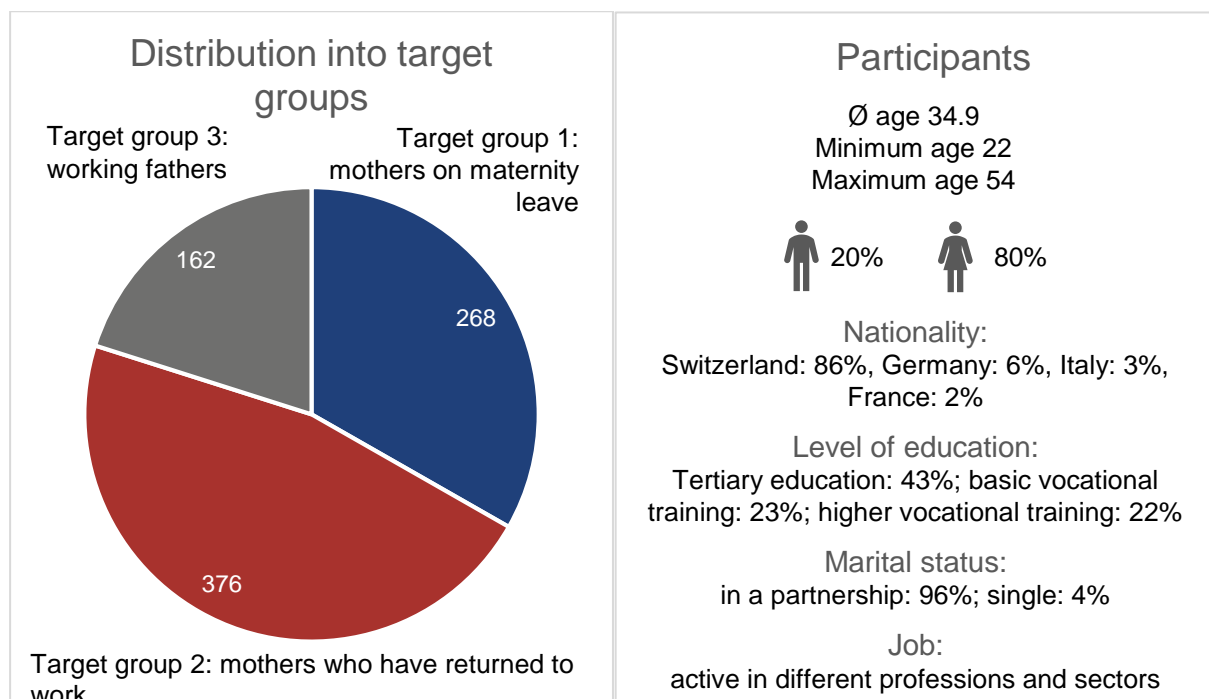


Figure 1. Overview of all individuals surveyed (806 responded to the online questionnaire)

## 3.2 Key findings

### Advantages for companies

- Mothers and fathers state in equal proportions that their personal development continued after childbirth and that their employer can benefit from this.
- Many mothers and fathers state that they now go to work with greater motivation and new-found self-confidence.
- Becoming a mother or a father generates various resources which can be used beneficially at work.
- These resources include a more positive attitude, new knowledge, new skills and focused use of time

### Shaping professional reintegration

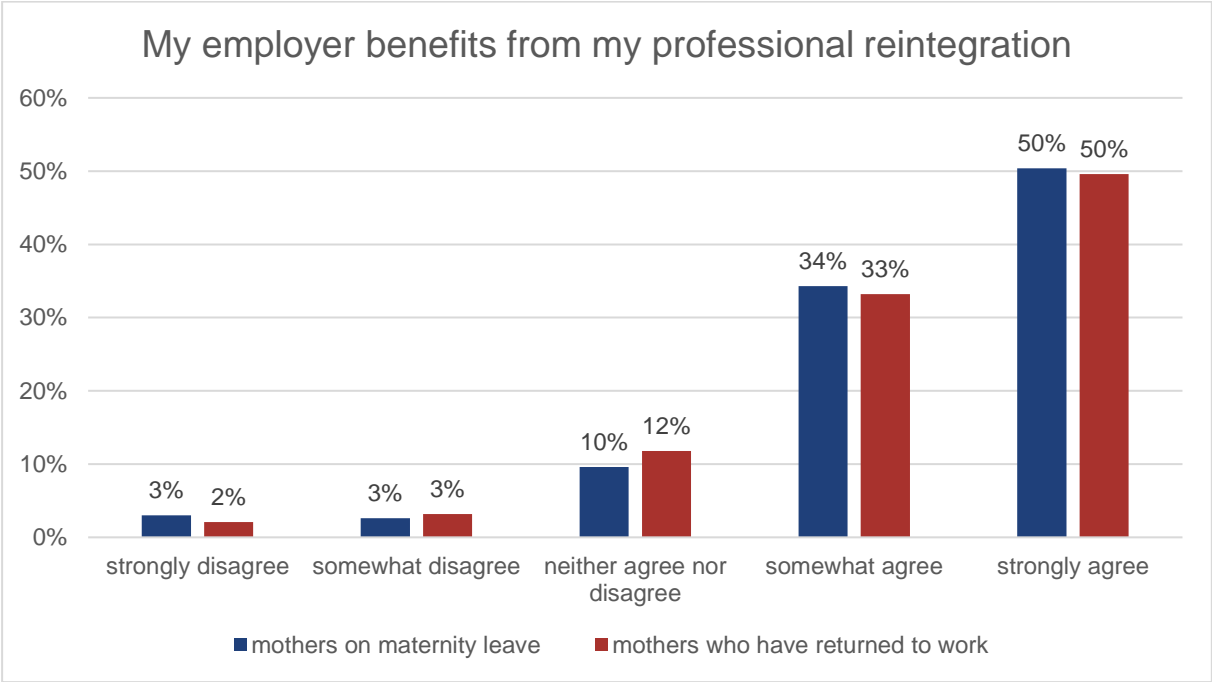
- Most of the mothers on maternity leave would like to return to work quickly and hope to reduce their working hours.
- Accordingly, most of the mothers who had returned to work had reduced their working hours, sometimes very significantly.
- In contrast, most fathers did not or only marginally reduced their working hours after the birth of their child.
- As reasons for professional reintegration, mothers primarily cited financial reasons and the desire to remain part of working life.

### Work-family balance

- Mothers and fathers can generally balance work and family well, though they do experience some conflicts. Work is generally seen to hinder family life more than vice-versa.
- There is no difference between mothers and fathers in terms of the scale of the conflicts they experience. Balancing work and family life is equally challenging for mothers and fathers.

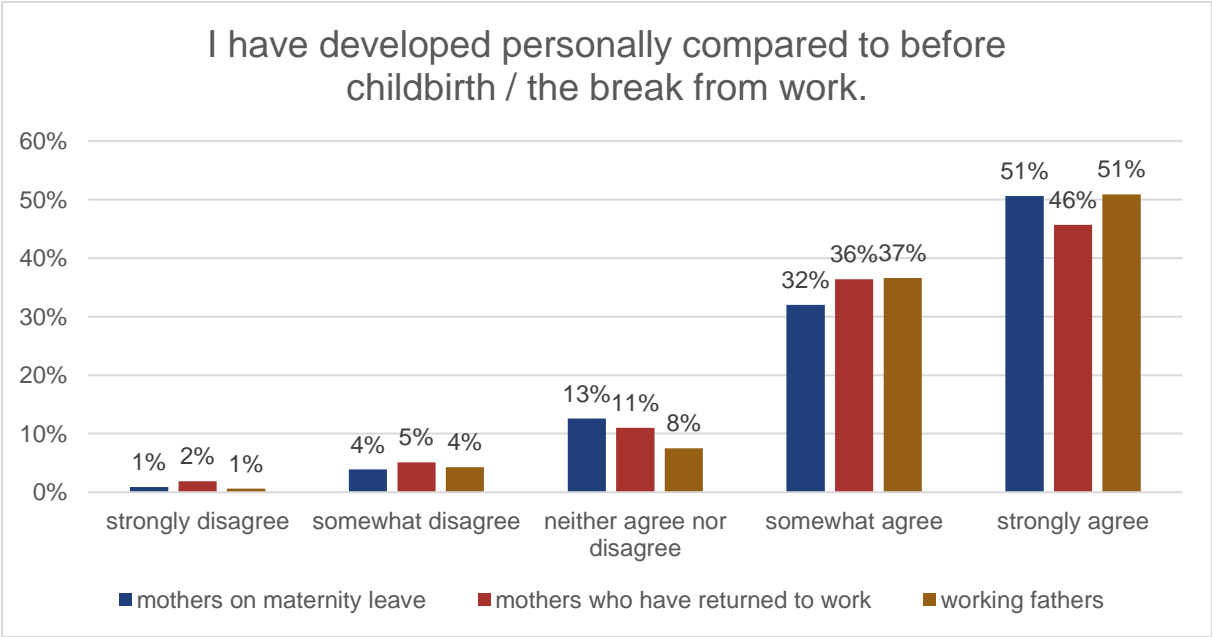
### 3.2.1 Advantages of professional reintegration

Overall, a large proportion of the mothers surveyed stated that their professional reintegration is advantageous for their employer. Over 80% of both mothers on maternity leave and mothers who have rejoined the workforce agreed somewhat or strongly with the statement that their employer will benefit or has benefited from their professional reintegration (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Does the employer benefit from professional reintegration?

Following this, the mothers and fathers were asked how they and their work patterns are changing or have changed following childbirth or the break taken during maternity leave. When these questions were posed to mothers on maternity leave when they filled in the questionnaire, the questions referred to the future (e.g. “After maternity leave, I will be more motivated to go to work”). Survey participants particularly emphasised the fact that childbirth and maternity leave had contributed to their personal development (see Figure 3). Over 80% of survey participants agreed somewhat or strongly with the statement that they had developed personally.



**Figure 3.** Personal development thanks to childbirth or maternity leave



A relatively high proportion of survey participants also stated that after childbirth or maternity leave they are/will be more motivated to go to work (see Figure 4). The mothers on maternity leave at the time of response to the questionnaire were most optimistic about this: almost 60% of them agreed somewhat or strongly with the statement that they will be more motivated to go to work after the break. In contrast, this proportion was significantly lower among mothers who had already rejoined the workforce (48%) and working fathers (46%).

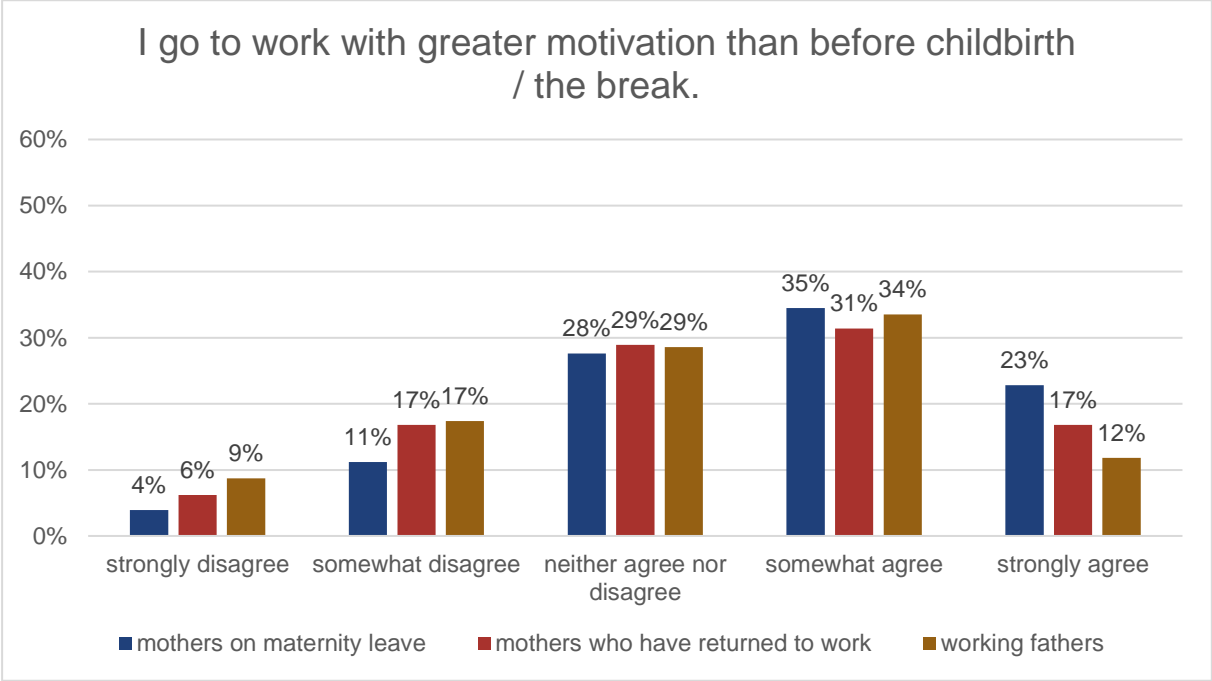


Figure 4. Change in motivation following childbirth or maternity leave

Mothers and fathers were also able to develop their own self-confidence. That meant that all three groups demonstrated relatively high rates of agreement with the statement that they could return to work with new-found self-confidence following childbirth or maternity leave (see Figure 5).

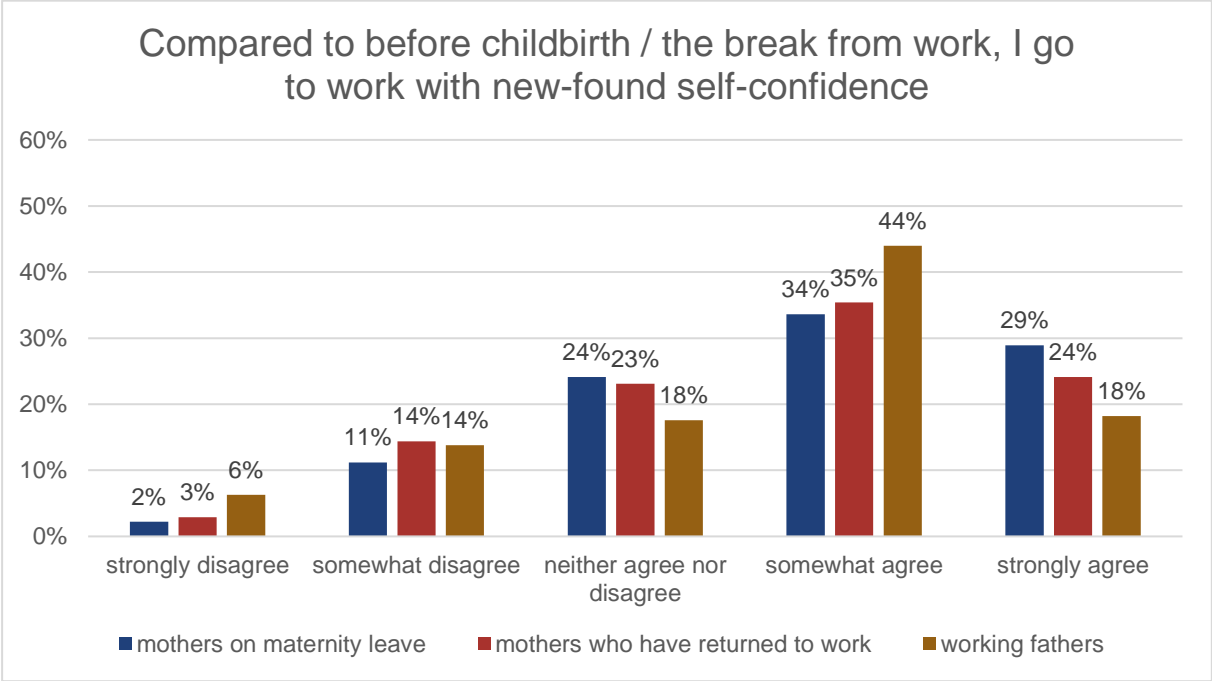
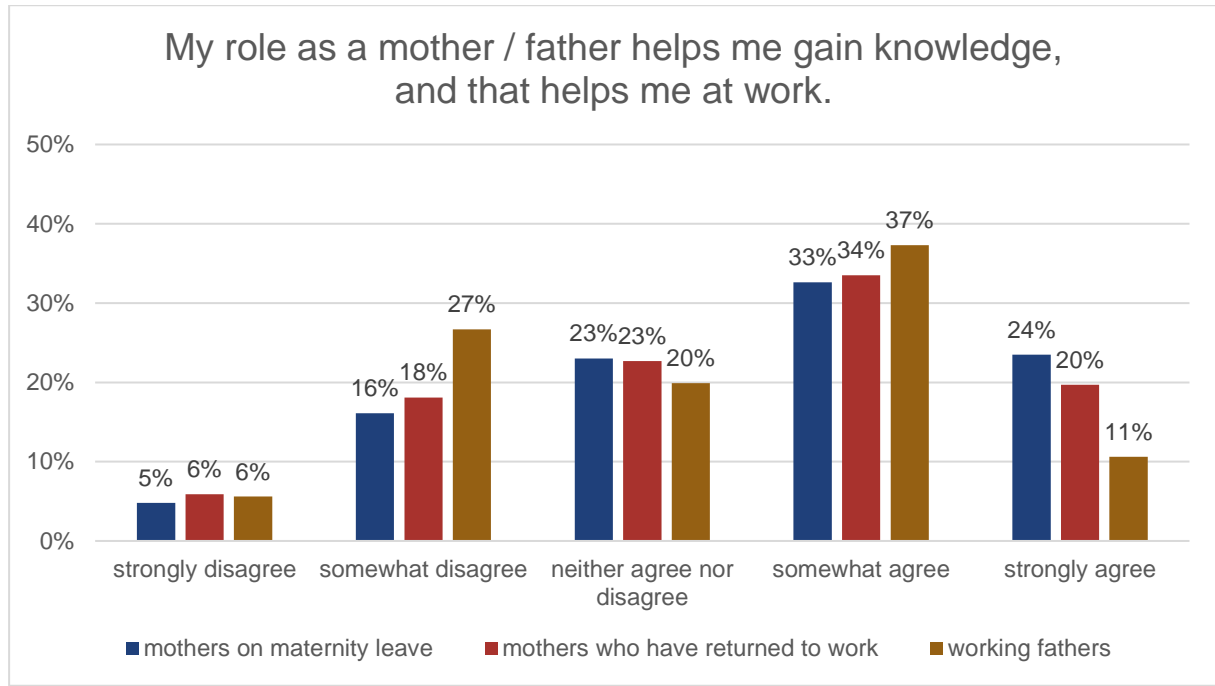


Figure 5: Change in self-confidence after birth or maternity leave

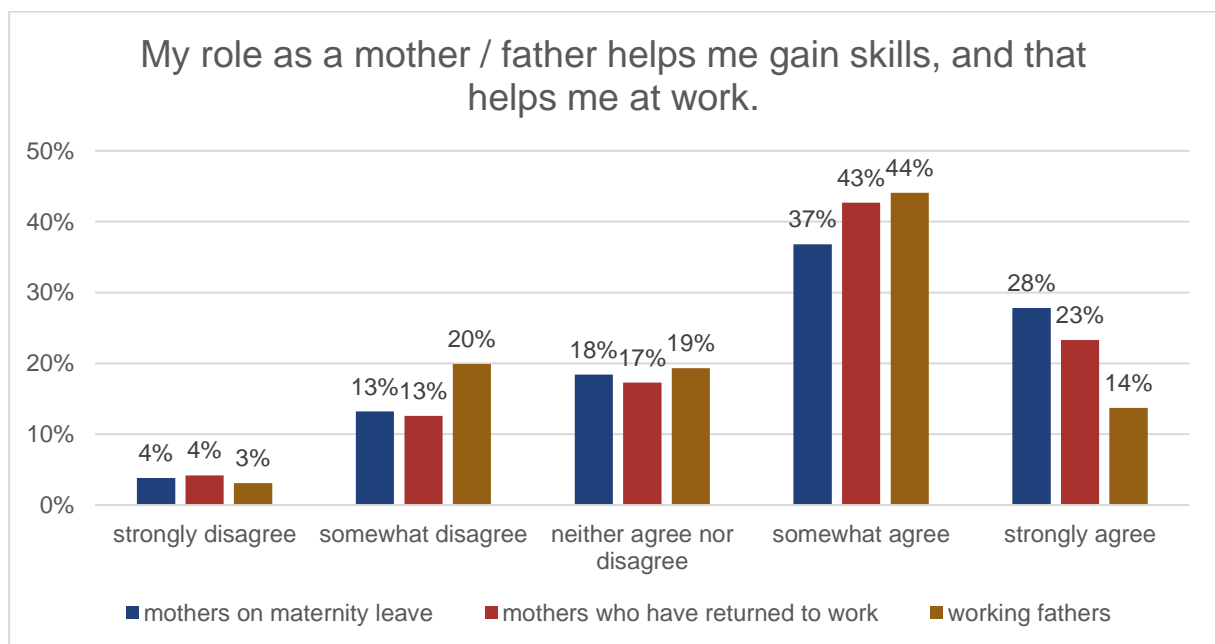
The mothers and fathers surveyed also gave information about the **personal resources** which their role as a mother or father gives them and which can help them at work. These resources include newly

gained knowledge and skills, a more positive attitude and focused work strategies. Many survey participants stated that they had gained knowledge through their role as a mother or father which would help them at work (see Figure 6). Agreement with this statement was higher overall among mothers than among fathers. Only 11% of fathers agreed strongly with the statement that they had gained knowledge through their role as a father, while this proportion was around twice as high for mothers (24% and 20%).



**Figure 6.** Knowledge gained through the mother or father role

The individuals surveyed were somewhat more likely to judge that they had gained skills than knowledge through their role as a mother or father. Over 65% of mothers and almost 60% of fathers agreed somewhat or strongly with the statement that they had developed skills through their role as a mother or father which help them at work (see Figure 7). Here, the level of agreement among mothers also proved to be higher overall than among fathers.



**Figure 7:** Skills gained through the mother or father role

There was also a very high level of agreement with regards to the positive attitude generated by the mother or father role. A large majority of mothers and fathers surveyed agreed somewhat or strongly with the statement that their role as a mother or father makes them happy and that helps them at work (see Figure 8). Agreement with this statement was somewhat higher among fathers than among mothers overall.

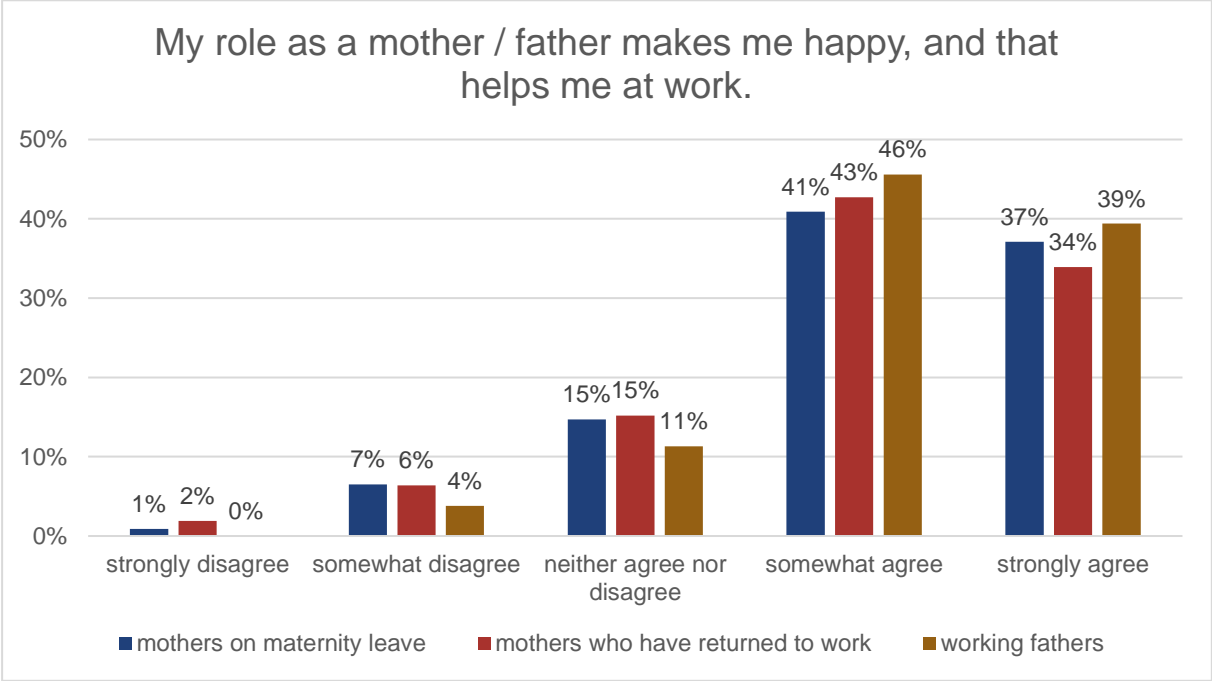


Figure 8: Positive attitude generated by the mother or father role

A large proportion of survey participants also stated that they make more focused use of time available, which also helps them at work. Moreover, agreement was visibly higher among mothers than among fathers. Around 40% of mothers agreed strongly with the relevant statement, while fewer than 20% of fathers shared this view (see Figure 9).

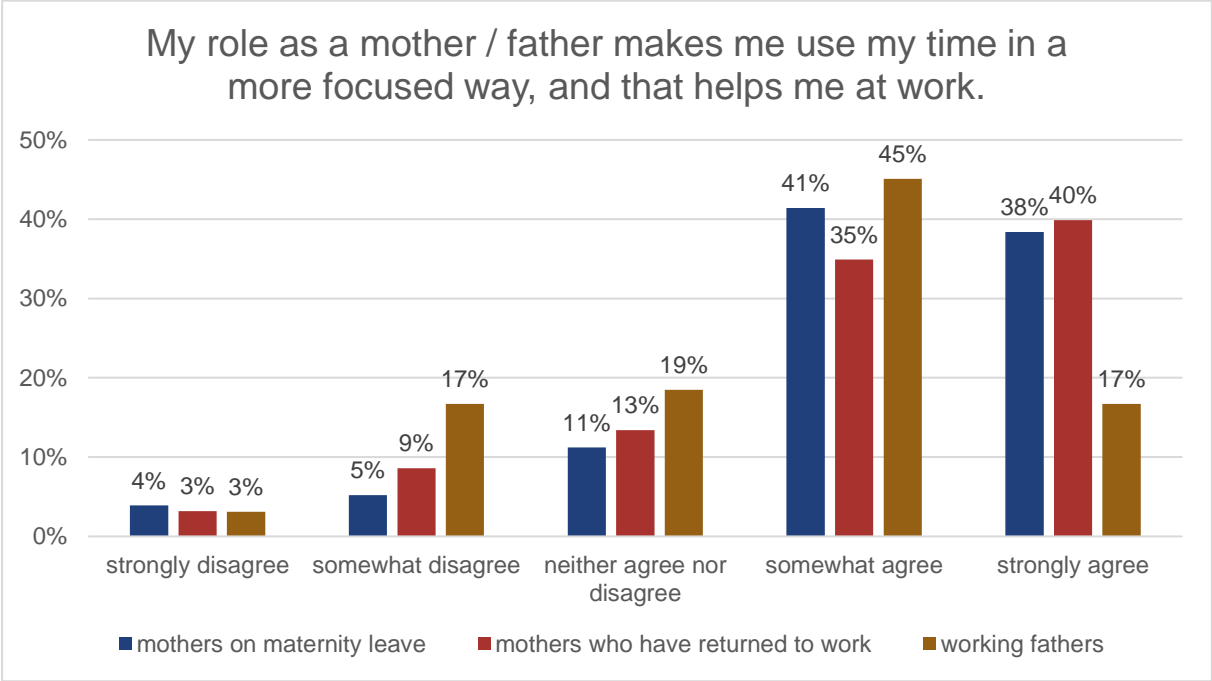


Figure 9. Focused use of time thanks to the mother or father role

Figure 10 shows the average of all participants’ responses regarding resources developed thanks to the mother or father role. It is evident that fathers report less substantial development of knowledge and

skills thanks to being a parent than mothers, and also report a lower gain than mothers in focused use of working time. However, they give a higher score than mothers to positive attitudes generated through their role as a father. Taking all resources into account, mothers reach a higher score than fathers, but the size of the difference is small, meaning it is of little significance. On average, survey participants estimated the resources generated through motherhood or fatherhood which can be put to beneficial use at work as moderate to high on a scale of 1 to 5.

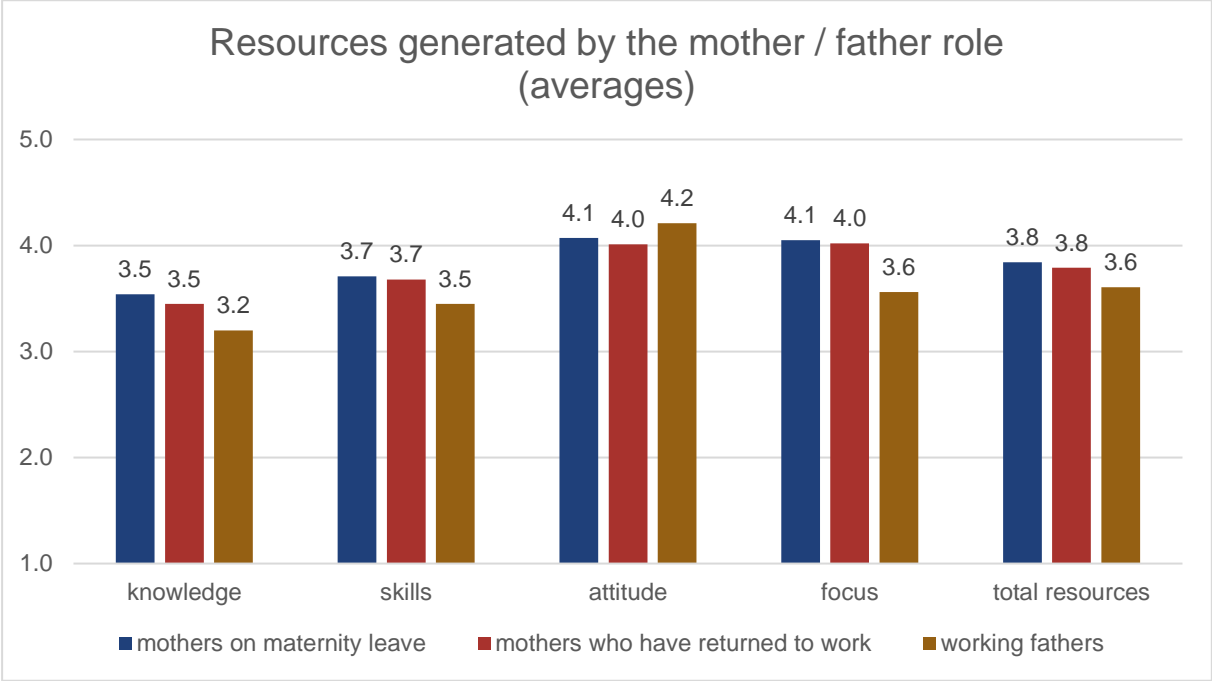


Figure 10: Resources generated through the mother or father role (average on a scale of 1 to 5)

### 3.2.2 Shaping professional reintegration

A majority of the mothers on maternity leave surveyed wanted to take up work again after the break, mostly in the same job and with the same employer (see Figure 11). Those who already had concrete plans for returning to work mostly sought professional reintegration within a short time frame, i.e. within a few months. (93.5%).

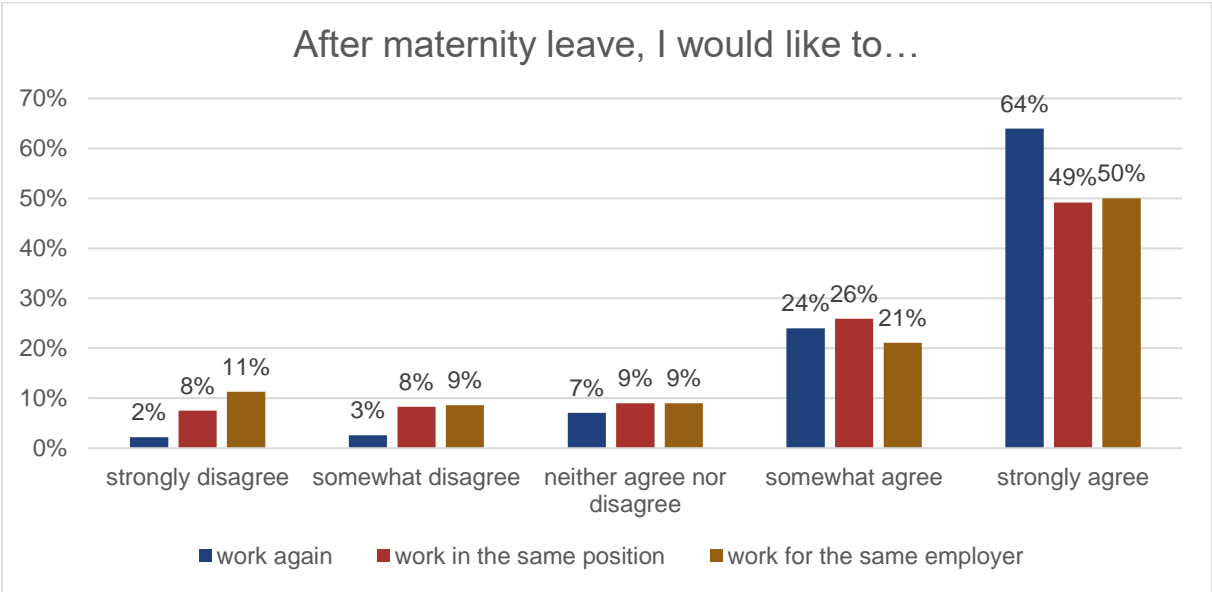
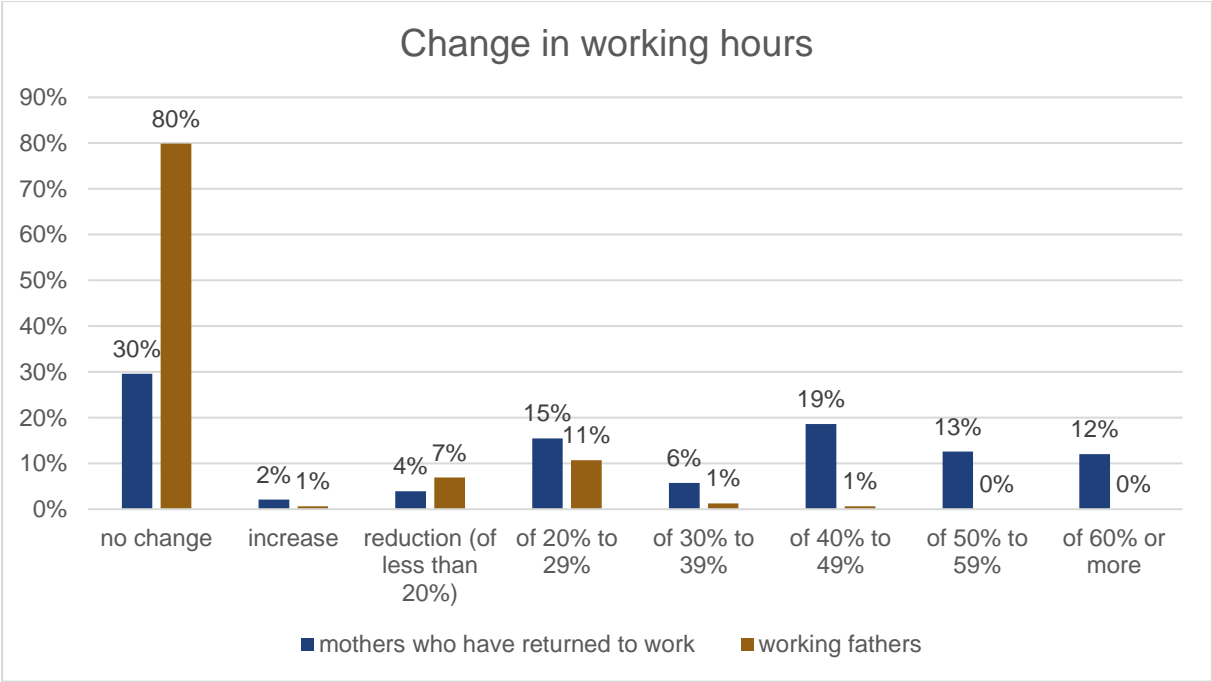


Figure 11. Professional reintegration: The desire to start work again after maternity leave or the break from work (generally in the same job with the same employer).

Before taking their break from work, a large proportion of mothers on maternity leave (40%) worked long **working hours** of 41 hours a week or more. For their return to work, the mothers surveyed wanted to work significantly fewer hours: the percentage of mothers who wanted a full time job was just 5%, while over a third of survey participants wanted to return to their career by working 20 hours or fewer.

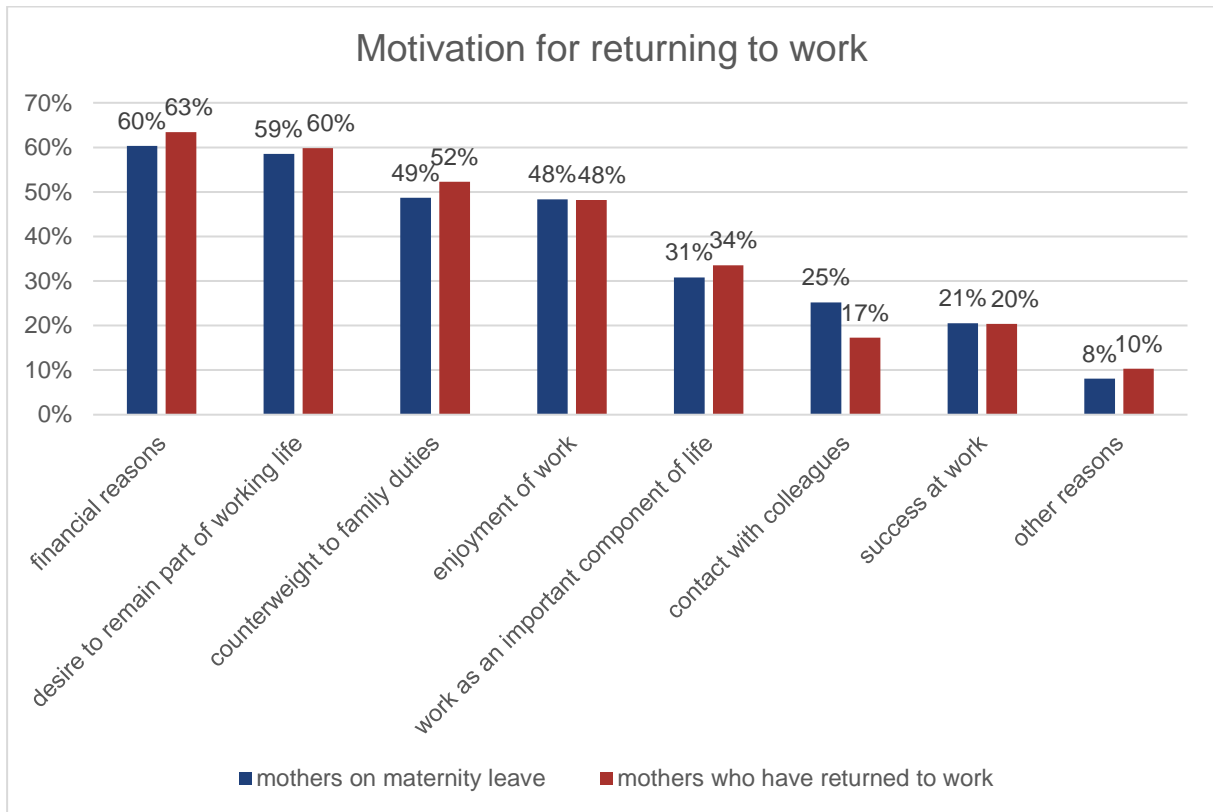
In line with this, the second target group showed that most mothers did in fact change their working hours after returning to work, with the overwhelming majority reducing their hours. Figure 12 shows that just under 20% of returnees only reduced their working hours slightly, while a large proportion of mothers reduced their working hours by 50% or more. In contrast, an overwhelming majority of fathers (80%) maintained their working hours after the birth of their child. Fathers who reduced their working hours mostly only made slight reductions.



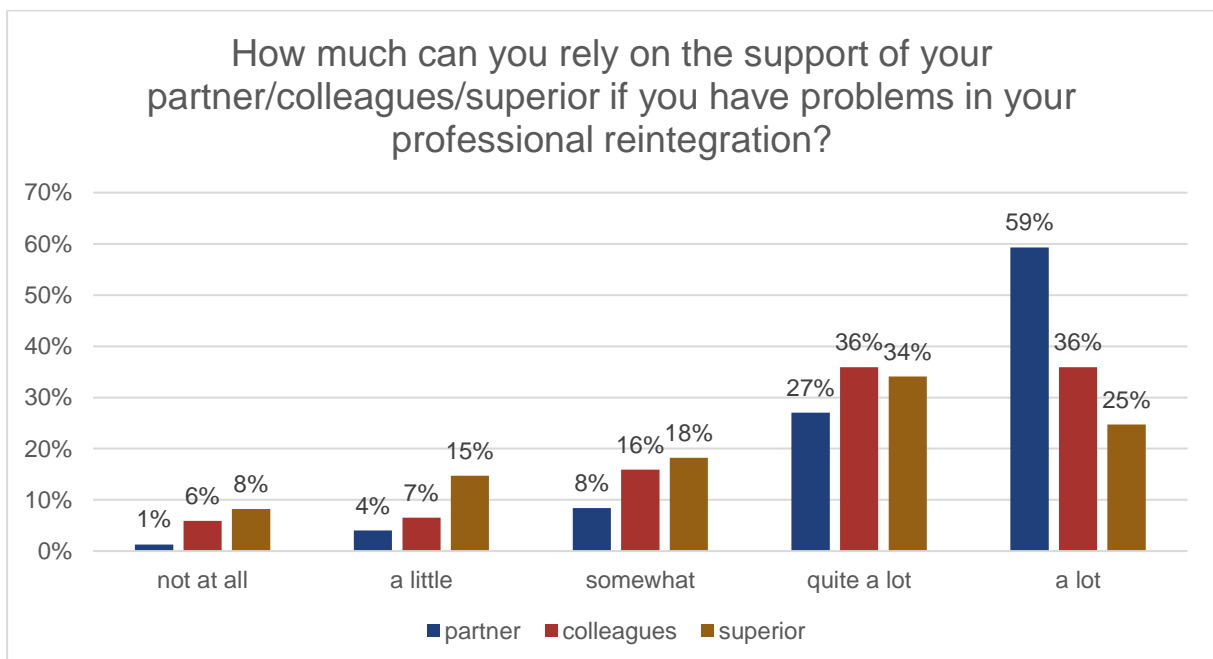
**Figure 12:** Change in mothers' working hours following professional reintegration and fathers' working hours following the birth of their child

Figure 13 shows the **mothers' motivation for returning to employment**. The reasons most often stated were financial and the desire to remain part of working life. Around half of survey participants also see work as important as a counterweight to family duties. Many survey participants would like to return to work because they enjoy it or because they see work as an important part of their life. There were no differences between mothers who were currently on maternity leave and mothers who had already returned to work in terms of the reasons chosen.

The mothers on maternity leave felt confident when thinking about their return to work. They viewed the level of **support** they will receive from their social circle when returning to work as high (see Figure 14). In particular, they saw their partner as a source of support in case of problems which could occur when returning to work. Reported self-efficacy with respect to professional reintegration – i.e. the confidence of survey participants in their own ability to shape professional reintegration positively – was also high, with an average of 4.1 on a scale of 1 to 5.



**Figure 13:** Motivation for professional reintegration. Proportion of survey participants who chose each reason (multiple selections possible).



**Figure 14.** Support from partners, colleagues and superiors in case of problems when returning to work.

### 3.2.3 Work-family balance

Parents' attitudes to **work-family balance** were on the whole positive. Mothers who were still on maternity leave at the time of the survey were particularly confident that they would be able to balance the demands of both aspects of their life after returning to work. A majority of both mothers who had

already returned to work and working fathers also stated that they could balance the demands of work and family well (see Figure 15).

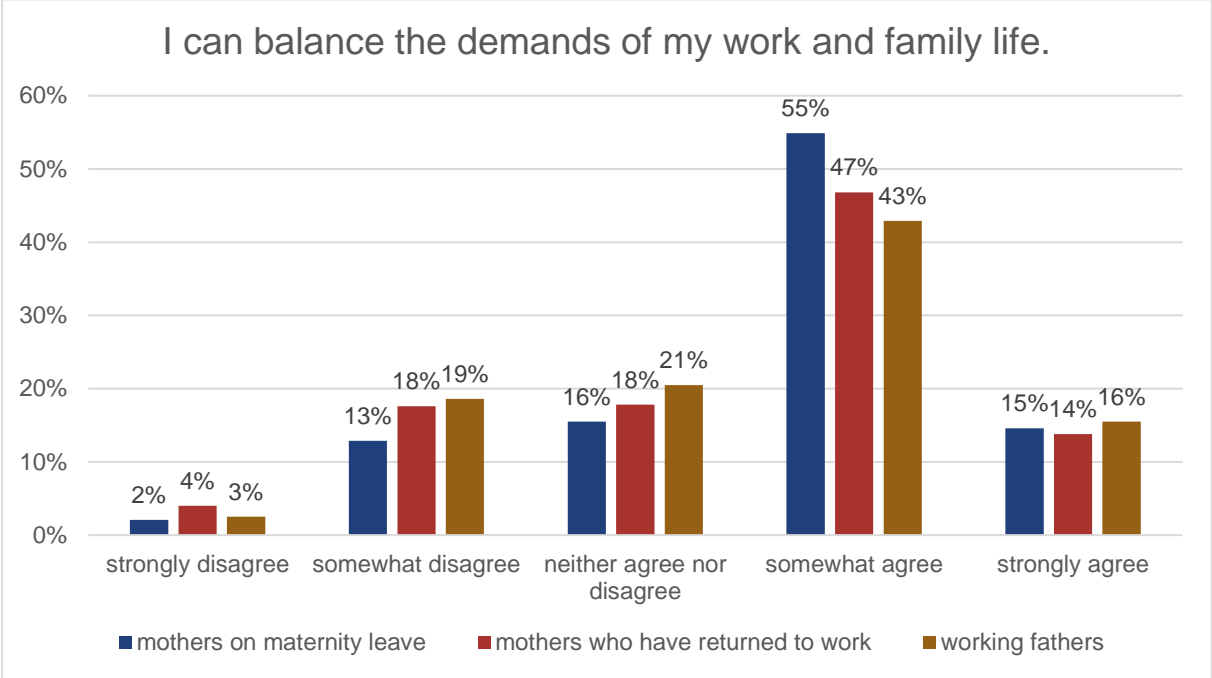


Figure 15: Balance between work and family life

However, both mothers and fathers experienced certain conflicts between work and family life. Around a third of mothers and fathers said for example that the requirements of their family would interfere with their professional activity (see Figure 16). And more than a third of survey participants agreed with the inverse statement that work requirements would interfere with their family life (see Figure 17). The averages of the various groups of individuals reveal no notable differences between mothers and fathers (see Figure 18). Work-family balance is thus equally challenging for both mothers and fathers.

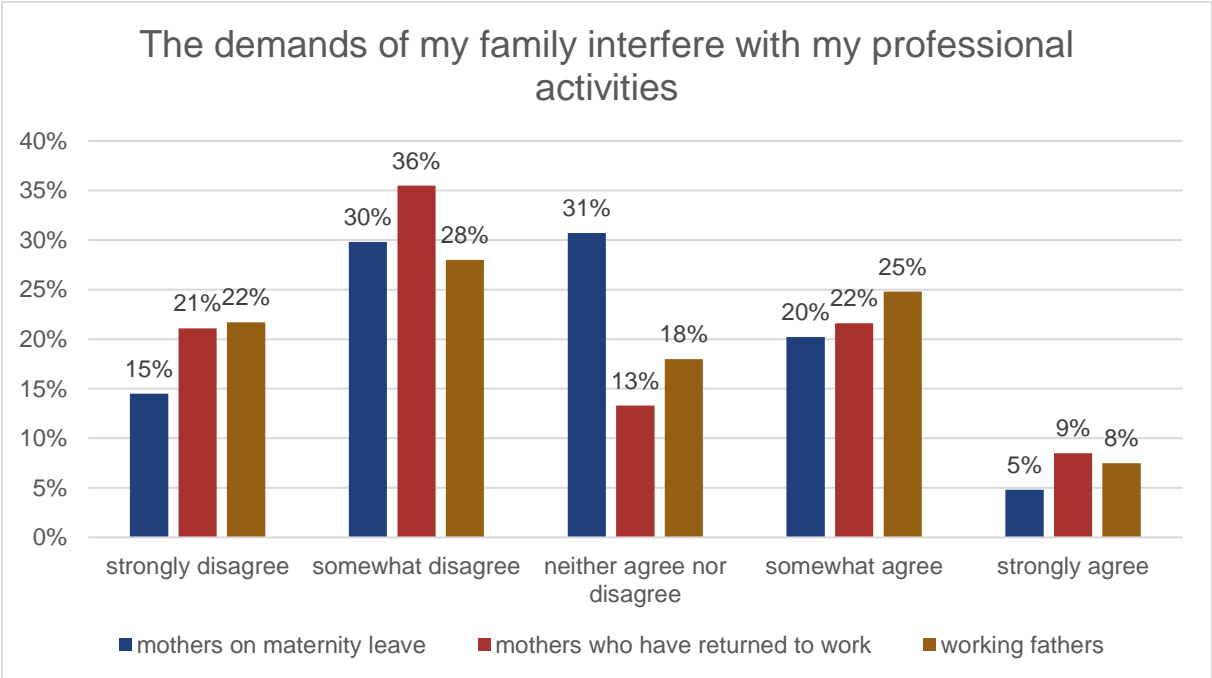
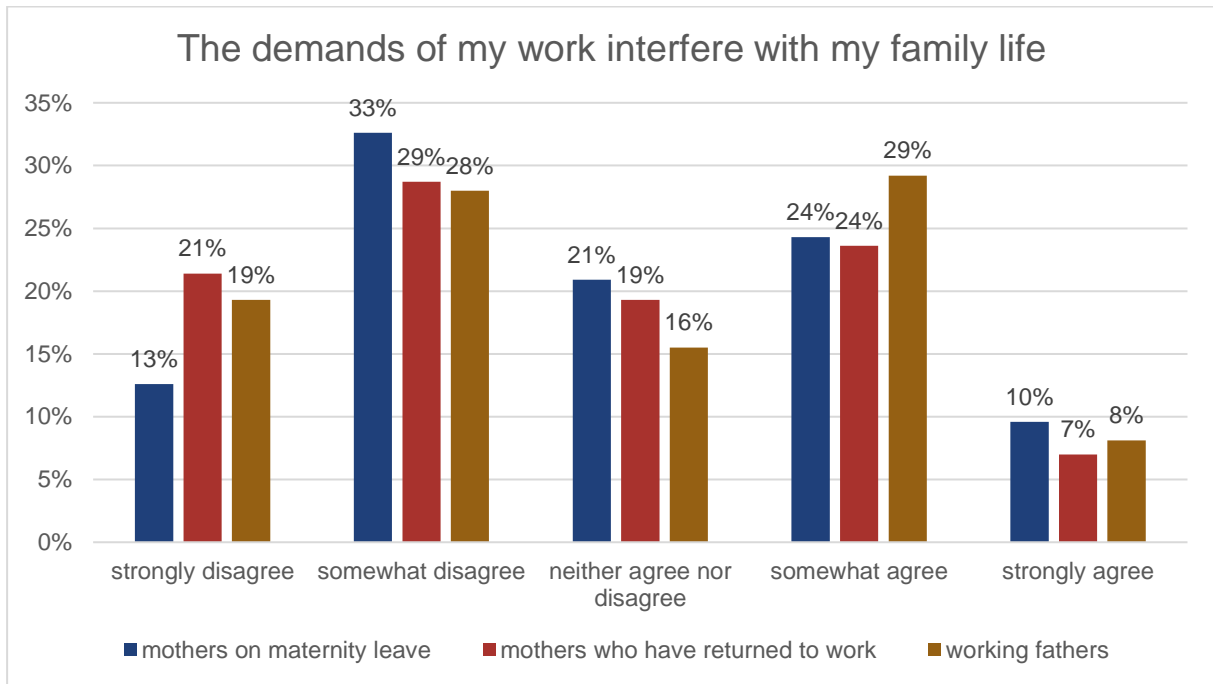
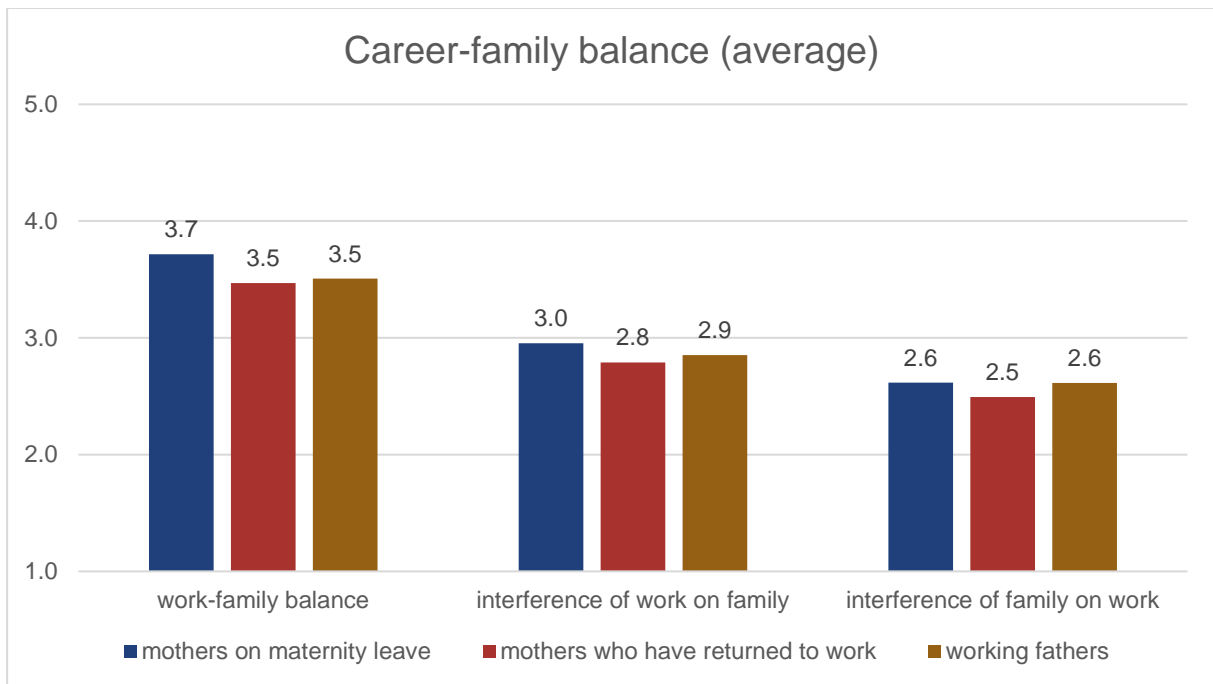


Figure 16: Professional activity undermined by family requirements



**Figure 17:** Family life undermined by work requirements



**Figure 18:** Career-family balance (average of all survey participants)



# 4 Interviews with managers from Swiss businesses

## 4.1 Method and participants

In addition to the online questionnaire covering the views of the staff affected, the polling institute GFS carried out 30 interviews with managers from different Swiss companies. In some individual interviews, several people were present, and so the total number of individuals covered by the survey was 34. The survey participants worked on five different function levels within the companies: top management, HR management, unit management, team leadership and diversity positions. The interviews were carried out in German or French and then transcribed for the evaluation. Figure 19 gives an overview of the individuals surveyed.

The aim of the interviews was to obtain the views of Swiss companies on professional reintegration. The interview guidelines were created by ETH Zurich and covered various topic areas. Firstly, questions were asked about the importance of the topic and the options the companies offer to facilitate professional reintegration. Following this, the advantages that professional reintegration offers companies on various levels were surveyed. Finally, the challenges and success factors were discussed in the context of professional reintegration in companies.

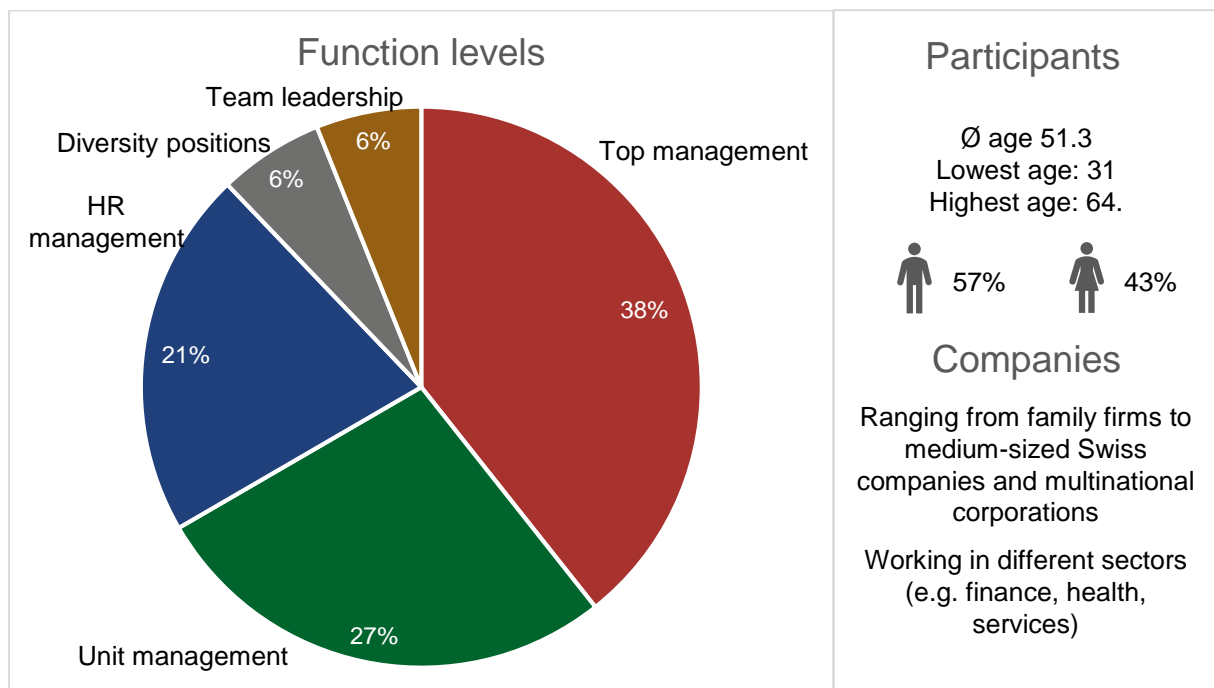


Figure 19. Overview of people surveyed (30 interviews)

## 4.2 Key findings

### Importance and support options provided

- For most companies, professional reintegration of mothers is a highly topical and important issue, particularly given demographic change and the shortage of specialists.
- The issue is also important for the economy as a whole because the state invests financial resources in training. Long breaks from employment mean that potential is not being used.
- Many companies provide options for facilitating professional reintegration, though these are mostly limited to flexible working time models and a reduction in working hours.
- Generally, these options are available to both mothers and fathers in equal measure.
- The options are frequently used and viewed positively.

### Advantages of professional reintegration for companies

- Supporting professional reintegration provides numerous advantages for companies.
- Knowledge is retained in the company and recruitment costs are reduced.
- Support for professional reintegration increases the attractiveness of employers and is an important element of employer branding.
- That makes it easier to tackle shortages of specialists overall.
- Staff often react to the support options offered with increased loyalty and stronger identification with the company.
- Mothers and fathers can bring the company new skills and perspectives in the long term, as most develop personally from their parenthood.

### Recommendations for tackling challenges

- Challenges arise for mothers and fathers, work teams and companies.
- Parents often face a double load and conflicts between their work and family roles.
- Companies and work teams have to be flexible and adapt, and sharing workloads is often a challenge.
- Key factors for success are flexibility, reciprocity, communication, planning and strong involvement of fathers in the family.
- A supportive company culture and acceptance by managers are also very important for successful professional reintegration.

### 4.2.1 Importance and support options provided

The interviews clearly demonstrated that professional reintegration of mothers following childbirth plays a key role for most companies, whatever their size and sector. Particularly in companies with a high proportion of women (e.g. in the health service or education), this issue is pervasive. Therefore, most individuals surveyed recognised the importance of the topic, in particular in the context of current challenges such as demographic change and the shortage of specialists.



“I am convinced that there is no alternative nowadays. If people say we need well-trained people who want to come and work here. Then there is no other solution than a) to try to understand their needs and b) to also say [...] we can offer such and such, but we can't offer such and such.” (I18, head of HR in a family firm)

Some of the survey participants also recognised the relevance of the issue for the economy and society as a whole.



“I think it's also very important for the economy as a whole because the state pays for training, and nowadays people are very well trained, and then people are not allowed to return to work, for whatever reason, and that of course does damage to the economy.” (I5, top manager of a division with 1,000 members of staff)

In line with this, most companies offer options to facilitate the professional reintegration of their staff. In most companies, these options are limited to a reduction in working hours, flexible working time models and different provisions on leave. Figure 20 gives an overview of these measures.

<p><b>Workload</b></p> <p>Part-time Job sharing</p>	<p><b>Flexibility</b></p> <p>Flexible working time models Shifts and flexible working hours</p>	<p><b>Consultation</b></p> <p>Refresher courses Consultations and workshops</p>
<p><b>Provisions on leave</b></p> <p>Maternity/paternity leave Unpaid leave Care for sick children</p>	<p><b>Infrastructure</b></p> <p>Nurseries and childcare Breastfeeding opportunities</p>	<p><b>Personalised solution</b></p>

**Figure 20.** Options available for facilitating professional reintegration

A large majority of survey participants stated that their company offers all staff, whether parents or not, the opportunity to reduce their working hours, sometimes in combination with job sharing. Some survey participants emphasised that fathers increasingly also want to reduce their working hours.



“Part time is tending to increase, [...] we are increasingly getting requests from men when they start a family. It's no longer the case that just the woman works less and the man just ploughs on full steam ahead.” (I18, head of HR in a family firm)

Many survey participants also mentioned that making part-time positions compatible with a management position and further career opportunities was a challenge. Some survey participants said that in their

company an attempt is made at finding solutions (e.g. through job sharing). Most survey participants stated however that for those in management roles part-time work is not possible or the possibilities are very limited in their company.



“And I do think that people’s acceptance of part-time in management roles has to increase. Colleagues have to be supportive. Right now I don’t think it’s widely accepted yet. By peers or work colleagues. It’s associated with so many stereotypes saying that they can’t carry out their job properly.” (I12, HR manager for a foundation)

Further key options for facilitating professional reintegration frequently cited include provisions on leave (e.g. an extension of maternity and paternity leave beyond statutory requirements) and increased temporal and geographical flexibility. Some companies offer additional infrastructure (e.g. breastfeeding facilities) and can organise childcare and consultation offers. Finally, some of the survey participants emphasised that they try to find individual solutions for individual cases through dialogue.

## 4.2.2 Advantages of professional reintegration for companies

The interviews focused on the advantages which professional reintegration of mothers following childbirth offers companies. The interviews showed that companies can benefit from professional reintegration of mothers following maternity leave or following a long break from employment in many different ways.

Most survey participants stated that parents generally, and in particular, mothers who have returned to work can bring valuable **skills** and a high level of **motivation** to their work. We found that mothers and fathers develop personally thanks to the birth of their child and gain new skills, such as for example more efficient time management, higher resistance to stress, better organisational capacities and social skills for interacting with others. These skills can be used to benefit the company and improve collaboration in work teams.



“There is additional responsibility which needs to be taken. I’m sure it affects everyone. In a positive sense, as long as it does not lead to a stressful situation. But at the end of the day I think it helps someone to develop, it provides another point of view and that is something the person can contribute.” (I14, chair of a top management team in a company with 70 members of staff)

Mothers and fathers also develop a high level of **company loyalty** if they are offered attractive options which facilitate the return to work and ensure a good career-family balance. Survey participants often reported that staff were very thankful towards the company. This can then have a positive effect on staff **identification** with the company.



“Yes, I would say that staff are then loyal. A large proportion of our staff come back and I would suggest that that’s strongly linked to the opportunities to work part-time and the extension of maternity leave, which doesn’t need to be justified.” (I4, diversity manager in a large corporation)

Another key advantage is the **retention of valuable knowledge**. When mothers or fathers do not return to the company after maternity leave or the birth of a child, the company loses a member of staff who may be a specialist and who has already built up knowledge and experience specific to the company. Depending on the position of the member of staff, replacing this knowledge can be very expensive for companies.



“So we benefit because we don’t lose all the person’s skills. We don’t have to run induction again for these people. [...] We are pleased when people keep going. It’s hard enough finding enough staff who are sufficiently qualified.” (I16, HR manager in a music school)

Therefore, support for professional reintegration is also often perceived as a way to tackle the **shortage of specialists** and compete for talent. This is particularly crucial in sectors where there is a lack of highly qualified staff and companies struggle to fill posts with qualified specialists.



“I think we could benefit so much more. We’d have access to so many more people who otherwise aren’t available. It’s a shame if you’ve got a specialist you can’t take on because this person has to look after the children and instead you take someone whose knowledge isn’t on the same level.” (I21, department manager in a large company)

These two points are also certainly linked to reducing the **costs** generated by **turnover** (i.e. the loss) of staff and the **recruitment** of new staff. If mothers do not return to their position following maternity leave, the company generally has to find someone new to fill the post and conduct induction for the new member of staff. That generates costs up to the equivalent of an annual salary.



“It takes a year for the people who take the quality tests to get <up to speed>. Not having someone for three or four months but then being able to have someone who can work straight away versus getting someone external who then needs a year to learn the ropes – when I look at it like that, it’s quite clear what I should go for, isn’t it?” (I21, department manager in a large company)

Moreover, providing options to support professional reintegration makes the employer more attractive and in many companies this is therefore used to develop **employer branding**. Particularly for companies with unattractive locations or which struggle to recruit specialists, shaping professional reintegration plays a crucial role in this.



“It’s also a factor which makes employers more attractive. It’s a way of compensating for our disadvantageous location. It shows [...] that we are trying to find solutions for the needs of society nowadays.” (I18, head of HR in a family firm)

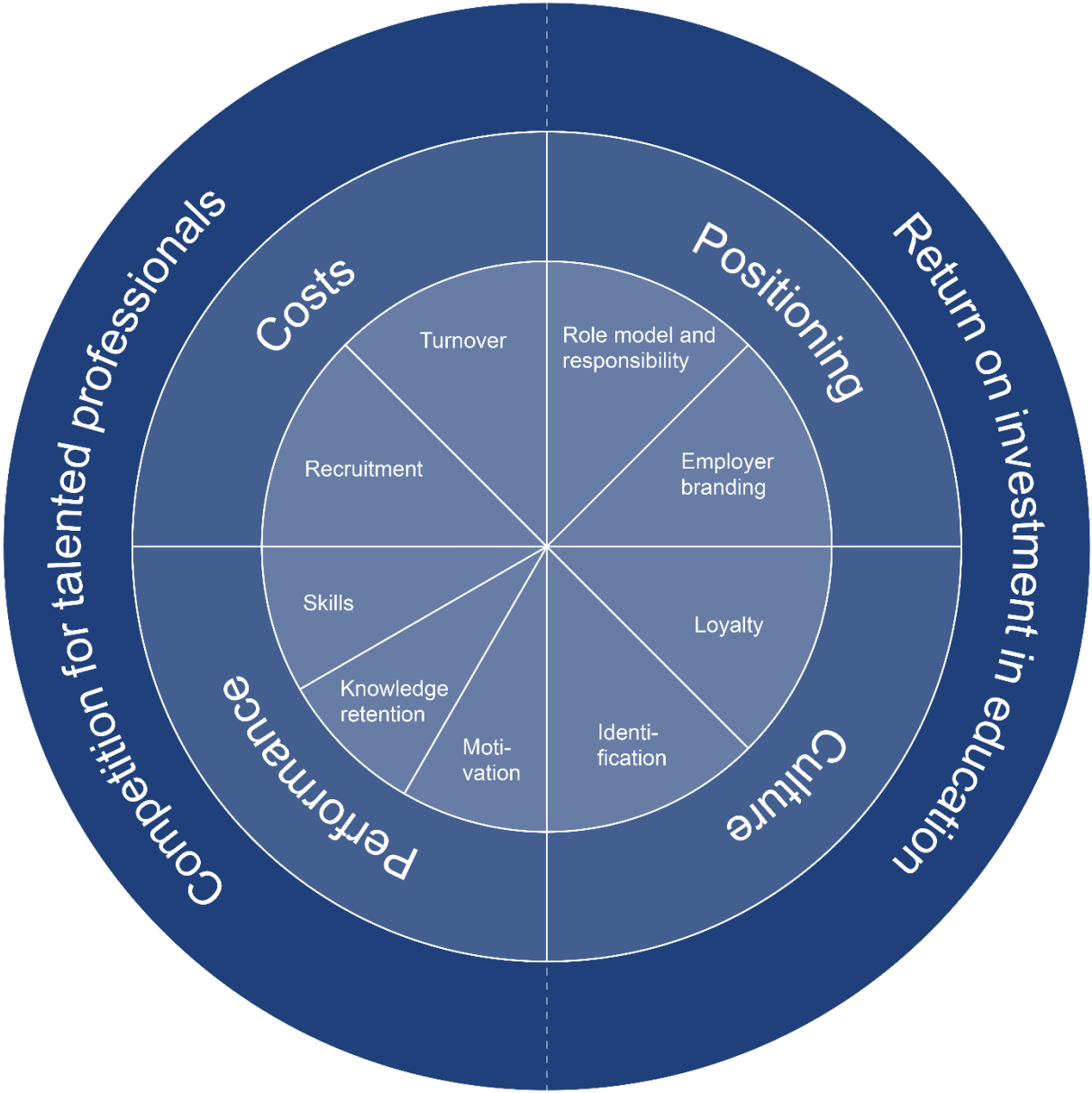
Finally, some of the survey participants stated that women who successfully master professional reintegration fulfil a very important **function as a role model**. This can have a positive effect beyond the individual company by sending a signal to other companies in Switzerland and demonstrating the importance of the topic to society. That means that companies can use their support for professional reintegration to position themselves as a socially responsible employer.



“I have the feeling that particularly very visible women, so women in management, who manage it become very prominent role models for other women and show that it is possible.” (I4, diversity manager in a large corporation)

The advantages that supporting professional reintegration brings to employers are summarised in Figure 21. On a higher level, companies can use professional reintegration to position themselves as an attractive and socially responsible employer. Moreover, professional reintegration can be used to establish a supportive company culture which increases staff identification with and loyalty to their company. A further advantage is in promoting and increasing performance in the company. Professional reintegration means that important knowledge is retained in the company, and those returning to work can contribute a variety of valuable skills and increased motivation. Finally, supporting professional

reintegration also offers financial benefits, as the costs arising from staff fluctuation and recruitment can be reduced. These advantages are not only important for individual companies but also from the point of view of society as a whole. They help strengthen our position when competing for talent or facing the shortage of specialists and let us achieve a high return on investment in education.



**Figure 21:** Advantages of professional reintegration

### 4.2.3 Recommendations for tackling challenges

#### Recommendations for companies

The analysis of the interview data enabled the formulation of eight key recommendations for companies for tackling the challenges posed by professional reintegration (see Figure 22).

Create the conditions for fathers' involvement in the family	Increase understanding and awareness	Shape the company culture	Plan reintegration together
Enable flexibility	Guarantee reciprocity	Promote communication	Facilitate exchanges among parents

**Figure 22.** Recommendations for companies tackling the challenges of professional reintegration

To relieve strain on mothers facing the double load of work and family, companies should create conditions which **encourage fathers' involvement in the family**. To achieve this, options which make it easier to balance career and family should be available to mothers and fathers in equal measure within the company. Moreover, the uptake of such options (e.g. flexible working time models or a reduction in working hours) by fathers should be actively supported by superiors to remove any hesitation and concerns about using such opportunities from fathers' minds. Further common measures to increase fathers' involvement in the family are extending paternity leave and giving both parents the opportunity of taking unpaid leave after the birth of a child.

To ensure that the staff affected can cope with the requirements of their career and family and find a good balance between both areas of life, companies should give staff a **high degree of flexibility**. That involves offering flexible ways of working such as working from home or flexible working hours, and also flexibility in certain situations where staff have to react to urgent family demands, such as, for example, if a child is ill or childcare is temporarily unavailable. Companies should make sure that a high degree of **reciprocity** is provided, ensuring there is a balanced give and take between the mothers or fathers and the company.

Furthermore, **understanding and awareness** of the importance of the issue and the situation of mothers and fathers should be strengthened within companies. A high level of understanding and awareness should be developed at all levels within the companies, from top management to line managers and the colleagues of the relevant staff members. To achieve this, companies should design and establish a supportive **company culture** in which professional reintegration is given great importance.

Moreover, companies should promote open **communication** between all those involved – i.e. between mothers and fathers, superiors and team colleagues. **Planning** a return to work together early on to make sure the needs of the mothers, team colleagues and superiors are taken into account contributes to shaping successful professional reintegration in the company and avoiding conflicts in the work team. Finally, companies should enable and promote **exchanges between parents** who are in a similar situation. This can lead to the establishment of valuable communities.

#### Challenges

The recommendations presented here are based on an analysis of the challenges which arise for mothers, fathers and companies during professional reintegration, and on the factors which lead to success in tackling these challenges as identified by the managers in the interviews.

Though professional reintegration offers companies numerous advantages, there are unsurprisingly many challenges that mothers and fathers, work teams and the company have to deal with. Figure 23 shows the most significant challenges.

For mothers and fathers	For work teams	For companies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisation and childcare</li> <li>• Stress &amp; double load</li> <li>• Career opportunities</li> <li>• Role and identity conflicts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordination</li> <li>• Absences</li> <li>• Additional burden</li> <li>• Flexibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workload</li> <li>• Acceptance by managers</li> <li>• Organising replacement</li> <li>• Reintegration after return</li> </ul>

**Figure 23.** Key challenges for mothers, work teams and companies

In the interviews, the central challenges facing **mothers and fathers** which were mentioned were primarily **childcare** and the **organisational effort** needed to fulfil the requirements of different areas of life. The picture which emerged from the interviews was not homogeneous; some of those surveyed stated that fathers were now much more strongly involved in family duties, while others surveyed emphasised that the allocation of roles remains standard and the main burden of family duties continues to be borne by mothers.



“Combining everything is certainly a huge challenge. It’s certainly still most often the case that all the organisation at home is done by women. Then there are the children who have to be organised. Taking on challenges at work. Those are huge challenges.” (17, managing director of a health centre)

Given this, survey participants often cited the **stress** arising at work and in the family due to the **double load** as another major challenge for mothers and fathers. This challenge is particularly present for parents with very young children, who often have to struggle with sleep deprivation and still wish to fulfil their work requirements at the same time.



“We regularly experience cases of parents saying “look, it’s just not working”. If someone comes to work day in day out with dark rings under their eyes, and the pressure is too great, due to this double load of family and career, then it does happen repeatedly that people just say – no, now I’m going to stop working.” (18, chief HR officer in a large corporation)

Further key challenges cited by those surveyed relate to the **limited career opportunities** faced first and foremost by women when they reduce their working hours, the **identity conflicts** which arise from the new role as a mother or father and the challenge of returning to work after a break, becoming part of one’s work team again and getting accustomed to the rhythm of work. For mothers who stop work for an extended period of time in particular, the need to refresh their specialist knowledge and learn the new skills needed also plays a role.

For **work teams**, **coordination**, **absences** and the **additional burden** present a challenge. These challenges arise on the one hand from the high proportion of staff working part-time: this can make it more difficult to fix dates and work together in a team. Other reasons cited were more frequent absences by mothers and fathers to take care of ill children and a lower degree of temporal flexibility, given for example the need to collect children from nursery. Parents’ absence can lead to conflicts in the team if the other team members have to constantly show more flexibility and therefore bear an additional load.



However, survey participants often stated that this was well organised in teams and that mothers and fathers made up for their absences by showing commensurate flexibility themselves.



But you see that sometimes, especially when the children are still very young, this demands a lot of flexibility within the teams. [...] But sometimes it also restricts the other staff who maybe need to be more flexible to help out their colleagues with young children. And so it's not always viewed well by everyone.» (127, director of a nursing home)

For **companies** an issue cited as posing a particular challenge was properly organising and sharing the **workload** among staff in work teams when mothers and fathers wish to work part-time. Small companies in particular states that it was difficult for them to set up multiple part-time posts in a team, as this would ultimately mean more full-time equivalents and therefore higher costs.



“We are also an SME and getting a certain percentage, a certain quantity of work is necessary. If this doesn't happen, then you don't have the flexibility to share it with others and you can't distribute the workload differently.” (119, top manager in an SME)

A further challenge – and also a key factor in successfully shaping professional reintegration – is **acceptance by managers** in the company. Only if the direct superiors of the relevant staff back the support measures can a supportive culture which enables successful professional reintegration become established.



“The last manager has to pass on this flexibility and live it out. The manager plays a decisive role and the direct superior who then represents the company is actually the one whose action dictates whether these opportunities are offered and whether they are then taken up and really have a positive effect.” (15, top manager of a division with 1,000 members of staff)

Other challenges for companies mentioned in the interviews are the **organisation of replacement staff** during the mother or father's period of absence and the **reintegration of the mothers or fathers upon their return to work**. Various solutions were mentioned for organising a replacement. These include temporary work contracts or a temporary increase in the full-time equivalents of other staff in the team.

### Success factors

Many staff members emphasised that the **father's involvement** in the family is an important factor in enabling mothers to successfully tackle the double load of work and family. Therefore, the options mothers are offered (e.g. reduction in workload) should also be available to men.



“No, I think that's exactly how mothers also see it. It's important for the same opportunities to also be available for fathers. Because if the entire organisational burden weighs on the mother's shoulders, we're not in keeping with the 21st century. [...] If you decide to have a family, it's not just the mother deciding to have a child, but the couple deciding to have a family.” (15, top manager of a division with 1,000 members of staff)

To make professional reintegration successful, the company has to show a high level of **flexibility** and **understanding and awareness** of the challenges and the parents' situation. The principle of **reciprocity** is of fundamental importance: to ensure there is no inequality, mothers and fathers should return the flexibility they are offered commensurately. Often, survey participants spoke of "give and take".



"A certain level of flexibility is needed. You can't be hard-headed if for example the child is ill. Then the mother, and sometimes the father too, will take time off. That requires a certain degree of flexibility, which you have to accept. But I think if the work atmosphere's good, then people are always willing to catch up the time if necessary." (I13, managing director of a residential co-operative)



"But it also depends on the flexibility of the woman returning to work. [...] The team shouldn't have to give and receive nothing. The person has to be able to rejig plans for three weeks to give the team something back. The biggest danger in the whole thing is it not being balanced." (I26, branch manager in the service sector)

An appropriate **company culture** which recognises the importance of professional reintegration and where support for professional reintegration is firmly entrenched is a key element of what companies should offer. Establishing such a culture increases acceptance by superiors and team colleagues.



"I think that's the leadership philosophy we have. I think it has a lot to do with the attitude we have in top management. And actually it spreads throughout the firm. My unit leaders and us, we actually all have the same attitude to the topic. And so it sort of becomes part of our company. I think we can have a lot of influence there." (I7, managing director of a health centre)

Moreover, many survey participants emphasised the importance of open **communication** between all those involved (members of staff, superiors, work colleagues) and early and appropriate **planning** of absence and professional reintegration. Some survey participants emphasised that communication should not cease during the mother or father's absence, and that visits to the company with the child could in some cases have a positive effect.



"So it is also important to prepare professional reintegration well and make sure those returning to work know what to expect when they come back. And the team and management should know too. That's how to do it. But you also need continuous discussion so as not to lose touch and forget the feelings of others. We need to keep having that communication." (I26, branch manager in the service sector)

Lastly, **exchanges between parents** in the company were cited as an important factor for facilitating professional reintegration and for dealing with challenges relating to the interaction of work and family.



"Yes, exactly, I think exchanging views within the team is extremely important [...]. But sometimes it's also cool for us if we have a break, say, three, four men together who all have children and we chat about it. That actually leads to a really exciting exchange of views." (I21, department manager in a large company)

# 5 Integration and conclusion

Analysis of the questionnaire and interview data showed that both the mothers and fathers and the managers from Swiss businesses thought that **professional reintegration offers numerous advantages** for companies. Companies can use professional reintegration to position themselves as socially responsible and attractive employers and to establish a company culture which increases staff loyalty and their identification with the company. Moreover, support for professional reintegration can be used to increase performance as mothers and fathers may bring higher motivation and new skills to the firm. Finally, support for professional reintegration also reduces costs arising from staff fluctuation and the recruitment of new staff. These factors are also important from a broad societal perspective, as professional reintegration correlates closely with competition for talent and qualified staff and the return on investment in education.

The study showed that the organisation of childcare, the double load it creates and conflicts between work and family are key challenges for mothers and fathers who return to work. For companies, the coordination of work teams and the organisation of workloads are particularly challenging. To **tackle the challenges**, companies should provide stronger support for fathers' involvement in the family, for example by supporting fathers' take-up of support options for balancing work and family life. Moreover, companies should show great flexibility and a high degree of understanding and awareness of the situation facing mothers and fathers. The principle of reciprocity is also a decisive success factor, and so a "give and take" must occur between staff and companies. To increase acceptance by managers and colleagues, companies should establish a supportive culture in which professional reintegration and the support options that implies are given high importance.

In summary, the study demonstrated that successful professional reintegration brings benefits not just to the mothers and fathers themselves, but also to companies. Even if there are challenges and certain investments are required, the mothers and fathers and the managers from Swiss businesses surveyed thought that support for professional reintegration is worthwhile in the long term. Companies should support fathers' involvement in the family, ensure flexibility and create a high degree of understanding and awareness in the company and a supportive company culture. The support for professional reintegration is therefore a task for society as a whole, one which is particularly important in the context of the shortage of specialists and investment in education.



“About 30 years ago, almost all Swiss men had to take a military refresher course and were absent from work for three or four weeks. At that time, no-one in the company complained or was moody about it. Maybe sometimes people had to grit their teeth, but it was part of society. That awareness and that culture should also apply to maternity leave.”  
(I28, top manager in a large company)

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