

VIDEO SLIDE –

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak today, I am humbled to be amongst such eminent speakers.

I want to start by showing you this video as it helps to illustrate the current situation that mothers face today.

Video link <http://www.itv.com/thismorning/hot-topics/do-you-think-housewives-are-lazy>
(watch to 2mins 35secs)

I think this is extremely sad that mothers are so judgmental of other's choices. We hear the descriptions "lazy", being a stay at home mother doesn't set dreams, and comments degrading the position of a stay at home mother. It is hard enough being a mother today, surely mothers should be supporting each other, not at each other's throats.

Can we change society's current perception?

Today I would like to talk to you about Elevating and Evaluating Career Breaks.

SLIDE: ELEVATING AND EVALUATING CAREER BREAKS

I am a chemical engineer by background and I started my career break in 2001. I am a mother to 3 boys aged 11, 14 and 16. When I started my break technology was very different: there was no continuous barrage of social media comment, no Twitter, no Snapchat, no Facebook, no iPads ... indeed we still had to use dial up to access the internet! I was also very lucky to have had a lovely team of midwives who introduced groups of new mothers to each other who then met up regularly.

But, as my boys grew up I became dismayed at the lack of respect mothers on career breaks were given.

SLIDE: TALK OUTLINE

So today I want to consider

- What it's like to be a mother on a career break today?
- Why I started Career Break People
- Can career breaks be valued?

SLIDE: FAMILY PICTURE

So, age 30, career progressing well I then started our family. This illustration sums up the impact that event currently has on a career:

"This is my baby" says Jane. "It is the end of your career" says Mummy. And we see the words cuddly, cute and redundancy highlighted.

In fact, at this point a woman cannot have an honest discussion with her employer for fear of losing her maternity benefits – so from the beginning there is no obvious support mechanism for taking a break. My own employer was supportive in discussing my return after maternity leave – however, to take an extended break (which they classed as up to 5 years), I had to resign: which I did, and then with a growing family I didn't go back.

I knew how I felt becoming a mum back then and I wanted to see what it was like to be a new mum today. Remember – we didn't have all the plethora of information and comment available, and had books that we could digest at leisure.

SLIDE: GOOGLE SEARCH RESULTS

I Googled “enjoying motherhood”. The first point is promising, secret to enjoying motherhood (note this is a book!); then we get “anyone else hate motherhood”, “coping but not enjoying motherhood”. So somewhat a relief to find “21 ways to enjoy being a mum” until I read in the blurb that the list includes “report yourself to Child Protective Services and have your children taken away for a day or two. Instant vacation!”.

My second Google search on starting a career break only pulled up results relating to returning to work *after* a career break.

Neither of these two searches make taking a break from your career for family seem an attractive or supported option.

SLIDE: WHO IS SAYING IT IS OKAY TO TAKE A CAREER BREAK?

In my twenties I had always said that it should be possible for a parent to have a break from their career to raise a family and that there should be a re-entry point back into the workplace. However, this was greeted with incredulity by people in HR departments who I mentioned it to at the time.

SLIDE: RETURNSHIPS

So I was delighted in 2014 when returnships (a scheme which was started by Goldman Sachs in the US in 2008) were brought over to the UK, in particular championed by a couple of mums Julianne Miles and Katerina Gould who founded Women Returners. Accolades were awarded and other organisations sprang up, a lot of which focus on the City.

A returnship is like a graduate internship and provides an opportunity to work for an employer for a given period whilst receiving training and support. At the end, a participant may receive a job offer, but this is not guaranteed.

This is great for the mums who have finished their breaks and now want to return to the workplace, but who is supporting those who are just starting their breaks or perhaps in the middle?

At one conference I attended about women returners I was dismayed to hear on the lectern 3 things:

- 1) Mothers were repeatedly being described as “economically inactive”
- 2) The value of the family was not supported: “You need a supportive husband to return to work, and if he isn't supportive then change him.”
- 3) Mothers at the school gates are relied upon: “Make friends with stay-at-home mums so that they can collect your children when you can't leave work.”

So, although a change has started and it is helpful to know that a re-entry point is emerging I do not feel it is doing enough for the career break itself.

Two years ago, PwC analysis, carried out with Women Returners and the 30% Club, found that career breaks carry a penalty of £1bn in reduced salaries. This is due to many women

returning to lower skilled roles than the ones they held prior to their breaks, and so working below their potential which also impacts their future earnings and career progression.

SLIDE: CAREER BREAK PEOPLE

This is why I set up Career Break People – to help people maintain their skills and confidence throughout a career break. This will benefit not only the individuals, but also employers with a confidently returning workforce.

Being an engineer at heart, I couldn't resist making the analogy of needing a catalyst to make the start of a chemical reaction easier and needing confidence to make returning to work easier.

SLIDE: CONFIDENCE ANALOGY

Often for a chemical reaction to start, you need to provide a source of energy (eg heat). You can see without a catalyst the amount of energy required is much higher – the red line - than if a catalyst is present – the blue line. Let's say in this case the reaction is that of returning to work.

Without confidence and society's respect for what a mother has achieved on a career break the energy to return to work that is required is high. However, if over the course of her break a women's confidence and knowledge has been bolstered, then less energy is required to address returning to work and more confidence will help her to apply to positions more commensurate to her skills set and commanding a salary to match.

So, how do Career Break People do this?

SLIDE: QUALIFYING CAREER BREAKS?

Given the growing trend for Lifelong Learning, can or should career breaks be qualified?

Maternity Teacher Project is an organisation which offers CPD qualifications for teachers on career breaks/ maternity leave. The nature of the teaching role means that they place importance on the classes and activities that mothers have done with their children.

Professional institutes also require evidence of continued CPD.

There are many online learning opportunities through TED talks, Open University online and the like (but we need to be careful that the mothers are not isolated at home, or staring at a screen whilst their children need attention).

At CareerBreak People we have developed a Personal Skills log that can be used to think about and record skills developed and plan to develop new ones. Non-technical skills developed whilst on a career break when described correctly on CVs are recognised by employers; this is why it is important to record them. People can keep track of all their experiences and think of what additional skills they might want (like keeping technical knowledge up to date, working in larger groups or learning a language).

Although the primary reason for a break is to spend valuable time with family and growing children, there are many other things that parents do ... which includes volunteering.

SLIDE: VOLUNTEERING DURING A CAREER BREAK

The actual volunteering roles that parents undertake are too numerous to list, but I have included some groups. You can see the focus on children through playgroups, schools and sports clubs – and do not underestimate the amount of time that parents give to schools. Charitable work and fundraising also features, particularly if a mother has been affected by something. My experience has also seen that as children get older, mothers have had more time and have joined associations which require more continuity: citizens advice, the Samaritans, help for the homeless and as magistrates.

With only 1 in 11 mothers now being a stay at home mum, the social heart of communities in the day time is disappearing and we are hearing more reports of how lonely mothers are. Netmums and Mumsnet discussion forums have been around for a while, although often the chat is not very positive about the motherhood experience. But face to face interaction is missing and the loneliness might reduce if more mothers were around in the day - there is currently a birth of “meet other mums” apps: mums meet up, mushmums for example.

It should also be noted that this volunteering also sets a good example to children of supporting society, and so the community benefits in both the short and long term.

I have said a number of times now that the real key is to maintain a person’s confidence whilst on a break. Who do mums have at the moment? Not society.... Hopefully their partner.

When considering what else was available, I noticed that a lot of people look for group activities, in parent school networks, through sport or exercise classes... but what could help them keep their minds active? Boost their knowledge and confidence? So, I founded *Pondero*, Pilates for the Mind.

SLIDE: PONDERO, PILATES FOR THE MIND

Pondero, Pilates for the Mind, is a series of talks across a wide-range of subjects held locally throughout term time during the day. *Pondero* is different because the talks are held at a time when childcare is not needed, people come as individuals (not parents of a particular child) and they become part of a different network. Over 60 talks to date have included topics as diverse as the psychology of colour, the latest trends in technology and social media, engineering, nutrition, and politics. At the end of a term, attendance certificates are issued which are helpful for people’s records.

Pondero also provides a safe place for returning parents to practise giving talks: a lawyer on a break had never given a presentation before and chose to challenge herself and give a talk on Brexit!

It is also known that mothers have a big influence in their children’s career choice – at a recent talk on energy in the UK one person had never come across chemical engineering before and said she was going straight home to talk to her 16 year old son about it (useful at a time the UK is desperately short of people with STEM qualifications)! Another has said that she currently has no plans to return to work, but *Pondero* gives her something to talk about other than her children.

SLIDE: DURING A CAREER BREAK

During a career break we work with people to keep up their confidence by offering Focus-*Accelerate-Succeed* workshops which are aimed at people later on in their career breaks to

help them identify their goals and aspirations. I collaborate with Sarah Reynolds of LifeForward Coaching whose career complements mine as she took two short maternity leave breaks whilst working for Deloitte over 20 years before retraining as an Executive Coach.

We also provide workshops for technical skills development.

As an aside, businesses are saving money in training costs for non-technical skills that mothers develop whilst on career breaks: collaboration, negotiation, conflict resolution, communication and being flexible.

I think what Georgie Palmer, a BBC presenter before her career break, said about one of our workshops helps to sum it up ...

“Your workshop was a transformation for me ... finding that confidence ... you are the first person that has made it okay for me not to have been at work for ages...I always carried a sense of guilt and you made me realise that it’s fine...”

So, people have taken their career break ... their children are older and now we come to the last phase ... returning to work.

SLIDE: RETURNING TO WORK

This is the final stage in the career break journey. There are a number of organisations, some of which I include here, who promote returning to work. This should start to give reassurance to people about to take a break that there is a way back to the workplace.

There seems to be more pressure than ever before to return to work (not forgetting today’s high living costs) and more women with young children are returning to part-time paid work. Specialist recruitment agencies such as ten2two are helping in this area.

Another growing trend is for entrepreneurial mums, or mumpreneurs. We are seeing large roadshows like Mums Enterprise Roadshows attracting thousands of attendees.

The digital growth has also sparked the arrival of training companies like TechPixies and Digital Mums, that focus on training for social media marketing from which people often start up their own businesses.

CareerBreak People also offers “Your Return to Work” workshops, building on people’s motivations and goals and addressing the actual mechanics and steps needed to return. Interestingly, at our workshops we often come across people who are in paid employment but don’t feel they are working as they are not on a defined career trajectory. We also see people changing career direction, lawyers retraining as garden designers is not uncommon.

After looking at the career break itself, I arrive at my next question:

SLIDE: HOW CAN SOCIETY VALUE THOSE WHO ARE ON CAREER BREAKS AND NOT DESCRIBE THEM AS “ECONOMICALLY INACTIVE”?

SLIDE: INCENTIVES FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO GET WOMEN BACK TO WORK

OECD data from 2016 and a subsequent PwC analysis summarised that if the full potential of the female workforce were harnessed that would add £170bn to GDP, or 9%, by 2030.

In the chart the lighter red area is full-time employment and the darker area part-time. To move from the UK's current position to the target of Sweden's female employment rates – not only does the total number of women in employment need to increase but also the proportion working full-time must increase and hence the proportion of part-time workers decrease.

The report assumes not only that stay-at-home mothers return to work, but also that other women who aren't currently working join the workforce.

This headline grabbing number helps the government to focus on increasing childcare subsidy and decreasing child benefit. However, the cost or debits incurred in women not being present at home or in the community does not appear to have been factored in.

SLIDE: DATA OF HOME PRODUCTION

This should help mothers at home to feel good that their work does carry a value, if they were paid at a market equivalent rate for doing it. The ONS put the value of home production at £1trillion in 2014 (equivalent to 56% of GDP). Home production has historically been excluded from GDP as it is unpaid and no tax can be levied.

The ONS report covers the areas of childcare, transport, household housing services, nutrition, clothing and laundry, adult care and voluntary activity.

60% more unpaid work is done by women than men in terms of hours and it tends to be the work that has a higher value. Of the 2.1m people currently out of the labour market 89% are women. However, if the stay-at-home mothers in this survey went back to work not all of this home production would have to be replaced by government expenditure (the government wouldn't subsidise the cleaning of our houses, for example), so this value alone does not change the inactive to active in society's eyes.

SLIDE: WHAT IS THE COST OF MOTHERS RETURNING TO WORK?

Now, I am not an economist ... but I decided to try to put a number on the economic value of a career break by looking at the costs if mothers return to work.

The data isn't easy to find but it's nearing the end of the afternoon, so let's have a bit of fun....

SLIDE: GOVERNMENT TARGET

Let's think about the government's carrot: the addition of £170bn to GDP by 2030 (12 years' time).

In the recent Treasury Committee inquiry into childcare Liz Truss said that she could assume that only half the number of woman currently at home would want to return to work. I don't know the exact proportion of stay at home mums that contribute to this figure, but her statement could reduce the target of £170bn by half to £85bn. However, I like a challenge, so I am not going to change it!

Let's now look at a few costs the government might incur if stay at home mothers returned to work:

SLIDE: POTENTIAL COSTS

I said previously that mothers in the home contribute to society in a number of ways, and I looked at childcare, care in the home for the elderly & disabled and volunteering.

I used as my basis the ONS Household satellite accounts, a study on the economic contribution of carers in the home by the University of Sheffield; Volunteering England's value of volunteering and the wellbeing benefits associated with volunteering determined by the Department of Work and Pensions.

The well-being value to frequent volunteers measures their well-being associated with volunteering then calculates the amount of monetary compensation they would need to maintain this if they stopped. The cost of childcare would need to be replaced, and with the additional drive of keeping people in work until much later in life, it cannot be assumed that the childcare will be picked up by grandparents in the future.

I then put a finger in the air and made a very rough estimate that 50-70% of women doing this unpaid work, were stay-at-home mothers or on career breaks.

From this, I figured that, of the costs that might need to be replaced, my total exceeded £120bn (but please note this was a very rough exercise).

So, if this were a rigorous exercise, we could say we are approaching the government's target...However, this isn't the whole story

SLIDE: OTHER FACTORS TO CONSIDER

You, the audience, are far more knowledgeable than me in this area and will recognise that we need to include other factors such as mental health in mothers, children and adults; the performance of children in schools and more. But these numbers are harder to find.

Erica Komisar says in her excellent book Being There "I am not an economist. I don't claim to have all the figures that can make the statistical case that when women stay home it's better ... not just for their families, but for society too."

But if the impact of these could be quantified by the economists and added to the mix what would the costs start to look like?

SLIDE: OVERVIEW OF COSTS

Whilst I appreciate that this is very much a layman's approach, with some rough and ready approximations, we can see that perhaps the much trumpeted GDP incentive is not as much of a carrot as initially thought.

I would like to lay down the challenge to someone to cost officially the value to society of stay-at-home parents.

SLIDE: SUMMARY

To summarise, society needs to support women in order to maintain their knowledge and confidence throughout their career breaks, and returnships should help give women the confidence they need to take longer breaks from the workplace.

However, in today's modern world, very sadly it seems that only once the position of the stay at home parent is valued economically will it be recognised by society as a respected choice and therefore supported and elevated.