

Parental Leave Return and Employee Adaptation: A Cluster Analysis of Work-Family Conflict and Job Resources With Implications for Sustainable Workplaces

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Abstract

This paper aims to identify the main profiles associated with people returning to work after parental leave, in order to better address the challenges encountered during this period and to find ways to increase work engagement and ultimately performance, thus contributing to social sustainability through improved employee well-being and work-life balance. The study is based on a sample of 1,199 employees, who answered to a questionnaire in the period October-December 2025. Our cluster analysis revealed three distinct profiles: Thriving, characterized by low work-family conflict and high levels of social support and meaning in work, Strained, characterized by high conflict and limited resources, and Supported but Strained, characterized by elevated conflict alongside high job resources. These profiles also differed significantly in well-being, engagement, and job performance, with the Thriving group reporting the most favorable outcomes and the Strained group the least favorable ones. Our main finding is that the Supported but Strained group maintained relatively positive outcomes despite elevated levels of conflict, suggesting that job resources may buffer the negative effects of work-family strain. These findings contribute to the literature by highlighting the heterogeneity of employee experiences following parental leave and by demonstrating the importance of considering configurations of demands and resources rather than isolated effects. From a practical perspective, our results highlight the role of social support and meaningful work in fostering sustainable employee functioning during critical career transitions.

Keywords

Social sustainability; parental leave; social support; work-family conflict; job resources; well-being, cluster analysis

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Introduction

Coming back to work after the parental leave is a critical period that can shape employees' well-being and performance. This transition is often accompanied by shifts in role demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), increased work-family tensions (Amstad et al., 2011; Carlson et al., 2000; Frone et al., 1992; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), and the need to readjust to professional responsibilities (Jaeckel et al., 2012; Odle-Dusseau et al., 2012). From a management perspective, understanding how employees adjust during this period is critical for sustaining performance, retention, and long-term workforce stability.

Sustainable workplaces are not only those that reduce job demands but also those that enable employees to maintain well-being and performance over time, even in the presence of competing pressures (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Crawford et al., 2010; Demerouti et al., 2001). Job satisfaction has been identified as a key component of sustainable work, shaped by factors such as job characteristics, organizational commitment, and work-related stress (Gumasing & Ilo., 2023). Job resources, such as

perceived social support and meaning in work, represent critical factors that may buffer the negative effects of work-family conflict. Actually, prior research has largely examined the effects of work-family conflict and job resources using variable-centered approaches, focusing on relationships between constructs such as conflict, well-being, and performance (Amstad et al., 2011; French et al., 2018; Kossek et al., 2011; Odle-Dusseau et al., 2012). While this approach provides valuable insights, it assumes that employees respond to workplace demands in a relatively uniform manner. In practice, however, employees may differ substantially in how they experience and manage competing demands and available resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Crawford et al., 2010; Michel et al., 2011). By taking into account this idea, we focused on identifying distinct profiles of employees based on combinations of job demands and resources. Such profiles can provide a more nuanced understanding of how individuals adapt to workplace challenges, and we believe this approach is particularly relevant in the context of returning from parental leave, where employees may simultaneously experience high demands and varying levels of support and meaning in work.

The primary objective of this study is to identify distinct employee profiles based on work-family conflict, perceived social support, and meaning in work. A second objective is to examine whether these profiles differ significantly in key outcomes, namely well-being, engagement, and job performance.

1. Review of the scientific literature

To understand how authentic employee engagement can be sustained, it is important to look at some of the conceptual models that have tried to explain why, in some contexts, people invest their energy enthusiastically, and in others they end up exhausted or withdrawn. One of the most influential theoretical frameworks is the JD-R (Job Demands-Resources) model, proposed by Bakker & Demerouti (2007). This model is based on the idea that any professional role can be analyzed through two main categories of factors: what the position requires and what it offers in support of the employee. Requirements include workload, time pressure, complexity of tasks, or emotional demands. Resources can take the form of autonomy, support from peers and superiors, opportunities for development, or clarity of role.

The JD-R model is not entirely a new one; it has developed and integrated conclusions from previous theories. For example, the Demand-Control Model formulated by Karasek (1979, 1998) highlighted the fact that the level of stress is influenced by the ratio between the intensity of tasks and the freedom of decision. When the demands are high and the control over the way work is organized is reduced, the likelihood of psychological tension increases. At the same time, the JD-R model explains the functioning of employees through two main processes: a process of deterioration of health, associated with high demands, and a motivational process (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

In the area of the work-family interface, two important requirements are the work-family conflict and the family-work conflict (Carlson et al., 2000; Frone et al., 1992). Work-family conflict occurs when professional demands interfere with family responsibilities, while family-work conflict occurs when family responsibilities interfere with the performance of professional tasks (Carlson et al., 2000; Frone et al., 1992). The literature describes work-family conflict as a form of conflict between roles, in which pressures from work and family are incompatible to some extent (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Family-work conflict can also function as a requirement because care responsibilities, fatigue, and family breakdowns can affect concentration, availability, and efficiency in the workplace (Amstad et al., 2011; Frone et al., 1992).

The two directions of conflict should not be treated as identical phenomena, as work-family interference and family-related interference with work can have different antecedents and consequences (Amstad et al., 2011; Carlson et al., 2000). For employees returning after parental leave, this distinction is important because professional reintegration occurs simultaneously with the maintenance of parental and family responsibilities (French et al., 2018; Jaeckel et al., 2012). Therefore, excessive demands can promote stress and burnout, while resources can support engagement, satisfaction, and positive professional outcomes (Crawford et al., 2010; Demerouti et al., 2001). Empirical findings further indicate that burnout moderates the relationships between work effort, perceived performance, and job satisfaction, diminishing these otherwise positive associations (Radu et al., 2020).

Another relevant framework is the Effort-Reward Imbalance Model developed by Siegrist (1996), which emphasized the relationship between the contribution made and the benefits obtained. When people perceive an imbalance – especially in situations where engagement is high and rewards are insufficient – negative consequences such as demotivation or impaired health can occur. Interestingly, the perception of effort has a subjective component: the same activity can be felt differently depending on skills, experience or personal context.

Compared to these previous models, the JD-R proposes a more flexible and comprehensive perspective. Instead of focusing exclusively on autonomy or rewards, it suggests that any element of the work environment can be classified as either demands or resources. Thus, engagement increases when the available resources are sufficient to compensate or manage the pressures associated with the position. An important contribution of the model is the distinction between two parallel processes, namely, one that leads to burnout, when demands are excessive and are not counterbalanced by adequate support, and another that favors engagement, when resources stimulate development and motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Thus, engagement is not only the absence of stress, but the result of a dynamic balance between challenges and support. The practical value of the model lies in the fact that it provides managers with a simple framework for analysis, in the light of the fact that if performance decreases, it is necessary to investigate not only the workload, but also the level of autonomy, organizational support, learning opportunities or clarity of objectives. By adjusting these variables, one can create an environment that stimulates engagement and prevents burnout.

Essentially, the JD-R Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), inspired by the contributions of Karasek (1979, 1998) and Siegrist (1996), shows that well-being and the level of involvement are not random results, but consequences of the interaction between professional pressures and available resources. Moreover, engagement occurs where challenges are supported by enough tools, freedom and recognition to turn the effort into a constructive and motivating experience. Within the JD-R Model, the professional activity is analyzed through a logic of the balance between what the role requires and what the organization offers to support its fulfillment. Any position involves a certain level of consumption – whether we are talking about physical energy, mental focus or emotional involvement. These requests are not, in themselves, problematic; on the contrary, they can be challenging. However, when their intensity exceeds the individual's ability to adapt, they can become sources of pressure and wear.

The demands of a job can take various forms: accelerated pace of work, multiple responsibilities, tense interactions with clients, the need to maintain a constant level of attention or the extension of the schedule beyond the usual hours. In the absence of adequate support, the accumulation of these factors can lead to chronic fatigue, psychological strain or even burnout. The literature on burnout confirms the link between overload and deterioration of well-being (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Consequently, the model highlights the role of elements that facilitate the performance of tasks and reduce the psychological or physical cost of labor. This may include clarity of objectives, support from superiors, access to constructive feedback, freedom to decide on how activities are organised or opportunities for professional development. Resources not only support performance, but can help increase competence and self-confidence, generating an engagement amplifying effect (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). A positive workplace culture that supports employee well-being, work-life balance, and stress management can further strengthen engagement and contribute to more sustainable work experiences (Radu, 2023).

The essence of the model lies in the relationship between the two categories of factors. It is not the absolute level of requests that automatically determines the result, but the ratio between them and the available resources. A high workload can be manageable when the employee has adequate autonomy and support. Instead, even moderate requirements can become overwhelming if the necessary tools to deal with them are lacking.

This perspective suggests that well-being and professional involvement occur when the support provided compensates for or exceeds the pressures associated with the role. Under such conditions, challenges can be perceived as opportunities for growth, not as threats. However, if the balance persistently tilts in the direction of requests, the risk of demotivation and withdrawal increases.

Another important element of the model is its dynamic character, by the fact that employees are not simple receivers of working conditions, more precisely they can try to adjust their activity, request support or reorganize their tasks to restore balance. This ability to self-regulate helps maintain engagement, but it has limits, especially in the absence of a favorable organizational culture.

Analyzed from the angle of active participation, the difference between being motivated and being truly involved becomes visible in concrete behaviors. A person may agree to work in an organization, fulfill their responsibilities, and even respond positively to incentives, but not go beyond the limits of the formal role. In this case, the contribution remains strictly conditional on requirements and rewards. On the other hand, when we talk about engagement, we notice a different type of reaction, namely spontaneous initiative, genuine concern for results and the desire to intervene in problematic situations without waiting for instructions or additional benefits. This type of conduct reflects an affective and cognitive bond with the organization, not just a contractual exchange of effort for reward.

In the literature, engagement is associated with active involvement and investment of personal resources in

professional activity (Kahn, 1990). People in such a state show energy, dedication and concentration, elements that translate into superior performance and voluntary contribution to collective success. Thus, engagement is not just an inner disposition, but is expressed through visible behaviors that add value to the organization.

However, the relationship to motivation complicates conceptual delimitation, especially if motivation is understood as the force that initiates and sustains goal-oriented behavior (Vroom, 1964), then engagement can be seen either as a result of this energy or as a precondition that fuels it. In one interpretation, attachment to the organization generates the desire for action; in another, motivation is the foundation from which deep involvement derives. Differences in nuance often depend on the theoretical perspective adopted and the context of the analysis.

The fact is that the mere presence of motivation does not guarantee intense involvement. An employee can act effectively to obtain benefits without developing an emotional connection with the organization. In contrast, where there is identification with collective goals and values (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986), behavior tends to exceed minimum standards, and contribution becomes voluntary and sustained. Therefore, engagement can be understood as an amplified form of motivation, characterized by personal ownership and active participation.

The JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) provides a practical insight into how engagement and burnout develop in the workplace. The balance between challenges and support becomes the explanatory key, more precisely, when the organization invests in relevant resources, the requirements can be transformed from sources of stress into catalysts of development and engagement. Our study is grounded in this theoretical framework, with its methodology designed to operationalize and measure the core components of the JD-R model, as detailed in the following sections of this paper.

2. Research methodology

The study was conducted through a questionnaire-based survey administered via Google Forms between October and December 2025. The sample consisted of 1.199 employees who had returned to work following parental leave. Participants were predominantly employed full-time (over 90%) and worked primarily in the private sector. Most respondents reported hybrid or on-site work arrangements. The sample was highly educated, with the majority holding a bachelor's or master's degree, and most participants were married or in a long-term partnership. This sample provides a relevant context for examining patterns of work-family dynamics and employee functioning during the transition back to work.

All study variables were assessed using established multi-item scales adapted for our research context. Responses were recorded on Likert-type scales. Work-family conflict and family-work conflict were measured using widely used scales capturing the extent to which work and family roles interfere with one another. Job resources were operationalized through perceived social support and meaning in work, reflecting both relational and psychological aspects of the work experience. Employee outcomes included well-being, work engagement, and self-reported job performance. Well-being captured general positive functioning, engagement reflected employees' level of energy and involvement in their work, and performance assessed perceived effectiveness in task completion.

Internal consistency was assessed by using the Cronbach's alpha values. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were as follows: work-family conflict ($\alpha = .88$), family-work conflict ($\alpha = .87$), social support ($\alpha = .77$), meaning in work ($\alpha = .88$), well-being ($\alpha = .89$), engagement ($\alpha = .61$), and performance ($\alpha = .75$). As it can be seen, slightly lower reliability was observed for engagement ($\alpha = .61$), which we still considered acceptable given the small number of items (3).

Our analysis was conducted using R (version 4.4.3) in RStudio (version 2026.01.1), using standard statistical packages.

3. Results and discussion

A k-means cluster analysis was conducted using standardized scores of work-family conflict, family-work conflict, perceived social support, and meaning in work. Based on theoretical interpretability and cluster separation, a three-cluster solution was retained. The clusters differed meaningfully in size, with more participants in Cluster 1.

The first cluster (43.5% of the sample), labeled Thriving, was characterized by low levels of work-family conflict and high levels of social support and meaning in work. The second cluster (27.2%), labeled

Strained, combined high levels of conflict with low levels of social support and meaning. The third cluster (29.3%), labeled Supported but Strained, exhibited elevated levels of conflict but simultaneously high levels of job resources. These profiles are presented in Figure no. 1.

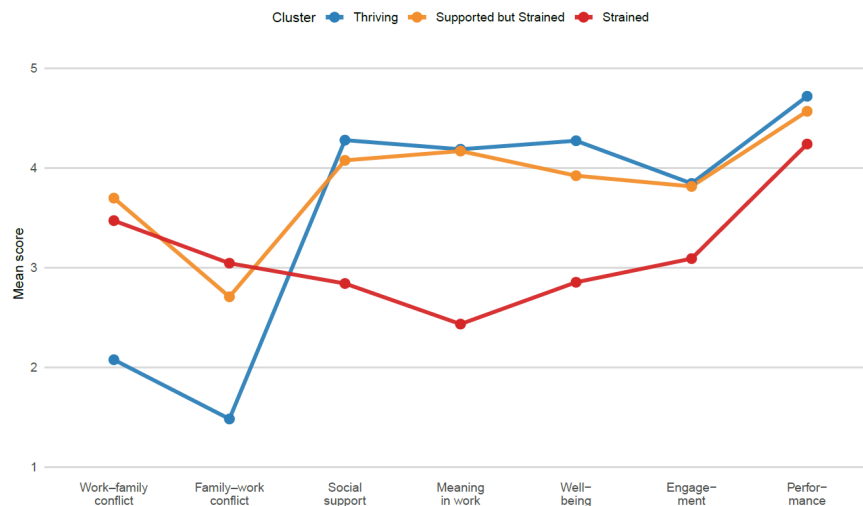


Figure no. 1. Profile plot of the three employee clusters

The first cluster, labeled Thriving Employees (43.5%, $n = 522$), was characterized by low levels of work-family conflict ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 0.65$) and family-work conflict ($M = 1.48$, $SD = 0.49$), alongside high levels of social support ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.66$) and meaning in work ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.83$). This group also reported the highest levels of well-being ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.74$), engagement ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.75$), and work performance ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 0.44$).

The second cluster, labeled Strained Employees (27.2%, $n = 326$), showed the opposite pattern, with high levels of work-family conflict ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.98$) and family-work conflict ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.03$), and low levels of social support ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 0.79$) and meaning in work ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 0.82$). This group reported the lowest levels of well-being ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.89$), engagement ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.82$), and work performance ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.71$).

The third cluster, labeled Supported but Strained (29.3%, $n = 351$), presented a more nuanced profile. These employees reported relatively high levels of work-family conflict ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.76$) and family-work conflict ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 0.86$), but also high levels of social support ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.60$) and meaning in work ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.70$). Their levels of well-being ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.79$), engagement ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.72$), and performance ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 0.54$) were closer to those observed in the Thriving cluster. This pattern suggests that job resources may buffer the negative effects of work-family conflict.

To further validate the cluster solution, analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted. Significant differences emerged across clusters for well-being, $F(2, 1196) = 323.90$, $p < .001$, engagement, $F(2, 1196) = 112.20$, $p < .001$, and performance, $F(2, 1196) = 75.01$, $p < .001$. These results confirm that the identified clusters represent distinct profiles of employee functioning, with meaningful differences in key outcomes.

The first profile, labeled Thriving Employees, suggests that a favorable balance between demands and resources enables optimal functioning. From a managerial perspective, this group reflects a successful reintegration into the workplace. In contrast, the Strained Employees profile indicates a vulnerable segment of the workforce. These findings are consistent with the Job Demands-Resources framework, which posits that high demands coupled with insufficient resources lead to strain and reduced functioning (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Crawford et al., 2010; Demerouti et al., 2001). The third profile, Supported but Strained, provides particularly important insights. Although these employees reported relatively high levels of work-family conflict, they also reported high levels of social support and meaning in work. Notably, their well-being and performance levels were substantially higher than those observed in the strained group. This suggests that job resources may buffer the negative effects of work-family conflict, enabling employees to maintain relatively positive functioning despite ongoing demands.

From a sustainability perspective, these findings are particularly relevant. Sustainable workplaces are not merely those that reduce demands, but those that actively cultivate resources enabling employees to function effectively even under strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Crawford et al., 2010; Demerouti et al., 2001). The presence of a Supported but Strained profile indicates that

organizations can promote sustainable performance not only by minimizing conflict, but also by strengthening social and psychological resources.

Conclusions

This study identified three distinct clusters of employee adaptation following parental leave. Specifically, Thriving Employees, Strained Employees, and Supported but Strained Employees emerged, reflecting different configurations of work-family conflict and job resources. Our study contributes to the literature on employee adaptation following parental leave by identifying these distinct profiles based on the interplay between work-family conflict and job resources. Rather than assuming a uniform adjustment process, the findings highlight the heterogeneity of employee experiences during this critical transition.

The results provide strong support for a resource-based perspective, demonstrating that social support and meaning in work play a crucial role in shaping employee outcomes. Notably, employees in the Supported but Strained cluster maintained relatively high levels of well-being, engagement, and performance despite elevated levels of work-family conflict. This suggests that job resources may act as protective factors, partially offsetting the detrimental effects of competing demands.

These findings have important implications for management practice, as they demonstrate that employees returning from parental leave are not a homogeneous group. As such, uniform policies may fail to address the needs of specific employee segments. Instead, organizations should adopt differentiated strategies. Identifying employees who are both highly strained and poorly supported should be a priority, as this group appears most at risk. Our results highlight the critical role of social support and meaningful work in sustaining employee functioning. Interventions aimed at strengthening supportive relationships, enhancing managerial support, and fostering meaningful job design may be particularly effective in mitigating the negative effects of work-family conflict. Even when demands remain high, strengthening resources can significantly improve outcomes. This has important implications for organizations operating in high-demand environments, where eliminating stressors may not be feasible.

In terms of limitations, the cross-sectional design limits causal inferences. Also, all variables were self-reported, raising the possibility of common method bias. In future, we could employ longitudinal designs and incorporate objective performance indicators. Additionally, future studies could examine how employees transition between profiles over time, providing a dynamic perspective on adaptation following parental leave. Organizations aiming to support employees returning from parental leave should therefore prioritize resource-enhancing practices alongside efforts to reduce work-family conflict.

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Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) usage statement

ChatGPT (GPT-5.5, OpenAI) was used solely for linguistic and stylistic assistance.

All ideas, interpretations, analyses, and conclusions belong to the authors, who reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and assume full responsibility for its content.

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