

## Returning to Work After Parental Leave in Romania: The Role of Social Support – A Survey Study\*

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### Abstract

This study analyses how perceived social support contributes to the adaptation of employees after parental leave in Romania, a transition in which they must simultaneously manage professional reintegration and family responsibilities.

Although previous research has extensively addressed work-family conflict, less attention has been paid to the extent to which social support can be a stronger resource than work-family conflict, as a pressure factor, in explaining post-leave well-being and performance.

The data was collected through a Google Forms survey, conducted between October and December 2025, on a sample of 1,199 employees who returned to work after parental leave. The study used a mixed-methods design, combining multiple regression analyses with thematic analysis of open-ended responses.

Multiple regression analyses indicated that work-family conflict was negatively associated with well-being, while perceived social support emerged as a strong positive predictor. Social support has demonstrated a substantially stronger association with well-being than work-family conflict. Social support was also positively associated with job performance, while work-family conflict did not significantly predict performance.

The qualitative insights highlighted the importance of supportive supervisors, collegial relationships and flexible working arrangements in facilitating the return-to-work process. The results suggest that sustainable return-to-work processes depend not only on reducing work-family conflict, but above all on strengthening support-based organizational environments.

**Keywords:** social support, parental leave, return-to-work, well-being, work-family conflict

### Introduction

The return to work after parental leave is a complex transition stage, characterized by the simultaneous readjustment to professional and family roles. This period often involves significant challenges, such as managing multiple responsibilities, restructuring the daily routine and adapting to organizational requirements. In this context, understanding the factors that support employee adaptation becomes essential, both from a theoretical and practical perspective.

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It is highlighted that the return from parental leave is experienced as a complex transition process, marked by a combination of emotional vulnerability, identity redefinition and professional readjustment.

Although parental leave is often predominantly analysed from a legislative or social perspective, the specialized literature in the field of human resources management highlights the fact that it represents a strategic human resources policy, with direct implications on motivation, psychological well-being, satisfaction and employee performance.

In an organizational context, parental leave should not be seen exclusively as a temporary absence from work, but as a professional transition stage that can significantly influence the relationship between the employee and the organization. Within the modern management of human resources, parental leave is integrated into the category of family-friendly policies, along with flexibility of work schedule, remote work and support programs for work-life balance. Moreover, parental leave functions as a signal of perceived organizational support, a concept widely analysed in the organizational psychology literature

Research in the field of strategic human resource management emphasizes that policies aimed at supporting employees in key moments of personal life, such as parenthood, contribute to strengthening human capital and creating an organizational climate favourable to long-term performance. Parental leave works as a signal of perceived organizational support, a concept widely analysed in the organizational psychology literature.

## **Literature Review**

Research on the work–family interface has consistently shown that start from the idea that professional and family roles are in a relationship of interdependence and can generate at the same time pressures, incompatibilities and resources for each person (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Clark, 2001; Grzywacz & Bass, 2003).

In this sense, work-family conflict is identified as a form of inter-role conflict in which the demands associated with work and those associated with the family are in contradiction to a certain extent, so that participation in one role makes it more difficult to identify in another role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Frone et al., 1992). Subsequently, the research pointed out that the phenomenon is bidirectional, taking the form of interference between work and family or family interference with work, and has components based on time, strain and behaviour (Frone et al., 1992; Carlson et al., 2000).

An appropriate theoretical model for integrating these relationships is represented by the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, according to which any professional activity includes job requirements, which consume physical and psychological energy, and job resources, which support motivation, adaptation and performance (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

In the classic delimitation of the model, high demands favour the burnout process, while resources activate a motivational process that supports engagement, well-being and positive professional results (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Crawford et al., 2010).

Demands such as workload, rigid schedule, long hours, inflexible organizational culture, and lack of managerial support increase the likelihood of work-family conflict (Allen, 2001; Clark, 2000; Byron, 2005; Michel et al., 2011).

In the same structure, the lack of a family-friendly organizational climate and the perception that the organization does not support the integration of roles are associated with higher levels of conflict and weaker professional attitudes (Allen, 2001; Kossek et al., 2011; French et al., 2018).

At the same time, for employees returning from parental leave, this history seems to become even more pronounced, as care requests, logistical adjustments and the pressure of professional reintegration can increase the tension between roles (Jaekel et al., 2012; Costantini et al., 2021; Franzoi et al., 2024).

Work-family conflict is also negatively associated with professional performance, directly or indirectly, by reducing energy, concentration, involvement and cognitive resources available for work tasks (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Crawford et al., 2010).

In contrast to the demanding role of work-family conflict, perceived social support is constantly described in the literature as a central resource for occupational adaptation and work-life balance (Kossek et al., 2011; French et al., 2018; Guo et al., 2024).

This support can come from superiors, colleagues, organization, partner or family and can take emotional, instrumental or informational forms (Hammer et al., 2009; Kossek et al., 2011; French et al., 2018).

Moreover, perceptions of a family-friendly organizational climate and the presence of a supportive work context are correlated with less conflict, more satisfaction, and better integration of roles (Allen, 2001; Clark, 2001; Kossek et al., 2011).

Based on these findings, the hypotheses regarding the negative association of work-family conflict with well-being and performance, the positive association of perceived social support with the same results, and the possibility that social support better explains well-being in the context of returning after parental leave are well delineated in the literature (Allen et al., 2000; Amstad et al., 2011; Odle-Dusseau et al., 2012; Guo et al., 2024).

*H1. Work-family conflict is negatively associated with the well-being of employees who return to work after parental leave*

Well-being generally correlates negatively with stress (Radu & Stan, 2005). The problem appears even higher when professional demands overlap with family responsibilities, employees consume more emotional and cognitive resources, which favours the appearance of stress, fatigue and a general state of imbalance (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

*H2. Work-family conflict is negatively associated with the performance of employees who return to work after parental leave*

Specialist studies show that the effects of work-family conflict are not limited to the sphere of well-being, but also extend to employees' professional behaviours and outcomes (Amstad et al., 2011; Odle-Dusseau et al., 2012).

The conflict between professional and family roles reduces the ability to concentrate, the energy available for work and the continuity of involvement in the task, which can lead to a decrease in individual performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Crawford et al., 2010; Wang and Tsai, 2014).

*H3. Perceived social support is positively associated with employee well-being*

As for perceived social support, it is considered one of the most important resources in the professional environment, given the fact that it contributes to reducing stress, increasing the feeling of psychological security and supporting adaptation to the demands of work (Kossek et al., 2011; French et al., 2018; Crain and Stevens, 2018).

It is identified that when employees perceive that they can receive emotional, instrumental or informational help from superiors and colleagues, they report higher levels of satisfaction, commitment and general well-being (Allen, 2001; Hammer et al., 2009; Guo et al., 2024).

*H4. Perceived social support is positively associated with employees' work performance*

At this level, employees who feel supported by superiors and colleagues tend to show more confidence in their own abilities, faster adaptation to tasks, and increased willingness to exert sustained effort, all of which are reflected in performance (Hammer et al., 2009; Jaekel et al., 2012; Rofcanin et al., 2017).

*H5. Perceived social support is a stronger predictor of well-being compared to work-family conflict*

Although work-family conflict is expected to be negatively related to well-being, social resources can play an additional and potentially important role in psychological adaptation during periods of professional and family transition (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Odle-Dusseau et al., 2012; Guo et al., 2024). This fifth hypothesis is rather formulated as a comparative empirical expectation, rather than as a conclusion established from the previous literature.

## **Methodology**

The study was conducted on a sample of 1,199 Romanian employees who returned to work after parental leave and agreed to answer to a Google Forms questionnaire comprising both closed-ended and open-ended questions, in the period October-December 2025. Participants were recruited across various sectors, with the majority employed in the private sector and working full-time. Most respondents were in a committed relationship and held at least a university degree.

The research design was cross-sectional, non-experimental, based on mixed methods.

All quantitative analyses were conducted using R (version 4.4.3) in RStudio (version 2026.01.1), with data processing and visualization performed using standard statistical packages, while the qualitative responses were analyzed, for concept identification and clustering, Python 13, specifically the sci-kit learn libraries.

Our variables were measured through items assessed on a 1-5 Likert scale. In order to assess the reliability of the instruments used, we calculated the McDonald's omega coefficients, which showed good internal consistency for all the variables in our study: work-family conflict ( $\omega = .88$ ), well-being ( $\omega = .89$ ), social support ( $\omega = .77$ ), and performance ( $\omega = .76$ ).

## Quantitative Results

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the effects of work-family conflict and perceived social support on employee well-being. The results are presented in table 1.

**Table 1. Regression results predicting employee well-being**

| No | Predictors           | B     | 95% CI        | p      |
|----|----------------------|-------|---------------|--------|
| 1  | (Intercept)          | 1.68  | 1.43 – 1.92   | < .001 |
| 2  | Work-family conflict | -0.15 | -0.19 – -0.11 | < .001 |
| 3  | Social support       | 0.67  | 0.62 – 0.71   | < .001 |

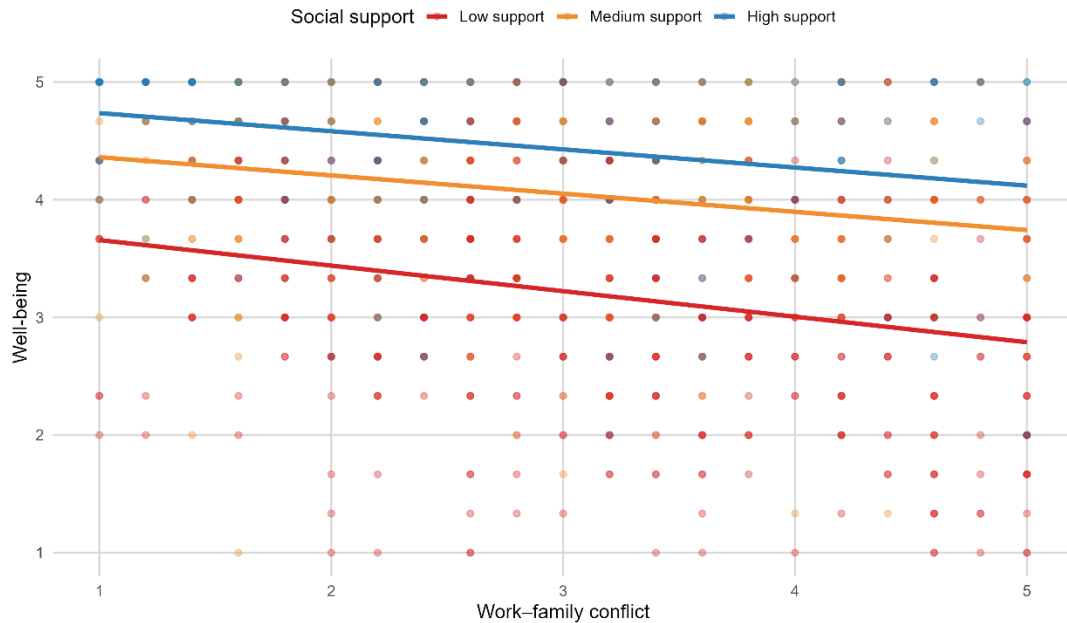
Source: Authors' own data processed with R 4.4.3 in RStudio 2026.01.1

Note:  $N = 1199$ ;  $R^2 = .465$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = .464$

The model was statistically significant,  $F(2, 1196) = 519.40$ ,  $p < .001$ , and it explained a substantial proportion of variance in well-being ( $R^2 = .465$ ). As it can be observed, work-family conflict was negatively associated with well-being ( $\beta = -.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that higher levels of conflict are linked to lower well-being. On the opposite side, as expected, perceived social support was a strong positive predictor of well-being ( $\beta = .67$ ,  $p < .001$ ). What we consider interesting is the fact that the effect of social support was considerably stronger than that of work-family conflict. It is important to add that we also conducted a supplementary analysis by looking at job performance as an outcome. This time results indicated that perceived social support was again positively associated with performance, yet not so highly associated ( $\beta = .19$ ,  $p < .001$ ), whereas work-family conflict was not a significant predictor ( $p = .089$ ). The model was again statistically significant, but it explained a smaller proportion of variance ( $R^2 = .094$ ).

Coming back to the interesting result of our main regression, we also tested a moderation. While both variables were significant predictors, additional analyses showed that social support did not moderate the relationship between work-family conflict and well-being. This finding suggests that social support does not necessarily buffer the negative impact of conflict, but rather contributes independently to higher levels of well-being.

Therefore, we looked more into the relationship between work-family conflict and well-being, for different levels of social support, and we created a graphical analysis to support our findings, showing that employees reporting higher levels of social support consistently exhibited higher well-being across all levels of work-family conflict (see figure 1).



**Figure 1. Social support and the relationship between well-being and work-family conflict**

Source: Authors' own data processed with R 4.4.3 in RStudio 2026.01.1

As it can be seen in figure 1, across all levels of work-family conflict, employees reporting higher levels of social support consistently exhibit higher well-being. This indicates that the presence of supportive work environments may be more important than the simple reduction of conflict.

## Qualitative Results

A supplementary qualitative analysis of the open-ended responses to our questionnaire was performed using a thematic approach, in order to capture participants' perspectives on factors facilitating their return to work.

The analysis aims at the answers to four open-ended questions regarding the return to work after parental leave. The dataset contains  $N = 1,199$  respondents.

In relation to the identification of themes (unsupervised, context-based NLP approach), in order to capture the semantic context beyond the strict fit of the sentences, NMF (Non-negative Matrix Factorization) topic modelling, was used applied on the TF-IDF matrix of unigrams and bigrams. MFN provides a breakdown of lexical space into latent components (topics), interpreted as themes.

At the level of theme renaming (interpretative validation), the initial theme labels (automatically generated from representative terms) were manually revised for clarity and alignment with the semantics of the question, resulting in a final set of interpretative names (e.g. "Child illnesses and absences", "Part-time and part-time", "Right to flexible and reduced hours", etc.).

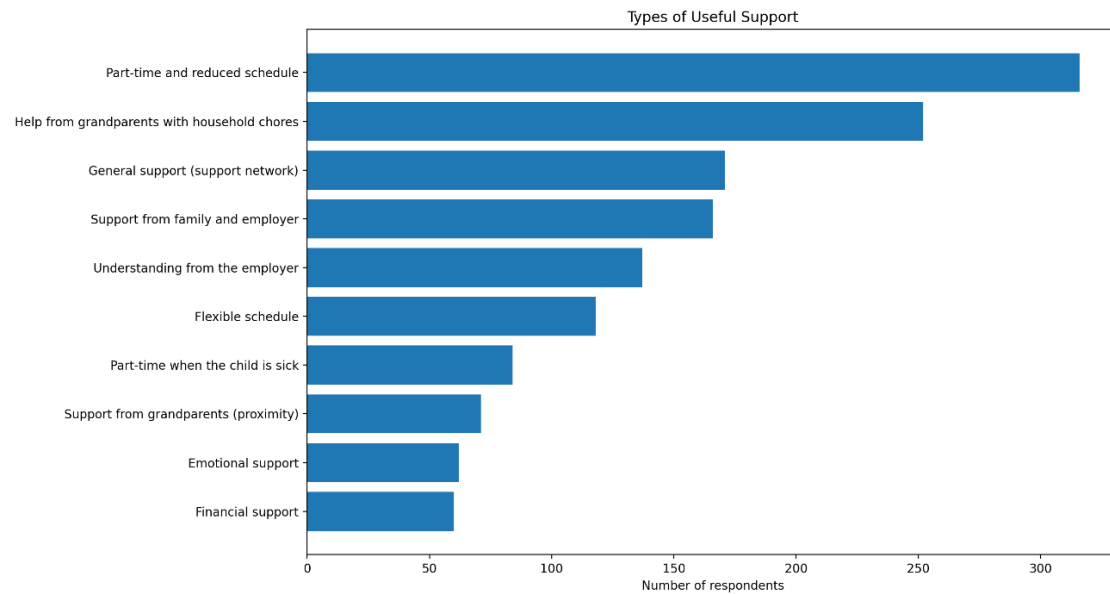
In the results section, conclusions were reported based on topics derived through topic modelling, because open-ended answers have a large variation of formulations (synonyms, paraphrases), and a report based exclusively on the matching of fixed expressions may underestimate the real frequency of some topics. Topic modelling, (MFN on TF-IDF) captures co-occurrence and context structures, allowing the identification of dominant themes at the response level even when ideas are expressed differently.

Consequently, thematic prevalences reflect the proportion of responses in which the theme is obvious (top 1–2 topics), providing a more comprehensive and comparable descriptive synthesis between respondents.

Useful support is predominantly formulated in terms of adjustment of working time (part-time, reduced/flexible hours) and logistical support in household/care (grandparents, household chores).

At the same time, there is a consistent component of relational and organizational support (support network, support from the employer, understanding at work).

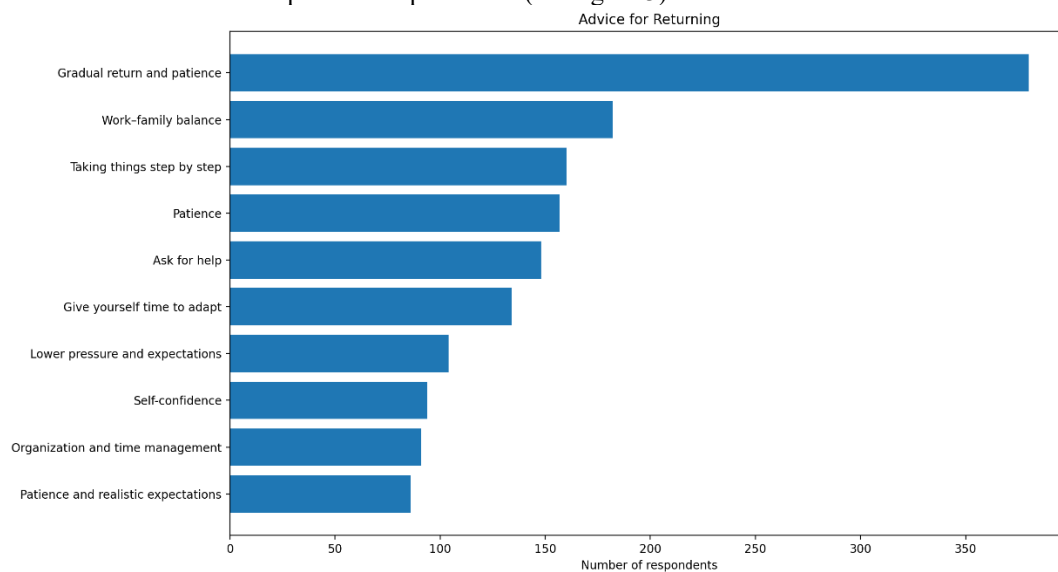
Distinctly, the theme "part-time when the child is sick" explicitly indicates the need for accommodation mechanisms for recurrent episodes, in line with the difficulties highlighted in the question. (see figure 2).



**Figure 2. Types of Support Considered Useful**

*Source: Authors' own data*

As for the advice on returning to work, the answers are strongly oriented towards coping and self-regulation strategies: gradual return, patience, gradual approach, adaptation time and pressure reduction. Complementary themes concern social resources (asking for help) and role management (work-family balance, organization). Overall, the content suggests that the return is understood as a transition process that requires both practical adjustments and recalibration of personal expectations (see figure 3).



**Figure 3. Advice for Employees Returning to Work After Parental Leave**

*Source: Authors' own data*

## Discussions

Our study aimed to examine the role of work-family conflict and perceived social support in explaining employee adjustment following parental leave.

*H1. Work-family conflict is negatively associated with the well-being of employees returning to work after parental leave. – supported.*

In line with prior research of Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017, work-family conflict was negatively associated with well-being, confirming that competing role demands can undermine employees' psychological functioning during the return-to-work transition; higher levels of conflict are linked to lower psychological functioning.

*H2. Work-family conflict is negatively associated with the performance of employees returning to work after parental leave.* – not supported.

Contrary to the research of Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017, our results did not indicate that work-family conflict would significantly predict performance ( $p = .089$ ). However, the results indicated a marginal trend, suggesting that the relationship may be weaker or influenced by additional variables such as coping mechanisms or perceived support.

*H3. Perceived social support is positively associated with employees' well-being.* – supported.

Perceived social support emerged as a strong positive predictor of well-being, with a substantially larger effect size than that of work-family conflict. This is in line with Kossek et al., 2011; French et al., 2018; Crain & Stevens, 2018.

*H4. Perceived social support is positively associated with employees' job performance.* – supported.

While the second regression was not so impressive, the findings regarding performance further reinforce the importance of social support. In that case, while work-family conflict did not significantly predict performance, social support remained a significant positive predictor (but less powerful compared to when predicting well-being). A possible interpretation is that, although work-family conflict may undermine employees' well-being, it does not necessarily translate into reduced performance. In contrast, social support appears to play a consistent and important role in sustaining both psychological functioning and work effectiveness as stated in the study of Hammer et al., 2009; Jaekel et al., 2012; Rofcanin et al., 2017.

*H5. Perceived social support is a stronger predictor of well-being compared to work-family conflict.* – supported.

We believe the most notable finding of the study is the strength of perceived social support as a predictor of well-being. Compared to work-family conflict, social support demonstrated a substantially stronger association, suggesting that resources may play a more central role than demands in shaping the employee outcomes (and especially well-being) in this context.

Our results did not indicate that social support is a moderator in the relationship between work-family conflict and well-being. Instead, we found a strong and consistent direct effect on well-being, regardless of the level of conflict experienced. This finding contributes to the Job Demands-Resources literature, Crawford et al., 2010; Crain & Stevens, 2018; Guo et al., 2024, by suggesting that, in certain contexts, resources may operate primarily through direct pathways rather than through interaction effects.

Qualitative insights derived from participants' responses further support these findings. Thematic analysis indicated that employees frequently emphasized the importance of supportive supervisors, flexible work arrangements, and the understanding of their colleagues in facilitating their return to work.

While the number of respondents to our questionnaire was higher than expected ( $N=1,199$ ), we should acknowledge a series of limitations in our study. The main one refers to the design itself, which was cross-sectional, non-experimental. While collecting the data this way was easier and we could apply the regression analysis, we are aware that causality cannot be inferred, and results could be interpreted rather in terms of correlations and predictions. Moreover, participants were only Romanian, which cannot lead to a generalization of our results, as culture should play quite an important role. Therefore, in our future research, we plan to think about a longitudinal design. Even sooner, we may replicate the study in other cultural contexts, and we also plan to explore deeper the role of social support, which was the main variable in our study.

## Conclusion

This study has shown the very important role of perceived social support in promoting employee well-being and performance after a parental leave. While it is normal for the work-family conflict to remain a relevant challenge when coming back to work, our findings suggest that supportive work environments may be more decisive in shaping positive outcomes than this conflict.

Our results indicate that employee adaptation following parental leave is dependent even more importantly on the presence of supportive organizational resources. From a practical perspective, we consider this is rather good news, as social support depends on the organizations' policies more than the existing conflicts between work and family; sustainable employee functioning is not achieved solely by minimizing demands, but by actively strengthening the resources available to employees during key transitional periods; thus, organizations should prioritize the development of supportive organizational cultures, based on managerial support, collegial

relationships, and flexible work arrangements. Such interventions may enhance employee adjustment and contribute to more sustainable return-to-work processes.

Beyond quantitative data on performance or level of motivation, respondents list factors such as the human experience of reintegration, with its tensions, fears and internal resources.

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