

Nine months is only the start: Managing maternity

Sticking to the regulations is only half the battle when it comes to managing maternity in the workplace, yet in a shrinking talent pool managing the issues is crucial for success. Annie Hayes looks at where the opportunities lie.

A tidal wave

Poorly managed maternity is costly for employers. Those that recognise this realise that pregnancy and the early years of parenting can represent a critical period in the career of women and, without adequate strategies in place, they risk losing key skills.

Added to this is the growing trend towards longer maternity leave. According to the ICAS in partnership with Managing Maternity Ltd 2007 survey, in almost a third of organisations women take 10 to 12 months off work to bring up their baby. This has, in part, been fuelled by an extension to the paid maternity period to nine months from the previous six, and with longer leave there are inevitably implications for communication and managing return.

Despite this, women are returning at a phenomenal rate – estimated return rates hit 96% in the public sector and 79% in the private sector, according to the survey. Although accurate figures are hard to come by because monitoring is not consistent.

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Jennifer Liston-Smith, Managing Maternity Ltd

Yet, whilst the number of women in the workplace swells, many employers are still getting it wrong when it comes to managing maternity. Jennifer Liston-Smith, director of Managing Maternity Ltd, says that part of the problem is that employers overlook the value of adopting an integrated approach:

"The approach needs to have three tiers – organisation, managers and individuals," she explains. "If you simply offer support to the women but don't educate the managers or have the right policies in place at organisation level, and fail to put them into practice like flexible working, then it doesn't work. You make a 'splash' and nothing else."

According to Liston-Smith, the bigger question is how to help parents in the workplace over the long term, not just for the maternity leave period. Employers also need to understand some of the difficulties faced by women returners including shaky confidence, the stress of juggling work and home life, and the problems faced when women feel that managers are failing to accommodate their requests. In many instances it is the lack of flexible working that brings things to a grinding halt.

In the second annual survey from Workingmums.co.uk, as many as 73% respondents blamed a lack of appropriate and available flexible jobs for their failure to return to work, and whilst 86% of the same sample said that flexi-hours was what they most desired, 16% of those surveyed said their request for flexible working was turned down, sometimes and shockingly, with no consideration being given to it at all.

In the same survey, only 31% got the flexibility they requested, with 26% achieving a compromise with managers.

Bosses are also letting this pool of talent disappear, with 75% of respondents admitting that they are currently looking for a new job, whilst almost half said they started a new job after taking time off for children.

Retention is indeed a thorny issue and Enid Moulder, organisational consultant for AXA ICAS, remarks that it is one of the key areas for managing maternity and says that failing to handle it from the outset is where employers go wrong: "Retention starts at the beginning, with the policies that induce women to join the organisation. Data shouldn't be overlooked either. Many employers fail to monitor how long women remain. Employers often use clever marketing, ie 'so many returned after maternity leave', but we want to know how many stayed on beyond the tie in bonus."

Getting women back to work and ensuring they stay and work effectively is the sign that maternity is being managed well, adds Moulder.

Too long a period out of the workplace and picking up a damaged career is another problem and one which is the trigger for many to stay at home.

Protecting careers

Moulder says that the reality is that in the short term, women's careers may be limited: "If a man took the same amount of time out of the workplace there would be a similar impact," she adds.

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The issue has stirred up considerable controversy in the wake of remarks by the head of the equality watchdog Nicola Brewer, who said: "Has the extension from six months to nine months in paid maternity leave (and the planned extension to a year) entrenched the position of women as the primary carer and therefore the parent who pays the career 'penalty' for having a child?"

Sadly Brewer might be right, if the findings of equality pressure group The Fawcett Society are anything to go on. According to the group, as many as 30,000 women a year lose their jobs simply for being pregnant, with nearly one in five women who work in London earning less than the London living wage, whilst women in the capital earn 23% less than their male colleagues.

Liston-Smith takes a different view, however. She says that the image that employers could do more is not what she has witnessed: "When it comes to it, employers are tearing their hair out over maternity issues, they are trying all they can."

What needs to change, suggests Liston-Smith, is much of the language associated with maternity that conveys negative connotations, suggesting instead a 'sabbatical' might be placed in higher esteem: "We've got to get rid of the idea that it's the 'kind' thing to offer maternity returners a job. These women are phenomenal – they are juggling everything. We did some independent research with an occupational psychologist, Margaret Chapman, in which she found that whilst many women lost confidence they also became empowered with new skills. If we embrace this and look at the productivity they can produce and their assertiveness skills, and the fact that these mothers return as more 'grown up', we gain a lot."

Coaching and KIT days

Communication, or lack of it, is one of the reasons careers can be damaged. The KIT days introduced by the Work and Families Act 2006 go some way towards addressing that need. Yet, in the survey by Workingmums.co.uk, 22% said they had no contact at all during their maternity leave period, whilst a third wanted more.

Some employers are rising to the challenge, however. At Citigroup, AXA ICAS in partnership with Managing Maternity is helping to co-ordinate a Keeping-In-Touch (KIT) day dedicated to group maternity coaching. "We look at the options for returning, how to have the conversation with your manager and managing reactions," explains Liston-Smith, who says that getting women together in a group who are all in the same situation really helps. Often women feel very alone and are ill-equipped when it comes to pitching their flexible working requests, she says.

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Rachel Campbell, KPMG

At professional services firm KPMG, recently named the UK's best big company to work for by the *Sunday Times*, a new package for working parents includes a mentoring site to bring together parents and new mothers, comfort rooms for pregnant women, first aid classes available for parents with very young children, coaching and training workshops on legislation, parenthood and work-life balance issues and more.

Rachel Campbell, head of people at KPMG, says: "Maternity is of course a very special time, but it can create difficulties for both women and men with their careers. It can create financial strains. Add to that the growing need to look after elderly dependents due to increasing life expectancies, and there is a danger of being squeezed at both ends. By providing increased support, we hope to make the task a little easier for our people."

Employers that succeed in managing maternity to their advantage are the ones that seize the opportunity that it presents. Sadly it's not a consistent approach across the board. With changing demographics, however, women and mums cannot be ignored for their current and future potential.

Employers that continue to shut the door to pregnant women or returning mothers are not only missing out but are passing over keen talent to the opposition. Whether plans to transfer leave to men for part of the maternity leave period will make a difference to the way expectant and returning mums are treated will remain to be seen, but what is in no doubt is that women are increasingly demanding choices and freedom over how and when they work, and when their employer fails them they often leave to set up highly lucrative businesses.

Moulder says that it's no joke that women entrepreneurs are taking over the business world. Keeping the competition at bay should be reason enough for employers to smarten up their maternity acts.

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