

# HOW TO MAKE A SUCCESSFUL COMEBACK

There are more women in the workforce and so, inevitably, maternity leave and return to work issues are becoming more commonplace. **Erika Lucas** reports on strategies for retaining all those talented mums and helping them return productively to work

**W**omen now make up 45 per cent of the labour force and, with talent at a premium, they are a key organisational asset. In common with their male colleagues, women have personal and professional ambitions and an increasing interest in getting the work-life balance right.

For some women this will mean taking career breaks to have babies. This is a fact of life that organisations are facing up to in a more positive and proactive way by introducing maternity management programmes. Most organisations now offer a range of flexible benefits – not just for working mums and dads but for all employees – and a growing number are beginning to introduce return to work programmes to support women at a critical time in their lives.

Jo Causon, director of marketing and corporate affairs for the Chartered Management Institute, says it is vital organisations address this issue. “Organisations cannot afford to miss out on any part of the talent pool in the current skills crisis, so it is crucial that employers have clear policies around maternity leave and reintegrating women back into the working environment.”

One of the first things employers need to look at is their overall position on flexible working. There is growing evidence to suggest that if companies only pay lip service to flexibility, women either won't come back after maternity leave or will find it all too difficult and give up the struggle after a few months.

Female resignations have hit an all time high, according to the findings of the latest National Management Salary Survey, published by the Chartered Management Institute and CELRE (see page 22). Whilst there are probably many different reasons for this, not just child care issues, there are other signs that women are seeking alternative forms of employment, for example, setting up their own businesses, to achieve the sort of flexibility and



work life balance they want in order to manage family and career ambitions.

The most famous, high-flying, City working “super mum” of them all, Nicola Horlick, now runs her own business. She took part in a live Q&A on *The Guardian* website in April, which focused on work-life balance. In response to a question on post-maternity return to work, Nicola Horlick said: “I think this is one of the biggest challenges facing our country. Getting well-educated women back into the workforce after a career break must be a priority. It is a shameful waste of resource to discard these women.”

### Shaky ground

The key to managing a successful comeback for an employee returning from maternity leave is to start by opening the lines of communication from the day a mum-to-be announces the news. Unfortunately, managers often feel they are on shaky ground talking about such issues.

Financial services firm Citi tackles this by providing regular training for managers to keep them up-to-date with frequent changes in maternity and family law. There is also a strong focus on giving managers the confidence to engage in open and honest communication with employees so that they can plan together for a successful comeback.

“I have seen situations where for fear of getting it wrong, managers would rather not say anything at all,” says Citi’s regional head of diversity Carolanne Minashi. “What we are trying to do is bring managers together in a place where they can talk openly and frankly about the issues and come to a realisation that it’s not hard and they can do it,”

The managers’ workshops are part of a much wider maternity management programme launched earlier this year by Citi. The programme, which is being run for the bank by AXA ICAS, was successfully piloted last autumn and is now available to all women at the bank’s London offices who are pregnant.

### ‘Keeping in touch’ days

It includes group coaching before, during and after maternity leave, plus the added support of one-to-one telephone coaching after returning to work. Citi is also using one of the new ‘Keeping in Touch’ (KIT) days introduced in recent legislation as the vehicle for a structured training day for women.

There are up to 10 KIT days when women can carry out work for their employer during the maternity leave period and be paid, under their contract of employment. Previously, any work undertaken during maternity leave brought the leave to an end.

Citi’s training day provides a forum where women can have a facilitated discussion about issues of concern, share experiences with others and meet up with their managers and team to keep up-to-date and talk about their return to work. It covers themes that research has shown crop up for the majority of new mothers such as childcare options, coping strategies and re-integrating back into the team.

Monica Gibson, a manager in Citi’s trading and equities team, found the workshop a highly positive experience.

She had worked for Citi for less than a year in a job she “absolutely loved” when she became pregnant. Although delighted about her pregnancy, she was concerned about how to broach the subject with management and felt she was letting the team down.

“The workshop was really enlightening and refreshing. I thought I was the only one who felt that sense of guilt so it was great to find that other women were feeling exactly the same way,” she said. “It was also a great opportunity to network with other women in the business, to compare experiences and to feel that you are not alone.”

### Talent retention strategy

Citi regards the maternity management programme as a key part of its talent retention strategy. It already has an excellent package of maternity benefits, but wanted to go beyond policies and provide direct, practical support for women.

“Many of the women who go on maternity leave have worked with the company for over 10 years. They have established their professional career by the time they have a baby and have a wealth of experience and talent that we simply can’t afford to lose,” says Carolanne Minashi. “Currently, 98 per cent of our female employees who go on maternity leave return to work with us, but we are not complacent. Their experience is vital to us and so it is crucial that we make sure those who return feel supported and are able to make a full contribution again.”

Recent research from the Department of Psychology at the University of Surrey suggests that this kind of ‘active management’ of contact with women during maternity leave is key to managing a successful transition.

A study of women in professional or managerial jobs suggested that women began to feel ‘invisible’ as viable employees almost as soon as their status as mothers-to-be was announced.

Part of the problem was that organisations often excluded them from discussions about how their job would be covered in their absence. They were left out of planning meetings, for example, and sometimes found their responsibilities were being re-shuffled from underneath them.

These feelings of alienation often continued once women returned to work. They perceived, rightly or wrongly, that colleagues were questioning their commitment to the job and their ability to cope. Some reported having to field constant enquiries about how they were coping, or being subject to patronising comments such as “I bet you come to work for a rest now,” or “I don’t know how you manage to get anything done with so little sleep”.

One woman said this created a feeling that she was being ‘tested’ – “as if people are waiting for you to somehow crack up under the pressure.”

The study found that women who were treated in this way tended to regard themselves as primarily “mothers who work” rather than valued employees who happened to have maternal responsibilities. Not surprisingly, their investment in their job and commitment to the organisation took a corresponding down-turn.

The study’s authors, Lynne Millward Purvis and Shane Crabb, suggest the key is for both the woman and the



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organisation to jointly manage the maternity leave and back to work process. They suggest an open discussion about mutual expectations should take place during pregnancy and then again on return. The responsibilities and opportunities for everyone who will be involved in covering the woman's absence should also be discussed and clearly defined.

Jennifer Liston-Smith, director of Managing Maternity Ltd, believes it's also important to acknowledge that people covering maternity leave may not always be fully supportive of a woman's return to work. "Sometimes the people who cover maternity leave have a real stake in it that is not always easy to balance with the needs of the returner," she says. "They may feel that they have been making such an impact in the role that it's not fair someone should come back and benefit from it – so there are all sorts of internal politics to be considered. If you can have a really clear pre-maternity leave review and post maternity leave review that includes all stakeholders you can bring to light expectations that otherwise will be festering away."

#### Two-way dialogue

Managers also need to make sure that they are not inadvertently sidelining women when they come back to their role. "Managers will sometimes give returners less responsibility and less input because they think they are making it easier for the person and protecting them from becoming overloaded," says Liston-Smith. "It's important to make sure both parties are clear about what is do-able and what the targets and outcomes are."

Dr Julia Rouse, senior research fellow at Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, says that if employers engage in this kind of open, two-way dialogue they have much to gain.

"The woman's own creativity can often help you solve your business problem, so the key is to get on side with the woman rather than setting yourself up with an adversarial relationship," she says. "Often the interests of the two parties in the negotiation are in conflict, but the ideal is to find a win-win solution for the woman and the business."

Rouse adds that businesses can use the opportunity of maternity leave to develop competencies across the team, so that people are more able to perform each other's roles if necessary. Small businesses may even be able to use the opportunity to grow the business, taking on additional support to cover the maternity leave period and generating new opportunities so that both parties can be kept on afterwards.

One-to-one maternity coaching is another approach that has been used successfully by a number of organisations to ease the transition back into work. Vanessa Taylor, a client information manager with AXA ICAS, says she found it a hugely valuable experience – and might well not have returned to work without it.

Vanessa had been with the company for eight years when she became pregnant with her first child at a time when the business was undergoing major change. In common with many women, she found that maternity leave dented her confidence and she began to experience doubts about her return to work.

"My biggest issue was a real anxiety about them not wanting me to return to work, which sounds silly now, but at the time I thought well, they have coped without me all this time, how valued am I really and am I going to upset the apple cart going back?" she says.

Child care arrangements were also causing some angst. Vanessa's job entailed being away from home two nights a week, and the plan was that her husband would pick up the child care responsibilities during this time.

As her return to work approached, however, he began to express concern about how he would juggle this with his own, heavy work responsibilities. "As it came closer he became more and more stressed about the fact that I wouldn't be there – and that was an enormous pressure on me," she says.

A series of three telephone sessions with a specialist maternity coach helped her work through her anxieties and organise a successful return to work. "It was brilliant because I thought it would just be about the work issues – I didn't think it would help me on a personal front as well," she says. "It helped me crystallise how I was feeling and break it down a bit – and I was able to work through some tools and techniques to help me communicate and look at things differently.

"I am not sure I would have come back without the coaching. I had always intended to, but during the period of my maternity leave the fears and anxiety about coming back to work were so exaggerated in my head that I had convinced myself there wasn't a place for me anymore."

#### Settling in

Once people are back on board, managers also need to think carefully about how they are eased back into work. There are the obvious things – such as giving people the opportunity to re-establish relationships and have a formal handover from anyone who has been covering their work in their absence. People need time to settle in and get their feet back under the table – so giving them a long list of urgent tasks to do on the first day back is probably not a good idea.

But attention also needs to be paid to how the team dynamics have been affected by a person's absence – an issue which is equally applicable if someone has been away for an extended period on a secondment, sabbatical or because of ill-health.

"In someone's absence they can either be sorely missed, or forgotten," says Margi Gordon, principal consultant at Roffey Park. "If they are missed, they are likely to return to overwhelming demands, which may feel unmanageable. If they have been forgotten, it may be very difficult to carve out their role again."

Gordon suggests the easiest way to handle this is to set up a team meeting where the only task is to help the team re-establish itself. New members who may have joined the team since the person left will need to be introduced, together with the expectations people have of each other going forward.

"It is important that the focus is on how the team can work best together, drawing on everyone's skills and contributions, she says. "Most importantly, everyone in the team, and the manager, should make the employee feel welcomed and valued on their return."

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