

MATERNITY LEAVE POLICIES THAT KEEP YOUR ORGANIZATION HEALTHY

by Phillip Perry MA



Running a department with a key person absent is always tough. The challenge is especially daunting when an employee is on a maternity leave that can last six to eight weeks or more. How can you give your pregnant employees the private time they need while limiting the disruption to your department? The answer lies in smart maternity leave policies and procedures.

Develop an effective policy

How much maternity leave should your organization allow? In reaching a decision you are balancing two things. On the one hand you want to be as accommodating as possible for an event that is so important to your employee's health. On the other hand you want the employee to return without unnecessary delay to maintain a smooth-running operation.

At the least, you must satisfy the requirements of overlapping federal, state and municipal legislation that mandates minimum standards. "Employers need to know what laws apply and assure their managers are trained on what is or is not legally permissible," warns Anna Gannon, a shareholder in the San Francisco office of Littler Mendelson, the nation's largest employment law firm.

Sticking to the letter of law is one thing. It's quite another to create a policy that communicates a real concern for your employees and keeps the most valued ones from becoming so disillusioned they jump ship. Employers are realizing that liberal maternity leave policies can be effective retention and recruiting tools.

"There are many ways that organizations can stand out as employers of choice," points out Marcee Harris, a senior associate in advisory services at Catalyst, a New York consulting firm specializing in women's workplace issues.

"Parental leave policies are one of those issues where there is still a lot of room to make important strides." While most companies still don't offer more than the legally mandated leave, that policy can be shortsighted. "Women who have access to more liberal and longer leave policies are more likely to return to that employer."

When designing your policy consider these important options:

- Length of leave: Will you extend leave time beyond what is legally mandated?
- Reimbursement. Will you provide full or partial reimbursement for time taken off from work?
- Phased return. Will you allow the returning employee to work part time, or work flexible hours, for a few weeks?
- Eligibility. Will you offer parental leave that allows fathers time to bond with their infants? How about leave for employees who adopt infants?
- Additional services. Will you offer the employee the services of an Employee Assistance Program, or set up a support group for new Moms? Will you provide support for lactation by setting aside a room or a private office a couple of times a day?

Whatever your decisions in these and other areas, be specific. "Have a clear, transparent and consistently applied policy that everyone can access easily," suggests Harris.


Express enthusiasm


Suppose Samantha breaks the news about her need for maternity leave. How do you react? It's vital to communicate a positive response. "Maybe the pregnancy comes at what seems to be the worst time, but you have to put your concerns behind you," cautions Liz Ryan, CEO of WorldWIT, a consulting firm in Boulder, Colorado specializing in women's issues. She suggests saying something like this: "I am delighted for you, Samantha. I would love to make this process easy because we value your work here. And we want to see pictures of the baby when you come back."

Unfortunately, says Ryan, such light hearted repartee is far from the norm at many employers. "Too often the manager looks at pregnancy as an inconvenience. We hear many horror stories of managers having negative reactions and saying things like 'Oh, no! Not with JCAHO coming up!' If you do not have a positive conversation and you end up losing a valuable employee you have only yourself to blame." A positive response is only the first step. The second is to assure the employee that their place in the department is secure. "Treat the woman as the responsible professional that she is," says Harris. "Our research shows that many women feel anxiety about telling their supervisors they are pregnant. They fear they will be treated differently, given less challenging assignments and lose credibility."

Cover the details

Once you have assured your employee that her maternity leave will not have a negative effect on her career, have a conver-






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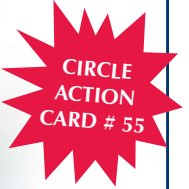
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sation about the administrative aspects. Here are some areas to cover: The employee's entitlements under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), your organization's policies regarding disability coverage, the role of health insurance coverage, how payment of premiums will be handled and the individuals who will perform the employee's work while she is gone.

Also discuss continuity in communications: How will the employee keep in touch while she is at home? "The details will vary by individual," says Harris. "We find some people do not want to stay connected while others keep up their social network. Talk about this beforehand and respect the individual's choice."

Companies are keeping in touch with their employees on maternity leave more often than in the past, according to Ryan. "It used to be that there was no contact whatsoever between the employer and the Mom: The ideas was 'out of sight out of mind.'



"The position didn't offer much job security. I got laid off during the interview."

When the employee returned she was so disoriented she didn't even recognize some people."

Let the home-bound Mom know about important news such as positions opening in other departments that she may be qualified for. Encourage managers to keep the employee involved through conference calls and one on one check-ins. Keep the person posted about key events so you don't end up delivering eight weeks of news all at once on the day the employee returns.

Assign the work load

So who will do the work of the employee while she is on maternity leave? Ryan suggests finding creative solutions. "Splitting the employee's work among two or three people is not an uncommon solution," says Ryan. "In the case of a department project, just push forward the deadline, putting it on hold until she comes back." Also consider taking on temporary employees.

This event might also offer your organization an opportunity to develop another member of your team who steps in and takes on the role normally played by the individual on maternity leave. "Doing this work can give another employee the chance to grow and potentially move up," says Ryan.

If the employer is ultimately responsible for solving the work assignment puzzle, the employee can play a critical role in putting the pieces in place. "Maternity leave is a partnership between the employee and the employer," says Harris. "The individual taking leave should be communicative and professional." After all, points out Harris, the employee is the expert on the work she is doing, so she can better identify the people who can perform her work. "She can even offer to train and transition the people into those roles. And she can also leave helpful notes for the people who are taking on her work."

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Welcome back

The employee returning from leave should feel welcome and supported by her team and the organization. "The boss should set aside some time to meet with the returning employee," suggests Ryan. "Start out by looking at the baby pictures. Then say something like, 'Now let's talk about what you missed and what is going on.'"

Employers need to realize that the return to work can be an emotional time. "Most new Moms cry on the way to work the first day," says Ryan. "It's a combination of hormonal struggle and a feeling of sadness and conflict, because they feel they are abandoning their baby by coming to work."

The supervisor should address the emotions of the new Mom in words that are specific without being condescending. Ryan suggests language such as this: "I want to let you know that we are here for you. I have read and heard that there is a conflict sometimes in the first few days back at work. If you have to duck out a half hour early or be late a half hour the first week or so that's okay."

"I don't know what you're going through but I've heard it's not a picnic. I may not be the best shoulder to cry on but I am all ears." Companies who greet returning Moms in a way that makes them feel understood will be the ones who retain their great employees.

Take it slowly

Plunging into the workplace all at once can be traumatic. "Our research shows that many times a gradual return from maternity leave is the most successful strategy," says Harris. "It's difficult for anyone to start out at 100 percent capacity. You may want to offer the returning employee a part time schedule for a while or flexible arrangements in terms of hours. Perhaps they can work from home one or two days a week. Try to manage the individual's work load

while she ramps up to full capacity." This graduated re-entry need not be long term: It can often be completed in a few weeks.

Gone are the days when employers treated pregnant workers like traitors to the cause. "The focus is changing from the old 'how could you do this to us?' to 'we understand this is a big event in your life; let's manage the process and make it easy,'" says Ryan. The employer who develops an effective maternity leave policy, communicates it with clarity and treats pregnant employees well will benefit from a productive and enthusiastic work force.

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