

How far have we come? Managing maternity leave in 2007

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It's time to reframe the issues around maternity leave. We need to recognise that maternity leave can be a disconnecting experience for many women. Our society sends mixed messages to new mothers. Governments exalt women to become mothers and offer financial – albeit small – incentives while organisations often see maternity leave as a problem. Observing the issue over 40 years I can see that the present realities of what was so dearly fought for may not be the dream we anticipated.

As a working parent maternity leave was not available to me and it was hard to argue that it should be seen as other than a privilege. In the seventies the Women's Movement ensured that maternity leave became a right and part of the feminist agenda. But culturally the thinking was that if you were going to be a good mother you would not dream of returning to work.

Many women like myself were in a state of conflict about wanting to go back to work and contribute to our society while wanting to be good parents. We truly believed that it was possible to be both. If it was not the world looked bleak and women could never assume leadership positions. As a consequence we turned our minds and activities to policy development and government leadership. We went to court and argued for equal pay and for maternity leave despite the opposition of employers and most unions. We won landmark cases and naively thought we had won the battle and the war.

We did not realise that we had not changed the deeply embedded cultural attitudes about working mothers and today it remains a significant issue. The statutory rights to unpaid leave enabling women to return to work are not quite the panacea we had hoped for. Extending the issue to include paternity and parental leave seemed a positive step but we see few men taking advantage of this and generally assume this is because of cultural disapproval.

Caring for female employees during the time of change and vulnerability in their lives is a challenge for most companies. Companies tend to worry more about staff replacements than the person approaching motherhood and when on leave she is forgotten. Ironically both the employee on maternity leave and her replacement feel vulnerable. Few companies manage this well.

My experience suggests that if companies invest in their female employees when they decide to have children they are likely to enjoy bottom line benefits. The most significant is employee retention. There are real savings in recruitment and training costs and immeasurable value in employee loyalty. Celebrating motherhood and not seeing it as a commercial problem is a good beginning.

It would be foolish not to acknowledge that the work design issues around maternity leave are a challenge and there is often a wistfulness expressed to me that it was all a lot better when maternity leave was a privilege rather than a statutory entitlement. That time is over and we need waste no time reframing it if we are to ensure that the talent of many is not wasted because of a small blip in what could be a long career.

Words around maternity leave slip off the tongues of people as though it's established practice throughout the community. It is not and many employers still deny it and many women do not understand it as their right. Even the best employers who understand the business case for retention of women after maternity are struggling with how to create meaningful work in response to their employees' wishes.

Perhaps the case could be reframed by considering the following assumptions for employers and employees

For employers:

- the majority of women will return to work.
- Women between 25 and 35 will not all leave and have children in the end.
- One size does not fit all
- Not all want the slower mummy track.
- Replacement is expensive
- Loyalty is precious

For women

- be honest in giving employers your best intentions re return to work
- we don't always get the baby we imagine, some require more attention and support than others
- take the long term career view
- stay connected
- Remember we do not have to do everything at once

The implications and assumptions for mentors are

- be well informed about the facts
- be non judgemental
- assist mentees to take a long and strategic view of their careers and help them imagine life in 5/10 years
- assist with their advocacy
- research options

We have a major issue to address. This is not the time for barricades. It's the time to start thinking deeply about how we might solve some of the issues. Be reasonable and be creative.