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## Returning to Work After Maternity Leave

*How Support from the Workplace can Help Retain Valuable Associates*

### The Transition is a Time of Tremendous Stress

Joyful. Elated. Thankful. Worried. Stressed. Anxious.

The words that come to mind can range as we think about how to incorporate a new human into our family life. Our sleep, priorities and lifestyle are impacted all at once. Not only will this new human require a much different care regimen than the adults and older children in our household, but then we must also think about returning to work. The stress of leaving a baby after only a few weeks, coupled with a body that may still be recovering and the high cost of childcare can make any new parent's return to work nerve-wracking.

According to a recent white paper by Maven, 75% of expecting mothers say they're excited to go back to work after giving birth.<sup>3</sup> But in the end, 43% of them end up leaving their careers. Of the new moms who do return to work after giving birth, 50% take a job for less money at a family-friendly employer. Why? The struggle to juggle everything may have been too great, they needed more

flexibility, or childcare was taking most of their paycheck. High attrition rates could also be caused by the fact that new parents come back with a whole new identity. Employers may overlook that they are not getting the exact same person back to the office who left a few short months ago. The normal stress of work may now be compounded with the logistics of having a baby, the pressure to catch up on work, and the added guilt of being away from the new baby.

While it may be disappointing for a woman who feels compelled to leave her career, the turnover costs to the company could also be detrimental, according to Maven's paper. A company in New Zealand calculated that recruiting and training replacements for new moms who quit after their maternity leave cost them an average of \$75,000 (USD) per woman. Their estimate is in line with Ernst & Young's claim that filling a new mom's vacant position costs them about 150% of her salary, when the median U.S. salary of \$44,000 is applied.

Given that more workers in the US took parental leave in January of this year than any other month since 1994, this discussion is timely. While access to parental leave in the US has increased in recent years, it is important to note that the US still lags far behind other countries and is one of only seven countries that does not have a mandated paid parental leave policy.

### A More Structured System is a Win-Win

Offering support during pregnancy and the transition back to work can help to improve retention of talented female associates and lessen the pressure they may feel of choosing between their careers and their families. While larger companies may have the flexibility to offer increased amounts of maternity leave, this might be too expensive an option for smaller companies. There are smart ways to support new parents – easing their challenging transitions and improving retention levels. Here are 5 Low to No-Cost options for supporting parents – whether they've just had their first baby (or fourth), adopted, or are fostering.

1. **Plan Ahead:** As with most life changes, the more you plan ahead the less anxiety you may experience when the transition approaches. Working with your expectant employee to create a return-to-work plan can ease uncertainty for everyone. Making sure you are both on the same page before their last day in the office can serve to calm any anxieties, fears, or trepidations. When the associate knows what to expect as it relates to their job, they are able to focus more on what matters the most when it is time to welcome a new family member home.

2. **Hybrid Schedules/Transition Back to Work:** Learning to balance parenting and work takes time. Given that 44% of new moms say that managing parenting duties like childcare and sick children is the hardest part of going back to work, having a hybrid return schedule could ease this anxiety. Creating a culture that values flexibility makes a difference for working parents. For example, having a temporary schedule for the first few weeks that allows time for the associate to adjust to morning drop offs could mean less worry for the associate about missing time or arriving to the office by a certain time each day. By planning a 'return-to-work' meeting, you and your associate can put a transition plan in action and discuss what the next 30-60 days might look like.
3. **Check-In During Leave:** Maternity leave should not be mistaken as a sabbatical or holiday. Time spent at home with a new child can feel lonely for some, especially once any spouses or partners return to their day-to-day activities. As everyone adjusts to the new family dynamic, this season of life is often a time when the mother puts her needs and self-care on the back burner to care for this new person. A phone call, text or card can go a long way to let someone know you are thinking of them. Sharing news or updates from the office – promotions, special events, or even moments when that person was missed also helps to keep them connected. Another thoughtful gesture during this time is to send a meal to the family. Chances are, "What's for dinner?" is not top of mind in between diaper changes, feedings and trying to find a spare moment for a shower or snack.
4. **Lactation Room:** Even though there is a law in place that requires workplaces to provide a private location, other than a restroom, sometimes organizations' facilities are not adequate. By investing in and promoting the availability of a nursing room, a new mother will feel supported in her choice to continue to breastfeed after maternity leave ends, which can reduce her return-to-work anxiety, increase morale, and result in the retention of valuable associates. According to a study by Forbes, companies with lactation support programs saw an average of 94% retention rate of mothers, compared to the national average of 59%.<sup>2</sup>
5. **Build a Culture of Empathy:** This may be one of the most difficult things to do but is arguably the most important one when you are trying to create and maintain a healthy workplace culture for parents. All organizations should encourage a culture of healthy work-life balance which includes encouraging breaks. The focus should always be on productivity rather than requiring adherence to a strict 9-5 schedule. One idea to cultivate a culture of care is to provide working parents with a space to communicate and to share advice and resources. This could be through a community page on your internal network of communication or by scheduling regular chances for parents to connect.

RiverFront's Director of Internal Sales and Western Regional Sales Officer, Jackie Carrico shared her insight on empathy, "With both of my maternity leaves I felt fully supported and prepared. Associates regularly checked in, and I was still invited to and attended firm events that helped me feel included. I could really feel the compassion and empathy from people as I returned to work on a part time basis for a few weeks before starting back full time. Flexibility has been key and now I feel like I can be both a great mom and a great associate."

Going back to work is often an intense physical and psychological adjustment for most parents. In order to help ease that transition, it is incumbent that all of us shift our mindset from that of maternity *leave* to maternity *return*. We believe these types of shifts will improve the retention of valued associates. Remember, leave is just a small part of the more comprehensive maternity plan. Looking at the whole picture, the joy of welcoming a child into the family can quickly fade if parents do not feel supported when they return to work. We need to change the way we view working parenthood as a whole so that parents can confidently raise their children while also having a fulfilling career.

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## Sources:

<sup>1</sup> [Nearly half of mothers work, take a break, and work again. Why is there still such a stigma? | LinkedIn](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Breastfeeding At Work Benefits Mom, Baby And The Employer \(forbes.com\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Maven for Business | Maven. The Digital Clinic for Women. \(mavenclinic.com\)](#)

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