

A Manager's Guide to Supporting Maternity Leave Returners

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Introduction

It is likely that you will have several people in your team who may plan to become pregnant, and there's a good chance that at least one of them will become a parent whilst they are working for you. Many managers can be anxious to talk to pregnant individuals about their work plans, being concerned about putting them under undue pressure. This guidance has been put together to help make going on maternity leave and returning to work a positive experience for your employee and the business. We have written it using the wealth of understanding we have gained from coaching employees who are returning to work after having children.

It's important to know that once an individual becomes pregnant, they will most likely already be thinking about their return to work and their wider plans for the future and may have many concerns that they may be nervous to discuss. An early, light touch discussion is a great way to keep an open dialogue about how they see the transition working and how you can support them. Spending some regular time discussing and preparing them and the team for maternity leave and the subsequent return to work will support a smooth transition and a positive outcome for both them and the business.

What to consider before maternity leave begins

Be prepared

Know your responsibilities towards your pregnant staff – what is your company policy with regards to things such as:

- Antenatal appointments
- Pregnancy related absence
- Annual leave accrued during maternity leave

Is the length of maternity leave negotiable at your organisation? If so, what are the parameters?

What is your company policy on flexible working? Do you know where to find it?

Getting everyone ready

- Does your employee have a maternity leave plan?
- When do they intend to work up until?
- What are their initial thoughts on returning to work?
- Are they planning to share parental leave with their partner (if applicable)?

Your employee may not know the answers to all of these questions or they might fluctuate but they will most likely welcome a discussion about the options and signposting to other parents in the organisation for guidance and advice. Remember, this is by no means a firm commitment to any of the above.

How can you make sure their last few weeks in the business are not stressful?

If your employee's role is business critical, ensure the handover starts early. They probably have years of experience, so don't expect someone else to be able to pick it up from a 'really good set of handover notes', it's stressful for everyone involved and may impact on your employee's decision to return to work.

What level of communication would the employee like from you?

- How would they like you to communicate with them?
- How will the practical things be handled? E.g. timesheets, IT equipment, system logins, organisational updates etc.
- Do they have any thoughts on how they would like to return to work? Full time? Part time? Condensed week? Office based? Home based? A combination of some of the above? What are the options?

Whilst the employee is on maternity leave

Whilst the employee is on maternity leave, you should:

- Find out what your company policy is on **Keeping in Touch (KIT) days**. Are they encouraged? Does your company pay your staff for them at their usual rate or at SMP?
- If you do use KIT days, make good use of them – it's not just about IT and HR, plan them out, have **objectives** for the day or an agenda so that individual feels there has been value in the day, as this will make them feel valued too.
- Feedback from returnees is that when their manager met them for a quick coffee first, **outlined the day** and then they went into the office together they felt much more **positive** about returning to work. You may find it helpful to do this.
- Ensure you include them in any **important communications** and keep them on your organisational chart. They shouldn't feel like they're out of the loop when it comes to important company developments or changes.

You can also signpost the employee to the Skills 4 [Returning to work after Maternity or Paternity Leave programme](#). This will deliver renewed confidence as well as practical tools and targeted interventions to help employees focus on specific areas of your work and home life and to safeguard their professional, personal and mental wellbeing.

Employees will:

- Establish personal motivation for returning to work
- Deal effectively with guilt and other negative emotions
- Adjust to the demands of being a working parent
- Improve confidence and self-belief
- Review values, priorities and strengthen time management skills
- Learn new techniques to help you communicate boundaries and prepare for potentially difficult conversations
- Find the right work/life fit through detailed gap analysis
- Review the importance of organisational and professional visibility
- Review and identify meaningful career goals and next steps for success.

Getting ready to return

To minimise stress on both sides, it is important to plan for your employee's first day and week back.

Drop them a note or give them a call letting know about the arrangements for coming back into the office. You should consider the following details:

- How will they access the building?
- Have they got a pass?
- Who will meet them?
- Are they still located in the same place?
- Do you have a breastfeeding/expressing place they can use (if applicable)?
- Is it possible for them to ease them in by starting them back to work mid-week?

Supporting the employee back to work

On the first day back

- Remember, they will probably feel quite nervous, so if you or someone else can meet them either outside the office or go for a coffee and then walk into the office together, most individuals will really appreciate that.
- Introduce them to any new team members.
- Be clear on what you think their priorities will be; a simple plan for their first few days will be useful for both of you.
- Who was covering their role whilst they were away? Make sure that person has blocked time out to spend with them to start the handover.
- This day is very important, you want them to go home feeling excited to be back at work and eager for their next day in the office, so this is not the day to give them the updated employee handbook and sit them in a corner.
- Make sure you check in with them before they leave to see how their first day back has gone and any priorities for the next time they are in.

One week on

Establish a weekly catch up either in person or virtually, as this will give you both the opportunity to discuss what is going well and proactively raise any issues so they can be dealt with early.

Within the first month

It can feel counter-intuitive to talk to your employee about their career aspirations so soon after returning to work. But many people comment that they feel at their most productive and ambitious during this period, so schedule a career discussion with them to discuss their aspirations and support them to create a development action plan to help them get there.

Three months on

This is a great time to review how things are going:

- What has their experience been like?
- Could they write a blog about it to share with others?
- Can they support the improvement of the related company processes?
- How is their development action plan going?
- Discuss upcoming opportunities.

If your employee seems to be struggling to adjust, or you think they would benefit from some extra support, consider signposting them to the Skills 4 [Returning to work after Maternity or Paternity Leave programme](#).

What to avoid

It is important to be mindful of stereotypes in relation to employees who have recently returned from maternity leave. Sometimes, benevolence bias may creep in regarding how new parents may wish to work or how much work it is assumed they want to do, and individuals returning to work may well feel underlying anxiety about facing these kinds of judgements.

Consider the following examples of benevolence bias and how to reframe them to avoid perpetuating these behaviours.

Potential Benevolence Bias	How to Reframe
It's Sarah's day off on Fridays so she can't join us.	Sarah doesn't work Fridays so let's plan to do that on Thursday.
Alice won't want to work on this project as they will need to be away from home once per week and they have young children.	Alice, there is a great opportunity to work on this project, I appreciate that you have a young family and it will mean working away from home once a week but I wanted to give you the choice to decide if you wanted to do this.
Let's give the promotion to Rashid, we don't want to put too much pressure on Skye right now.	Skye I know you've only recently become a parent but I think you'd do well in this new role, let me know your thoughts.

Organisational benefits

What can you expect to achieve from these adjustments:

- Improved retention with fewer female resignations
- More women having the opportunity to progress their careers
- More recruits – people want to work for companies that manage life changes well
- Better balanced teams
- Greater flexibility in the way people work
- Closing your gender pay gap
- An improvement in your external and internal reputation as an employer.