

Despite anti-discrimination legislation and increasing maternity rights, many women still face a less than positive attitude from their employers when it comes to motherhood. But, says **Victoria Hoban**, managers who handle it well will be rewarded with highly motivated, dedicated and loyal staff

KEEPING MUM



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Eleanor, a senior architect, had been working for her firm for five years and was thrilled when her boss agreed that she was next in line for promotion. However, a year on, not only is she still waiting, she no longer manages a team and reports to a colleague who was previously her junior. When challenged about the lack of opportunities, her boss replied: ‘Yes, but you did have a baby.’

Eleanor, 37, has a strong case for discrimination but, feeling betrayed and demoralised, she has decided not to fight. ‘I have resigned myself to being less ambitious,’ she admits. ‘I just come in, do the work and go home.’

Maternity leave has always been a management

minefield. From the moment an employee announces her pregnancy, laws and policies come into effect covering everything from time off for antenatal care to negotiating working hours after the baby is born. But it is now more important than ever to get it right. For a start, maternity rights are tightening. The 2006 Work and Families Act, which came into effect in April 2007, increased the length of statutory maternity pay from 26 to 39 weeks, and maternity leave to a maximum of 52 weeks.

‘No other area of employment law is changing as frequently as maternity leave,’ says Carolanne Minashi, regional head of diversity at global financial services company Citi’s Markets & Banking division. ‘As maternity provision increases we will see the average length of leave taken creep up.’

It is not just the length of leave that is increasing – so is the average age of women taking it. This, says Minashi, has huge implications for talent management: ‘Our data shows

that by the time women take maternity leave they have an average of 10 years’ experience. These are talented people making a huge contribution to the business.’

In January this year, Citi launched a maternity programme, including group and one-to-one coaching sessions for pregnant employees, six months’ maternity leave on full pay, and workshops for managers.

These steps were not ‘damage control’ – Citi already boasts a 98% retention rate for employees on

maternity leave and has received awards for its family-friendly policies. Instead, the programme reflects the far-reaching advantages for both staff and employer of providing excellent maternity packages. ‘It communicates the message to all staff that it’s possible to combine an interesting career with motherhood or fatherhood,’ says Minashi.

How maternity is managed is also vital to a company becoming ‘employer of choice’ for huge numbers of talented employees.

‘Women have more choices nowadays so employer brand is critical,’ adds Glenda Stone, CEO of Aurora and www.wheretowork.com, which publishes its annual Top 50 Places for Women to Work survey in *The Times*. Interestingly, the Top 50 indicates that it is not necessarily female-dominated industries that offer the best packages – professional services and banking feature more heavily than retail and media.

‘Organisations looking more closely at becoming an “employer of

choice” are winning the war on talent,’ says Anna Hayward, director of Managing Maternity, a specialist consultancy that supports employers and women through maternity leave and return to work. ‘Above all, this comes down to a shift in outlook.’

Managers, Stone stresses, are key to this shift. ‘It’s easy for organisations to say, “We have flexible working,” but if the mindset of managers doesn’t match that, it doesn’t matter what policies are in place.’

Research by the Equal Opportunities Commission (now the Equality & Human Rights Commission) in 2005 confirmed that one in ten managers had negative attitudes towards managing pregnancy and only half (56%) of employees felt their employers had responded positively.

Keeping managers up-to-date on maternity issues is the first step to ensuring maternity is handled successfully. To this end, Citi runs regular workshops.

‘Sometimes it can feel like everyone is on maternity leave or getting pregnant,’ Minashi says. ‘But actually, it’s a small percentage of the employee population. Bringing managers together means you can deal with such myths head on, particularly around the cost of maternity leave.’

The EOC’s Great Expectations survey in 2005 revealed that 35% of employers believe pregnancy places an ‘undue cost burden’ on their organisation. It found that a whopping 30,000 women are forced out of their jobs for being pregnant. Those who lose their jobs miss out on £12 million in statutory maternity pay every year, while replacing them costs employers £126 million.

FAMILY PLANNING

A lack of open dialogue and forward planning is often the cause of such undesirable outcomes. For example, the EOC discovered that a third of employers find uncertainty over whether a woman will return to work a ‘huge difficulty’. But 90% of the time, the plans women make before they go on maternity leave remain unchanged.

‘Managers are reluctant to broach the subject,’ says Hayward. ‘They feel uncomfortable about asking questions and worry about not being able to deal with the answers. But once that conversation happens, the fear factor disappears.’

Planning should start early and be realistic and well thought-through, says Minashi. ‘Often managers tend to either reject an employee’s requests too quickly or say yes without thinking the request through.’

Part of the planning process could also include group or one-to-one coaching. ‘For women, additional support via coaching can help them to come back feeling confident and hit the ground running,’ says Hayward.

Minashi agrees: ‘Putting

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communities of mothers together is really useful in terms of swapping concerns and advice and enables HR to deal with issues as they come up.’

Enhanced maternity packages are another way of improving support. Accenture, for example, support women through IVF treatment with 10 days paid leave per year. Other perks offered by companies include paid paternity leave, parenting clubs and bonuses for employees who return to work after their maternity leave.

But however good the communication is before a woman goes on maternity leave, many employers and employees have no contact during the leave itself – which in some organisations can now run up to a whole year. The solution



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Right: Enhanced maternity packages can offer support to those going through IVF treatment
Below: ‘Keeping in Touch’ days maintain contact between employee and employer during maternity leave



is ‘Keeping in Touch’ (KIT) days. Outlined in the 2006 Work and Families Act, these enable employees to work for up to 10 days at any time during their maternity leave without losing their entitlement to statutory maternity pay or triggering the end of their leave.

However, KIT days are not compulsory and so need to be negotiated carefully. ‘Although a lot of women want to maintain their career, they also want to make the most of their maternity leave and enjoy their time off,’ says Hayward.

One way of encouraging employees to partake in KIT days is to ensure they are productive and employee-led. At Citi, paid KIT days have flexible hours and include coaching sessions and a 90-minute lunch meeting between employee and manager. ‘We employ intelligent women who can decide for themselves what they want to be out of the loop about,’ says Minashi.

EXPECTING FLEXIBILITY

However, even if you successfully support your employee back to work, expecting them to ‘slot back in’ exactly as before is unrealistic. Many parents request flexible hours and employers are now obliged under law to consider such requests carefully and provide good reason to refuse them.

For some industries, making this work is harder than for others. But there are always solutions and compromises. Job sharing is one option that is often overlooked and can provide employees with the flexibility that they require, while allowing bosses to have someone there all the time.

Stone insists that UK employers

need to change their view on how employees ‘put in the hours’. ‘It’s a mindshift from “face time” to “output”,’ she says.

In fact, the more supportive and flexible companies are around maternity, the more likely employees are to be motivated and ready to compromise. ‘As one director said to me, “Whatever we offer in flexibility we are paid back 100-fold in loyalty and continuity”,’ says Hayward.

Well-supported through two pregnancies, Shalini Mathur, a private banker at Citi, chose to return to work full-time on both occasions.

‘I wanted to come back full-time to build up my client book,’ she says. ‘But the fact I knew I could choose to work at home for two days a week means my loyalty is much higher.’

Even when women return part-time, managers must be supportive of ongoing career progression rather than steering such employees onto the ‘mummy track’ – a career pathway to nowhere. According to the EOC, a fifth of employers admit that becoming a parent impacts negatively on employees’ promotion prospects.

A High Court ruling in 2007 means that working mothers who fall behind in the queue for promotion will now be able to sue their employer for sex discrimination. Maternity leave must count as continuous service and be included where it affects a woman’s promotion. Women are also entitled to be consulted fully about any changes to their jobs while on maternity leave.

Many observers, though, feel that a shift in attitude is what is needed. Hayward feels that employers need to pay more attention to the positives that parents bring to the workforce. ‘After having children, women become incredibly focused on hitting priorities and making things happen,’ she says.

In the end, a little bit of loyalty can also go a long way. ‘By holding your employee’s hand for this short period there is a huge long-term benefit,’ says Mathur, who is often headhunted because of her experience but remains loyal to Citi. ‘I will definitely be loyal because they have seen me through these important times in my life.’ ■



MATERNITY RIGHTS KNOW THE SCORE

■ All employed women can take up to 52 weeks maternity leave of which 39 weeks is paid (minimum: six weeks at 90% of salary, followed by statutory maternity pay), regardless of how long they have been with their employer, how many hours they work and how much they are paid

■ Those on Ordinary Maternity Leave (first 39 weeks) are entitled to all terms and conditions of employment (except salary), eg holiday entitlement, car allowance and pension. Those on Additional Maternity Leave (remaining 13 weeks) still receive holiday entitlement, notice of termination, redundancy compensation and disciplinary procedures

■ You must not allow an employee to return to work for two weeks after her baby is born. Failure to comply is a criminal offence and employers are liable to be fined if convicted

■ You can recoup approximately 92% of Statutory Maternity Pay through the PAYE system. Small employers can recoup 100%, plus administration fee

■ You are entitled to make ‘reasonable’ contact with employees (and vice-versa) at any stage during their maternity leave to discuss a range of issues – for example, plans for their return to work, important developments at the workplace and relevant promotion opportunities

■ Employers should agree the parameters and method of contact before maternity leave and if an employee objects at any time, cease contact

Source: 2006 Work and Families Act, DTI