

MANAGING YOUR MATERNITY LEAVE

>> 10. Best practices for managing maternity leave for line managers

This guide is one of the outcomes from our policy work on gender and equal pay. It forms part of a suite of solutions intended to help women in public relations successfully navigate the challenges of maternity leave and then return to work confidently. It was produced by The Talent Keeper Specialists for and on behalf of the CIPR.



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Best practices for managing maternity leave for line managers

In a nutshell? *“Ask don't assume, encourage Keep In Touch days and demonstrate your commitment to helping your colleague have a smooth return.”*

>> BEFORE YOUR COLLEAGUE GOES ON MATERNITY LEAVE

1. Keep an open mind - ask, don't assume

Demonstrate a desire to get things 'right' by asking your leaver/returner what she/he would like or needs from you at various stages (e.g. how much and what type of contact whilst he/she is away). Better to ask than assume what your team member's preferences are. Be on the front-foot and make suggestions about what you think might be appropriate with the caveat that they are only suggestions and you are keen to hear what he/she thinks. For example, you might say *“It could be an option for you to do a phased return over a couple of weeks, what do you think?”* You don't have to have all the answers as a line manager; you just need to demonstrate a commitment to finding them.

“It is key for managers and new working mums to keep an open mind. It's easy to assume that all new mothers need and want the same things at this stage in their lives, but I've seen time again that this is not the case. I had an instance a few years ago where two of my team were on maternity leave at the same time. While I strived to treat them both equally, their desired approach couldn't have been more different. One wanted to be kept informed of everything, the other wanted to stay in the baby bubble as long as possible. One found the prospect of putting their child in childcare a struggle while the other was more matter a fact and upfront about when they would return to work.”



Michelle Doyle-Wildman,
External Affairs Manager,
South East Water

2. Agree how you'll keep in touch

The vast majority of women want to maintain contact with colleagues whilst on maternity leave and your team member probably wants more contact with you, her line manager, than you might realise. In a recent study of professional women's return to work experiences, one in three said they hadn't had enough formal contact with their line manager and other colleagues which may account for half of those respondents saying they hadn't continued to feel part of the wider organisation.

>> Do say: *How would you prefer me to stay in touch (phone, text, e-mail) and how much contact would you like? What, if anything, would you like to be kept up to date on whilst you're away?*

3. Encourage Keep In Touch (KIT) days

Your team member can have up to 10 'keeping in touch' or 'KIT' days during your maternity leave

without bringing her statutory maternity pay or leave to an end. KIT days are a tool to smooth your colleague's transition from maternity leave to being back at work. Anecdotal reports are that employees who make use of them have an easier return to work - and that's good for you, the wider team as well as your returning colleague. There's no prescribed format for KIT days and they can be used to undertake a large range of work-related activities.

>> **Do say: Have you considered Keep In Touch days? Other maternity leavers says they helped them. We could use them for....**

What the law says about KIT days:

- Both you and your employee need to agree to KIT days as there's no legal right to them.
- They can be taken at any point during maternity leave except for the two weeks immediately after the baby's birth. KIT days can even be taken before baby is born.
- Any part of a day worked on maternity leave (even just an hour) counts as a whole KIT day. A KIT day might include working from home.
- No law exists about how much your team member should be paid when doing a KIT day, although she must be paid at least the minimum wage. Many employers top up employees' maternity pay on a KIT day to the equivalent of a regular day's pay, although you don't have to. This is something to agree in advance and your organisation may have a policy.

Possible uses of / activities to do on KIT days

- Planning meetings
- Budget meeting
- Project scoping meetings
- Annual strategy meeting
- Attending a conference
- Training
- Client events
- Team away day
- Team meeting
- Meeting new members of the team
- Recruiting new member of the team
- Conducting direct reports' performance reviews (in conjunction with your cover)
- Agreeing your team member's 'comeback plan' (see below)

"Managing a colleague on maternity (or paternity) leave is really quite straightforward; it's all about transparency and good communication. Be proactive about keeping in touch informally as well as formally. The occasional phone call or email will help them to feel they are still part of the team – but don't expect an immediate answer, babies are a bit unpredictable. You should also make sure that your team member is notified of all and any significant changes in the workplace, e.g. any promotion or job opportunities that arise while they are on leave. Also, do invite them to any team-building or social events – they may or may not be able to come, but at least you'll have invited them."



Catherine Grinyer,
Big Voice Communications

>> WHEN YOUR COLLEAGUE IS ON LEAVE

4. Be inclusive and send signals you're looking forward to her return

Send invitations to away days, team lunches and any other activity your colleague has said she's interested in and underline that you know her head may well be in another space entirely and it's

acceptable not to respond to your contact. Send your leaver a personal card during the break to remind him/her that you're looking forward to them coming back. You might also send a copy of *Mothers Work! How to Get a Grip on Guilt and Make a Smooth Return to Work* by Jessica Chivers (Hay House, 2011) to reinforce the message 'I want you back.' This isn't a replacement for the formal process of managing a maternity leave, it's one human being reassuring another in a possibly difficult and uncertain time.

>> **Do say:** *I hope everything is going OK. (My experiences of becoming a parent were....) We're missing your.... You might be interested to know.... Would you like to join the team at X - it would be great to see you if only for a part of it...*

5. Share positive feedback

Share praise or give recognition whilst your colleague is away for things s/he has contributed to, such as client feedback, internal stakeholder comments, a successful launch of a process/initiative she was involved in. Equally, when your colleague has returned, regularly remind her of strengths and point to times you've seen them in action. Suggest new ways she could use them to give her a stretch and get closer to any career aspirations shared with you.

6. Discuss and be open to flexible working

Employees who work flexibly are on average, more committed to the organisation than other employees who don't 'benefit' from such arrangements (see Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Other research shows those who work flexibly feel grateful and also the need to reciprocate through working harder. A study by Catalyst (2013) found that women in organisations that offer flexible working are 30% more likely to aspire to high-level positions than those at organisations that do not offer flexible ways of working. By highlighting this type of research you're sowing the seeds to win over a line manager who may be otherwise reluctant to support flexible working.

What the law says about flexible working:

- Since 30th June 2014 all employees who have worked for the same employer for 26 weeks have had the right to request flexible working (previously just parents and carers).
- The right to request does not mean the right to have requests granted, it means employers must handle requests in a 'reasonable manner.' A reasonable manner includes assessing the advantages and disadvantages of granting a request.
- An employee can only make one flexible working request per year and a decision must be given by the employer within three months of a submission (or longer if agreed).
- The application must include: the date; a statement that this is a statutory request; details of how the person wants to work flexibly and when s/he would like to start; an explanation of how s/he thinks flexible working might affect the business and how this could be dealt with and a statement saying if and when s/he has made a previous application.

Types of flexible working

- Part-time hours
- Compressed hours
- Annualised hours
- Working from home/remotely
- Term-time working only
- Different hours during term-time and school holidays
- Guaranteed time off in school holidays
- Staggered hours, e.g. coming in 'early' and leaving 'early'
- Specifically timed lunch break
- Working from home when a child is ill
- Different hours on different days or under certain circumstances

"Employees are required legally to inform their employer of their intentions at certain key times. However having 'without prejudice', open discussions between line manager and new mum can be really helpful in planning cover and giving proper consideration to flexible working. Clearly babies, as with life, happen while you are busy making other plans. Your employee's circumstances may have to deviate from what they hoped. Your flexibility and understanding can really help."

7. Consider comeback coaching

Women who engage in strengths-based coaching with a coach skilled in career transitions report feeling more confident, better able to manage upwards and clearer on what they can do to effect a smooth return to work than those that don't. Coaching time allows your colleague to talk about their life in the round and create solutions to personal and professional challenges that are not always comfortably discussed with a line manager. Where once coaching was seen as remedial, coaching is now viewed by many coachees as evidence of their company's belief in and willingness to invest in their development. (Skiffington and Zeus, 2003). Does your company offer this? Do you offer out-placement coaching? If you offer the latter but not the former, that's a good basis on which to talk to HR about comeback coaching - better to plough money into helping someone who's staying in the organisation than someone who isn't.

8. Adopt a transition mindset

If you've not already talked to your team member about her return to work being period of transition (perhaps on a KIT day for example) it's good to talk about this on day one of her return. Transition simply means a period of adjustment where your expectations of her are different (more leeway, less demands made of her, time spent on different things to 'business as usual' for a number of weeks. 4-6 is probably about right). Some organisations have formal transition policies - for example employees at the law firm Morrison & who are returning from maternity leave have a 50% reduction in their targets for the four weeks before they leave and the four weeks after they return.

>> WHEN YOUR COLLEAGUE HAS RETURNED

9. Be interested and empathetic

Ask about life at home and show interest in the family. First thing in the morning and before going home are good times to turn the conversation to life beyond work. Share your own experiences, if applicable, to legitimise your returner's feelings and experiences. Watch out for exhaustion and encourage her to leave early in the first few weeks – acknowledge the mental demands of effectively being a new starter on top of coping with broken nights' sleep. These things are equally relevant to new fathers in your team.

>> Do say: *Transitions can be exhausting - why not leave earlier this week and have a bit of extra time at home with (name of child)? When X was born the hardest things I found was... Is there anything I can do to make things easier?*

10. Build a plan for success and seek to use her strengths

It's useful to co-create a written plan of what your returning team member is going to do over the first 90 days. Alternatively, a shorter plan of a month may suit you both better. Reminding her of her strengths and taking into account any preferences she's signalled about her career direction should be part of this conversation. The key point is that your expectations should be made explicit. Giving your team member this certainty and an opportunity to negotiate - if she thinks it's under or over stretching - is important.

11. Have weekly or fortnightly 1:1s

Research (see Chokkar & Wallin, 1984) shows that performance drops off if line manager-team member 1:1s happen less frequently than once every fortnight - and that there's not much gained from having them more frequently than that. That might be much more frequently than either of you is used to and now's a good time to 're-contract' and put them in both your diaries for the first three months. Keep talking honestly, making adjustments accordingly and giving praise.

12. Have a broader career progression conversation

Keep an open mind and avoid making assumptions about what your team member may or may not want carer-wise. If in doubt, ask. As a line manager you have a role to play in growing your team and 'growth' will mean different things to different people. In the early days of her return a woman is likely to be focussed on getting back to feeling competent in the role she's in rather than thinking about what her next career step might be. However, this can change quickly and when your team member talks about feeling comfortable in her role she may appreciate you talking about next challenges or stretch assignments.

>> Some pointers for career conversations:

- Comment on what you see her doing well (behaviours as well as output and impact)
- Encourage her to share her own ideas about how she can progress
- Ask what support she would like from you
- Suggest ways you could help, e.g. introductions, meetings and activities that could raise her profile
- Talk about internal and external mentoring options
- Highlight relevant resources to fuel her success (books, podcasts, blogs, journal articles, courses, coaching)

LINE MANAGER CHECKLIST

What	When	✓
Discuss the type (both the 'what and the 'how' - e.g. texts, phone, e-mail) and level of contact she would like whilst on maternity leave	Before M/L	
Highlight Keep In Touch (KIT) days and discuss positive uses for.	Before M/L	
Raise the subject of flexible working - what are her thoughts at this stage?	Before M/L	
Send invitations to team events and other opportunities that may be of interest	Ongoing	
Send updates about projects/other information as requested by your team member	Ongoing	
Personal card to say you're looking forward to her return	c. 3 months pre-return	
Call/e-mail to discuss dates for KIT days and share any positive feedback	c. 3 months pre-return	

Talk about flexible working (as appropriate)	KIT Day	
Discuss phased return options	KIT Day	
Create plan/rough idea of what the first day back will involve with your team member	KIT Day	
Create a 90 day plan with your team member	KIT day/first day back	
Arrange technology and co-located desk space for both your returner and her cover	2 weeks before her return	
Block the morning of your team member's return out of your diary to give an update to your team member	ASAP	
Create a positive start to your team member's first day back - be there to welcome her. Organise welcome lunch?	First day back	
Discuss and define what a 'successful' first week and month looks like (based on the 90 day plan)	First day back	
Schedule weekly 45-60 minute 1:1s for the month ahead	First day back	
Have a career progression conversation when your returning team member indicates she's feeling competent in role and looking for stretch	3-9 months post return	

FURTHER RESOURCES & REFERENCES

- Also see the other nine guides in the CIPR's *managing your maternity return* series - it may be useful to use the others guides for discussion before your team member goes on leave and/or on Keep In Touch days.
- <https://www.gov.uk/employee-rights-when-on-leave>
- <https://www.gov.uk/flexible-working/overview> - the law and how to make a statutory application for flexible working.
- www.acas.org - code of practice for handling requests in a 'reasonable manner.'
- Maternity comeback coaching - information for line managers and HR practitioners: <http://talentkeepers.co.uk/line-manager>
- *Coaching Women To Lead* by Averil Leimon. Francois Moscovici and Helen Goodier (Routledge: London, 2011)
- *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will To Lead* by Sheryl Sandberg (Random House: New York, 2013)
- *Mothers Work! How to Get a Grip on Guilt and Make a Smooth Return to Work* by Jessica Chivers (Hay House: London, 2011).
- Catalyst. (2013). *The great debate: flexibility vs. face time. Busting the myths behind flexible working arrangements.*
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