

## ‘Retail Return: Supporting new parents in their return from parental leave in retail’

Transitioning back into the workforce after a period of parental leave can be challenging. Parenthood comes hand in hand with a number of new and unexpected demands (emotional and physical), and the return to work can be an emotional and difficult journey for many women, who find themselves surprised at the difficulty that they have in meshing their ‘pre-child’ career with their new parenting commitments. First-time mums in particular, can struggle with navigating the transition back from parental leave. Their concerns range from the practical (making suitable child care arrangements), to the emotional (will I be able to spend this time away from my child?).

Transitioning Well specialises in supporting transitions in the work-life cycle, and our experience in this arena helps us to understand how *vital* it is that we support parents in navigating their return to work. Support during this time can help to maximise mental and physical health of the individual worker, resulting in increased productivity, boosted staff morale, and higher levels of staff retention. Research also suggests that a flexible workplace which demonstrates support for parents, can attract talent and build a high strength team.

In an attempt to manage the juggle of parenting and work, new parents will often request flexibility upon their return to work, and whilst this strategy is recommended, the retail environment does not, or cannot, always cater to new parents who may wish to work reduced or modified hours. Our work with a number of retail clients has given us valuable insight into the real (and often unconsidered) challenges faced by management within the retail environment who support parents transitioning back into the workplace.

The **reality** is that the majority of these types of retail roles (particularly staff in management positions), require long hours on a shop floor, or being ‘on call’, resulting in ad hoc and erratic hours. Women in these roles can experience a decline in energy levels (physical and mental), often citing an inability to ‘switch off’ from work and its’ demands. A fatigued mental state can result in tangible physical risks, which is particularly concerning - falls in the office, poor decision making, and risks associated with stock/machine handling can all lead to injury. Studies also indicate that new parents experiencing high levels of fatigue can be at greater risk of accidents while travelling to and from work.

**Recognising** these challenges faced by a group of new parents returning to work, one of our retail clients felt that they needed some support to effectively address these concerns and create policies and procedures to assist in managing the return to work experience. A number of staff - nearly all were first time mothers (with some being single mothers), described themselves as being at ‘breaking point’, and of particular concern within this group of women were the long work hours, on call responsibilities, and a baby/young child at home, all emulsifying to create physical and mental fatigue. Interestingly, the business hadn’t been made aware of the employees/staff concerns until that point; many of the individual women that we spoke to cited concern about showing vulnerability as a primary reason for having not initiated a conversation earlier; they felt that speaking up would reflect poorly on them and impact on their current role and future opportunities within the business. This example really highlights the need for businesses to initiate these conversations, creating an environment where new mothers can feel comfortable sharing their experiences, and remain confident that they will remain valued members of the team.

Once aware of the difficulties experienced by parents transitioning back into the workplace, this business recognised that this was not sustainable long term. There were concerns that these women, lacking support in managing the return to work, would leave – resulting in a loss of valuable knowledge and experience. They also acknowledged their duty of care in ensuring that their staff were able to juggle the work-family balance. The issue was raised by regional and line managers who suggested piloting a parental leave transition coaching program with these women.

In exploring the pain points raised by this group of women through their individual coaching sessions we assisted the business and individual employees/ clients to work on strategies that could help ease the pressure. For some this meant having tough and vulnerable conversations with their teams to increase supports at the shop level. This could only occur for them knowing they had the support from their coach and the business. As a result of this intervention, this group of new parents have a voice within the business. There is increased awareness (at all levels of the business) of the difficulties that many new parents face, and these women report feeling confident and respected when sharing their needs and wants.

Communication within the teams has become stronger, and the new parents feel supported by the business which they hadn't reported previously. Management have been supported to implement changes (i.e. redistributing responsibilities) or acknowledging what situations/ circumstances actually constitute needing a late-night phone call or what can wait until the next day, and workers feel comfortable sharing the mental and physical load at times when they need to focus on their family commitments. The results have been heartening. These women are proof that if businesses think laterally outside the square, and really listen to their staff and their needs, sustainable changes can occur. We have come to realise that whilst flexibility is important, there are many other factors that can assist with managing the demands of challenging roles.

The first step in all of this is communication and removing assumptions. The strength of teams and human understanding is enhanced through open and honest dialogue. It takes strong leadership to acknowledge this and model this. We hope to see more of this particularly in the retail sector!

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