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# Successful Strategies to Support Working Parents

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A RESOURCE FOR EMPLOYERS • 2016

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**SUPPORTING  
WORKING  
PARENTS**

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# Successful strategies to support working parents

The modern workforce is one in which workers of all genders juggle caring responsibilities with paid work. Supporting working parents within workplaces is crucial to realising the full potential of the workforce and of the Australian labour market.

While compliance with legal obligations assists business to create workplaces that support working parents, several organisations have taken this a step further by implementing innovative, leading practices that advance this goal. Supporting working parents through targeted strategies can reduce business costs related to recruitment, retraining and restructures, widen the talent pool, increase organisational productivity and performance and improve organisational reputation.

The purpose of this document is to highlight these 'leading practices' as opportunities that can be used to successfully support pregnant employees and working parents. It brings together strategies implemented by leading Australian employers, many of which are effective, low cost and easy to deliver.

#### Four steps are outlined below that set out how to:

- 1 Establish strong foundations
- 2 Support pregnant employees and employees planning to take parental leave
- 3 Value employees on parental leave
- 4 Enable a successful return to work and support for working parents



**4.1 million** or nearly two in five (38.2 per cent) employees are either parents of a child under 15 years or have caring responsibilities.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia 2009, Basic CURF, Version 3, CD-Rom (2009). Findings based on SPRC's analysis of ABS CURF data.

# Step 1: Establish strong foundations

A strong organisational foundation requires a thorough understanding of rights and responsibilities, robust policies, as well as informed and empowered managers and employees. Moreover, policies must be embedded into organisational culture in order to ensure they are successful, sustainable and set (or reset) workplace 'norms'.

## 1.1 Lead with expansive policies

**Outline what your organisation is doing to create a workplace that actively supports pregnant employees/working parents above and beyond minimum legal compliance. Ensure policies clearly affirm the value of working parents within the organisation.**

**Leading organisations are offering:**

**Leave:**

- Employer-funded paid parental leave for primary and non-primary carers.
- No qualifying period of service for access to employer-funded paid parental leave.
- Allowing the non-primary carer to access other existing leave entitlements, including annual and long service leave, for extended periods around the birth of a child, adoption, foster or kin caring arrangements.
- Allowing employees to purchase longer periods of paid leave.

**Flexibility:**

- Actively promote flexible work options.



**Superannuation contributions:**

- Offering employees employer-funded superannuation contributions, above the legal requirements, while on paid and unpaid parental leave.

### Leading Practice

#### Superannuation contributions

ANZ offers superannuation contributions for up to 24 months of parental leave.

**Childcare assistance:**

- Employer-funded early childhood education and care options.
- Childcare allowances to the primary carer.
- Provide emergency carers and babysitters.
- Provide a 'parents room' either with or without childcare workers on the premises.

### Leading Practice

#### Childcare assistance

Stockland built childcare facilities at their headquarters in Sydney with priority access for employees.

**Salary increments, bonuses and pay rises:**

- Systems to ensure employees on parental leave or working flexibly do not miss out on salary increases or bonuses.

## 1.2 Communicate commitment

**Make clear to your employees that supporting working parents is a priority.**

**Leading organisations:**

- Regularly communicate with all staff on the policies and support available.
- Publish the organisation's policies on the intranet, the internet and/or distribute hard copies.
- Conduct workshops/seminars to promote understanding about the policies.
- Make visible employees' caring responsibilities or flexible work arrangements, particularly within senior leadership.



## Step 1: continued

### Leading Practice Communication

The CEO of Goldman Sachs has focused on increasing his communication with those planning, on and returning from leave.

He conducts one-on-one meetings with employees as they commence parental leave, invites employees to the office at least once while on leave and hosts a business update for parents before, during and upon return from leave.

### 1.3 Visible commitment of senior leaders Ensure visible commitment of senior leaders.

#### Leading organisations:

- Ensure personal communication from leadership to working parents regularly – before, during and upon return from leave.
- Profile senior leaders who have families and use workplace support.
- Appoint senior leaders as champions who can arrange seminars, luncheons, informal networks, circulate research and generally maintain enthusiasm for making support for working parents a reality.
- Create internal networks of support with information for parents and parents-to-be.

### Leading Practice Impact of senior leadership

The CEO of Taj, a leading law firm and member of the Deloitte international network, personally tackled the lack of gender diversity in his organisation. He was involved in every promotion discussion. “What I have done is promote people on performance. If someone works 50% of the time, we adjust that performance to its full-time equivalent. When you adjust performance on a Full-Time-Equivalent (FTE) basis, maternity issues stop being an indicator.”

He insisted on gender parity from the beginning. He personally ensured that the best assignments were evenly awarded between men and women. He tracked promotions and compensation to ensure parity. If there was a gap, he asked why. He put his best female lawyers on some of his toughest cases. When clients objected, he personally called them up and asked them to give the lawyer three months to prove herself. In every case, the client was quick to agree and managed to overcome the initial gender bias.

### 1.4 Understand employee needs

**Talk with your employees about the kinds of issues that may arise during pregnancy, parental leave and return to work, and discuss solutions.**

#### Leading organisations:

- Regularly ask for feedback from employees and conduct confidential surveys.
- Review and revise support and policies based on employee feedback.

## Step 1: continued



### Leading Practice

#### Retaining talent through childcare support

Caltex was concerned about retention rates of female employees so it developed a suite of initiatives to support employees returning to work following parental leave.

This includes a 3% a quarter bonus up until the child is 2 years of age to help with childcare costs ('Babycare' package). Consequently, 100% of employees taking parental leave have returned to the company.

### 1.5 Sponsor manager capability

**Build manager capacity and drive commitment of managers.**

#### Leading organisations:

- Include KPIs for managers on retention of pregnant employees and employees returning from parental leave.
- Provide training, mentoring and coaching to managers on parental leave policies and effective management of employees before, during and upon return from leave.
- Support managers to have conversations with staff about flexible work and the needs of both the business and the employee.
- Build capacity to manage flexible work including through job redesign and adjustments to performance metrics for part-time workers.
- Drive commitment of managers through CEO sponsorship of training for managers and personal messages from CEOs signalling the importance of attending and actively participating in training.
- Encourage managers to discuss the 'human' elements including congratulating an employee when a pregnancy, adoption, foster or kin caring arrangement is announced and being mindful of potential anxiety and vulnerability around the perceived impact on career.

## Step 1: continued

### 1.6 Focus on the employee not on the 'employment stage'

**Manage pregnancy, parental leave and return to work in a holistic and integrated way rather than in isolated phases.**

**Leading organisations:**

- Develop a plan from the pregnancy, adoption, foster or kin caring announcement through to preparing for an employee's parental leave, staying connected during parental leave, reintegrating and career acceleration upon return from parental leave.
- Ensure employees who are pregnant, on parental leave or working flexibly are included in talent discussions and pipeline reviews and considered for promotion opportunities.

### 1.7 Encourage non-primary carers to take parental leave through targeted action

**Improve sharing of care between parents by encouraging secondary carers to take parental leave.**

**Leading organisations:**

- Provide dedicated employer-paid leave for non-primary carers that is available over a 24-month period.
- Use targeted communication encouraging non-primary carers to take parental leave and use flexible work options.
- Promote and encourage flexible work options for non-primary carers.

### 1.8 Increase scrutiny on role changes, redundancies, dismissals and retention of parents

**Ensure any changes to the job of pregnant employees and those on or returning from parental leave is appropriately scrutinised.**

**Leading organisations:**

- Make unconscious bias conscious, by recognising the danger of parents (before, during and upon return from leave) being inadvertently over-represented in redundancies and dismissals. Leading organisations are ensuring increased scrutiny including elevating sign-off to senior leadership.
- Review parental leave metrics at least twice a year to ensure retention and progression rates are thriving.



### 1.9 Monitor and track the implementation and impact of policies

**Assess and review existing programs and practices at regular intervals to identify where improvements or changes need to be made.**

**Leading organisations:**

- Actively track career progression of pregnant employees and employees who have returned from parental leave.
- Conduct regular audits of retention rates of employees who are pregnant or have taken parental leave.
- Conduct regular surveys and consultations with staff who intend to use/have recently used parental leave or have returned to work and update policies and practices accordingly.

## Step 1: continued

### Tips for small organisations

#### Recognising parents as an asset

Many small businesses provide niche goods and services and thus require staff with specific skills and experience. They value all employees as an asset to their organisation and understand that retaining pregnant women and parents is an imperative for the long-term success of the business.

#### Building on close relationships

Small organisations often foster close working relationships. This can lead to greater understanding of and flexibility around employer and employee needs.

#### Having open conversations

Open communication directly between an employer and employee, instead of through Human Resources, can facilitate trust and help to avoid confusion and uncertainty when an employee is pregnant, on parental leave and returning to work on flexible arrangements. Similarly, open conversations with all staff help to manage expectations and encourage a supportive work environment.

#### Keeping in touch

Providing employees on parental leave with advanced notice of any changes in the organisation,

or opportunities for training and professional development, can maintain an employee's ties to the organisation. Employees on parental leave can be invited to bring their baby to work and to team meetings and social gatherings.

#### Flexibility

Discussing flexible work options with working parents and other staff early on, and considering varied rosters and different start and finishing times, will facilitate solutions and enable employees to work as a team to complete tasks, including covering for each other to accommodate different working schedules.



Research from Australia and internationally shows that access to flexible work practices has several **benefits such as increased efficiency and outputs for employers** irrespective of their size. This includes reduced absenteeism and turnover, and increased job satisfaction.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia 2009, Basic CURF, Version 3, CD-Rom (2009). Findings based on SPRC's analysis of ABS CURF data.



## Step 2: Supporting pregnant employees and employees planning to take parental leave

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Open communication, consultation and a supportive framework are critical factors at all phases of an employee's parental leave experience. It is particularly important at the time of the pregnancy, adoption, foster or kin caring announcement as this is an opportunity to set up for a successful transition process.

### 2.1 Manage the process proactively

**Encourage managers to take an active role in supporting pregnant employees and employees planning to take parental leave.**

#### **Leading organisations:**

- Ensure managers and Human Resources talk to employees about policies and available resources.
- Ensure managers set up a meeting to discuss issues that may be relevant for a pregnant employee such as expectations for work arrangements during pregnancy, planning for pre-natal visits, pregnancy related illness and workplace safety.
- Ensure managers are informed about adoption, foster or kin caring processes and relevant entitlements, for example, pre-adoption leave.
- Provide for a separate meeting to discuss planning for parental leave and expectations for keeping in touch and return to work.

### 2.2 Provide information

**Clarity and transparency on policies and support for employees and managers.**

#### **Leading organisations:**

- Provide guides, toolkits or checklists to give new and expectant parents relevant and practical information including information on: employee rights and entitlements, processes and timeframes for applying for leave, documentation requirements, information on where to turn for advice and support, keeping in touch on leave, and returning from leave, including return to work notification requirements and career planning with extended leave.

You can access this information at  
[www.supportingworkingparents.gov.au](http://www.supportingworkingparents.gov.au)

## Step 2: continued

### Leading Practice

#### Sharing information on parental leave

The My Parental Leave guide for employees and the Managing Parental Leave guide for line managers are the two key sources of 'self-service' information housed on one employer's intranet, which help the employee and their line manager navigate through every aspect of parental leave. They contain key facts, policy details, timelines, checklists, sources of external information, benefits and processes.

The Guide for Employees includes specific employee relevant information concerning entitlements, applying for leave, being on leave, and returning from leave – whether they are the primary care giver, the mother, the father, the partner, co-parent, guardian or carer.

The Guide for Line Managers includes information to help managers support their employees in checking eligibility, applying for leave, keeping in touch while on leave, and enabling a smooth transition upon return from leave. These guides also include signposts to government websites and other external agencies.

### 2.3 Take steps to eradicate prejudice and assumptions

**Leading organisations actively take steps to eradicate prejudice and assumptions about pregnant employees and working parents.**

#### Leading organisations:

- Provide training for co-workers to encourage understanding and minimise bias and resentment (such as when a pregnant employee is transferred to a safe job or is provided with flexible working arrangements such as working from home or adjusted hours).
- Provide unconscious bias workshops.
- Normalise parental leave as akin to any other form of leave.



## Step 3: Value employees on parental leave



Maintaining contact with an employee on parental leave is an important way of letting them know they are a valued employee and is critical to ensuring retention and a smooth transition upon return.

### 3.1 Implement a 'keep in touch' program for employees on parental leave

#### Leading organisations:

##### Engage employees on leave:

- Within legal requirements, maintain the employee's desired level of engagement with the workplace and check in with the employee to ensure the level of engagement they opted for before leave is still appropriate.
- Ensure employees on leave are invited to relevant training opportunities, important functions or other occasions that will support their engagement with the workplace and their professional development, as well as social functions.
- Explain to employees the option to use 'keep in touch' days. Subject to legal requirements, managers can use this as a tool to engage employees and quickly bring them up to speed before their return to the workforce.

#### Support managers to stay in touch with employees on leave:

- Ensure that all employees taking parental leave are captured accurately within human resource management systems including their effective return date. This helps facilitate a smooth return to work transition and allows more scope for proactively managing the careers of parents.
- Support managers to stay in touch by providing automated calendar reminders.

#### Support employees to retain technology that will enable them to remain connected to the workplace:

- Ensure employees on leave can retain their emails and communication devices (such as laptops, phones, etc.) and maintain links to information or events important for their continued professional development.



## Step 3: continued

### Leading Practice

#### Sharing information on parental leave

One large employer's parents@work program provides parents with the knowledge, confidence and support to transition successfully to and from parental leave, and to help them thrive as working parents.

The program provides parents and their managers with access to a suite of options including: the parents@work interactive portal, accessible by all staff, where employees can access information about flexible work, company policies and government entitlements and a dedicated Q&A section supporting parents and carers.

The portal also includes information about: childcare resources, preparing for parental leave, staying in touch, returning to work and managing your career as a working parent. 'Parents@work' seminars and personalised coaching are also available.



### 3.2 Discuss the employee's return to work expectations and needs

**Contact your employee when they are nearing the end of their leave to ensure a smooth transition.**

#### Leading organisations:

- Proactively reach out to employees on leave to discuss their return to work transition and how best the organisation can support their reintegration.
- Explore options for flexible work and any other adjustments.

### 3.3 Institute regular 'development and opportunity reviews'

**Be in contact with employees on parental leave to ensure career plans are understood and to identify opportunities to reignite career plans upon return.**

### 3.4 Identify a return to work co-ordinator or establish a 'buddy system'

**Ensure that there is an individual in the organisation who is responsible for remaining connected with the employee on leave and facilitating return to work.**



## Step 4: Enable a successful return to work and support for working parents

A supportive and deliberate reintroduction to the workplace sets the employee up for success upon return from parental leave. In most cases, flexible work arrangements are a key enabler to successful reintegration for working parents and all employees juggling work and caring responsibilities more broadly.

### 4.1 Establish a formal return to work process

**This may include a reinduction seminar designed to provide additional support services to working parents who have recently returned to work.**

### 4.2 Discuss flexible work arrangements that will enable working parents to succeed

**Don't make assumptions about an employee's work requirements; this applies to both primary and non-primary carers. Have an open conversation about flexible work options. Arrangements may include part-time work, reduced hours, condensed working week, nine-day fortnight, different locations or job redesign, or a combination of these. It is essential that flexible jobs are redesigned to take into account reduced hours (i.e. ensuring an employee working less than a full-time load is not still given a full-time load and that their performance is not measured against full-time requirements).**

### 4.3 Support and educate managers and all staff to create a positive and responsive culture

**The team's attitudes and approach to that employee will significantly contribute to the success of the return to work arrangement.**

### 4.4 Ensure appropriate space is available for employees to breastfeed or express on return to work

**Also consider providing a family or parenting room to allow parents to bring their children to work after school or if a child is unable to attend day care/school.**

### Leading Practice Flexibility

The 'All Roles Flex' initiative pioneered by Telstra means that every role in the company can be undertaken flexibly. The aim of this new position is that it will amplify productivity benefits, lift engagement, establish a clear market proposition and also enable a new way of working. Mainstreaming flexibility means that the option to work flexibly is available for all Telstra employees and is not only considered an issue for women.

When Telstra announced "All Roles Flex" would be adopted throughout the company by the end of March 2014, a key factor in embedding it into workplace culture was how it was modelled by the leadership. Telstra's leaders have led by example in showing what it means to be balanced, flexible, creative and effective in how they work and lead.

The use of technology, workplace design and new attitudes have shifted the focus on face time towards a focus on outcomes. The results have benefitted both Telstra and its employees. In 2015, 84% of employees agreed that they are able to access the flexibility they need to balance work and personal life.

Flexible work options have also resulted in significant improvements in gender equality. For example, in the past year the total number of Telstra employees has increased by 2.8%, while the total number of women increased by 5.8%. Rates of parental leave return and retention are higher than 90%, and the number of male managers at Telstra taking primary parental leave has increased from 0.8% to 2.3%. These numbers illustrate a shift in culture and a new norm around men and flexibility at Telstra.

## Step 4: continued

### 4.5 Track employee experience and assess needs following return to work

#### Leading organisations:

- Regularly meet to discuss the experience of employees returning to work and tailor responses to their needs.
- Monitor and review job fit of part-time employees and those choosing their own hours to ensure they aren't being required to work excessive hours or perform full-time roles in part-time hours.

### 4.6 Offer coaching, mentoring and/or training to support the individual needs of employees returning to work

#### Leading organisations:

- Establish one-on-one customised 'coaching' for employees preparing to return to work that recognises individual needs and circumstances.
- Offer internal and external coaching, mentoring and training on career progression and work/life responsibilities to support employees.

### 4.7 Promote and demystify flexibility for managers and for employees returning to work

#### Leading organisations:

- Establish a 'flexibility manager' within the Human Resources team to deal with all requests relating to flexibility. This role includes coaching managers on how to better manage flexible work.
- Establish a jobshare register to help staff and managers negotiate jobsharing arrangements. This could be promoted internally on the organisation's intranet.
- Train managers on managing flexible work arrangements and making them work. This should include capability around job redesign and adjustments to performance metrics for part-time workers.



#### Leading Practice Schedule control

A retail store chain introduced a flexible work program, known as the *Results Only Work Environment* (ROWE). This program provides workers with the opportunity to nominate when and where they work based on individual needs and job responsibilities, which are then agreed upon with their employer.

Flexible work options included work from home and increased schedule control such as self-rostering. Analysis of ROWE found positive outcomes including improved health of staff and reduced work-family conflicts. In addition, voluntary turnover rates reduced as much as 90% within teams implementing ROWE.

This resulted in savings of \$2.2 million over the course of two years for one particular team and increased productivity among teams by an average of 41%.



This document brings together in four steps, leading practices from businesses across Australia that move beyond minimum legal obligations and provide opportunities to create workplaces that better support working parents. **Many of these strategies are low cost and easy to implement.** The Australian Human Rights Commission hopes this resource will inspire businesses to implement similar leading practices to better support working parents.

