

A very happy return

Transitioning back to work after even just a week's holiday can sometimes be a daunting prospect. Things move quickly in the workplace, so returning after several months, or a year – especially after going through something as life-changing as having a baby – may rightly seem terrifying.

Not only is readjusting to office life a challenge, but maintaining a work-life balance will be more important now than ever before. Here representatives from the Wibl group's gold sponsors – many of whom are living proof that it can be done – offer practical tips and tricks to get you back in business in no time.

A&L Goodbody

By partner **Marie O'Brien**

A&L Goodbody recognises that to retain and attract the top talent in the market, we need to ensure that taking a period of leave is not a daunting prospect nor an obstacle to progression. In the case of maternity leave, it is a brief but very special period in hopefully a long, successful and rewarding career. In addition to encouraging pregnant lawyers to discuss their concerns in advance of taking maternity leave, it is vital that the transition back to work afterwards is handled correctly. Having recently returned from maternity leave myself I know that it is a time when feelings of insecurity and apprehension can surface easily. High performers often have a determination to show that nothing has changed on their return.

The reality is that there has been a big change, and timetables have to be shifted accordingly. It is important that an environment exists where an open discussion around a person's commitments and expectations takes place.

This does not necessarily mean a drop in productivity or a sideways shift in career. It means an adult conversation around expecta-



Marie O'Brien

tions and flexibility being shown on both sides, whereby the demands of family and of clients are balanced appropriately. It means coaching and training for partners and managers to understand that small shifts in their working practices can make a world of difference to family life. It means embracing tech-

nology to make it possible to implement flexible and remote working policies that allow a person to remain productive without sacrificing family time unnecessarily. There will be pressure points that are hard to avoid, but these can be minimised by taking the right approach and thereby creating a healthier and less stressful environment for the whole team.

A&L Goodbody is acutely aware that it is a business imperative to get the balance right. We are working hard to implement appropriate structures to assist and support those returning from maternity leave and also on ensuring we have workable parenting policies allowing both parents the ability to manage family and career. Having a baby is probably the best time management course anyone can do, and we at A&L Goodbody know that hours in the office don't necessarily equal excellence as a lawyer. In my experience, trust, integrity, confidence and communication are the key components to successfully transitioning back to work. Our approach to maternity and paternity leave is just one aspect of our general ambition to create a healthy workplace environment from a work-life balance perspective.

DLA Piper

By head of diversity & inclusion **Mitra Janes**

At DLA Piper we have introduced a maternity and parental coaching programme for everyone taking maternity leave, and fathers or partners taking shared parental leave. Coachees are offered three individual sessions focused on helping to manage this transitional period in their life and career. The first session takes place before leave commences, and focuses on planning for leave both practically and emotionally, as well as how to maintain contact while on leave. The second session takes place during leave and focuses on planning for the return to work and thinking about the logistics of the dual role of parent and professional. The final session takes place within the first few months back at work, and reviews the return-to-work process and continued focus on career goals.

Additionally we are offering all partners and managers individual coaching to provide support in managing sensitive conversations regarding maternity or parental leave with their direct report, maintaining contact during

We believe the initiative will improve the retention and career progression of women



Mitra Janes

the leave period and successfully managing return and re-integration post-leave. All of our coaching is provided by specialist external coaches who have experience of working with law firms.

Through this initiative we are aiming to give

a clear message regarding continued support for the career development of our people as they become parents. Longer term, we believe the initiative will improve the retention and career progression of women in particular.

Shearman & Sterling

By partner **Paula Anderson**

Transitions are hard for everyone, and transitioning back to work after a period of leave proves to be no different. Nothing beats real-world advice from women who have been there – those who left and have come back, and lived to tell the tale. Most often, a female lawyer will take some amount of leave to have a baby, and the return to the office can be professionally – and personally – challenging.

Do not be shy about asking for help before, during and after your leave – either formally or informally. Have coffee with a colleague or look to one of the dedicated departments that many law firms have to help lawyers throughout their careers, including during times of transition. Women who have come back to the workforce understand the challenges and can be great sources of insight and support.

The best advice for handling a maternity leave transition is the same as advice for handling any transition – be prepared. It is critical to prepare as much as you can before you go. Creating comprehensive case files with important information and documents will help those taking over during your leave, and will give you peace of mind that things are not going to fall apart without you. Stay in touch with colleagues and partners while on leave, if you can, particularly as you draw closer to your return date – this will ensure that when you transition back, there will be work on your desk and you will still be top of mind.

Nothing beats real-world advice from women who have been there



Paula Anderson

When I was preparing to go on maternity leave with my first child, I reached out to one of my fellow female partners who had returned from leave a couple of years earlier to solicit her advice on how best to handle the transition. Not only did she provide some very valuable tips on managing the process, she also provided the reassurance I needed that with the proper planning and execution, it was possible to have a successful transition. Importantly, she counselled me on managing my own expectations and helped me to un-

derstand that a ramp-up period following a leave was typical. I have imparted this same advice to other female lawyers, who have in turn come to me to seek guidance on their transition.

What is most important about giving (or receiving) mentoring during a transition is the opportunity to have a sounding board for questions or concerns about navigating the transition back to work, and the reassurance that everything will be just fine when you return.

Sidley Austin

By senior associate **Nicola Bartholomew**

“My time off gave me a new focus and renewed energy”

Nicola Bartholomew

The transition back to work after a period of parental leave can be a daunting and challenging time. However, if managed well, it can also be a positive and empowering experience for both the individual and the business.

I was the first employee at Sidley to benefit from the new shared parental leave regime introduced in April 2015. I elected to give my husband four of my 12 months maternity leave,

and return to work full time after eight months out of the office. During that time, Sidley had undergone a number of significant but exciting changes. The landscape of the firm and the role I was returning to was, in many respects, quite different, and the thought of swapping play dates and nappy changes for conference calls and nursery runs was daunting.

While in practice each individual's circumstances will differ and there is no one-size-

fits-all solution, there are a number of practical steps that can help ensure the transition back to work is a positive experience. For me, support, planning and communication were key.

- **Support:** it is important that women (and men) are supported by the business in their transition back to work to ensure they feel valued and motivated on their return.
- **Planning:** it was vital to have childcare arrangements in place that I trusted and was confident in, together with contingency plans for when things (inevitably) go wrong.
- **Communications:** businesses can often be reluctant to communicate with employees who are on parental leave. However, I believe open lines of communication during parental leave can lead to a smoother transition back to work. I took a proactive approach in keeping in touch with Sidley during my time off (particularly the latter stages) and, as a result, I had a better understanding of what had been happening in my absence which, in turn, boosted my confidence on my return.

Returning to work as a full time working parent in a City law firm is not without its challenges. However, my time off gave me a new focus and renewed energy. With the right support, planning and communications, the transition back to the world of work can be a positive experience – as it was for me.

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