



# RETURN TO WORK:

## HOW TO SUCCEED AT BRINGING PARENTS BACK AFTER LEAVE





## SOLVING TODAY'S COSTLIEST RETENTION PROBLEM

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Employers are concerned about retaining working parents – and for good reason. With 61 million of these employees<sup>1</sup> serving in valuable jobs, many in client-facing positions and leadership roles, employers cannot afford to lose them.

Though parental leave policies have expanded over recent years,<sup>2</sup> the cultural shifts and organizational systems needed to support leave have not kept pace. Nearly one in four women would be worried to tell their boss they are expecting – a figure that has doubled from 2014. And if taking leave is challenging, returning can be more so: 34% of new mothers don't return to work after maternity leave, and 11% of those women will find a new employer.<sup>3</sup>

For organizations, the impact is twofold: losing today's workers and shrinking pipeline for future leaders. In fact, while women are on track to make up most of the college-educated labor force in 2019,<sup>4</sup> they occupy just 10% of top management positions in S&P 1500 companies.<sup>5</sup>



## THE LEADERSHIP PARADOX

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According to the CDC, more women today are having babies in their 30s than in their 20s.<sup>6</sup> These women are hitting work/family conflicts when their careers are well established and they are especially valuable to their employers. This gap between qualifications and career heights reveals the need for cultural shifts.<sup>7</sup>

- ▶ **84%** of working Americans say that a business is more successful with working mothers in leadership roles.
- ▶ Yet, **41%** perceive working moms as less devoted to their work.

The bottom line is, with so much at stake for both parents and their organizations, their organizations, parental leave alone cannot solve the issue. Employees need support that allows them to maintain their career goals while adjusting to their new priorities as parents when returning to work.



## PERCEPTIONS SHAPING REALITY

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The Modern Family Index confirms that working mothers are dedicated employees who are passionate about their roles and look forward to developing their careers.<sup>8</sup>

- ▶ **90%** of working mothers say their careers are important.
- ▶ **74%** work because they love their careers.

Many of these women have their eyes set on what is next: **33%** are working towards a promotion, **28%** have goals of becoming a leader in their organization, and **17%** have plans to journey all the way to the C-suite.

However, many women encounter new career roadblocks from the moment they request parental leave. Even with good intent, managers may limit their workloads, pass them over for high-impact projects, or limit career advancement opportunities based on perceived notions of the employee's needs or goals. In fact, **73%** of mothers believe they see fewer advancement opportunities than women who are not mothers. Moreover, it is not only working mothers. According to a recent study from Unum,<sup>9</sup> **80%** of fathers have experienced the first-hand stigma of taking parental leave.

# MAKE PARENTING AND A CAREER POSSIBLE

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Working parents should not have to choose between their job and family priorities. To retain these employees, organizations must remove roadblocks and establish specific policies, programs, and cultural supports that are in place before leave begins and continue well into an employee's return.

## Engage the Audience

To address the challenges working mothers face, employers must go right to the source: working parents themselves. Today's top organizations are creating programs that seek and respond directly to feedback from employee engagement groups.

Unlike surveys, engagement groups provide employees with a forum of their peers to share insights and provide HR with specific examples of the challenges they are facing. Organizations can then engage senior leaders, especially women in leadership, to cultivate and promote an inclusive culture and help solve specific challenges for their workforce.

## Invite Transparent Discussions

The foundation for a successful leave – and return – is preparation. To create a culture where working parents feel welcomed, organizations need open conversations across all parties involved.

Topics to focus on include:

- ▶ **Conveying the policies and programs** available during this transition
- ▶ **Establishing a clear understanding** of how the employee would like to re-enter the workforce
- ▶ **Defining responsibilities and sharing specifics** about needed coverage while the employee is on leave and transitioning back
- ▶ **Creating specific coaching programs** that offer training and tools to ensure employees and managers have a successful return
- ▶ **Openly communicating** about the support programs available to new parents through the employer, and actively encouraging use.

To retain working parents, organizations must show employees, including managers, that they are committed to welcoming new parents back and supporting them as they enter this new stage of life and career.

## Offer Flexible (or Phased) Return

Successful transitions require a thoughtful process that enables employees to plan for their workplace re-entry. Flexibility is needed, as new parents adapt to the challenge of balancing their career with new parental responsibilities. During pre-leave discussions, managers should work with employees on a return plan that includes:

- ▶ **Asking how much responsibility** they want to take on while they transition back into the workforce
- ▶ **Ensuring their career goals are clear** and not compromised by new challenges
- ▶ **Removing assumptive conversations** such as, “I know you just had a baby, so...”

Simple but effective programs, like a Parental Leave Toolkit, can signal support for employees during this time and offer the tools they need to feel welcomed and wanted as they return.

## Ease Child Care Concerns

A significant part of returning from leave is arranging child care. Nearly half of Americans live in areas with quality child care shortages,<sup>10</sup> especially when it comes to infant care. Child care wait lists can be months long, meaning a parent might return to a ‘regular’ work routine before their child’s care plan is fully established.

Emergency back-up care programs lower stress by helping new parents quickly find an in-home caregiver or local child care center for days when their initial plans fall through. These programs can be particularly valuable in the early weeks when an employee might view child care-related absences as a setback to their re-entry goals.

Many parents choose to keep their child home during their first year. To do this, they often alternate work schedules to share the responsibility and rely on part-time help from a sitter or family member. Breakdowns in these care arrangements can add stress, diminish productivity, and weaken confidence in a successful return to the organization. A trusted and responsive back-up care program that allows employees to instantly confirm last-minute care can turn a potential challenge into an example of organizational support and commitment to employees and their families.



## BUILD A COMPETITIVE EDGE

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Working parents are a critical part of every workforce. Organizations that recognize this and implement effective supports build long-term competitive advantages, including:

- ▶ **Increased talent pools.** Family-friendly employers can reclaim skilled women who might otherwise opt out. As Kellogg's Dean Blount points out, this is a global trend: "Denmark, Norway, and Sweden – nations where high-quality, affordable child and elder care is the norm – all rank among the top OECD nations in female workforce participation."<sup>11</sup>
- ▶ **Recognition as an employer of choice.** The 2019 SHRM Employee Benefits<sup>12</sup> report shows increases in many family-friendly benefits, from nursing support to dependent care support, and 84 of the Working Mother 100 Best Companies feature phase-back programs.
- ▶ **Capable and confident leaders.** Parenthood hones several skills that are essential in the workplace. For example, working mothers rate higher than any other peer group in time management, remaining calm in a crisis, and multi-tasking.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, a 2019 study from Talking Talent found that one-third of new mothers and more than half of new fathers exhibit greater confidence in their roles after returning from leave.

The benefits of a well-planned and inclusive return-to-work program go beyond retention. Forward-thinking companies recognize this as an opportunity to build a diverse, high-performing workforce with a culture that supports employees through each stage of their life and career.

# ABOUT BRIGHT HORIZONS

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**Bright Horizons®** creates and manages employee support programs that empower working parents before, during, and after leave. More than 1,100 of today's top employers rely on our solutions to address key challenges – improved well-being, increased engagement and retention, and greater productivity – for their entire employee base.

**Contact us to learn more about our employer solutions.**

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Characteristics of Families Summary, April 18, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Society for Human Resource Management, SHRM Employee Benefits Survey, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Oviahealth, Motherhood in America, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> NPR, New Report Says Women Will Soon Be Majority Of College-Educated U.S. Workers, June 20, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Desilver, Drew, Women Scarce at the Top of U.S. Business – and in the Jobs that Lead There, Pew Research Center, April 30, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> CDC, Vital Statistics Surveillance Report, May 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Bright Horizons, Modern Family Index 2018, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Unum, Parental Leave for New Dads, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Center for American Progress, America's Child Care Deserts in 2018, 2018

<sup>11</sup> Kellogg Insight, Getting More Women Into the C-Suite Means Keeping Them in the Talent Pipeline, March 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Society for Human Resource Management, SHRM Employee Benefits 2019 Executive Summary, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Bright Horizons, Modern Family Index 2018, 2019.



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