

# How to support parents in the modern workplace



Many Australian businesses are on board with offering their staff flexibility and maternity leave. But to truly support modern parents in the workplace, it goes beyond just paid leave and policies – it's about genuine leadership and understanding work-life transitions.

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## 1 Go beyond the cash splash

While paid leave is a critical piece of parental leave programs, great organisations don't stop there – they consider what else is needed beyond the monetary reward.

Some examples of good practice in this area include coaching to support both the practical and emotional elements of the transition, and building consistent leadership capability whereby employees don't have to rely on 'the boss lottery'.

Far too often when you speak to someone who has experienced the parental leave transition, they will say they had a good experience because they had a "good manager" or that their experience was negative due a "bad manager". Navigating the challenges around returning to work is already difficult without the added stress of worrying about one's manager.

From a retention perspective, many people will leave the workplace based on this if their experience is negative. It makes good business sense to focus on building leadership capability. It is a key to the success of the parental leave

transition and one that unfortunately is still overlooked. It seems that truly innovative companies also ensure that superannuation payments continue to be paid to employees taking both paid and unpaid parental leave. This is great news as it has the double bonus of boosting retirement savings while also helping to reduce the superannuation gender gap.

## 2 More than just a policy

While good policy is an essential foundation for good parental leave support, we know that companies doing this well are very good at ensuring that the rhetoric is translated into reality.

There are often good policies that sit on the intranet, yet so often people and managers are not aware of the resources and support that are available to them. Ensuring that policies are kept up to date with new legislation is also critical such as the new changes to flexibility from 1 December last year.

Finally, understanding the barriers to update is also important. For example, according to a recent OECD report, only one in 50 men in Australia take parental

leave. What are the barriers and how can organisations address these? Three of the most common problems for many men are not being aware of the option, financial constraints and seeing it as a 'career killer'.

Understanding these barriers and having culturally-sanctioned options is therefore critical for those businesses that want to do this well. Following on from this is having role models within the organisation who harness support and openly acknowledge the challenges.

Far too often our clients will say "I never knew that other people were feeling this way" or "I thought it was only me". Supporting internal networks and peer-to-peer mentoring programs can make a real difference if resourced well.

## 3 Understand the modern family

The make up of the Australian family is ever-changing. The increase in LGBTQI families, single parents and foster parents means that we can no longer call this a 'mum-related' transition. We need our programs to broadly capture all parents including

fathers and caregivers, whether biological or not.

Companies are actively changing policies to reflect this but do not realise the importance of offering support in this area. Adoption and foster care are often overlooked because they tend to be placed in the 'too hard basket'. Businesses need to focus on the individual experience and commit to putting the right supports in place for people at the right time, which differ according to each parental journey.

#### **4 Recognise shared parental leave support**

Traditionally, it has been common for companies to support a parent taking primary carer's leave, from offering a period of paid parental leave to filling their role while they are on leave.

In the past, this period of leave has generally been taken by the mother. In recent times, due to the changing face of families, there has been an increase in the primary carer's leave being taken by both parents in a shared model. During the year, one will take either the first six or nine months and the other takes the latter six or three months.

Companies embracing this are providing support to bridge the challenges parents and couples face during this handover period from one parent to another. This includes offering coaching to both parents in relation to role clarity and particularly the isolation that dads and partners can feel at this extended time away from work.

#### **5 It's not always smooth sailing**

It is important that workplaces have the right supports set up to manage situations such as early delivery, miscarriages, still births and perinatal mental health to name just a few.

In fact, recent research by PriceWaterhouseCoopers has shown that the cost of lost productivity in the workplace is estimated at \$158 million for mothers in one year if postnatal depression is not addressed and \$68 million for fathers.

Often, parents who are experiencing distress view what they're going through in the context of having a baby, rather than the context that something may be wrong, like early signs of mental health problems.

As such, many parents only seek help when they are at absolute breaking point and finding themselves no longer able to cope. For fathers in particular, this is becoming an all too common problem.

The 'Perinatal Workplace Wellbeing Program, created by the teams at Transitioning Well and Centre of Perinatal Excellence, is a great example of helping workplaces move towards a more supportive future. The program was recently funded through the WorkSafe WorkWell Mental Health Improvement Fund.

#### **6 Beyond the parental leave transition**

In addition to supporting the parental leave transition, great companies are also supporting the family planning phase as people consider becoming parents. From the moment someone plans to have a baby whether it's a natural pregnancy or involving fertility, IVF or adoption, people need understanding and support.

The businesses that are doing it well understand the true meaning of flexibility and not only support people to use it, but actively encourage it in the workplace. Equally important are the ongoing work-life transitions that parents often go through, such as school transitions and practical strategies

for raising teenagers. Great companies are increasingly supporting a growing number of what is often termed the 'sandwich generation' – those employees who support both their children (child care) and their ageing parents (eldercare). Businesses that offer truly flexible work environments understand that it's important to support work-life enrichment, no matter what state of the parental journey their employees are at.

#### **7 It's no longer a 'nice to have'**

We know that great companies understand the importance of supporting their people in transition. Rather than seeing it has a 'nice to have', they understand the true return on investment.

In fact, a research by the Australian School of Business shows a positive impact on a number of objective measures of business performance. The importance of evaluating programs and ensuring the value to not only the organisation but also hopeful, expectant and new parents is critical.

So often, we see organisations putting in place programs without first understanding need or evaluating their impact. It cannot be assumed that just because a program has been implemented that it will be helpful – you need to test it and check both fit and ROI.

Great companies first understand the need, then set up both pilots and ongoing evaluations to ensure success and sustainability. ■

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*Transitioning Well helps shape and support parental leave, work life and mature age transitions and provides a range of services to fit the individual needs of organisations and employees. Visit: [transitioningwell.com.au](http://transitioningwell.com.au)*

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