

Executive mom

Returning to work after a maternity leave is especially hard for women in leadership roles

BY EILEEN CHADNICK

As a senior-level account manager at Hill and Knowlton, an international public relations agency with Canadian head offices in Toronto, Hilda Kinross was managing one of the agency's largest accounts when she had her first child more than six years ago. Having children was always in the plan, but so was having a fulfilling and progressive career.

"I always imagined being a career person as well as being a mother. I just couldn't anticipate how I would balance both," says Kinross, who today has two children and has since been promoted twice. She's currently vice-president of technology practice at Hill and Knowlton.

Speaking from her home office where she telecommutes for part of her workweek, Kinross recounts feeling overwhelmed, uncertain and emotionally stressed — particularly with her first maternity leave. But her resourcefulness and tremendous support from her employer, which included flexible work arrangements, a fully functional home office and supportive colleagues, helped her get through her leaves and get back on track.

Managing a career after having a baby is no small feat for even the most talented, dedicated and experienced women. Unfortunately many don't receive the support they need from their organizations

and either leave or opt out of their careers all together.

Smart companies are realizing they need to pay more attention to this issue and support women.

"It really is not a 'nice to have' — it is a requirement," says April Taggart, senior vice-president of talent management and diversity at BMO Financial Group and a mother of two. "What's at stake in an increasingly shrinking labour pool is that you don't have the right talent that you need to meet the business goals that you have."

Simply being guaranteed a job upon return is not enough. People expect opportunities for growth, development and flexibility, she says. Also, while programs and policies are important, it's equally important to focus on the cultural side of things to create a supportive environment.

Start early

Having a child can be one of life's most exciting events but it can also be fraught with anxiety, especially for first-timers. Women who have invested heavily in their careers may worry: How will I stay current? Will my career be derailed or can I get back on track? Will I be able to handle it all?

Employers should counsel women before they go on leave to manage expectations, provide information and help alleviate concerns. This can include formal packages or even information on the company intranet. But, most

importantly, it should include one-on-one conversations.

Striking the balance of letting go and staying connected can be an issue for leaders on maternity leave. Make it easy for employees to stay in touch during leave if they choose, but ensure it's not perceived as mandatory. Examples could be e-mail updates on key issues or assigning a colleague to keep in touch with the woman on leave.

It's also a good idea to counsel women to keep an open mind during early conversations about their reintegration plans because they may not be able to accurately predict how they will feel or what they will want when they return.

Flexibility is king

Flexibility is enormously valued at this stage in a woman's life. Companies such as BMO and Hill and Knowlton offer programs such as flex-time, flexible workweeks, permanent part-time, job sharing and telework.

However, no one solution works for everyone so it's important to acknowledge individuality. Where possible, create a mix of programs the employee can choose from to meet her unique circumstances. When a solution isn't already on the menu, be creative and resourceful to find a way to meet a need of a valued employee. Hill and Knowlton went above the call of duty in giving paid time off to support Kinross through some personal challenges associated with her second pregnancy. This goes a long way to build loyalty, says Kinross, who has now been with the company for more than nine years.

Walking the talk

Helping women successfully reintegrate into leadership roles after a maternity leave is about more

than programs and policies. A company's efforts must be grounded in a belief system with core values that genuinely reflect the desire to support women in all stages of their lives and careers. Buy-in has to start from the top and be pervasive throughout the company.

Reintegrating women back to work is about more than managing workflow issues. Women often return with conflicting feelings, such as feeling guilty about not doing enough at home or at work, feeling overwhelmed or uncertain, as well as being tired.

Support women confidentially and sensitively in these issues and encourage empathy by sensitizing others within the company. Colleagues and managers can be a valuable support when they understand what's going on. This is where the culture counts as much as the policies and programs.

At Hill and Knowlton, women now receive welcome back kits with certificates for Mom (for things such as massages) and the baby. Soft touches like that can make the difference.

Coaching can help too

Leadership can be lonely at the top. Many high-achieving women won't feel comfortable expressing their concerns, doubts or challenges to others within the company. A coach can provide a confidential, safe and supportive process to freely explore and work through some of the issues. The woman leader can then have more productive and meaningful conversations with her employer about what she wants and needs.

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