



WHY WOMEN CAN HAVE IT ALL

With paid parental leave due to start in 2011, businesses need to help their female staff plan for their time off and help them come back to work afterwards.

STORY MAUREEN FRANK

The statistics in Australia for women at executive levels of work and the overall economic security of Australian women have a disturbing correlation. Many women don't make it to board or senior executive level because they choose motherhood over advancing their careers. This choice also leads to a reduction of their own financial independence and economic security, with them existing on lower incomes and lower superannuation. Sadly, it is contributing to the creation of a growing gender gap in society. The female poverty statistics in Australia are alarming.

Earlier this year, the Australian Government finally committed to a paid parental leave scheme, to come into force in 2011, going some way to helping women take time out to have a baby. Hats off to the Government. They're at least putting their money where their mouth is.

Some Australian organisations have been ahead of the game for a long time, offering paid maternity leave and other flexible workplace incentives. These organisations are the female-friendly ones, and interestingly, if you looked at their workforce statistics I bet you'd find a high percentage of gender equity in the workplace and also solid senior women executive numbers at higher levels. The entire culture of the organisation would be one which represents a strong mindset of employee values, employee equity, diversity and inclusivity and amazingly, innovation, high productivity and generally strong financial results.

However, the majority of the private sector in Australia does not have sufficient strategies around women taking parental leave and how that affects business. They probably aren't even aware of the business case numbers or the longer term impacts to their bottom line or brand equity. The reality is the female economy globally is worth trillions; a greater market than China and India combined. Considering this market you would think organisations wouldn't want to ignore the female dollar. This means having female employees at all levels of the organisation to reflect their customer base and to ensure the products and services they develop and market are in tune with the female end-market. It is a sad reality that many businesses don't get this.

- ▶ The problem is greater than that though; it is systemically because of the male-run psyche of Australian business. Until we see greater gender diversity around the boardroom table and in senior executive teams, we won't see women encouraged to rise through the ranks or encouraged to come back to work with a babe in arms. We won't see changing cultures in the workplace around more flexible workplaces, strong parental leave strategies and strong employee brands aligned with female employee values. From a bigger picture, we won't see women stopping their employers becoming leaking pipelines of talent. So which comes first, the chicken or the egg?

“Organisations can at least start to encourage strong parental leave planning”

Ideally it can be tackled from the top down *and* the bottom up and organisations can at least start to encourage strong parental leave planning for their female employees and encourage them to return to work. Even if a woman comes back part-time when her children are at school age, she is more than likely wanting to return to full-time employment after that. She will choose her existing place of employment to return back to work (and to stay with them) if they do the right thing by her, because a woman has different values to a man and more often she is loyal. She has different reasons for wanting to stay in a workplace and a lot of them come back to allowing her to pursue her career whilst being the best guilt-free mother she can be.

When I had my twins I had no choice. As a single mother I had to go back to work. I am also a strong and determined woman. I was determined to make it happen for my career and determined to put food on the table for my children.

In hindsight, I did a lot of things the right way for the children and I, not just through determination but with a little bit of luck. I had a good employer who allowed me to work flexibly, telecommute and be a role model to other women in the organisation, as I was the most senior woman on the books. However I also had a plan and I went to my employer with a business case around why I needed them and they needed me.

Today, I see a tidal wave of pregnant women in organisations who really have no clue as to the path they could lead, with the only guidance they have being their workplace's parental leave policy. They have no idea how to truly plan for their parental leave, in terms of the career choices they can make there and then, whilst they are on parental leave and how to manage it when they come back. They have no educational support from their organisation in helping them make the right decisions for their economic future. They have no real encouragement to say 'we

want you back'. They don't understand that they can really drive their own destiny and literally have their cake and eat it too. Now that might sound like I am making it sound like an easy ride. I know that isn't the case. But if employees had practical education around the process of taking parental leave—how to set goals, financially plan, what they need to know about communication with work—and they also felt valued by their employer, even though they were leaving for some time, their inclination to return to work would be so much greater. Let's face it, the whole process could be an employer-employee win-win.

So, women need to be empowered into believing that they can have their babies and their careers and they need to see it modelled by existing female employees in parental leave-friendly workplaces. When an organisation's culture changes to achieve this type of momentum, then we will start to see a shift in more women returning to work and continuing their career journeys. Ultimately, we may start to see the cost to business being reduced for its lost women. **DB**

—Maureen Frank is CEO and founder of Emberin (emberin.com), one of Australia's leading gender diversity organisations. It focuses on helping organisations attract, retain and advance their women.

□ TOP TIPS FOR BUSINESSES ON PARENTAL LEAVE STRATEGIES

1. Ensure you have a parental leave policy that is openly communicated and available, and that complies with regulations.
2. Encourage and pay for pregnant women to have access to a parental leave education program.
3. Set up a parental leave mentoring scheme for pregnant women to have access to existing mentors who are mothers
4. Fix some of your policies and behaviours NOW around flexible work practices and model a flexible, female-friendly work environment.
5. Stay in touch with the employee when she is on leave and encourage her to come in and visit work and communicate regularly.
6. Make sure the doors are always open for her return.
7. Be prepared to negotiate with her so that her return to work is a win-win for you both.
8. When she comes back, continue to understand that work and motherhood go hand in hand.
9. Do not overlook women for projects or promotions because they are pregnant or mothers.
10. Promote your parental leave strategy and flexible workplace environment as part of your employee brand.