breastfeeding friendly workplaces

Juggling motherhood and employment

By Amanda Volpatti

As the number of women in the workforce increases, the issues faced by women as they juggle family and work are being pushed into the limelight. Dr Rae Cooper, Associate Professor in Work and Organisational Studies at the University of Sydney Business School, specialises in employment relations and is presently working on an Australian Research Council-funded project on flexible working arrangements. Rae has shared her thoughts with us on the challenges facing women as they return to work after having children.

As a mother of two, Dr Cooper has personal experience in managing a career and family. Her children are past the days when maintaining breastfeeding was an issue, but she knows the feeling of having to keep all the balls in the air. ‘Work is exhausting; having babies and toddlers is exhausting; doing both together sometimes feels impossible’, says Rae. ‘Sometimes it felt too hard to keep all of the balls in the air, but I am so glad I stuck it out. I’m glad I made that decision as I’ve managed to build a career that I love whilst having two lovely kids who I adore’.

Rae returned to work when her first was 10 months old. Her husband was at home until they found a childcare place and she remembers feeling a lot of judgement, often from other women with small children. Through her research and regular commentary, Rae is helping to remove that stigma for other mothers.

Breastfeeding friendly workplaces contribute to supporting women throughout their working life

While the need to consider the differing life cycles of men and women is widely recognised, the implementation of policy to support these differences has been slow. An example of this is Australia’s experience with paid maternity leave. Having access to enough parental leave has been identified as critical in establishing a sound breastfeeding relationship. Rae also lists the following benefits:

- parents can take a break after the exhaustion of pregnancy, labour and tiny babies
- babies can bond with their families
- parents don’t need to choose between their career and having a family life
- employers have a higher return-to-work rate from valued employees they have invested in.

This recognition of both individual and industry needs is inspiring an vocal commentary around the issue has been divisive. When the focus is on what is ‘taken’ from an employer through parental leave, rather than on the very real positive outcomes for women and their employers, mothers are not empowered to access arrangements that support their continued breastfeeding.

We know that women stop breastfeeding earlier than they wish or delay their return to work due to the lack of supportive policies and practices. Rae stresses that the right to feed a baby, in the way that suits a woman and her family, is a rights issue. Being able to combine breastfeeding and work enables mothers to be economically independent as well as gain a sense of fulfillment and reward from their work. Therefore, policy that supports women throughout their different life stages is good for women, children and society. Rae goes on to say that, ‘If a mother wants to breastfeed, for however long she chooses to maintain that, she should be supported in that decision by family, employers and government. She shouldn’t have to choose between maintaining a career and having a particular relationship with a child’. The addition of breastfeeding as an independent grounds for discrimination to the Federal Sex Discrimination Act 1984 has strengthened the guidelines for acceptable behaviour toward breastfeeding mothers while at work.

Organisations can assist women to manage their return to work and ongoing work life balance

Women with access to workplace practices that support them to breastfeed and/or express breastmilk, flexibility in their hours of work, and colleagues who are accepting of their needs are more likely to be exclusively breastfeeding at 6 months. The Fair Work Act 2009 means that every woman has the right to negotiate flexible work arrangements. For some, this is easier said than done and is often influenced by the type of employment she is returning to. Many women find that casual employment is their best option while their children are young. There are pros and cons to this that need to be assessed by each individual family. The concept of a ‘flexible career’ appeals to Rae. She describes this as where employers can access flexibility when they need it, for example when looking after littlies. However, this should not mean that they miss out on all of the benefits of good jobs with decent pay, access to promotion and to training and development.

Transitioning back to work after taking breaks to have children can be challenging and really tiring. Family support has a big impact on how a woman approaches her return to work. Organisations that recognise this and try to make the transition less difficult have a better chance of retaining their employees. Gaining BFW Accreditation, genuine flexibility such as staged returns and adjustable hours, and programs aimed at staying in touch while a woman is on maternity leave are all useful. There is a clear business case for flexible jobs and, as Rae points out, ‘we know that flexible workers in good jobs are some of the most productive and engaged in our workforce’. Flexibility is a key element when supporting breastfeeding mothers in the workplace as it allows them to effectively build breastfeeding into their schedule.

When planning your return to work, Rae reminds us that as a mum you need to do what is right for you, rather than what is right for other people’. She vividly remembers the days when her children, now 11 and 9, didn’t sleep through the night. This lasted until they went to preschool. With that memory fresh in her mind, she encourages all mothers to take it easy on themselves! Rae credits the support of her family, especially her husband, mother and father, with enabling her to pursue a balance between mothering and her career.

Rae’s refreshing forthcoming responses remind us that ongoing advocacy is required to continue normalising practices that support women throughout their careers. We look forward to seeing the conversation around flexible work and gender equity continue to develop and appreciate Rae’s contribution to making the workplace easier for mothers to negotiate.

*Make your return to work easier with our new online seminar*

This informative seminar covers the skills and knowledge needed to return to work and continue breastfeeding or expressing. For more information visit our website.

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