Working Mothers: The Whistlestop Guide To A Successful Maternity Leave

It's all over the news. Women leaving organisations, changing careers and just finding it downright hard to navigate the world of the working mother. At the same time we're bombarded with messages telling us work is good for us, our relationships and, most recently, even our [offspring's future pay packets](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/on-leadership/wp/2015/05/19/the-potential-payoff-for-kids-of-working-mothers/). And let's not forget, if you're in our club, the likelihood is you love working too. Luckily, this kind of dilemma is right up our street. Not only are we both working Mums, but Phanella regularly delivers corporate maternity coaching programmes on how to make being a working mum actually, well, work. So what are the secrets? Here's our whistlestop tour to getting through your pregnancy, maternity leave and return to work with job, sanity and children intact.

**Before you get pregnant.**

**The obvious:** Make sure you've been in the job long enough. 26 weeks non-stop from the end of the 15th week before your baby is due for statutory maternity pay. But let's face it, SMP won't pay for that shoe habit. So to make sure you get your enhanced maternity package, check your firm's maternity policy. There's no standard time period and this is something you want to get right.

**The not-so-obvious:** We all know we're supposed to *Lean In*, but what about *Step Up*? It might seem counter-intuitive, but the more senior you are when you get pregnant, the better the position you'll be in. Public image, communication and flexibility are all crucial when pregnant. If you already have some autonomy, the easier it will be to remain integral, communicate openly about your ambitions and follow the approach that suits you once you've popped.

**Pregnant already. Now what?**

**The obvious:** Make sure you tell your boss the right way. Even the most enlightened of managers may not be jumping for joy at the prospect of your imminent maternity leave. So, create the right impression by making sure your boss is the first to know - beware the office grapevine - and finds out in a formal meeting at which you stick to the facts: think due date and plans about when you're going on leave (if you know already), rather than the pros and cons for the nursery of F&B's Calamine vs Middleton Pink.

**The not-so-obvious:** The number 1 predictor of a successful return from maternity leave is the relationship you have with your manager. And more specifically how you communicate. Now, more than ever before, it's important to get the conversation right. Schedule a meeting with your boss a few weeks before it's time to go. Use it as an opportunity to highlight what you've achieved since your last formal review meeting, crystallising in their mind how brilliant you are. Next, set out a plan - how, when and who is going to keep in touch. Not only will this add certainty for both of you, but you'll look professional, committed and focused. Not easy when the only workwear that fits is a muumuu and you can't remember when you last wore heels.

**While you're off.**

**The obvious:** If this is your first baby, we'll break it to you now. Things are going to change. A lot. And no matter how much you love your work, there will be times when a feed is just more important than checking the Blackberry. Be prepared. We talk about the first few months after a baby is born as protected time. Later on in your leave you might well want to get back in the game but for now, don't over promise. As the Mum thing starts to fall into place, you will start to focus back towards work again. When that happens, it might be time to start using your Keeping In Touch days (we get 10) to reconnect. Golden rule: Stay comparison free. Women are different. Do what works for you, not the rest of your NCT group.

**The not-so-obvious:** Know yourself. Are you a planner or more of an ad hoc kind of girl. Planners, otherwise known as Type As, can find the unpredictability of a newborn tough to handle, making you long to rush back to work. Those who are less planned, on the other hand, can get lonely, struggling to get up and out. Make sure you maximise your time on leave so your return to work is the most positive it can be. The Golden Rule: Try to plan one thing every day whether that's a coffee morning, baby massage or even a catch up with colleagues. Planners will, well, have something planned. And the more laid-back will get dressed (not so simple on maternity leave), get out of the house and make friends. And local friends are another top tip for working Mums. Because there will be days when everything goes wrong and you'll need some support round the corner. And no one knows how to step into the breach like another Mum.

**When you return.** **The future.**

**The obvious:** There's no right answer to whether or how you come back but there is a right way to return to work. Get your childcare in place. Practice the nursery run before D-Day. Invest in some stylish work wear that fits. Make sure you've used your KIT days to ensure your boss and team are expecting you and the reverse handover is already underway. Because you want to hit the ground running. It may be your old role but you still want to treat this like a new gig. Research says you have 3 months to make the right impression, so don't lose time unnecessarily. Your work day is likely to be more constrained now so make sure every moment counts.

**The not-so-obvious:** Maternity isn't the end of your career, it's really an incredible new beginning. Women can return re-energised, enthusiastic and focused. Motherhood means you have to be more efficient and, ironically, this can really kickstart your career. Women often fall into the trap of being reliable: a safe pair of hands. But nobody uses that kind of language to describe a CEO. The time restrictions and renewed energy of a return to work can move you beyond that "go to" role, into someone more strategic. Read someone who looks more like a boss herself.

**The Step Up Club**

We are Alice, a journalist by trade, and Phanella, a former lawyer and banker turned career coach. We are a fresh, new voice in the women's career conversation. We are here to celebrate all women - whatever your job. The two of us sit at either ends of the creative/corporate spectrum: we know that it's just as valid to aspire to career contentment, as it is to want to become your company's next CEO. Through our stylish events, online content and newsletter, The Step Up Club will make you feel empowered, boost your skill set and broaden your network.

We are vocal about female success - we are the career columnists at [Get The Gloss](https://www.getthegloss.com/behind-the-brand/brand-you-are-high-heels-bad-for-your-career) and our book, Step Up: Confidence, Success and Your Stellar Career in 10 Minutes a Day (Ebury) came out in September.