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Escape the parent trap

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Careful planning can make it easier to return to work after a baby, writes Owen Thomson.

Bringing a baby into the world is one of the most joyous things many people do in their lives. But taking time off work to care for a newborn can result in a big dip in your career trajectory. Mothers and fathers who act as primary carers can find it hard to return to the workplace after a break. Their skills may be less relevant, the office environment may have changed and their self-esteem may be lower than it was.

Careful planning, networking and choosing a good employer can all make the experience easier.

Kate Sykes, director of online support network www.careermums.com.au, says a lack of self-confidence is often the main hurdle to returning to work post-baby. "What can happen is that you get to a point when you'd like to go back to work, and you suddenly think, 'Oh my gosh, I can't remember anything. I don't even know if I'm going to have the skills to do it.' One year tends to be a reasonably good time frame in which to return because you can still remember what it used to be like."

Jude Whiteman, a 35-year-old Sydney HR consultant, knows all about resuming a career following childbirth. She's done it twice - the first time in 2005 following an 18-month break and the second earlier this year after six months on the sidelines. One of her greatest challenges the first time around stemmed from the attitude of her then employer.

"I was working for a sales and marketing organisation at the time, but it wasn't the family-friendly organisation that I needed it to be," she says. "They couldn't fit my role into a part-time role and I didn't want to go back full-time. The job that they offered me was not one that I wanted to do. So I decided to leave and find another job. I found a very family-friendly role and a very family-friendly organisation in the pharmaceutical industry."

Following the birth of her second child in August last year, Whiteman re-entered the employment sphere at the helm of her own consultancy - an option she says gives her the best of both worlds. "I can fit that work in around my children," she says. "I find that provides me with the ultimate level of flexibility."

Whiteman isn't alone in pinpointing employer attitudes as a potential hurdle to workplace re-entry. Sykes says there is a widespread lack of workplace initiatives aimed at accommodating new parents.

"Employers can take very simple steps to keep them in the loop," she says. "It could be the manager phoning that person maybe once a month and saying: 'How's it going? We really miss you and can't wait for you to come back. If you'd like to do any ad hoc project-style work, let us know.' They could also offer the option of coming in for a monthly work meeting to keep up to date, to meet with colleagues and find out what's happening. It doesn't take much, but it's not being done."

Rebecca Harper, a career coach and director of Reach - Career Potential, believes the process of career resumption is something that should be thought out well in advance - especially for those who won't be returning to their previous employer.

"For people who take a longer period of maternity leave and have actually resigned as part of the process it becomes an opportunity to re-evaluate their career and possibly do something completely different," she says. "The first thing you need to do is think about what it is you want to get out of your work, what is it that you want and don't want. If you're looking for challenge, stimulation and social interaction, it's good to be clear about that. If you don't want to work really long hours and work full-time, again it's good to know that."

"The second thing is to think about what you can and can't do. For instance, can you travel for work? Can you be interstate for four days in a row or overseas for a week at a time? If not, that will rule out some opportunities. All this will help you narrow down the options."

Harper says that undertaking specific training programs also may be a useful option, even if it is to brush up on existing skills.

"That can be enough to then give you the confidence to walk into an interview and talk confidently about what it is you're going to bring to the workplace."

Whiteman says that a spot of extra training was just the thing to make her second transition more effective. "I did this with my second child and I'm calling upon the skills I learnt during that time to add value to my work now."