

BLOOM

The Great Return:

Ensuring work really works for new mothers – and our industry



**MAJOR
PLAYERS**

*A practical Guide covering the run up to
maternity leave, during leave itself and the return*

by Bloom UK in partnership with Major Players, November 2021

Welcome to Bloom UK's Guide to a successful return from maternity leave.

Whether you're a manager, looking to ensure an employee's return from maternity leave is a positive experience, a returning parent, keen to understand what good looks like and what to expect or a colleague looking for insight into the maternity leave and return experience – thank you for taking the time to read this Guide.

At Bloom UK, we're on a mission to ensure that all women have equal opportunity in the communications industry. Achieving gender equality will make our industry stronger, happier and more effective.

It's no secret that we don't yet have that equality. Women make up 52.6% of employees but only 28.5% of Managing Directors¹. The overall percentage of women in C-suite positions sits at 32.4%. Then there is our average gender pay gap of 22.7% (based on IPA member agencies)², with that gap widening as seniority increases³. There are many reasons for this, but it is fair to say that maternity leave is one important factor.

Maternity leave is a life-changing event. It is a moment in time when an employee needs support from their employers. *And it is a huge moment for potential talent drop off.*

In addition to the financial challenges brought on by childcare, sadly, many mothers do not feel encouraged to return to work and/or do not have a positive return experience. In a recent survey commissioned by Bloom UK, 4 in 10 first-time mums agreed their return was "a more negative experience than I was expecting". Crucially, those with negative experiences were 63% more likely to leave the company within 6 months compared to those with positive experiences⁴.

Over a quarter surveyed stated that from when their pregnancy was announced, they were treated more negatively⁵. Moreover, more than half of women who took parental leave in the last 5 years, have felt that it disadvantaged their careers⁶.

1 A Future of Fairness – IPA 2021
2 2020 IPA Agency Census
3 All In Census 2021
4 Bloom UK Maternity Leave Survey 2021
5 Bloom UK Maternity Leave Survey 2021
6 All In Census 2021

As an industry, we have a decision to make: do we leave this as is or take action to retain our maternal talent and ensure their full potential is unlocked? For the businesses that can fuel successful returns, the benefit goes beyond just helping the individual returning, it makes brilliant business sense:

- Research shows that women can account for approximately 85% of consumer purchasing decisions, building that representation in our senior ranks influences thinking, creating more representative outputs.
- 83% of Gen Z candidates have stated that a company's commitment to diversity and inclusion is important to them⁷ – a diverse and inclusive business can make a difference when it comes to attracting the best and the brightest.
- Equally, particularly as we emerge from COVID, empathetic leadership and varied leadership styles within a business have never been so important, whether it be for employee wellbeing, retention and/or business results. Encouraging and supporting working mothers into leadership roles is a key way of building real empathy into working cultures. Cultures, commercials and creativity are strengthened with inclusivity.
- Lastly, beyond just our industry, considering the broader economic picture, addressing what PWC call 'the career break penalty' for female professionals could generate an additional economic output of £1.7 billion annually⁸.

This Guide was born out of a simple conversation between a group of Bloom parents: women who work in different parts of the communications industry, of different ages, ethnicities and backgrounds. But they had two things in common; all believed that small things could make a big difference to keeping more brilliant mums in work and all believed there was a lack of meaningful information around return available to employers, managers and colleagues to help.

We don't have all the answers, but we hope this can be a start.

With 2 out of 3 mothers stating none of the return-to-work initiatives suggested in this Guide were available to them upon their return (including those that bear no cost)⁹, there is significant room for us to improve as an industry and we hope this equips us to do so.

With this Guide, we encourage you to step into the shoes of returning parents and take some steps, no matter how small, to make a return as good as you can – to make our industry that bit better.

The Bloom UK Parents Team

7 Monster 2020 Candidate Survey
8 PWC Women Returners November 2016
9 Bloom UK Maternity Leave Survey 2021



THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

An Executive Summary of Bloom UK's Maternity Leave Survey 2021

Our survey captured the experiences of over 200 women in the run up to, during, and on their return from maternity leave. Our participants came from across the spectrum of the comms industry – media agencies to client organisations, junior to board level.

Pre-Maternity Leave

Pregnancy announcements at work are fuelled with apprehension and this is warranted:

- 58% of those pregnant for the first time were worried about telling their employer about their pregnancy (increasing to 73% of those with a subsequent pregnancy)
- 1/4 were treated more negatively than they were expecting
- Less than 1/2 felt they were sufficiently supported with practical guidance

Crucially, more support pre-leave directly correlates with more positive returns to the workplace.

During Maternity Leave

Contact during leave is crucial:

- Proactive communication from the company during leave is positively correlated with good return experiences, yet only half had companies stay in touch
- 2/3 first-time mums used their Keep-In-Touch days, but this dropped to half of those on subsequent maternity leaves, driven by a lack of encouragement from the company and access to childcare
- The desire to stay connected and additional pay were key motivations for take up



Returning from Maternity Leave

A lack of diligence and preparation on the company's part is a big issue:

- 2/3 weren't given any form of return to work programme or initiatives
- Around 1 in 6 wanted to change their work pattern but couldn't reach an agreement
- Over half said returning mothers did not have consistent experiences within their company
- As a result, nearly half of mums find the return more negative than they expected.

Despite this, the initiatives our respondents felt would be most beneficial and impactful on their experience are free to deliver – inductions, thorough handovers, internal parent mentoring, and clear development plans.

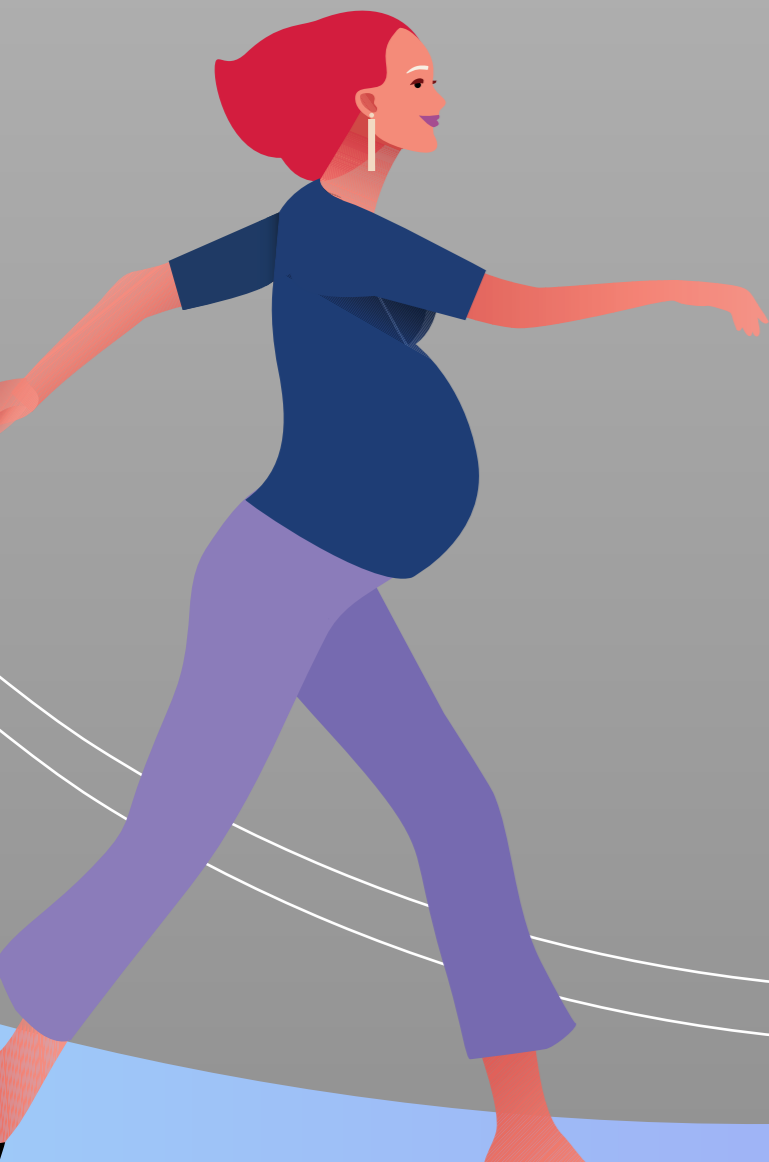
Companies need to take note as these experiences have a long-term impact:

- Those with negative experiences were 63% more likely to leave within 6 months than those with more positive experiences
- Lack of flexibility and development opportunities were the main reasons for leaving
- Yet half (over half for subsequent mums) of returners with positive experiences are still with their companies more than 3 years later.



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PRE-MATERNITY LEAVE



It all starts... at the beginning

In truth, a positive return from maternity leave doesn't really begin on the first day back. The best returns are preceded by a strong pre-leave approach.

Those whose return to work was 'more positive than expected' were **32% more likely** to have been sufficiently supported and given practical guidance before their maternity leave.

Here are some suggestions for how to lay the strongest possible foundations.

SHARING THE NEWS

1. Think employee-first from the get go

A maternity leave might be hugely inconvenient for you/the business - maybe you'll temporarily lose your star player, maybe you can't bear the thought of more recruitment for cover...Whatever practicalities the news will mean for you, in this moment, ignore them. It's big news for your employee, research suggests they will have been nervous to tell you; it's time for joy and support.

Consider this moment as setting the tone for future conversations.

Over 50% of first time mums felt 'worried' about telling their employer they were pregnant, rising to almost **75% of mums** with a subsequent pregnancy.

WORKING TOGETHER THROUGH PREGNANCY

2. Do take her pregnancy into account where it counts

There are small things an employer/manager can do to help an employee perform at their best and comfortably through pregnancy. And some of these small things make a big difference in terms of building two-way trust and demonstrating that you are a truly inclusive employer.

Here are some suggestions:

- **If there is a long commute**, consider offering the employee the chance to work at home or come in/leave outside of rush hour.
- **Be vocal in your desire to see them working healthy hours** (and actively support that with resourcing and client management if needed).
- **Encourage understanding within the wider team**, more specifically acknowledge that there may be bespoke working arrangements as a result of pregnancy (rather than risk colleagues being surprised or frustrated by a particular agreement e.g. time out for medical appointments).
- **Consider the set-up of social events to be inclusive**. Ensure non-alcoholic drinks are available and allow for food being available. Never. Forget. The food.
- **Be mindful of language and the observations being made**. At a time of intense change, not all will feel comfortable with certain physical or lifestyle changes being called out.
- **See if any special facilities are needed** e.g. a better chair, laptop stand, swiss ball for extra points...
- **Be aware that your employee will need to attend pre-natal appointments** and the number of these will vary depending on their specific pregnancy and health circumstances. If their hospital or surgery is closer to home, consider being open to them working from home that day to reduce travel time. Most importantly, this is about showing trust in each other; they're trusting you to support their time out without judgement, and you are trusting them to fulfil their responsibilities to the company/clients working flexibly.
- **Consider that every pregnancy is different and be prepared to adapt**. There is no way for you or your employee to know whether the pregnancy will be straightforward, whether they may feel ill at times or whether lack of sleep could even become an issue. This is possibly the hardest part of working through a pregnancy – all parties being open to adapt and able to have honest conversations as they need to happen.

PREPARING FOR LEAVE

3. Ensure the maternity leave policy and any options are accessible and explained objectively

It's entirely possible your employee won't know the maternity leave policy or the detailed options within it. If your company offers shared parental leave, this is also the time to explain it.

It's worth noting that pregnancy aside, all employees should always have access to a company's maternity and parental leave policies - without having to request them.

4. Consider their cover and, if possible, involve them in any choices

You know the feeling of going on holiday and worrying that things will stall or be missed when you're away? Imagine that x 10. The majority of pregnant employees will be keen to ensure a smooth transition for the benefit of their colleagues and/or clients, but also for their peace of mind.

Equally, the topic of maternity cover specifically can be extremely sensitive. Anecdotal evidence suggests that lack of cover and/or handovers can leave those pregnant questioning the validity of their role, whilst on the flip side, there can be concern that specific 'cover' hires will become permanent replacements. Communication and planning is key in managing these concerns from the outset; this is a handover to plan carefully between you.

A few tips:

– Don't leave this to the last minute – consider a staggered handover.

This is for the benefit of both parties. It allows the employer time to ensure others have confidently picked up projects and reduces the risk of unfinished handovers with a potential early finish. For an employee, it allows the mental transition from working to 'going on leave' to commence and can be helpful as pregnancy becomes more physically demanding with the due date approaching.

– Consider including the employee in cover discussions.

Leaving aside the likelihood that the employee will have a valuable perspective to feed into any selection process, it's worth bearing in mind (as above) this can be a sensitive time for the employee going on leave. For some, they will really miss you/the job, for others there may even be a fear of replacement. Even if that is not your intention in any way. Involving the employee can be a chance to give that all-important signal that you see leave as temporary and you value their skills.

Women whose return to work was more negative than expected were **11% less likely** to have had their role covered by a maternity cover.

5. Encourage them to consider a few things during their leave

Most mums understand that coming back to work as a parent will involve a period of transition and that working life may look different to pre-baby.

However, especially for those experiencing their first pregnancy or leave, they may not know what options are available to them to help them manage that and come back as confidently as possible.

Suggestions include:

- **Explaining any flexible working options** available and how to request them at a later date
- **Explaining what KIT (Keep-In-Touch) days are** and introducing these as an option if wanted
- **Explaining any childcare benefits** the company may offer should they be needed
- **Clarifying their main/official point of contact** through maternity leave should they have any questions
- **Sharing details of any internal parent mentor** or 'buddy' allocation for more informal questions

6. Consider offering a pre-maternity leave coaching session

If you have budget, a brilliant offering is a pre-maternity leave coaching session/s. These are run by external qualified consultants and can cover topics including but not limited to:

- **Preparing for maternity leave** (support in developing a solid handover)
- **Preparing for that first week of maternity leave** and the transition from work to leave
- **Nutrition** through maternity leave

7. Consider a developmental review focused on the successes to date

Your employee will likely miss an end of year review due to maternity leave, so this can be a great way of reminding them of all they have achieved so far and their strengths, before they go on leave. Many enter leave with some trepidation and many more find their confidence levels low when it's time to return, so a reminder of their professional successes and evidence *that they have been noted*, can have a huge mental impact.

8. Send them off in style

Take a moment to wish them well, show the team's excitement and demonstrate that they'll be missed.

One watch out, the send-off is for them, not you, so do consider what they can/can't do in planning.

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DURING MATERNITY LEAVE



There probably won't be a huge amount of contact between you and the new mum whilst she is on leave. She will likely be adjusting to a lot of feeding and weaning chat, missing some sleep and watching in awe as her small person grows amongst other things. However, some contact is advisable, not just to cover off the practicalities in good time but to ensure they are made aware of any key company announcements formally and with sensitivity as an ongoing employee. The communication through this period can also set the tone and manage expectations for both sides for the potential return.

Those whose return to work was more negative than expected were **34% less likely** to have been proactively communicated with during their maternity leave, while those whose return was more positive than expected were **26% more likely** to have been proactively communicated with during their maternity leave.

EARLY DAYS

1. Share your congratulations

Leaving aside the fact that everyone loves a card and/or a present, this can have greater significance here. Sending something to the employee not only suggests that you care about them as a person but also shows that even if they are not working with you right now, they haven't been forgotten.

"A few weeks after my baby was born it was Mother's Day. The MD sent me a Mother's Day card to congratulate me on my first Mother's Day as an agency mummy. I was blown away with the thought and gesture."

2. Let a Buddy scheme kick in

A parent buddy scheme at your organisation, matching expecting employees up to those who are already parents, can be brilliant for this stage.

This first involves identifying parents within your organisation who are willing to share their experiences as a working parent, listen and offer support to another. Then, those parents should be matched with those going on leave or even joining the organisation as a fellow working parent.

It should be an informal relationship that the new mum can use as much or as little as they wish through their leave period. You have done the best thing in giving them a friendly, understanding point of contact within the business, that comes with no pressure regarding return plans and practical points.

PAST THE HALFWAY MARK

3. Make use of the KIT days

KIT days literally stand for Keeping In Touch. At its simplest, that can be just arranging a coffee to catch up. They can tell you about their leave and you can share the latest business goings on.

An employee/employer can make use of up to 10 KIT days within a 52-week maternity leave period.

A simple KIT approach:

- **Try and be flexible on the time, date and location**

Remember that the employee is still on leave, so they may not have childcare available and they will likely be trying to factor in the baby's routine. If they have to travel to you with the baby, they may also need to consider routes and locations that are pram-friendly, allow for feeding or changing stops etc.

- **Be mindful that a coffee is not just a coffee**

Particularly for first time mums, seeing colleagues on maternity leave with their baby can be quite challenging. Even if they are delighted to see you, and even if they have successfully navigated the trains with the pram, they may still be getting comfortable being a parent themselves and being a parent in front of their colleagues will certainly be a new experience for them. You just being friendly, happy to see them and signalling that anything goes, could mean a lot.

- **The money can be important**

KIT days should be paid, though the sum may depend on when it falls i.e. whether within the 39 weeks statutory maternity pay or after it. For some, the money attached to them is really important given that at a certain point, a new mum will be on statutory pay or even unpaid leave. Do ensure that you are clear on what the payment will be, that Finance are aware of the day and process payment. Many mothers won't want to discuss money, but they will even have incurred costs coming to see you (travel, childcare, etc).

A more focused use of KIT days:

- **KIT days can allow for a phased return to role.** For some returning mums and employers that can be a great way to come back more gradually. It's one to discuss together. A reminder, KIT days should be taken within the 52-week maternity leave period and an employee is allocated up to 10 KIT days for use.

Of women who did not use some or any of their KIT days, the main reasons were 'my company did not encourage/allow/want me to take them' (33%) and 'I wasn't able to arrange childcare' (20%).

"I requested them to help ease myself back into the company, plus the extra money helped."

"HR told me to come in for lunch / coffee and count that as a KIT day which was lovely and made me feel more socially in touch."

4. Add them to the guest list for key events/meetings

When an employee isn't in the office (virtual or physical), it can be all too easy to forget that they are still a member of your team and part of the business. Key meetings and company events may be of interest to them and/or serve as a reminder that they're still being considered as part of the team - counteracting feelings of disconnection that many can experience on maternity leave.

An employee on leave is not obliged to come, but by issuing the invitation the offer of inclusion is there.

Example events include:

- **Seasonal celebrations** such as the Summer and Christmas parties
- **Departmental Away Days**
- **Quarterly/Annual Business Updates**
- **Annual Company Meeting/Conference**
- **Events flagging any major announcements** e.g. a change of management

5. Discuss what a return looks like

This is the conversation that should definitely happen - allowing the timing of it to be led by the employee. It's worth noting that legally the employee on maternity leave is not obliged to confirm their return and/or any change of plans until 8 weeks before the expected return date.

Your employee is returning with a changed set of personal circumstances and potentially after a long period of absence. It's best to manage one another's expectations and consider what 'right' looks like for you all now.

A few things to cover:

- **Flexible working** - is this an option at the company and would the employee like to make use of it? If there are forms to complete for contractual changes to take place, these will need to be arranged.
- **Any new considerations** - the most likely one here will be childcare. Even if someone doesn't change their contracted hours, the chances are they will need to leave at a certain time every day to make nursery pick up or their equivalent - and this will be new for them and potentially you. If you can both discuss this openly, that can be a massive help for the return.
- **The actual start date**
- **A potential phased return** - there is much feedback to suggest this is a key ingredient to a successful return. It allows both parties to adjust to new circumstances and for the returning mother in particular, allows some time to adjust to a new childcare routine and less time with their baby. It's worth noting many employees return from maternity leave with a lot of annual leave to take and this can be one way to organise a phased return without their pay being impacted. The goal is for a positive return experience for all parties and a return that sticks - try and consider what is most likely to get you both there.
- **The shape of the reintroduction** - openly discuss what would be helpful here. For example, the standard handover of projects might be assumed, but have any of the software systems changed? Have there been lots of team changes and would intros help? Do you need to plan ahead for IT logins needing to be updated? Aim to make it as easy as possible for the returning employee to get stuck in.



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THE RETURN



For many mums, this has been weeks if not months in the planning. From the childcare provisions to the commute timings, the work clothes dust-off to the sorting of a home office space.

In theory, prior to day one back at work, the business and the returning mum should have been in contact, with expectations managed as per the previous pages and both parties broadly clear on what the first few days will look like.

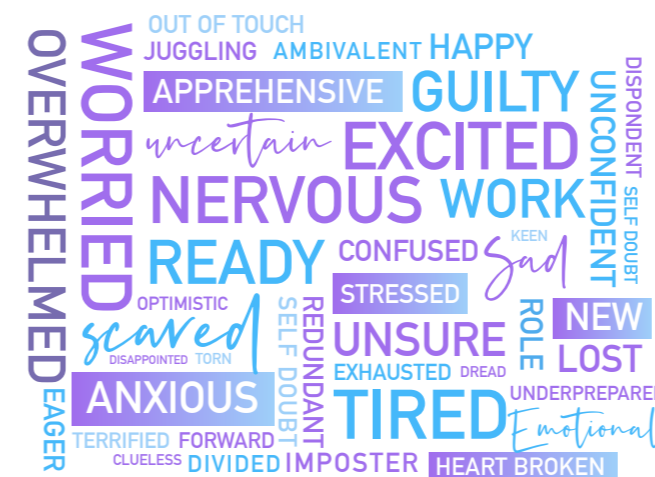
Even with that prior contact, the return to work itself is a big moment for both parties.

For the employee, it really is Day One of a new chapter. For first-time mums it is the start of life as a working parent with all its new responsibilities and mixed emotions. For others, even if they have experienced a return before, it's still Day One of a return here and/or as parents of more than one child and potentially a very different child to the other/s. Throw into that a little sleep deprivation for the big day (babies do love a good sleep regression) and in some cases breastfeeding – just to make the 9-5 that bit more complex.

For the employer, there'll be work that needs to be done and teams that need to adjust. A returning employee will be an important feature of the day, but realistically just one part of a busy schedule. There may be a mix of excitement, nervousness and the classic time-pressure.

In 3 words, describe how you felt in anticipation of returning to work?

First-time returners:



Second/subsequent returners:



Here are some suggestions to help ensure a positive return for both parties.

IT ALL STARTS WITH A PROPER WELCOME BACK...

1. Whether it's a one to one coffee, balloons on the desk or a full-team lunch (lucky them!), do take a moment to officially welcome the employee back and let the team know they are back too.

This is about making someone feel welcome, valued and starting the return with a burst of positivity.

DON'T FORGET THE PRACTICALITIES

2. Provide a safe and comfortable space for pumping

For women who are breastfeeding or expressing when they return to work, a small space they can use for this can be invaluable. It simply needs to be clean, private – and have a seat! The goal is to not end up with a returning mum squeezed into a toilet cubicle in the shared loos pumping – because that's rubbish.

It's also worth being aware that some breastfeeding mothers may have a hard stop linked to needing to feed their baby at the end of the day.

68% of mums breastfeeding on their return, had no provisions made to pump and/or store milk.

3. Consider enforcing early finishes for Week One

A huge part of the first week back is about establishing the new routine. For most new mums, hitting pick up is a big concern – it may be the first time they have truly had to leave the office at a specific time. Keep in mind most nurseries even charge parents by the minute for late collection.

Enforcing a finish time of, for example, 4pm on Week One can help relieve the pressure for Week One at least. It also signals that as a company and team, you acknowledge that parenting responsibilities exist and want balance to be achieved ultimately.

If a couple work at your company, you may want to offer it to either parent.

4. Check the workload is in line with any newly agreed working pattern

Some returning employees will be coming back with an updated contract, typically reduced hours in return for a reduced salary.

It is hugely important then that the workload allocated to them upon their return takes this into consideration; if they were working five-day weeks pre-baby and are now on four, four-days worth of work should be allocated to them.

Failing to adapt the workload can lead to increased stress for the returning employee, feelings of failure (linked to an unreasonable demand) and, ultimately, a view that the return to work is not sustainable.

2/3 first-time mums returning to work negotiated reduced hours and/or agreed to work from home more.

FUEL EMPATHY AT WORK

5. Consider team-wide training on the challenges facing returning mothers

This could be via an external training partner or something designed internally leveraging the insight of existing working parents. It could consist of several sessions or even just one roundtable. It's a means of sharing perspectives and building empathy. Empathy is critical to both parties understanding one another and to setting the foundations for honest, open conversations.

Areas to consider could be:

- **Allowing for pumping** if applicable/acknowledging this may need to happen
- **Sleep deprivation** (reasons for it, any tactics to help support or manage those struggling with it)
- **Childcare responsibilities** (importance of drop off/pick up and any implications for leaving/log off time or starting/finishing meetings on time)
- **Child illnesses** (useful context here and tips to manage/support those needing to take unplanned leave or manage poorly children with work)
- **Adjusted working patterns and/or workloads** (if an employee has changed their contract in particular, it's worth discussing the new boundaries that will accompany that but more broadly, this is a chance to warn against presenteeism and promote flexibility)
- **Inclusive socialising** (considering how to provide different socialising options so a parent is not automatically excluded due to their parenting responsibilities)
- **Understanding and identifying any issues with confidence** on return

It's worth noting that much of the above impacts all working parents. So it is a valid initiative to support all those returning from maternity, paternity and shared parental leave - and even those currently in the business with older children.

The goal here is to help managers and peers, *no matter their own experience*, have reasonable expectations of returning mothers/working parents and to help fuel inclusive company cultures. Managers cannot solve for all of the above. If a bug sweeps a nursery, they cannot change that – but they can be aware of the unpredictability coming into play now and be equipped to effectively support the returning parent and the wider team.

PUT EFFECTIVE SUPPORT IN PLACE

Almost **2/3 mums** had no return to work initiatives in place (including formal handovers, inductions and buddy schemes).

The top 3 return-to-work initiatives returning mums felt would make returns more positive are all free.

1. **An onboarding/induction programme**
2. **A thorough handover process**
3. **An internal parent mentoring programme**

6. Let the Buddy scheme kick in

If you have matched the returning mum with another working parent at your company, this is a great time to ensure that relationship is functioning.

The Buddy could be an invaluable sounding board and/or field questions based on their own return-to-work and 'life as a working parent' experience.

7. Consider offering formal coaching specifically for returning mums

If budget permits, it's worth investing in external coaching for the returning mum. Coaching can range from just a couple of sessions to several. The returning mum should agree topics with the qualified Coach, given that every returning mum is different and will have different concerns/areas they'd like to discuss.

Sample topics are:

- The balance of parenting and work – adjusting to life as a working mum
- Managing sleep deprivation and emerging sleep patterns
- Routine – planning effectively for changed responsibilities and goals
- Confidence building – considering imposter syndrome, return to work nerves etc.
- Career planning – considering values, motivators and goals

Outside of formal coaching, bodies such as NABS and School of Life amongst others, also offer one-off workshops and talks.

59% of mothers surveyed felt that external coaching would help make the return a positive experience.

PLAN THE FIRST WEEK

8. Organise a solid induction

The average maternity leave in the UK is 52 weeks. That is a long time to be away from a business and an industry. And whilst some mums may have been reading up whilst away, it would be unfair to assume all have been able to keep on top of the latest news for your business or industry. After all, small humans are quite demanding.

Set the scene for them and help them get back up to speed quickly with a planned induction.

Topics to cover could be:

- **Latest Business results and objectives**
- **Any key personnel changes**
- **Any relevant Department plans**
- **Top industry/category news/developments** to be across
- **Any major software developments** if within tech
- **Client-specific updates e.g. latest campaign results**, satisfaction scores, changed objectives
- **Organising meetings** with new colleagues and clients

Note: As part of an induction, it may even be worth checking the employee has all the latest software you are using and access to all password-protected documents/servers as needed.

9. Structure the week

There are few things more deflating than starting a new job only to find that nothing has been planned for you. And you with your shiny notebook, just need to shuffle around awkwardly until someone works out what to do with you.

The return from mat leave is a bit like starting a new job – no one wants to feel like an outsider or be at an awkward loose end. It's actually exceptionally important as so many employees report returning to work with uncharacteristically low confidence – so returning to no plans can quickly lead to an employee feeling undervalued.

Have some key meetings in the diary – handovers, team meet and greets, inductions, first meetings that need attending.

10. Consider with care which projects/clients your returning mum is assigned to

Realistically, this step should have happened before Day One. But it is an important factor in the return. There are some scenarios that are particularly challenging for those returning to work after a long period of absence and/or those with young children.

In the spirit of wanting a return to stick and seeking to ensure a returning employee is able to realise their full potential, the following is worth considering:

- **Time differences involved** – some global pieces of business in particular can involve work running through traditional pick up periods and/or late night meetings or deadlines. Consider whether the returning employee can accommodate that with childcare, whether specific arrangements need to be made for it i.e. increased flexibility or whether there is a better project/client fit.
- **Consistency in clients and/or teams** – if it's possible to return a new mum to previous client or team relationships, do consider it. The familiarity can be helpful, particularly in those first few months of return where not all mums returning feel especially confident.
- **Consulting the returning mum on key factors like the above** - every returning mother will be different, so rather than make an assumption (even with the best of intentions), it's always worth giving the returning employee a choice where possible. For example, they may love a particular piece of business or be keen for a pitch at this stage.

11. Include a first HR/People Team/line manager check in – and maintain them

This check in is less about the nuts and bolts of the role, and instead a forum to discuss how it's all going more broadly.

Ideally, it will be led by a member of the HR/People Team so if there are any line management concerns, these can be discussed. And ideally, it would be the main point of contact used through maternity leave, reappearing here for consistency.

As a guide, a solid check in pattern would involve check ins:

- Prior to day one at work
- On week one
- At the six-week point

LOOK FORWARD AS A UNIT

12. Agree short-term developmental goals

The aim here is to provide a mutual focus for the first few months of the return and to avoid a return feeling overwhelming.

It can also provide a helpful point of measurement – if an employee is ever doubting their achievements through return, there may be milestones they can literally tick off.

58% of mums surveyed felt that a development plan would help make the return experience more positive.

13. Be mindful of the milestones to come

The return is just one part of working parent life and in reality, one of many challenges to come. Albeit one of the most significant!

Important developmental milestones like first steps, birthdays, first days at schools, school plays, parents evenings - are all moments to come that will be charged with new emotion for parents and full of significance.

These new pulls and responsibilities are moments for employers to be mindful of. As the working parent juggles an increasingly packed diary and competing demands, the key ask of an employer must be empathy, paired with a willingness to adapt so that a working parent really can unlock their full potential at work.



THANK YOU

TO ALL THOSE WHO COMPLETED THE SURVEY AND SHARED THEIR EXPERIENCES TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE SUGGESTIONS IN THIS GUIDE...

"Working with people who do not have children - they often don't get it. I didn't understand the stress, constraints etc. of my colleagues who had children until I had mine - there needs to be some education about this. If as a parent, we have a hard stop or can't start early in the morning due to childcare, then others need to be made aware / understand and be more flexible. It's not about the employer and the policies, it's about colleagues."

"When I returned to work on a reduced number of days I was told that I couldn't be promoted and a colleague was because it made more sense with my working pattern."

"When I returned I was expected to work 12-14 hours per day, with no support of my new condition as a mother or respect for my personal time. It was incredibly disappointing."

"The process for returning to work differed massively depending on who your manager was and what team you were in."

"It was so difficult to negotiate any level of flexibility in my hours on return to work, despite my line Manager (MD) working flexibly herself. There were huge inconsistencies in what was permitted/agreed with other returning mums."

"Being part time coming back from maternity leave the second time was frowned upon, my workload was not reduced, so I burnt out and had to leave."

"I didn't feel like part of the company when I was off as no one ever contacted me about social events and when I returned I felt completely unsupported."

"I had no idea how tough returning to work would be. Getting back in gear mentally is extremely challenging, as is reintegration into the culture. On top of this, there are the physical and emotional challenges of being a mum. It was a shockwave that threw me totally off balance for many months. Added to which, there are time pressures that are irreconcilable with the 'impossible is nothing' mentality of many ad agencies."

"...the company technically didn't do anything wrong or illegal but the way they handled it all left me feeling so devalued. It wasn't the right way to behave."

"I think that for mothers from minority communities outside coaching is even more imperative. We need to know and feel that we are a worthwhile part of the workforce and that we are wanted and needed back and will be valued accordingly, just the same as any other team member. I can honestly say that looking back now my experience was actually traumatic."

"Not enough support/awareness is given to the difficulties of the day to day (e.g. balancing work with sick children/off nursery or childcare), uniqueness of the pandemic and what it has meant."

"The lack of planning for my mat leave return really affected me - I felt frustrated and like the reintegration was made especially hard for me."

"I feel very strongly that it's possible to have a really positive mat leave return – something as simple as someone taking me for a coffee (virtual or IRL!) to welcome me back would have been amazing – and of course, having a plan for what I would work on. The small things go a really long way."

ABOUT US

Bloom UK

Founded in 2010, Bloom is a professional network for women in communications. It is on a mission to ensure women have equal opportunity in the communications industry. By harnessing the power of their real voices, Bloom strives to future-proof women's careers, spearhead industry change and pay it forward.

Today Bloom UK has over 300 members and continues to grow. Bloom members are active in a mix of events and initiatives, with skill-sharing, mentoring and working to drive real change in the industry, all part of the Bloom world.

Bloom is a proud partner of Women's Aid.

Author – Zara Gregory

Zara has been a member of Bloom since 2020 and is a Global Business Director at Anomaly London. Whilst she started her career client-side, she has worked in creative agencies for over a decade now. Zara returned from her first maternity leave on 23rd March 2020, the first day of national lockdown in the UK. She is a passionate advocate for considered maternity leave returns and increased understanding in the industry for all working parents.

Insight Lead – Rachel Stern

Rachel joined Bloom in 2020. She started her career as a researcher at Millward Brown (now Kantar) both in London and Sydney before moving in house to drive actionable insight through businesses. She is now Head of Brand Strategy at N Brown. A mum of two young boys, during her maternity leave with her second son, she and her husband took shared parental leave.

MAJOR PLAYERS

Major Players is the UK's leading digital, marketing, and creative talent agency; helping transform businesses, from trailblazing start-up's through to household names.

Major Players are committed to creating a fairer and more equitable future for all and for the last 28 years, has been a passionate change leader for progressive places of work. Tapping into their extensive network of over 1000+ businesses and 400,000+ candidates, they have unrivalled access into the Creative Industries; influencing real, positive change through ground-breaking initiatives including Earn Your Worth which is aimed at tackling pay disparity across marginalised groups.

Major Players are a proud partner of Bloom UK.

A CLOSING NOTE

Thank you for taking the time to read this Guide. We hope you have found it useful.

As this is the first time we have published such a Guide for our industry, we would welcome your feedback if you would be open to sharing it with us at: bloomgreatreturns@gmail.com.

Equally, if as an employer, manager or returning mum (whether permanent or freelance) you have a suggestion for how to improve the maternity leave experience (pre leave, during or the actual return), please do let us know. We are especially keen to understand if something not already in this Guide has worked particularly well and could therefore be shared more broadly with others as a suggestion.

In 2022, we will be hard at work developing further insight and advice tailored to supporting parents returning with neurodiverse and disabled children, as well as considering paternity leave and return in more detail.

**Thank you for taking the time to
make our industry that bit better.**



BLOOM