



WORDS ON WISE MANAGEMENT

The value of retaining working mothers

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Forty-three percent of highly qualified women with children are leaving careers or off-ramping for a period of time.

—Sheryl Sandberg

Gender diversity is a business imperative. While most organizations are committed to the concept of gender diversity, they often struggle to put that commitment into practice. Studies show that having women in the workforce and in leadership positions can increase productivity, spur innovation, and improve team dynamics and decision-making processes. Women frequently possess stronger leadership qualities—such as empathy, flexibility, and communication—than men. Nonetheless, working women tend to step away from their professional life while their children are young more often than men do.

There are a number of factors involved in a woman's decision to “opt out” of the workforce, including the quality and cost of available child care, the lack of opportunities for professional advancement, and the inability to access sufficient paid maternity leave.

Employer costs of replacing employees

An employer will need to spend the equivalent of up to nine months of an employee's salary to find and train her replacement. Many companies use an abundance of resources to recruit talented individuals into their businesses and develop them over time. During a time of transition, such as entering parenthood, employees are looking for the same level of thoughtfulness and support.

New parents are learning how to manage the competing demands on their time and emotions that arise from being in the workforce and parenting young children. The first months are critical for retention. Providing an employee the tools and ability to reengage with her career after maternity leave and making worthwhile promotional opportunities available are fundamental parts of the equation.

Unlocking working mothers' full potential

Here are some practices you can implement to retain working mothers and encourage their reentry into the workforce:

- **Flexible schedule and telecommuting.** Allow working moms to work from home when their

children are sick or schedule work from home on half days or certain days each week.

- **Extended paid maternity leave.** Give employees paid time off (PTO). Access to PTO can have a significant impact on the readiness and willingness of an employee to come back to work.
- **Lactation program.** Offer a private, relaxing place for employees to pump breast milk at work to help alleviate the stress associated with returning to work.
- **Back-to-work transition.** Employers can help ease the transition of leaving their children and getting back into full work mode. One approach is to have an employee work a reduced schedule her first weeks back at full pay for up to six months.
- **Reentry program.** Offering mid-level internships for stay-at-home moms who have been out of the workforce for more than two years and are looking to restart their careers can provide training opportunities to sharpen skills and ease the transition back to work.
- **Childcare subsidies or on-site day care.** Affordable and convenient child care can ease a new mom's stress by knowing that she isn't far from her child in case she is needed. Childcare subsidies also increase employee retention by alleviating concerns about day care affordability.
- **Development of emerging female leaders.** Fostering female leaders by assigning sponsors to women with high potential can actively champion women and move them up the career ladder. That's especially important for female employees who are returning from an extended leave.

Bottom line

There are many highly motivated, talented professional women who aren't interested in opting out of their careers simply because they made the decision to start or extend their family. Employers can support working women who want to continue to pursue their careers by providing them the tools, policies, and programs that support a work-life balance.



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