

## Article topic: HR Consultancy

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### A pregnant issue

When it comes to pregnant employees, there can be many positives if the situation is managed wisely.



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Although news of a pregnancy is rightly cause for celebration, in the world of business this is not always the case. Attitudes may have improved over the years, but the logistics of holding a job open for 52 weeks, plus any accrued annual leave and possible parental leave, means the reaction of most companies is, unfortunately, negative.

Many business owners believe that pregnancy will jeopardise profitability and the security of other employees and some of the more outspoken ones say they should have the right to terminate a pregnant women's employment!

#### Cause for concern

In an investigation launched by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), almost half of all the pregnant women surveyed said they had been dismissed, threatened with dismissal or redundancy, or felt forced into resignation because of their pregnancy.

However, considering the scarcity of good professional staff as one of the main barriers to recruitment, can firms really afford to throw away experienced and knowledgeable staff?

Moreover, as we come out of recession and the jobs market improves, talented staff may start to look elsewhere, so employers should be warned against being inflexible on such topics or they will lose key people at the very moment their business starts to pick up!

#### The benefits of being flexible

Many successful firms take the view that being flexible on the work/life balance issue can have a positive impact. Bravissimo, who rose 16 places to 8<sup>th</sup> in the Sunday Times top 100 Companies to work for in the UK, is a leading lingerie retailer with a difference.

Employees get plenty of room to fit their life in around their job, which gave the company a top 3 ranking for Wellbeing. Everyone, not just parents, can request to change their hours.



Other businesses coming within the Sunday Times Top 40 Small Companies to Work For regularly site flexibility in their working practices as one of the main reasons for low staff turnover, higher productivity and client satisfaction.

## Enhanced rights

In addition to the provisions stated above, as of 5 October 2009 when new legislation came into force, pregnant employees now have more benefits, including the right to accrue full contractual holiday throughout the whole maternity period. This could be seen as detrimental to small businesses, because of the costs implications; however, there are benefits to employers if they manage the situation constructively.

It is common sense that if pregnant workers are treated with respect, they are more likely to want to return to work so the company can retain their skills for the future, as well as having a more committed workforce.

Furthermore, flexible working can offer valuable solutions to resourcing issues, which is particularly relevant in today's economic climate, as well as presenting valuable development opportunities for other members of staff.

## In summary

Getting some perspective on staff pregnancies is easier said than done, but here is a quick summary of how you can make pregnancy positive for your business.

- Consider the expertise and knowledge you will be regaining when staff return to work, rather than focusing on the absence.
- Keep in contact with your staff during their maternity leave, so that they don't feel alienated from the business.
- Ensure they are advised of staff news and business progress.
- Send them details of any internal staff vacancies. Not only can you better plan for their return, but you can also avoid potential discrimination claims.
- Employ interim employees. Growing numbers of professionals prefer the flexibility of interim work and this can help cover maternity work.
- Consider whether you need to have full-time roles. Can the role be divided into three roles to suit hours, for example?
- Can a position work on flexible hours? Discuss the situation with your staff. They often can come up with good alternative solutions, because they are motivated to make them work.
- A working from home option may mean that your maternity leaver will be able to start contributing earlier than you originally thought. It is worth considering all the options.

**For more information on maternity policies and flexible working, please contact Debbie Taylor on 0845 241 3387.**

