

"Disrespectful" approaches mar parents' return to work

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Most employers are simply not engaging in effective or supportive conversations around what being a parent means or what returning-to-work employees need, says a performance and leadership expert.

Making unfounded assumptions that a parent with a young baby at home won't be available when needed and therefore is not in a position to take on a more senior role is a common example, according to [Corporate Dojo](#) founder **Karen Gately**.

"We shouldn't be starting from the assumption that this person's commitment or capability is eroded because of their parental status."

Discrimination is often borne out of a lack of understanding surrounding employer obligations to parents and carers, according to Gately.

And it's not only women who come up against assumptions and prejudiced decisions as a consequence of their parental status, she notes.

"A man who wants to make sure he's available for his children in certain circumstances can have leaders questioning his commitment," Gately says.

"Some fathers want to take extended paternity leave and their wife goes back to work, but employers are closed-minded to allowing that."

What not to ask

Asking if they have family in the local area or back up in case their child needs them can leave returning to work parents feeling stressed and under pressure, Gately warns.

Questions believed to be innocent can also open employers up for problems.

"A question I heard, for example, was, 'are you finding you've got baby brain and is that affecting your work?'"

The person who asked the question had joked about baby brain with his wife, and wrongly thought it would be acceptable to have a similar conversation in the workplace, she notes.

Another "disrespectful" question implied that the pregnancy was highly inconvenient for the employer.

The mother was asked "did you deliberately do this? You would have known that you wanted to get pregnant".

How to approach the transition

A smooth transition begins before the employee returns to the workforce, and is aided by early conversations and keeping in touch. In the absence of an ongoing connection, Gately recommends initiating a conversation at least six weeks prior to the return-to-work date.

It's important to be ready for parents to return to the workplace by ensuring they have the necessary tools and resources to jump into the role, and critical to ensure they are filled in on any information, programs or events

that they might need more insight into.

"History happens. Sometimes people can feel out of step with what's happened in recent times," says Gately.

Managers should ask whether there's any areas they've lost confidence in, or anything they would like to brush up on.

"HR can be deliberately checking in as well. I'd be inclined to have a first fortnight, first month, and first quarter kind of check in as the person transitions in [to the workplace]."

Employers need to be understanding of the fact that returning to work parents may need a certain degree of flexibility in some circumstances, Gately says.

"In the workplace, most parents are working hard to be focused on their role and also don't want disruption or an interruption to the flow of their work.

"But if they're a primary caregiver and their child is sick and school rings, there's a pragmatic reality about what they may need to go and then do."

Open communication is key, and a good question to ask is: "are there any aspects discovered from becoming a new parent that you want us to be aware of so we can provide the flexibility or support you need?"

Employers can also ask things like, "are you going to be able to meet the demands of the role?" and "is there any support you need to make that easier for you?", she says.

Gately recommends approaching the matter like any other form of extended leave.

"What questions would you ask someone coming back from long service leave about where they're at, what support they need, and how to help them kick goals? You're not necessarily going to have assumptions that the employee won't be able to fully commit again."

She also recommends asking what else parents have learnt.

"Just because someone's been away for an extended period doesn't mean that they haven't grown or had a valuable experience. Some people take a year or two and learn a hell of a lot of stuff. They're not just sitting around changing nappies. There's more going on usually."

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