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Pregnant at Work

By Denise Schipani

What to expect when you're expecting on the job.

Working and Expecting

When I was 10 weeks pregnant with my first son, I kept one appointment that had nothing to do with ultrasounds or blood pressure checks: a job interview. I was skeptical (not to mention queasy!), but the process moved quickly. By the end of that week, I had a job offer in hand -- and an important decision to make. Should I change jobs now? Would my potential new boss still want me if I was pregnant? I agonized, then came clean about my condition.

My potential boss was sympathetic -- and still wanted to hire me. I took a big gulp and took the job. Later, when it came time to discuss maternity leave, I got lucky again. Not eligible for full protection under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), a 1993 federal law that mandates 12 weeks unpaid leave and retention of job status and benefits (you have to work at a company for at least a year to qualify), I was at the mercy of my company's informal, between-manager-and-employee policy. They offered, and I accepted, four weeks paid leave, then eight weeks unpaid. Toward the end of that time, though I was sure that I wanted to return (and had to, financially), I also knew I didn't want to go back full-time just yet. So I negotiated again -- and wound up with a three-day work week.

What my story demonstrates is this: First, I was lucky. And second, the fact that "luck" should enter into discussions of maternity leave at all suggests that the whole topic is a huge minefield. FMLA has made a huge difference, but even so, questions surrounding pregnancy, work, and maternity leave can confound women. What are your rights? What should you do? Here, a guide to navigating pregnancy and new motherhood on the job.

Telling Coworkers & Devising a Plan

Start Spreading the News

You're pregnant. You're thrilled. You come in to work and...what do you do? Tell your coworkers in confidence? Wait until you can't zip your skirt before telling your boss? "If you're feeling fine and can hide the pregnancy, wait until you're past the threat of miscarriage before you tell anyone," advises Laura Lorenzen, director of global recruitment for Capital One Financial. "That way you're not in an awkward spot if something terrible happens." But if you've got morning sickness or other pregnancy complications, it's wise to come clean sooner.

And while the timing of your announcement depends on your situation, your boss should get the news first, from you -- not via water-cooler gossip. "Telling your boss first is more about preserving your relationship with her than about arranging your leave," says Brette Sember, author of *Your Practical Pregnancy Planner: A Month-by-Month Guide to All Financial and Legal Aspects of Preparing for Your Baby* (McGraw-Hill, 2005). Once you have that hurdle out of the way, it's time to research your legal rights and your benefits package at your company -- and to figure out what you want to do. Consider all of your feelings surrounding the subject of returning to work: Will you? Won't you? Do you have to? Give yourself time and space to figure out what's the best move for you and your family.

Your Rights, Your Plans

When you are ready to discuss your plans, do so with plenty of information on your side. Consult your human resources department to find out if your company offers paid maternity leave and/or disability insurance. Some companies offer this type of insurance, which will extend the paid portion of your leave. Some states (California, Hawaii, New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island) have mandatory disability programs, says Sember. You should also find out whether you can tack accrued vacation or

sick time onto your leave; some companies require that you use this time as part of your leave.

Next, talk to coworkers. Get the scuttlebutt on what others have been offered. Even if something's not official policy, if your company has offered a twist on maternity leave before, such as letting someone return on a modified schedule for a while, they may be amenable to doing so again. The law may be on your side; companies that have offered one worker a certain perk may not be legally able to deny you the same.

Armed with this information, devise an action plan. This should include what you know you're entitled to (job protection, benefits) and what you believe your company can offer you (a certain number of paid weeks, the possibility of a flexible schedule later). It should also include concrete ideas on how you will handle the transitions of leaving and returning to work. Your employer will appreciate your efforts to finish or farm out projects, and that goodwill may buy you some wiggle room later.

Even now, as you're discussing the nitty-gritty, you still don't have to commit to such things as your last working date or your actual return date. Again, as the months pass, you may change your mind, or your physical situation may alter your plans. You may find you have to dip into maternity leave thanks to doctor-mandated bed rest, for example. Conversely, even if you thought you'd start your leave early to rest up at home, you may decide you want to work right up to labor day. These dates can and should be flexible.

What You Need to Know While on Leave

While You're Away

In an ideal world, you'd spend your entire maternity leave nestling with your newborn, immune to the worries of the workplace. But if you really love your job and want to keep it -- whether you're a nurse, an office manager, or a lawyer -- "it's smart to keep in touch with the office while you're on leave," says Cynthia Shapiro, a former human resources vice president and author of *Corporate Confidential: 50 Secrets Your Company Doesn't Want You to Know -- and What to Do About Them* (St. Martin's, 2005). "Maternity leave is an expensive proposition for a company. Showing that you're still interested in your job demonstrates that you're worth the investment." That doesn't mean, however, that you should be pounding away at the computer. Check in with weekly e-mails and calls, or meet coworkers for lunch.

What if you're not coming back to work? It's still wise to keep in touch, say experts. Today's financial realities mean that most women who become mothers will return to work at some point, says Lorenzen. And if you're not going back right away, an ongoing friendly relationship will keep you front-of-mind should other opportunities arise later. Employers, says Lorenzen, are finally becoming wise to the fact that women's careers can -- and should -- be fluid, and that experienced workers can return to the workplace in all kinds of capacities. "It's how valuable your employer thinks you are," she says. If a company has put time and money into training you -- whether you're a bigwig or an entry-level assistant -- they may be willing to work out a suitable arrangement with you.

Before you leave, you can agree upon how, and how often, you'll stay in contact with your workplace. For example, tell your boss you want to hear about projects you'll be working on when you return, but you don't need updates on things your replacement will do.

Back to Work -- or Not?

So you're not sure you will be going back? Think long and hard about it. Many variables will play into your decision -- from finances to hormones to career ambitions -- and you should weigh all of them when making your choice. While it's optimal to tell your manager before you give birth whether you'll be back, it's not always possible. It works both ways: Women who are sure they'll come back for financial reasons discover that the pull of full-time motherhood is too strong and find a way to budget. And moms who were positive they would embrace a world of Mommy & Me classes find they can't bear to be away from their office. Do the best you can before birth, but be honest if your circumstances change, says Lorenzen.

That said, don't leave your decision to the very last minute, and don't promise to come back if you know that you won't. "That only reinforces negative stereotypes that women are less serious about their jobs after they become mothers," says Jennifer Glass, PhD, a professor of sociology at the University of Iowa, in Iowa City. "And it's those stereotypes that employers use against other women in future situations." In addition, says Shapiro, "You may have to pay back your maternity-leave benefits if you don't return to work after your leave ends."

Finally, never discount the power of intelligent negotiation. Two years ago, Sharon Anne Waldrop, a mom of four who had negotiated her own maternity leaves, was working as human resources manager

for a university conference center near Los Angeles. "An employee was close to the end of her maternity leave. She had to work for financial reasons but was dreading being away from her baby for 40 hours a week." So Waldrop helped her find a workable solution. "Though there was no official policy, we presented her manager with a part-time schedule, which he agreed to as long as she could swing working full-time during their busy season." Where you may not have seen a solution before, one may exist. Ask. You never know.

Good Conduct

Cynthia Shapiro, author of *Corporate Confidential: 50 Secrets Your Company Doesn't Want You to Know and What to Do About Them* (St. Martin's, 2005), offers the following tips on being professional while pregnant and postpartum.

- **Wear professional-looking clothing before and after giving birth.** "It communicates to your boss that you're not checking out just because you're expecting or a new mom," she says.
- **Try to schedule doctor appointments and milk pumping on your lunch hour.** "If you can't, keep your boss in the loop and create a plan to make up those lost hours."
- **Stay focused.** "Unfortunately, to most companies, having a pregnant or new-mom employee is risky and expensive," says Shapiro. You'll need to work twice as hard to prove you're engaged in your job -- not distracted by pregnancy and motherhood.
- **Choose only one or two cute baby pictures for your desk.** "If you plaster your desk with baby photos, your boss will wonder if your job is still a top priority."

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