What can employers do to support women returning to work?

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What can employers do to support women returning to

work?

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As part of City Giving Day, BDBF LLP is working with Smart Works, a charity supporting women returning to the workplace. Here, Emily Plosker, a senior associate at Brahams Dutt Badrick French LLP, looks at what employers can do to help women re-entering the job market.

Today marks City Giving Day – a day for businesses in the City of London to celebrate and promote the charitable and community work that they do. Hundreds of businesses take part with a vast array of fundraising activities, all for a number of different charities, and all dressed in red!

For example, we're supporting Smart Works, which provides unemployed women with a free styling session, interview outfit and interview coaching to boost their confidence before interview.

As a working mum, I know that returning to work after a period at home with your baby is a daunting prospect. And as an employment lawyer, I am also aware of some of the errors made by employers as employees' transition back into the work place.

Here are my tips to help employers manage a successful return to work for their employees, who may be returning to the workplace after maternity leave or a career break.

Flexible Working

Returning to work may involve a conversation about flexible and/or part-time working arrangements. Modern technology now allows for remote working, meaning that businesses can adapt

to their employees' modern lives, and make cost efficient use of office space.

When you receive a flexible working request an employer is obliged to deal with it and must give a decision within three months. It's important that you listen to each request, think creatively about how a new working model could work and not worry about "setting a precedent".

The way you deal with a flexible working request can really set the tone and atmosphere for your employee's return (for better or worse). A content employee is beneficial for business.

Breastfeeding

Some women may still be breastfeeding when returning to work and so you may need to discuss the practicalities of this (e.g. use of a private room to express and fridge space for expressed milk, etc.). Remember – a toilet is not good enough! It's important that employers treat breastfeeding with sensitivity – it's an emotionally charged subject so being open and non-judgmental is key.

Keep flexible working arrangements under review

Once a flexible working arrangement has been agreed, it is a good idea to keep it under review from both the employer and employee side. Employers should monitor whether their employees are getting into bad habits, such as regularly working on weekends or on their day off.

Once colleagues and clients know a person is contactable, the amount of contact will increase and inevitably eat into their family time. A review of whether the arrangement meets the demands of the business and the needs of the individual should be carried out after a reasonable period of allowing the arrangement to bed in, and then discussed.

It is possible to have a transparent and constructive

conversation with an employee to try and find a solution which works for both parties. This way, an employer can avoid complaints being made about unfair and detrimental treatment since an employee's return to work. Positive attitudes on both sides and keeping the lines of communication open are crucial to a successful return.

Offer training

A few months out of the market can feel like a lifetime – technological advances, company restructures or changes in regulations can all influence an employee's confidence when returning to work.

It may therefore be worth discussing with a returning employee what gaps in knowledge or skills they are feeling particularly concerned about and whether internal or external training sessions to get them up to speed, would be beneficial. For women on maternity leave, this could be taken as a "Keeping in Touch Day" (KIT Day) prior to their return to work.

City Giving Day

BDBF is running a clothing drive and taking donations of women's office wear, shoes, accessories, jewellery and cosmetics at its office at Monument Place. If you do not have any suitable items to donate but still want to show support, monetary donations are also very welcome. Here is Smart Works' website if you want to know more: http://smartworks.org.uk/

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