

## From Work to Maternity Leave:

When you learn that you are expecting a baby, you are filled with emotion – happiness, excitement, confusion, fear. It is the beginning of a new life phase, one filled with incredible joys (along with incredible worries and sleepless nights). Pregnancy and childbirth are truly awe-inspiring processes. I still look at my little girl every day and can't believe that we created her. She is a true miracle.

There is a lot to be done before your bundle of joy arrives. You need to wind down from work and find a way to prepare both professionally and personally. In this paper, I hope to share with you what I have learned from my own experience, as well as the experience of my clients, colleagues and friends.

### Professionally:

I was the first senior female professional to go off on maternity leave at my firm, so I had to establish a process and hopefully a positive precedent for other women to follow. The firm decided not to replace me during my maternity leave, so I had to make sure that all of my files and clients were transitioned seamlessly to other colleagues. I was lucky to have a very supportive employer, who was willing to work with me to do what was best for both them and me. Here's what we learned:

- ***Discuss Details with your Employer:*** After you've told your employer that you are pregnant, you need to land on the date you will go on leave, how much time you will take, and the date you plan to return. Begin thinking about whether or not you want to change your job schedule or function at work once you return. If you're comfortable, discuss these options with your employer. However, don't firm up anything until after the baby has arrived. You may feel completely different once you've had the baby, so this is only the time to become aware of and understand your options – not make any commitments.

- ***Create a Transition Plan:*** A transition plan is essential. This is a document that outlines what files, projects, accounts, or clients you have on your plate and how you will transition each before you leave. For example, in my plan, I included: the current status of the file/client; how far I was going to take the file/client before transitioning them; who I was transitioning them to; and when and how the client was going to be told about this plan. Your transition plan should also contain a contingency plan in case you deliver early. Although this can be an emotional and confusing time for you, don't bring that emotion to the workplace. Your supervisor and colleagues will be looking to you for a clear, solid plan, and a professional attitude.
- ***Gain "Buy-in" to the Plan:*** Once the transition plan was created, I had it approved by my supervisor and then met with each of my colleagues to discuss the plan and which files/clients each of them would take on. I wanted to ensure my clients were serviced well in my absence, so it was important for my colleagues to understand the clients' needs and agree to take them on. Next, meet with your clients (or project team members or stakeholders) to discuss the plan and ensure they are comfortable with the transition plan.
- ***Work the Plan:*** Over a six-month period, I enacted the plan. I updated and circulated the plan internally every two weeks, so that everyone involved knew where we were in the transition and what was still to come.
- ***Be Flexible:*** Things WILL change. New projects come in, colleagues arrive and leave, and clients change their minds. The goal is to take care of your clients/projects/team members and to do your best to make sure they are taken care of leading up to and including your time away. Go with the flow and do your best.

- ***Start Removing Yourself & Slowing Down:*** As you get into your third trimester, you're going to get increasingly tired and you will need to start slowing down. This can be difficult for us "Type-A" personalities. In order to help myself and my firm, I went down to a 3 - 4 day work week in the last two months of my pregnancy. This was the best thing I did! It allowed me to get ready for the baby (since I hadn't started buying things or preparing the house) and forced the firm to get used to me not being around full-time. There were definitely bumps along the way, and I did work more than I intended, but it was better to work out the kinks in those last couple of months than with a newborn. Before you go off on leave agree on the terms of contacting you. Be clear about the areas where you want to be kept informed and how. If you don't want anyone to contact you for the first few weeks or months, let them know.

## **Personally:**

This is an exciting but scary and draining time. Depending on your pregnancy, you could be having a ride in the park or a very difficult time. Regardless of your type of pregnancy, your first priority must be taking care of yourself and the baby. Slowing down can be tough for achievement-oriented women who are used to long hours and going hard all the time. Here are some things that might help:

- ***Take Time When You Need It:*** If you're having a tough pregnancy, slow down and take time off when you need it. At a minimum, give yourself some time near the end of the pregnancy to relax and prepare for the baby. I stopped working two weeks before my due date and went down to a 3 - 4 day work week for the last couple of months. These two things gave me time to rest, read, shop, and take the yoga class I wanted to. Your life is about to change drastically, try to carve out some alone time to do whatever you find relaxing (workout, read, have lunch with friends).

- ***Don't Over-Read:*** If you're anything like me, you feel the need to become an expert in pregnancy and labour (just like everything else you do), and go over-board on the reading. Try to pace yourself by alternating between one "baby book" and one personal book. The other mistake I made was to just focus on books about pregnancy and labour and nothing post-birth. I was so focused on the here-and-now that I just kept reading. Once Stella was born, I realized how silly it was to focus so much time reading about something that lasted ten months and nothing at all about the next eighteen years. I suggest that, before the birth, you read one or two books about the first three months of the baby's life, so that you have some sense of what you're doing, or at least where you can find information when you need it (see list below for some ideas). Trust me; you won't have a lot of time to do this type of reading once the baby's born.
- ***Establish a Support Network:*** Whether this consists of your parents, siblings, friends, or close colleagues, you will need them all. Before the baby comes, spend some time reflecting on who you would like to help you and in what capacity. For example, my mother came for the first ten days of Stella's life and this was a godsend. We also had friends who came over to cook us dinner a couple of times. Don't be afraid to ask for or accept help. Though this can be difficult to do, it is essential.

- ***It could be Harder than you Think:*** This is one time in our lives that I truly believe our perfectionist, achievement-oriented personalities work against us. Don't get me wrong, having a baby has brought me unquantifiable happiness, but those first three months were brutal. You're trying to figure out this new little person and you don't have a clue what you're doing. As a successful professional, you are used to being in control and being able to measure your success in concrete terms. This is like nothing you've ever done and will TEMPORARILY throw your world upside down. You will try to figure it out and, in the process, learn just as much about yourself as your little one, but it will be tough. There's not much anyone can really do to prepare you other than urge you to let the baby guide you. Trust that they know what they need and you just need to be there to support them. This time is less about mastering and more about letting go. I had to follow Stella's plan, not my own. At the end of the day, you will ask yourself: "What did I accomplish today?" Recognize that life is no longer about getting things done – if you have a baby that is fed and rested, you have done a lot. Don't compare this task to others you've done in the past by saying, for example, "I used to be able to close a million dollar sale, or manage a team of six people, and yet I can't get this baby to sleep!"

There is no right or wrong way to do this, which is what's so hard, so try to go with the flow, trust your instincts (as much as you might think you don't have any in this area, you do!) and leverage those support networks. Also, try not to compare yourself to other mothers. It always looks like others are having a much easier time than you are – THEY'RE NOT. For me, things really turned around 3 months (by 3 - 4 months a newborn usually settles into a fairly predictable routine and you start to feel competent). This is when things got really fun and they haven't stopped since.

After spending a glorious year home with Stella, I have decided to jump back into work on a part-time basis. Look for Part 2 of this series – *Successfully Transitioning Back into Work after Maternity Leave* – which I hope to write in the next few months.

**Suggested Books for Women Leaders Post-Birth:**

Secrets of the Baby Whisperer, Tracy Hogg

On Becoming Baby Wise, Gary Ezzo & Robert Bucknam

The Happiest Baby on the Block, Harvey Karp

The Baby Book, William Sears and Martha Sears

The Working Mother's Guide to Life, Linda Mason