

My flexibility story

Mismanaged return from maternity leaves ends in resignation

I am a senior associate in a defendant insurance practice. I have two children under three and work four days a week.

My current flexible arrangements work because of the attitude that the partners of my firm and the other employees take to my flexibility. Nothing is too difficult; there is open communication and the partners are very understanding of my need to balance the needs of my family (and my desire to be with them) with my desire and willingness to be a contributing member of the firm.

My manager is happy to call me on the days I am not in the office to discuss any urgent work or anything happening on my files. The solicitors and administrative staff that I work with also feel comfortable contacting me. I have a good support person who manages my diary, and our clients are aware of my flexibility and happy to schedule meetings on the days I am working.

I have never had any negative feedback from clients or from those with whom I work. I am available to deal with urgent issues on the days that I am not working, but this rarely happens.

I joined my current firm after a disappointing and difficult return to work at my last law firm following my first period of maternity leave. Some examples about the way my work changed as a result of my maternity leave and return to work are:

1. On my first day back in the office after my maternity leave (I was working three days a week in the office initially, increasing to four days a week when my child turned one):
 - a. My manager was informed of my return to work date but did not inform anyone in my team.
 - b. I went to my office and discovered that all of my belongings had been moved and someone else was using it.
 - c. I was allocated a spare office with no computer, phone, chair, stationery or files.
 - d. I was not allocated any files for the first week, which caused me considerable anxiety about how I would meet my budget and satisfy targets for billable hours.

2. I was given less work to do and therefore on the days that I was working I was not gainfully occupied.
3. Regular team meetings were scheduled on the days that I was not at work.
4. The space provided to express breastmilk was unsuitable because other employees used it to store their lunch and I would be interrupted while trying to express. I then began to express by sitting on the floor in the shower room.

I raised concerns about the space provided for expressing and although other staff were directed not to use the fridge, in practice they continued to do so. At my performance review I complained to my supervisor and human resources manager about the way that my return to work had been managed.

My supervisor acknowledged that my return to work had not been well organised, and apologised for what he described as a breakdown in communication. By that time, however, I felt that the relationship could not be repaired. I resigned my position shortly thereafter.

Queensland Law Society

Practice Management Course

Preparing you for success as a law practice principal

Prospectus out now >>qls.com.au/pmc

This lawyer's return from maternity leave was a nightmare. However, because of a new employer who showed understanding and flexibility, her story has a happy ending.

When I interviewed with my current firm, I was upfront and advised that I intended to have another child. The response during interview was positive. My supervisor said that he was happy to accommodate a period of maternity leave and that there would be ample work for me up to any period of leave and when I wanted to return.

I started working three days a week and within five months I had fallen pregnant. I then began working four days a week and continued to do so until my second child was born. Originally I intended to have five months of maternity leave, but while I was on maternity leave our firm became quite busy and my partner contacted me to ask if I would be interested in coming back to work earlier than I had otherwise anticipated. He made me completely at ease and impressed on me that I should feel no pressure to come back early, but if I wanted to, he would like to facilitate an early return to work for me.

I told him I would be happy to return to work earlier than I had anticipated but that, in order to make the arrangement work, I would need the following things:

- a. A dedicated support staff person. The firm operates on a typing pool arrangement so there is no dedicated assistant or secretary for each lawyer. In order to make the flexibility work, I needed somebody in the firm every day that I could trust to take messages for me, manage my mail and manage my diary.
- b. A place to be able to express or breast feed privately.
- c. If I was to work in the office, my daughter would need to accompany me.
- d. I would need remote access to our systems.

My employer agreed quickly to all of these requirements, modifying my office with shelving along a window for privacy and providing appropriate administrative and IT support. I returned to work in the office two days a week when my daughter was eight weeks old. My daughter accompanied me to work until she started daycare at five months old. At the same time I increased my workload to four days a week.

Now that my children are in daycare, I share pick-up and drop-off duties with my husband. On the days that I pick them up, I finish work at 4.30pm.

Because I practise in litigation, there are times when I will have to be available on days I would not normally be working, for example, on court hearing dates and if trials are set down for a week or more. At those times I will either swap my usual working day for the court hearing day or, if I have to work a full week, I do so and then am paid on an hourly rate. Otherwise I am paid a pro-rata of my salary.

Previously I travelled regularly to Cairns, Mackay, Townsville and Rockhampton for trials and other work. Now (where possible) my partner allocates me Brisbane-based work, which will hopefully reduce the number of nights that I am away from home this year.

I feel very connected and loyal to my firm because of the consideration and support they have given me. With their help I have been able to strike a good balance between work and family. I have been able to keep my skills up to date, make a meaningful contribution to the firm and progress my career while caring for two small children. I could not imagine working anywhere else.

The Queensland Law Society flexibility working group needs your story. Please contact flexibility@qls.com.au and share your experiences with flexibility in the legal profession.



Keep Family Law Disputes Out Of Courts

- Nationally Accredited Mediator
- Accredited Specialist (Family Law)
- No Cancellation Fee
- Available Australia Wide



Brett Hartley Mediations

Discourage litigation

☎ 0427 482 186

✉ brett@bhmediations.com.au

🌐 www.bhmediations.com.au



Brett Hartley