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Working mums

Speaking from both personal and professional experience, **Christine Khor** frankly discusses the realities for working mums.

Picture this. It's 9.02 on a Tuesday morning. A significant business meeting is taking place. We are discussing productivity, budgets and forecasts, a scene that is simultaneously playing out in thousands of boardrooms around the country. But not this particular meeting. In fact, this meeting is taking place at a hairdressing salon on St Kilda Road, Melbourne. A meeting between two working mums, trying to fit in a catch-up between breakfast, kinder runs and school drop-offs.

Admittedly, it was not a normal day – I was preparing for a shoot for our company website, and in desperation had booked a session with a stylist after the kids had been dropped off to school. But it got me thinking about working mums, a topic of contention that has been rehashed in the media due to the recent paid maternity leave debates.

Why am I qualified to speak on this topic? Because I am a working mother. I wear the hats of mum, wife, boss and at times can feel like the jack-of-all-trades. And I am certainly not alone.

MOTHERS RETURNING TO WORK IN RECORD NUMBERS

According to the ABS, more mothers with children aged under 15 are employed than ever before. Almost two-thirds (63 percent) of mothers with children aged under 15 were employed in March 2008, compared with 54 percent 10 years earlier.

As a director of a recruitment company specialising in sales and marketing, I can tell you that the 'returning to work' trend is alive in the marketing industry, an industry that is

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known to be fairly female dominated. I have witnessed first-hand the surge of working mothers returning to marketing roles, which I attribute to three key factors.

First, many organisations are now encouraging their staff to take maternity leave and accommodating their transition back into the workforce. These are the organisations that consider their skilled and experienced long-time employees as central to their success.

Second, it is for financial reasons. And when I say financial I don't necessarily mean in the sense that they can't afford to pay the mortgage or can't afford to eat. It is more about financial independence. With women now choosing to start families much later in life, they have been in the workforce for a long time before they have their first child, meaning they are used to making their own money and they are used to contributing to the household earnings. They want to continue to support the family budget and income. And many women want to maintain the lifestyle that they grew accustomed to before they had children – whether it be to buy something frivolous like a pair of shoes, or something as significant as setting up a personal share portfolio.

It is also about state of mind. Many women who have worked for a number of

years miss the mental stimulation that is associated with day-to-day working life. I know that there is only so much discussion of maternal health and nappies that one can take.

So while there is a surge of women returning to the industry, I can see that it's not an easy thing to do. Professional women want to return to work part-time, but also want seniority, responsibility and the same pay they received before they went on leave. Many women struggle with the fact that when they do finally return to the workforce, it may not be at the same level, nor the same pay packet.

THE EMPLOYER PART-TIME BLUES

And then there are the employers. Despite there being a large demand for part-time roles – in fact, 60 percent of employed mothers with children aged under 15 are working in part-time roles according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics – it is clear that there are still organisations out there who are hesitant to employ working mothers.

It sometimes comes down to handover issues, particularly if it is a job share set up with two people sharing a role. Things can be missed in the handover, causing organisations to shy away from this style of working arrangement.

Furthermore, organisations struggle with higher head counts, as higher head counts means more computers, desk space, conferences, annual leave and public holiday pay. So organisations considering whether to have five people at five days a week or eight people at four days a week, will often go for the former.

And while employers want women with high levels of experience, they struggle to see how they can give a management position to someone working part-time, particularly if the role comes with the responsibility of a large team.

Some employers question who will look after the team when the part-time manager is not around. Then they question how effective the manager will be if they are not around for 40 percent of the working week, as they know that coaching, mentoring and leadership are difficult to do by email and phone. Furthermore, senior positions often entail travel, and employers can see that it is difficult for a mother – particularly a mother with a young family – to commit to this.

They also question whether it is fair on their other staff members to be managed by someone who is only in the office three days a week, which is a particular concern when you consider that the key reason someone leaves an organisation is because of dissatisfaction with their management.

THE TALENTED TALENT SO OFTEN OVERLOOKED

On the flipside, neglecting this key pool of talent can be detrimental to an organisation as it can mean that they miss out on some of the best candidates out there.

With many women having babies well into their 30s, it means they often return to the job market with a decade, or more, of experience. And working mothers are often renowned for their loyalty and commitment, particularly in organisations that show respect and an understanding of their circumstances.

They are expert multi-taskers, with the ability to do 17 things at the same time – after surviving the demanding first years of child rearing, working mums know what is important and what isn't and are able to use their time more effectively.

So while employers may have some initial concerns, it is vital to carefully consider the calibre of person that could be added to the team, the loyalty and commitment.

WORKING MOTHERS – THE PULL BETWEEN WORK AND HOME

Of course, there are many times that a working mother will question what she is doing it for. The industry we are in is notorious for its long hours and constant deadlines and this can leave working mothers feeling particularly perplexed.

I tell my candidates that they have to be honest with themselves about why they are returning to the industry. And I also tell them to be prepared for the fact that they are going to feel like a failure sometimes, and that's OK. As long as you can walk away and have a laugh, and your kids can have a laugh, all is OK. It doesn't matter if your house is not pristine, it doesn't matter if your socks don't match some days. There may even be times that you are having a dinner party, but are running late and need to order in pizza. And that's OK too, because your friends are there for you and not the food.

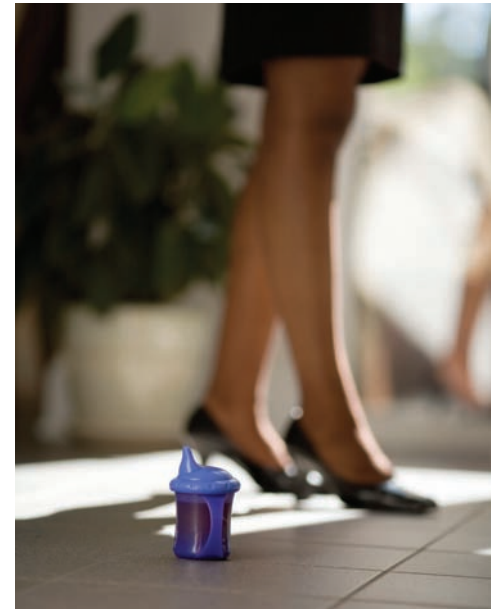
You will think about your kids non-stop, particularly if they are sick or have a curriculum day. You may even have to work on one of your kids' birthdays. You will constantly feel torn between home and work, and at times question both your parenting skills and your professional work. And there will be times when it all just feels too hard. But returning to work can also be unbelievably rewarding – with the right support network and employer, I believe the positives can outweigh the negatives.

SO CAN WORKING MOTHERS HAVE IT ALL?

I firmly believe something has to give. You have to be prepared to compromise. The compromise is that you have to manage your own expectations and remind yourself that you can't be perfect at everything. There's physically not enough time in the day to do everything.

And let's face it, what woman ever thinks she has it all? If you choose to be a stay at home mum, you won't think you have it all.

If you choose to return to the workforce full-time, you certainly won't think you have it all. No matter what choice a woman makes and no matter what our personal circumstances, I don't think we ever really feel we have it all. The trick is to be confident with whatever decision you make. **M**



Five considerations for working mums before they re-enter the workforce:

- 1** Ask yourself, what are you doing it for? Are you doing it for the money? Are you doing it for the mental stimulation? Are you doing it to get out of the house? Ensure you are doing it for the right reasons.
- 2** Be prepared to feel guilty, but then remind yourself why you are doing it.
- 3** Before you commit to returning to the workforce, ensure you have a good support system set in place. Maybe it's the in-laws, maybe it's a flexible husband, maybe it's childcare. Investigate whether you can organise shared drop-offs/pick-ups with a friend, or perhaps a set routine with the grandparents. Whatever it is, it's important that it doesn't all fall on to you.
- 4** Don't expect everything to run like clockwork. Be prepared to be adaptable and to go with the flow. If you expect it to go like clockwork it's just not going to happen.
- 5** Remember to be flexible. At home, at work and with your friends.