



Back to Work

Thought having a family meant putting your career on hold? Think again. Meet the mums getting back on the fast track (and the employers helping them on their way). Whether it's been a few months or a few years, it's never too late.

Take back your  
**CAREER**

**B**eing a mum is the most demanding and rewarding job most of us will ever have. But what happens when it's time to pick the Cheerios out of your hair and get back to the office?

Re-joining the professional world can be a challenge, whether it's putting in the long hours needed to get ahead, or catching up on everything that's happened while you've been away.

We take a look at some different ways mums are getting back into their careers, and how they're making the workplace work for them.

### Coming back after maternity leave

Sarah Quigley, staff engagement manager at the Financial Ombudsman Service (the free service who you can talk to if you're unhappy with your bank or insurer) recently went back to work after having twins last year.

#### Tell us about your family

*"I've got twin girls, who turned one earlier this year – as they were my first I was definitely thrown in at the deep end. But while it can be hard work, it's exciting and double the fun too."*

*"I went on maternity leave in April. It was such a relief not having to do the commute for a while – it's amazing how many people don't offer you their seat on the train! I took nine months off after having the babies and returned to work in February this year for four days a week."*

#### Can you tell us a bit about what your job involves?

*"I work in a busy internal communications team which helps staff feel involved and work more efficiently together. Our organisation's recently taken on an extra 1,000 staff, so we now have around 3,500 people - with plans to hire another 1,000 this year - so it's been busier than ever."*

#### How did you feel in the run up to your return to work?

*"It was a complete mixture of emotions – I had the natural worries that probably occur to most mums returning to work. What if I missed the girls too much? What if my job had changed since I had left?"*

*"I had "keeping in touch" days, which were a great way to stay up to date with what was happening in the office and with colleagues. It made the return to work a far less daunting prospect. I'd definitely encourage anyone who's planning to return to work to use your keeping in touch days."*

*"It's worth checking out what your employers can do to help you out – you never know if you don't ask. It can take a bit of time to get all the arrangements in place, so don't leave it to the last minute – and if you're not sure about anything just ask your employer. I'm lucky that I love my job and arranged flexible working to balance my work and home. I also have some really good friends across the service so I was excited to catch up with them again, too."*

#### What's it like, juggling your work and looking after the twins?

*"It makes for a busy life but I certainly never get bored. Naturally I still worry about the girls when I'm in the office but I'm lucky enough to have a strong network of family, friends and childcare, which means that I can get on with my work knowing*

*they're in good hands or that an update is just a phone call away."*

#### What advice would you give to any return to work mums?

*"Be prepared, organised and realistic about your time – and don't be too hard on yourself. Most of all, try to enjoy it!"*

### Getting back after a few years

Even if you've been out of things for a while, there's plenty of help to get you back on track. Employers are starting to realise that – apart from years of experience – mums have other valuable skills too, like time-management and communication skills (dealing with office prima donnas is a doddle after sorting a toddler tantrum).

In fact, some companies are even running schemes to get mums on board, like a recent initiative by Bank of America Merrill Lynch, specifically aimed at mothers who'd been out of work for three years or more.

### Room at the top

As Michelle Fullerton, the bank's head of diversity for Europe and emerging markets, put it, "One thing we noticed is that while we have a good number of women at lower levels, as you go up the organisation there are fewer and fewer women."

*"We can keep fishing at the bottom and expect women to progress, but it will take a long time for them to get to the top. So we wanted to look at how we could parachute some female talent in."*

One of the issues it confronted was that many of the experienced women had taken time out to have children, so they decided to target those who might be looking to get back into the workplace. Working with Mumsnet, they advertised the three-week returners' programme, aimed at senior-level women who had taken at least three years away from their careers. "These women needed someone to say that their skills and talent were still valued and to give them some support to get back into the workplace," said Fullerton.

The bank cast the net as wide as possible, but deliberately kept the application deadline to just two weeks as Fullerton knew they would be inundated.

Over 90 women applied for the 20 spaces and she says every one of them was of a high calibre. The bank's recruitment team sifted through the applications and assessed them as if the women were applying for a job. Fullerton offered feedback to all who had not been accepted.

Not all had experience in the finance sector, but all had transferable skills. The programme consisted of three one-day sessions – 10am-4pm – spread over two weeks. At least one woman had been out of the workplace for seven years.

On the first day, the group focused on their current situation, past experience, and how they could get back into the workplace. They heard from a panel of women managers, including a single mother, who spoke about how they managed their work-life balance. It also cov-

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Michelle Fullerton,  
Bank of America Merrill Lynch



Sarah Quigley, staff engagement manager at the Financial Ombudsman Service

ered industry changes over the last five years. "Literally everything regarding regulations has changed," says Fullerton, "which may mean it's a good time to come back since everyone's in the same position."

The last day included sessions with members of the recruitment and leadership teams who gave the women individual tips about their CVs and passed on advice.

Fullerton says that in just two weeks the group's aspirations have undergone a "radical transformation".

*"On day one they wanted to work part time and were saying they needed to leave at a certain time. They were still very much in the mums' mindset. By day three they had seen how IT advances had made it easier to work flexibly and were talking about maybe working four days with one day working from home or working till 5pm and then logging on after the children were in bed. They recognised that they deserved a career and they realised that they had missed work,"* she states.

As a follow-up, the organisation offered to support them for a year by giving them a space to meet up every quarter to catch up and network. They've also set up a LinkedIn group to stay in touch and give each other support. Recruiters at the bank will also contact them if suitable vacancies arise. Fullerton says the bank is definitely interested in doing it again.

## THE FINANCIAL OMBUDSMAN SERVICE

If you're unhappy with your bank or insurer – or you'd like to find out more about current vacancies at the service – talk to the ombudsman 0300 123 9 123 or [www.financial-ombudsman.org.uk](http://www.financial-ombudsman.org.uk)

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## Finding the right balance

Whether you have taken a few years off to bring up your children or are going back to work after maternity leave, there are often similar issues that arise. In Workingmums.co.uk's surveys, the top three barriers to return to work are consistently childcare costs, lack of flexible opportunities and confidence.

Confidence may be a bigger problem the longer you're away, but lack of flexible working opportunities is the main factor. When you're dealing with a traditional one-size-fits-all corporate culture, getting home for bedtime and achieving professional recognition can be hard, if not impossible.

That's why Workingmums.co.uk was set up in 2006 – to put employers who offered family friendly working together with women who wanted some degree of flexibility in their working lives. So employers get workers with bags of experience – and employees can work in a way that fits better with family commitments.

Flexible working covers anything from part-time hours and flexi-hours to compressed hours, job shares or a few days a week homeworking.

## Going it alone

Just because a job's not advertised as flexible, doesn't mean you shouldn't ask. Legally, you can't apply for flexible working until you've been in the job for six months, but many employers are open to a bit of negotiation at interview stage (for example, you

could ask about the organisation's flexible working policy and take it from there).

Of course, the employer needs to know they're getting something out of it too.

## The job share

Niamh Conroy and Katie Quinton are a great example. They share the role of Global Brand Development Director – Becel/Flora pro.activ at Unilever. They planned their job share meticulously and got buy-in from their colleagues. Both admit to working a little over their hours to make it work, but the payback of being able to work three days a week and having someone to share the load and bounce ideas off is, they say, priceless. And for Unilever there are ample returns. Katie says: *"We have complementary skills and double the energy. If one of us has not been in a particular situation before we can be sure that the other has – and knows how to deal with it, so the company gets a lot more than six days out of us."*

Sometimes the difficulty is not that there aren't options, but there are so many, it's hard to know what to do – or what to expect. In reality, there are as many different arrangements as there are families, and only you know what's right for you. Making it come together can involve a bit of trial and error, but with the right balance and the right employer, your career can go from strength to strength.

Just remember to take those Cheerios out first.



Job share can be very productive, both for the employees and employer

# 10 ways to be FLEXIBLE

Want a more flexible working approach? Here are some of the buzzwords employers are using now. (Good news for mums, whatever you call it.)

- ✓ Working part-time
- ✓ Flexi-hours
- ✓ Agile working
- ✓ Compressed hours
- ✓ Remote working
- ✓ Telecommuting
- ✓ Job-sharing
- ✓ Working from home
- ✓ Location independent working
- ✓ Smarter working

## Flexible working: who's doing it?

- ✓ 96% of companies offer flexible working overall (100% large firms; 95% medium-sized firms and 91% SMEs)
- ✓ Three-quarters make 'some use' of flexible working
- ✓ The most popular form of flexible working offered is part-time working – by 88% of all employees
- ✓ Some 25% use some form of flexitime, while 20% say they work from home on a regular basis.
- ✓ A further 14% say they take advantage of remote working
- ✓ More women work flexibly than men (77% vs 70%)

Source: CIPD, May 2012

## USEFUL LINKS

[www.workingmums.co.uk](http://www.workingmums.co.uk)

[www.mojomums.co.uk](http://www.mojomums.co.uk)