



Returning From Parental Leave: A Best Practice Checklist for HR

Coming back to the office after taking parental leave can be a daunting prospect. For many returning parents, it's their first extended break from the workforce. Add to that the lifechanging experience of welcoming a newborn into the world and it's no wonder that returning to work can be a source of worry.

At ELMO, we get it. Over the years we've had many parents and families who have grown with us, and as an organisation, the support in place has grown and evolved too. To help, we've created the following return to work checklist, packed with thoughtful hints and tips for HR professionals to consider. It includes legal obligations and best practice strategies for supporting employees on the transition from parental leave to part-time or full-time work.

The return from parental leave is often overlooked, but creating a smooth and well-thought-out process helps employees settle back into their role more quickly, boosting productivity, engagement, and trust with their employer.

No.	Employer action	Done
1	Confirm pending parental leave Celebrate the news for your team member. Give them time to celebrate first and when they're ready, you can begin discussing the next steps. Organise a meeting with your team member to discuss the timeline for going on parental leave. Are they expecting to be the primary or secondary carer? You may have a different policy for each role. You can ask at this time if they have any initial thoughts as to when and how they might like to return to work. Remember this can change between birth and life as a parent. Confirm whether the business is providing employer-funded parental leave and whether superannuation will be paid by the business while on parental leave.	
2	Begin preparing for their return Organise a meeting with the employee's manager to discuss the timeline and logistics of their team member's return to work. Has their role changed? Has the team structure changed? Ensure managers are aware of both compliance and best practice behaviours. While the policy belongs to HR, how it is delivered will come down to managers. Provide them with resources from Fair Work as well as any internal policies and guidance.	
3	Ensure compliance It's vital for organisations to comply with the Fair Work Act in relation to parental leave and flexible work entitlements, including, but not limited to, the following: • Employees have the right to return to work in the position they held before starting their parental leave. This differs for employees on a fixed-term contract, if the contract has run out during their parental leave. • If their old position doesn't exist when they return, the employee is entitled to an available position for which they are suitably qualified, which is nearest in status and pay to their pre-parental leave position. Any changes to an employee's job, including status, pay or location, must be discussed with the employee – even if they're on leave. • Employees who are returning to work after taking parental leave have the right to request flexible working arrangements, if they have been with the employer for at least 12 months. This can include working patterns, hours, and location. Employers can only refuse a request on reasonable business grounds. For more information: Returning to work from parental leave Flexible working arrangements	
4	Communicate often Communication is an essential factor in facilitating a smooth and positive return. Reach out to the employee in advance of their return to discuss next steps and answer any questions they might have. This may be the responsibility of the employee's manager or HR, depending on your organisation. Aim to get in touch with them at least 10 weeks prior to their planned return date, or earlier if the employee reaches out first.	

	Consider using technology to set calendar reminders for the initial and subsequent meetings, ensuring the process isn't rushed and both employer and employee have plenty of time to work through any hurdles. Use this time to discuss the return to their role, their desired working arrangement, and share any resources relating to flexible working policies, breastfeeding policies, FAQs, etc. Be proactive in communicating the employee's entitlements under the Fair Work Act. For more information: Pregnant employee entitlements	
5	Consider breastfeeding needs There are several things an employer can do to support an employee who is breastfeeding. These include providing a private, comfortable space to breastfeed or express, somewhere to store a breast pump, and a fridge to store breast milk. Employees should also be given appropriate breaks to breastfeed or express, and be supported by their manager. Training may be required to ensure support given by managers is consistent across the organisation. There could be legal ramifications if an employee is not given adequate lactation breaks. Check your state's workplace health and safety laws here. Breastfeeding is also a protected ground of discrimination under the Fair Work Act. Consider implementing a breastfeeding policy to outline the level of support provided to employees and demonstrate a family-friendly culture. Creating an FAQ document is another useful resource for returning mothers who are navigating breastfeeding at work for the first time.	
6	Introduce a buddy system One of the best ways to build a supportive culture for new parents is through peer-to-peer support. Employees who are feeling apprehensive about returning to work may benefit from the knowledge and experience of a colleague who has been through it before. Design a buddy system by reaching out to employees who have returned from parental leave in the past and may be interested in taking part. Once on board, match them with first-time returnees as a source of support and guidance. Be sure to make buddies feel supported and valued by HR.	
7	Offer a gradual return 'Keeping in touch days' help to ease employees back into the business after a period of leave. A lot can change in the space of six or 12 months, so it's a good idea to get employees up to speed gradually before their first official day back. It could also be an opportunity for the employee to refresh their skills, take part in training, or get to know new team members. Employees must be paid their normal wage and accumulate leave entitlements for each 'keeping in touch day' or part day. For more information: Keeping in touch days	

8	Design the employee journey Returning from parental leave shouldn't be a 'set and forget' for managers and HR. Instead, they should work together to map out an employee's return and provide regular checkpoints. By taking a similar approach to onboarding a new employee, it ensures a thorough and seamless experience. For example, why not utilise technology to schedule one-week / one-month / three-month meetings with both manager and HR. This demonstrates a high level of organisation from the start and a commitment to supporting employees beyond their first day back. The first months are critical in ensuring the psychological contract the employee has with their employer is met and they feel welcomed, supported and valued. ELMO Experiences takes the hassle out of designing personalised employee journeys, such as a return from parental leave. With mobile-first access and automated processes, Experiences is the must-have tool for designing and visualising an employee journey for all the critical moments that matter.	
9	Make getting help easy Ensure employees know who to reach out to if they need support or assistance in their return to work. The personal touch matters, so encourage your HR team or manager to check-in with employees and ask how they're doing. This is particularly important for remote employees who may be feeling isolated. Encourage HR members to use video calls where possible, or schedule catch-ups in person. If your organisation provides an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), it's worth communicating the services available and how employees can access support. There may be dedicated post-natal services available, for example. Low take-up of an EAP is often the result of employees not knowing what type of support is available and how to access it. With frequent communication and reminders, HR can make sure accessing help is as frictionless as possible.	
10	Ask for feedback Like any other key moment in the employee journey, it's important to gain feedback on what's working well, and what could be improved. Surveying employees who have returned to work after parental leave is an opportunity to gain invaluable insight from the source and continually improve the experience. Using the right surveying tools reduces the manual work behind collating feedback, allowing HR to automate the survey at scale and achieve maximum participation. Easy-to-use dashboards enables HR to periodically analyse the data, spot trends and take action to course-correct in real time. ELMO Survey makes it easier than ever to collect, manage, analyse and compare data. Its range of ready-made HR survey templates are built by industry professionals with over 18 years of experience, helping users to make better business decisions.	

Disclaimer: Please note that the information in this checklist is not exhaustive and is intended for general information purposes only. It does not constitute tax or other advice. Always seek professional advice

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