

## Reducing the motherhood penalty to bridge the gender pay gap

### Background

How Do You Do It has over 12 years of experience running coaching programmes with thousands of working parents in Australia and the UK. Despite differences in statutory maternity and paternity rights, we have seen common themes from mothers and fathers across both countries that support the [growing body of evidence](#) that the single biggest factor in the gender pay gap today is motherhood.

From talking to thousands of parents about their experiences we've found the issues (and therefore the solutions) can be grouped around several themes;

- **Maternity favours not parental rights** - *the perception that maternity leave is a company doing an employee a favour rather than a right*
- **Promotion by presenteeism not performance** – *the double maternity leave penalty of lower performance ratings and lack of promotion because a woman hasn't been visible for a while.*
- **Part time – fully committed** – *expectations about which roles are suitable for part time or flexible hours and what it signals in terms of an employee's commitment*
- **The confidence gap** – *the cumulative effect on confidence that tends to mean women don't put their hand up for career progression and aren't vocal about decisions they don't agree with in relation to their careers*
- **Only one version of success** – *a lack of male role models for dads and senior role models for women who work flexibly which perpetuates the belief that success can only come in one size*

### So where next?

Now that gender pay gap data is public and companies are in the spotlight to improve things, what are the practical steps that they can take and what are the organisations that are already on this journey doing to make the incremental improvements that are necessary for change?

1. **Change the narrative from maternity favours to parental rights** – Even in countries where there are strong statutory maternity laws, maternity leave can have a tendency to be viewed as a favour that an organisation gives and which employees should be grateful to receive. This sets the tone of indebtedness leading to women sometimes accepting second best or a return to work on any terms because their employer is perceived to have granted them a huge favour. Society needs people to have children, so why penalise women for what is an inescapable fact of biology? Best practice organisations are changing the narrative by offering equal parental leave rights to men and women. This increases the options for parents to share the amount of time they are off work and removes the perception from women of a favour being done rather than a right being claimed.
2. **Put in robust processes for appraisals and annual reviews before maternity leave** - When women come back from maternity leave they can find they are doubly penalised with a lower rating than usual in their performance review because they haven't been visible for part of the annual review cycle. Previous ratings or performance over part of a year aren't counted as much as presenteeism.

In addition, women may find they are at the back of the queue for promotions because the time they have been on maternity leave isn't counted as continued service in role or worse because they are perceived as being not worth investing in, in case they go on maternity leave again.

Post maternity, length of service and presenteeism become more important factors than previous potential and outputs. This impacts salary immediately through a lower rating but can also put women on an altered career trajectory to their peers or to their own previous expectations, impacting earnings in the mid to long term.

Putting clear and robust plans in place to agree objectives against which performance will be measured before and after maternity leave helps organisations to recognise that maternity leave is a pause not a full stop in terms of a woman's promotion chances and helps performance be measured by outputs and in a way that that doesn't hinder post maternity leave progression.

3. **Part time and flexible still means committed** – There are still assumptions that if a woman chooses to return to her pre-maternity role on a part time or flexible basis she is less committed to her job and not as interested in promotion. This compounds the pro-rata salary drop of becoming part time with a drop in projected future salary growth and career opportunity too and can become a self-fulfilling prophecy as over-qualified women become demotivated doing jobs that no longer challenge them. Companies that are normalising flexible working across the organisation are more likely to promote the most capable people rather than only those willing or able to work the most hours, avoiding the situation where women are held back from contributing fully to their organisation simply because they want to work flexibly.
4. **Getting creative about what kind of role works part time** – Part time or flexible hours are still viewed as not workable for many client facing roles which can force very good front office female employees into back office or support roles to which they may not actually be the best candidates. Aside from the loss of talent from client facing positions – and frankly shouldn't all companies want to put the best suited candidates in front of their clients, back office roles tend to attract fewer promotion opportunities, bonuses and hence impact salary potential in the mid to long term. In an era where office space in many places is at a premium and technology is an enabler for many jobs to be done remotely, thinking creatively about how to utilise people in an organisation to maximise the best use of skills rather than hours worked makes sound business sense.
5. **Champion different versions of success.** The lack of role models in a lot of organisations at a senior level who are working anything other than full time is still minimal. Hence when women look up they don't see examples of career progression that necessarily work for them or their family and the default assumption is that career progression and family life are incompatible. Women often don't feel confident enough to challenge this default model of 'success' and so their own limiting beliefs hold them back from even trying to change things. Great companies are reaping the rewards of a more diverse workforce by championing lots of different versions of successful working patterns.

6. **Champion flexible working for dads** – Men tend to feel very anxious about asking for flexible work, they see how career limiting it is for women so avoid asking and often hide the fact that they may be leaving the office for a childcare related reason. Whereas the assumption for women is often that they will want flexible or part time work after having children, the reverse is true for men and it is assumed that having children hasn't altered anything in their life. Therefore, men tend to stay in full time roles and move into the position of primary bread winner in their household, even if this hadn't previously been the case.

Once this pattern is established it is hard (not to mention often not economically viable) to alter that balance and women become the default primary child carer rather than it being able to be shared. Organisations that encourage flexible working patterns throughout their workforce for men and women, dads and mums lift the stigma of flexible working being career limiting, create more opportunities for women and recognise that men are just as keen as women to play a very active role in being a parent, they just haven't had the opportunity to do so up to now.

7. **If you find that your female staff aren't putting their hand up, question why** – Don't assume it is because they don't want promotion, they may just be less able to see the possibility of one working. As women see their peers take a different career trajectory to them, they start to believe that this is because they are less able and talk themselves into a situation where they are less likely to put their hand up for promotion or a new role. What they believed initially was a temporary blip to their career becomes the new normal and the gap between their salary and those of their peers continues to grow.
8. **Be proactive about championing your female employees getting what they deserve.**  
Women are less likely to dispute a decision about their bonus, rating or promotion opportunity whilst on maternity leave, partly because they aren't physically there to argue their cause but also because they have never had to before. A tendency to rely on being treated the same as they had been previously means many women don't think to challenge a decision or are too bought into the narrative about maternity leave being a favour that they see this as part of a temporary trade-off for maternity leave.

Smart organisations don't assume that women not questioning things equates to them being happy about a decision, they champion their cause and make decisions based on merit, not what they can get away with. In return they are rewarded with happy, engaged and loyal employees.