

Five Ways to Support Women in the Post Pandemic Return to Offices

'A woman's work is never done': there is a real risk that men and women may not return to offices equally.

By Christine Braamskamp and Lucy Blake, Jenner & Block.

Now that most children have returned to school and people are gradually returning to their offices, many of us feel a sense of excitement and hope at the prospect of reimagining our working practices, including how and from where we will work.

However, just as gender equality in the workplace suffered during the COVID lockdowns, with working mothers shouldering a disproportionate share of the domestic load and childcare, there is a real risk that men and women may not return to offices equally either.

A recent UK [poll](#) of over 2000 senior leaders, managers and employees found that of those working virtually, 69% of mothers said they wanted to work at least one day from home when the pandemic ends, compared to 56% of fathers.

Law firms and other organisations are devoting much energy to developing return to office plans. This moment presents as a vital opportunity to address gender imbalance

issues. We set out below five ways law firms and other organisations can maximise support for women and boost gender equality and female advancement in the post-COVID workplace.

1 – Counselling women impacted by the “double shift”

Throughout the COVID lockdowns, it has been widely reported that women bore the brunt of the increased domestic load, home-schooling and childcare burdens, often working a “double-shift”. The Office for National Statistics [reported](#) that women took on 77% more childcare than men in the first lockdown in the UK. Another [report](#) by McKinsey and the LeanIn foundation on “Women in the Workplace” found that in the US in 2020, one in four working women were considering downshifting their careers or dropping out of the workforce. For working mothers, particularly of young children, the figure climbed to one in three. Law firms should



Women are concerned that as law firms return to the office, they will get left behind.

consider how best to counsel women whose career ambitions may have shifted over the past year, in particular those with burnout or other mental health issues brought on or exacerbated by the pandemic.

2 – Providing women time and space to rebuild childcare networks

For many women, their carefully constructed Jenga towers of pre-COVID after-school childcare arrangements may have fallen away. Law firms should appreciate that many women will need time and space to rebuild these networks, being

patient and supportive of childcare challenges in the interim. In addition, whilst legal restrictions may have lifted, the pandemic is far from over. Law firms should be supportive of a potentially ongoing need for home-schooling where employees' children are in self-isolation and unable to attend school – and to provide the space for employees to focus temporarily on their families where necessary.

3 – Avoiding a flexibility stigma

For many women, home-working has been a welcome relief. Precious time is no longer wasted commuting and there can be greater engagement with their home and family life as well as serving their clients. It is however striking that these benefits are typically greater priorities for women than they are for men.

In those circumstances, law firms should be mindful to avoid a two-tier workforce, where those without domestic duties who are able to go into the office can build deeper relationships and advance their careers ahead of those working from home. There is no one size fits all solution to this problem.

Law firms will need to be aware of the issue and agile in their response. Men without domestic duties should also consider what they need to do to support and be allies to their female colleagues.

4 – Prioritising support for women of colour

A survey by the [Slack think tank Future Forum](#) found that just 3% of Black knowledge workers said they wanted to return to the office fulltime, compared with 21% of white knowledge workers in the US. An [article](#) by the same institution attributed these numbers in part to reduced workplace racism, discrimination and “code-switching” (pressure to alter speech, mannerisms, appearance and behaviour to fit in with others in the workplace, especially white peers) as well as an increased ability to “bounce back” quicker from incidents whilst remote working.

For women of colour, the return to offices is therefore especially complex. Law firms should be mindful of these very specific issues and prioritise support for women of colour, including listening and understanding what they need to do to create more inclusive cultures.

5 – Recognising health risks for pregnant women

Although restrictions have been lifted, the COVID pandemic is far from over. The return to offices may be a particular source of anxiety for those who are at increased risk of complications from COVID, including women who are pregnant or hoping to become pregnant. Law firms should recognise these particular risks and ensure that women are not pressured

into choosing between endangering their health and pregnancy and advancing their careers. Providing a flexible and understanding environment will be key.

After 18 months hibernating at home, returning to office desks may be met with mixed feelings by employees. Law firms should recognise the enormous toll the pandemic and home-working culture have taken on all lawyers' mental health (not just women), with the pressure of increasingly blurred boundaries between work and home life preventing people from “switching off”.

Support for working mothers will also need to be balanced with support for working fathers, carers and men and women without dependents. Law firms should place particular emphasis on mental health in their return to office plans and cultivate inclusive and adaptable workplaces for their employees.

For law firms and other employers, this new start represents an opportunity to reimagine the role of the office and consider afresh how to maximise diversity, inclusion, productivity, collaboration and enjoyment of work. Supporting women must be at the front and centre of the plan.

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