

## Paid Maternity Leave

As a rule I am not Black & White. I live my life in the grey! When faced with an issue I tend to see both sides and find it difficult to decide which side of the fence to sit.

Maternity leave is no different.

As a 24 year old, I worked at Coles New World (Shepparton). My husband and I had purchased our first house and the budget was very tight. We had been married for close to 6 years and were thrilled when I became pregnant.

Unpaid Maternity leave had not long come into being and I was the 1<sup>st</sup> at Coles Shepparton to take the leave. The new baby was beautiful, but making ends meet proved difficult and I returned to work when he was 6 months old, and was very grateful that my job was waiting.

It would have been a breeze if I had been paid my full wage for 12 months and there would not have been as much pressure to return to work as early as I did.

My child went to Arthur Dickman Child Care Centre and thrived on the attention he received. Now 25 years Old he has a degree in History with Honours from Melbourne Uni and has not long left to live in Italy. So being separated from me at 6 months doesn't seem to have held him back in any significant way.

I sound very pro paid Maternity leave don't I?

Well, this is were things change, after having worked at Coles for about another 6 months I started work at a joinery in the Office. My time was a little more flexible and worked a mixture of 3 and 4 days a week for the next 4 years during which time I had another 2 children. I didn't require the formal Maternity leave in this position as I was a personal friend of the Manager and we worked it out between us. But technically it was still the same thing, no pay but time off to have the baby and then return to work. By the time I had my 3<sup>rd</sup> child my husband and I were managing the business ourselves for an absentee boss. I went back to work when the baby was 6 weeks old because I knew the business could not afford to be paying a lot of money for a fill in.

In 1989 we purchased the business and have owned it as a partnership since. In 2003 we sold part to other partners.

The Managing and owning of a small business for over 20 years has made me very aware of the lack funds available most the time to cover

the extra cost government regulation enflicks on the business community. To be forced into paying full or part wages for an employee who is not contributing to the income of the business could mean some small business' would be unviable and have to close the doors.

In reality, even unpaid maternity leave puts a lot of pressure on smaller business. Managers find themselves torn between finding and training a replacement employee prior to the experienced person going on leave therefore paying double wages for the time required or waiting until the employee is on leave and having to work to cover the job while the replacement is trained up. Even what appear to be the simplest of jobs usually require some training before a person can be left to their own supervision.

We have legislation that prohibits employers making decisions based on sex as well we have "Affirmative Action" to employ women in our workforce both of which are fantastic and have gone some way to breaking down male domination in the workforce.

However what sort of business owner doesn't weigh up the long term consequences of the act of employing someone. Assuming the average family has 2 or 3 children and usually 2 years apart, you could calculate a woman of child bearing age on minimum wage has the potential in a ten year span of costing \$90,000 more than a male in the same time span.

If there is to be a paid Maternity leave, it needs to be funded by the entire community or a user pays system not by individual business.

For mothers to have the choice to be with their children during the early months or years should be a priority for the entire society. I am sure governments realize the family unit is one of the hottest issues facing our economy.

The cost to the entire population is enormous from vandalism, drug and alcohol abuse and other issues that have increased due to the breakdown of family. Some of the breakdown is due to the pressure caused by the cost of living and the demand for both parents to work to pay the bills. The cost of childcare forces the lowest paid workers to find alternative care and in some cases leaving children to fend for them selves.

I would like nothing more than Australia to have a paid Maternity Leave system, with payments fairly distributed to all employed woman who plan to leave and return to work within a reasonable set time.

Then that leads onto the women who choose to give up the extras in life to stay home and bring up their children in a full time capacity.

Is it fair for them to go without a no-strings hand out?

In the building industry there is a long service leave board, from the early 80's until November 2003 the fund made enough money from previous investments that no contributions were required from employers. At present there is a 1.5% payment made for the gross ordinary wage of those registered in the fund. This covers their Long service leave of the employees and is portable through the industry.

I would suggest that a large enough fund be put aside from the huge surplus the government has at the moment, not to spent but to be invested for the sole purpose of the interest being used. Rather than the employer paying into a fund the employees themselves be given the choice of being involved. The women working could plan ahead as to when they are going to start their family & decide when they no longer need to pay into the fund when they have finished having their families.

The user pays principle would not put any extra pressure on small business than unpaid maternity leave does now, other than an administration cost.

It would be fair to those who chose not to work and be full time mums and it would give women the option to use the system or not.

In the case of Long Service Leave it is 15 years before anyone is eligible for a full payout of their 12 weeks. In most cases women won't have worked long enough before they start families so there would need to be a lot of work done to calculate what sort of percentage would need to be paid and how much money would come from the investments.

In some European countries there has been one off payments to everyone who has a baby to help offset the costs and encourage population growth.

I know in France 20 years ago the payment was around \$5000. If a scheme like this was introduced it would give a kick start to the leave fund and help non working mother families cope with a new arrival.

In closing although I said at the start I am in the grey and I can still see both sides. I am convinced Small Business can not afford to carry this burden and survive. As the President of the Shepparton Chamber of Commerce I will be recommending we lobby against business funded paid maternity leave.