

'Back to work within a week': maternity leave when you're self-employed ^[1]

For self-employed people and small business owners, traditional maternity leave is often not an option. Mothers who run their own businesses discuss the challenges

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Technically I am still on maternity leave, but in some ways I never left," says Lucy Werner, a PR company founder. She is currently working remotely while travelling around France with her partner and five-month-old son.

"I get small pockets of time when my baby's asleep and that's when I speak with my team and do my own work, so it can be a bit frantic. I'm often writing strategy or new business documents pre-9am and after 7pm," she says.

This "never really leaving" mentality is one that many sole traders and small business owners will relate to. For self-employed women in the UK, Maternity Allowance (MA) is technically available for up to 39 weeks. However, the sticking point for small business owners is that in order to claim, you are only permitted to work for 10 "keeping in touch" (KIT) days throughout this period – anything further will stop your payments.

This presents a conundrum: taking time completely away from the business is at best difficult and at worst impossible. For those who do take time off, many return to work very quickly. Research from the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) found that almost half (43%) of women return to work sooner than they would like to after maternity leave.

Holly Tucker, who went on to be the founder of notonthehighstreet.com, was freelance when her son was born; she had no choice but to return to freelance work soon after the birth.

"We really couldn't afford the mortgage repayments, and I just had to go. I was of course, beyond shattered. But I had to bring in those sales targets, and in a way it made it easier, because I didn't have a choice," she says.

Tucker's latest enterprise, Holly & Co, advises small businesses. She says that "traditional" maternity leave is simply not an option for most small business owners.

"With all the businesses that I work with every day, there is no question really – except for a few, they're back within a week," she says. "When the buck stops with you, when it's your career ... when you've got people that are reliant on you ... I don't judge anybody for the fact that they need to get back to work."

Suzie Cregan, co-founder of Jimmy's Iced Coffee, also ended her maternity leave early. "I took three weeks off work after having my baby before I was back in meetings at the office. Jimmy's [Iced Coffee] is also my baby and I felt incredibly guilty about not going in during those weeks I took off. The emails didn't stop when my baby arrived and when the business faced a few unexpected challenges, it was important for me to get back in the ring again."

Joeli Brearley is behind the campaign Pregnant Then Screwed, which aims to end pregnancy and maternity discrimination. She believes that a new approach to shared parental leave could be the key to better supporting self-employed parents and offering more choice to female business owners.

"The way Shared Parental Leave (SPL) was set up means that if one parent is self-employed, the family are unable to access SPL and shared parental pay," she explains. "This means that the entire burden of childcare is placed on the mother: a self-employed father has no right to leave or pay whatsoever. For the mother to access Maternity Allowance, she must take her maternity leave, so she therefore risks damaging her business," she says.

Access to SPL for the self-employed was one of the five demands made by the March of the Mummies, a protest march in October of this year spearheaded by Pregnant Then Screwed. Thousands of women and men marched on Downing Street in London – with sister events taking place in four other UK cities – to demand better rights for working mothers.

"Implementing [SPL for the self employed] would cost the government nothing, as it is simply a process of redistributing the funds that are already allocated to women," Brearley says.

It certainly isn't straightforward, but in a working world where pregnancy discrimination is rife and flexible working remains a buzzword rather than a reality, being self-employed can be a definite advantage when it comes to parenthood. For the most part in small businesses, unlike more corporate environments, you're not expected to leave your identity as a parent at the door when you arrive at the office.

Mat Lyon, co-owner of design agency Lyon & Lyon, sees that flexibility as a huge advantage. He took two weeks' leave after the birth of his daughter, Eve, and says the flexibility of being your own boss allows you to take time off "when you really need to". "For the first six months [after Eve was born], I would take a day or two off as and when stuff got hard at home.

"I didn't do any work as such during my leave, but I did check in a couple times a week to creatively direct projects. I remember Skyping the studio with Eve asleep on my chest – that was quite cool and totally not what I'd imagined," he says.

"I've always said that if someone wants to see me, my baby needs to come," Werner says. "All of my meetings have obliged, and the result is that I have breastfed in boardrooms and cafes across the city, with entrepreneurs, journalists and CEOs who don't even blink an eye."

Tucker adds: "95% of small businesses on notonthehighstreet.com are run by women.

"I do think that we've got to count our lucky stars that we've got the opportunity now to do these things. We just have to muddle on through."

-reprinted from The Guardian

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