

Bringing in baby [UK]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

An unlikely trend is emerging in the US: a growing number of companies are allowing parents - usually mothers - to bring their babies into work. But is it possible to get anything done? A very sceptical Zoe Williams attempts it in the G2 office, with her six-month-old son in tow. Plus new parents Ian Prior and Imogen Tilden also put the idea to the test.

The United States and Australia are the only two countries in the industrialised world that don't have paid statutory maternity leave (there are exceptions in some US states). At least in Australia, though, your job is protected for a year; in America, even the leave protection only lasts for 12 weeks. It's an astonishingly backward state of affairs, like discovering that France doesn't have a postal service. A Harvard Study of 168 countries, measuring how different governments meet the needs of working families, found the US to be in the bottom five. But rather than do anything so tedious as campaign for reasonable terms, American lobbyists have instead thought more laterally, with a softly, softly, looky-after-baby approach: bring your baby to work with you. Until it can crawl, it can think of your workplace as liberty hall.

There are supposedly at least 83 companies doing this in the US. According to the Parenting in the Workplace institute, it is "a viable, inexpensive tool for helping employees return to work sooner, lowering turnover, improving morale, increasing overall productivity, enhancing teamwork and collaboration, recruiting new employees, attracting new customers, and making existing customers more loyal".

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In the interests of researching this idea, I have brought my baby into the office. But first, I'm going to tell you why I disagree with it to my very core. For a start, it irks non-parents. A typical response, from a reader of Time magazine after it ran a piece on the trend, was this: "I do not go to work every day to listen to the breeders' brats scream all day and to smell their baby poo diapers. And I certainly don't want to walk past a cubicle to see some woman breastfeeding her baby. NO."

Now, granted, this is a fairly feverish response, but only in tone - parents are annoying. We are self-righteous and a bit frazzled and we're never listening properly, and we bring with us a whole load of noise and smell pollution that we're not prepared to apologise for, and really the only people who can put up with us are other parents, not even of older children, but of babies exactly the same age. Non-parents would assume, not unfairly, that a person fussing over her baby was not doing as much work as everyone else. In one of these progressive American firms, employees are asked to clock off while they tend their infants, to offset these feelings of simmering resentment among colleagues, but I don't really think of that as a solution, so much as an outrage.

Second, if you're being asked to do your job and your childcare at the same time, the implication is that one of those things is not work. Multitasking, schmultitasking, my friend - it is just another word for not concentrating properly, and while it is possible to put on laundry with half an eye on a baby, it isn't possible to undertake anything complex.

But you know, whatever ideological objections I have, if it did work, then for a lot of people, that would be brilliant. I'm just not sure it did. Well, I'll just tell you what happened, you decide.

Getting in to work with Thurston, who is six months old, was an incredible slog - I got on a packed tube with this too-hot baby, way too heavy for me in his sling, and evil-stared the top of this guy's head to make him give up his seat for me, while he resolutely read his paper, pretending not to notice, until he finally looked up and it transpired that we knew each other. So that was embarrassing, even if you're not going to factor in the fact that I was sweating and grunting like a farmyard animal with just the sheer effort of it all. How I managed to be only 27 minutes late is beyond me, though I did sacrifice my makeup and tooth-cleaning me-time, and I also didn't smell my cardigan to see if it was clean, which saved me all of about four seconds and stored up a wellspring of shame that lasted throughout the day. I can't tell you what it smells of, exactly; something stewed. It definitely isn't clean.

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Meetings aren't work, though - checking emails, now that's proper work. Technically, you can do this with a baby on your knee, but there are flaws in this plan. Mine likes to thump the keyboard repeatedly, or until he has found "select all" plus delete, whichever is the sooner.

Then he likes to stand up, and sit down again, and wriggle and grunt, and all this makes it really hard to think.

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With him awake, I can just about keep my mind on an email of two lines, but nothing longer: and I can't hold it together to reply. Sure, employ me in this condition if you want to, but I would strongly counsel that it would be cheaper to pay me to stay at home.

My memory of office life was that you could wait a year for lunchtime to roll around, but now mornings appear only to last 30 or 40 minutes. Suddenly it was 1pm. I hadn't done anything; well, no, I had read a bit of the paper and then Thurston had helped me tear it up.

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By mid-afternoon, the most taxing task I'd even undertaken, never mind completed, was trying to mash half a banana with a chopstick because I'd forgotten my fork. What I did write - this - took three times, easily, as long as it would normally have done, and since I'm just describing events as they happen, in real time, I should have been able to do it with a baby in one arm and a zebra in the other.

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No, you can't take them into work and plonk them in the corner. I can't say why; that's just not the way it works. -Zoe Williams

'I keep breaking off to gaze adoringly at Miri'

One week after returning to work following my maternity leave and the idea of bringing 10-month-old Miri into the office rather appeals. Both of us shed tears as I left her with the childminder last week; sitting back at my desk I felt as if I was missing a vital organ, so odd - and wrong - did it seem to be without her.

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I'm 15 minutes late- not a good start - because as we arrive at the Guardian she looks sleepy, and I push her up and down the street hoping she'll have her morning nap. She doesn't. But she perks up, and I'm reminded of how you feel like royalty with a baby - everyone smiles indulgently at me, and coos at Miri. At my desk in the arts department, Miri lights upon a shelf of DVDs and CDs with enthusiasm, and sets about pulling them off one by one. My colleague Anna swoops her up and takes her on a tour of the floor, allowing me to read a few emails and make a start on the day's work.

Next to my feet is a pile of the weekend's newspapers. A couple of minutes later and Miri is eating the Sunday Telegraph magazine with gusto. I offer her a rice cake instead. On my lap, she reaches forward and grabs the mouse. Several emails disappear from the computer screen and pieces of puffed rice lodge themselves between the space bar and letters X and C. Anna comes to my aid again, and I manage another 20 minutes work.

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Gareth, who sits behind me, sensibly puts on headphones.

Nappy-changing and feeding are a problem - there are very few quiet spaces here, and when she starts rooting (I'm still breastfeeding) I firmly offer her a bottle. I manage to make a couple of phone calls, but rather spoil what I hope is my usual professional manner by giggling as she makes a particularly sweet noise, and then completely lose the thread of what I was saying. She has to eat lunch sitting on my lap - so my poor keyboard is now covered in sweet potato and yoghurt. By 1pm she still hasn't slept, and is getting overtired. My boyfriend - not at work today - comes to the rescue, and takes her home. He reports she's asleep "within two minutes of leaving the building".

I feel strangely bereft as I walk back to my desk. For me, the hardest, but perhaps also the best, thing about returning to work has been beginning the process of re-finding myself, remembering who I used to be, and that I can relate to people not as a mother. It's been lovely having Miri here, but I realise I've now got two identities, and I need to keep them separate.- Imogen Tilden

'Two hours into the day and I've done zilch'

The Brighton-to-Bedford rail line is officially the most overcrowded in Britain. It is also my route to the office from south London and frankly, I'd rather crawl to work naked with six-month-old baby Charlie strapped to my nipples than squeeze a loaded buggy on there at rush-hour. So cop-out No 1: we take the car.

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We haven't even arrived and it's already past the time for his feed and he's getting impatient. As the clock speeds towards 10, his mother's voice does Marley's Ghost in my head - "Any later than quarter-to and there'll be trouble." Panicked, I dash past my desk to a quiet corner of the office where I shovel a pureed pear and baby-rice combo down his starveling gullet like one of those penguin mothers just back from three months' fishing. I follow that up with a bottle of the morning's freshly pumped breast milk and, as he guzzles, I have time to reflect that the supreme barrier to bringing baby to work regularly is anatomical; Charlie has been on solids for barely a fortnight and still needs topping up by his mum. She's dead good with that pump, but there are limits.

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Two hours into my day and I've done zilch whatsoever but keep him fed and amused. Colleagues are patient because they know this is a one-off but it wouldn't last. I feel mortified as nap time arrives, tempers worsen through tiredness and the options narrow to (1) walk around the office for 20 minutes as he roars himself to sleep and makes everyone smile through grinding teeth or (2) take the buggy

outside and walk him off. Guess which, and yet more work shirked. This feels impossible, not to mention unfair on both of us. By midday it's cop-out No 2 - call mum, hovering in a nearby cafe, and admit defeat. -Ilan Prior

- reprinted from the Guardian

Tags: maternity and parental leave ^[2]
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