

No parental leave? No worries (in an era of alternative work arrangements)!

Juggling the demands of a newborn baby and challenging legal work is only possible if employees communicate clearly with management and set in place some strict personal guidelines to get *both* jobs done, writes Catherine Brooks.

While the advocates continue to champion for parental leave, there's a cohort of people who will elect not to take it – even if it is made available to them.

Many of those people are women, many of whom are self-employed and/or have built their livelihood based on client and referrer relationships and simply have no ability or desire to take extended leave from work.

We have all read in the press about unicorns (i.e. well-known women who appear to parent as well as they perform at work, such as the CEO of Business Chicks, Emma Isaacs, and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern) but we don't hear much about parents in the law who turn down the chance to take parental leave.

Yet it's a reality for some of us in the legal industry. In fact, I'm currently working (as Associate Director at Law Squared) with a newborn, alongside a number of women (who run their own firms) doing the same. Thank goodness for social media as it has enabled us to connect and support each other as we enjoy newborn bliss and a balanced (!) work-flow. But when family and friends ask me how much time I'm having 'off' after the birth of my second child, they're surprised and confused about how I can juggle a newborn and work. So how am I doing it? Well, it's something I'm working out each and every day and it's not always easy, but I've set out my 'how' below. Hopefully that will give many readers an insight into the possibilities of alternative arrangements.

For the love of work

But first, why do I continue to work while having a new baby? Quite frankly, because I love what I do. Clients don't just stop needing my services because I have had a child. And because it's my prerogative to do both (be a parent and work) if I'm privileged enough to be able to do it.

When I had my first child, Remington (who is nearly 3), I took three months' leave and, with the use of annual leave, extended that to five months. When I returned to work it was not a smooth transition and while I was so happy to be working again I really struggled being away from my baby. That first year was tough and it took a long time before I felt comfortable at work again.

Second time around I wanted to do it differently, so I weighed up all the options. While many land on the option of taking a longer period of time off, I realised that just wasn't what was going to make me happy. It also wouldn't have helped our family finances.

So I work predominantly from home, with an *au pair* living with us, doing work and meetings with my newborn in tow. I'm only working part-time hours, but I'm accessible throughout the week and clients know that if I don't answer their call straight away, I'll get back to them at my next opportunity.

I'm really enjoying it and although it's a juggling act, it's one that I'm preferring to the traditional childcare/office routine as it means I don't have to leave my newborn, and I'm only away from my toddler for short periods, but I still get to use my work brain and keep in touch with my profession and industry.

My personal blueprint

So how do I make this work and what does my day look like? Here goes.

At home we all wake up at 6am, my husband showers and gets ready for work while I change nappies and prepare breakfast for everyone. We eat together, either in the backyard or the playroom (the LEGO craze has hit already!). I check emails and WhatsApp or Slack discussions from overnight and prepare our schedule for the day. I do a load of washing and my husband hangs it out before he leaves for work (one chore ticked off the list). Our *au pair* starts work at 8.30am (and what a joyous time that is!) and I then shower and get ready. I have two uniforms, and have organised my wardrobe Marie Kondo style accordingly: active wear for stay-at-home days and wrap dresses for work days (perfect for travelling and breastfeeding).

I generally keep the newborn with me at all times and the *au pair* is in charge of toddler wrangling. I try to ensure teleconferences and meetings don't start until 10am so I have plenty of time to get everyone settled and sorted (lunches packed, teeth cleaned etc) before I have to plunge into work.

I have rostered in Monday and Wednesday mornings as work time so the *au pair* takes the toddler out (to music class, playground, library etc) for at least half a day so I can get some quiet time with my newborn and laptop. Sometimes I can put the baby down, but most of the time I cherish just having him lie on me and join in on teleconferences (cooing and farting noises all part of the fun!).

Tuesdays normally see me in the CBD meeting clients, referrers and the broader team for some face time (and sushi!) and on Thursdays and Fridays I just generally carry out unscheduled ad hoc work –we have a lot of clients on retainers that call as they need us. I aim to finish all meetings by 3pm so that I can give the toddler some time and then I get dinner ready and on the table by 5.30pm. We enjoy outdoor play until 7pm and then both babes get a bath and we do the bedtime routine. If all is well, the children are asleep by 8pm and then I can check emails and messages again before getting to sleep myself. I often listen to podcasts to get to sleep or, if that fails, I try to write some articles, blog posts or Insta stories (important business development work) on my iPhone before I log off for the day.

What's required to make this work?

- Solid but flexible childcare arrangements – it takes more than two to tango in this scenario! I have to be flexible for the firm, clients and the needs of the business, so having an *au pair* who can plan her day around my work needs is amazing. This allows me to spend time with my children when I'm not working, but also fit in clients or team members as they need me.
- A supportive partner who can take the children off to the swimming pool for a few hours on the weekend so I can catch up on admin (urgh, filing!) and planning.
- A team that gets it and is supportive in this short but full-on time.
- An employer who is encouraging of flexible work arrangements and can 'go with the flow' and who trusts you to just get what you need done without micromanaging you.
- Communication skills – it's a two-way street with you and your employer and then you add in clients, colleagues and family/partners and you've got a whole lot of conversations and discussion points to keep up with. Be honest, be clear and while you've got a plan, appreciate that sometimes it doesn't work. Having open, frank and honest discussions and building those relationships within your workplace will make the world of difference, particularly if your plan B needs to be enacted. Allow your employer, clients and

family/partners to also be clear with you around expectations and their communication because things won't always go smoothly.

Something else of interest to note is that my KPI structure is based on output, not billable hours. At our firm we bill based on value pricing and we are measured on more than just our monetary contribution to the business.

This enables me (and all our lawyers) to focus on building referrer relationships and carry out business development work, as well as provide optimum client service. I love that I can forget about the time I put in and just focus on the needs of our clients and meeting financial and other targets. It's taken a while to get my head around it, but my pay does not directly link to my hours, but rather to my performance and contribution to the team. This KPI system combined with value pricing enables flexible work practices for everyone, not just working mums, and really motivates the team in the right way.

Learnings of my experience so far working with a newborn:

- Clients really don't care if you bring a baby with you, breastfeed in meetings or schedule teleconferences around your other children. So long as you are upfront with them about your availability, committed to carrying out the work and can be trusted to deliver, they don't worry how you're doing it.
- Courts and tribunals can be accommodating to childcare arrangements. This was a refreshing learning for me when I recently called the Fair Work Commission and the associate to a Commissioner happily advised me that they understand if my newborn needs to be present during a conference and can make arrangements if I need to exit and breastfeed. Luckily, I was able to find a junior barrister for the job, but it was so comforting to know that I wouldn't have been precluded from representing my client if necessary. It goes to show that we need to be upfront about our child-caring responsibilities and seek help and guidance when required. Help is often forthcoming.
- Babies prefer to be with you than without. They travel well (if not in the car then in a BabyBjorn or pram). They will sleep when tired and feed when hungry. It's not always easy, but the more you practice the easier the juggle gets.
- There are many others out there doing the same. Find them, build your tribe and keep connected. You're not alone and social media will help you traverse geographical distances so you never need be lonely. I've listed some accounts to follow below.
- Just by doing your thing you can be a role model for others. My *au pair* recently told me that she wants to work when she has children and I've shown her how it is possible! To hear that sentiment from young people makes it all worthwhile.
- Research all the options available for your family. If it's not possible for you to have an *au pair*, find out the cost of family day care or other childcare options available near you. Flexible work is never a stagnate experience. Get used to living in constant flux and going with the flow and watch your anxiety reduce tenfold (even if your workload increases).

Catherine Brooks is an Associate Director at Law Squared and an accredited specialist in workplace relations. She is also the author of *Let's Make It Work, Baby!*

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Social media accounts to link up with:

- The Juggle Podcast is on Instagram and Facebook @managingthejuggle

- Circle In has an amazing online community and free resources on Insta @circlein and at www.circlein.com.au
- Parents at Work is a wonderful group which is very active on LinkedIn through founder Emma Walsh and it's releasing free podcasts this year to answer all your flexible work questions. Get the latest podcast info here: <http://paw.pages.ontraport.net/CWSvideo>
- The team at Beyond Billables is constantly exploring innovative ways to work, so follow them on Insta @beyondbillables
- She Thrives Tribe offers career clarity courses for those feeling a little lost @shethrivestribe
- Business Chicks and League of Extraordinary Women are two great women's networking and business building groups to get involved with @businesschicks or @theleaguewomen