

08. Career break:



: women,
equity,
architecture.

Career breaks are common in architecture and many people take one or more breaks over the course of their career. The reasons are diverse and include caring for children or other family members, further study, travel, an occupational side step, or an enforced break due to redundancy or illness. Some of these are seen as career advancing, while others are perceived ‘career killers’. Whatever the reason for the break, it needs to be carefully managed.

This guide assists employees and practices to collaboratively plan for and manage career breaks, particularly parental leave, and to support a successful return to work life, particularly for women.



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What are the impacts of career breaks?

A career break might be only for a few months, or for a decade; it may involve other paid work or entirely unpaid labour.

A career break can be advantageous for both employees and practices. Diverse and sometimes unexpected skills are developed in non-work activities and the employee is likely to return as a more well-rounded individual with greater life experience. Individuals returning from a break can be fiercely loyal and dedicated employees, with very low turnover rates.

Nevertheless, many individuals in architecture have reported difficulty returning to work, especially after a long break. Others find that their changed circumstances, for example returning after parental leave, mean that their work life is thereafter radically changed, and not necessarily for the better.

Still others may find that the job they left is no longer available to them – 2013 research by the Australian Human Rights Commission found that across all fields of work, one in five mothers were made redundant or dismissed during pregnancy, while on parental leave, or on their return to work. Anecdotal reports indicate such practices are also rife in architecture, despite their illegality.

Returning from parental leave

Returning from parental leave has some specific challenges. This can be a stressful time for both parents and employers, as clashes between societal, personal, financial and work expectations and demands become apparent. Practices must adjust to an employee with changed availability, perhaps with reduced ability to work overtime, or more limited flexibility. In addition, there is often a major upheaval for mothers in terms of routines and priorities during their parental leave.

Many of the women who responded to the Parlour survey were surprised by the huge effect the arrival of children had on their career trajectory. Many had returned after parental leave to work part time, only to find their work and status greatly compromised. Many chose to open their own practices to help address the problem.



Why does it matter?

The unfortunate fact is that while taking time off to travel is usually seen as career advancing, taking a break to care for children is often seen and experienced as a career killer. This disproportionately affects women, who still carry the majority of child-rearing responsibilities.

As a profession, architecture could be more conscious of the way it attributes value and work to curb unreflective judgments on what constitutes a useful career break.

Practices

Ethical and legal responsibilities Practices have legal obligations around parental leave and return to employment, but they also have an ethical obligation to value and support their workforce.

The benefits this brings to practice are manifold: a diverse workforce better able to service diverse clients, with design solutions based on knowledge of a wider range of situations.

Retain skilled employees Equity around career breaks and leave, especially parental leave, is also good business sense. It can ensure that skilled, experienced employees continue to contribute to the practice and avoids the significant costs associated with employee turnover and recruitment.

Workplace morale and recruitment

Employees returning from leave are likely to be highly motivated, loyal and hard working. On the other hand, those who find that their role has evaporated in their absence, or who on return find that they are less valued as employees, will have low morale, with corresponding negative effects on workforce commitment and productivity. Practices that are rumoured to offer fewer opportunities are unlikely to attract or retain the best talent.

Employees

Well managed, supported career breaks are a vital ingredient in the satisfying long-term careers of many women and enable many to participate to their fullest capacity in the profession.

The Profession

A large number of trained women take a career break from architecture, but then never return. The profession can ill afford to lose these talented and trained individuals, with a rich range of experiences, and a wealth of skills.

Working towards a gender-inclusive architectural profession involves taking extra measures to retain, negotiate with and accommodate those with responsibilities beyond their professional work. This will be to the profession's long-term benefit.



What can we do?

Architecture is already fairly adept at accommodating breaks taken for travel, further study, or working outside private practice, all of which are often seen as positive steps that add to skills and employability. Involuntary breaks, such as those forced by redundancy, are also a well-understood part of an industry that is very susceptible to economic shifts.

We need to change perceptions around breaks to raise children, care for others or manage an illness, so that these are also understood and accepted as part of a career.

The challenge for employees and practices is to understand and value the full range of skills and experiences gained through various types of breaks, to ensure that a break is prudently thought out and carefully managed, and that the return-to-work life is mutually positive.

A well-planned, well-carried-out career break – especially from parental leave – requires collaboration, trust, goodwill and flexibility on both sides.

Practices

Practices can play important roles by developing flexible and supportive workplaces that welcome employees back from career breaks, and work with them to develop their careers.

Understand your legal obligations

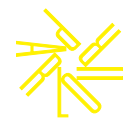
Employees returning to work from parental leave have specific rights under current legislation. Ensure these are understood and followed in your practice.

● See ***Rights and responsibilities at the end of this guide.***

Recognise the benefits of life experience

Architecture is a profession that requires an understanding of life. Architects who have had diverse experiences and have met a wide range of people outside architecture contribute to a richer engagement with the broader community. They also bring a broader range of knowledge to their work in architecture.

- Acknowledge time well spent. A productive and well-managed career break can be seen as evidence of initiative, autonomy, and skills in time and project management.
- Remember, a career break is a purposeful activity – whether that be raising a child, recovering from illness, finding a way back after redundancy, or working in another field – and brings new skills that may be effectively transferred to the world of practice.
- Understand the opportunities that a break brings to develop a broader range of networks in the community, which may also be useful in the workplace.



- Recognise that an employee returning from parental leave may bring additional management benefits – for example, they may have drastically improved their time-management skills and have a better understanding of how to negotiate situations that don't go to plan, understanding that you can always choose another route.

Develop a family-friendly work policy

Many architectural practices, especially smaller ones, run along very informal lines and do not have specific processes to deal with career breaks and parental leave or set out policies on flexible or part-time work. Having such policies means that expectations and obligations are clear to everyone at all times. This can be very helpful for practices of all sizes.

- Develop a fair and equitable policy. This is important for all practice sizes and will avoid the need to make decisions on the fly.
- Ensure that your policies are known, understood and accessible to all staff.
- Larger firms could prepare a 'parental leave pack', similar to a new starter pack. Include legal information, tips about what needs to be done before an employee goes on leave, information on childcare, a copy of the practice's policies on flexible work and family-friendly work, and contact details of staff who have previously taken (or are currently on) parental leave.

Consider establishing a paid parental leave scheme

Paid parental leave on top of existing government systems can be an excellent way to retain staff and encourage them to return. This can bring long-term benefits associated with keeping knowledge within the practice, avoiding costs associated with staff turnover and retraining. Small businesses may find that it involves a

larger upfront financial outlay than they can support. Nonetheless, it is worth investigating and assessing the benefits and costs.

Negotiate in advance, and put it in writing

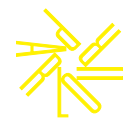
A successful career break and return, from the perspective of both the employer and employee, needs to be carefully planned and agreed upon.

- Have at least one structured, formal conversation with the employee, well in advance of their departure.
- Consider preparing a pro-forma or checklist of things to discuss, including expectations on both sides for the period before, during and after return to work.
- Record the agreement in writing. This will minimise the possibility of misunderstandings or conflicting expectations.

Keep in touch with staff on leave

Staying in touch is very important for employees on temporary leave. It allows them to understand what is happening in the office and to remain connected to the world of paid, organised office work.

- Before an employee goes on leave, discuss what contact both parties wish to maintain during that period, possibly including specific dates for contact. Consider key milestones such as stage deadlines or handovers, and keep the employee in touch with developments on ongoing projects.
- Be sure that expectations about contact during leave are clear on both sides, and preferably recorded in writing.
- Make sure that someone in the practice is specifically delegated to maintaining contact, passing on newsletters or vital internal emails.



- Be sure that the employee on leave is invited to any social or planning events that might occur during their leave, but be mindful that they may be unable to attend.
- Remember, ongoing communication can make an employee feel connected and engaged with their colleagues and projects in the office, and ease the transition back to work life.

Consider training opportunities

Many returning employees may need training or briefing about changes that have occurred during the leave period.

- Be cognisant of changes in the practice and keep employees on leave abreast of these. These might include shifts in legislation or technology, or changes in in-house systems and processes.
- Where a large technological change occurs, consider including those on leave in the training. For example, if the practice is upgrading to completely different software (or even a new version), it can be worth offering the training to parents on leave and others absent from the workplace. This may be done with the rest of the practice, or a similar training opportunity offered on return to work.

Establish or support mentoring schemes

‘Return to work’ mentors and support schemes are important in retaining women in the profession, and can be particularly helpful after parental leave or a career break. Mentors can help to build confidence and offer insights into recent changes.

- See *Parlour guide: Mentoring*.

Provide breastfeeding support

Women who continue breastfeeding after their return to work require a private space in which to feed or express milk, and a cool place to store it. (Remember, other people may have a similar need for a private place to attend to personal matters, such as religious observations or health matters.)

- Ensure your practice can provide facilities for breastfeeding mothers.
- Where a dedicated room is not available, consider discussing other options, such as making a private office or meeting space available for use.
- Be sure to have clear signals about how a space can be used, and signals for occupation.

Realise that even the best-laid plans may change

It can be frustrating to have to adjust expectations and staffing levels when a previously negotiated return to the office doesn’t work out as planned.

- Keep communication lines open to ensure that what is possible short-term, and what is desired and planned for the long-term, are clearly understood by both parties.
- Remember that changes to the conditions of leave are rarely the result of a whim and can be determined by unforeseen factors such as health or childcare.



Employees

The single most important piece of advice for employees contemplating a career break is to think it through and plan carefully.

If a career break is forced – for example, through redundancy – planning may not be so easy, but managing the break is important.

Plan for your break

Think about how you will manage the break both professionally and personally.

- If you intend returning to the same employer start the negotiations in advance.
- If you do not intend returning to the same employer (or can't due to redundancy), make sure you have strategies in place for staying connected to the profession.
- Let people in your networks know about your plans, not only for the break but when and how you intend to return.
- If you will be on unpaid leave, plan how to manage your financial situation – it's vital for your confidence and maintaining your options.
- Be sure you will have good internet access for the period of your break.

Prepare for the discussion with your employer

If you plan to return to the same employer, ensure that you are well prepared to negotiate about how this will occur.

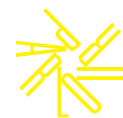
- Prepare a proposal for your employer about your career break. Think carefully, plan in advance and negotiate thoroughly.
- Understand your legal rights and responsibilities. ● See *Rights and responsibilities at the end of this guide*.

- Think about the break from your employer's point of view and be ready to explain the business case. How can you make it easier for your employer to agree to your requests?
- Articulate the benefits to the practice. Think laterally – skills developed on a career break may include problem solving, time management and advanced negotiation.
- Think about how your work could be covered in your absence. Colleagues affected may be able to assist with identifying ways to proceed.
- Be creative about what you might be able to do either from home or on limited time. Sometimes employers may not have had time to think through solutions or ideas, and being proactive will put you in a good position.

Negotiate in advance

If you are planning a break such as parental leave, detailed negotiations are crucial for avoiding misunderstandings.

- Have at least one formal conversation with agreed outcomes. This should include arrangements for the break and your return, along with an understanding of what contact is desired or needed during the period of leave.
- Know your value to your employer, and be prepared to articulate this clearly.
- Be realistic in your requests. Show that you understand it needs to work for everyone.
- If you need moral support, consider asking a colleague or mentor to attend negotiations.
- Remain calm and professional at all times.
- Be specific about when you wish to return, but be flexible to accommodate your employer's needs. Agree on a re-start date.
- Ensure the agreement is documented. This will help identify conflicting expectations early and avoid miscommunications.
- See *Parlour guide: Negotiation*.



Plan for your return

Planning for your return is as important as planning for the break.

- Ensure that you and your employer both clearly understand expectations about the return-to-work arrangements before you leave. Set out in advance any request to work part time, flexibly or remotely, and have some agreement on this with your employer.
- If the practice has a family-friendly work policy, it may help guide your expectations and negotiations. If there is no policy in place, this could be the time to assist in setting one up.
- Arrange a date a few weeks before the end of your leave, to discuss arrangements upon your return. Take the written agreement from your negotiations before you went on leave. Be prepared – have a written list of any proposed changes to the original agreement.
- Remember that a successful flexible work arrangement requires goodwill, trust and excellent communication from both sides.
 - See *Parlour guides: Flexibility and Part-time work.*

Find and/or become a mentor

Mentors can be incredibly helpful when navigating career turning points and transitions. Becoming a mentor to a younger architect can also be a great way to keep your own skills sharp and stay in touch with the profession while on leave.

- If you don't already have a mentor, seek one out before you go on your break – preferably before you have even begun the negotiations. Someone from your current employer who has already been through a career break may be particularly helpful.
- Consider mentoring less experienced architects while you are on your career break.
 - See *Parlour guide: Mentoring.*

Manage the break

It is unwise to lose all contact with your work life while on a career break, unless it is a very short one.

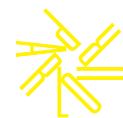
- Plan how you will keep your knowledge and skills up to date before you go on leave.
- Maintain some ongoing connection with your professional life if you intend to go back to it.
- Keep in touch through industry websites, including Parlour.
- Maintain institutional memberships, and consider if you can engage more than before with professional bodies.
- Join your local library, or a university library. Many have extensive remote access now, so you can access the most up-to-date publications from your home computer.
- Enjoy it! A career break is usually no holiday, but it can be a time to pause and reflect, to think about values and priorities.

Remain visible

Staying visible and maintaining your networks are important for both your confidence and keeping up-to-date with industry developments.

It can be prudent to spend some time and money on professional-development activities such as conferences or talks. It may be hard to find the time and money, but these will ease the transition back to professional life.

- Be aware of your ongoing visibility at work if you plan to return to a particular workplace.
- Find ways to maintain or even develop your profile within the broader profession.
- Keep professional networks active. (Remember, new job offers often occur through informal connections.)



Stay in touch

Adjusting to the subtle shifts in workplace processes, projects, culture and personnel can be tricky for employees returning from any prolonged absence. Organising to touch base periodically during leave can help women return to practice well informed and confident and will help both parties to formulate a realistic return-to-work plan.

- Clearly establish expectations on both sides about staying in touch in advance.
- Explore how to best stay in touch. Possibilities include attending some meetings, regular phone calls, attending social events or completing a few hours of non-urgent work in the month before returning to work.
- Consider offering preliminary involvement in projects that you may work on extensively after your leave. (Of course, any work completed in this manner should be paid.)
- As always, be prepared to re-negotiate as circumstances change.

Maintain confidence

A loss of confidence is often experienced during a prolonged career break, particularly if more than one period of leave has been taken. UK research suggests that many women experience a dramatic drop in confidence around eleven months after giving birth – or about a month before the anticipated return to work.

- Network with other architects who have taken time off. If you are going on parental leave it can be very helpful to talk to those who have 'gone before' with children.
- Build confidence about re-entering the workplace by undertaking re-entry programs and attending public talks and professional events. Some people use registration courses as a 'refresher course', which can be particularly helpful if you've been practising overseas.

- Try simple but effective strategies including mentally assembling a portfolio of previous successes, recalling your expertise and how your time away from the workplace has contributed to your abilities.

Think through the nuts and bolts of starting back

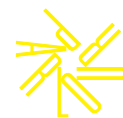
Returning to work can bring practical challenges, whether you are returning to a former employer or starting an entirely new job. Plan for these.

- For new jobs, consider doing a 'dry run' commute and finding out about dress codes.
- Returning to work with a truncated week (for example, by starting on a Wednesday) can also help ease into the new routine.
- Depending on your childcare arrangements and financial situation, it can be worthwhile getting settled into the new routine slightly before you return to work. This can help to adjust to new situations – such as coordinating a multi-stop commute – and will give you time to respond to unexpected challenges.

Be positive about the break

Set out your career break simply on your CV. This may feel unwise in the case of a redundancy, but it's better to be frank than leave an unexplained hole in your CV. Better yet, make your career break into a feature – note its benefits for professional development and emphasise all the qualities and skills that you gained.

- Turn the break into a positive, and emphasise what new attributes you can bring to an employer as a result.
- Remember, employers can be impressed by an employee's initiative during a career break.
- Set out your career break in your CV as though it was a paid job – with a specific duration, tasks completed, and skills gained.



The profession

Professional organisations can help lead the cultural change required to address the negative impacts on those who take a career break, especially parental leave.

Develop 'on ramp' programs

Industry organisations can play a greater role in reaching out to women who are at risk of being lost to the profession.

- **Develop targeted programs to assist women to return from a career break (following examples in other professions). This could include orientation and training programs, mentoring, networking and career development seminars.**

Modify fee and/or membership structures

Industry bodies can play important roles in women maintaining contact with the profession during a career break. However, many women currently find the cost prohibitive.

- **Expand fee and membership structures that enable women to continue their professional engagement while on a career break.**
- **Consider relaxing CPD and insurance requirements during periods of parental leave.**

Formal policy on breaks

Formal policies on career breaks from peak bodies can help ensure that individuals are not disadvantaged by a career break.

- **Develop formal policies on career breaks following the example set by professional bodies in other industries – for example, Engineering Australia.**

Rights and responsibilities

The *Fair Work Act 2009* requires firms to ensure that women returning from parental leave return to the same position they had prior to going on leave. The only exception to this is if the position no longer exists, in which case the *Fair Work Act* requires that an employee must be consulted on any changes to the position and provided with a comparable position. This means a position for which the employee is qualified, with the same or similar responsibilities, pay and status. If a position like this does not exist within the re-structured practice, a redundancy package may be required.

The *National Employment Standards* provide employees with a right to twelve months unpaid parental leave after they have given a year's continuous service. Under the *Fair Work Act 2009*, and subject to some conditions, individuals have a right to request that this initial period be extended by a further twelve months, and this request can only be refused on reasonable business grounds.

The Act likewise offers employees in certain circumstances the right to request flexible working conditions, which can only be refused on reasonable business grounds.

Note: This is offered as an overview only. Readers are reminded that legislation may change and are advised to check current legislation at the time of reading.



Credits

The Parlour Guides to Equitable Practice are an outcome of the research project 'Equity and Diversity in the Australian Architecture Profession: Women, Work and Leadership' (2011–2014), led by Naomi Stead of the University of Queensland.

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Further resources

Maternity at Work

NSW Industrial Relations, Department of Finance and Services, ninth edition, June 2012

http://www.industrialrelations.nsw.gov.au/biz_res/oirwww/pdfs/Maternity_at_Work.pdf

Parental Leave Pay

Australian Government, Department of Human Services

<http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/parental-leave-pay>

Fair Work Australia Rules 2010

<https://www.fwc.gov.au/fair-work-australia-rules-2010>

Best Practice Guide: Parental Leave

Fair Work Ombudsman, Commonwealth of Australia, December 2013 <http://www.fairwork.gov.au/ArticleDocuments/2213/12-Parental-leave.pdf.aspx?Embed=Y>

Best Practice Guide: Work and Family

Fair Work Ombudsman, Commonwealth of Australia, December 2013

<http://www.fairwork.gov.au/ArticleDocuments/2213/01-Work-and-family.pdf.aspx?Embed=Y>

Career Breaks Policy

Engineers Australia

<http://www.engineersaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/shado/About%20Us/Overview/Governance/Policies/Career%20Breaks%20Policy.pdf>

Further reading

Headline Prevalence Data: National Review on discrimination related to pregnancy, parental leave and return to work

Australian Human Rights Commission, April 2014

<http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/headline-prevalence-data-national-review-discrimination-related-pregnancy-parental>

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