

## **The Road to Success after Maternity Leave: Retaining Professionals in the Mining Industry**

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With burgeoning demand for materials from Central Asia ramping up minerals production in Australasia, attracting and retaining talented professionals is high on the agenda of many mining companies.

The rate of turnover in the industry has always been high; during a time of heightened production it is even more so, with companies taking advantage of worker dissatisfaction to poach employees from one another. Excessive turnover has adverse effects on costs, staff morale and work safety as well as bottom-line production.

From a human resources standpoint, the advantages of being a company that embraces diversity are obvious. Without the capacity to attract women professionals, employers miss out on one half of the value-adding talent of the working population. Without the capacity to retain women professionals after they have children, employers lose mission critical staff and corporate knowledge. Moreover, an inability to retain women as mothers can create the perception of an inflexible workplace culture.

While workplace policies within major companies are largely supportive of diversity, many managers are still coming to grips on how to devise effective short and long term work plans for a professional who becomes pregnant. When discussing work and maternity issues with colleagues I am often taken aback by how easily the conversation regresses into generic absolutes: blanket statements about the utility of paid maternity leave, debates about the pros and cons of varying child care arrangements and presumptions about the efficiency of part time professionals.

The AusIMM is keen to support all professionals in the industry, and address some of the attraction and retention issues. A range of women were interviewed to find out what made their stories of returning to work after maternity leave a success. It is clear that there is no one-size-fits all model, but there are sound strategies to making it work. The key appears to be mutual recognition that there is a significant overlap in interests between professionals and their employers, and making the time to sit down over a coffee to develop a work plan that delivers certainty to both parties.

### **Alison Keogh—Consultant in Resource Evaluation, Snowden**

When entering the industry, Alison did not think much about how she would reconcile motherhood and professional life, indeed she did not think about it for some years. "People always expect you to be thinking about it, which can actually be quite annoying," she says of her pre-motherhood days.

When she found out she was pregnant Alison was working as an exploration geologist for Rio Tinto, spending five months of the year out bush. Having spent close to 10 years at residential mine sites or on exploration camps, she felt apprehensive about how motherhood would fit with her continuing career. Her first challenge was to determine if it was possible to continue participating in an unique opportunity as part of the first exploration teams in Pitjantjatjara Land, freehold Aboriginal land near the border of South Australia, Northern Territory and Western Australia.

Alison addressed the fact of her impending motherhood head on, presenting her boss with a written plan for both the short term (pregnancy) and long term (return to work). Alison felt writing down the options was an important part of broaching the subject.

“A written plan helped me be positive and consider all options and roles available, and provided my manager with some possible solutions that would meet both business needs and my needs. It set the path for a good working relationship, and I found that my employer was very supportive.”

After consultation with an obstetrician about possible risks, Alison and her boss developed a medical contingency plan for the duration of her time in the Pitjanjatjara. She continued going into the field until the last trimester. For the last three months, Alison shifted to an office-based role to manage exploration programs, drilling contracts and conduct a greater proportion of office-based target generation and technical reviews. She worked full-time until a week before the birth.

Alison took five months unpaid leave, and relished the time at home, feeling that the first few months of motherhood was precious. Adapting to sleep deprivation was a challenge, as was the loss of confidence that comes from any career break.

Confidence was quickly restored as Alison returned to promotion as senior geologist. Her return was gradual, starting at one day a week and working up to a seven day fortnight. Rio Tinto offered flexibility by allowing her to do fieldwork in projects close to Perth, and offering her a greater proportion of desktop review and farm-in project due diligence work.

While Alison felt lucky to be able to work effectively part-time in a role she enjoyed, she admits there were feelings of guilt associated with returning to work. There were also practical difficulties,

“When you have a child so young and dependent, especially with breast feeding, you realise just how much a baby needs its mother and recognise it as a very special time.”

The second time Alison fell pregnant she was working full time as an independent consultant in Brisbane. Through networking extensively through organisations such as The AusIMM, she secured a range of consulting work. At first she felt compelled to conceal her pregnancy, as she was concerned it may undermine client confidence. Her worries were ill founded, as offers continued to increase during the pregnancy. Alison worked full-time until a few days before the birth, and found the work stimulating, but admits it was a struggle to juggle deadlines and long hours as an independent consultant with a toddler.

“Having a supportive partner was very important to my success. My partner opted to be primary carer for a year, which allowed me to successfully establish an independent consultancy between children.”

Alison has now chosen to work part-time with Snowden as a consultant, three days a week. She works with her employer to review her schedule regularly to ensure the arrangements fit in with business needs. She believes benefits of flexible work arrangements go both ways.

“Having a supportive workplace fuels my loyalty and makes me focus on being as efficient as possible to make the arrangement successful for my employer. There are

challenges, but with a positive attitude, you find a balance that works. Being both a mining professional and a parent is fulfilling. Having a child helps you reassess priorities and focus on career changes that will accelerate both your career and your life goals.”

### **Natasha Bouliane—Mining Engineer, BHP Billiton Iron Ore**

Natasha Bouliane and her husband— also a mining engineer—moved to Australia from Canada in 1997. Sharing a passion for the industry and the sense that life is an adventure, they undertook FIFO positions at BHPB’s Cannington mine, and spent five years shuttling back and forth from Townsville. When Natasha discovered that she was going to have a baby she was uncertain of how it would affect her ability to work in an underground mine as well as her career.

Natasha’s employer responded positively. After consultation with the OH&S officer about risks of going underground in a lead, zinc and silver mine, a plan was worked out where Natasha continued working from plans above ground while training her replacement. Though there were frustrations in having to rely on documents and other people’s descriptions of how things looked, she found work during pregnancy went relatively smoothly.

As there were very few other women with children on site at the time, Natasha admits to a feeling of difference:

“When you are a woman in a male dominated field, you’re different, when you are a pregnant woman, you are an anomaly.”

When Natasha handed in her maternity leave form she was not sure of what lay beyond. Fate intervened and her husband, Nicolas was offered a position at the iron ore operations at Newman.

As a small residential operation with a lot of people in the same boat, Natasha felt Newman was an ideal place to have her first child. Support networks sprang up with minimal effort on her part. Following the birth of her daughter she enjoyed the benefits of the baby club, and participating in local touch footy and soccer team. She recalls speaking to a friend in Melbourne who found motherhood quite lonely and isolating, and being struck by the contrast with her own experiences.

When her daughter was 11 months, Natasha felt ready to return to work. She took a part time position as a drill and blast engineer. There was a shortage and her employer was flexible, agreeing to a 34 hours per week arrangement.

“I would get in, find out what I had to do for the day, and work straight through until it was time to go home. There was no “down time” for things like personal email that I had between tasks before.”

When Natasha fell pregnant a second time there were very few OH&S issues, as the mine was open cut. Thus she was able to work in the same role until three weeks before the birth of her son.

Upon reflection, Natasha says that while working part-time there was a sense that she had to work hard, and that it may have been wise to pace herself towards the end of her pregnancy.

"I came down with sinusitis and bronchitis during the seventh month of my pregnancy. However I didn't slow down as I didn't want to come across as less than capable."

After the second lot of maternity leave, Natasha's manager had changed and there was an opportunity in another department. She was offered a position in the planning department three days a week, 30 hours per week. Though Natasha does miss the operational side, she relishes the experience in a more strategic role.

"I figure that the company has been flexible with me so I am willing to be flexible with the company," she says.

### **Jacqui Coombes—Principal Geostatistician, Snowden**

Something of a renaissance woman, Jacqui Coombes has applied her mathematical and organizational development skills broadly across in the industry. Her role entails the application of geostatistical tools to resource estimation, teaching technical/statistical courses within companies and running business improvement workshops.

Her diverse role at Snowden in resource estimation has taken her to a range of mine sites across Australia and the world. Prior to pregnancy she would undertake more than 10 trips per annum, about a fortnight in duration. She knew having a baby would entail a change in lifestyle but had no qualms telling her employers Viv and Phil Snowden, as they had been flexible with other professionals who had had children. Jacqui worked until one week before the birth.

Becoming a mother was a challenge when compared to the predictability of work.

"There is no training for it. It is a huge change from working in a professional role where you know how everything works, things are predictable and you are good at your job, to adapting to something entirely new for which you have no instruction book."

She felt that the break in work, and the loss of interaction with work peers impinged on her confidence. After six weeks she contacted her employer and was allocated a few hours each week that were completed at home. Initially, tasks were taken on board mostly to maintain a sense of connection, and over time she gradually increased the hours.

Jacqui found that she missed her daughter when returning to work after 12 months, and was concerned about "missing out" on all of the little milestones. Her schedule was renegotiated to two full days and three half days a week. The more flexible schedule enabled her to better focus on her tasks. She also believes that without the support of her husband, who put flexitime arrangements into place, she would not have been able to work effectively.

"At first when I went back to work I did 80% and he worked 90%. We then realised this was unmanageable and cut back to 70 and 80. My husband and I arrange it so that someone is always with the children in the afternoon."

She feels there should be more support for men who want to engage more actively in the care of young children. Jacqui expressed gratitude to her employers Viv and Phil, for being ready to accommodate her work needs. Jacqui believes a number of things assist in making flexitime work. Transparency and clear communication regarding workloads, time availability and priorities are important.

“At work I write all the things I need to do on the whiteboard. It is very helpful for delegating as others may assume that you may have less to do because you are working flexitime. Other people understand your priorities and allocate tasks to you accordingly.”

### **Megan Clark—VP technology at BHP Billiton**

Dr Megan Clark is responsible for managing development technologies for BHP Billiton’s business units across the world. Having responsibility for the shape of innovation of a global company as well as having two children requires a significant commitment to good planning. Thus it is not surprising that Megan sees “the ability to develop a *realistic* schedule, and stick to it”, as one of the most important factors in effectively balancing work and family.

Megan’s first job was as a geologist at Saint Ives gold mine near Kalgoorlie with WMC. Her employer supported her desire to complete a PhD, and she went to Canada for three years to write a thesis on the gold mine. Here she met her husband, who was studying both Music and Mathematics at the time.

When their studies were completed the couple moved to Kambalda where Megan took on a more senior exploration role. When she found out she was pregnant Megan was confident management would be supportive.

“I think the two most senior people at the time had ten and nine kids, so they were pretty relaxed about my becoming pregnant.”

Intending to go back part-time after the birth of her first child, Megan drafted a schedule for an 80% work week; her boss handed it back and told her to come up with a second draft.

“If it was going to work the schedule had to be realistic. My boss suggested that I cut the schedule back, and then build it up as I felt ready.”

Megan took annual leave as her maternity leave before returning part time. As her husband’s work with choir and community orchestra primarily took place in the evenings, they were able to share child care. Did Megan keep up field work after her daughter was born?

“I don’t think that this would be possible nowadays. But when she was old enough I would take her out bush with me. I remember making a harness to make extra sure she was safe coming over the emu-proof fence once. We had a great time.”

When Megan’s husband decided that he wanted a Masters Degree, Megan and her daughter followed him to Perth. She fell pregnant with her second child two years later. In total, Megan worked six years part-time. She believes maintaining her privacy about work arrangements was an important part of her approach.

“If I had to go I would just tell people ‘I have a commitment’, because that was the case. There are a whole range of reasons why people need to alter their working schedule. This was a few years back and wanted a level playing field; I didn’t want to feel that I was making apologies to people for being a mother.”

Megan resumed full time work with WMC and a role came up for a chief geologist at Mt Magnet.

“I was very happy to return to work at the operations. The company needed someone at the mine and to live on site to support the team members.”

As the company had been flexible, Megan felt she had a responsibility to give back. As her husband had not yet finished his degree they agreed to a reverse FIFO arrangement where he came to visit on weekends.

“The kids came with me and I took the nanny as well. She was the key to the whole arrangement.”

Over the years Megan has attempted to maintain the boundaries between work and personal life by not bringing work home unless absolutely necessary. The exception has been conference calls, which in the 24 hours marketplace, can take place at all hours.

She admits that being a professional and a mother can occasionally evoke guilt about being too absorbed by work.

“My halo is a bit grey at the moment as I had to return emails this weekend after going on leave. Being absorbed at work is good but you need to know when to stop and have fun with your family. Sometimes we all need to just go down to the beach and go ‘woohoo’.”

### **Kathryn Harrison—Mining Engineer, BHP Billiton Iron Ore**

Kathryn Harrison works a nine on, five off roster and has a five year old son, Ryan. She entered the industry as a mother, and feels having a child has been a very positive factor in her career. It has provided additional motivation both to plan effectively and to succeed.

Kathryn found out she was going to have a baby while in her third year of mining engineering at the University of Queensland. She took a year off study to focus on becoming a mother and then returned part-time. Enrolling her son in a child care centre near the University, Kathryn balanced motherhood and study by separating out her spaces, doing the bulk of her head-down studying in the library.

Did added responsibilities affect a high academic performance? Kathryn found her marks took a significant leap after she had the baby.

In her last year of University, Kathryn put in applications for graduate positions with a range of companies. She did not mention having a child in her letters, as she was uncertain of how it would affect her prospects in an interview. At her first interview at BHP Billiton Iron Ore she was asked why her transcript revealed such a significant step in marks. This allowed Kathryn to raise motherhood in a positive light:

“Basically I pulled my socks up because I had a child,” she told them.

Rostering was discussed in a transparent way and she got the job. Initially Kathryn was working Monday to Friday permanent days. She found the biggest hurdle in starting work was to secure a place in child care.

“The day care centre there was bursting at the seams. Once you got in you were fine, but waiting for a place is definitely an issue.”

Cost of child care also takes a significant chunk of salary. However, Kathryn found that as salaries in the mining industry increase quite quickly this has become less of an issue.

Kathryn is currently working nine on five off roster on day hours. She finds work immensely satisfying, and loves the mixture of operational and technical challenges of working in the super pit. She does not feel being able to accept work only in residential operations poses any career disadvantages.

“Especially now, there are more options since the ramp up in production and everyone is working full tilt.”

From a lifestyle perspective she feels a part-time schedule—along the lines of four on four off—would be preferable to working full time. It would enable her to accommodate other interests such as sport, and have more time if she were to consider having another child. However a benefit of Kathryn’s current schedule is that it leaves her with five full days to devote entirely to being a mother.

“I love the funny things, watching him wake up to the world and seeing how his little brain works. The other day he got into trouble and he asked me if he was going to have to go to jail.”

Will he follow his mum into the world of mining engineering?

“I’m not sure. He told me he wants to work for Caterpillar. He saw a really big piece of their equipment the other day that caught his fancy.”

### **Kerry Jones, Senior Mining Engineer, BHP Billiton**

Kerry Jones grew up in Mt Tom Price. Having finished highschool in the late seventies, she followed her technical leanings to undertake a traineeship as a cartographic draftsman. Kerry met her husband in highschool in Tom Price, and he completed an apprenticeship as a fitter. Once both Kerry and her husband were had completed their qualifications, they moved to Perth where Kerry got a job in town planning. The young couple soon decided that the city lifestyle was not what they had in mind for their future.

“I’m a country girl and I think I will always prefer living in regional Australia.”

Kerry and her husband subsequently moved to Newman where they were both offered employment. As a geological draftsman, Kerry found she had a knack for making the most of the emerging technologies.

“Computers were just coming in then. The time taken up with doing hand drafting and calligraphy were aspects of the job that I enjoyed but they are time consuming. Going over to do more of the computer stuff was great and it has come a long way since then,” she says.

In 1989 Kerry gave birth to her first child Reece. She says that she was not too phased by her impending motherhood. She enjoyed her work but did not have a career plan at the time. She just took each day as it came.

Kerry felt that resolving career and motherhood aspirations was not the biggest challenge for her. Rather it was settling into motherhood itself, as she was called upon to extend her skill set as never before.

"It was quite difficult living in an isolated community with family far away. Just managing things, and knowing what you are supposed to do in different circumstances without guidance can be very challenging."

Kerry believes that for women going back to their career after childbirth availability of a range of support and guidance would be very beneficial.

"I think information sessions or some kind of guidance would definitely have been helpful. Something to help you maintain confidence whilst you are getting into the new routine. There just aren't those resources available."

When her son was ten months old Kerry went back to work full time in a technical computing support role. She felt fortunate that there was a very good child care centre in Newman. The centre was open from 6am to 6pm and she became President of the Committee for a time. Having input into running of the child care facilities gave her confidence during her time away from her son.

After three years and a second child Kerry advanced to a mine-planning role, which was closely aligned with her work as a cartographer. Kerry was working with engineers all the time, and soon felt very at ease with the different aspects of the role,

"After a while I felt that I could do a lot of the role on my own without so much mentoring."

Once the kids had gotten out of primary school Kerry felt ready to revisit her career and put in an application for the student scheme. Her application was approved and she went to Ballarat University to study Mining Engineering on a block release program. During her studies Kerry earned mostly High Distinctions.

"Mature agers often do better," Kerry says, "All that hands on experience I'd had helped me put things in to place and visualise things."

Kerry's family were very supportive of her whilst she was studying, and her husband looked after the kids so that she could study in the evening. Six months short of turning 40 Kerry finished her degree and went straight in to a mining engineering role. She enjoyed her new responsibilities, and satisfaction that came with managing tasks that needed to be completed within a clear and urgent time frame.

I asked Kerry what her kids thought of her role change.

"They are very blasé about it. Sometimes It's like they are not even aware of the way in which my work has changed. Kids often forget that you are anything outside of a mother. It's like when they need help with a maths problem and they assume that you don't know what they are working at and it's like, 'hang on, being a mining engineer does actually involve understanding maths.'"

Currently Kerry is a senior mining engineer at Newman's satellite orebodies and is involved in managing a contractor. She feels that developing her skills in a management role is a constant learning process.

"I find that some of the best advice I received about being a manager is rather than trying to look like you know everything, you are better off taking some time to think things through before you get back to people, and give them a complete answer."

When the children were younger Kerry says she would not have been interested in moving around. Now that they are heading towards the end of their schooling she feels that she would be happy to take on roles at a variety of locations. Kerry thinks of herself as mother first and a mining engineer second,

“If I had ever thought it was adversely affecting the kids I would stop working. They are quite independent though. And my supervisors have always been supportive.”

### **Tracey Kerr – Exploration Geophysicist and Geologist, BHP Billiton**

In her eighteen years with BHP Billiton, Tracey has been involved in a variety of exploration programs and has lived in Melbourne, Perth, Brisbane, the United Kingdom and Canada. Her partner is a minerals geologist and they have always moved together and both travel extensively from home base.

Tracey was unsure about having children and delayed motherhood for a long time, uncertain as to how it would impact on her career.

“I wanted to make the decision as to whether I was going to have a baby by 35,” says Tracey. “I kept putting off motherhood until the time was right, and then realized that there is never a right time. It always comes down to a decision to put the other things in your life aside and make motherhood a priority.”

Shortly after her first overseas transfer to London, Tracey became pregnant. She was rather apprehensive about how the company would feel about her impending motherhood after securing a competitive overseas position, however found that her boss was very good about it. Her role was adapted at different stages of pregnancy to meet her needs.

“I continued to travel for a while, and then switched to a lot of computer modelling at the end,” she says.

Tracey spent three months at home after having her first child and feels that the time getting to know her daughter and to care for her daughter was very precious and special. Initially when she was ready to go back to work she felt anxious about leaving her child in someone else’s care. Tracey and her husband spent some time canvassing different nanny agencies, and found an agency that spent several sessions getting to know the Kerr family and their needs,

“There are agencies that don’t even want to meet you and just get you to fill in a form,” says Tracey. “It makes you think, if they spend less than half an hour with you, how long do they spend with the nanny?”

Eventually they found a nanny that they were both very happy with, who had an extensive background in childcare and a diploma in Early Childhood studies.

Although she never really saw herself as someone “who was super into kids” before she had children, Tracey says she loves being a mother and was very eager to have a second child. She gave birth to her son whilst she and her husband were back living in Australia.

“With my son I was less anxious because I knew what I was in for, although every baby is different,” she says, “My daughter has always been quite independent whereas my son has always needed more cuddles.”

After the birth of each of her children Tracey took three months break from work. After six to twelve months she started to taking short trips. She has travelled to a myriad of remote regions in places like Russia, Guinea in West Africa and Mexico.

“My husband and I are never absent at the same time. And the good thing about going on trips means you get a few days off when you get back. So I can spend a few days playing with them or using the time in lieu to volunteer at their school and go on excursions and things,” she says. “I think they get the best of me.”

When asked if there is any ‘best practice’ to resolving work and family life balance Tracey says that what is best is different for everyone,

“Some people want to have children when they are younger and then focus on career later on. Others like to do a few things workwise and then come to it. I was able to come to motherhood with all my restaurating and nightclubbing behind me, and was less restless and ready to really balance things.”

In Tracey’s opinion, a key to returning to work successfully is feeling secure about your child’s development and well being when you are away from home:

“The most important thing is knowing that you have a child care arrangement in place that you are happy with. If you go back to work worrying about how well your child’s is being looked after would be the worst kind of stress,” she says.

#### **Tatum Woodroffe , Mine Planning Engineer, Xstrata Copper**

Tatum Woodroffe is a Mining Planning Engineer with two daughters, Charlotte and Lillian. Tatum met her husband whilst they were both studying Mining engineering. Upon graduation they moved to Mt Isa where Tatum was employed as a Mine Planning Engineer whilst her husband was employed at Atlas Copco (but now works for Xstrata).

After two years of full time work Tatum became pregnant with her first child, shortly after she had started working at the George Fisher site. As there were safety concerns associated with going underground Tatum and her boss discussed how to best utilise her abilities above ground. For Tatum this meant undertaking an office based role and mostly doing ore reserves work and long term planning. She found that the more strategic work enabled her to gain a different perspectives and skills:

“The fact of being office bound is only a negative if you make it that way. I made the most of it by identifying the things I could do and putting my hand up for additional tasks and experiences. You are exposed to a range of learning opportunities in a range of commodities.”

Tatum and her husband went to Adelaide for the birth, so that Tatum could be close to her family in the initial weeks. After returning to Mt Isa, Tatum started to take on some work from home. However as her computer was not networked and the scope for interaction with others was limited, Tatum did not find it as satisfying as being in the office.

Reflecting on her experiences, Tatum indicates that there was a world of difference between returning to work after her first and second child. The second time she returned was brilliant. However her initial experience was challenging:

“After two months I went back for 20-25 hours and found part time was quite frustrating. There was not the systems in place to work effectively at the time and

therefore no real area of responsibility. If your role is not clearly designated you often wind up with bits and pieces that no one really wants to do.”

In the period between her first and second change Tatum even considered a career change.

“I actually did a first year of teaching by distance education,” she says, recalling that time. “Now I love my job, and have much more clarity and focus.”

I asked Tatum what approach she and her employer had used to make her second return to work experience so successful.

“A couple of things,” she says, “For my part, I knew to maintain contact with the superintendent while I was away to let them know that I was still there, and I kept work informed of the time frame in which I was intending to return. One or two weeks after Lillian I was ready to do some tasks. Basically I kept pestering them until they got organised.”

Thanks to a workable plan with her employer Tatum was able to go back to work full time and still stay close to her daughters,

“I was able to go straight back to work full time as my employer arranged to have a spare computer at the copper mine networked. So I spent half my time at George Fisher and half at Mt Isa. It meant that I could breast feed at lunch whilst keeping up the same quality of work.”

Tatum says that she currently loves the mix of short and long term planning in her current position,.

“I am a big picture person and like the technical stuff. Its great to get broad exposure and have lots of self contained projects, and lots of interaction with operations.”

Now that she has been transferred over to the copper mine Tatum feels that balancing work and motherhood has been made much easier. Overall, she feels that she has a very reciprocal relationship with her employer.

“If I need to take my daughter to the ophthamologist or something they are OK with that. Also my contract is very task oriented rather than time oriented. I am happy to put in the time and energy required, so it averages at around 50 hours a week.”

It also helps that there is a great day care centre five minutes from her home that is open from 6am to 6:30 pm.

“The day care centre was recommended by a friend. We checked them out and were really happy with their structured program – lots of stimulating activities. You have to book ages in advance to get a place though,” she says.

### **Christine Standing, Principal Consultant, Snowden**

Christine graduated from the University of Western Australia in 1981. After graduation she worked as a geologist involved in exploration and the mining industry with Chevron Exploration Corporation and Australmin Holdings Limited. She found that she greatly enjoyed working in resource estimation. In 1985 she married her husband, who works as a corporate lawyer.

Christine saw an advertisement for reserve estimation at Snowden in 1988 when the company was still quite new identified it as an opportunity to grow with the company. Over the next few years Christine enjoyed a good relationship with her employers Viv and Phil. Moreover, as she saw her employers successfully balance managing a company with looking after their own children, she had no apprehensions about having a baby whilst remaining in the industry.

“When I decided to get pregnant I did not really have a work plan because I knew that working in resource estimation would be office based and could offer me flexibility. People said, ‘you can’t start a family just like that,’ but resolving work and my role as a mother was really very easy.”

Christine worked up until two weeks before the birth and then returned to work on a part-time basis after six months.

“I took my son in to work and a baby sitter would look after him in the office. Before long the baby started becoming mobile and it wasn’t possible to continue having him in the office.”

Over the next few months Christine worked casually and intermittently from home on an as needs basis.

“Working at that stage was not so much for the money as to keep up the connection,” she says, “Also working from home is not as enjoyable as in the office, because you miss the interaction with other people.”

Christine greatly enjoyed her role as a mother and when her second child was born she took two years off from work in order to care for her children. When she was ready to go back she undertook to work twenty-four hours a week. She feels that the work arrangement with her employer has been very satisfactory.

“Conditions are very flexible and although I generally work the same hours each week, I can be flexible and make up missed hours later on in the week. I generally have Friday off – if I need to I can then use this day to catch up on my hours. I sometimes take unpaid leave to accommodate holidays. This does work two ways, as I can help out and do extra hours if work is very busy or can take unpaid leave if work is quiet.”

For Christine, a key to a successful work element has been a supportive partner.

“When I went to work my husband cut his work hours back to three days a week. I think being a man and asking to go part-time in a corporate law firm raised a few eyebrows initially. However we have both been very lucky to have employers that are very accommodating.”

Caring for the children has always been a team effort in Christine’s family.

“My husband now works full time with flexible hours – starting at 6 am. One of us is always there to pick them up from school. My husband collects them on Wednesday and Thursday and he would never let that go.”

Christine says that she enjoys the diversity of her work, which involves resource evaluation studies, grade control and reconciliation studies, and application of statistical and geostatistical techniques to multi-element studies. Although she is now

in a senior role, Christine recognises that she has put opportunities on hold, as she has not been able to undertake to travel and be away from home for long periods.

“Now that my children are getting older I feel that I can be away occasionally and in the last few years I have traveled to Brazil and Vancouver.”

Whilst she is more comfortable with travel these days, Christine says that she would not go back to work full time until her children have grown up as she and her husband want to maintain a close involvement with their children.

### **Professionals and their Managers—Strategies for Success**

Though the women interviewed have had varied opinions on what constitutes the ideal “work life balance”, a number of common threads can be seen, which may be useful in developing strategies for both employees and employers to retain women in the workplace. These are:

- Positive attitude
- Focus on opportunities, not difficulties
- Employee and employer work together and communicate well
- Develop a joint plan that is reviewed regularly

Some suggestions for employer success in retaining mothers were:

- Active encouragement of female employees to maintain contact with your manager through maternity leave, even extending to training opportunities and email correspondence if both parties wish.
- In regional communities, working together with local childcare providers to ensure places are available that fit in with available roster or shift lengths.
- Work together with the employee and draft a plan that focuses on roles and tasks that will provide career development as well as fit a business need. If the previous role is difficult to maintain, consider how you can use your employee’s skills at an equivalent level, for example in a technical support role or reviewing and implementing business improvements.
- Consider setting up a computer and email and/or web communications from your employee’s home—many tasks can be carried out remotely.
- Breastfeeding-friendly workplaces, providing a private room with storage and cleaning facilities and flexibility for women to take time out.

Some strategies suggested by the women when asked how an employee might approach motherhood were:

- Present a written plan to the employer when you inform them of pregnancy and maternity break plans, including solutions and options to address proposed family commitments while fitting business needs.
- Find at least one mentor who has successfully returned to work after maternity leave.
- If your employer is not supportive, there are alternatives -- ask around and determine the pool of your employers of choice. Approach them with a proposal that meets their business needs.
- Initiate and maintain a network of contacts—most opportunities are found through networking, not advertised roles.
- Investigate child care options, and if you plan to use a day care centre, lodge your application well in advance!

Most of changes to facilitate return to work after maternity do not require a significant structural shift in the way we work but rather the willingness to make minor alterations to work practices to accommodate lifestyle.

This article has focused on women, but it has been mentioned by several mothers that fathers often feel frustrated about problems negotiating flexi-time, as do non-parents with other kinds of commitments, such as looking after an ageing parent. In the end successful retention comes down to a competent management style that is big on communication, and low on fear of habit change, and the foresight to articulate needs on the part of the professional.

*This article was an initiative of the Women in MiningNetwork, a sub group of The AusIMM. To register your interest in the WIMNet please email Monika Sarder on [policy@ausimm.com](mailto:policy@ausimm.com) or visit their web page at <http://www.ausimm.com/women/women.asp>*

*The mentoring program is also a useful resource for networking further to discuss these issues with peers, as it features a database of email contacts searchable by a range of features including "topics" such as Work Life Balance, and can be accessed under What's New.*