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Is It Time to Take a Fresh Look at Your Parental Leave Policy?

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In 2014, Baker Donelson's Women's Initiative decided it was time to revisit our decade-old parental leave policy. While the policy was still competitive in our market, offering 12 weeks of leave for primary caregivers, we wanted to do more to improve the success of our attorneys' leaves. In order to determine what changes needed to be made, we looked at the benefits offered at other law firms across the country and then dove deeper into non-legal fields. We held meetings with attorneys at our Firm to determine how our policy could better fit their lives and practices. Our goals were improved recruitment, retention and client service surrounding leave.

In October 2014, after going through more drafts than we can remember, we implemented a market-leading parental leave policy which increased the amount of parental leave available to primary caregivers from 12 weeks to 16 weeks. The unique and most exciting part of the policy was a change from a one-size-fits-all model to a leave policy that could be tailored to the individual attorney's life and practice. Specifically, our leave policy now permits leave to be taken intermittently in the 40 weeks surrounding a child's birth. That language provides attorneys with the opportunity to ramp down work as leave approaches, stay in touch with clients as leave progresses and transition back to full-time work at their own pace.

Since the policy's inception, 40 individuals – associates and shareholders alike – have taken successful leave under its terms. Our attorneys report that they felt more freedom both during the initial months of leave and while transitioning back to work, as they were able to address necessary tasks while knowing that the banked leave time could be spent with their children months later. They also relay that their clients were not negatively affected by their absences in the same way that they may have been had the leave been taken all at once without the opportunity to stay involved.

Paid parental leave is gaining traction on the national stage. Is it time to take a fresh look at your business's parental leave policy? Here is our **Baker's Dozen** of items to consider when evaluating your parental leave program and implementing a new one:

1. **Establish your goals.** Knowing what you want out of a parental leave policy is the first step. Do you want to retain your best talent? Do you want to minimize the effect leave has on your clients? Do you want to make your policy gender-neutral? All of the above?
2. **Evaluate your current policy.** What works well? Where have you had hiccups? Are your clients being served well by your policy? Are your employees happy when they transition back from leave? We examined these questions as a starting point in our research.
3. **Look at your employee mix.** What are your demographics? What kind of employees typically take leave? Your policy may need to be tailored depending on who you are serving.
4. **Consider the gender issue.** A gender-neutral policy is not only the best bet legally, but it will help the men and women in your office by removing outmoded stereotypes surrounding caregiving.
5. **Look at your competitors.** What is the guy next door doing? Are you ahead or behind? Competitor policies offer helpful benchmarks in drafting your new language and give you support for the proposal you present to your management team.

6. **Phone a friend.** Some fantastic ideas came from friends at other businesses. Call yours to find out what creative solutions they've employed.
7. **Make the business case for offering more leave.** When we did research into the economics of offering more leave to our employees, we found a monetary benefit in offering longer leave to keep our best talent.
8. **Make sure you're legal.** When drafting your leave policy, have your employment law attorney on speed-dial.
9. **Tap mentors.** One of the best decisions we made was to appoint parental leave advisors in every office. They serve as mentors to attorneys taking leave by assisting them before leave begins and as it progresses. They know the policy inside and out and can answer the tough questions.
10. **Get buy-in from human resources.** Your HR department will be your partner in implementing your new policy. Keep HR involved as you make big decisions.
11. **Conduct trainings.** After the policy is in place, train until you can train no more. Train your management, train your leaders, train your mentors and conduct a thorough rollout to your employees as a whole. We offered Q&A sessions after each training.
12. **Measure success along the way.** As the Parental Leave Committee Chairs, this policy is – for lack of a better word – our baby. To ensure that it is successful, we monitor every leave that is taken to make sure the intermittent policy is used as intended, the transition goes well and to uncover any surprises. We also recommend monitoring the overall stats to learn how your goals are being achieved. For example, we were pleasantly surprised to learn that of the 40 individuals taking leave in the first year, 22 of them were men. Our previous, non-intermittent policy was under-utilized by non-primary caregivers, who receive three weeks of parental leave surrounding the birth, adoption or foster of a child. Now that they are able to take the leave as needed in the months following birth, non-primary caregivers report that the leave is much more attractive and useful to them. The fact that our new policy is being used by more men than women is the first step to a truly gender-neutral leave policy in *practice*, and we could not be more thrilled with the results.
13. **Don't forget the men!** Our internal monitoring emphasized the need to ensure that our male attorneys' questions and concerns were well addressed. In executing your policy, do not neglect the needs of the men in your organization. At Baker Donelson, we have interviewed male attorneys regarding the challenges of leave, appointed male leave advisors and conducted training of male leadership.

If you have any questions about our leave policy, or how you can reevaluate yours, please contact Baker Donelson's Parental Leave advisors, Sara Turner and Caldwell Collins.