

Maternity burden on small business overstated, finds new review

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Small business owners over-estimate the burden of providing maternity protection to their staff a new review, conducted by a team of experts from Middlesex University for the International Labour Organization, has revealed in a new report, out 20 October 2014.

The review, led by Middlesex University Professor of Organizational Psychology Suzan Lewis, suggests that effective maternity protection has a positive rather than negative on SMEs and can have a range of positive productivity related outcomes for firms, as well as wider social benefits.

The team found:

- SME owner-managers are often adverse to maternity protection regulations, fearing the time and costs involved can lead to a competitive disadvantage.
- There is a link between maternity protection and improvements in performance and productivity, linked to enhanced employee satisfaction and commitment.
- There are wider societal benefits of effective maternity protection including poverty reduction, reproductive health, gender equality, fertility rates, and economic development.

Commenting on the review's findings, Professor Lewis said: "Anything that is going to impact the financial stability of a business is naturally of concern to its owner, and that is why it is so important to understand that many maternity protection practices can have little or no costs and

considerable benefits.

Middlesex University Centre for Enterprise and Economic Development Research (CEEDR) Research Associate Dr Bianca Stumbitz added: "It is clear that a supportive workplace is crucial – one that is sensitive to gender-specific issues and that recognises the joint roles that both men and women play in family life."

The report shows that women who know their employer will support them as they start a family and avoid stereotyping their role in the workplace are happier, more loyal and therefore more productive. For these positive effects to arise and maternity, paternity and family responsibilities to become a normal fact of business life, maternity protection and other work-family balance measures need to 'fit' into practices and interests of SMEs.

The review also found there was space for government to help ease any financial strain on small businesses complying with maternity provisions.

Professor Lewis said: "The economic reality means that if we want small business to implement strong maternity protections, some financial compensation by way of tax breaks or public subsidies may be necessary – and that is something policy-makers ought to consider seriously.

"Additionally, education campaigns designed to raise awareness and provide practical advice to employers struggling with maternity entitlement issues is also vital – especially information which highlights the potential productivity benefits."

The report also highlighted the urgent need to address economic and cultural challenges facing working mothers in developing countries, which has largely been ignored by research.

Provided by Middlesex University

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