

Maternity leave for freelancers?

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One of the benefits for freelancing mothers or those with their own businesses is the greater likelihood of flexibility to spend time with your children. The downside of this is that there is no such thing as paid maternity leave in a "no-work, no-earn" model. So if you're pregnant or considering having a baby on your freelance income, here's how to try and make it work for you.

Do the maths

The first and most important thing to do is sit down and work it all out. There's no point in sticking your head in the sand or hoping for some big commission to materialise. You need to know what you need, and how much of it. Be realistic.



For many freelancers, December and January are dead months. You should already be calculating your annual income over 10 months, to put away what you need for year-end expenses. Don't forget this when you work out when you'll be going back to work, since most babies aren't considerate enough to be born during the holidays. Calculate how much you're realistically going to need to be earning over the remaining seven months of the year (minus January, February and three months' maternity leave).

Don't freak out!

When it's put as starkly as that, you may find yourself starting to panic. Panic is good; it can be motivating, but don't freak out completely. Everyone tells you that babies are expensive, but they're not actually that costly at first. It's only later when you start trying to educate them and feed them steak that they burn a hole in your wallet.

Also, as soon as you've had a baby, your social life will go out the window. You won't buy books or magazines, go to a movie, eat out or eat anything that doesn't come readily assembled in a plastic container for about a year. Trips to the salon, leg-shaving and hair-washing will also probably take a dive, and all of this represents a massive saving without even trying.

Get in touch

Your clients will respond to your news with varying degrees of sympathy and support. Give them the assurance that you've thought this all through. Tell them how long you plan to be out of commission, whom you recommend in your absence, and what you'd like to finish up in advance.

Nothing makes a client more scared than a supplier going on leave with only vague plans of when they'll be back or how they plan to manage things. When offering to do extra work in advance, be willing to accept payment on publication or use. This makes it a no-lose situation for them, and gives your bank balance an extra boost when you most need it.

What to say

In 1948, Buckingham Palace announced that Queen Elizabeth II was in an "interesting condition" - the first time the palace had ever publicly discussed a royal's pregnancy. Fortunately, times have changed, and it is now acceptable to let people know that you are carrying a child.

However, in some cases, attitudes haven't changed much - especially not those regarding the "flighty" work ethic of a

freelancer - so it might *not* be best to discuss the full, gory situation with all your clients or potential clients.

Obviously, those with whom you have a long-standing relationship will already have worked it out, and you should send them a personal mail, sometime in your last three months of pregnancy, letting them know your full plans. If you advertise services or are posting a notice on your website, it's up to you whether you want to say that you are on maternity leave or - more simply - "leave".

And, rather than announcing that you are away, announce when you will be back and what contact, if any, they can expect to have with you in your absence.

Find a substitute

As terrifying as it can be to put your precious clients in contact with someone else who's good at what they do, this is exactly what you should do if you can't be around to service their needs. Make sure it's someone you trust, preferably someone who might be having a baby herself soon, so that you can return the favour. If you're not 100% certain of your substitute's ethics about poaching clients, get her to sign a restraint of trade that you can draw up with a lawyer.

Accept that it's possible that some clients might prefer your replacement or not want to change back after breaking someone else in. This is still a better alternative than your client finding their own substitute who owes you nothing. Possibly work a "referral fee" into your contract with your associate in the eventuality that your client becomes their client in the long term.

Work your butt off

You might want to be putting your swollen feet up, but these nine months are your last chance to fill the coffers, so put your nose to the grindstone. Don't procrastinate. Go into pitching and networking overdrive. You wanted a lifestyle where you could pop out to movies on a Friday afternoon, or attend a Thursday-morning swimming gala; this is how you pay for it.

Think of good ideas, leap at opportunities, call all your contacts and work like you've never worked before.

Cancel unnecessary expenses

Take a look at your expenses and cancel anything you don't absolutely need. Timeshare? Gone. DSTV? You could probably do without endless reruns for a few months.

Some banks even offer a "payment holiday" on your bond if you can provide a good reason and guarantee that you'll be able to get back to making payments after a specified timeframe.

Consider any work you can do

Although you'll probably want to spend every waking second gawping at the tiny miracle of nature that you've created, you may want to consider hanging on to one or two undemanding clients just to keep your hand in. If your baby is struck with colic or is the variety that's not keen on sleeping, you may find it impossible to service even this small volume of work, so don't rely on the income, but if you can make it happen for yourself, it's a good way to stay in the game.

It's also a very good idea to keep checking your email and respond to people with explanations of your future availability, referrals to other freelancers and quotes for future projects, rather than leaving a gaping hole where your communication used to be.

Get back early

Unfortunately for freelancers, maternity leave isn't about taking three months off and then rocking up for work at the end of

it. You'll be surprised at how much you're marketing yourself just by being available every working day. When you're out of touch, believe me, you'll be out of mind. If you haven't started pitching and communicating your availability in the month before you plan to get back to work, you'll be taking another month's unwilling maternity leave.

A month before you want to start working, get in touch with all your old clients. Let them know that you'll be coming back to work. Tell them you're looking forward to any commissions they want to send your way. Try to get them to give you a heads-up on any new projects and ask how you could help. Ask for publications' feature schedules and start thinking and pitching ideas. Use your new experience to your advantage and try to think of stories that come out of what you're going through.

Overwhelmed?

On the one hand, any new mother feels like she's juggling too many balls - whether she's tilling the fields with a baby strapped to her back or firing off quick emails about share prices from her birthing suite. As a freelancer or work-from-homer, you'll have the added burden of having to keep it all going yourself.

On the other hand, the benefits of the flexibility to be at home when you're needed and the lack of pressure from bosses who're watching, eagle-eyed, for post-natal ineptitude, really are worth the stresses of making your work work for you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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