

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

By Monika Sarder and Alison Keogh

With burgeoning demand for materials in Central Asia ramping up minerals production from 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 are missing 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 tangible key skills and corporate knowledge. Moreover, an inability to retain women as mothers can give the perception of an inflexible workplace culture.

While workplace policies may be supportive of diversity, in many cases management may still be 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



Alison Keogh working as an exploration geologist, 4 months pregnant, mapping in Pitjantjatjara Land, Central Australia, 2002

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 Pitjantjatjara. 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 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 through 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 from Townsville. When Natasha discovered that she was going to have a baby she was uncertain of the impact.

Her 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 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 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 skills across a range of disciplines 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.

Jacqui moved to Australia with her husband four years after completing her Masters in Statistics in South Africa. 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 and had no qualms telling her employers Viv and Phil Snowden, and 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.

Her 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 new 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.”

Her husband decided that he wanted a Masters Degree, Megan and her daughter followed him to Perth. She then 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 returned part-time. Enrolling her son in a child care centre near the University, Kathryn balanced motherhood and study by separating out her spaces.

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. While she did not mention having a child in her letters, she was uncertain of how it would affect her prospects in an interview. At her first interviews 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.”

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



Kathryn Harrison with son, Ryan

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. 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.”

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 useful in terms of 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
- Review regularly

Some suggestions from employers 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—though a global market and demands for more flexibility from Generation Y are driving changes in

themselves—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. 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. ■

An expanded version of this article, featuring additional profiles, is available from the WIMNET homepage at <http://ausimm.com/women.women.asp>.

This article was an initiative of the Women in Mining Network, a sub group of The AusIMM. To register your interest in the WIMNet please email Monika Sarder on 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.