

Supporting a Pilot's Post-Maternity Return to Work

NOTE

This briefing leaflet is intended as a female-focused supplement to the guidance contained in 25HUPBL06 - Supporting a Pilot's Return to Work. While that publication addresses general long-term absences, this paper focuses on the unique training and support needs of pilots following maternity leave. It offers actionable solutions and strategies designed to support a smoother return to work and improve pilot retention.

FOCUS POINTS

- Parents returning to work after the birth of a child experience a unique transition that requires beyond standard return-to-work training programs.
- Flexible training, childcare-aware scheduling, and peer support can ease the return-to-work process and strengthen long-term career continuity.

BACKGROUND

Many airlines place pilots on inactive status during pre-natal periods and/or extended maternity leave which can last up to several years. For example, German law prohibits pregnant pilots from operating during the statutory maternity protection period to ensure the safety and wellbeing of both mother and child.¹ This contrasts with shorter absences where pilots may return more quickly once the illness or short-term disability has concluded.

Returning to the flight deck after parental or maternity leave is a unique transition that can require additional flexibility with respect to standard training schedules. This is because carrying mothers experience physical and mental postpartum recovery, demands of infant care, and sometimes disrupted sleep, a unique phase that can lead to elevated fatigue and stress when combined with pressures of return to work (Delta Pilots Mutual Aid, 2020). Flexible return-to-work (RTW) training programs, child-care aware scheduling and voluntary peer support, enable pilots to regain currency, manage the demands of physiological parenting responsibilities, and return to duty efficiently.

¹ Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, n.d.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS AND SUPPORT STRATEGIES

Returning to flying after maternity leave can present a range of challenges from technical proficiency to managing new family responsibilities. To support this transition, airlines should adopt a comprehensive approach that includes flexible return to-work training, scheduling that accommodates childcare needs, and access to voluntary peer support. Together, these measures can ease the adjustment back to operational duties, promote wellbeing, and improve long-term retention.

1. Flexible RTW Training

Return-to-flying training should offer self-paced formats including e-learning, simulator sessions, and classroom-based refreshers. EASA² and industry best practices recommend customizing training timelines to allow for gradual cognitive and physical ramp-up. Notably, EASA also emphasizes the importance of flexible support, stating: *"The operator should provide relief from flight duties, adjusted rosters, or customized training to support the crew member's return to normal operation."*³

Operators such as Qantas have implemented phased return-to-work strategies for female pilots returning after maternity leave, called the "Carer's Line," which allows pilots to reduce their workload and select their preferred working days. This initiative has contributed to increased retention rates among returning pilots. *"The overall retention rate for women returning from maternity leave 97%, and for female pilots, 100%."*⁴ This clearly demonstrates that flexible training and operational reintroduction contribute to high retention rates.

2. Lactation Needs

One of the most practical ways airlines can support pilots returning from maternity leave is by adjusting flight training schedules to better accommodate childcare and lactation needs.

Scheduling daytime training and training flights to minimize overnight duty allows pilots to pump at home or in lactation facilities. Flights and training schedules should be assigned to avoid disrupting the cyclical pumping schedule women typically need every 2–3 hours.⁵

² EASA, CAT.GEN.MPA.215.

³ European Union Aviation Safety Agency [EASA], 2022.

⁴ Qantas Airways, 2010.

⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023.

Schedule changes or quick turnarounds often reduce pumping opportunities; providing a month's advance roster enables mothers to coordinate childcare and lactation needs effectively.⁶

3. The Role of Pilot Assistance via Peer Support

IFALPA's [Pilot Assistance Manual](#) states that peer support provides confidential assistance from trained pilot volunteers, offering a safe space to discuss concerns ranging from stress and anxiety to life transitions such as returning to work after childbirth. Benefits include:

- Reducing feelings of isolation during career transitions: Peer encouragement fosters a sense of belonging and motivation.
- Offering emotional support from peers with shared experience who truly understand their challenges can be imperative during the return-to-work process.
- Peers can share practical tips, coping strategies, and insights about transitioning from maternity leave to work.
- Encouraging resilience and wellbeing through trust and confidentiality when asked by the pilot. Seeing peers successfully return to work may encourage pilots to return to work after a childbirth.

Such peer support has been shown to improve mental health outcomes, which is critical for pilots managing stress related to career breaks and return transitions.⁷

CONCLUSION

Returning to flying after childbirth may require more flexibility than standard RTW training. IFALPA encourages flexible return-to-work (RTW) arrangements that take family needs into account and advocates for the inclusion of such provisions in more collective agreements. By recognizing the realities of postpartum recovery and early parenting, and by offering targeted support through training, scheduling, and peer connection, airlines can better retain experienced pilots and foster long-term career continuity. These changes don't just benefit individual pilots; they strengthen the profession as a whole.

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⁶ GAO, 2023.

⁷ Dennis, 2013.

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