

Supporting a Pilot's Post-Parental Leave Return to Work

NOTE

This paper supersedes 25WPBL01, of the same name.

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 women 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 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 statuses during prenatal 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 child¹. 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 maternity leave is a unique transition that can require additional flexibility with respect to standard training schedules. This is because carrying mothers handle 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)². Flexible return to work (RTW) training programs, childcare aware scheduling and voluntary peer support enable pilots

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

² Delta Pilots Mutual Aid. (2020, May).

to regain currency, manage the demands of physiological parenting responsibilities, and return to duty efficiently.

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 RTW 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 work training should offer self-paced formats including e-learning, simulator sessions, and classroom-based refreshers. EASA Air Ops Part ORO provides flexibility for operators to adapt recurrent and requalification training according to absence length and previous experience³. In addition, EASA's *Safety Issue Report: Skills and Knowledge Degradation due to Lack of Recent Practice* (2021) emphasized the need for risk-based and flexible approaches, such as refresher CBT, adjusted rosters, or phased reintroduction to support crew returning after extended leave⁴.

Since women pilots returning from maternity leave face a distinct combination of physiological recovery, childcare responsibilities, and potential skill decay, their re-entry cannot be treated as a routine requalification. As EASA provisions already allow flexibility in requalification, adjusting this flexibility to women pilots returning from maternity leave represents a consistent and evidence-based extension.

Operators such as Qantas have already 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, where "The overall retention rate for women returning from maternity leave is 97%, and for female pilots, 100%." ⁵ This clearly demonstrates that flexible training and operational reintroduction contribute to high retention rates.

³ EASA. Air Operations Regulation - ORO.FC (Flight Crew) and ORO.CC (Cabin Crew), AMC and GM.

⁴ EASA, Skills and Knowledge Degradation due to Lack of Recent Practice, V2.0 (2021)

⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 202.

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 hours⁶.

Schedule changes or quick turnarounds often reduce pumping opportunities, and providing a month's advance roster enables mothers to coordinate childcare and lactation needs effectively⁷.

3. The Role of Pilot Assistance via Peer Support

IFALPA'S Pilot Assistance Manual⁸ 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:

- Reduced feelings of isolation: Peer encouragement fosters belonging and motivation.
- Emotional support: Peers with shared experiences who understand the same challenges can provide guidance.
- Practical tips: Coping strategies and insights on transitioning from maternity leave to flight deck.

Such peer support has been shown to improve mental health outcomes, which is critical for pilots managing stress related to career breaks and return transitions⁹.

⁶U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023

⁷ GAO, 2023

⁸ International Federation of Air Line Pilots' Associations. (2022). Pilot Assistance Manual.

⁹ Dennis, C.-L. (2013).

CONCLUSION

Returning to flying after childbirth may require more flexibility than standard RTW training. IFALPA encourages flexible 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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