

Managing career breaks – a practical guide

The Bar has traditionally embraced flexible working arrangements which in turn have allowed members of the Bar to pursue a range of outside interests such as taking part time judicial or academic appointments, or becoming MPs, or writers, or actors. The list is long and varied. What it demonstrates is that a successful career at the Bar can be combined with time consuming outside interests, which of course can include childcare and other domestic responsibilities. In this article Freya Newbery considers some practical guidance for those managing career breaks.

There are two strands to the guidance set out below. Firstly it gives some practical suggestions about managing continuing professional obligations whilst on a break. Secondly the guidance encourages positive and structured communication between the tenant on a break and chambers with the aim of managing a smooth transition back to work. The guidance sometimes uses the language of maternity leave but is intended to apply equally to fathers and adopting parents where they are the principal carer, and more widely to any member of chambers planning to take a career break.

Practicalities – advance planning

Compulsory Insurance

- Check the position with the BMIF and keep them informed.
- Telephone them on 020 7621 0405.

Continuing Professional Development

- Check with the Bar Standards Board and keep them informed: Contact LPrats@BarStandardsBoard.org.uk.
- You can seek a reduction in your CPD commitments, but you may consider it would be better to keep your hand in and increase your confidence by gaining the information, education and opportunity for networking during your break.

Bar Council Subscriptions

Check the up to date position with the Bar Council and keep them informed:
Contact: SmitaShah@BarCouncil.org.uk.

Accounts

- Get them up to date. You may not have the time when you are on your break and sorting this out now may result in a timely adjustment in payments to take account of any future drop in income
- Meet with your accountant and discuss:
 - Adjusting your year end, if beneficial;
 - Provision for tax and pension payments;
 - Keeping in touch

VAT

Consider whether you will remain registered and how you will fill in your returns.

Lawtel/subsription services

Consider what you want to have during your break. It may be tempting to cancel everything, but on the other hand keeping up to date might make your return easier.

Chambers Rent – Direct debits

Check the relevant chambers policy re maternity/paternity/sabbatical/parenting break etc and agree how it will be implemented in advance to avoid misunderstandings.

Maternity Benefit

Maternity Allowance is available to a self employed person on maternity leave and is not means tested. Information is available at the www.direct.gov.uk website.

Practice Management – keeping in touch

Some uncertainty over the timing of and potential limiting factors around the return to work is usually inevitable and positive flexible management is helpful in ensuring a comfortable return. It is important to think ahead.

Have a Practice meeting before you go

- Arrange a meeting with your Head of Chambers/clerks/practice manager as appropriate.
- It may be worth taking minutes of the discussion to avoid misunderstandings later.
- Matters on the agenda would usefully include the headings below.

Contact and communication

- What will be the route, frequency and formality of communication between you and chambers?
- Home internet access: It will be useful to have internet access at home and remote access to chambers intranets/ diary etc.
- Email addresses/ out of office messages/ Voice mail message: Decide what to keep open and how you will access and respond to messages. Draft an out of office reply.
- What message do you want to be given to your solicitors about the reasons for and duration of your break? Who will communicate with them and how? Will you differentiate between them - keeping some of them informed of more detail during your absence, for example the date when your child is born? Don't expect your clerk to guess at this – give them relevant lists and details.

Cheques and post

- Make arrangements in advance about how your cheques will be paid into your bank account.
- Your pigeon hole will fill up with post. Much of it may be irrelevant. Do you want it sent onto you or will you organise to collect it? Perhaps your mentor/contact buddy could keep an eye.

Continuing your practice

- Do you want to be offered paperwork while you are absent?
- From what date do you want the clerks to start booking court work in your diary?
- Do you want to/are you prepared to contribute to chambers newsletters or seminars while you are absent?

Mentor/contact buddy

- Will you have a mentor whilst away and/or on your return and if so whom and what will be their role?
- This person can keep you informed as to what is happening in chambers in your absence and might speak to the clerks or other members of chambers on your behalf. They might give you support and advice on your return to chambers too.

Returning to work

- Do you have an approximate return date?
- Will you return to the same room (what will happen to your desk/place in chambers while you are away?)
- Are you thinking of changes to your work pattern and adjustments to your practice in terms of the amount you work and where you work?

Put return/update meeting in diary

- Don't leave this to be "when you are ready".
- Chambers may not want to bother you until such time as you are ready but you may read this as a lack of commitment to you. Putting a date in the diary avoids any misunderstanding. Move it if necessary.

At the return meeting

- Set an intended return date

- Discuss your proposed availability if different. If you intend to cut down on days/hours of work and/or travel then communication, clarity and understanding between you and your clerks is very important.
- Which solicitors would you like to be notified that you are back and how?
- Set a date for a review meeting. This will be particularly important if your work pattern has changed.

Managing a career break is the responsibility of chambers as a whole. Managing it well is achievable with forward planning and good communication which the above guidance promotes. Further information and guidance will be given at the Bar Council course on 3rd October 2008 Managing Career Breaks which is aimed at all those managing career breaks including barristers going on or coming back from a break from practice, clerks, practice managers, equal opportunity officers and members of management committees. The programme includes advice on clerking, re-establishing practice, funding, maintaining a work life balance, Code of Conduct and ethical updates and opportunities for career development including judicial and other appointments.

To register for the course contact ACampbell@BarCouncil.org.uk.

Freya Newbery is a member of the Bar Council Equality and Diversity Committee.