Expanded and extended parental leave benefits and flexible return-to-work policies are increasingly becoming the norm in the growing competition to attract and keep top talent. However, intentional policies, organizational cultural norms, and management of the phase back can mean the difference between retaining and attracting top talent and signaling to employees less than desirable experiences with an employer.

Today, most children in the US grow up in dual-income households where the division of labor in the home is split between parents. Mothers are increasingly the primary earner, and fathers are increasingly taking on a caregiver role. According to a 2014 study by the Families and Work Institute, 70% of women work in a job outside the home, and fathers have increased the amount of time they spend with their children during the work day by 65%. The study further found that 61% of US employees no longer agree with the statement: “Men should earn the money and women should take care of the children and family.”

In the rush to remain competitive, many companies have implemented generous parental leave policies and expanded benefits to include fathers, secondary caregivers, same sex couples, and the LGBTQ community. These benefits often apply to adoption, surrogacy, and foster care in addition to live birth, and can last weeks, months, and in some cases, more than a year. The US has long lagged behind the rest of the world with regard to parental leave policies. However, while expanding and extending parental leave policies is an important first step, instituting return-to-work policies that allow new parents and caregivers to phase back into work on a reduced and/or flexible schedule is crucial to retaining those workers.

Many companies are just now beginning to address the challenges related to managing the phase back process. While extensive information is available regarding parental leave benefits, very little information is readily available regarding re-entry to the workplace once those benefits have expired, or managing the return-to-work of employees who choose to take their parental leave incrementally over an extended period. For many companies, this portion of the equation is still a work in progress.

In the 2015 Working Mother 100 Best Companies, 87% of companies reported they offered a phase back or reduced-hour schedule following pregnancy. However, only 23% reported that the phase back program was automatic for new mothers returning to work, and only 36% reported that new mothers receive full pay during the phase back period. The median phase back period reported by the companies was 12 weeks. In addition, 80% of companies reported that following the phase back period, the new mother can elect to stay in a part-time capacity.

Although the focus of this paper is on return-to-work practices, the company extracts that follow also include information related to parental leave options to provide the full context of benefits, eligibility, and phase back.
Best Practice Companies

**Vodafone** – The company offers 16 weeks of maternity leave to all its workers. In addition, for the first six months following their return from maternity leave, new mothers can work 30 hours a week - at full pay. Unlike flexible work policies that many women must individually negotiate with their managers, or reduced-hours arrangements that also reduce salary, the benefit helps women phase back into their jobs without disrupting income or career. Talent retention was one of the goals Vodafone had in mind when it designed the new policy: in the past, 65% of women who left the company following maternity leave did so within the first year. On a global level, women comprise roughly 35% of Vodafone’s employees, but only 21% of the company’s global senior leadership team. Vodafone believes its enhanced maternity policy will play an important role in bridging that gap.

**Strategy&** - Following maternity leave, new mothers are automatically given access to a program that offers them a more family-friendly role at the firm for their first six months back to work, such as internal staff roles or client-facing work without travel. The benefit moved the burden of negotiating a flexible return-to-work schedule away from the employee by guaranteeing it as part of the benefit package. During the six-month period, the employees required 'billable hours’—a key metric for consultants—is guaranteed, affording the employee protection on their bonus during the transition period.

**Patagonia** – The company offers new mothers 16 weeks of maternity leave at full pay. Fathers and adoptive mothers respectively are provided 12 weeks of leave, also with full pay. The company has an onsite child-care center that is run by teachers, some of whom are bilingual and trained in child development. Parents can eat lunch with their children, take them to the farmer’s market, or play with them outside. The company buses school-age kids back to the child-care center at the end of the school day, allowing additional opportunities for parents and children to reconnect. Parents who need to travel for work can bring their child, and a nanny or partner with them – the company covers the expense. During the past five years, 100% of new mothers at Patagonia returned to work after their maternity leave. Today, approximately 50% of company managers are women, and 50% of senior leaders are women. As a side note: Patagonia employees are provided 12 weeks of full pay for any serious medical condition, or a serious medical condition of a spouse, domestic partner, child, or parent. The company also offers 12 weeks for an employee’s active military duty, and 12 weeks to care for a member of the military.

**Google** - Birth mothers receive 18 weeks of paid maternity leave, during which their stock shares continue to vest. Mothers who experience complications during childbirth receive an additional four weeks. The primary caregiver (gender neutral, includes adoptive parents and surrogates) is given up to 12 weeks paid 'baby-bonding leave.' The non-primary caregiver receives up to seven weeks of paid leave. Families also receive $500 in baby bonding bucks, and the company provides on-campus child care and designated mother's rooms as part of its return-to-work incentive. If the employee dies, his or her children will
receive $1,000 per month until age 19, (or 23 if they’re a full-time student), regardless of how long the employee worked at Google.

Procter & Gamble – Primary caregivers who give birth or adopt are provided 16 weeks of parental leave with full pay. Secondary caregivers receive four weeks of leave with pay. If they supplement that time with unpaid leave, parents can take a year off with job guarantee. Managers work with new parents throughout their leave to ensure they return to meaningful assignments and promotional opportunities, and maintain their career path. Alternative work options, three paid personal days, and five family-emergency days per year offer added flexibility. Employees with children with special needs are provided a dedicated support network.

Colgate-Palmolive – New birth mothers are provided nine weeks of leave with full pay to bond with their child, or seven weeks with full pay if they adopt, foster a child, or use a surrogate. When they return-to-work, the new mother can take advantage of on-site lactation rooms, consult nursing hotlines and medical-management programs, and request subsidized backup care. Most women employ flexible schedules during the phase back to work.

SC Johnson – The company offers new parents a daycare center at HQ, nationwide backup care, flex options and paid sabbaticals, plus wellness programs and free concierge services.

Johnson & Johnson – The company offers birth mothers a total of 15 weeks of fully paid leave (17 weeks if they have a C-section), and fathers and adoptive parents nine weeks of leave at full pay. New parents can opt to take the leave continuously or in intermittent intervals of at least four hours. The entire allotment of leave time must be used within one year. Parental leave is paid at the employee’s base pay rate, and benefits continue if the employee pays their share of coverage costs. (follow link above to view J&J policies and procedures)

Amazon – The company offers four weeks of paid leave before birth; ten weeks after, and an additional six weeks that any new parent (mother, father, biological, or otherwise) can take, for a total of up to 20 weeks, during which stock shares continue to vest. Fathers and adoptive parents get six weeks of leave with pay.

Microsoft: The company offers 12 weeks of parental leave at full pay for all mothers and fathers. For birth mothers, an additional eight weeks of maternity disability leave is offered, with full pay, enabling them to take a total of 20 weeks of fully paid leave if they choose. The company also offers birth mothers an expanded opportunity to use short-term disability leave during the two weeks prior to their scheduled due date to manage the physical impact that often comes with late pregnancy and to prepare for the upcoming birth. New parents have the option to take their leave either in one continuous 12-week period or split into two periods. They also have the option to phase back into work on a half-time basis.
**Goldman Sachs** – The company offers 16 weeks of maternity, adoption, and surrogacy leave at full pay, in addition to onsite and in-home back-up child care, and lactation support services. An onsite Expectant Parent Coordinator is available to meet with employees—and his or her spouse or domestic partner—to deal with issues ranging from infertility to pregnancy planning to adoption, and to help navigate the company’s resources. There is also a virtual Help-at-Home Bulletin Board on the company Intranet, open to all employees, who can post help-needed notices and share recommendations for child care. The company reports the tool is widely used, with over 20 posts on any given week. Over 70% of employees who have used the company provided back-up child care reported they would not have been able to work without the service. The company also provides one-on-one and group training for manager on how to support a team member’s transition onto leave and subsequent phase back to work.

**Accenture** – The company recently increased paid maternity leave to 16 weeks and enhanced its paid leave for secondary caregivers. The resulting increase to 16 weeks has already made an impact. Since the increase took effect, Accenture has seen a more than 30% reduction in new mothers leaving their job after the birth or adoption of a child. As part of its return to work incentive, new parents don’t have to travel for a year after the birth or adoption of a child.

**Pinterest** – The company provides 12 weeks of paid maternity leave and four weeks paid paternity leave. Families can take advantage of the company’s **Dependent Care Flexible Spending Accounts**, which let employees set aside a portion of their paycheck tax free to help pay for childcare costs.

A blog by the name **m&pper** breaks down the parental leave policies of nearly 50 of the UK’s largest companies. According to the blog, some companies have bundled maternity leave benefits with return-to-work incentives and requirements.

**National Trust** - Enhanced maternity leave benefit includes: 12 weeks of leave at 100% pay; 27 weeks at £139.58pw or 90% pay (whichever is lower), and 13 weeks unpaid. To receive the enhanced maternity benefit, the employee must stay with the company at least three months upon their return to work.

**Wiggin (Legal Services)** – Maternity leave benefit provides six weeks of leave at 100% pay; ten weeks at 50% pay; 23 weeks at £139.58pw or 90% pay (whichever is lower); and 13 weeks of unpaid leave. The company offers a return to work bonus of a sum equivalent to 50% of ten weeks’ pay, provided the employee returns to work and stays for a minimum of three months.

**Pitney Bowes** – Enhanced maternity benefit provides six weeks at 100% pay; 12 weeks at 75% pay (based on average weekly earnings); 21 weeks at £139.58pw or 90% pay (whichever is lower), and 13 weeks unpaid. The employee must return to work for at least six months to choose the enhance maternity package.
Princes Trust - Enhanced maternity package provides six weeks at 100% pay; 12 weeks at 50% pay; 21 weeks at £139.58pw or 90% pay (whichever is lower); 13 weeks unpaid. Employees must return to work for 12 months after the end of the maternity leave or they will be required to repay the difference between the Statutory Maternity Pay and the Enhanced Maternity Pay.

Baker and McKenzie (Legal Services) - Enhanced maternity package provides 26 weeks at 100% pay; 13 weeks at £139.58pw or 90% pay (whichever is lower), and 13 weeks unpaid. The employee must return to work for six months to choose the benefit. If the employee resigns or leaves during this period, they are required to pay back 50% of the enhanced maternity package.

Guiding Principles and Considerations

Ensure Equal Eligibility and Access
With increased adoptions, same sex marriage, and other emerging non-traditional family structures, it is important for employers to ensure that parental leave policies are non-discriminatory and accessible and equitable for all soon-to-be parents. Companies on the leading edge of parental benefits extend parental leave benefits to employees regardless of marital status, gender identity, or sexual orientation. The benefits apply to live birth, surrogacy, adoption, and foster care.

And while paid leave is fast becoming a competitive benefits enticement for highly-skilled salaried workers, hourly workers are often left out of the mix. Netflix drew attention in 2015 with the announcement the company would allow unlimited leave for new parents during the year following their child’s birth or adoption. The company came under tougher scrutiny when it was learned the unlimited leave policy only applied to salaried streaming employees, and not to the hundreds of hourly workers in the company’s DVD distribution centers. Netflix amended its policy to include specified periods of paid maternity, paternity and adoption leave for its hourly workers. Under the revised policy, streaming employees receive 16 weeks; customer service workers receive 14 weeks, and DVD workers receive 12 weeks, all at full pay. Although both sets of parental leave policies are more substantial than many currently offered in the US, Netflix has been criticized by workers’ rights groups for maintaining a two-tiered system that provides one set of parents more time to bond with their child than the other sets of parents.

Recognize the Needs and Concerns of Other Employees
It is also important to consider the perceptions of benefits inequities on the part of other employees, including singles. In a Adecco survey, while 88% of employees surveyed said they admire working parents’ ability to "do it all" when it comes to work and family, 36% of respondents said parents’ flexibility at work negatively affected team dynamics, and 31% said employee morale suffered. 59% of working men between the ages of 35 to 44 said flexibility for working mothers caused resentment among co-workers.
Communication and Open Dialogue
Maintaining communication and contact with employees who are on leave for an extended period is crucial. Employers often unintentionally lose contact with employees and fail to keep them current on events and changes in the workplace and in the industry. Long periods of parental leave without consistent communication may pose challenges when the employee returns to work, particularly if companywide changes have occurred that will impact the employee and the work they perform.

EY has made communication a formal part of the company's leave and return-to-work policy. The company provides mandatory training and coaching to all line managers - even senior managers receive six hours of one-on-one coaching. Women are provided group coaching and attend webinars on ‘Pre-maternity’ (before leave); the ‘Juggling Act’ (0-six months after birth), and ‘Managing Your Career’ (six+ months following return). After 12 months of launching the training and coaching series, the percentage of women returning to work after maternity leave rose from 80% to 94%, and saved the company an estimated $35.5m AUD in attrition costs.

Barclays provides ongoing support for working parents and engages line managers to ensure the progress is sustainable and wide-reaching. Coaching sessions are provided pre, during and post maternity for women, men, and their line managers. An on-line portal is available 24/7 to ensure support. The company offers heavily subsidized back up care, in-home help, and child care. Because of these supports, the company saw a 6.6% increase in retention, which they estimate provided a GBP of $3.28m in attrition savings.

The Harvard Business Review also offers guidance related to the employee and manager communication and coaching process. (follow link to HBR recommendations).

Conclusion
The variety and innovation in policies and benefits offered reflect the cultural values and importance of retention of the companies presented. Measuring the financial impact of the policies/benefits and reporting back to stakeholders (particularly the managers) helps leadership instill the importance across the organization for greater support by colleagues. Individualizing the needs of both the participants and their managers through training, one-on-one coaching, and support tools for parents, as well as for managers and colleagues, demonstrates a collective need for education and flexibility to ensure success for the organization.

Parental leave policies are a great first step, but the phase back is critical to retaining valued employees.