Google has a problem with pregnant workers, employee memo alleges

Enlarge / Being pregnant in the workplace comes with a whole host of challenges… and sometimes the employer is one of them.

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Discriminating or retaliating against employees for becoming or being pregnant is against the law. Unfortunately, like so many other kinds of discrimination, it’s still far too common to find in the workplace, and a Google employee says the problem is alive and well there, too.

The employee (perhaps soon to be a former employee) described her experiences in a memo obtained and published by Vice Motherboard.

“I’m Not Returning to Google After Maternity Leave, and Here is Why,” the memo begins.

The employee writes that, after several years as a high performer with a strong track record within the company, she was promoted to manage a small team of her own about 18 months ago. “At one point after my promotion, my director/manager started making inappropriate comments about a member of my team, including that the Googler was likely pregnant again and was overly emotional and hard to work with when pregnant,” she writes.

The writer's boss made clear that the writer should "manage the member of staff" out of the team. After documenting several instances of inappropriate remarks by her boss, the writer went to HR, and the manager evidently learned about it.

"I endured months of angry chats and emails, vetoed projects, her ignoring me during in-person encounters, and public shaming," the employee writes. She reported the retaliation several times to HR, but nothing improved.

The employee (who, by this point, was herself pregnant) accepted a position on another team inside the company. When she disclosed her intention to leave, the VP in charge of her section—above her problematic boss—personally asked her to stay. So she did. However, the situation with her boss did not improve, and so she again sought to transfer within the company.

She accepted a management role with another team more than four months before her maternity leave was expected to start. Her new boss introduced her via email as a manager, she writes, but then said she wouldn't actually be given a team to manage until after returning from maternity leave several months later.

"My new manager repeatedly stated that I was not to tackle any management tasks, and I was excluded from certain management communications and offsites," she writes. "I initially didn't complain about what was obvious discrimination" because of her demoralizing experience in her previous role. Eventually, she mentioned the retaliation and discrimination by the former boss to the new boss. The new boss "warned that I should let the situation go given the seniority level and influence" of the former manager.

Pregnancy can be fraught and difficult, and a few weeks later, the employee developed a condition that put her life and her pregnancy at risk. The condition was likely to force her to

start her maternity leave early. When discussing it with her manager, however, the boss dismissed her concerns, claiming that a media report “debunked the benefits of bedrest.” The boss added that she herself had ignored her own physician’s recommendations to keep working when she was pregnant.

The manager “then emphasized in this same meeting that a management role was no longer guaranteed upon my return from maternity leave and that she supported my interviewing for other roles at Google.”

“Poor job of communicating”

A few weeks later, the employee did indeed have to begin early maternity leave for medical reasons. She ultimately had an emergency cesarean section to deliver her baby prematurely. While she was on leave, HR finally got back to her with the results of the discrimination investigation against the first manager.

“I was told that my manager did a poor job of communicating the scope of my new role,” she writes. HR additionally claimed that she was excluded from managerial functions due to “administrative error” and that the boss didn’t actually mean to discourage her from taking early leave.

Motherboard said it verified the authenticity of the memo though it cannot verify the veracity of every claim. Motherboard also reports that at least 10,000 Google employees have seen the memo, which went viral on the company’s internal systems. (Google’s parent company, Alphabet Inc., has more than 100,000 full-time employees worldwide.)

A Google representative told Motherboard in a statement, “We prohibit retaliation in the workplace and publicly share our very clear policy.” The spokesperson also said the company investigates “all allegations of retaliation.”

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