How I Got My Employer to Acknowledge My Nursing Issue

Did you know there’s a federal law mandating accommodations in the workplace for working moms?

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When I gave birth to my daughter Maya in 2011, I barely had time to master the details of the nursing regimen I had embarked on — much less master my legal rights as a mother in the workplace.

However, in my first week back in the office, I immediately knew something was different. Sure, the culture at my startup tech company was inherently different from that of traditional corporate America, but still, something was off. It was business as usual for my colleagues, and my team was happy to have their manager return. However, I felt on display in my open-plan office and continually feared that breast milk was leaking through my bra.

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That wasn’t all: There were those C-section stitches I worried might pop, and the real possibility that I would fall asleep at my desk from sheer exhaustion.

In a desperate attempt to understand my situation and explain my emotions, I typed my feelings and experiences into Google. And I quickly found I wasn’t alone: Lots of conversation threads from moms in multiple industries detailed feelings and experiences similar to mine. One woman’s words in particular caught my attention:

“At a previous employer, I pumped in a dusty supply closet that locked from the outside. I slapped a Post-It note on the door to keep people out. It felt degrading and super stressful.”

I was shocked and disgusted; and this woman’s experience wasn’t isolated: I read story after story with similar complaints. Nor did there seem to be any pattern: Instead, the lack of concern about nursing mothers seemed a general cultural phenomenon at both startups and well-established organizations. A lack of appropriate accommodations for this segment affected women from all industries, and of all levels of education and income.

Indeed, according to a national study published by the Jacobs Institute of Women’s Health, only 40 percent of working mothers of infants surveyed said they had access to both a private place and break time to express breast milk. At the same time, the Bureau of Labor Statistics has reported that 58 percent of mothers of infants under 12 months are in the workforce.

However, merely a fraction of the women among them who chose to breastfeed continued to do so six months after giving birth — with employment frequently cited as a barrier.

What I found through further online searches frustrated me even more: Not only was there a chance I’d experience a “motherhood penalty” in my career, but some of my colleagues might consider me less productive than my counterparts who didn’t have children.

These worries about productivity, it turns out, are a myth. And my own Google rabbit hole ultimately led me to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). The federal Break Time for Nursing Mothers law, I learned, requires employers covered by FLSA to provide basic accommodations for breastfeeding mothers in the workplace. These accommodations must include time for women to

express milk and a private space that isn’t a bathroom for them to use each time they need to pump.

Christine and her daughter Maya.

Image Credit: Courtesy of Christine Michel Carter

Armed with the law, I made my next move …

During my next one-on-one with my manager, I presented the law, then immediately walked her to where I was pumping, in a bathroom stall with my giant Medela black tote balanced on top of my feet. “Federal law aside,” I asked, “when you think of a mother’s room at an innovative, forward-thinking startup, is *this* what you’d think of?”

My manager didn’t hesitate to agree and to admit that because the organization hadn’t employed many parents in the past, designating a mother’s room hadn’t been a top priority. Within days, though, the company rented adjacent office space so that I could pump comfortably and hygienically. The federal law also forced my employer to recognize me as a *diverse* employee.

But I still didn’t feel *included* — so I kept up my efforts, to change that.

Within the organization I challenged my team and our home office to start thinking about how working parents might perceive our company culture: Not only did we work late on weeknights and host weekend events but we frequently attended three-hour “happy hours.” The overall effect was hardly what I’d call family-friendly.

As an alternative, I encouraged my team and our home office to

think of additional ways we could operate efficiently and inclusively. For example, millennial *parents* network differently than do their peers within organizations; and considering that might help us retain talent.

I didn't expect the company to change overnight into an organization as advanced as, say, Deloitte (which offers working mothers flexible work schedules, sabbaticals and an annual "well-being subsidy" for massages and meditation). But it's a safe assumption that my company hadn't even considered the fact that breastfed babies are statistically healthier, which for their mothers means less time away from the office.

And though we were a progressive tech company, I also didn't expect a benefit as helpful as that which companies like IBM, Zillow, Pinterest and TripAdvisor give travelling mothers who are nursing: shipping their breast milk to them. Irregardless, we needed to change as a company. We needed to remain competitive, to attract productive, hard-working millennial talent.

We needed to move the needle.

Next, I broadened my work on behalf of millennial moms …

Being a mother started changing me as a consumer-marketer, too; I began thinking about our company's business model. I championed targeting a new consumer segment and revenue stream: millennial families. And I led discussions with leadership on the topic and spearheaded the market and consumer research needed to develop insights – insights about how companies are leaving money on the table by not targeting consumers who are also parents.

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Unexpectedly, that nursing experience became the catalyst for my current work. I now dedicate my spare time to advocating for working moms. I'm a writer, speaker and consultant to brands on hiring millennial moms. And in this context, I created the country's first free mommy and me professional development event, Mompreneur and Me. I also advocate with groups such as 2020 Mom and Mom Congress. U.S. Sen. Kamala Harris, D-Calif., even reached out to me for support in her advocacy of the Maternal Care Act. Along the way, the goals I've advocated for at companies include:

- Mothers-to-be should work through a maternity plan with their managers which includes clear communication of how they'll remain productive during and after their pregnancy.
- Not just moms but all professionals in the workplace should advocate for breastfeeding moms in the workplace, and reflect on how working moms might perceive the existing company culture.
- New mothers should take advantage of online resources, like Medela at Work, which helps mothers prepare, plan for and successfully practice breastfeeding when they're back at work.
- Employers should support pumping mothers by not delaying until those mothers stumble upon advice from others or existing government policy but rather by proactively setting up resources to help them in advance of their return to work.
- Pregnant women and new mothers should seek out supportive resource groups or networking communities to learn best practices and watch outs. If women don't anticipate having a healthy dialogue with their current manager, they should also explore other organizations with parent-friendly HR practices and benefits.

In short, employers shouldn't wait to help new parents until they – the employers – are themselves those new parents.

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