

**FlexBulletin #103: Marissa Mayer – Work-Life Pioneer?**

By Paul Rupert

September 30, 2015

*I waited a while for the dust to settle on Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer's latest work-life firestorm before writing this piece. In case you somehow missed the robust back-and-forth, she announced her plans to "work through" a two week maternity leave after the forthcoming birth of her twins. Opinions ranged from "CEOs are a breed apart when it comes to leave" to "her poor role modeling will doom the women of Yahoo and beyond to abbreviated leaves."*

*True or not, I think much of the commentary missed the larger point embodied in her actions. It's worth examining how she dealt with the larger work-family challenges, and what this might mean for policy and practice at Yahoo beyond its and tech's current pre-occupation with leave.*

**[Note:** As we all struggle with getting issues of flexibility and employee supports right, it is great to find creative and instructive best practice resources. I am happy to point you to a new website just launched by my colleague Kathy Christensen and others at [www. OpenWork.org](http://www.OpenWork.org). The site showcases companies that are leading the reinvention of how we work, and is a contribution to all of us. An excerpt from the site:

At OpenWork.org, we share stories of organizations that **inspire us** by shattering the poverty of imagination that limits business productivity and societal well-being. By telling these stories, we can accelerate the pace of change in the way people can and should work in the 21st century.

*Perhaps all of us, and certainly the leaders of diversity-challenged tech companies, would benefit from a close reading.]*

+++++

**Marissa Mayer came to Yahoo with transformation in mind.**

The high-flying tech leader left Google and came to Yahoo with a focus on reinventing services and technology and delighting investors. It's been a mixed record. Perhaps her biggest success will come later this year if she successfully sells Yahoo's stake in China's online behemoth, Alibaba.

Ironically, work-life and workplace practices have led to her greatest national visibility in the media and social media. She is widely known for the unusual choices she has made on where and how employees and working parents live their lives. During her [3 years as CEO](#) she has:

- Summoned Yahoo's telecommuters back to the office
- Spun "take your child to work day" into a next-door nursery for her first-born
- Offered Yahoos 8 weeks of paid parental leave + 8 more weeks for moms
- And just declared she'll take only 2 weeks of 'working leave' with her new twins

**If timing is everything, this was a tough time to take on leave time**

Ms. Mayer's casual social media announcement about her leave plans seems to have been a case of particularly bad timing. Across the country, there are growing demands for paid parental leave. Governments and political campaigns are pushing for longer periods of paid vs. unpaid leave. Valley tech firms (including Yahoo) are offering months of paid parental leave as part of their efforts to recruit and retain women. Large advocacy groups have made substantial leave a central item on their national agendas. It seems to be an idea whose time has come.

So it was inevitable that Marissa Mayer's minimalist leave announcement had the effect of dropping cold water in hot oil. As happened with the telecommuting controversy, opinions zipped around the web immediately with equal parts intensity and diversity. Unlike the almost universally negative reaction to her telecommuting stance (outside of Tech), this decision evoked a much more mixed response. Among the reactions:

- ✓ She could be a great role model, taking a long leave; but she is not
- ✓ She's betraying her own leave policy by signaling: "Winners don't use it."
- ✓ Essential CEOs can't take long leaves with Alibaba-like challenges afoot
- ✓ Men wouldn't announce their leave plans and wouldn't be judged so harshly
- ✓ You need more leave, not less, with twins...and more

One can find some truth in any of these and the dozens of other opinions expressed. But I think they all take a narrow view of the situation. I believe there is value in stepping back and looking more carefully at what Ms. Mayer is doing as she plans to execute her unique blend of work and family this fall. Whether intentionally or not, I think she is in the process of modelling much more than the right amount of leave.

### **However uniquely, even the CEO has to plan for pregnancy and beyond**

Like any working parent contemplating a new child, including the employees at Yahoo, Marissa Mayer has to wrestle with a number of factors:

- 1) Past delivery or **health issues** that might require a longer leave;
- 2) Adequate or limited family support and **child care resources**;
- 3) **Back-up coverage** at work to cover the person's absence;
- 4) Availability of intermittent or ongoing **part-time or work-at-home** schedules;
- 5) The **impact on a career** of prolonged absence.

So how does Yahoo's CEO work through this checklist? As to health issues, she has said "Since my pregnancy has been healthy and uncomplicated" my physical needs for a leave will be limited. On child care resources she could draw on her first experience and say she can afford any option, including outfitting an office next to hers as a "personal child care center." In the event of illness or emergency she has family support and access to 24/7 highest quality nanny care or back-up care as needed.

On the matter of flexible schedules, without having to declare it she can work what could be called CEO "flextime" or "reduced schedule" or "work-at-home/hospital/wherever." She has superior technical support and can make modest schedule changes as she sees fit. On the matter of career impact of a long leave, she could take or model the full leave. Whether that's ever feasible for a CEO, the particularly heavy demands of her role right now (Alibaba, etc.) probably allow little room for leave.

### **You can model and support true work-life support for others without exhausting leave**

Marissa Mayer has an opportunity to advance the work-life practices of Yahoo by acknowledging that she has a unique cluster of supports that can be extended to her whole workforce. It was a great first step for Yahoo and others to offer lengthy parental leaves. But they are only a piece of the mosaic needed to support working parents and families. Generous child care options, flexible schedules and cross-training to enable full leaves to be taken are all vital. Eliminating any negative career impact for those who take long leaves is challenging but crucial to their robust use.

These are not easy things to do in most organizations, and especially in tech. It needs CEO level awareness and support. It is a leadership opportunity for Ms. Mayer – pre- or post-Alibaba. The difficulty comes from the fact that leaves are not a continuing and variable option: in the binary world of tech, it seems easier to deal with on/off or working/on leave status. Part-time, offsite work, intermittent leaves, etc. are more demanding of managers and employees.

It is not too late for Marissa Mayer to become a work-life pioneer. Perhaps her brief leave could become a lengthy teaching moment for her company and industry. And it would be interesting to see “Marissa Mayer + Work-life pioneer” fill the pages of a Google search.

Best regards,  
Paul Rupert

Rupert & Company  
Chevy Chase, MD  
301-873-8489  
[paulrupertdc@cs.com](mailto:paulrupertdc@cs.com)

*Rupert & Company, publisher of the **Bulletin**, is the global leader in business-beneficial flexibility.*  
© 2015 Rupert & Company. All Rights Reserved