

ANGELA BANKS

THE ANNEX COWORKING SPACE FOR NEW MOMS: CHANGING HOW COMPANIES MANAGE MATERNITY LEAVE

You've become a new mom for the first, second or third time and that dreaded moment is approaching, the end of your maternity leave. For most moms, transitioning back to work after having a baby is one of the toughest times in their lives. You're dealing with sleep deprivation, an unpredictable schedule, hormonal imbalance and more. On top of that you are now forced to put your baby's care into the hands of someone else while you are expected to perform at optimal level, although you are riddled with mom guilt and the immense longing for your baby. Angela Banks, mom of 2 and founder of The Annex, understands this all too well. The Annex is a coworking space designed for moms who are transitioning from maternity leave back into a corporate environment. With a mom's needs in mind, the space will include a nursery room, a lactation room, nannies, video monitoring and more. Slated to open in the Dallas area Spring 2019 with plans for future expansion, The Annex will change how corporate America does maternity leave.

CEOMOM chatted with Angela about why The Annex is so important to the state of maternity leave in America and how The Annex will redefine work/life balance.

A pregnant woman with dark hair, wearing a pink lace dress and a necklace, stands outdoors with her hands on her hips. The background is a soft-focus natural setting with green and yellow foliage.

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Many companies are making great strides to improve maternity policies, but there is still a lot of room for improvement in this area. This is evidenced by the fact that women continue to leave or postpone work following childbirth, contributing to the scarcity of women at executive levels.

Photo Credit: Laura Beltran

What is the inspiration behind The Annex?

I wanted to create a space for moms to ease back into the office at their own pace. When I returned from work following the birth of my son, I dreamed of having access to a place like this, where I didn't have to choose between maintaining my career track and spending more time with my infant child. I wanted adult interaction and the fulfillment from my work, but not at the expense of missing all of the first year milestones and having to pump in random rooms while on client visits. I made the decision to take an additional 3 months of unpaid leave, but would have returned sooner had there been an office where I bring my nursing baby and have onsite nannies to lend a hand. There was no such place for me, but during my second pregnancy, I set out to create this space for other corporate moms. The Annex gives new moms the chance to spend more time with their infant children, in a supportive environment where they can fully heal and settle into their new "normal", while maintaining the trajectory of their careers.

What products and services do you offer?

Our space is designed to feel like a home office. We offer the comforts of working from home, but layer on support from on-staff nannies, which actually makes it possible to get something done while your newborn is with you. A community of professional moms and a network of resources come with the package. Conference rooms are available for on-site client and team meetings. Separate access is required to enter the remainder of the office, which includes a nanny room, lactation room, break room, open gathering space and a personal "home" office for every member, equipped with a rocker and crib. Our network includes lactation consultants, sleep trainers and other local resources. Scheduling and live streaming to the nanny room will be available through the Annex app. Peace of mind is a by-product.

Are there other coworking communities like the Annex?

Not exactly. There are coworking offices that cater specifically to women, but they are geared toward all women and mostly entrepreneurs, rather than new corporate moms. They operate as traditional coworking spaces, where the client and the user are one in the same.

How will The Annex stand out from current and potential competitors?

The Annex is a whole new take on coworking, because mom's employer covers the cost of the space, as a wellness benefit and incentive for mom to return.

I read an article by USA Today that said maternity leave is an elite benefit in America. Do you believe this is true? Why or why not?

While there are notable outliers, many US companies do not provide adequate maternity leave benefits. As compared to other developed countries, our standards are simply too low.

As the article states, these basic standards harm lower level employees more than others. Leave needs to be extended in this country for the well-being of all new moms and their children. The Annex was created to be a supplement to whatever policy is in place. We pick up where the maternity leave policy ends.

Do you think corporate America is doing enough to help women transition from maternity leave back to work? If not, what more should/can be done?

Many companies are making great strides to improve maternity policies, but there is still a lot of room for improvement in this area. This is evidenced by the fact that women continue to leave or postpone work following childbirth, contributing to the scarcity of women at executive levels.

Companies must find more ways to support working moms in this transition, or the number of moms missing from the workplace will continue to rise. I recently blogged about an article that addressed this issue, suggesting that it's time for corporate America to come up with new solutions.

What is corporate America getting right?

Corporate America is starting to recognize the need for improved maternity benefits. Some of the large, global companies have recently increased their leave benefits in the US, to match the policies they've always had in place throughout other parts of the world. Hopefully, more companies will catch on to the idea and begin to make similar improvements.

Why is a coworking community for new moms a solution for America's challenges with maternity leave?

The Annex offers a solution for helping moms transition back into a corporate environment after maternity leave has ended. It's an extension to maternity leave that gives moms a chance to experience all of the milestones that happen in that first year, which really start to show up after the "fourth trimester", when personalities emerge and the real fun begins. It provides a comfortable place to deal with the hormonal changes that come with delivery and continue throughout the time of breastfeeding and/or pumping, allowing for the time needed to get back to normal, both physically and mentally, before officially returning to the office. It eliminates many of the distractions that come with working from home, plus it's been my personal experience that getting out of your pajamas and leaving the house changes your mindset and leads to a more productive day. Finally, being surrounded by other moms within the community will make for an enjoyable and motivating work environment.



Your company focuses on life-work balance rather than work-life balance. What does life-work balance mean to you?

Our motto is “Life comes first”. Children have a unique way of changing our perspectives. Work-life balance was my goal before I had my son, but everything changed the moment he arrived. I extended my 3 month leave to 6 months. When I finally returned, I was still passionate about my career and the success of my firm, but there was a shift in my priorities. I had made meaningful relationships at the firm and my work allowed me to make a positive impact within my community and help support my family, but I had to make a change in how I spent my time. This new little life needed a good portion of my time and attention. In the past, I never thought twice about rearranging my calendar to accommodate a client’s needs, but my pumping schedule and well visits were set in stone and everything else was scheduled around these times. I was also home in time for his 5:30 feeding and didn’t even glance at my email until after he was down for the night. Of course, my work was still done and clients were still happy, but life came first.

As a working mother of 2, how do you maintain life-work balance?

By setting priorities. There are only 24 hours in the day and I have to prioritize time for the things I care about most. Faith, family and friendships are my top 3. For me, balance means that the majority of my time and other resources are spent cultivating these things.

When will The Annex open? What can we expect from the initial opening?

The Annex is scheduled to launch Spring 2019. Sign up through the website to get updates and information on upcoming events.

Learn more about The Annex at <http://www.annexcommunity.com>. Read the Summer 2018 issue of CEOMOM Magazine at <http://ceomommagazine.com/latest-issue>.