Canadian Tech Worker Sues Google, Claiming She Was Fired For Being Pregnant



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A lawsuit against Google claims the global tech giant suddenly and wrongfully fired a female employee after she told the company she was pregnant and planning a maternity leave.

Sarah Lilleyman filed a statement of claim against Google in Toronto's Superior Court of Justice on Friday, saying her joyful news was not greeted with the same enthusiasm by Google Canada, and she was given notice of termination within days of her telling her bosses.

"It is a scary thing to put yourself out there to take on this gigantic company that does have so much power," said Lilleyman's lawyer, Kathryn Marshall, in an interview.

"But she knows that there's so many other women who are experiencing pregnancy discrimination at work who don't have the ability to put themselves out there; either they don't have the support, or they don't have the resources. And she knows that she's not only helping herself, but she's helping so many other women," Marshall said.

Lilleyman is seeking damages for wrongful dismissal for lost compensation and benefits, as well as $250,000 in punitive damages and $150,000 for alleged breaches of the Ontario Human Rights Code.

None of the allegations have been proven in court. Google has not yet had a chance to file a statement of defence. A Google spokesperson addressed questions about the lawsuit by the National Post in a general way.

"We prohibit discrimination in the workplace and publicly share our very clear policy," said Lauren Skelly, a Google spokesperson.

"Reorganizations are part of the normal course of business. These decisions are based on business needs, and this is part of an ongoing effort to simplify structures and align product priorities."

Google said some teams at Google are changing to focus on top priorities, which impacts corporate resources including shifting the skills they need from employees. Google said employees who are let go are supported in accordance with local requirements and practices.

The statement from Google included a link to a 6,607-word document titled “Google Code of Conduct” which outlines “the ways we put Google’s values into practice. It’s built around the recognition that everything we do in connection with our work at Google will be, and should be, measured against the highest possible standards of ethical business conduct.”

Lilleyman, of Trent Hills, a largely rural community midway between Kingston and Oshawa, joined Google in October 2021 as a content strategist for its Canadian marketing team. She was recruited from a job at Shopify, her statement of claim says.

She earned $180,000 plus an annual bonus, a benefits package, and Google Stock Units worth about US$200,000, she says in her claim.

In 2022, she says she was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes and took a two-month medical leave after her first pregnancy. She was granted remote work status by Google as part of a medical accommodation, her claim says.

Then she became pregnant a second time.

“The Plaintiff was terminated by Google shortly after she disclosed her pregnancy and her intention to take an 18-month maternity leave and her need for medical accommodations. At the time that the Plaintiff was terminated, she was in the second trimester of her pregnancy,” her claim says.

“She was told by Google that this was due to a ‘restructuring’. However, comparable roles were available within Google that she could have been given,” she says in her claim.

Lilleyman was given two months’ notice of her termination, until the end of March this year, she says. She was 39 at the time. Her baby was born in June in a medically complicated birth, Marshall said.

“The Plaintiff was extremely stressed upon learning she had been fired and didn’t know what to do. She was visibly pregnant, due to give birth within months,” according to her claim. “Google did not care about the Plaintiff’s concerns or the impacts that her sudden termination had on her health and the health of her unborn baby,” her claim says.

She claims that a Google human resources representative told her she “should conceal her pregnancy when seeking new jobs during the working notice period. The Plaintiff was shocked to receive this advice,” the claim alleges.

Marshall said such advice is “terrible.”

“This is the kind of stuff you hear about happening in the 1970s and this is supposed to be a modern company, in touch with younger generations,” she said.

“Google, in this case, really promotes their work culture, their positive work culture, so I think it’s particularly insidious that they did this to my client. My client wants her story out there because she wants companies to take note and she’d like to see some change.”

Lilleyman’s claim alleges that while she was pregnant, and despite her objections,

Google also cut off her medical benefits. Because of medical complications with her pregnancy, she says in her claim, she required expensive medication.

“The manner in which the Plaintiff has been treated by Google has been traumatic and has caused the Plaintiff immense stress and anxiety. It has impacted her health and had made what should be a joyful time an immensely stressful time,” her statement of claim says. Her claim says she was “a competent, hardworking, loyal employee with no performance concerns and no cause for her termination.”

Google is best known to the public for its namesake search engine and has an immense presence on a global scale as one of the world’s biggest technology companies. It is a subsidiary of Alphabet Inc., which is ranked as one of the world’s largest companies and most valuable brands.

The content of this article is intended to provide a general guide to the subject matter. Specialist advice should be sought about your specific circumstances.

Author: Adrian Humphreys

Levitt LLP