



Workers left behind: The impact of covering for co-workers on leave

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SEPTEMBER 2024



Background

The purpose of this study was to understand the physical, mental and emotional impacts of leave (2+ weeks) programs on the workers who were “left behind” during a co-worker’s absence and took on at least some of their co-worker’s responsibilities to ensure business continuity during those leave periods. The data was collected from a national consumer survey of 1,001 respondents who had covered for a co-worker on leave in the past year. This survey was conducted in January 2024.

Key findings

Managers play a crucial role in the overall job satisfaction and well-being of workers left behind when co-workers take leave. Supervisors and managers tend to bear the brunt of resentment from those workers left behind, as opposed to the person taking leave. Through planning, appreciation and recognition, this can be mitigated for those responsible for business continuity during the leave period.

The most common method of preparing for the co-worker’s leave was dividing the work among multiple co-workers (56%), followed by reassigning the work to a single person (29%), with hiring additional temporary staff (15%) or full-time staff (12%) being the least used.

A longer leave duration (9+ weeks) more often results in the hiring of additional staff compared to shorter leave. Given this, extended leave may require additional preparation by businesses involving job postings, Human Resources involvement and potentially outside recruiters.* This is important to take into consideration as the impacted groups are not just the direct workers left behind, but potentially additional departments and functions as well.

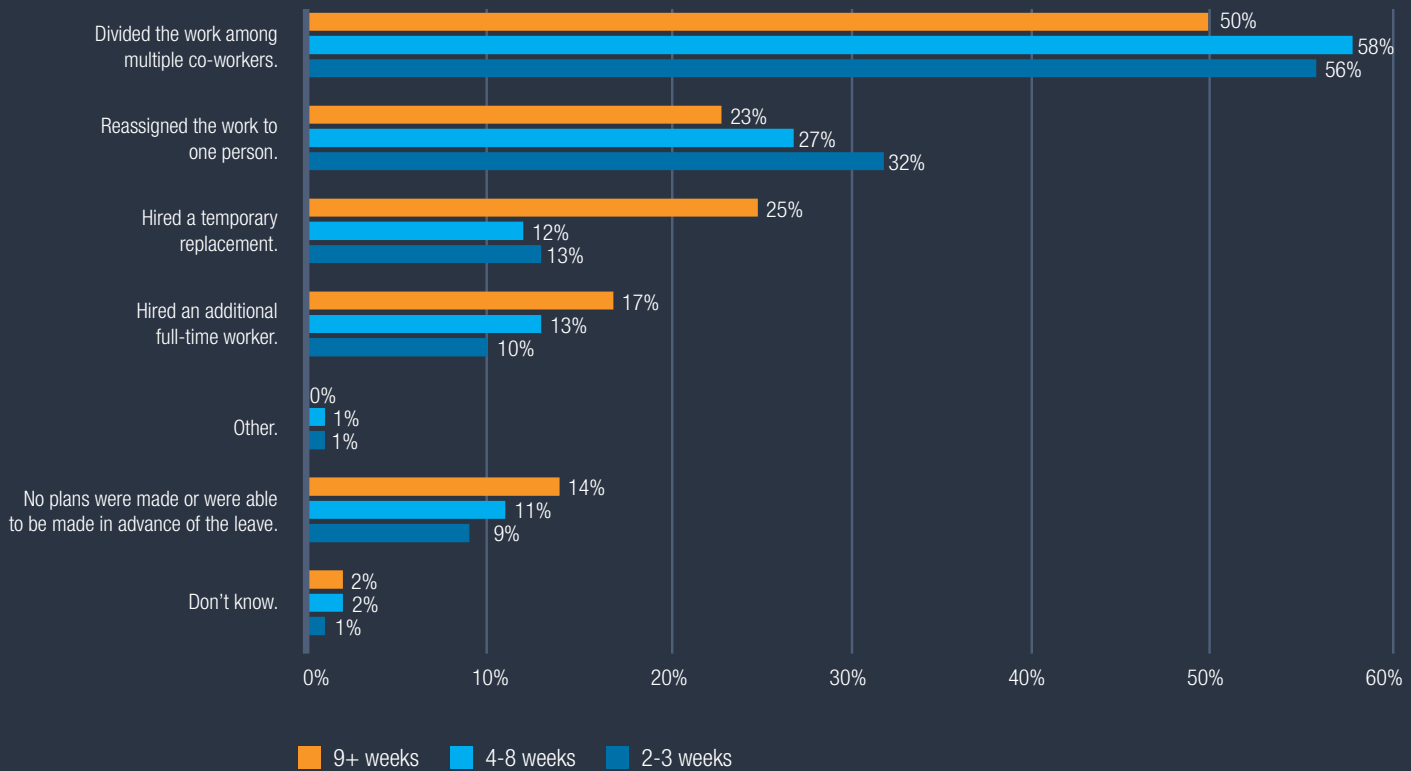
The feelings of many workers toward their employer changed because of how coverage was managed during the co-worker’s absence, with 29% feeling more positive, 24% feeling more negative and 47% feeling unchanged.

As expected, hourly workers are significantly more likely than salaried workers to have been compensated for the additional work they took on with payment for their overtime (58% vs. 45%). In this vein, they are also significantly less likely to harbor any resentment toward their co-worker, manager or company.

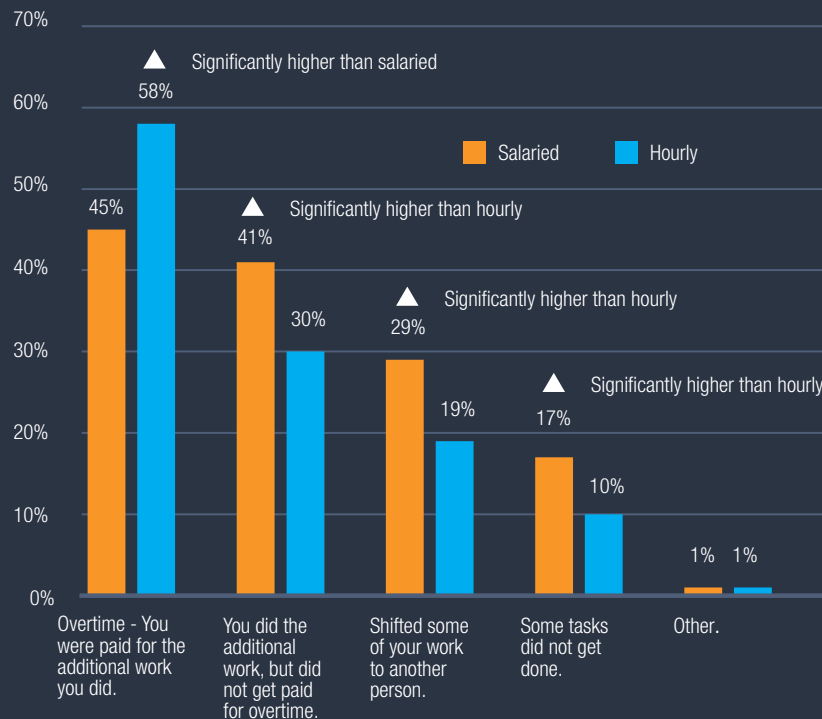
- While the data does not show causality, it certainly underscores the importance of financial compensation as a token of appreciation to reduce resentment and job dissatisfaction while covering for a co-worker on leave.
- 60% of respondents received some form of recognition for taking on the additional work, such as additional paid time off (25%), one-time bonus (22%) or pay increase (22%).

* Note the issues involved in hiring replacement workers and an employee’s right to be reinstated upon return from leave are complex, and experienced counsel should be consulted to ensure a complaint process is followed.

PREPARATION FOR IMMINENT LEAVE BY LEAVE DURATION

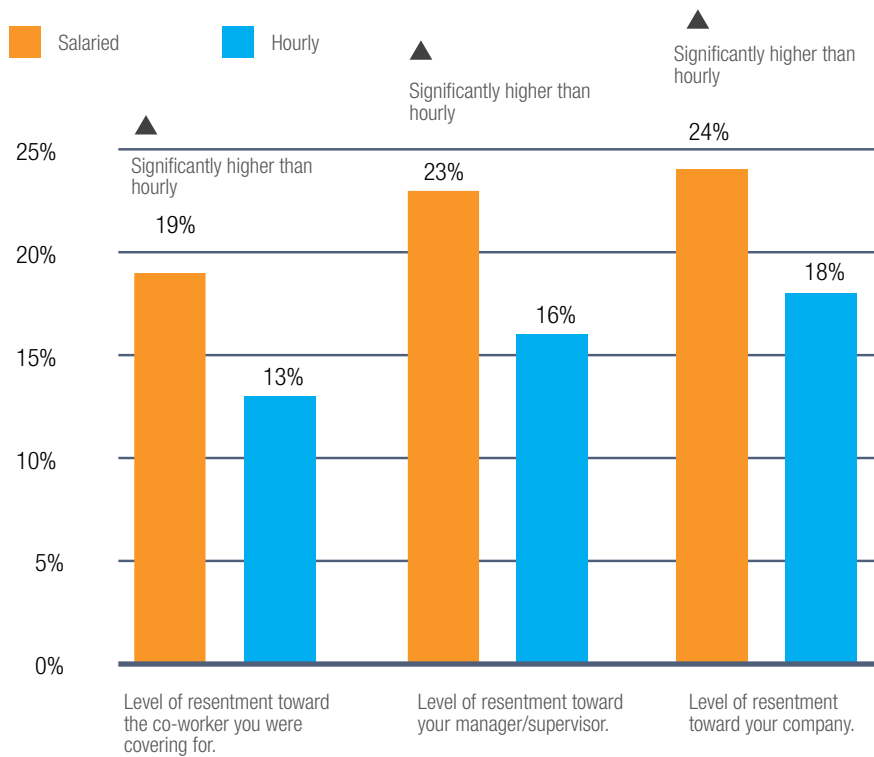


METHODS TO COMPLETE ADDITIONAL WORK BY PAY DESIGNATION



Note: The quality of work and any delays in completing the work were not measured.

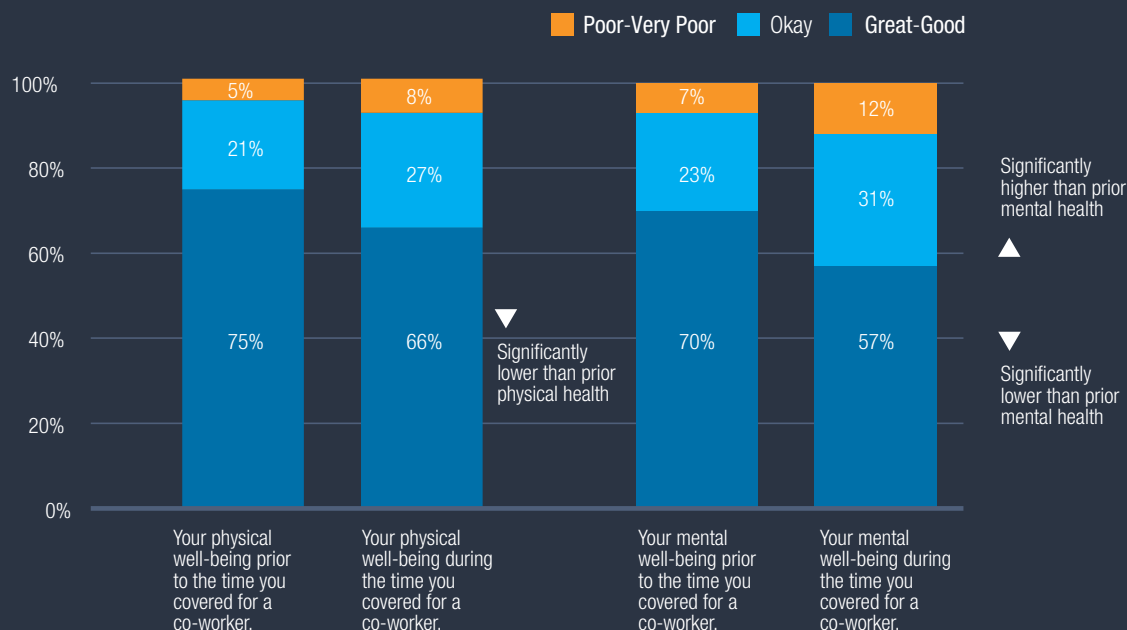
RESENTMENT BY PAY DESIGNATION - (RESPONDENTS ANSWERING VERY HIGH-HIGH)



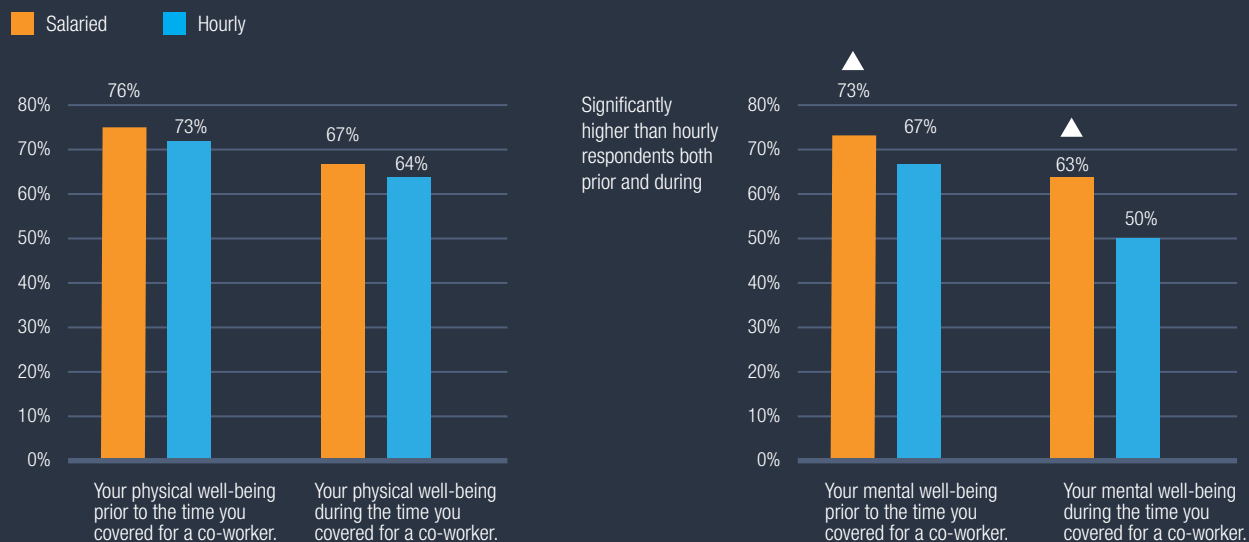
Workers' physical and mental well-being are significantly impacted when covering for their co-workers on leave. Providing adequate resources to monitor and proactively manage both physical and mental well-being of workers left behind is of paramount importance.

- Of note, mental well-being dropped 13 percentage points (70% to 57%) while covering for a co-worker while physical well-being dropped 9 percentage points (75% to 66%). The drop in mental well-being is more pronounced among hourly workers (dropped 17 percentage points) than salaried workers (10%).

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELL-BEING



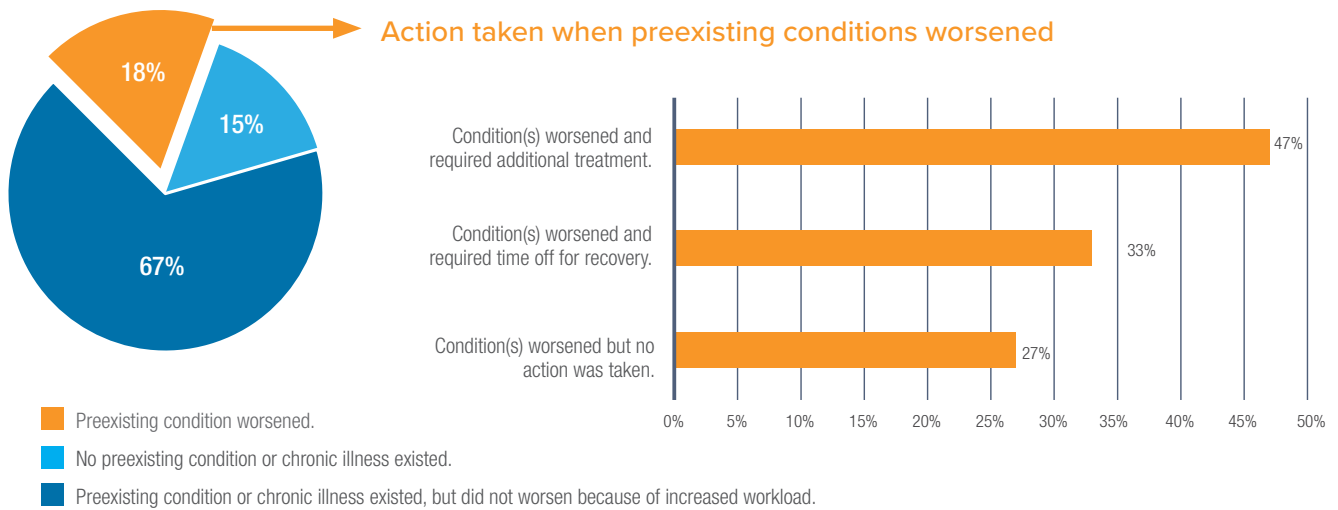
PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELL-BEING BY PAY DESIGNATION (RESPONDENTS ANSWERING GREAT-GOOD)



Additional resources for physical and mental well-being are necessary to ensure that those left behind have what they need to perform their function and cover for a co-worker.

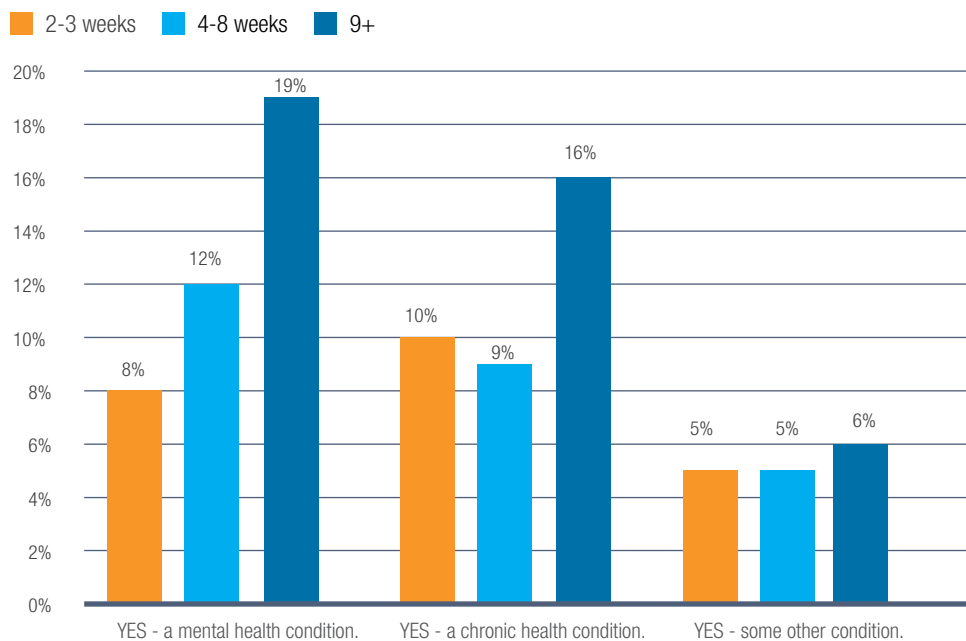
- Only 15% of workers had no preexisting condition. Of the 85% with a preexisting condition, 18% stated the condition got worse while covering for a co-worker. Of those with a worsening preexisting condition, 47% required additional treatment and 33% required time off for recovery.

STATE OF PHYSICAL WELL-BEING



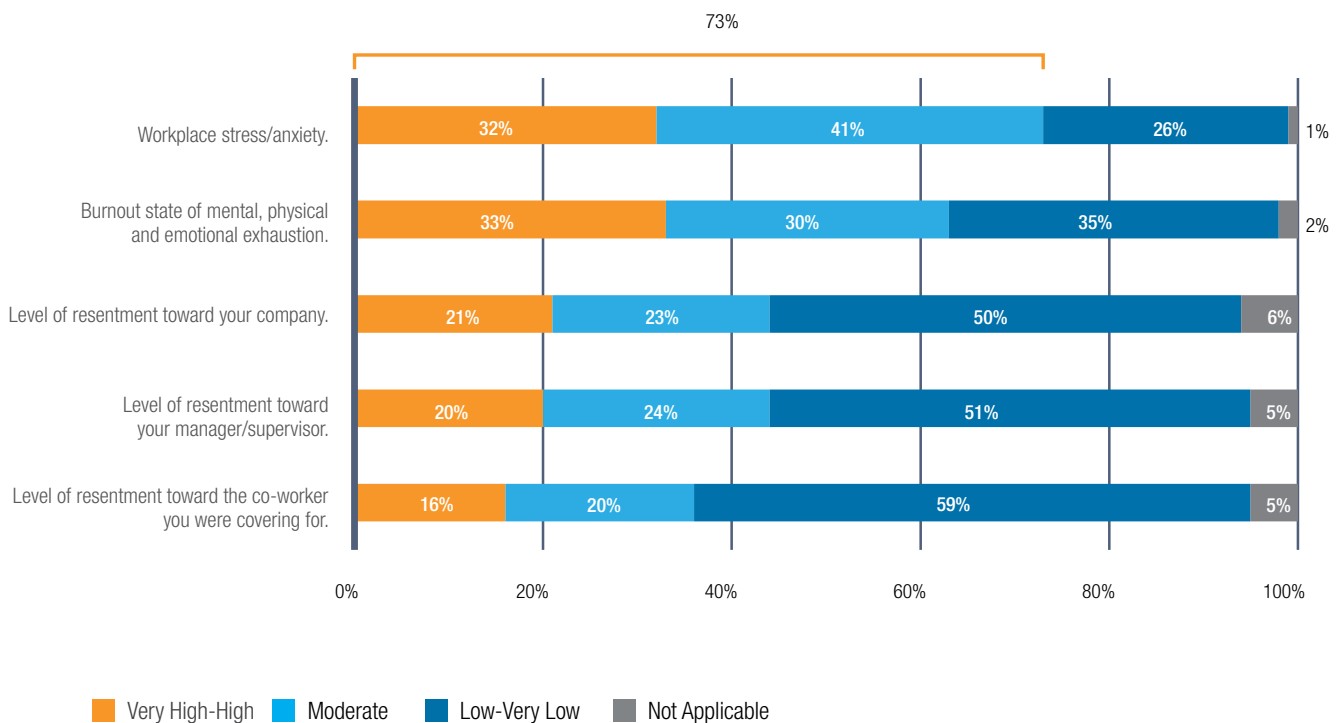
Longer leave durations increased the likelihood of a new health condition occurring for workers who were covering for their co-workers. In fact, 24% of workers were diagnosed with a new health condition while covering for a co-worker on leave.

DURATION OF LEAVE COVERAGE AS IT IMPACTS THOSE WITH NEWLY DIAGNOSED CONDITIONS

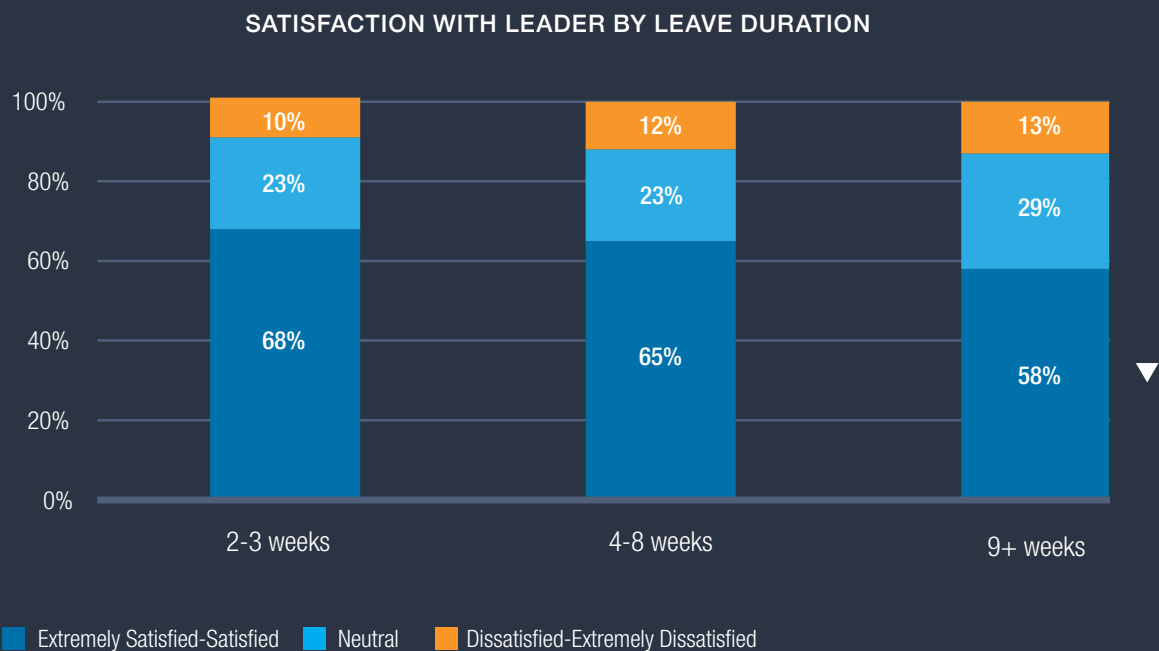
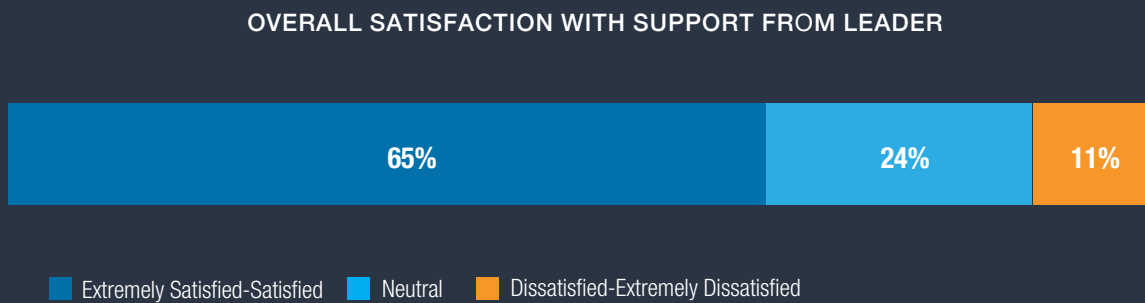




Additional strains placed on the workers left behind include at least very high-high and moderate levels of workplace stress/anxiety (73%), burnout (63%) and resentment toward their manager/supervisor (44%) and their company (44%) because of their increased workload.



Extended leaves (9+ weeks) require more support for workers left behind than shorter leaves. Most respondents (65%) were satisfied with the support they received from their leader during the co-worker’s absence, but satisfaction levels dropped when the leave extended beyond nine weeks.



- The research showed that smaller organizations (2-99 employees) are significantly less likely to offer paid leave benefits than medium/large organizations. Employees left behind in smaller organizations tend to feel a bit more resentment toward the co-worker they are covering for compared to large (1,000+ employee) organizations (18% responded High or Very High vs. 12%). Over half of employees of small companies also report that no additional support program or assistance was provided to them.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, we recommend that companies take the following actions to improve the experience of their team and to retain their loyalty and engagement:

- Review the current policies and practices for managing leave programs and ensure that they are consistent, transparent and fair across the organization.
- Communicate clearly and proactively with your team about the expectations, responsibilities and timelines for covering for their co-worker on leave.
- Provide adequate training, resources and support to your team to help them perform their additional duties and cope with the increased workload.
- Compensate your team for their extra work and hours, either through overtime pay, bonuses or pay increases, depending on the duration and intensity of the leave coverage. Consult with counsel to ensure compliance with all laws and regulations with regard to overtime pay for non-exempt workers and the provision of additional compensation/bonuses for exempt/managerial staff.
- Recognize and appreciate your team for their contribution and flexibility, either through formal or informal channels, such as verbal or written feedback, awards or additional paid time off.
- Monitor and address the physical and mental well-being of your team and offer them access to health and wellness programs, such as counseling, coaching or stress management.
- Conduct regular check-ins and surveys with your team to assess their satisfaction, engagement and feedback and to identify any issues or concerns that may arise during the co-worker's absence.
- Facilitate a smooth transition and transfer of work when the co-worker returns from leave and ensure that everyone is updated and aligned on the status and expectations of the work.
- Monitor the length of the leave as many extend longer than expected and consider different tactics for coverage such as temporary workers, swing staff and developmental or intern programs.

Checklist for leaders

The following are the top three key takeaways from the survey research that leaders should be aware of and act on:

- Workers left behind are a valuable and vulnerable segment of the workforce who need to be rewarded and/or compensated as required by law, recognized and supported for their extra work and contribution during their co-worker's leave.
- The duration and intensity of the leave coverage have a significant impact on the well-being, satisfaction and engagement of your team, and may lead to negative outcomes such as stress, burnout, resentment and turnover.
- The management and communication of leave programs are critical factors that influence the feelings and perceptions of your team toward their employer and may affect their loyalty and retention.

Thought exercise for leaders

The following thought exercise can help leaders within organizations understand the implications of the survey findings and generate action items and impactful next steps for the business:

- Imagine that you are covering for your co-worker who is on leave for eight weeks. How would you feel if you were not paid overtime or were fearful of claiming overtime, or were not recognized or supported by your leader or employer? How would you cope with the increased workload and stress? How would your well-being, satisfaction and engagement be affected? How would your relationship with your co-worker, leader and employer change? How likely would you be to stay with your employer after the co-worker returns from leave?
- Now imagine you are a leader who has to manage a team that has to cover for a co-worker on leave for eight weeks. How would you prepare your team for the co-worker's absence? How would you communicate the reassignment of work and the expectations for the team? How would you provide training, resources and support to your team? How would you compensate and recognize your team for their extra work and contribution? How would you monitor and address their well-being, satisfaction and feedback? How would you facilitate a smooth transition and handover of work when the co-worker returns from leave?
- Is there an opportunity to bring your team together to identify ways to cover the work, evaluate any work that may no longer need to get done, provide recommendations on how to use technology differently and so on?
- Based on your answers to the above questions, identify the gaps and areas for improvement in your current policies and practices for managing the work. What actions can you take to address those gaps and improve the experience and outcomes for your team? What metrics can you use to measure the impact and effectiveness of those actions?

Future opportunities and challenges

The survey findings also reveal future opportunities and challenges that leaders may or may not yet be aware of, such as:

- The increasing demand and expectation for paid leave programs among employees, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on health, family and work-life balance. With four additional states requiring paid family and medical leave programs over the next 18 months, these challenges will continue to present themselves as workers have access to paid leave.
- The potential benefits and risks of leave programs for employee retention, productivity and performance, depending on how they are managed and implemented.
- The need to balance the interests and needs of workers who take leave and workers who cover for them, and to foster a culture of trust, collaboration and mutual support among them.
- The opportunity to leverage the skills, knowledge and experience of your team and to provide them with career development and advancement opportunities.
- The challenge of adapting to the changing workforce dynamics and demographics and to the evolving needs and preferences of employees regarding work arrangements and flexibility.
- The longer-term changes to staffing, operating models and access to talent that need to be considered now in light of these findings.



Leaders should be proactive and strategic in addressing these future opportunities and challenges. It is also important to ensure that leave programs are aligned with the business goals and values and employee well-being and engagement.

How to communicate the findings to the broader business

The study's findings provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of leave programs for both the workers who take them and the workers who cover for them. The following strategies can help leaders communicate the findings to the broader business:

- Highlight the benefits of leave programs for employees, such as improved health, well-being and work-life balance, and for employers, such as enhanced reputation, retention and productivity.
- Emphasize the importance of workers left behind in ensuring business continuity and quality during the co-worker's absence and acknowledge their contribution and dedication.
- Share the best practices and recommendations for managing leave programs effectively and equitably and demonstrate how they can improve the experience and outcomes for workers left behind.
- Engage employees and invite feedback and input from workers left behind on how to improve the policies and practices for leave programs and how to address their needs and concerns.
- Showcase the positive stories and testimonials of workers left behind who have successfully covered for their co-worker on leave and received recognition and support from their leader and employer.

About the study

Aflac's 2024 Workers Left Behind Study examines how employees are impacted by leave programs. Conducted by Kantar Profile Divisions on behalf of Aflac Incorporated, the employee survey took place between January 23, 2024, and February 2, 2024, and captured 1,001 responses from employees across the U.S. in various industries.

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