



Time away study

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

JUNE 2025

Background

The purpose of this study is to understand the impacts of time away/leave (two-plus weeks) programs on the workers who are covering for co-workers on leave.

To provide a more complete picture of U.S. businesses' leave programs, this year's study includes both employees covering for a co-worker on leave and benefits decision-makers providing the employer perspective.

The data was collected from a national consumer survey of 1,000 respondents who had covered for a co-worker on leave in the past year and 500 benefits decision-makers working for companies that offer leave programs. Fieldwork took place in January 2025.

Key findings

Innovation is the most important organizational objective across all employer roles, followed by the future of work.

- This is particularly true for leadership roles such as owner, chief human resources officer (CHRO) or benefits lead.

Overall, 3 in 4 employers are satisfied with current employee productivity levels.

- However, perceived productivity of employees decreases based on proximity to employees.
 - HR managers report the lowest satisfaction (68% very/extremely satisfied) while owners and CHROs report significantly higher levels of satisfaction (98% and 85% very/extremely satisfied, respectively).

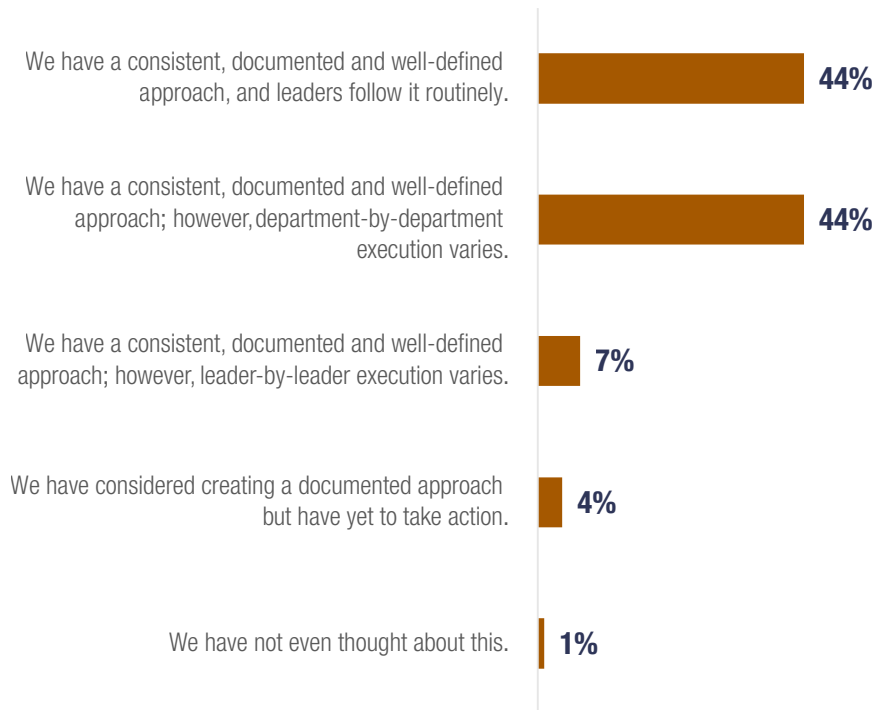
The vast majority of business leaders hold their company's leave coverage practices in high regard.

- More than 3 in 4 leaders rate the handling of extended leave coverage within their organization an "A" or "B" (excellent/very good) on a standard A-F grading scale.
 - Male leaders skew slightly higher than female leaders (82% vs. 74%).
- Grades vary widely by industry, with education and health care professionals rating their organization's leave coverage practices significantly lower than those in manufacturing, retail and technology.
- Owners tend to view their practices most positively, with nearly half (47%) giving their organization an "A" and 40% awarding a "B."
 - Among other leader roles, less than one-third give an "A" and half give a "B."

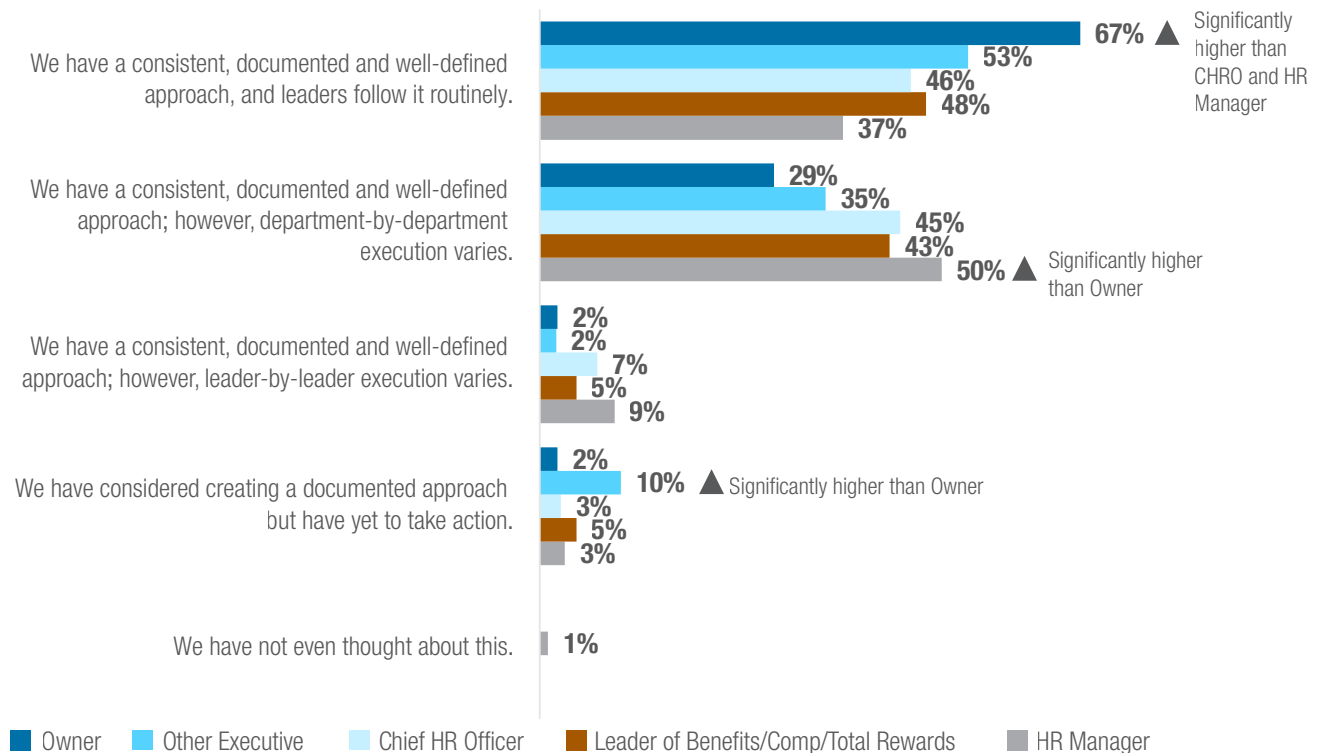
Although documented, leaders are not uniformly implementing practices to provide coverage or move work around to cover for an employee out on leave.

- While there is a general consensus that a consistent, documented and well-defined approach to leave coverage exists, leaders are split on whether it is routinely followed (44%) or execution varies by department (44%).
 - Two-thirds of owners feel that leaders routinely follow their documented process while HR managers tend to feel that execution varies by department.
 - Routine adherence by leadership to documented leave coverage practices is strongest among tech/IT companies (58%) while all other industries are split on how execution is handled.

APPROACH FOR LEAVE COVERAGE



APPROACH FOR LEAVE COVERAGE BY LEADER



▲ ▼ Significance testing was conducted at the 95 percentile, +/- 5%, which revealed the differences have statistical significance.

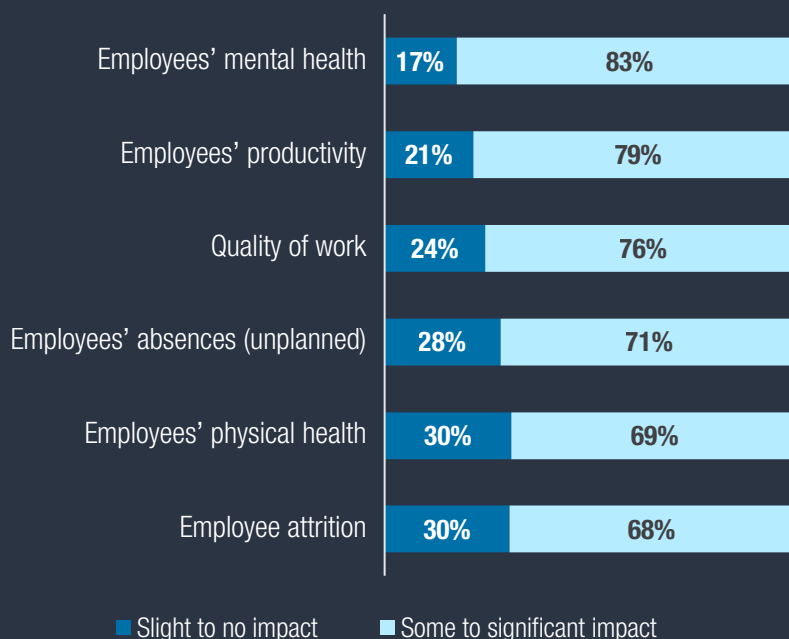
APPROACH FOR LEAVE COVERAGE BY INDUSTRY

	Education	Health Care	Manufacturing	Retail	Technology/ Information Systems/IT
Count	27	42	87	62	77
We have a consistent, documented and well-defined approach, and leaders follow it routinely.	41%	43%	40%	42%	58%
We have a consistent, documented and well-defined approach; however, department-by-department execution varies.	41%	40%	46%	50%	30%
We have a consistent, documented and well-defined approach; however, leader-by-leader execution varies.	11%	10%	8%	5%	6%
We have considered creating a documented approach but have yet to take action.	7%	7%	5%	2%	5%
We have not even thought about this.	0%	0%	1%	2%	0%

Managers play a crucial role in the overall job satisfaction and well-being of workers covering for co-workers when they take leave.

- Supervisors and managers tend to bear the brunt of resentment from those workers left to cover work as opposed to the person taking leave. However, this can be mitigated with proactive planning, appreciation and recognition for those covering the work of a co-worker during a leave.
- Leaders are acutely aware of the impact of leave on their employees, with 8 in 10 acknowledging the impact it has on mental health, and 7 in 10 acknowledging the potential impact on physical health.

LEAVE IMPACT ON EMPLOYEES



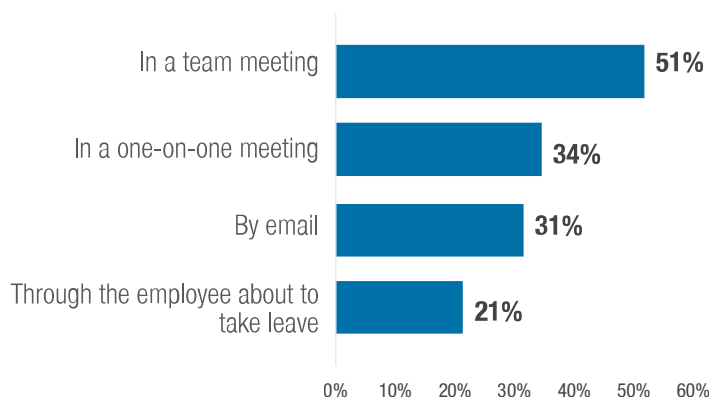
- Employers and employees agree that the workload of the person taking leave is typically divided among multiple co-workers and believe employees are compensated with overtime pay, where eligible.
 - The most common method of preparing for the co-worker's leave was dividing the work among multiple co-workers, with the manager (55%) or the team (48%) deciding how to split up the work.

PREPARATION FOR IMMINENT LEAVE - LEADER PERSPECTIVE

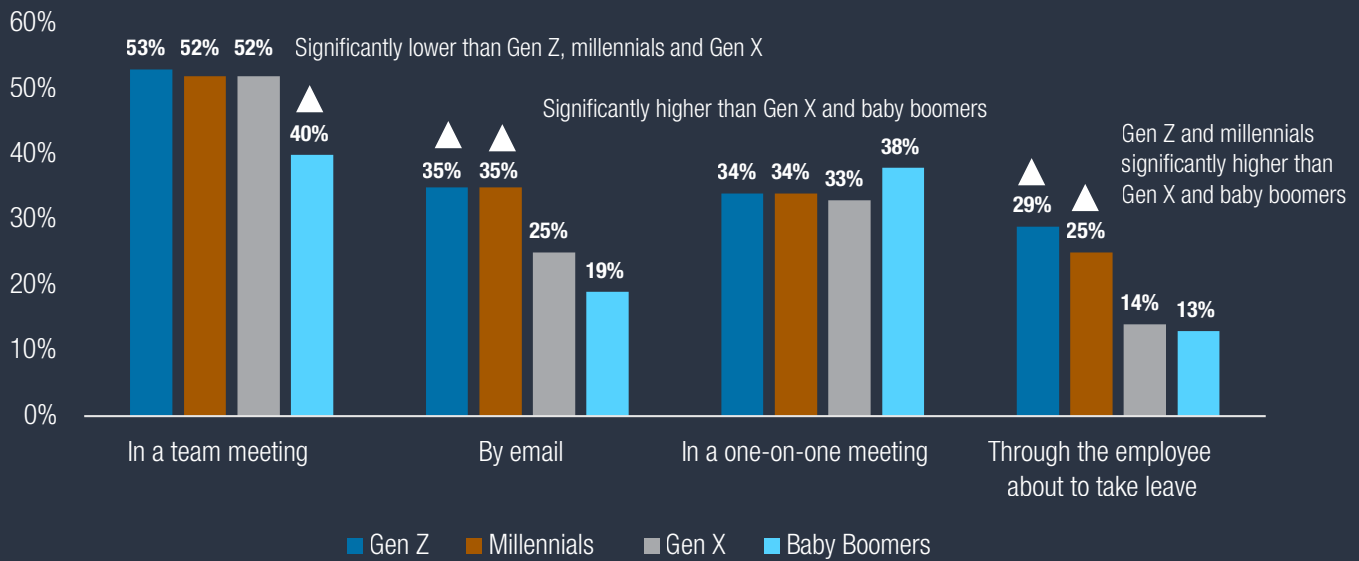


- More than half of workers (51%) indicate they were informed about work reassignment in a team meeting, followed by a one-on-one meeting (34%) and email (31%), with most indicating that plans were communicated more than one way (1.4 communications on average).
 - Younger workers (Gen Z, millennials, Gen X) are more likely than baby boomers to indicate transition plans were communicated in a team meeting. Baby boomers had coverage plans communicated equally in either a team or one-on-one meeting. The employee taking leave sometimes had the burden of communicating coverage plans.

COMMUNICATION - EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE



COMMUNICATION BY GENERATION



- Leaders communicate coverage plans, on average, in at least two ways (2.1 on average), with some form of email communication foremost (62% net – 39% team email and 42% email to impacted workers), and team or one-on-one meetings (46% for each).

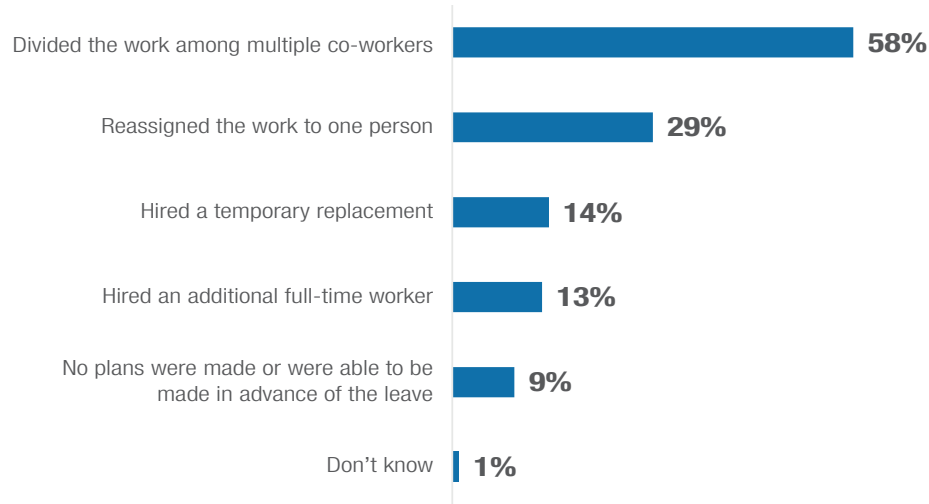
COMMUNICATION - LEADER PERSPECTIVE



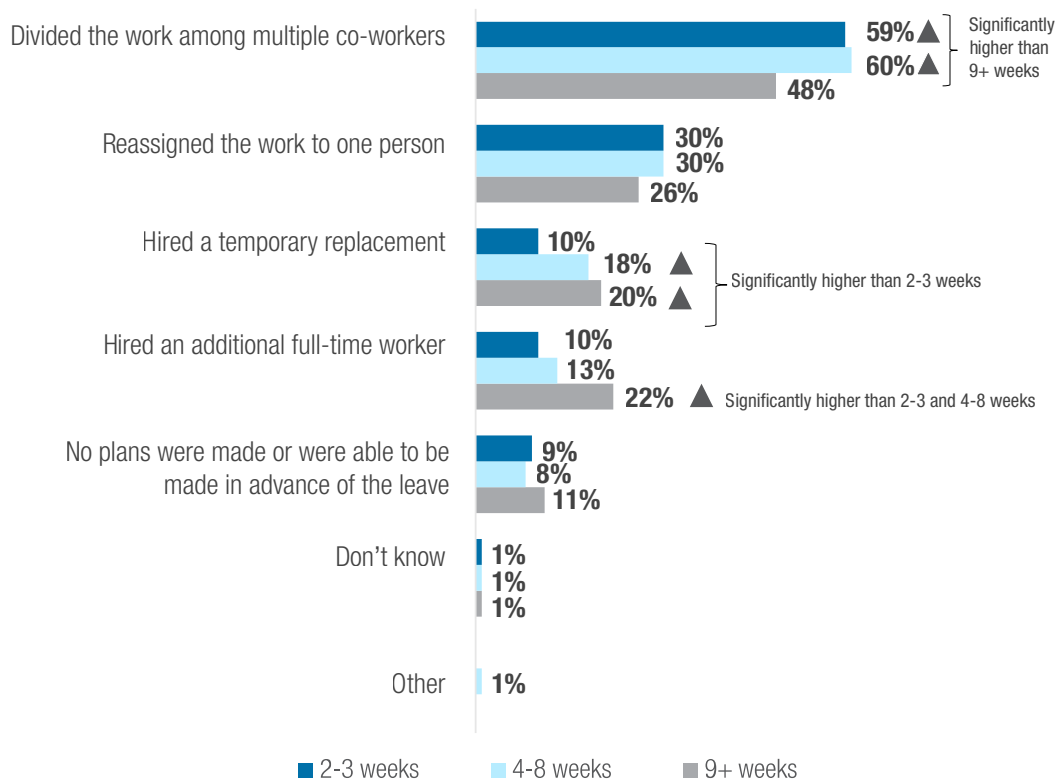
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- Extended leave (nine-plus weeks) more often results in the hiring of additional temporary or full-time staff compared to shorter leave (20-22% vs. 10-18% for leave up to eight weeks). As in the [2024 Workers Left Behind Study](#), extended leaves may require additional preparation by businesses, involving additional departments and functions involved in hiring. It continues to be important to proactively plan because impacted groups include other areas, in addition to the employees covering for co-workers.

PREPARATION FOR IMMINENT LEAVE - EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE



PREPARATION FOR IMMINENT LEAVE BY DURATION OF LEAVE



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Similarities exist in employer and employee perspectives.

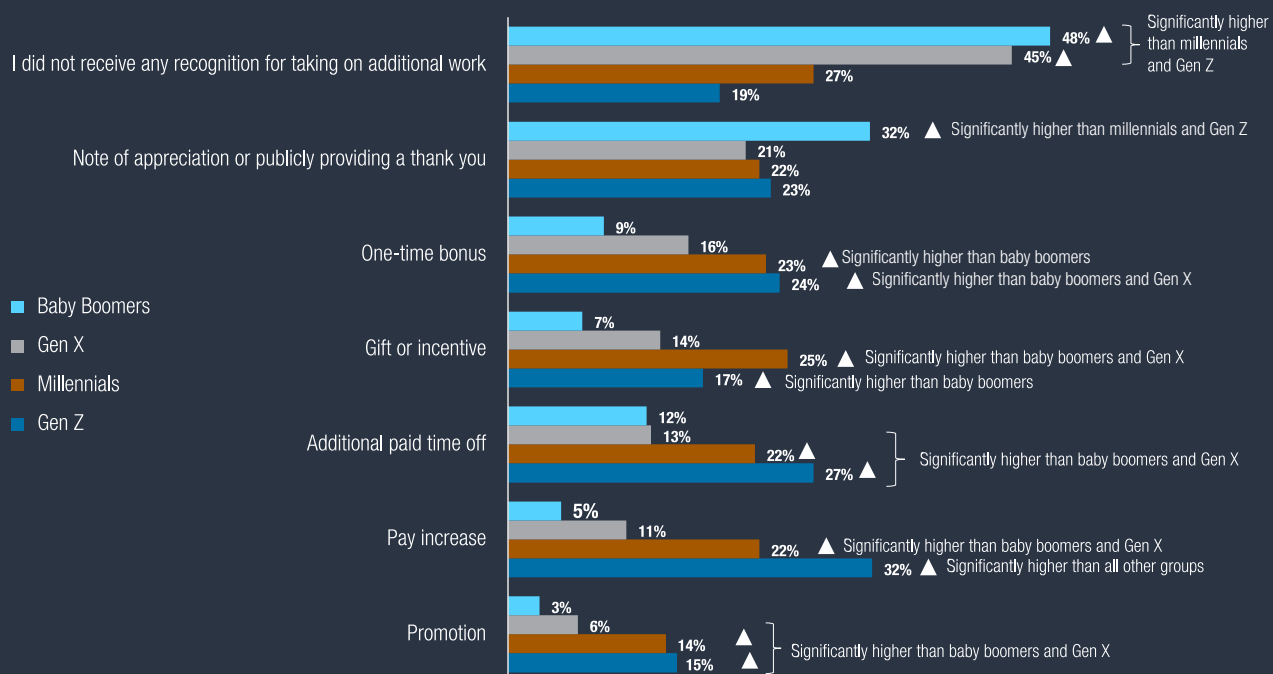
Both employers and employees acknowledge the importance of planning in advance for an employee's extended leave to mitigate negative impacts on workers covering for those on leave. They also agree that recognition and compensation for additional work are crucial to prevent resentment and maintain morale. Additionally, both groups recognize that the duration of leave coverage has a significant impact on worker well-being, with longer leave coverage periods leading to increased physical and mental challenges.

However, there are crucial differences in how employees are recognized and compensated.

While nearly all employers report having multiple methods for recognizing employees, the reported utilization of recognition methods by employees is lower than the availability indicated by employers.

- **Recognition varies widely by generation and industry.**
 - About half of baby boomers and Gen X indicate they did not receive any recognition (vs. about 1 in 4 Gen Z and millennials). When they do, most often it was in the form of a note of appreciation.
 - One-third of Gen Z report a pay increase or additional PTO, and millennials most often report a gift or one-time bonus.
- **Of the top five industries responding, education, health care and manufacturing businesses are the least likely to recognize their employees.**
 - Notably, while 36% of manufacturing employers report being able to send a note of appreciation or public thank you, only 11% of employees in this industry report receiving this type of recognition.
 - In education (37%), health care (37%), manufacturing (38%) and to a lesser extent, retail (28%), employees are more likely to report receiving no additional recognition, whereas in tech/IT about one-third report receiving a gift/incentive.

RECOGNITION - EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE



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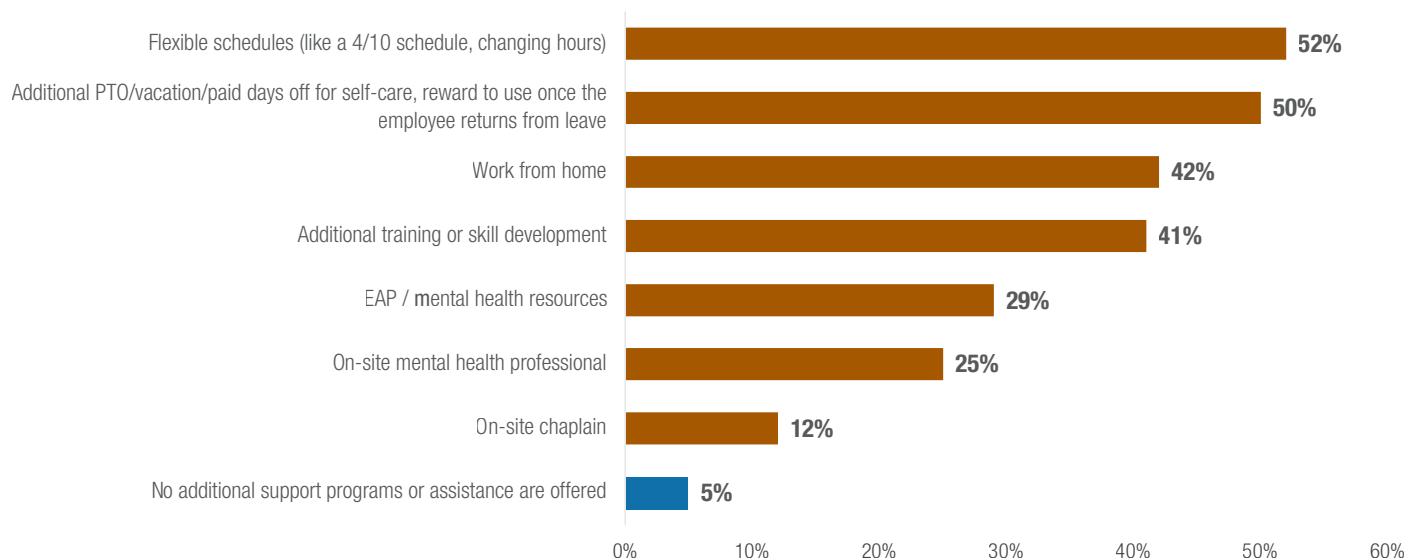


Publicizing and using available support programs may decrease the impact to those covering for a co-worker.

Employers and employees are not aligned on the availability of support programs within their organizations, which could be due to lack of awareness or resources not being top of mind. If tools are available, regular reminders about those programs may be beneficial to employees who are covering for a co-worker on leave.

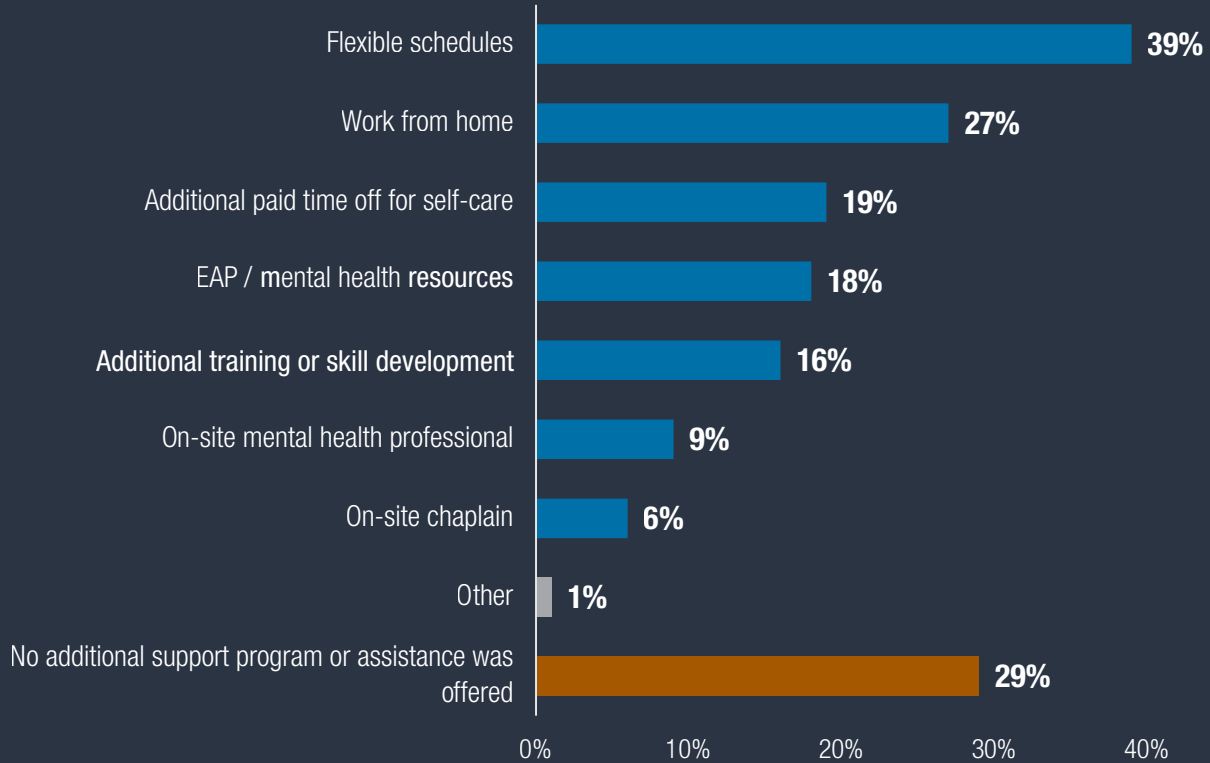
- **Employers:** Only 5% of leaders say their organizations do not offer additional support programs, but 29% of employees say they received no additional support while covering for a co-worker.

SUPPORT PROGRAMS - LEADER PERSPECTIVE

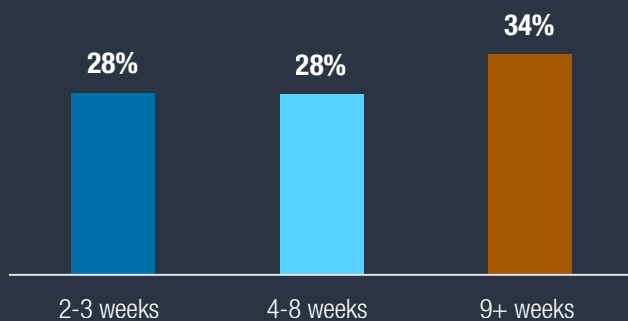


- Interestingly and counterintuitively, employees covering for longer leaves were more likely to report that their company offered no additional support than those covering for shorter leaves.

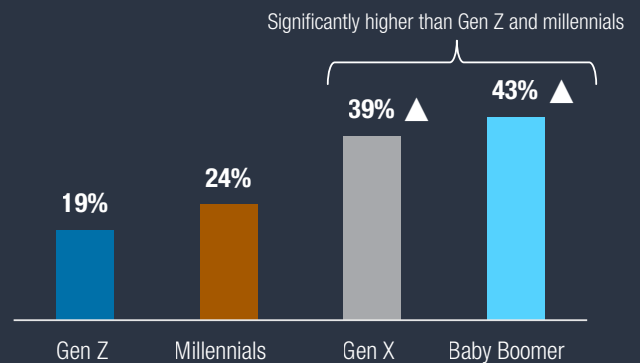
SUPPORT PROGRAMS - EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE



NO ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE OFFERED (BY LEAVE DURATION)



NO ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE OFFERED (BY GENERATION)



- Gen X and baby boomers are also significantly less likely to be offered additional assistance or be aware of support programs.

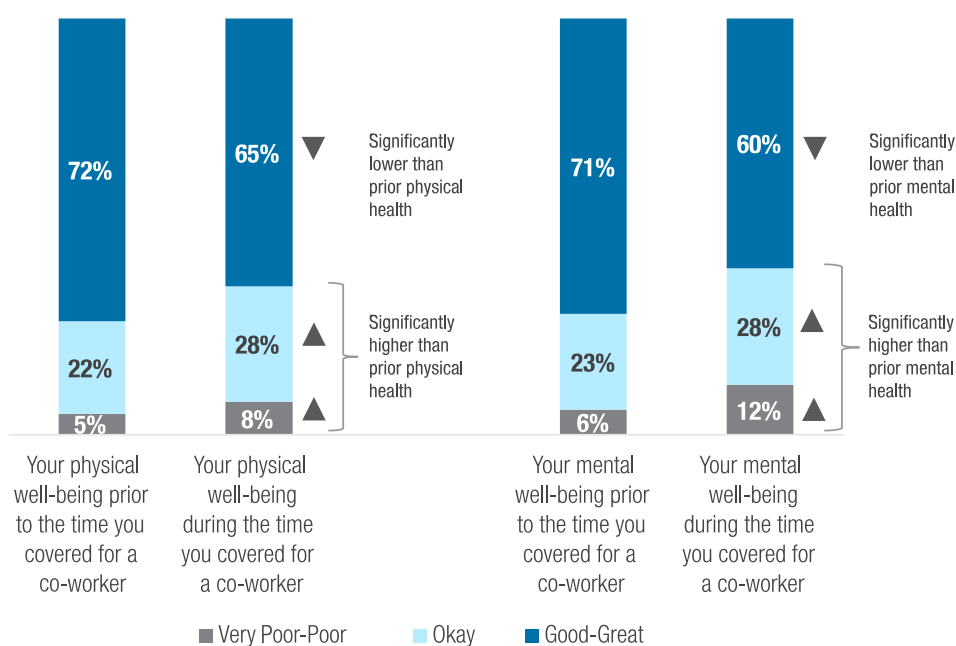
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Employees' physical and mental well-being continue to be negatively impacted while covering for a co-worker on leave.

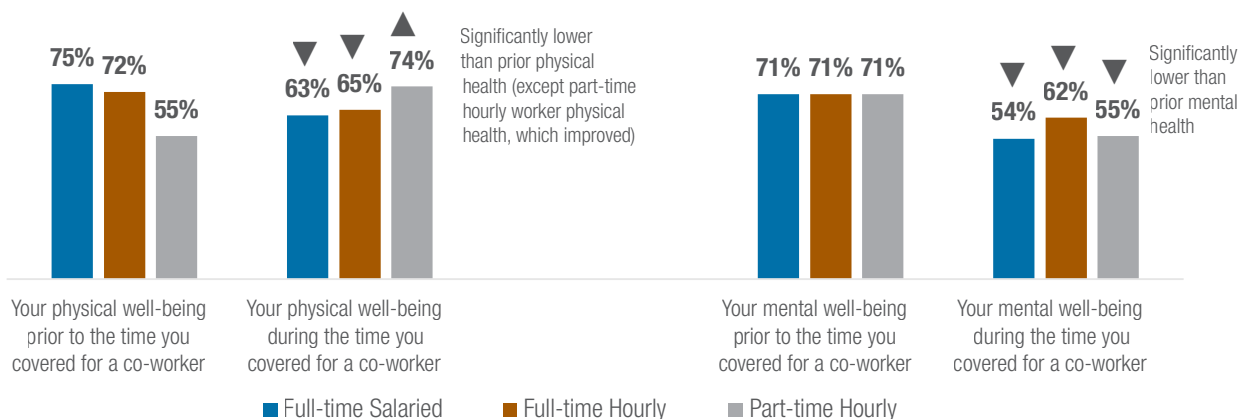
Providing adequate resources to monitor and manage both the mental and physical well-being of workers while they are covering for a co-worker is of paramount importance.

- Mental well-being dropped 11 percentage points (71% to 60%) while covering for a co-worker, and physical well-being dropped 7 percentage points (72% to 65%).
 - Full-time salaried workers report the most significant drops in both physical and mental health compared to hourly workers.
 - Interestingly, part-time hourly workers report an increase in their physical well-being (good/great) while they were covering for someone on leave.

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

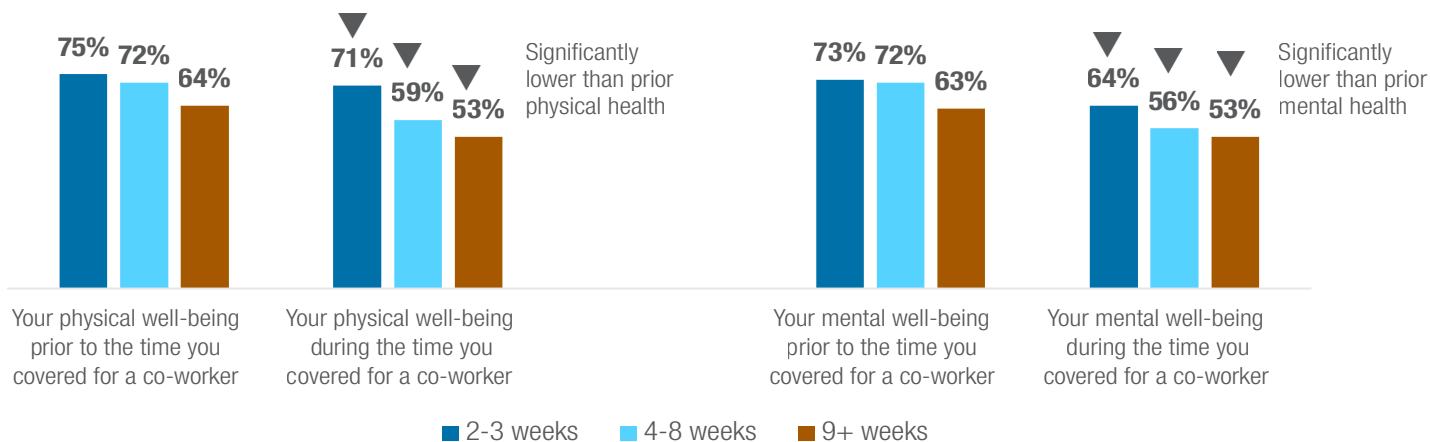


PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELL-BEING BY PAY DESIGNATION (% GOOD-GREAT)



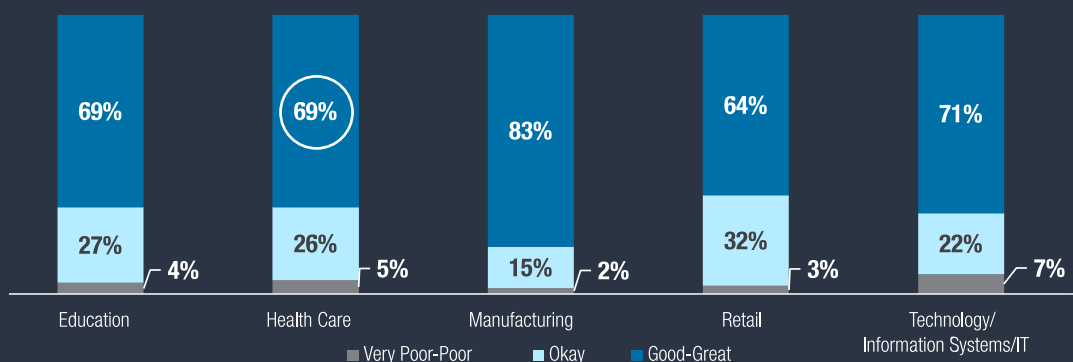
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PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELL-BEING BY LENGTH OF COVERAGE (% GOOD-GREAT)

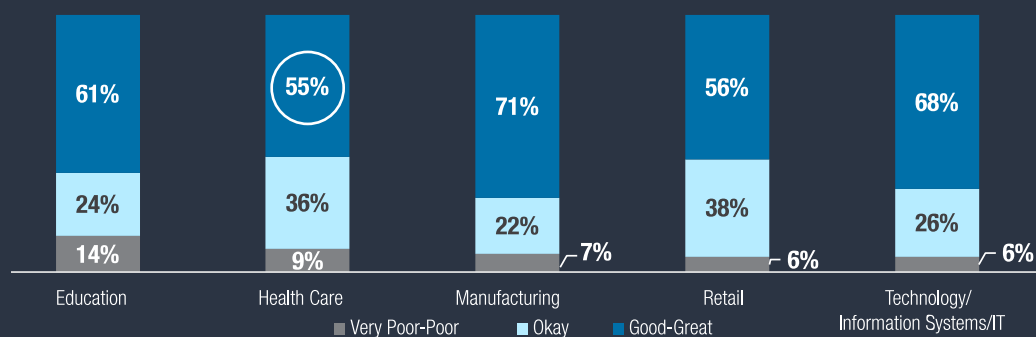


- It is especially important for health care leaders to be in tune with their departments that are short-staffed due to extended leave.
- Employees in health care report the steepest drops in both their physical and mental health while covering for a co-worker.

PHYSICAL WELL-BEING PRIOR TO COVERING FOR A CO-WORKER (BY INDUSTRY)

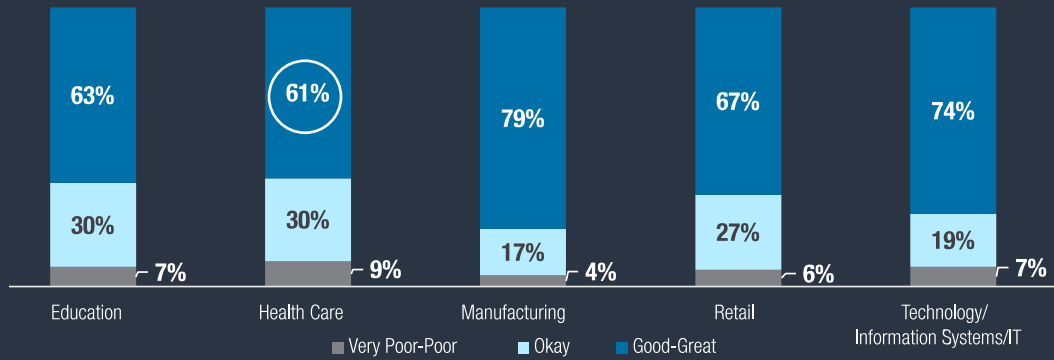


PHYSICAL WELL-BEING WHILE COVERING FOR A CO-WORKER (BY INDUSTRY)

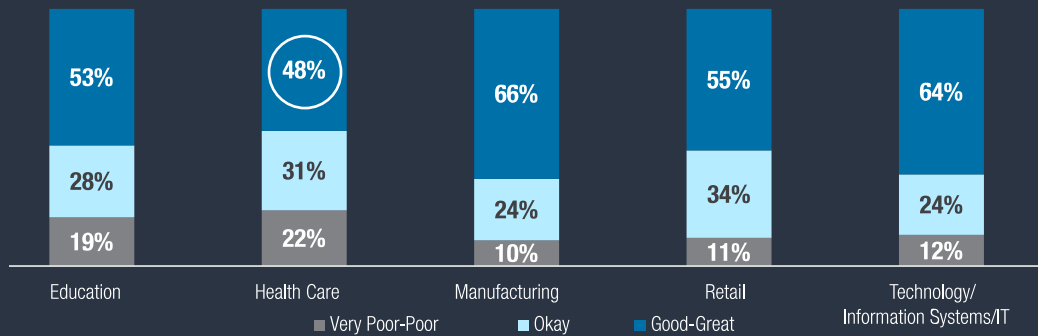


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MENTAL WELL-BEING PRIOR TO COVERING FOR A CO-WORKER (BY INDUSTRY)



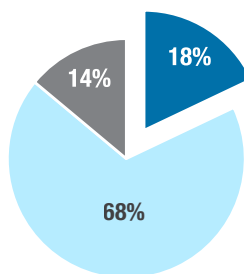
MENTAL WELL-BEING WHILE COVERING FOR A CO-WORKER (BY INDUSTRY)



For those employees with preexisting conditions, mismanagement or poor management of their workload can result in additional leave being necessary for them to recover.

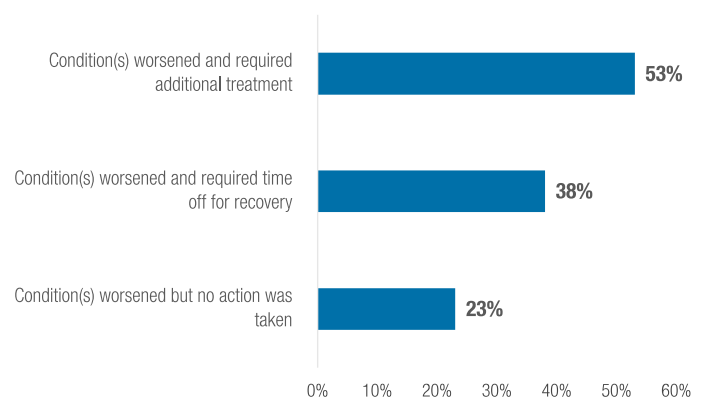
- Of the approximately one-third of workers reporting a preexisting medical condition, 1 in 5 say the increased workload during their co-worker's leave caused their condition to worsen. The [2024 study reported](#) similar findings, where one-third of respondents had a preexisting condition and 47% said the condition worsened.

STATE OF PHYSICAL WELL-BEING

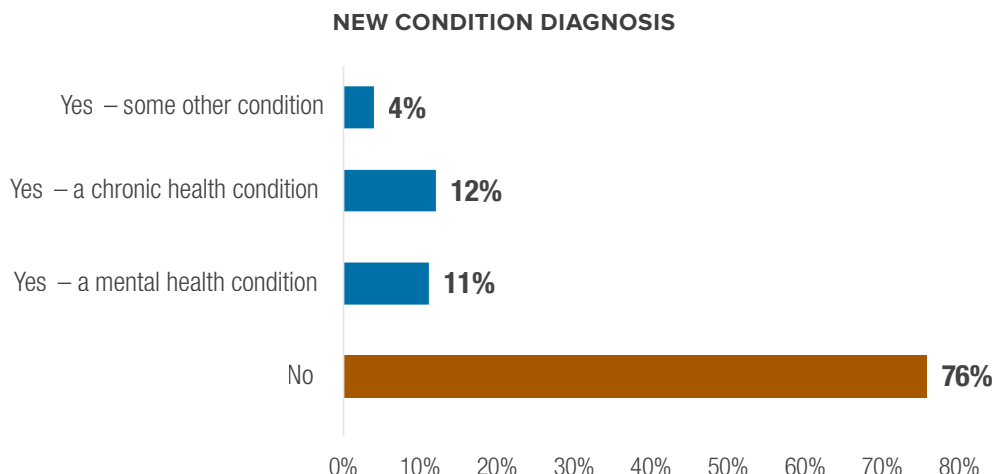


- Yes.
- No, you did not have a preexisting condition or chronic illness.
- No, you had a preexisting condition or chronic illness, but it did not worsen because of your increased workload.

ACTION TAKEN WHEN PREEXISTING CONDITIONS WORSENE

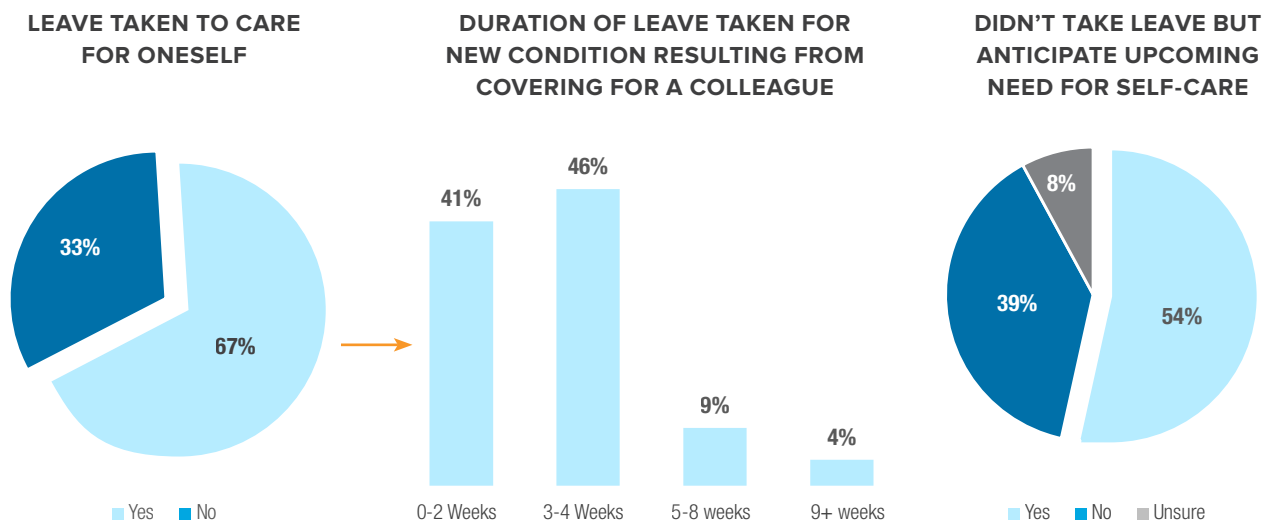


- Overall, 1 in 4 employees (27%) report the diagnosis of a new condition while covering for a co-worker as a result of their increased workload. These types of newly diagnosed conditions are similar to those reported in the [2024 study](#).



Leave cycles could become perpetual. Employees diagnosed with a new condition while covering for a co-worker required personal time to recover. Fifty-nine percent of those with new conditions took three or more weeks of leave for self-care. Leave cycles could become perpetual, adversely impacting morale, engagement and overall effectiveness and productivity of the impacted teams.

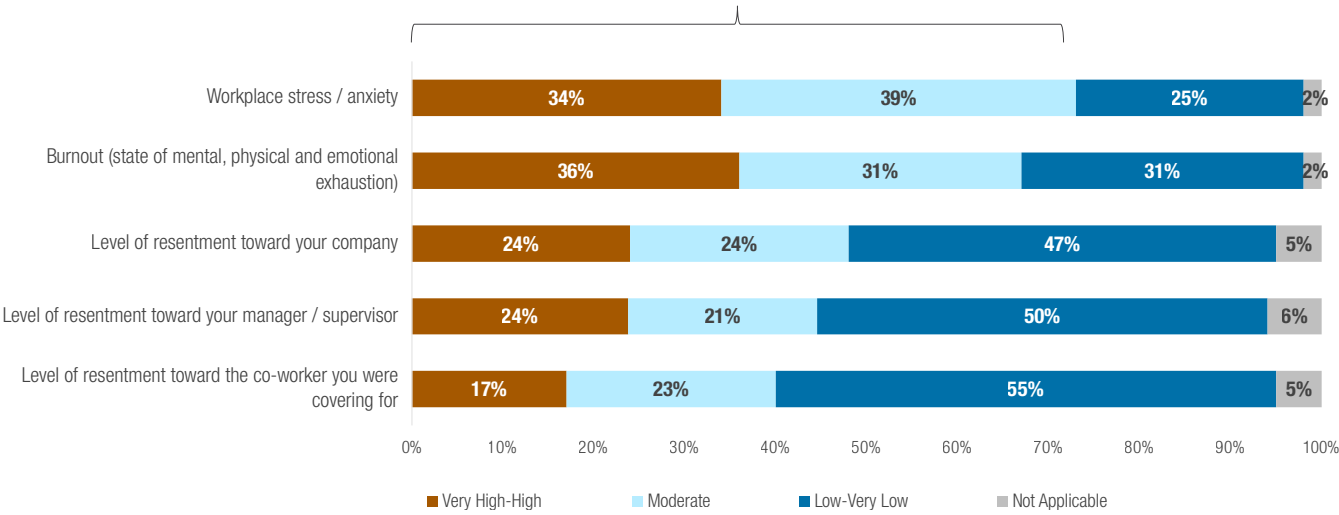
- New health conditions resulted in more absences for covering workers to recover (67%), and more than half of those who didn't take leave to care for themselves anticipate upcoming time away to do so.





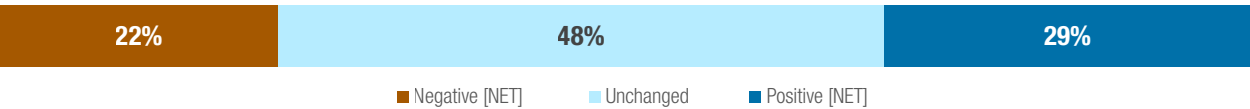
- Additional strains placed on workers covering for those on leave include at least moderate levels of workplace stress/anxiety (73%), burnout (67%) and resentment toward their company (48%) and their manager/supervisor (45%) as a result of their increased workload. These findings are consistent with those from the [2024 study](#) where 73% experience moderate to very high workplace stress/anxiety, 63% burnout, 44% resentment toward their company and 44% toward their manager/supervisor.

MODERATE - HIGH - VERY HIGH = 73%



- More than one-fifth of employees report feeling more negative about their employer after covering for a co-worker on leave.

CHANGE IN FEELINGS TOWARD EMPLOYER AFTER COVERING FOR CO-WORKER ON LEAVE - OVERALL

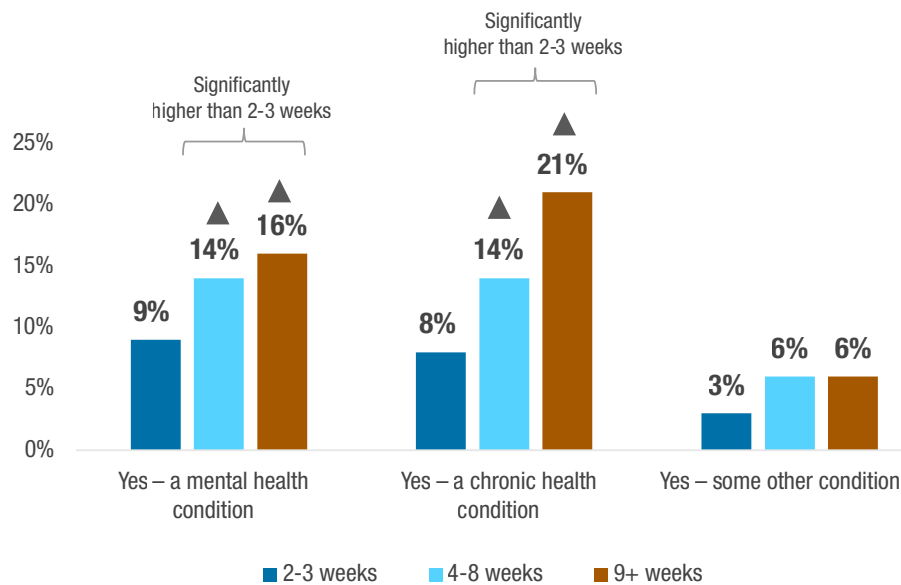


Better preparation when leaves are extended may reduce the physical and mental impact to workers covering for co-workers. Extended leaves (nine-plus weeks) take the greatest toll on workers and necessitate more support for the covering workers than shorter leave periods.

Longer leave coverage is correlated with:

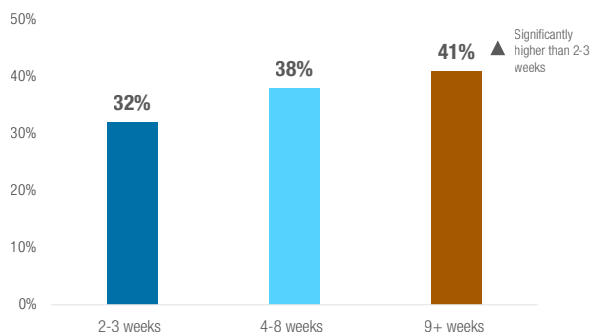
- **Increases in diagnosis of a new condition.**

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

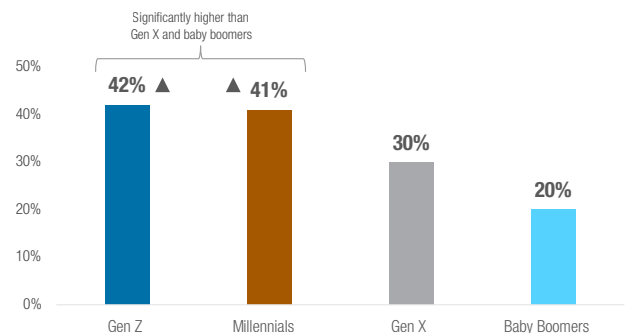


- **Higher burnout**, particularly among younger workers.
 - Gen Z and millennials indicate experiencing high levels of burnout at double the rate of baby boomers.

BURNOUT BY LEAVE DURATION (% HIGH - VERY HIGH)



BURNOUT BY GENERATION (% HIGH - VERY HIGH)

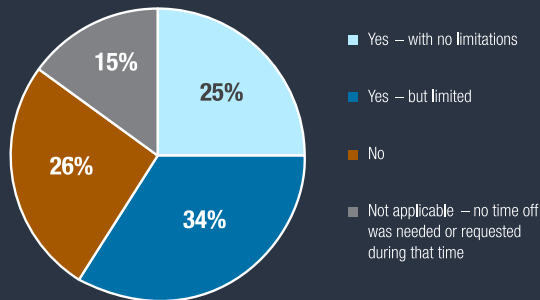


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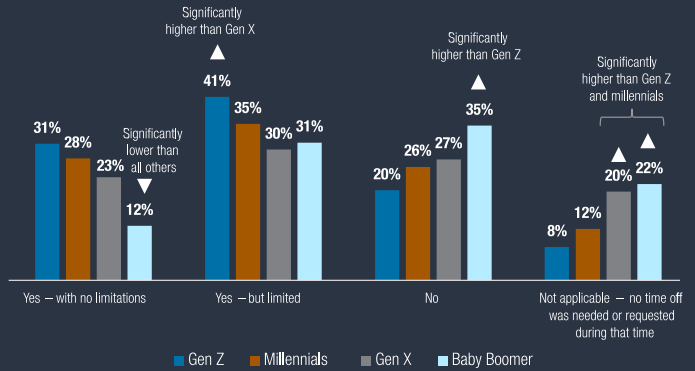
- **Limited or no option for relief through personal time off.**

- Although reporting higher levels of burnout, Gen Z and millennial workers had the ability to take personal time during leave coverage at a much higher rate than Gen X or baby boomers.
- More than a third (35%) of baby boomers say that they could not take any personal time during leave coverage, which may indicate a disparity in the way leaders support workers of different generations.

ABILITY TO TAKE PERSONAL TIME OFF DURING LEAVE COVERAGE

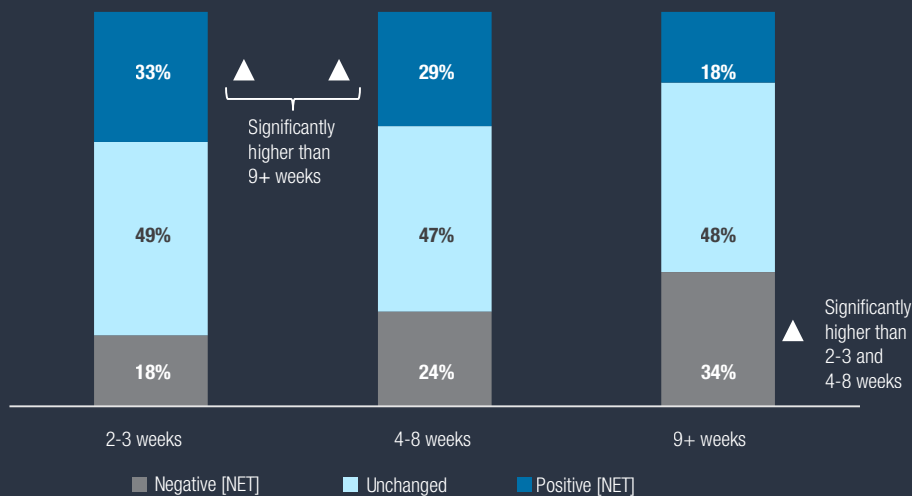


ABILITY TO TAKE PERSONAL TIME OFF DURING LEAVE COVERAGE (BY GENERATION)



- **Increased negative feelings about employers,** underscoring the importance of employee support during these times.

CHANGE IN FEELINGS TOWARD EMPLOYER AFTER COVERING FOR A CO-WORKER ON LEAVE BY DURATION OF LEAVE

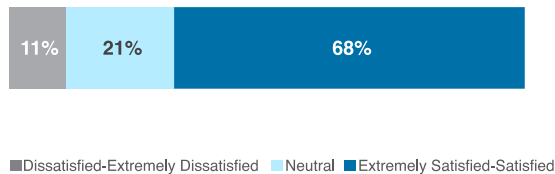


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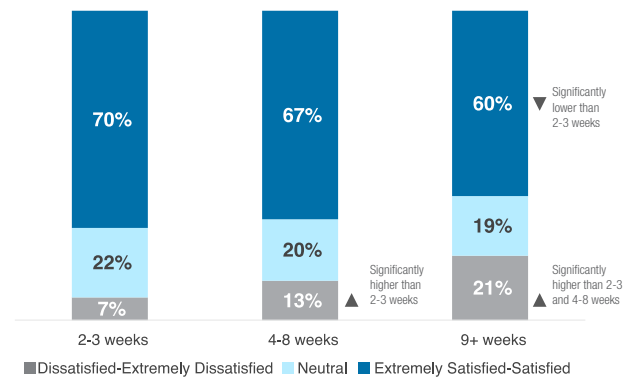
- **Lower levels of satisfaction with leaders.**

- One in five workers covering for a leave longer than eight weeks report extreme dissatisfaction with the support received from their leader. This may have longer term implications on employee retention and job satisfaction if not properly addressed and acknowledged by leadership.
- Most respondents (68%) 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 three weeks. These findings are consistent with the results in the [2024 study](#) where 65% of respondents were satisfied with the support they received from their leader during leave coverage, and satisfaction levels dropped when leave coverage extended beyond three weeks.

OVERALL SATISFACTION WITH SUPPORT FROM LEADERS



SATISFACTION WITH LEADER BY LEAVE DURATION



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Recommendations

Adopt the mantra “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail” when it comes to planning for employee leave, particularly extended leaves (nine-plus weeks).

- Prior to planned leave, communicate coverage plans clearly to the team/employee that will be covering for the employee taking leave.
- Ensure that employees have a chance to voice any concerns they have with the plan and be open to adapting it as needed.
- If standard approaches and plans are documented, be sure all departments and leaders are aware of these and consistently follow them to decrease inconsistent experiences across departments.
- Based on this research and work, if there are no standard approaches or plans, consider creating some as soon as possible to ward off the impact that poor or no planning can have on overall employee well-being.

Conduct regular “pulse checks” with employees.

For planned extended leaves, schedule check-ins with your employees at appropriate increments, e.g., two-week mark for four-week leave, three- and six-week marks for nine-plus week leaves.

- Add these check-ins to the documented leave process and enforce compliance. Not only does this show that leaders care for their employees, but it will also build trust between employees and managers/leaders by showing that they truly do value their well-being.
- While pulse checks might be the “on-paper” policy, putting it into practice will demonstrate to employees that they are valued and appreciated.
- Adapt the method of these check-ins (email, one-on-one meeting, team meeting) as needed to best suit business and employee needs.

Beware of the snowball effect that leave has on the organization and the employees covering for their co-workers.

The added physical and mental stress of covering for a co-worker takes a notable toll on those workers who are taking on additional duties. Often, this results in the development of new or worsening conditions requiring time off for those employees. This can quickly become a vicious cycle for employees and leaders but can be mitigated if covering leaves is effectively and consistently managed by leadership.

- Develop strategies to support employees covering for co-workers on extended leave to prevent burnout and resentment. If tools, resources and assistance are available, be sure to remind employees about them regularly.
- Offer additional support programs and assistance to improve well-being and productivity.
- Recognize and show appreciation for the dedication and sacrifice those covering for employees on leave are making.
- Consider adding questions to engagement or other employee-based surveys to identify areas of inconsistency and opportunity among leaders and departments.

Enhance recognition practices and ensure use.

- Ensure all employees receive adequate recognition for their additional efforts during leave periods, especially extended leaves.
- Recognize everyone equally – any recognition, but particularly public recognition, helps employees feel valued and appreciated.
- Implement tangible and intangible recognition methods to address feelings of being left out, especially among Gen X and baby boomers.

About the study

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