

Returning to the workplace: Are your employee benefits ready?



As vaccination rates rise and employers game-plan how to return to a shared workspace, decision-makers are left juggling a bevy of considerations. Adhering to COVID-19 vaccination protocols and helping employees who are struggling to return are just two of them.

Revisiting your company's benefits plan can be just as important, especially as the pandemic has reshaped employees' needs. Revising your benefits plan to better suit them can make the transition back to a shared workplace easier for everyone.

A change in workplace requires a change in work structure

Though 68% of employers say their typical employee should be at a shared location at least three days a week once pandemic concerns recede, 55% of employees want to be remote for at least three days a week.¹ By the same token, 48% of employees, and 59% of people of color, express a strong preference for a hybrid work arrangement—even in industries that require on-site work. And 41% of employees say they would take a pay decrease to have this option, while 47% say they'd be likely to leave their jobs if they weren't offered a hybrid option once the pandemic ends.² In light of this, mandating a change in where your employees work may also require other changes, even beyond COVID-19 protocols.

Of the 98% of leaders planning to newly offer or expand at least one benefit, flexibility on where and when work gets done is one of the most prioritized benefits options.³ This is reflected by the fact that in this new era of remote work, 61% of executives plan to consolidate office space in at least one premier business district location this year.¹ Between offering hybrid options and allowing some employees to remain remote full time if they choose, increased flexibility is becoming a staple, making it an important structure to consider as you prepare to return—especially as it doesn't always have to come with a hefty price tag.

Caring for your employees means caring for who they care for

As the nation closed down during the pandemic, not only were employees stationed at home, but their children were too. With this, parents—especially mothers—were stuck having to balance work and child care. As a result, between April and August 2020, 10% of working mothers reported not working each week because they were caring for a child who was not in school or childcare.⁴ And 66% of parents feel that their productivity has suffered from juggling child care and workplace responsibilities throughout the pandemic.⁵

But this isn't just a pandemic issue, and children going back to school isn't the sole fix. Not all children are of school age, and child care can be expensive. As a result, many parents, specifically mothers, are forced to alter their employment status. In fact, if conditions for families do not improve—and if mothers leaving the labor force and reducing their work hours to assume caretaking responsibilities persists—it is projected to cost the United States \$64.5 billion per year in lost wages and economic activity.⁴



And child care isn't the only unpaid service these employees provide. Forty-one million Americans serve as unpaid caregivers to the elderly,⁶ which also demands substantial time and attention. And as 83% of family caregivers have sought new care options for their senior loved ones during the pandemic and 89% have considered switching from a nursing home to in-home care,⁷ the associated costs—both money and time—are not to be underestimated.

Simply asking your employees whether they're struggling with family needs might not be the best route. More than half of employees report hiding child care concerns from their employers out of fear that they won't understand.⁵ This can lead to employees coming up with workarounds on their own—29% of employees say they would trade some of their paid vacation days for child care assistance.⁵

The good news is that employers are paying attention. Among the 98% of employers planning at least one expanded benefit, 50% say their organization will offer or expand child care benefits in the near future, and 42% will offer or expand senior care benefits.⁶

Paid leave may require some upkeep

With the expiration of the [Families First Coronavirus Response Act](#), businesses are no longer federally obligated to offer weeks of paid leave to people with COVID-19 and to those unable to work because of child care needs. But this doesn't absolve employers from state requirements. California, for example, mandates that employees who contract the virus are entitled to up to 80 hours of paid sick leave.⁸ (State guidelines regarding COVID-19 are in flux; check your state's latest status before taking action.)

Researching your state requirements is a start. Yet doing the bare minimum required may not be in the best interest of your employees. Between the pressing health concerns of our time, child care and mental health needs, your company's paid leave policy may bear revisiting. You'd be in good company: 48% of employers plan to expand paid vacation and sick days.⁶

Restructuring employee benefits can help you and your employees alike

Improving your benefits plan to best serve your employees doesn't just mean adding on to your existing benefits, but rather restructuring your entire plan. For example, while 98% of employers plan to offer or expand at least one benefit—prioritizing child and senior care benefits, work flexibility, mental health support, emergency leave for child and senior care—89% are deprioritizing at least one employee benefit, such as commuter benefits and food or meals.³ It's a trade-off. One that, in light of both COVID-19 protocols and remote and hybrid work models, makes sense for employers and employees alike.

For help making sure that your benefits are up to date, contact your Aflac benefits advisor or visit [Aflac.com/business](https://www.aflac.com/business).

¹PwC. "It's time to reimagine where and how work will get done: PwC's US Remote Work Survey." Published 1.12.2021. [Accessed 6.7.2021](#).

²Envoy. "Envoy survey finds employees want companies to embrace hybrid work and mandate COVID vaccines." Published 3.16.2021. [Accessed 6.7.2021](#).

³Harvard Business Review. "The Pandemic Is Changing Employee Benefits." Published 4.7.2021. [Accessed 6.1.2021](#).

⁴Center for American Progress. "How COVID-19 Sent Women's Workforce Progress Backward." Published 10.30.2020. [Accessed 6.7.2021](#).

⁵Care.com. "Back-to-School 2020: Care.com survey reveals what's really on the minds of working parents." Published 8.6.2020. [Accessed 6.7.2021](#).

⁶Care.com. "The Future of Benefits 2021." Published 2021. [Accessed 6.7.2021](#).

⁷Care.com. "New senior care survey reveals high levels of worry during COVID-19 and the holiday season among people caring for older adults." Published 11.16.2020. [Accessed 6.7.2021](#).

⁸The National Law Review. "Statewide COVID-19 Paid Sick Leave Returns to California." Published 3.27.2021. [Accessed 6.14.2021](#).

Content within this article is for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal or medical advice regarding any specific situation. Employers and employees and other individuals should consult their own legal or medical advisors about their situations.