MEETING IN A BOX
Supporting Parents in a Post-COVID World
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The pandemic changed the employment landscape and what people want and need from their employers.

Perhaps no group was impacted by this more than parents. Many left the workforce entirely for a period and have since returned, but with new needs and expectations.

This Meeting in a Box is designed to help you understand the challenges parents face today, the ways that companies are evolving their paid family leave policies and provide data regarding parents in the workplace.

What Parents Need from Employers in a Post-COVID World

The COVID-19 pandemic has put a strain on working parents. Parents were more likely to have quit their jobs since the pandemic started than people without children, according to research compiled by McKinsey & Company at the end of 2021. Among the reasons they left? Parents were struggling to balance working from home and managing childcare responsibilities.

As workers resigned in record numbers, companies have come under pressure to attract and retain talent. Those that don’t are putting their businesses at risk and could potentially lose good employees. To thrive in a post-pandemic world, experts say companies will need to examine what parents need and why they are leaving.
What parents want most from employers is flexibility. Flexibility can take many forms — hybrid work or the ability to work from home, paid parental leave or giving workers the freedom to step away briefly from their desks for personal reasons.

“The ability to work asynchronously and take care of a sick kid when needed or take a half-day during school early release, that perk is invaluable,” says Kory Underdown, a Content Marketing Manager at cybersecurity firm DNSFilter and working mother of two children.

Underdown says the pandemic showed her that flexibility and remote work were non-negotiables.

“The other single parents in my community were struggling to figure out what to do with their kids while trying to work, or worse, they couldn’t work at all during the early part of the pandemic,” she says. “I realized that I was extremely lucky to be able to just bring my kids home and hunker down together.”

As parents’ needs change, companies need to be fluid with the types of benefits they offer to employees, says Dr. Amanda Zelechoski, Professor of Psychology and Founding Director of Clinical Training at Purdue University Northwest and co-founder of Pandemic Parenting, an organization that helps parents and caregivers navigate the COVID-19 pandemic.

“What’s working for me right now may not work in three months when my kids go back to school,” she says. “Summer is quite different for parents than the school year for a variety of reasons. Maybe we have these built-in check-in points where we say, ‘this is what’s going to work for now.’ Then in three months, we’re going to check in again to see if this is still working.”

As much as companies try to build flexibility into their plans, Zelechoski says it’s important to recognize that final decisions may not work for everybody.

“How can we continue to be open to hearing that and be responsive and accommodating?” She asks. “Recognizing that things may keep changing as life circumstances change for people.”

Listen and Learn

Emergency leave for childcare was the top change companies made to paid and unpaid leave policies, according to research from the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans.

Companies also offered perks like backup emergency childcare or allowing people to work from home.

Zelechoski says before adding benefits, companies need to speak to their employees.

“A lot of companies jumped in trying to add wellness webinars, self-care or everybody gets to work from home which is great in theory,” she says. “Making these blanket decisions, rather than talking to each employee or groups of employees and getting a sense of what they think would be helpful, rather than assuming.”

Zelechoski says while individualizing services can be hard for companies making global decisions, communication between the HR and the employees is the key to understanding exactly what employees need.
“When you can individualize and have supervisors talk with their direct reports about what can I do, how can we increase the flexibility for you, what do you need to make this work,” she says. “Get a sense of where people are and what would be helpful right now.”

**Provide Childcare Options**

Childcare costs, which have always been a concern for working parents, became even more expensive during the pandemic. In some states, workers can spend nearly 30% of their income to care for a child younger than five. Parents are looking to their employers to help them manage those costs.

Seventy-three percent of parents said they would be more likely to stay at their current job if their employer began offering childcare, according to UrbanSitter, a website that connects parents to nannies and babysitters. Additionally, 80% of parents said a childcare benefit would help them decide to accept a new job.

“The pandemic highlighted for many employers how tough it is for their employees to juggle childcare and work,” says Lynn Perkins, founder and CEO of UrbanSitter. “That may be one of the good things that came out of the pandemic, is that hopefully there’ll be more employer support and subsidy support.”

Underdown says childcare assistance is a perk she would have welcomed early in her career.

Perkins says part of the problem may be the way companies promote their benefits.

**Promote Company Benefits**

Employers are making changes to benefits like adjusting their paid-leave policies or allowing workers to have flexible schedules. But are employees fully aware of all the benefits at their disposal? Companies don’t seem to think so.

Parents are experiencing burnout as they try to juggle their responsibilities at work and home. Many workers feel that senior managers value productivity more than their mental health.

Breanna has since left that company and now focuses on P3 Productions, a production agency she founded during the pandemic. Although she was not able to receive the support she needed, she is now able to focus on her career and the care of her son.
“Parents shouldn’t have to choose,” she says. “There shouldn’t be jobs that people can’t do because they have decided to be parents.”

John Heil, Employee Benefits Consultant at Scott’s Insurance, has this advice for employers.

“You’re paying them to be there, but they’re not being productive,” he says. “It’s probably better to pay them to not be there that day and for them to feel supported. Let them take care of what they need to take care of and then come back and do a good job.”

Providing support can be as simple as managers regularly checking on the wellbeing of employees.

“I feel so seen and supported when I have supervisors that will check in with me,” says Zelechoski. “How are you doing? What can I do to support you, what are ways you want to grow this year? How can we make that happen? Just feeling supported, valued and recognized for the things that you are trying to contribute to your organization or your company. That goes a long way. Relationships matter.”

Show Your Commitment

Perkins says companies can demonstrate their dedication to improving the workplace for parents with what she calls a “good, better, best” plan. Initiatives can begin with adding additional flexibility days, then helping workers access local childcare support systems. The supreme step would be offering a childcare subsidy. Perkins says it doesn’t have to be a big one.

“A subsidy to apply towards childcare and that would be either a backup care situation or a nanny or it could be a subsidy to apply towards childcare and that would be either a backup care situation or a nanny or it could be funding to offset the cost of preschool and daycare,” she says. “Addressing it openly with your company and showing your company culture supports working parents, I think that goes a long way.”

Company executives shouldn’t be afraid to show employees if they too are struggling with and juggling these things, she says.

“It’s having that mindset and that holistic approach of being paternalistic for your employees and allowing them to take care of their families and their needs,” he says. “Everybody wins when you have programs or you instill that culture in your organization.”
FAMILIES IN THE WORKFORCE

There are 83.2 million families in the United States.

78.5% had at least one employed family member in 2021.

The Proportion of Families With an Unemployed Person:

- **White:**
  - 6% of families

- **Black:**
  - 10.3% of families

- **Asian:**
  - 7.7% of families

- **Hispanic:**
  - 10.1% of families

- **Married couple families:**
  - 5.5% had an unemployed member

- **Women who maintain families:**
  - 9.8% are unemployed

- **Men who maintain families:**
  - 10.5% are unemployed
Among Families With Unemployed Members:

Families that had at least one member who was working full time in 2021

White: 69.9%

Black: 56.7% of Black families

Asian: 75.6% of Asian families

Hispanic: 68.4% of Hispanic families

Families With Children:

32.8 million families include children under the age of 18

89.1% at least one parent is employed

96.5% of households where parents are married have at least one employed parent

In 62.3% of households where parents were married, both parents were employed

81.7% of fathers who maintain the family are employed

71.2% of mothers who maintain the family are employed

65.6% of mothers with children under the age of 6 participate in the workforce

75.5% of mothers with children aged 6-17 participate

93.9% of fathers with children under the age of 6 participate in the workforce

91.5% of fathers with children aged 6-17 participate
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The Evolution of Paid Family Leave Policies

It was more than a century ago that the battle for paid family leave began. As feminist groups and female trade unionists around the world battled for fair labor standards following the role women played in keeping industry going during World War I, they met resistance from male-dominated policy making bodies. But eventually, even the politicians had to acknowledge their concerns and provide what they were asking for.

Among the demands were free medical care during and after pregnancy, a guarantee of returning to work after pregnancy, periodic breaks to nurse infant children and notably, 12 weeks of paid maternity leave.

It wasn't something that employers around the world were keen to do, but pressure became sufficient that the International Labour Organization was created and adopted the Maternity Protection Convention of 1919. Over the course of the following decades, every developed nation gave in and created policies around that set of demands, though it took years for many countries to meet the standard the convention advised. The only nation of note that didn't adopt it was the United States. An ongoing debate has been had since then. But as the country stripped unions of their bargaining power and handed more power to employers, little was done about issues like paid family leave.

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The Impact of the Pandemic

Many workers long felt as if there was no choice but to accept this lack of understanding and empathy from their employers until the COVID-19 pandemic realigned many people’s priorities. Suddenly, as workers reconnected with their families, courtesy of the ability to work remotely, they also wanted the freedom to take time to prioritize the family unit.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, both mother and father work in nearly half of all families where the parents are married. It comes as no surprise then that most of all working parents say that finding a work-life balance is difficult, if not impossible.

This contributed significantly to what we now refer to as the “Great Resignation.” Between March and April 2020, nearly 3.5 million working mothers with school-aged children left active employment. Some of these women took paid or unpaid leave, others were laid off, but even more were forced to make the decision to resign as they struggled with child care, homeschooling, and caring for family members sick with COVID-19, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

While women are three times more likely to leave the workforce, many corporations seeking highly skilled talent have adopted paid family leave policies as a means of being competitive for that talent, but a significant number of workers in the U.S. for whom a pregnancy or addressing family needs can be financially devastating.

The only protection for those workers is the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which simply guarantees the security of their job for 12 weeks, unpaid, while they handle life’s other obligations. Due to strict eligibility requirements, two-thirds of the workforce simply doesn’t qualify to receive that guarantee.
This has left current efforts to formalize legislation around paid family leave to the states. Just this year, Maryland and Delaware became the latest states to institute some type of paid family leave, bringing the total number of states with such a policy to 11. Other states include California, Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Washington.

Because these are state laws rather than federal, they can vary dramatically in what they require from employers, what the paid family leave benefits include and who is eligible to receive them. The state policies are encouraging in that it seems paid family leave is finally picking up steam in the way that it has in other countries, but at the same time, there is much concern over what they’ll mean for the American worker. House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Richard Neal expressed some of those concerns in a statement last April.

"While the state actions are encouraging, a patchwork of policies could exacerbate inequalities among women, people of color HUKSV ^HNL ^Y RLY ZnSLHZHPK [BVYLV] LLY[OLVWSP] PLZ "Present challenges for employers operating in multiple regions.”

5LHS ^LU[VU[VHKK[OH[OLYLTHPUZ]VTTP[LV[OLPKLHV universal paid family leave policies that the Ways and Means committee had a hand in creating just last year as part of the Build Back Better framework. In the end, the issue was tabled due to concerns over costs and who is eligible.

But the discussion about paid family leave is far from over. As more states adopt them, it is often followed by disappointment and outrage in other states whose residents see inequity between the states and many desire federal policy to level the WSH.UNFLSLKUZ[OHUPTWVY[HU[PZ].

Paid family leave polls well not just with liberals, but with independents and conservatives as well. This has many political analysts thinking it will likely be a hot topic this fall as midterm elections roll around. Whether or not it sparks action in congress remains to be seen.

An alternative House proposal for paid leave would have allowed employees to make contributions to tax-free savings accounts, which could then be used when the employee [HRLZWHYLU[HSSLH] LPTS[SHNPSH[PVU ^HZSZWYVVZLKV 6Y LVUH5K6PUULZV[HSLP]OLYTLHZYLOHZILLUWHZZLKH[ the federal level.

At some point, either businesses or legislators will have to make contributions to tax-free savings accounts, which could then be used when the employee [HRLZWHYLU[HSSLH] LPTS[SHNPSH[PVU ^HZSZWYVVZLKV 6Y LVUH5K6PUULZV[HSLP]OLYTLHZYLOHZILLUWHZZLKH[ the federal level.

Paid Family Leave in the Future?

The Washington Center for Equitable Growth notes that paid family leave is not only a societal imperative, but an economic one as well as a lack of paid family leave exacerbates issues around inequality for those with low- and moderate-income jobs. It notes that "paid family leave improves child health and development and maternal wellbeing while causing minimal negative impacts on employers, and paid leave at the federal
level could help children from all backgrounds, curb the growth and stability.”

There is a great deal of debate around the cost of paid family leave policies to employers, but what gets much less focus is the improvement to job continuity for parents who must take leave, the improvement to child wellbeing and the fact that research shows existing state programs have had little impact on employers.

In the end, the details of any policy are where the rubber meets the road and an important factor in determining the success of paid family leave programs. For example, studies show that leave policies exceeding one year have adverse effects on a mother’s employment and wages in the long term.

Specific components of leave policies that will be up for debate should the house or senate choose to re-engage on this issue in the future include duration, replacement rate and job protection. The only component that has been isolated for study by researchers to date is the wage replacement piece, with researchers finding that higher wage replacement rates do not impact the duration of a person’s leave or the likelihood that they make claims to begin with.

Many experts predict that at some point a federal leave policy will arrive and part of the reason why is the complexity of state-by-state policies. Some states only guarantee job security, others only pay and others nothing at all. When that federal policy does arrive, it will need to be integrated into state laws and employer leave policies and it will need to provide a minimum bar for employers to comply with, thus simplifying some of the uncoordinated legal frameworks that cause confusion and prove to be time consuming for employers as they navigate the leave landscape by state and municipality.

For all the discussion about leave policies, it comes back to one central component of the talent landscape that employers must focus on: experience. Employers may have the best of intentions but getting paid leave policies wrong can have employees feeling unsupported, undervalued and easily replaceable.

**Discussion Questions for Employees**

How do you feel about the current family leave policies and practices we have in place? In what ways could we as a company improve upon these policies?

In terms of workplace flexibility, how comfortable are you as a working parent with our current policies and what can we do as the employer to enhance your work-life balance?

The Facts and Figures presented above show that parents who are minorities are more likely to have at least one family member who is unemployed. If you are in a household with an unemployed family member and are comfortable sharing, how have you handled this? What obstacles have you faced that maybe we as your employer could assist with?

Other countries have family leave policies and other work policies in support of parents that may offer more than what’s currently available in the United States – what countries are doing a good job with their policies in support of parents that the U.S. should try to gain inspiration from?