

There's a Gap Between Family-Friendly Work Policies and Reality

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As employers continue to roll back COVID-19 pandemic-era workplace policies, many working parents say their expectations of work have changed for good. While return-to-office mandates and evolving hybrid policies have prompted many organizations to scale back pandemic-era flexibility, parents continue to value stability, well-being and support that helps them balance work and family life.

New research from Newsweek and Plant-A Insights Group found that 85% of working parents named job security and stability as one of the most important contributors to workplace satisfaction, with 83% valuing mental well-being and 82% saying compensation and benefits were a top priority. By contrast, workplace perks such as complimentary meals and fitness facilities were far less important, with just 62% expressing satisfaction with these benefits.

"Trust, above anything else, matter most to me. I'm a driven person and I'll go above and beyond for an employer who respects me as a professional and understands me as a mother of two. Give me that trust and flexibility, and I'll give you everything I've got," Rebecca Roberts, Mumsnet senior content editor, told Newsweek.

Despite the widespread adoption of hybrid working, flexibility remains an area where many parents feel employers could do more. Only 63% of parents surveyed said their employer provides adequate opportunities to work from home, below the national average of 65%. Meanwhile, just 69% said they felt comfortable discussing mental health concerns with their direct manager, compared with 72% overall.

"At TELUS Health, we see many working parents continuing to work while under tremendous strain or unwell, often because financial pressures make taking time off difficult... As a result, flexibility and mental health support have become increasingly important factors for parents when evaluating where to work," said Paula Allen, global leader of research and insights at TELUS Health told Newsweek.

Creating family-friendly policies is only part of the solution, according to Diane Bergeron, a social psychologist and researcher at the Center for Creative Leadership. "The biggest mistake organizations make is assuming that having a policy is enough. Employees judge their employer by whether they actually feel able to use flexible working, or parental leave, without worrying it will damage their career," she told Newsweek.

Jasmine Wicks-Stephens is the founder of Known PR agency and mother to two young children. As a business owner and parent she sees the situation uniquely. "It's hard to understand the daily stresses that people with children face, until you're experiencing those yourself. As a mum of two, running two businesses for five years (and just one now), has given me a lot of empathy for how work and home life can better collide," she told Newsweek.

Wicks-Stephens continued: "Childcare isn't set up for working parents. As one of many examples, how can you start work at 9am when school can start at 9.15 - that's not factoring in any kind of commute either? I know there's breakfast club and afterschool club options, but what if you have a child who doesn't enjoy attending those things? Also children don't always sleep well. Adding a layer of stress to the day, to get out the door earlier might not always be a favourable option. It's nice to be able to ease in your day at a time and in a way that suits your family."

Some employers are already adapting. Cisco offers months of paid parental leave in the U.S. for both parents, up to \$50,000 in family planning support and flexible benefits for caregivers. According to the company, 66% of its employees identify as caregivers, based on an internal employee survey.

Mumsnet has adapted in a different way. "It's less one specific policy and more the culture around it. I can set my Slack status to 'sick child at home' or 'school run' without a second thought. If I need an hour in the afternoon, I take it and log back on once the kids are in bed. Nobody bats an eyelid if a small head appears behind me on a call during the summer holidays, or if I say I'll be online later because I'm at a Harvest festival or nativity. That everyday, unremarkable acceptance is what makes the difference," Roberts said.

"A decade ago, a parent leaving early for a school pickup might have felt the need to explain or apologize," said Manuel Moerbach, CEO of Plant-A Insights Group. "Today, that is much more normalized in many workplaces. But flexibility only works for families when it is predictable and supported by managers. Parents need to know they can care for a sick child, adjust their schedule, or take leave without creating uncertainty around their job or career progression. The strongest workplaces recognize that practical support, stability, and trust matter far more to families than traditional office perks."

Newsweek recently published a ranking of America's Greatest Workplaces for Parents and Families in partnership with Plant-A Insights Group.

Wicks-Stephens and Roberts both have advice for employers: Enable better parenting. "Extend paternity leave. Two weeks isn't enough for dads to support their partner and bond with a new baby," Roberts said.

"Find a more suitable working pattern for parents when returning to work. For example, someone who was previously doing full time (5 days a week), might want to come back 2 or 3 at first," Wicks-Stephens said. "I would rather have someone come back part time who cares about the business and doing a good job, and also, I'm proud of the fact that we're a business who can provide those solutions for someone, rather than excluding them from the workplace."