

Employee Leave Requests Rise for the Third Consecutive Year

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Mental health issues, new company policies, and state laws granting paid leave drive up employees' requests for extended time off.



Francis Scialabba

Employee leave requests rose for the third consecutive year, with 57% of organizations reporting that more workers asked for extended time off in 2024, according to a survey released earlier this month by AbsenceSoft.

The pace of the requests is slowing, however. Requests increased by 62% in 2023, after swelling by 96% in 2022. An AbsenceSoft spokesperson speculated that the 2022 jump may have stemmed from the "tail-end of Covid impacts", while the increase in 2023 may have resulted from the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act, which went into effect that year and gave more workers the ability to request leave.

Employees' desire to care for their mental health seems to have been a cause of the jump, said Seth Turner, co-founder and chief strategy officer of AbsenceSoft. Nearly half (47%) of employees cited mental health as a reason for needing the leave, making it the second most-named justification, the survey found. Turner said that employees are more comfortable discussing their mental health needs than they were even five years ago.

Almost six in 10 (57%) workers cited needing time to recover from an injury or illness as the reason they needed leave, making it the most common driver of requests. The third, cited in 37% of the requests, was caring for an aging parent.

Turner said the combination of employers offering and state laws requiring paid leave is also pushing requests higher. Thirteen states and Washington D.C. have passed laws that require paid family and medical leave, according to The Center for American Progress. The Family and Medical Leave Act requires certain employers to give job-protected leave to workers who meet specific criteria, though it does not mandate that workers must be paid.

Turner said that many employees' inability to take unpaid leave stifled some of the requests. "If you know you aren't going to be compensated it makes it less accessible to people," he said.

"We're seeing a lot of organizations that add their own company policies in the interest of retaining employees and, in some cases, attracting [them]," Turner said. "That's also something that's changed the dynamic of the leave space."

Turner said the increase in leave presents three challenges for employers. It makes more work for the HR team that has to manage the procedures and comply with changing laws and regulations. Additionally, when a worker takes leave, it can place a burden on the employees left behind. "There's also managing that morale of the people that are there to make sure you're not just dumping workloads on people that aren't on a leave," Turner said.