

HR Insights

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Encouraging Employees to Take PTO During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on nearly every facet of the workplace. With everything upended, employers are understandably focused on maintaining their service and product quality. But working hard isn't the only key to successfully enduring the pandemic—in fact, the opposite may be just as critical.

Paid time off (PTO) is something many employees take for granted. Hundreds of millions of vacation days go unused each year, according to the U.S. Travel Association. Due to a variety of factors, some employees opt not to use time off, and they—and the entire organization—end up suffering for it in the long run.

This article explains why encouraging employees to take PTO can be just as important, if not more so, than encouraging the “hustle” culture.

Reasons Employees Don't Use PTO

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many businesses to migrate online and required employees to work remotely. This unprecedented scenario has blurred the line between work and home. Now, employees are clocking more hours and staying online longer than they did before the pandemic. All this extra work and no play can add up.

Employers are already reporting low PTO usage among employees this year. They're concerned this unrelenting push will lead to mass burnout in the near future. Employers are looking to implement fixes now to avert that disaster, but the solution isn't

as simple as advertising PTO—some employees are aware of their time off and simply not using it.

In fact, employees might know they *need* time away from work and *still* don't use it. Why? For many, it's due to concerns over job security. The COVID-19 pandemic forced some businesses to furlough employees—others had to lay off their entire workforce. Some workers who retained their jobs during this uncertainty are now worried that taking PTO will make them seem dispensable.

However, job security isn't the only motivation for not taking PTO. Another major culprit is company culture. Specifically, the “hustle” culture. This is the mindset of prizing work over all else—where working late into the night and replying immediately to emails are things to brag about. In this culture, taking PTO is a sign of being unable to handle job responsibilities.

This attitude might simply seem like a reality of today's workplaces—especially among managers who have similar working habits—but that's not the case. In fact, employers need to start encouraging more rest among employees before the nonstop work catches up with them.

Why PTO Is Important

Time away from work is important for both employees and employers. Employees need time to

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reset and decompress to avoid burning out. Employers need a productive workforce that doesn't compromise quality for quantity.

This isn't anything new. Experts have talked for years about how nonstop work can lead to greater absenteeism, stress, burnout and service quality degradation. In fact, data suggests that employees should work *less* if they want to improve their performance.

Even the act of taking PTO—whether it's used for relaxation or not—is correlated with greater success. Employees who took 11 or more vacation days were over 30% more likely to receive a raise than those who took fewer days, according to the Harvard Business Review. Furthermore, for each 10 vacation hours an employee used, their performance review scores raised 8% on average, according to international research firm EY.

These studies illustrate how important PTO can be for refocusing energy in a positive way. Now, employers just need to get employees to use it.

How Employers Can Help

Getting employees to use their time off is a worthwhile challenge for any organization. Here are a few initiatives to help.

Advertise the PTO Policy

Employers should ensure all employees understand and are aware of the PTO policy. This could involve an email communication, a page dedicated on an intranet site or some other method. It's critical that all information stays consistent across channels, and that employees know how much PTO they can use and when they can use it. Employers should be transparent about expectations, including when requests should be submitted and under which circumstances.

Encourage Frequent Use, Not Extended Vacations

If policies allow, employers should encourage frequent PTO usage if employees don't want to take extended vacations or entire days. This would allow employees to be present most of the time, while still having an opportunity to unwind. This could be a nice compromise for individuals who are concerned about being away too long.

Lead by Example and Show Care

Sometimes employees don't feel comfortable taking PTO because their managers don't seem to use any. Employers should instruct managers to use PTO as well, explaining that it's important at every level of the organization. Likewise, when managers encourage employees to use time off, they should do it from a place of care. For instance, they should explain that PTO is critical for avoiding burnout, and that not taking it is equivalent to throwing money away at the expense of mental health.

Be Open About PTO

Teams should talk openly about their PTO with one another. This helps shift the workplace culture toward one that prizes self-care. This open communication also enables teams to coordinate responsibilities amid overlapping time off, adding further to the supportive atmosphere.

Discourage Unhealthy Work Traits

Working hard is laudable in most cases, but sometimes it can go too far. For instance, employees shouldn't be bragging about working long hours—that's an unsustainable practice that can lead to serious health issues if it persists. Instead, overworking should be framed as a failure of time management, not good "hustle." At the very least, it should not be praised. If employees are routinely overworking themselves, their managers should reach out about it.

Conclusion

PTO initiatives will vary by organization, but every employer should be encouraging its use among employees. At the end of the day, a burnt-out workforce will hurt the employer more than anyone else.

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