

Methods for Supporting Working Parents

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, working parents are now being forced to contend with their children's new school routines. Unfortunately, these routines will be varied by school, with little universal guidance. The uncertainty surrounding these routines and their impact on working parents will undoubtedly have ripple effects in the workplace.

Accommodation Methods

Unfortunately, there is no universal answer for how to accommodate all working parents. The solutions will be unique to the circumstances, influenced by the schools that employees' children attend.

However, although the specifics will vary, there are a number of solutions that can help in a variety of circumstances. This article includes methods for accommodating working parents and pitfalls to avoid when doing so.

Telework Arrangements

Working remotely (telework) has boomed in popularity recently—obviously influenced by the coronavirus—but the trend began well in advance of the pandemic. This arrangement allows employees to work entirely remote. It can be a way for working parents to get kids to school without having to worry about an additional commute. It also allows parents more time to spend with their young children or kids who must be at home due to virtual learning. Granted, the latter scenario may be more distracting than beneficial, so additional guidelines should be put in place alongside the telework arrangement to ensure the employee remains productive.

Flexible Scheduling

Flexible scheduling is a step back from telework, focusing instead on when an employee works rather than where they do so. With this arrangement, employers set designated “core” hours that an employee must be working (location irrelevant) and otherwise let employees work whenever they like. For instance, an employer may set core hours from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., then allow employees to work their own schedule, so long as they total 40 hours at the end of the workweek. Alternatively, an employer may not have core hours and instead allow employees to work any combination of 40-hour workweeks. This can be a great way to accommodate working parents who must also act as stay-at-home teachers or day care instructors. It can also free up time for parents so they can work earlier and see their families more in the evening.

Generous Time Off Policies

Some employers have generous policies related to paid time off (PTO), which is different than extended leave. Expanding PTO can be an excellent way to attract and retain working parents. The easiest method for implementing this would be to adopt a PTO bank policy where employees can use their time off for any reason (as opposed to having set categories, such as sick days and vacation days). Going further, employers could allow employees to take as much PTO as they need for their unique circumstances. This would allow working parents more time to make appointments, run errands, see family and accomplish other family-related tasks as they come. Keep in mind, many parents may have already exhausted their time off due to COVID-19, so additional PTO would be welcomed. However, unlimited PTO banks require a high level of trust, so employers should consider setting a PTO limit first, then potentially expanding the policy later. Moreover, unlimited PTO may be a more tenable option after the COVID-19 pandemic, when production output isn't as critical.

Robust EAP Offerings

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on everyone. For employees fortunate enough to retain their jobs, the stress of the coronavirus can be compounded by the stress of daily work duties. In fact, 82% of employees said they feel overworked, according to an Asana study—and that was before the pandemic. Add parenting and household responsibilities on top of those stressors, and it's obvious that some employees may be spread too thin. That's where an employee assistance program (EAP) comes in. These programs can be tailored to a workforce to provide critical employee resources. Some EAP offerings may include mental health resources, therapist appointments, financial counseling and other well-being programs. Essentially, EAPs can help connect employees with the resources they need to improve a given situation, even if it's their overall well-being. For working parents, this could be the lifeline they've been searching for.

Transparent and Frequent Communication

Sometimes the easiest accommodation for working parents is open communication. Depending on the team size, managers could have open discussions with working parents about needing to take time off or flexing their schedules. This wouldn't necessarily require amendments to existing policies, provided the existing policies aren't too restrictive. Open communication between managers and working parents would enable both parties to plan for upcoming changes to daily routines. Having an ongoing, transparent dialogue can help identify and address issues before they turn into real problems. Specifically, some parents are concerned about their co-workers' perceptions during the school year—hypothesizing that they appear more focused on duties outside of work. While these perceptions may be unwarranted, it's important for employees to feel comfortable bringing them up with managers. Such conversations also show employees that their well-being is just as important as their performance.

Social Hangouts

Working parents tend to burn the candle at both ends. Many parents work during the day, then run their households at night. Some parents are around their families 24/7, juggling all their responsibilities simultaneously. As anyone who spends the majority of their time around kids will tell you, sometimes a parent needs time alone with other adults. This is where social hangouts come in. Employers can help reduce the stress of working parents (and all employees) by hosting social events. These events might be in-person with social distancing measures in place or entirely virtual, using digital platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Whatever the logistics, social hangouts provide employees much-needed time to unwind and socialize about topics unrelated to the workplace. Some organizations use this time to play games or toast cocktails. Regardless of the setup, employers should consider scheduling periodic events to encourage a break from work. It's important to note that these hangouts will likely be more successful if conducted during or toward the end of the workday.

Accommodation Pitfalls to Avoid

Employers should be careful when drafting and implementing new policies. Below are some pitfalls to watch out for.

Targeted Policies

Targeting specific groups of individuals when creating workplace policies is generally not a good decision. While it might seem obvious that a policy intended to accommodate working parents should only apply to them, that may not be beneficial to the organization on the whole. Not only is targeting specific employees illegal in many cases, but it can sow resentment among workers who do not qualify. Instead, employers should devise policies that help all employees. This might involve offering a flexible schedule to everyone, as opposed to just parents.

Lax Enforcement

Regardless of how employers choose to accommodate working parents, enforcement of those accommodations must be clear and consistent. This means holding individuals accountable for the arrangements they agree to. For instance, a manager may allow an employee to work remotely each Friday to accommodate their child's class schedule. The manager should then ensure the employee is actually being productive on those days (using whatever method or standard the employer chooses). If employers start easing work responsibilities without following up on performance, it can quickly lead to apathetic attitudes toward the job itself. In other words, an employer should clearly set expectations for any ad hoc arrangement, then follow up regularly with the individual.

Ill-conceived Policies

As the old adage goes, "If you don't know, ask." Workplace policies are no exception. Before employers start drafting policies or begin devising worker accommodations, they should reach out to employees. Since the goal is to make life easier for working parents (and the rest of the workforce, to a lesser extent), employers should ensure the decisions are welcomed by employees. This can be done through surveys, one-on-one meetings or a variety of other methods. Spending the extra time soliciting employee opinions now can save countless hours in the future.

Conclusion

Schools are, inarguably, among the most critical organizations that must reopen amid the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the lack of consistent, practical reopening and ongoing operational guidance makes every case unique. This makes it difficult for working parents to coordinate their schedules, especially when their own routines are up in the air.

If employers can anticipate and prepare for some of these problems, their employees can have some peace of mind. Scrambling to draft policies later in the school year will only make them more challenging to implement. In fact, the absence of workplace guidance related to working parents' circumstances may force some employees to resign or take extended leaves to accommodate their families. Plan for these situations now, and prevent turmoil later.

Speak with VCG Consultants for more workplace guidance.

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