

benefit fringe | inclusive holidays

As the workplace becomes more diverse, employers may want to consider whether their schedule of paid holidays accommodates the needs of all of their employees.

The average employer offers nine paid holidays per year, and the most commonly offered are Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day and Labor Day, according to the International Foundation's 2022 *Employee Benefits Survey*. However, organizations may have workers who want to observe a wider range of holidays for cultural, religious or other reasons.

With dozens of holidays to consider, how can organizations ensure that their paid holiday schedule is inclusive of a greater number of workers without losing control of the number of paid days?

Patricia Jespersen, chief curiosity officer at EmployeeEXP, suggests taking a thoughtful approach. Jespersen recently presented "Total Rewards: Essential to a Total Inclusion Solution" at the 41st Annual ISCEBS Employee Benefits Symposium in Toronto, Ontario.

Employers should start by asking: "What do you want your offerings around holidays to say about your organization?" Jespersen suggested. "It's really about authenticity of leadership, about who you want to be and establishing a culture that supports an increasingly diverse workforce."

Employers likely don't have to scrap their current offering of paid holidays but may want to make adjustments, she said. They should consider what their employee base looks like. For example, an employer with a large population of Muslim employees or numerous military veterans may want to evaluate how it can make those populations feel included and respected, whether it's by adding a paid holiday or acknowledging important days in other ways.

Tracking days that are popular for taking time off that are not on the employer's official schedule or conducting surveys or town hall meetings can help employers determine employee needs and wants for paid holidays, a recent blog by human resources firm Insperty advises.

Another important step is to benchmark what other employers are doing, including those in the same industry or geographic area, Jespersen added. Employers also should project what they think their employee population will look like in the future.

Offering floating holidays may be an option for making holidays more inclusive. Floating holidays are paid days off that employees can typically use at any time for any reason (within employer guidelines) and are offered in addition to other paid time off. A July 2022 Business News Daily article suggests that an employer could create a list of holidays for which it doesn't currently offer paid time off and allow employees to choose their floating holiday from that list. Another option is to simply allow each employee to choose any day of the year as a floating holiday.

The 2022 *Employee Benefits Survey* shows that about 44% of corporate and public employee organizations do not offer floating holidays. But nearly 18% offer one per year, and 17% offer two days.

Insperty also suggests considering options for inclusive holidays that don't involve paid time off, such as celebrating significant days by providing a free lunch, allowing casual dress or releasing employees early.

Whatever an employer decides to do, Jespersen stressed that organizations should make sure they are clear with employees about the reasons for observing a particular holiday and that it's not just a flavor-of-the-month response. "The intentional decisions you make need to align with the organization's written and unwritten values—Employees are taking note," she said. "As long as your organization is acting in accordance with who you are, then you're in a better place."

