As America reopens, we need to offer caregivers a lot more support

By Heather Williams and Bobbi Thomason for CNN Business Perspectives

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What this national daycare center is doing to stay open safely

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Editor's Note: Heather Williams is a senior policy researcher at the nonprofit, nonpartisan RAND Corporation. Bobbi Thomason is an assistant professor of applied behavioral science at Pepperdine Graziadio Business School. The opinions expressed in this commentary are their own.

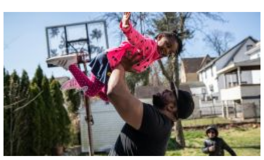
As some workplaces start to reopen and work-from-home guidelines relax, corporate leaders may hope things will quickly get back to normal. But for employees who are also online classes and learning from home, lack childcare or have ill or elderly family members in need of care.

In this transitional period of the pandemic, companies and managers should pursue giving caregivers the time they need — particularly in terms of time off — and to create a work culture where they can use it.

Companies that have the financial capability to provide emergency leave should make efforts to do so. It may be less cost-prohibitive than they realize; likely only a small portion of their staff are actually full-time caregivers. RAND researchers have estimated around 88% of households have no young children at home or have a non-working adult or older child who could provide childcare. While these numbers do not account for those providing full-time care to adults, we presume that is also a small overall percentage of employees.

Ultimately, most employees will not need caregiver time off, but for that small percentage that do, it is critical. There is extensive research on how balancing paid jobs and caregiving demands — a role that disproportionately falls on the shoulders of women — is particularly stressful and can even be associated with physical and mental illness.

Alarm bells are being rung that many childcare centers will not financially be able to reopen, and those who step away from careers because they lack childcare options will disproportionally be working moms. This risks undermining the investments many companies have already made in increasing diversity among their workforce.



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That caregiver leave is good for employees should be motivation enough to offer it. But there is some encouraging research that shows it doesn't come at the cost of a company's bottom line.

At Boston Consulting Group, subject of one famous study, employees were hesitant to take even a single evening off per week from work and from email. When forced to do so, employees reported higher job satisfaction, greater likelihood that they could imagine a long-term career at the firm and higher satisfaction with their work-life balance. BCG wanted to improve retention, but the benefits that manifested extended further: Teams better communication, increased learning and a better ultimate product delivered to their clients.

In another study of companies in California after the state mandated paid family leave, 91% of companies reported that leave had either a positive effect or no effect on profitability.

But putting family leave policies on paper will not be enough. Extensive organizational research finds that employees, in general, do not feel comfortable taking time off to care for a dependent. One study found that women, parents, low-income employees and African Americans were most likely to feel they needed family or medical leave, but it was married women and whites who took it most often.

Employees' low usage of time-off is rooted in well-founded concerns about negative career consequences. Evidence holds that the use of dependent care leave can result in lower performance evaluations, decreased lifetime earnings and deflected career tracks. Given the pervasive layoffs and furloughs during Covid-19, employees may feel all the more afraid of doing anything to put their job at risk.

Managers and high-performing individuals have the social currency to reshape such workplace norms. Research shows that middle managers are the linchpins for this. When managers support workers who take time off in particular, they buffer those employees from possible negative ramifications.

Coworkers also can help. Men and high-performing working fathers in particular can play a study found that fathers were more likely to take paternity leave if their coworkers or brothers had taken leave after the birth of their own child. It is broadly documented that men hold higher status at work and are more likely to be in leadership positions — and thus are less likely to be punished for breaking workplace norms. By taking the lead in advocating for caregiver leave, flexible hours and taking time off to care for their own families, working fathers might help themselves, their companies and the mothers they work with.

Burnout, retention and inflexible work arrangements were harming companies before Covid-19 came along. The call for improved caregiver leave predated it as well. Using this moment of disruption as an opportunity to improve policies and work culture will put companies a step ahead in the post-Covid-19 environment.

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