

Create a **FAMILY-FRIENDLY** work environment

Three workplace issues impacting mothers and what to do about them.

FROM THE US



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It's no secret that working mothers face many issues in today's society. These challenges were the very reason we started building MomUp in 2019 after years of hearing stories about highly skilled, educated and talented women who didn't want traditional careers – and the knowledge that there were fast-growing, progressive companies out there that would benefit from their expertise.

We're living in an entirely different world from when we started – for many of us, the pandemic has made a four-year time span feel like a lifetime away. I often note that despite a workplace that looks vastly different than before, I haven't seen the needle move much regarding the majority of these issues. One thing we have learned? Remote and hybrid work – once the Holy Grail for many of the women we work with – only scratches the surface regarding attracting and retaining working mothers. Here are some

of the issues moms face – and what employers can do to help create family-friendly workplace environments.

ISSUE #1 PAID FAMILY LEAVE

The United States remains the only developed Western country without a federal paid family leave statute. In addition, while the United States has the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), the leave period is relatively short compared to other countries – and pay is not guaranteed. As a result, for many women, going without pay for any length of time is not feasible – meaning they may not be able to take their full leave, or the leave they take is financially stressful for their families.

Employers should create their own paid family leave plans. Parents make up nearly half of the workforce, so doing so is imperative. Additionally, employers should develop processes and systems to cover the work and support teams while parents are on leave, and work to reduce toxicity and bias against parents. A good parental leave policy doesn't just start and end with family leave. It's also essential for companies to implement policies that support the rest of the team while the employee is on that leave.

Employers could hire family leave contractors, offer lactation rooms to feeding parents once the employee returns and hire outside experts or consultants to establish these procedures. For example, consider hiring someone with expertise in developing a parental leave system that can be included in the employee handbook. HR is often stretched thin and expected to tackle and manage various areas, from benefits to working employee issues to hiring, onboarding, etc. HR Professionals can seek support through a myriad of expert consultants that can help develop a parental leave system and communicate it clearly to

the entire company. Lastly, employers should support and encourage federal policies that support paid leave to influence change.

ISSUE #2 INADEQUATE AND EXPENSIVE CHILDCARE

Safe, reliable, and affordable childcare is the backbone of being a successful working parent (and having a functioning society) – and the U.S. is in a childcare crisis. Misalignment between the workday and school day creates hours for parents to backfill their childcare schedule. In addition, early childcare is prohibitively expensive for many working families, with public school not starting until kindergarten.

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, four out of every five childcare centers recently had a staffing shortage. Combine this with long waiting lists, and childcare is hard to find and expensive once parents find it. This leaves parents in vulnerable positions without support systems. The Demanding Change report presented by ChildCareAware found that childcare costs are more than \$10,000 per year. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the median household income is around \$70,000, meaning parents are spending well over the 7% the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends parents spend on childcare. Some reports estimate that the amount parents spend on childcare is nearly a third of their total income.

Managers should be trained to support working parents, and senior management should exemplify empathy when parents have childcare issues. Further, companies need to understand the stress and pressure that a lack of affordable childcare puts on employees and address it just as they have learned to manage the importance of having affordable, accessible healthcare options and savings options as part of their benefits packages. Employers who want to provide a workplace culture that supports parents need to look at the childcare needs of their employees and consider real, tangible ways of helping them combat these issues, whether through subsidized daycare, on-site childcare, backup care options or increased flexibility to handle pickups or sick children who cannot attend daycare.

ISSUE #3 WORKPLACE CULTURE AND WORKING HOURS

According to the third edition of McKinsey's American Opportunity Survey, less than 10% of companies plan to scale back on remote work, with 32% saying hybrid work is likely to expand. In addition, women employees surveyed who had the option to work remotely or in person reported being less burned out, happier, and more likely to stay.

On the flip side, the tools that enable remote work have also helped a 24/7 work schedule that is nearly impossible to maintain for many working parents – and unhealthy for most of us. In addition, many workplaces exist where in-person employees get preferential treatment (consciously or subconsciously), leaving remote/hybrid workers at a disadvantage. For example, women are more often penalized for being mothers than men for being fathers. To this end, there is also an unconscious bias against mothers in hiring, promotion, and salaries.

According to LeanIn.Org's Women in the Workplace report, employees who work outside of the office are more likely to be women and, therefore, receive fewer opportunities for recognition and advancement. According to the University of Chicago Press, this experiment found that employers discriminate against mothers – and not fathers. In fact, the father even sometimes benefits. The study found that mothers were penalized on various measures, including perceived competence and recommended starting salary. Further, mothers and women are often expected to do "free" work or more "admin" jobs. The AOM (Academy of Management) reports that women often do these administrative tasks that men often don't think of and don't get assigned to do.

Easy ways to implement strategies to combat these issues include holding meetings at more parent-friendly times and creating working hours that take into account the rhythms of working parents, i.e., avoiding essential, required meetings after 3 pm (when many parents are also managing pickups and children's schedules), using discretion when creating meetings, offering a hybrid workplace and specific days of in-office/collaborative work, and focusing on productivity/results instead of time spent.

A good workplace culture takes time and is an investment. The C-suite should consider the ROI for employing working parents, which includes increased employee retention, a positive brand image, increased productivity and a more attractive talent pool pipeline. ■

MICHELLE KEEFE leads MomUp in its quest to connect organizations with the amazing resource of mothers. She holds a graduate degree from Harvard University and an undergraduate degree from the University of Notre Dame. Based in Needham Massachusetts, when she can, Michelle tries to sneak in teaching a yoga class on the side and she recently spent 6 weeks in New Zealand living in a camper van with her husband and 3 kids.