

Bereavement Leave and Candidate Attraction

Paula Santonocito Thursday - July 20, 2017

A company's benefits package attracts job candidates, and bereavement leave is one of the benefits in that package.



Why concern yourself with something as seemingly insignificant as bereavement leave? Because it speaks volumes about a company's culture.

A Specific Benefit

Employers recognize the need to offer paid time off for the death of a family member. This benefit is frequently available to full-time employees, and it is usually defined in terms of days, while specifying whose death qualifies.

A company policy typically states that employees may take X amount of days off following the death of an immediate family member. Many policies then go on to define "immediate family member."

This is the definition of "immediate family," from one employer's policy: "the employee's spouse, domestic partner, legal guardian, son, daughter, mother, father, sister, brother, grandparents, aunt, uncle, niece and nephew, and in-laws of the same categories."

Still other companies offer different leave for different family relationships: for example, three days off in the event of the death of the employee's spouse, child, father, father-in-law, mother, mother-in-law, son-in-law, daughter-in-law, brother, sister, stepfather, stepmother, stepbrother, stepsister, stepson or stepdaughter; and one day off in the event of the death of the employee's brother-in-law, sister-in-law, aunt, uncle, grandparent, grandchild or spouse's grandparent.

How much time off do companies normally provide, and how do they define the benefit?

A 2016 survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) finds on average four days of bereavement leave are offered for the death of a spouse or a child.

Holes in the Policy

Unfortunately, in an effort to get specific, policies don't consider the obvious. Not everyone lives near their family members. What happens if someone has to travel to attend a funeral?

Policies also ignore the emotional aspects of family relationships. A person's grandmother may have been one of the most important people in an employee's life. Yet the death of grandma may qualify for less time off.

Also missing from most policies is the death of a close friend. Policies suggest if you're not connected by blood there is a lesser connection.

And of course, in general, the time off granted may be far from adequate, even when other aspects of the circumstances seem to fit within policy guidelines.

Best Practices

Death is a difficult subject to address, and companies tend to not handle it well. A company that, through its policy, attempts to dictate how an employee should respond to the death of a loved one can come across as less than compassionate.

Employee responses to death are not universal. Some people want to get back to work right away; they take comfort in tasks that distract them from their grief. Others are unable to function; the fog surrounding them as a result of their loss is all-encompassing.

Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook, has talked openly about the death of her husband and how it affected her. Her candor has led to a national conversation about how a family member's death can impact job performance. It has also influenced policy.

Facebook, which previously offered 10 days of paid bereavement leave, earlier this year announced it was doubling the time off allowed, to 20 days. Following Facebook's lead, Mastercard recently increased its bereavement leave from 15 to 20 days.

A company that supports its employees in their time of need will earn a reputation as an organization that cares. Who wouldn't want to work for such an organization?

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