

Member's Quarterly

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Perspective

Is It Time to Improve Bereavement Benefits?

It's more than just a day or two off

Most of us will experience the loss of someone dear to us during our working years. Yet, we talk very little about death and dying, grief and grieving. These have a direct impact on our ability to work, at least for a period of time following such an event. Isn't it time that we, as managers and directors, started talking more openly about this? In addition, isn't it past time that we reviewed our employee bereavement policies and practices?



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Grief and loss have a tremendous impact on employees. We can see it with our own eyes. There is often a marked drop in productivity, focus and performance on the job. Some people get depressed and suffer from mental health distress. Others develop physical ailments and become more susceptible to picking up seasonal illnesses and have an increased risk for chronic conditions and things like heart attacks. We offer what support we can, but is it enough? Is there more we can and should do?

In Canada, we have a hodgepodge of regulatory requirements when it comes to bereavement leave. In Ontario, most full-time employees have the right to take two days of unpaid leave each year because of the death of certain family members. For federally regulated industries, employees can take three paid days of bereavement leave and up to an additional seven more days unpaid leave under certain circumstances. Most employers in Canada offer something in between these provisions and there are also informal arrangements that organizations will make on an ad hoc or as requested basis.

From many employees' perspectives, none of the above, even the most generous, would likely be enough. A survey by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that while the vast majority of employers provided some bereavement leave, about 30 percent of employers said they had to use vacation or sick days after the death of a family member. In another American survey, employees said that more paid time off after the loss of a loved one was the most important thing they wanted from their employer.

But while bereavement leave or more time off would be helpful, it's not the only thing that employers can do to help their workforce go through the grieving process. Organizations of all sizes are providing access to grief counsellors, mental health apps for mobile phones, funeral or memorial service support and allowing more hybrid, remote and staggered work scheduling to assist their employees.

This may be even more important than an extra day off. Grief is not a linear process and everyone will take their own time to go through it. Providing ongoing support will be crucial as they walk their way through this process and return to some form of normal at work. So, too, are kind words and encouragement as the grief rises and falls. Employees will be appreciative of this concern shown by their employers at possibly one of the most difficult times of their working careers.

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