

# Employers Give Employees the Gift of Time

By Kylie Ora Lobell

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**B**y mid-December each year, many workplaces start to empty out as employees take paid time off (PTO) to visit family and prepare for year-end festivities and travel. This year, workplaces are expected to be even more desolate thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic.

While most businesses will close for Christmas Day and New Year's Day, and perhaps a few more days in between, some employers plan to expand their time-off policies this year due to the pandemic. They say they recognize how hard employees have been working—both remotely and in person—and want to make sure they take additional time away from work demands to decompress. Other employers are offering a range of new perks to keep employees connected and to recognize their contributions during this challenging time.

Here are five ways in which employers are approaching the 2020 holiday season to ensure that employees stay healthy and happy in the new year.

## **1. Offering more discretionary time off.**

Prior to the pandemic, many workplaces offered limited PTO. To make sure employees get much-needed time away from work, some companies, such as the Thrive Internet Marketing Agency in Arlington, Texas, have instituted discretionary time off available whenever needed.

"Everyone is entitled to take personal leave when the appropriate circumstances arise," said Cindy Deuser, HR manager. "We are giving everyone autonomy, and the thing about autonomy is that since you are given that trust, employees use it wisely and appropriately."

So far, Deuser said, she hasn't noticed anyone abusing the system, which applies not just to those who are sick or have family members with COVID-19. "Everyone is allowed to take [PTO] for various reasons as long as they finish their responsibilities before taking their leave," she said.

In addition, some companies are allocating more days off in December.

"We will have three days off for the holidays," said Deuser. "We are all out on the 24th and the 25th, and everyone can pick another day that week for their third day off. And, of course, discretionary time offs, which are paid, would still apply."

## **2. Recognize signs of burnout.**

Employees are working an average of 48.5 minutes more per day this year during the pandemic, which is leading to less rest and widespread burnout, according to research from Harvard Business School and the New York University Stern School of Business.

Sheila Ryan, chief people officer at Clear Capital in Reno, Nevada, said that although there hasn't been a big change in how her company has handled time off, she's worked closely with people managers to make sure they are aware of the signs of burnout and stress. That way, they "could encourage their team members to take time [off], even if it's just one 'me day,' as well as utilize our EAP [employee assistance program] and other tools and resources."

Ryan also said her company is training managers to move quickly by offering time off as soon as burnout becomes apparent. "We're emphasizing that while they may not be able to go to an exotic location, there is value in taking time to be off the clock," she said.

### **3. Encourage employees to use time off.**

Even if employers don't spot signs of burnout among staff this holiday season, they should encourage employees to take vacation days and unplug from work activities.

"As a provider of behavioral health services, we understand the importance of employees balancing their work life and personal life," said Turkessa Antrum, senior vice president of HR at Community Health Resources in Windsor, Conn. "We have quickly realized that for those employees, particularly the ones working remotely, they are working more hours than the norm, and they no longer have that decompress time from office to home during a normal commute. They are now logging off in one room and going straight into the next room to deal with home life."

Jenna Saponaro, HR manager at Postal in Columbus, Ohio, said that she recently pulled a PTO report for every team member and then reached out to those who haven't taken much time off—something she hasn't done in past years.

"Once we were able to meet, I encouraged them to take PTO days, even if it was a random day here and there," she said. "One aspect I mentioned during each chat was that days off are important for their mental health, even if they didn't have anything planned. It has been a successful effort so far. Honestly, some people just need to hear it from their leaders."

### **4. Make sure employees stay safe.**

Because employees who are working onsite may travel during the holidays, employers are putting up safety measures to protect everyone. Antrum said Community Health Resources informs staff about the governor's daily updates and travel advisories. If an employee is traveling to a COVID-19 hot spot for the holidays and expects to return immediately to working in person with clients, his or her leave request likely will not be approved.

"That decision does not affect employees who can quarantine for two weeks following the end of their vacation and fulfill their job requirements remotely," she said.

Ashley M. Delaney-Olson, director of HR and administration at The Wesson Group in Johnstown, N.Y., said her company, which provides construction services, is also being careful about not spreading the coronavirus this holiday season. "We have requested all employees continue to follow all New York State Department of Health guidelines and CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] recommendations for safe gatherings."

### **5. Send employees gifts and hold events.**

For the holidays, Community Health Resources will be sending workers either a gourmet gift basket or a grocery store gift card "that employees can use to buy ingredients to make some of their favorite traditional holiday meals," said Antrum.

Delaney-Olson said her firm is sending a chocolate package to each employee's house with a holiday card attached. [For more giving ideas, see [A Gift Guide for Your Employees \(www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/employee-relations/Pages/A-Gift-Guide-for-Your-Employees.aspx?\\_ga=2.138400112.1732432480.1605555360-136878348.1596451575\)](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/employee-relations/Pages/A-Gift-Guide-for-Your-Employees.aspx?_ga=2.138400112.1732432480.1605555360-136878348.1596451575).]

"We are postponing our companywide holiday gathering, instead opting for project-based gatherings to ensure social distancing and limiting visitors to our main office," said Delaney-Olson. "We intend to offer a summer gathering in 2021 to make up for the lack of a holiday party in December 2020."

Hippo Insurance in Palo Alto, Calif., has held fun events through the year and plans to offer more during the holidays, said Anna Lenhardt, the company's vice president of people. "To promote our company's culture, we offer employees the option to participate in virtual games, contests and events where employees from all sites can engage together and win prizes," she said. "Most recently, we've facilitated virtual

bingo, pumpkin carving and a home office decoration contest, and we will be doing similar events over the coming holidays."

While presents are great, the best gift may be additional time off. The Wesson Group has "continued to encourage everyone to take their allocated vacation, even as a staycation, so that employees can get the R&R they need to be productive," Delaney-Olson said. "We value our employees and want them to perform at their best, both at home and at work."

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