



Designing Leave Programs That Deliver Meaningful Impact: A Framework for Employers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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A Message from Bryon Bass, Chief Executive Officer

How do employer-provided leave benefits influence employee satisfaction, engagement, and retention? And what are the conditions under which those benefits actually deliver meaningful outcomes for both employees and employers?

This is a question many organizations are now asking more directly. For years, leave has been treated as a defined set of policies, often shaped by regulation, cost considerations, and incremental decisions over time. The assumption has been that providing access to leave is, in itself, enough.

But the results are not always consistent. Similar programs can lead to very different outcomes depending on how they are designed, communicated, and experienced by employees when they need them most.

This white paper examines that gap. We brought together employer perspectives, employee survey data, and a review of the latest academic and industry research to understand what actually drives impact. What emerges is clear: leave programs do not operate as isolated policies. Their effectiveness depends on how key elements work together, including benefit design, cost, compliance, communication, culture, and measurement.

The framework that follows provides a structured way to evaluate where your program

stands across these elements, identify gaps, and understand how they affect outcomes. It includes a maturity model and practical checklist to guide your assessment. The research also quantifies the measurable impact of leave benefits on satisfaction, retention intent, and employer advocacy, providing evidence for strategic investment.

For many organizations, this is ongoing work. The question is no longer whether leave benefits matter, but how effectively they contribute to the employee experience and workforce stability. We hope this resource supports that assessment and helps you design accommodation and leave programs that deliver real value for employees and your organization.

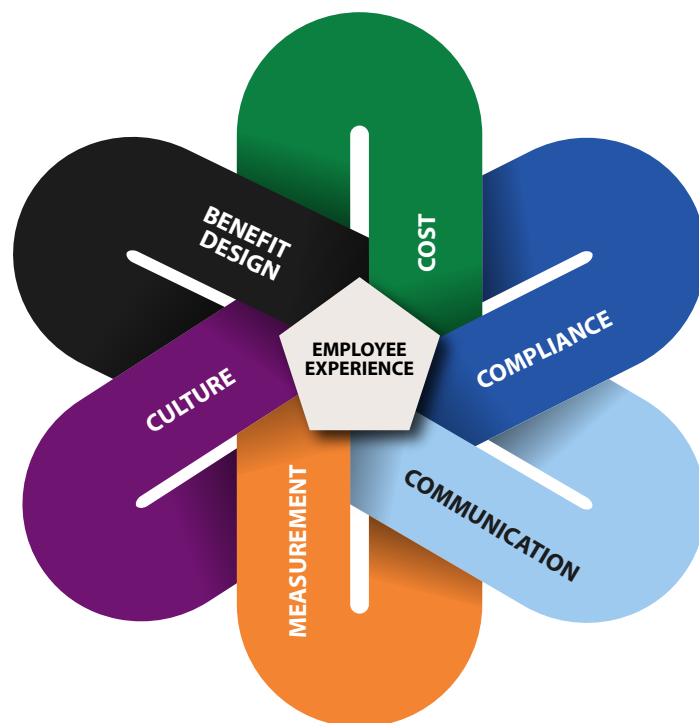


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The landscape of employee benefits has evolved rapidly in recent years, with employer-provided leave policies emerging as a critical factor in workforce satisfaction and retention. This paper explores the relationship between leave benefits and employee satisfaction, seeking to answer, How do employer-provided leave benefits influence employee satisfaction, engagement, and retention? And what practices maximize their positive impact?

To address the research question, DMEC, in partnership with Unum, employed a mixed methods approach. This included discussions with employers of various sizes and across industries to capture firsthand perspectives on leave policy design, communication practices, value measurement, and observed outcomes. We also surveyed employees to understand their experiences with and perceptions of leave benefits in practice. In addition, we conducted a comprehensive literature review of academic research, industry surveys, and organizational reports published between 2020 and 2025 to ground our findings in existing evidence.

The findings from this research point to a clear conclusion: The impact of leave programs is shaped not by any single policy decision, but by how key elements work together as an integrated system. Employers seeking to maximize the value of their leave investments should focus on the following outcomes:



- **Benefit Design:** Leave offerings that align with employees' real-life events are more strongly associated with satisfaction and retention than the sheer number of leave types offered.
- **Cost:** While leave is often viewed through a cost lens, the evidence suggests that satisfaction with leave benefits is meaningfully associated with intent to stay, job satisfaction, and employer advocacy, which highlights the importance of measuring value, not just expense.
- **Compliance:** Compliance establishes the necessary floor for leave programs, but programs driven solely by legal requirements risk fragmentation and reduced employee understanding.

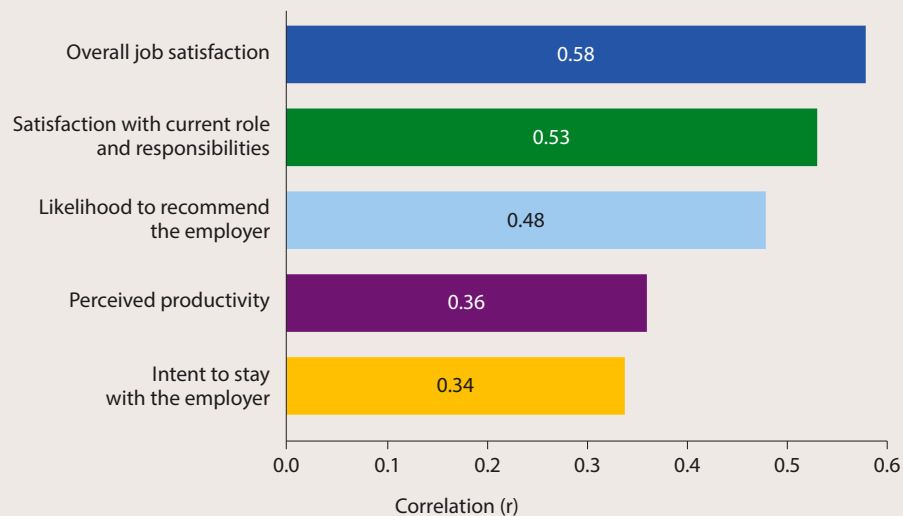
Employers that move beyond minimum requirements create more coherent and trusted leave experiences.

- **Communication:** Awareness of available leave options is a critical driver of perceived value. Employees who better understand their leave benefits report higher satisfaction and stronger attachment to their employers, underscoring communication as a high-impact lever.
- **Culture:** Policies alone do not determine use. Manager behavior, leadership modeling, and cultural norms strongly influence whether employees feel safe and supported when taking leave.
- **Measurement:** Organizations that connect leave data to workforce outcomes, such as satisfaction, retention intent, and advocacy, are better positioned to demonstrate return on investment (ROI), refine programs, and sustain leadership support over time.

Together, these findings reinforce the need for a systems-based approach to leave impact in which benefit design, cost, compliance, communication, culture, and measurement are intentionally aligned to drive meaningful outcomes for both employees and employers.



CORRELATION BETWEEN LEAVE SATISFACTION AND KEY EMPLOYEE OUTCOMES



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