



The Future of the Employee Leave Experience

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Message from Bryon Bass, Chief Executive Officer

For accommodation and leave professionals, complexity is part of the work. We understand the distinctions between policies, benefits, job protections, wage replacement, administrators, and internal processes. For an employee preparing for leave, those distinctions can be much harder to navigate.

That difference in perspective matters. An organization can provide employees with extensive information and resources, but access to information does not always translate into understanding. Employees need to know what applies to their situation, what they need to do next, and where to turn when they have questions. And those needs change as they move from planning a leave through returning to work.

DMEC and Penguin Benefits developed “**The Future of the Employee Leave Experience**” to explore what it takes to better support employees throughout that process. The white paper draws on perspectives from employers, insurers, and service providers and looks at what is working today, from clearer and more progressive communication to stronger role clarity, thoughtful use of technology, and earlier return-to-work planning.

My hope is that this white paper encourages accommodation and leave professionals to look at their programs through a different lens: not only at the information and processes they

provide, but at how employees encounter and use them.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this Think Tank and shared their experience. These conversations help us better understand where the profession is heading and how DMEC can continue supporting the people leading this work.



Bryon Bass, CLMS
Chief Executive Officer, DMEC



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Employees often struggle to prepare for leave because information can be difficult to access, interpret, and apply to their own situations. They may need to understand job protection, wage replacement, documentation requirements, and return-to-work expectations while managing stressful or time-sensitive circumstances. Unclear ownership across managers, HR, administrators, and other partners can add further complexity.

“The Future of the Employee Leave Experience” examines how employees plan for and navigate leave, and how employers and administrators can better support them throughout the process. The white paper draws on a Think Tank that brought together employers, insurers, and service providers to discuss challenges in leave planning, solutions that reduce friction, criteria for evaluating different approaches, and future needs.

Key findings

- **Leave information needs to be easier to understand and apply.** Participants identified visual timelines, planning aids, checklists, and scenario-based guidance as useful ways to translate complex information into practical decision points. Progressive communication can deliver information in stages and reinforce key information as employees move through leave.
- **Employees need clearer direction on where to get support.** Managers are often a first point of contact, but they may not know what information to provide or when to escalate questions. Manager talking points, escalation pathways, and role-clarity maps can help employees reach the right resources and reduce confusion about who owns each part of the process.
- **Better leave experiences require intentional program design.** The findings point toward an employee-centered approach built around how employees understand, process, and act on information. Plain language, visualization, staged communication, accessibility, and alignment among employers, administrators, and partners can help make the process easier to navigate.
- **Technology can improve access and navigation, while human support remains essential.** Digital tools can support education, visual guidance, and self-service while reducing repetitive questions. More complex situations may still require clarification and support from HR, administrators, call centers, or managers.

- **Return to work is part of the full leave experience.** Return-to-work planning can begin before an employee's first day back. Earlier communication and coordination can help address documentation, restrictions, accommodations, schedules, and expectations before the employee returns.

These findings form the basis of the **Employer Toolkit: What's Working Today**, which organizes practical approaches around what employees need throughout leave: understanding the basics, applying information to their situation, navigating the process over time, getting the right support, and returning and reintegrating into the workplace. The toolkit includes plain-language benefit guides, visual timelines, planning checklists, progressive communication, manager talking points, escalation pathways, role-clarity maps, technology and human support models, and return-to-work planning tools.