



Employer Solutions For Supporting Working Mothers During The Pandemic – And Beyond

Insights

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Undoubtedly, working mothers have always worked a “double shift” – a full day at work followed by hours spent caring for their children, running to soccer practice, and getting food on the table. Before the pandemic, however, working mothers at least had a network of support including childcare and school to make this challenge possible. But once COVID-19 hit, childcare became scarce, virtual school continued indefinitely, and the months blurred together. The pressure mounted to such unrealistic levels that working mothers began to leave the workforce at a shocking rate. This article will take a closer look on the unique problems faced by working mothers during the pandemic, and will offer six tangible solutions that employers can put into place to support these valuable team members at their workplaces.

The “Shecession”

In September, an eye-popping 865,000 women dropped out of the U.S. workforce – more than four times the number of men. Working mothers in heterosexual relationships are three times as likely to be responsible for the majority of the housework and childcare during the pandemic, one source reports. One in four women are considering downsizing their careers or leaving the workforce because of the damage brought by COVID-19.

Simply put, the pandemic has magnified gender inequalities in the workplace. Women of color are even more adversely affected. Of the 865,000 noted above, more than 324,000 were Latina and 58,000 were Black women. The mass exodus of women from the workplace has set women’s progress in the labor force back to levels not seen since 1988.

The Long-Term Impacts On Women And The Economy

Women helped shore up the U.S. economy during the last recession, but this time around they are falling behind. Companies risk losing women in leadership, future women leaders, and unwinding years of painstaking progress toward gender equality. The impacts could sideline an entire generation of women.

Economists worry that if women decide to stay on the sideline post-pandemic, the dynamism of the U.S. economy is at risk with an estimated \$64.5 billion per year lost in wages and economic activity. The wage gap will likely be more than two percentage points wider after a pandemic recession,

instead of shrinking like it would during a normal downturn. The consequence from the pandemic could deadlock women's earnings potential and career progression, and for women who leave the workforce during this time, reentry could prove even harder than usual.

Solutions Employers Can Take Now to Curb The Long-Term Impact

Here are six tangible solutions that employers can implement now to retain women and nurture a culture in which women have equal opportunity to achieve their potential over the long term.

1. **Communicate Openly and Frequently.** Listen to the needs of working mothers and communicate openly and often. Employees that are surprised by job decisions are more likely to be unhappy and frustrated. Share regular updates on the state of the business and any key decisions that impact employees' lives such as pay and benefits. Also, ensure that leaders and human resources communicate empathy and flexibility to employees.
2. **Adjust Policies to Better Support Working Mothers.** Many companies have offered more paid time off and resources for families homeschooling. Consider paying for or subsidizing virtual or in-person tutoring services or babysitting. Remind your employees of your company's mental health benefits and bolster them, if feasible.
3. **Make Work More Sustainable.** A sustainable pace of work is essential. Re-evaluate productivity and performance expectations pre-pandemic and consider whether they are realistic. Realize that the old structures may not work in this new reality. Companies may need to reset goals like narrowing the scope or keeping the same goals and extending deadlines. Prioritize which employee projects are most important, reduce the number of meetings, and carefully choose who must attend. Assure employees that their performance will be measured on results and not hours worked. Come up with creative ways to give employees extra time off, such as "COVID-19 days" that allow parents a chance to prepare for the new school year.
4. **Normalize Flexibility.** Employees working remotely are struggling to "turn off" and find a balance between work and life. Companies should encourage flexibility by setting certain hours for meetings and encourage employees to set their own boundaries. Set standards for work-life balance. Consider introducing job sharing or part-time work for positions where those options do not exist. Record meetings or have someone else take notes for those who cannot attend. Leaders can mitigate the stigma associated with flexibility by adopting the same work-life balance.
5. **Minimize Gender Bias.** When co-workers see young children in the background or overhear them during a meeting, there may be an assumption that women are less committed to their jobs. Mitigate this bias by requiring unconscious bias training for employees and having leaders speak out against these biases. It is also important to track outcomes for promotions and raises by gender to ensure that women and men are being treated fairly and consistently.
6. **Empower Women Leaders.** It is important for female leaders and other employees to connect with one another. Help empower women in your business by organizing a forum for women

leaders to come together to share ideas and connect. Implement programs and policies encouraging female leaders to mentor women beginning their career or returning to work after the pandemic.

Conclusion

In a year marked by uncertainty and panic, employers have an opportunity to make significant investments in building a more flexible and empathic workplace. The efforts, or lack of effort, will have consequences on gender equality and the wider economy for years to come.

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