

A program for donations of paid time off strengthens workforce satisfaction, says **KAROLINA KARR**, Brunswick's Chief People Officer.

Taking Care of Your Own

WHEN I SWITCHED JOBS AND STARTED WORK in the US in late 2011, I was prepared for the sticker shock of a system that relied on employers to provide health benefits. What I didn't expect to find was that, despite the tremendous costs of this system, there were times when employees with good benefits coverage would nevertheless find themselves in personal hardship situations with little support.

Imagine a single working parent who has to undergo cancer treatments but has already exhausted the limits of short-term disability insurance and all of their own paid time off; a parent who is now facing unpaid leave and the possibility of coming up short on their monthly pay check. Or a colleague who takes time off to care for a sick family member. Or an employee who needs additional time off after a storm or fire has damaged their home.

We all want to believe that the companies we work for will be there for us in the event of such an emergency. But there

are limits to what organizations may be willing or able to offer, no matter how tragic the situation. In that moment, will a loss of income be covered by insurance? Too often it is not.

Such a case was presented to me in the first week in my US role. It led me to conduct broad research and ask other HR professionals about creative solutions they may have encountered. I found organizations in the public and the private sectors that ran employee donation programs for paid time off (PTO), a basket that includes vacation, sick and personal time. These programs allowed employees to donate unused PTO into a pool available for colleagues in emergency situations. Many smaller companies had donation programs in place, started at the request of employees looking for a way to support a colleague in need.



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The feeling of social belonging, a sense of community at the workplace and among colleagues, is one of the most important factors influencing employee engagement. As a direct expression of the desire to care for and support others, a PTO donation program enhances that sense of community, creating in turn a greater loyalty and pride among employees.

A few **SIMPLE RULES** help make such a program successful:

1. Pool donations and don't earmark them for a specific employee. While requests to donate are often triggered by knowledge of individual cases, employees quickly understand the need to make donations equally accessible to all.
2. Have clear eligibility rules governing the distribution of donated time. What emergency situations are eligible? Are there prerequisites? For example, must the applicant use all their own PTO first?
3. Put a small team (such as the HR head and the general counsel) in charge of approvals to make distribution quick and avoid red tape.
4. Place an upper limit on donations per employee; even the most generous employee still needs to use PTO for themselves.
5. Have similar limits for PTO distributions to ensure there's donated time available for all cases.

Companies should consider matching employee donations. An employer match in the first year can encourage adoption of the program and ensure a bank of time sufficiently large to cover emergency cases as the program gets started. Similar matches could be set up as a recurring event to signal ongoing support for the program and the community.

The reactions from colleagues during the roll-out of our PTO donation program were some of the strongest, most positive I have experienced during my time as an HR professional. Employees proudly mentioned the program to friends and family, earning us a lot praise by word of mouth. We maintained a regular flow of communication about the program and the bank of time never ran out.

Most donations didn't reach the upper limit and there was no pressure for employees to donate, but many gave an average of two days annually, especially toward the end of the year. Every application for an emergency distribution ultimately became a story of support and engagement – of feeling part of a caring community that had the ability to do the right thing. ♦

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