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Parental Leave Policies: Progressive US Companies Pave the Way

Written by Sarah R. Marmor

As today's [New York Times reflects](#), some of the US's most innovative companies are expanding parental leave policies in moves that are light years ahead of the law. These changes are being led by technology companies, where the “product” in many ways is the people who create the code or processes or sales of ever-better solutions for business and personal needs. Retention of great workers is a driving force behind these new, generous policies — as much as a year of parental leave at Netflix; 16 weeks at Accenture; 12-20 weeks at Microsoft. These companies seem to be adopting the [approach taken in Scandinavian countries](#), offering not only generous leave, but also largely gender-neutral leave as those countries do, with interesting if somewhat mixed results for gender equality.

The question the Times asks is, will the best US workers really take advantage of these lengthy leaves, or will the same drive that leads employees to be high-achievers chill the urge to take all the time allotted? This concern has long been noted for [women lawyers at big firms](#), who find that taking extended maternity leave or reduced schedules may delay or derail their chances of making partner. Professional services businesses are relationship businesses where out of sight can mean out of mind, and so long as there is someone eager to take up the slack, you could be at risk. One also wonders whether the values embodied in these changes will fit the go-go ethos here in the US.

The counterpoint to this — and we have seen this in consulting with our own clients — is that so long as the actual values of the company match its policies, the disconnect should not be so great. Before a company institutes a leave policy, it needs to determine what it cares about most. Is retention important? Then making it easy for parents to come back to work (and maybe not travel for a while) after the birth or adoption of a child is probably a really good idea. Do you believe that a little extra autonomy in handling the ups and downs of life will lead to more committed and happy employees? Then doing away with the distinction between vacation, personal and sick leave and just offering one package of Paid Time Off, or PTO, is something you can do — with the added benefit of [not needing to know why](#) your employee is out of the office.

We will continue to watch with interest the innovations being wrought by these progressive companies.