2024 The Future of Benefits

Employee benefits trends shaping today's workforce

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Executive overview

Since 2021, we at Care.com have been researching and reporting on the relationship between family care benefits and employers' business objectives. Year after year, employers have affirmed that the key objectives around which they build their benefits programs are driving productivity and recruiting and retaining top talent.

Our data, as well as numerous recent studies by The Century Foundation[i], Catalyst[ii], and the National Bureau of Economic Research[iii] (to name just a few) have consistently revealed that there is an irrefutable connection between care benefits and those objectives, as well as actual financial impact when those benefits are not in place. According to research conducted by the Council for a Strong America[iv], the lack of adequate and affordable child care costs U.S. employers $23 billion a year in recruitment, retention, and productivity challenges. Factor in the $44 billion[v] in the same types of costs due to inadequate resources for those caring for the elderly and chronically ill and the scope of the crisis becomes blazingly apparent.

From our first report to the present, there has been not only a radical shift in how we work and live, but also a shift in the expectations employers have of their workers and vice versa. To better understand this new paradigm—both the shared expectations and the gaps—in this year's Future of Benefits Report, we surveyed 620 Human Resources leaders and 1,000 American workers across industries.

Our findings were surprising. Despite media coverage of conflicts such as the battles over return-to-office mandates or the challenges of managing a multigenerational workforce, there is actually significant common ground, areas where the perceptions and wishes of workers and employers converged. And that common ground centered on care benefits.

Key findings

1. **Family care benefits are key to meeting employers' business objectives and the family needs and career goals of workers.**
2. **All four generations in the workforce agree upon at least one thing: the need for care support.**
3. **Now more than ever, workers are looking to their employer to help manage the financial burden of caregiving.**
4. **Enhanced care benefits are key to a successful work arrangement whether return-to-office (RTO), hybrid or fully remote.**

Key findings

1. **Family care benefits are key to meeting employers' business objectives and the family needs and career goals of workers**

   One in five (20%) of employees in our study have left a job because their employer didn't provide family care benefits, and a lack of child care benefits topped the list of reasons why they sought another job. And 21%—spanning all generational cohorts in our study—said that they'd switch jobs in order to obtain senior care benefits.

   Given that the cost of replacing a worker can amount to 6-9 months of the employee's salary[vi], companies as well as employees pay a substantial price. But if attrition is the ailment, family care benefits are the cure. Employers in our study say child care benefits have a positive impact on talent recruitment (81%), retention (80%), and productivity (82%). Senior care benefits are similarly powerful, with HR leaders citing their positive impact on recruitment (76%), retention (76%), and productivity (78%) as well.

2. **All four generations in the workforce agree upon at least one thing: the need for care support.**

   True, child care is a higher priority for Millennials and Gen X and senior care looms larger for Gen X and Boomers, but the lines are increasingly blurred. 23% of the US population[vii] is or will be sandwiched, caring for both the young and the elderly. This is reflected in our data, which shows that the percentage of those caring for the elderly is nearly uniform across all four generations.

   And since employers need workers from all generations to thrive, it is not surprising that they agree upon the importance of care benefits. In 2024, 56% are prioritizing child care benefits (up by 10% over 2023) and 50% are prioritizing senior care benefits (up by 7% over 2023).

1 in 5 employees
have left a job because their employer didn't provide family care benefits

56% of employers are prioritizing child care benefits in 2024

3. **Now more than ever, workers are looking to their employer to help manage the financial burden of caregiving.**

   As the availability of child care has plummeted, the cost has spiraled. The average annual price of child care in America has increased nearly 220% over the past three decades[viii]. Without care, parents are, at best, less productive or worse, unable to work at all.

   Given that impact on two of the leading HR benefits objectives—productivity and talent retention—it's no wonder that employers are responding by prioritizing family care benefits such as Dependent Care Flexible Spending Accounts and cash subsidies.

4. **Enhanced care benefits are key to a successful work arrangement, whether return-to-office (RTO), hybrid, or fully remote.**

   As more employers ask workers to return to offices and worksites—as 89% of those in our study are—the majority are trying to provide benefits that will make this reversion to on-site work more enticing.

   But which benefits matter most to employees? Given the correlation between care and a parent's ability to work, it is unsurprising that care is among the most important. As RTO upends many workers' pandemic-era care arrangements and causes them to incur additional expenses, it makes sense that commuter benefits (51%) and child care benefits (48%) are the benefits employees say are most critical to their successful return.

While it is clear there is still much to do to bridge the gap of employer/employee expectations, it is equally clear that there is common ground to be built upon. HR leaders actually want to offer what employees are asking for. And enhancing care benefits is the place to start.

About this study

The surveys were conducted using the online survey platform, Pollfish, and compiled by DKC Analytics. Response completion rate was 65%, and only fully completed responses were considered valid.

Employer sample: 620 C-suite and executive HR leaders surveyed Nov. 11-Dec. 10, 2023

Role	
Lead decision-maker for policies and benefits	47%
Part of HR leadership team	15%
Manager supporting benefits	38%

Gender	
Men	53%
Women	47%

Industries	
Technology	12%
Finance/insurance/consulting	12%
Retail	12%
Healthcare	12%
Manufacturing/construction	12%
Food/hospitality	8%
Education	8%
Transportation/warehousing	8%
Government/nonprofit	8%
Legal	8%

Company size	
100 to 1,599 employees	60%
1,600 to 9,999 Employees	32%
More than 10,000 employees	8%

Age by generation	
Gen Z	4%
Millennials	60%
Gen X	28%
Baby Boomers	8%

Type of employees benefits designed for (multi-select)	
Salaried	91%
Hourly workers	68%
Shift workers	57%

About this study (cont.)

Employee sample: 1,000 employees (all earning wages and eligible for benefits) surveyed Nov. 11-15, 2023

Industries: major industries	
Technology	10%
Finance/insurance/consulting	10%
Retail	10%
Healthcare	10%
Manufacturing/construction	10%
Food/hospitality	10%
Education	10%
Transportation/warehousing	10%
Government/nonprofit	10%
Legal	10%

Age by generation	
Gen Z	10%
Millennials	46%
Gen X	29%
Baby Boomers	15%

Type of employment* (multi-select)	
Full-time salaried	46%
Full-time hourly workers	49%
Part-time salaried	5%
Part-time hourly	10%
Gig economy	4%

*These totals exceed 100% as 24% of respondents have multiple jobs

Gender	
Women	52%
Men	48%

Care benefits enhance worker recruitment, retention and productivity

The ROI of family care benefits

As a result of both attrition and absenteeism, U.S. businesses lose an estimated $44 billion annually[ix] from failing to attract, support and retain workers who have caregiving responsibilities for elderly or ailing family members. And for each year that a child under the age of three lacks sufficient child care, employers lose $23 billion[x] due to the increased hiring costs, and diminished productivity and revenues caused by their employees' child care challenges ($1,640 on average for each working parent).

Asked why family care benefits matter, employers pointed to the fact that it helps them to achieve multiple business objectives:

Positive impact of family care benefits according to employers

Benefit	Employee productivity	Top talent recruitment	Top talent retention	Supporting a diverse workforce	Supporting a multigenerational workforce
Child care benefits	82%	81%	80%	82%	79%
Senior care benefits	78%	76%	76%	78%	80%

Their beliefs are validated by the employees in our study. One in five (20%) have previously left a job because their employer didn't provide family care benefits. Indeed, the lack of child care benefits topped the list of reasons for seeking another job, with 29% of job switchers citing it as their primary motivation.

20% of employees have previously left a job because their employer didn't provided family care benefits

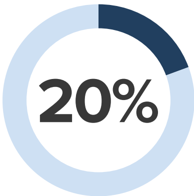
And when asked what benefits that they currently lack could entice them to switch jobs:

- 20% of the total sample cited child care benefits, including 27% of Gen Z and 25% of Millennials.
- 21% of the total sample cited senior care benefits. Notably, the appeal of this benefit was fairly equal across generations (with fewer than 5% separating Millennials from Boomers), belying the notion that it's primarily Boomers and Gen X employees who need it.

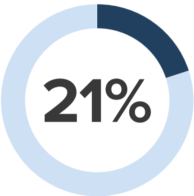
Our data are echoed by numerous other studies, including a recent Catalyst/Harris survey[xi], which found that:

- Four in 10 women (44%) say they will likely need to change jobs to balance child care with work demands, as do 37% of men.
- 70% of working parents say they are more likely to choose an employer that provides child care benefits over one that does not.
- 59% of employees would use caregiving benefits for elder care or the care of other relatives if available from their organization.

Given that the cost of replacing a worker can amount to 6-9 months of the employee's salary[xii], employers have ample incentive to invest in care benefits that will help with retention.



of employees said child care benefits could inspire them to leave their job if offered by a different employer



of employees said senior care benefits could entice them to switch jobs if another employer offered them

Caregiving and the multigenerational workforce

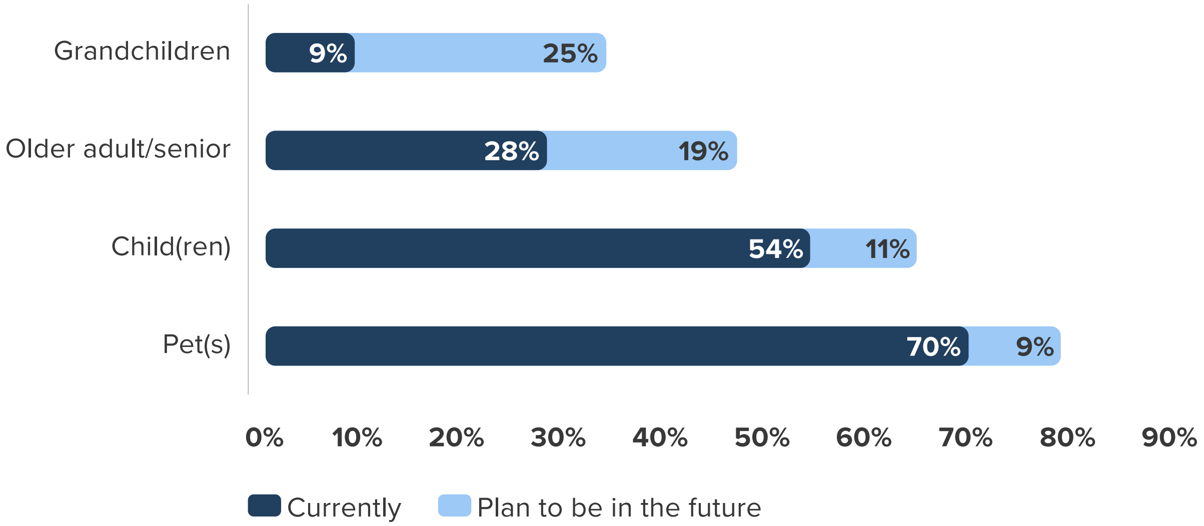
> I wish they would understand how hard it is to work all while trying to figure out who will watch my two kids and take care of my old dad.
>
> *— Female retail employee, age 22*

Much has been written about the challenges of managing a multigenerational workforce. Among the leading refrains are that they have different work habits, different career expectations, and frequently, different lingo. But the common ground upon which Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X and Boomers all stand is care. 79% of employers in our study report seeing more Millennials in their workplace in recent years, while 41% report seeing more Gen Z employees. Thus the greatest growth is among those workers most likely to need child and elder care.

But these two cohorts are no longer mutually exclusive; 23% of the US population[xiii] is or will be simultaneously caring for both the young and the elderly. And while adults in their 40s are most likely to fall into this category (54%), this dual-care burden spans generations, with 27% of adults in their 30s and 36% of adults in their 50s similarly sandwiched. These demographics are not merely of academic interest. According to a recent University of Michigan study[xiv], sandwiched caregivers participate more heavily in the workforce than do "non-sandwiched" caregivers.

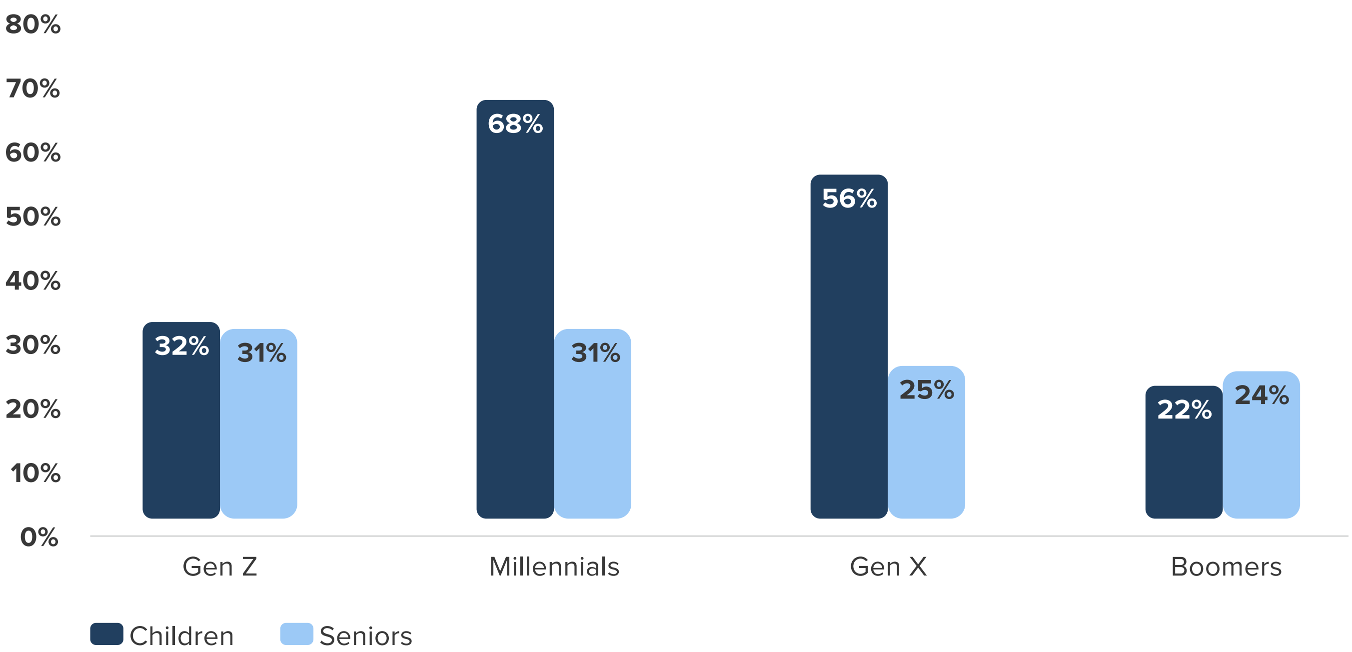
That's reflected in the 1,000 employees in our study.

What describes your status as a caregiver for each of the following?



Consistent with census data and other national studies, workers across generational cohorts in our study are caring for both children and the elderly. While those caring for children are concentrated among Millennials and Gen X employees, 32% of Gen Z and 22% of Boomer respondents also have that responsibility. And strikingly, the percentage of those caring for the elderly is nearly uniform across all four generations.

Caregiving demands by generation



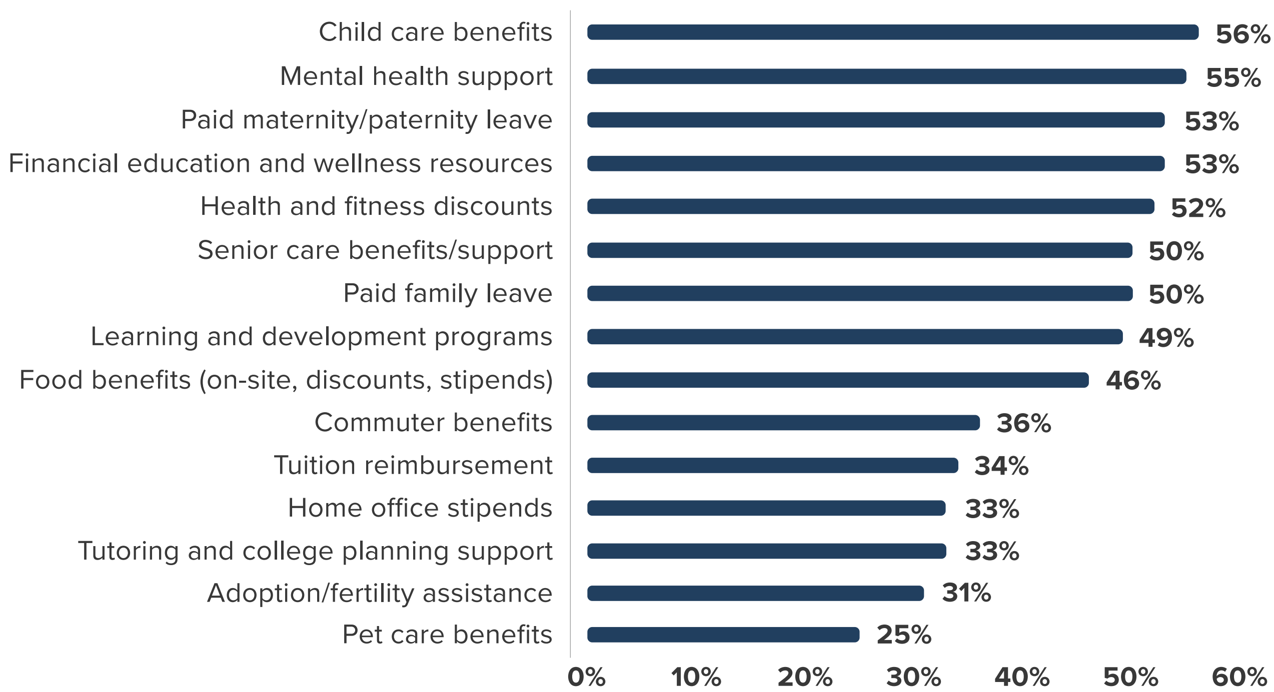
Employers are listening

That’s why to attract and retain employees of all ages, organizations must continue to expand family care benefits. Our study suggests that employers are striving to do just that. Excluding “table stakes” benefits such as retirement plans, health/dental insurance, and PTO/sick days, child care and senior care benefits are among the top ten benefits that HR leaders are prioritizing in 2024. And the increase in the percentage of employers emphasizing family care benefits is notable:

56% are prioritizing child care benefits, up from 46% in 2023

50% are prioritizing senior care benefits, up from 43% in 2023

Select all the benefits you are prioritizing in 2024



Expanded and enhanced family care benefits are the most essential ingredient for a stable and productive workforce. In fact, when responding to an open-ended question asking what employees wish their employers better understood about their caregiving needs, employees made that clear. For instance, 22% cited the need for flexibility, 12% voiced their wish that employers better understood the importance of senior care, and 11% stressed the difficulty of finding and affording quality child care.

Easing the financial burden of caregiving

Spiraling costs and plummeting availability take a huge financial and emotional toll

On September 30, 2023, the $24 billion Child Care Stabilization program—developed to help working parents through the pandemic—ended. Dubbed the "child care cliff," this loss of funds put 70,000 daycare centers, preschools, and similar facilities at risk of closing or significantly reducing enrollment. That, in turn, has jeopardized the daycare access of 3.2 million children[xv].

The child care cliff is just the latest crisis to be inflicted upon America's child care infrastructure. Since 2020, 12,000 programs have closed, due at least in part to the fact that, unable to live on rock-bottom wages, 80,000 child care workers have left the field[xvi]. And pre-pandemic, 51% of Americans lived in "child care deserts[xvii]" where there are more than three children under the age of five for every one licensed child care slot. That ratio has certainly worsened as daycare supply has dwindled.

But even if it were available, daycare is increasingly unaffordable. The First Five Years Fund reports that the average annual price of child care in America has increased nearly 220% over the past three decades[xviii]. The average price to place an infant in a daycare center for a year is over $13,000. As Forbes[xix] notes, this means that the annual cost for two children exceeds that of mortgage repayments in 44 states.

> "As a share of family income…child care prices are untenable for families across all care types, age groups, and county population sizes…"
>
> *— Liana Christin Landivar, Nikki L. Graf, and Giorleny Altamirano Rayo, U.S. Department of Labor*

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)[xx], child care is considered affordable when it costs families no more than 7% of their household income. Yet, on average, according to the 2024 Cost of Care Report[xxi], which presents data from a Care.com survey of 2,000 parents, respondents are spending 24% of their household income on child care, with 84% spending 10% or more and 60% spending 20% or more. In fact, 24% of the employees in our study are working multiple jobs, presumably because they must in order to make ends meet.

Even more alarming is that parents are not relying solely on household income to pay for child care. More than one-third (35%) are dipping into their savings, too. This lays the path for even less financial security as they age, thereby increasing the burden their children will have to shoulder in the future for both child and elder care.

The toll on businesses and the economy as a whole is just as staggering. According to research conducted by the Council for a Strong America[xxii], the lack of adequate and affordable child care costs the U.S. economy an estimated $122 billion a year in lost earnings for workers, productivity and hiring costs for employers, and diminished state and federal tax revenues. In a recent Catalyst/Harris study[xxiii], more than half (55%) of the 1,086 working adults surveyed say that without financial assistance or subsidies from their organization, they are unable to afford child care, and 35% of the mothers surveyed say they will likely need to stop working altogether to manage the child care they need.

That's why, as a result of the child care cliff, 40% of the employers in our study (particularly those in banking/finance and technology) have made strategic changes to their benefits strategy, 31% have made minor tweaks, and an additional 15% have at least discussed the possibility of changes that might mitigate the impact.

40%

of employers have made strategic changes to their company's benefits strategy as a result of the child care cliff

31%

of employers have made minor tweaks to their benefits strategy because of the child care cliff

15%

of employers have discussed the possibility of changes that might mitigate the impact of the child care cliff

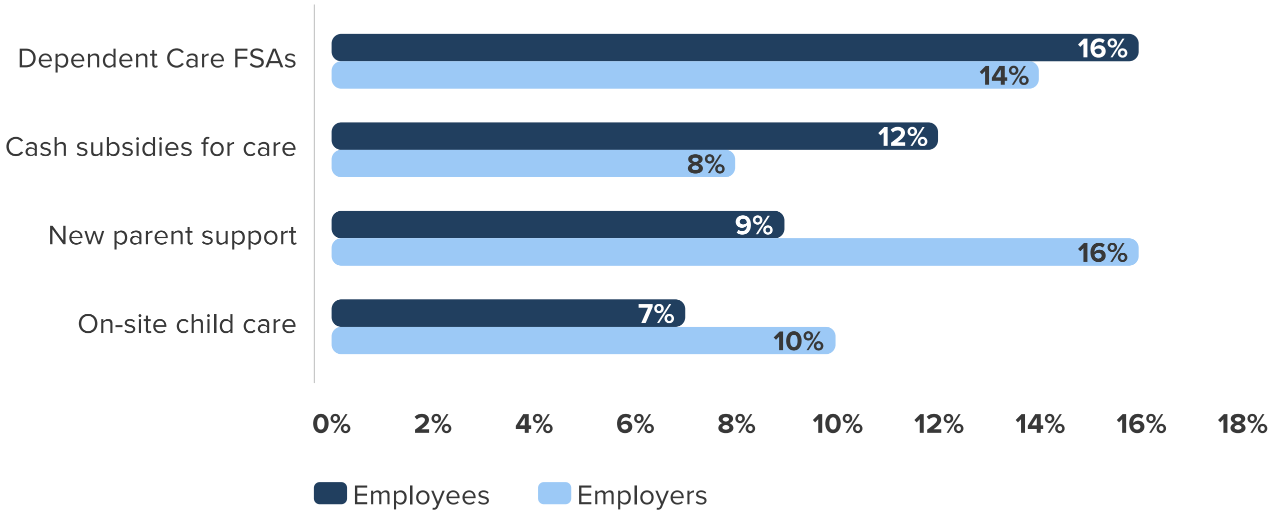
FSAs, cash subsidies, and new parent support are most in demand

Given the immediate and dramatic financial and emotional implications of having a baby, employers report that new parent support is the family care benefit that prospective employees most often request (33%). And when asked what family care benefit they'd offer if limited to only one, employers also most frequently select new parent support (16%).

However, employers are clearly also realizing that care needs extend well beyond birth. Following new parent support, when asked what family care benefits they'd choose if limited to just one, 14% of employers say Dependent Care FSAs, followed by on-site child care (10%) and cash subsidies for care (8%). When asked why they chose the benefit they did—regardless of what they selected—69% describe it as the one most useful to their workforce, while half (50%) say it is the most requested one.

Underscoring more common ground between employers and employees, when asked "if you could have only a single family benefit, which would you choose?", employees selected the same set of benefits as their top four. They did, however, prioritize them differently. Unlike HR managers, workers ranked FSAs and cash subsidies first—those benefits most likely to help them mitigate the direct cost of care.

If you could offer/receive only one family care benefit, what would it be?



And while we saw modest differences between salaried and hourly employees in these rankings, the top two—Dependent Care FSAs and cash subsidies for care—were selected in almost equal proportions across the two cohorts.

Indeed, cash subsidies for care ranked as the top family care benefit that employees are not currently offered and would definitely use if it was available (30%).

Employees report major savings from child and senior care benefits

According to the Cost of Care Report[xxiv], nearly 47% of respondents spent more than $1,500 per month on child care expenses in 2023, adding up to $18,000 per year. And 20% of respondents report spending more than $36,000 annually.

To better understand the financial impact of child and senior care benefits in mitigating those costs, in this study we asked employees who had used whatever family care benefits their company offered how much money they thought they'd saved in the past 12 months.

Those whose companies offer **child care benefits report an average out-of-pocket savings of $2,727**, or 15% of the average annual cost of $18,000. This number was highest in the manufacturing and construction sectors, where the average savings were $3,860.

Those whose companies offer **senior care benefits report an average out-of-pocket savings of $2,909**. This number was highest in the finance industry, where respondents reported an average annual savings of $4,100.

While these savings are still a drop in the bucket, for all working families they are meaningful help and particularly for low-earning families, they may tip the scales in favor of being able to work at all.

Successful work arrangements, including return-to-office, rely on family care benefits

> Especially in corporate marketplaces, two factors create work-life stress and attrition: high cost of living and long commute times. Those make it so stressful for workers to manage childcare, elder care, family responsibilities, and be available when they need to be at work[xxv].
>
> *— Eric Severson, Neiman Marcus Group's chief people and belonging officer, quoted in Fortune*

With the onset of the Covid pandemic, 47% of the employees in our study entered into virtual or hybrid work environments. Now, almost four years later, 37% of that group have been required to return to office/on-site full-time, and another 42% are expected to return under a hybrid system.

The HR leaders in our study report similar trends. 89% say that their company has required either a full-time (47%) or hybrid (42%) return to office.

Employers' desire for a fully populated workplace is somewhat at odds with workers' wishes. When asked to select all of the work environments they desire, 53% of the 1,000 employees surveyed for The Modern Workplace Report[xxvi] preferred having the option of working remotely, 44% were amenable to hybrid arrangements, and fewer than half (43%) favored on-site work.

This isn't simply a matter of personal preference. Remote and hybrid work has also dramatically leveled the playing field for female and male workers. According to a Gallup survey[xxvii], fewer than half of U.S. adults (47%) think that men and women have equal job opportunities. Even more notable, only 33% of women do, versus 61% of men. However, 77% of workers in The Modern Workplace study—men and women in equal ratios—say that remote work is good for career advancement across gender lines.

47%

of employees entered into virtual or hybrid work environments with the onset of the pandemic

89%

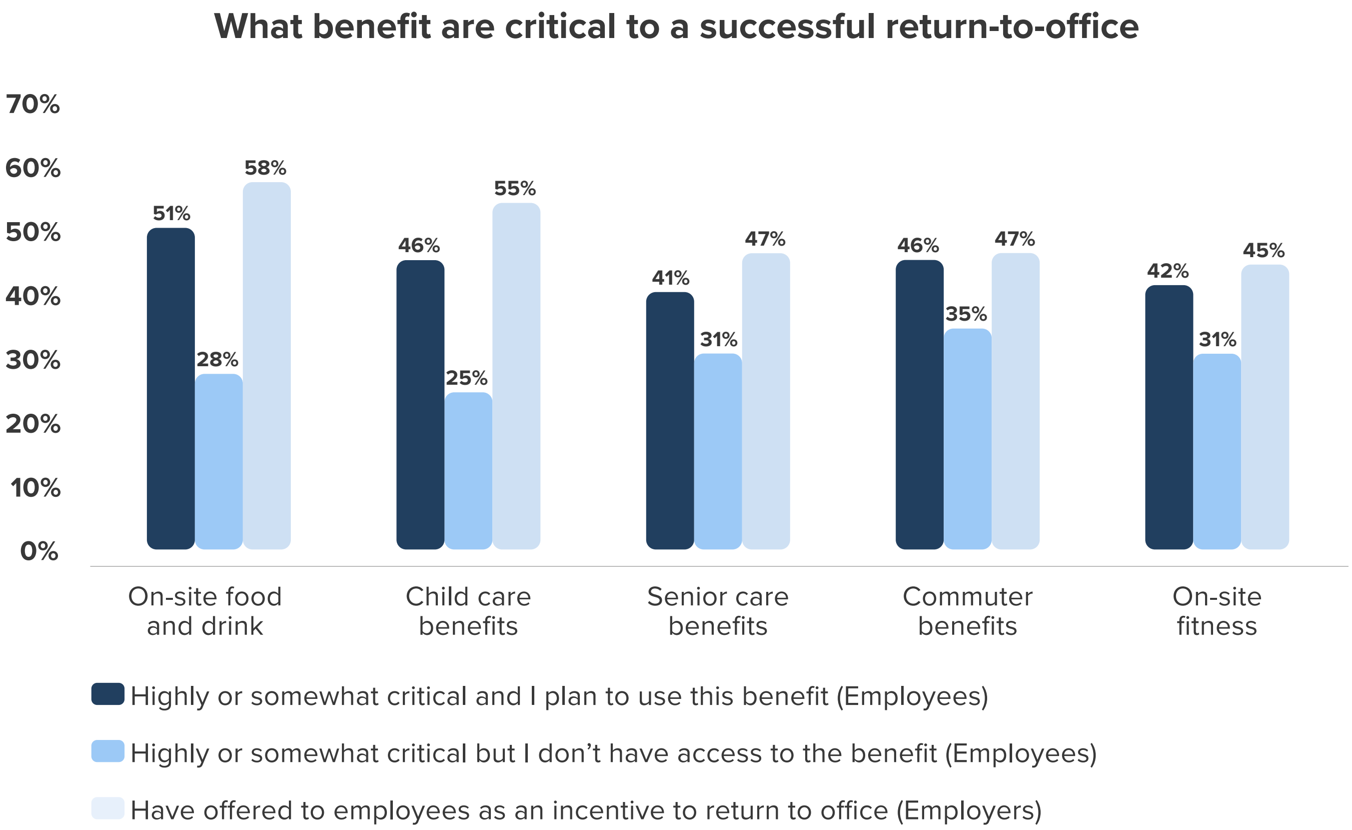
of employers say that their company has required either a full-time or hybrid return to office

Bridging the gap

Almost every study conducted in the past few years demonstrates workers' enthusiasm for remote or hybrid work. But while employers and workers may never completely see eye-to-eye in this new work environment, specific benefits can go a long way to bridging the gap, meeting and satisfying the objectives of both sides. In fact, a shift in benefits strategy can make on-site work not just appealing, but possible. That's why among employers who require a return to office, 89% are offering an incentive via increased benefits. Specifically:

- **58%** are offering on-site food and drink
- **55%** are offering child care benefits
- **47%** are offering senior care benefits
- **47%** are offering commuter benefits
- **45%** are offering on-site fitness options

Indeed, while there are slight discrepancies between what employers offer and employees want, they are not far apart.



In returning to the office, workers must once again deal with the financial and temporal costs of commuting, and radically change the child and elder care arrangements they'd had in place. That's why while on-site food and drink is the most frequently offered benefit to entice employees back to the office, employees in our study indicated that it's commuter benefits (51%) and child care benefits (48%) that are the most highly critical to their successful return.

And notably, the employees most likely to say that child care benefits are highly critical and they plan to use them tend to work in industries with a high concentration of hourly workers: retail (50%), food/hospitality (48%), and technology (47%). Retail workers are also most likely to say the same about senior care benefits (39%), followed by finance (35%) and manufacturing/construction (30%).

When remote or hybrid work is feasible, it yields tremendous employee rewards. As the Modern Workplace Report[xxviii] indicates, working caregivers strongly prefer hybrid work over full-time on-site work for:

Career fulfillment
(46% vs. 29%)

Life balance
(49% vs. 27%)

Happiness
(56% vs. 22%)

Less stress
(54% vs. 24%)

Remote or hybrid work not only offers workers emotional rewards, but helps employers mitigate “presenteeism—the practice of showing up in the office even when ill or distracted by caregiving or other personal challenges.

Conclusion

Despite our culture's penchant for conflict, this year's study tells a less sensational but more compelling story: employers want to offer what employees most want.

For employers to get what they want—strong productivity and a steady talent pool—they need only listen to what their employees want—help with care. And given the commonality of this need from the youngest workers to the oldest, this request isn't going away anytime soon. But if, through their benefits and culture, employers look after the working caregivers among them, all stakeholders in the workplace will prosper.

Ultimately, every institution in American society must support family caregivers, and we are still a long way from making that a reality. As The American Prospect[xxix] notes, "At the minimum, there is a vast disparity in early child care choices between the U.S. and the world's early child care leaders. When considered with the limitations of long-term care in the United States, families can become sandwiched by caregiving responsibilities. A 2019 UNICEF study ranked the U.S. dead last[xxx] among high- and middle-income nations for family-friendliness."

But much as they'd welcome it, American employers and workers aren't waiting for massive help from the government. In recognition of their mutual interests, they are doggedly, incrementally finding common ground through which to forge a trail.

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