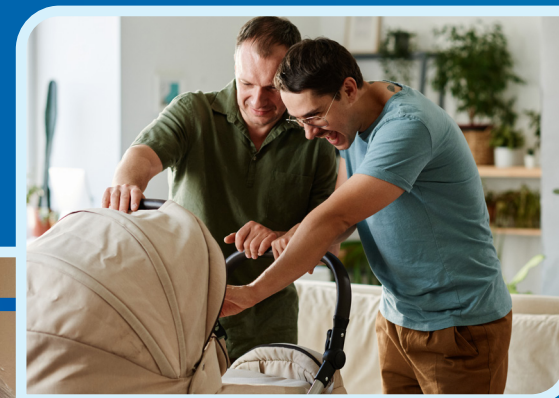


Leave Perception by Gender

What HR Isn't Seeing About Absence for Women and Men



Workplace benefits research from The Standard shows women and men use employee leaves of absence in roughly equal numbers, both to care for themselves and their loved ones. The research also reveals that HR significantly overstates the percentages of women who take a leave in comparison with men. Setting perceptions aside and basing benefits decisions and communications on absence data will better position employers to avoid business risks. Focusing on absence data will also equip organizations to foster stronger engagement and retention across gender in the workplace.



Ensure Data Drives HR's Thinking on Leave and Benefits

Keeping data at the forefront of benefits planning can help HR decision-makers avoid inaccurate perceptions about women, men and their leaves of absence.

Key Findings:

HR believes women take more leave than men overall, but the research shows the opposite.

- **More men than women take leaves to care for themselves, but HR thinks the reverse.** Men report taking somewhat more leave than women to care for their own physical and mental health. HR professionals believe that women are more likely to request this type of leave than women actually do, and that men take less personal leave than men report. The disparity between HR's perception and what women report is markedly greater than the gap between HR and men.
- **Men take more leaves than women to care for family, but HR believes the opposite.** HR professionals think women are likely to take more leave to care for a family member's physical and mental health than women report. Men indicate taking this type of leave at higher rates than women — and at significantly higher rates than HR estimates.
- **HR vastly overstates maternity and new parent absence for women while understating it for men.** Women report taking somewhat more maternity and new child leave than men, but employers overestimate women taking this form of absence by a large margin, while underestimating the frequency of men doing the same.



The story on leave for men and women isn't what HR professionals think it is. But employers can close the gap in understanding. Minimizing inaccurate perceptions related to leave and other benefits is an important step in improving retention. The key is to seek out expertise that leads to clear assessments and decisions rooted in solid data and experience."

Brad Yoder
*Assistant Vice President
Life, Supplemental and
Disability Claims
The Standard*



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- Life-stage assumptions collide with actual leave behavior.



HR assumes all employees are familiar with the benefits same way HR is.”

HR professional at a technology company with 10,000+ employees

Observation 1

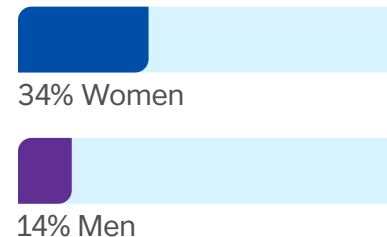
Men are taking leave to care for their physical and mental health at higher rates than women — or than HR thinks.

By small margins, men are greater drivers of absence than women when it comes to caring for one's own physical health. But HR decision-makers view women as much more likely to use absence for their personal health, especially in relation to mental health. The data shows otherwise. Men report they take leave to care for their own mental health at a significantly higher rate than women.

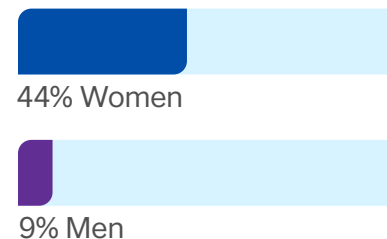
HR decision-makers don't align with women or men on how likely they are to take leave to care for their own health needs.

What HR Believes

HR's Perception of How Likely Women and Men Are to Take Leave to Care for **Their Own Physical Health**

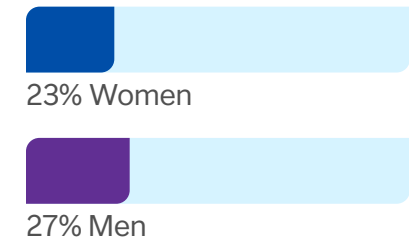


HR's Perception of How Likely Women and Men Are to Take Leave to Care for **Their Own Mental Health**

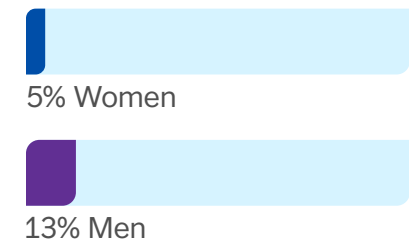


What Employees Report

Employees Reporting Taking Leave to Care for **Their Own Physical Health**



Employees Reporting Taking Leave to Care for **Their Own Mental Health**



Reflections

1. Women may be toughing it out on mental health.

The largest perception gap exists between how much absence women report taking to care for their own mental health compared with how likely HR professionals believe women are to take leave for that reason.

It's easy to think HR's view of women's mental health absences is simply based on old stereotypes. But it's also possible they're seeing women in their organizations who face real mental health challenges and aren't taking time away from work to care for themselves.

2. Gen Z is a likely driver of men's mental health absence rates.

Men are also more likely to report taking leave to care for their mental health than women, with 13% of men compared with 5% of women indicating they've taken leave for this reason. While 13% isn't a large percentage, it's more than double the rate at which women take leave. Previous research from The Standard points to one reason for these findings. Gen Z men take leave for mental health at higher rates than any other generation of men and at rates equal to Gen Z women.*

Gap in HR Perception of Women's Leave for Personal Mental Health

44%

of HR professionals say women are more likely to take leave for their mental health.

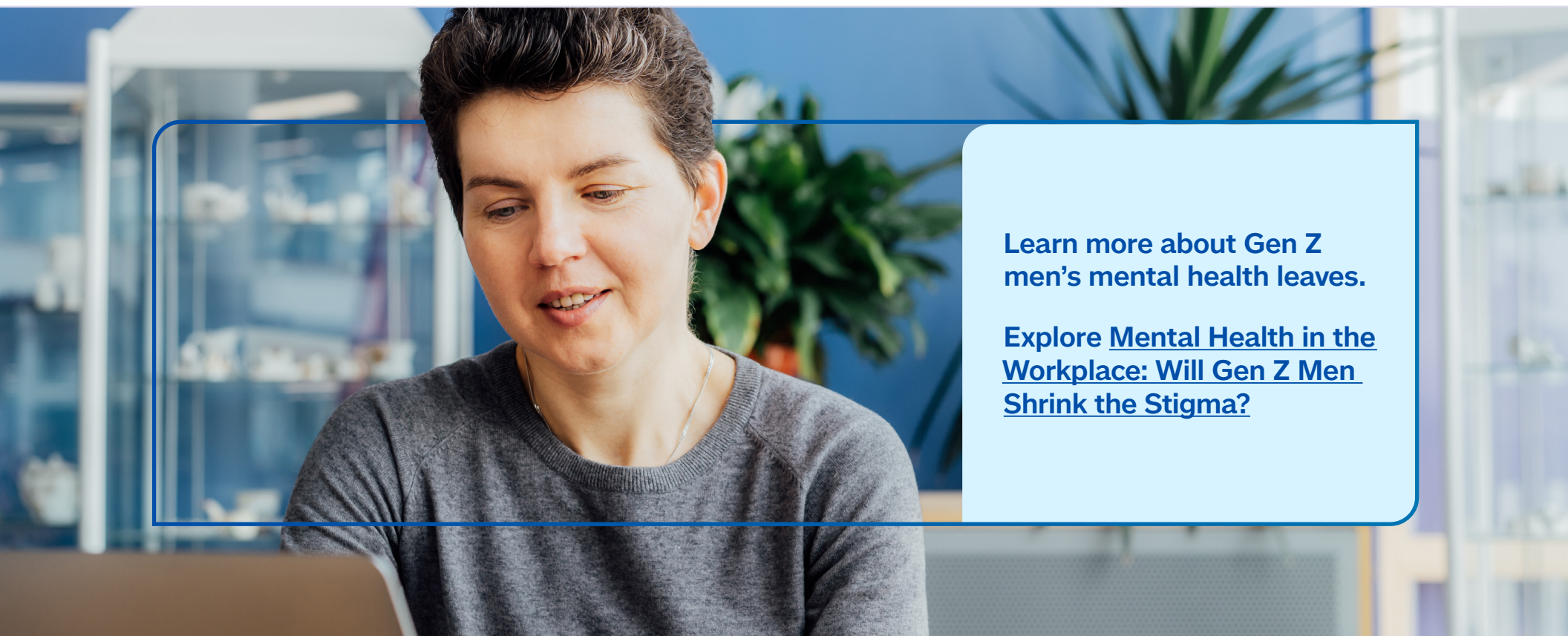
5%

of women report taking leave for their mental health.

* [Mental Health in the Workplace: Will Gen Z Men Shrink the Stigma?](#) The Standard, June 2026

3. Accessing leave data for personal health leaves may pose an obstacle.

Leave data is inherently complex. Multiple types of leave, varying rules for eligibility and timelines, and numerous state laws can make easy, real-time access and reporting a challenge. If HR professionals struggle to regularly view and understand absence data, it likely makes it easier for misapprehensions to slip into their thinking on the topic.



Learn more about Gen Z men's mental health leaves.

Explore [Mental Health in the Workplace: Will Gen Z Men Shrink the Stigma?](#)

Observation 2

Contrary to HR perceptions, men take more time off than women to care for family.

The research reveals some stark differences in HR's perception of how likely women and men are to take leave to care for a loved ones' health compared with what employees report. Interestingly, more men than women indicate using absence to care for a loved one, particularly when it comes to physical health. HR professionals also think women are far more likely to take leave to care for a loved one's mental health than women report.



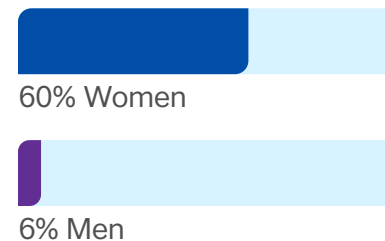
They don't openly communicate about benefits — you have to ask to find out what is available.”

Employee working in the medical field at an organization of 100 – 499 employees

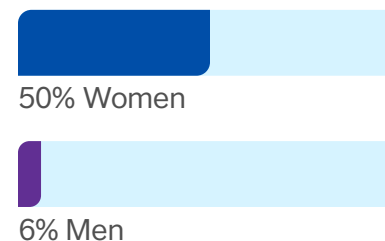
HR decision-makers don't align with women or men on how likely they are to take leave to care for a family member's health.

What HR Believes

HR's Perception of How Likely Women and Men Are to Take Leave to Care for a **Loved One's Physical Health**

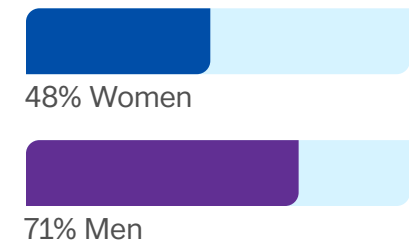


HR's Perception of How Likely Women and Men Are to Take Leave to Care for a **Loved One's Mental Health**

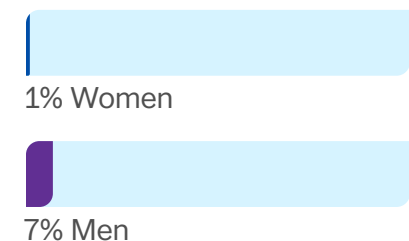


What Employees Report

Employees Reporting Taking Leave to Care for a **Loved One's Physical Health**



Employees Reporting Taking Leave to Care for a **Loved One's Mental Health**



Reflections

1. Men are unseen caregivers.

With men taking leave to care for family members at notably higher rates than women report and HR believes likely, there's a risk that this cohort's specific needs as caregivers aren't being seen or met. It also prompts the question: Are communications about leave and support for caregiving engaging men in relevant and meaningful ways?

Employees Reporting Taking Leave to Care for a Loved One's Physical Health



HR on Who's More Likely to Take Leave to Care for a Loved One's Physical Health



Caring for aging parents hits women harder.

The Standard's study shows men report taking more leave for caregiving than women and more than HR believes. But when that care is for an aging parent, other research suggests the experience hits women harder. Forty-seven percent of women vs. 30% of men say caring for an aging parent has a negative impact on their emotional well-being and 38% of women compared with 26% of men report a negative effect on their physical health.* It's possible women suffer worse repercussions from caring for parents because they're squeezing these caregiving duties into their lives rather than taking leave.

* [Family Caregiving in an Aging America](https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2026/02/26/family-caregiving-in-an-aging-america), Kim Parker, Pew Research Center, Feb. 26, 2026, www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2026/02/26/family-caregiving-in-an-aging-america

2. Low rates of absence for family mental health don't mean the need is rare.

It may mean employers don't fully understand whether those needs lead to formal leave, are being handled informally or go unsupported. For employers, the disconnect matters because assumptions can shape benefit design, manager expectations and benefits education.

3. When family leave data lags, so can HR perceptions.

Paid family leave is available in more states than ever before, and more employees are using the benefit. But when tracking leave for an employee's own health, employers typically have more structured administrative data and better information on duration, claim status and return-to-work outcomes. Coding for this type of leave is also more consistent when the leave is associated with a medical certification or disability claim. In contrast, absence to care for a loved one often presents greater visibility gaps. Caregiving leave can draw from multiple programs, and reasons for an absence are frequently recorded in broader caregiving categories. Employers may know that a leave occurred but have less detail about the care situation, relationship and length of caregiving responsibilities. They also might lack insight into ongoing impacts after an employee returns to work.



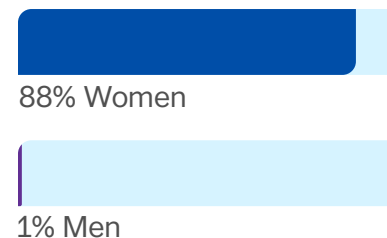
Observation 3

HR overestimates younger team members' use of leave for a new child.

A large gap emerges between women reporting taking leave for pregnancy or a new child and the number of HR professionals who believe women are likely to take this leave. The difference was much less sizeable for men, but still notable.

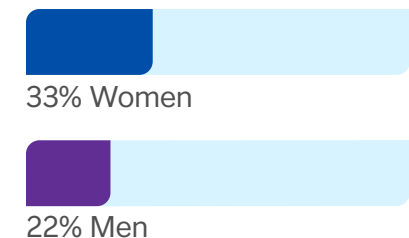
What HR Believes

HR's Perception of How Likely Women and Men Are to Take Leave to Care for a **Pregnancy or Bonding With a New Child**



What Employees Report

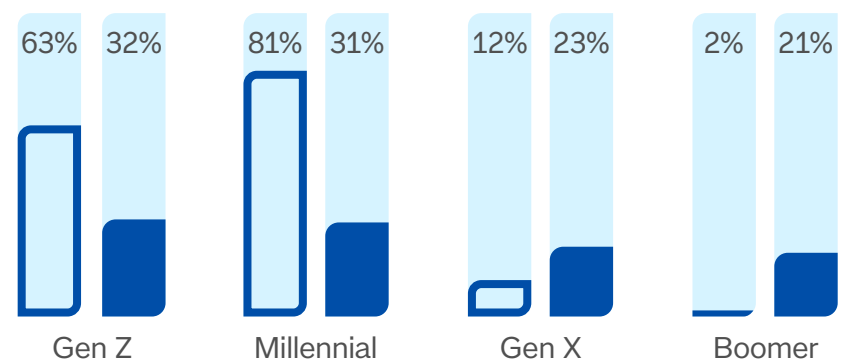
Employees Reporting Taking Leave to Care for a **Pregnancy or Bonding With a New Child**



Disconnect on Younger Generations

Less New Child Leave: While generally considered to be in their childbearing years, Gen Zers and millennials report taking much less new parent and pregnancy leave than HR believes likely.

Leave for a Pregnancy or a New Child



Reflections

1. New parents might be missing out on support.

HR's impression that many more women than men take leave for a new child may result in absence policies and communications that are overly focused on mothers. Fathers and non-birthing parents could overlook relevant benefits or believe those benefits aren't intended for them. Mistargeted messaging might also affect white-collar workers concerned that parental leave will reduce their yearly bonus, even when shoring up an absence with paid time off. If they don't clearly see how parental leave helps and applies to them, members of this group could shy away from this form of absence despite the advantages for them and their families.

HR's View of Who's More Likely to Take Leave for Maternity or to Bond With a New Child

HR on Women

88%

HR on Men

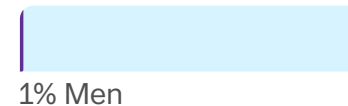
1%



2. Incorrect assumptions present risk to businesses.

When employers underestimate men's parental leave usage, it impacts planning for running the business while employees are out and when they come back to their roles. That includes issues like staffing, workload coverage and return-to-work support for fathers and other caregivers. And if managers unconsciously plan for women's absences more than men's, it could reinforce stereotypes about women's commitment to work. Besides creating disparities in women's career opportunities, that thinking might lead to gaps in succession planning or project assignments.

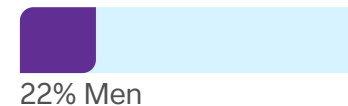
HR's View of How Likely Men Are to Take New Child Leave



HR's View of How Likely Women Are to Take New Child Leave



Men Who Report Taking New Child Leave



Women Who Report Taking New Child Leave



3. Life-stage assumptions collide with actual leave behavior.

Do age-based assumptions work in an era of falling fertility rates? The CDC reports that between 2007 and 2025, the U.S. fertility rate of women ages 15 – 44 has generally declined, decreasing by 23%.*

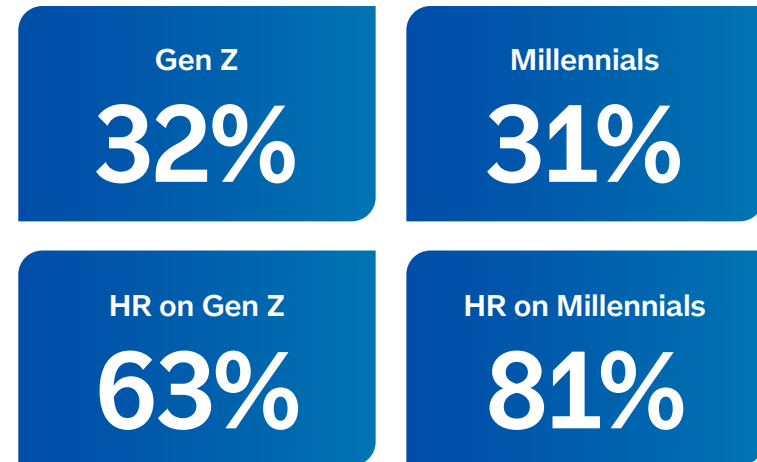
And what about delayed family formation, different household structures and varying career paths?

Although Generation Z and millennials are mostly viewed as being in their childbearing years, employers may overestimate how strongly age predicts demand for parental leave. For those using the benefit, the gap in perception may pose a risk to meeting important caregiving needs.

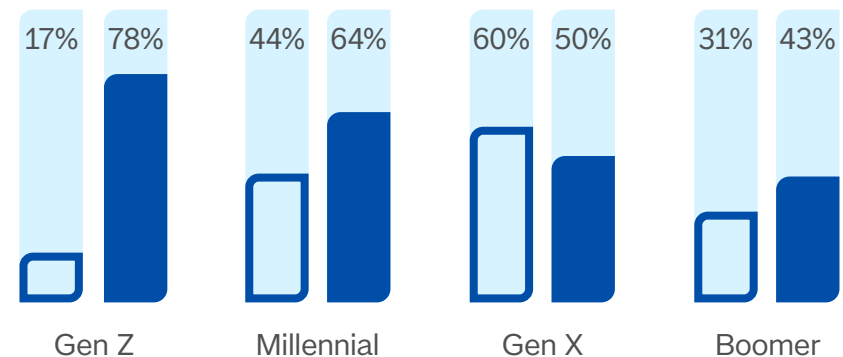
Especially when Gen Zers report taking leave to care for a family member's physical health at higher rates than any other generation — and far more than HR leaders believe.

Given that Gen Z employees are more likely than employers expect to take leave for a family member's physical health needs, HR could be focusing too heavily on parental leave while underestimating other caregiving responsibilities.

Leave for a Pregnancy or New Child



Leave for a Loved One's Physical Health



 HR Perception  What Employees Report

* [Vital Statistics Rapid Release, Births: Provisional Data for 2025](#), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, April 2026

Summary of Findings

The Standard's research reveals a consistent gap between what HR decision-makers believe about leave-taking and what employees report about themselves. The findings raise an important question: How much of employers' understanding of absence is based on comprehensive data, and how much is based on observations, assumptions and anecdotes?

Key Data:

- Women and men report similar rates of personal health leave, but HR assumes women take it more frequently, especially for mental health.
- By wide margins, HR views women as using more absence to care for a family member's health needs. But men take this leave much more often than women.
- Women and younger workers aren't using maternity or parental leave at the rates HR thinks.

Why It Matters

- Misreading who's taking leave, how often and for what reasons can hamper decision-making and planning for the actual needs of the employees who rely on absence. Employers who regard absence as a universal benefit that helps workers across age, gender and other demographics are more likely to prioritize it, ensuring a robust offering that can increase retention.
- Reliable data on employee leaves is critical to helping employers run the business while employees are away. Solid information on absences will also empower organizations to support workers when they return, leading to stronger morale.
- Leave is still a cornerstone of a solid benefits package. Straightforward access to accurate absence data can reduce unconscious bias and equip employers to make sure opportunities for advancement and leadership growth reach workers across the employee spectrum. Doing so is a solid strategy to boost employee engagement and tenure.

About the Research

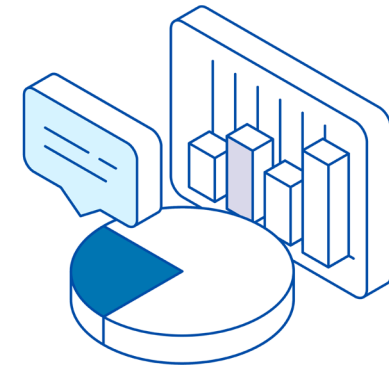
On behalf of The Standard, two third-party research firms conducted nearly identical surveys, one with HR decision-makers and one with employees. Each survey explored employee differences in return to work, benefits priorities and employee resource groups.

HR decision-maker survey:

- Fielded: 509 HR decision-makers
- Field dates: Jan. 5 – 23, 2026

Employee survey:

- Fielded: 501 employees
- Field dates: Feb. 9 – 19, 2026



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(10/26)