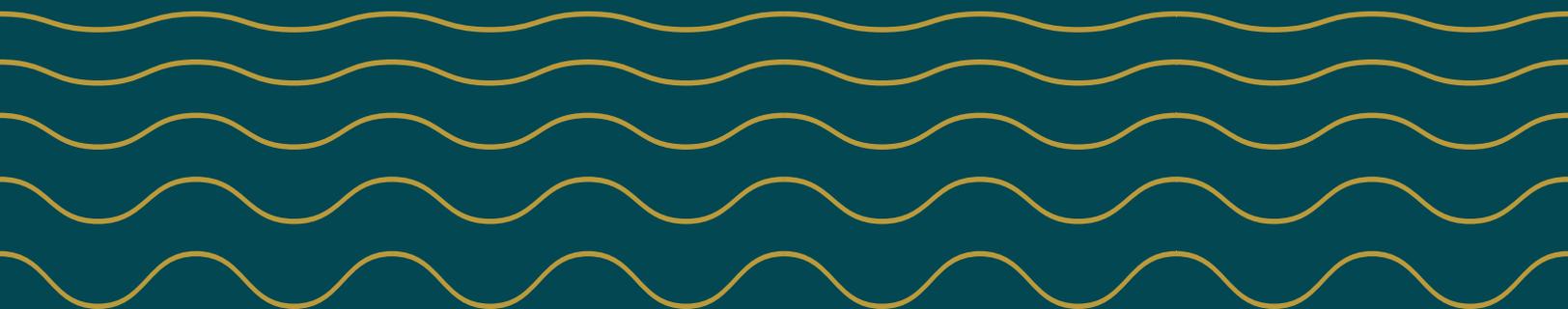


# Recharging and Returning from Parental Leave

A new framework for organizations to optimize parental leave experiences



# Welcome

The impact of welcoming a new child into a family is undeniable. Physical, mental, and financial health– impacted all at once. Yet, we still exist in a world and a country in which many moms and dads are not afforded the time and ability to process, celebrate, and recover from these changes. Despite parental leave benefits ranking as an important benefit to employees, the prevalence of paid maternity, paternity, and adoption leave has dropped since 2020.

Organizations have the ability to change this trajectory.

At The Mom Project and Werklabs, we know that parental leave is critical for all caregivers, primary or secondary, and for all forms of family expansion. For years, Werklabs and The Mom Project have supported organizations through custom research and analytics to develop best-in-class parental leave policies. Now, with the present research, we provide organizations with robust, prescriptive, and updated insights to optimize their own parental leave policies and experiences.

It is our hope that this research helps guide organizations in supporting and retaining working parents. Our research speaks for itself: when employers invest in this crucial segment of the workforce, the returns are tremendous.

Sincerely,

Pam Cohen, PhD  
Chief Research & Analytics Officer  
Werklabs & The Mom Project

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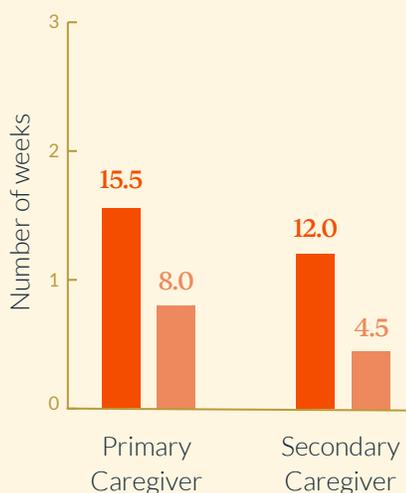
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# Many organizations are moving the needle to offer robust paid parental leave; far fewer parents experience this reality.

## Average Weeks of Leave Offered or Taken

■ TheSkimm Employers   ■ Werklabs Talent Community



Today, robust parental leave benefits go far beyond offering just paid leave to include benefits that also support parents before and after their family expands. More and more organizations are beginning to cover fertility and family planning services, adoption costs, as well as breast milk shipping for traveling moms and child care stipends. TheSkimm’s recent ShowUsYourLeave campaign highlighted this trend, calling on employers to publicly share their leave policies in an effort to foster greater transparency with regard to paid parental leave. The campaign went viral, prompting more than 500 employers to share their leave policies.

The campaign and its [coinciding database](#) paints a rather rosy picture of paid leave in America— one drastically different from the results gleaned from Werklabs’ present study. Employers in TheSkimm’s database offer an average of 15.5 weeks of leave for primary caregivers, but participants in Werklabs’ parental leave survey report taking an average of 8 weeks. For secondary caregivers, TheSkimm’s employers offer an average of 12 weeks, but TMP talent community members report having actually taken an average of 4.5 weeks.

Clearly, a gap exists between the parental leave offered by today’s progressive organizations and those organizations offering no paid leave at all, and the reality is many Americans experience something somewhere in between.



## **A massive gender gap in parental leave experiences presents a clear opportunity for gender parity progress.**

Parental leave ought to empower moms and women by allowing them to recharge with their families and return to work when they are mentally and physically ready. Parental leave is not meant to risk backtracking on progress made toward achieving gender parity in work. Yet, the data does not lie.

Werklabs' survey results and predictive analytics show that compared to men, women report being 51% less satisfied with their most recent parental leave experience. And as a function of this poorer experience, women are 35% less likely to report an intention to stay at their organization and 22% less likely to recommend their organization as a great place to work.

More positive parental leave experiences garner significant increases in employee retention and recruitment. As a result, prioritizing and optimizing parental leave experiences becomes one critical tool of many (i.e. flexibility) to attracting and retaining high-performing female talent.

In the pages that follow, Werklabs details a new framework that integrates predictive analytics and the human experience to optimize parental leave.



# Methodology & Demographics

For years, Werklabs and The Mom Project have supported organizations in building best-in-class parental leave experiences through custom qualitative and quantitative analytics. Here, Werklabs constructed its Parental Leave Questionnaire, asking professionals to rank their work experiences related to parental leave on a scale of 1 to 10. From there, the questionnaire was fielded.

An analysis based on Grounded Theory was performed to evaluate the measurement model and assess which questionnaire items best “fit together” to define predictors of parental leave satisfaction that ultimately impact outcomes such as recommendation and retention. There were no preconceived notions of what characteristics were likely to emerge given the topic; the data came together to create the story. Once groupings were tested, a label was used to describe the concept or theme. In this case, five predictors of parental leave satisfaction were identified. In doing so, the model developed by Werklabs establishes a clear relationship between how different aspects of the parental leave experience impact feelings of leave satisfaction, and how this satisfaction in turn impacts employee retention and productivity upon returning from leave.

Werklabs’ Parental Leave Questionnaire was fielded to The Mom Project community and social networks and gathered more than 3800 responses. The majority ranged between the ages 25-44 (79%) and identified as White (54%), followed by African American/Black (15%), Southeast or East Asian (11%), and Hispanic/Latino (10%).



90% identify as female, followed by 10% male.



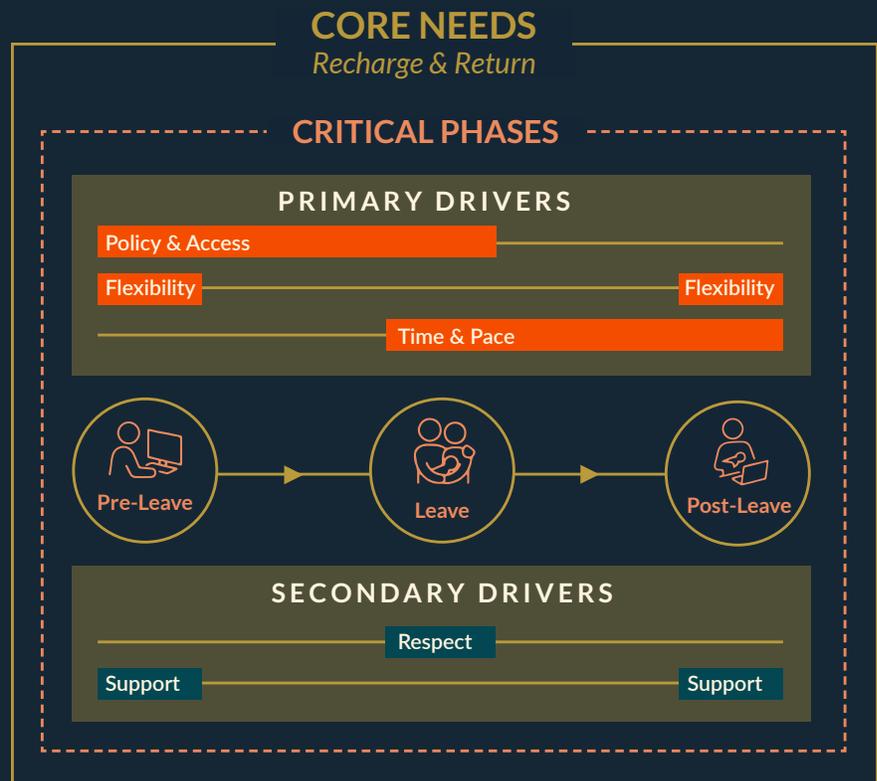
81% are parents or caregivers. Of those, 89% are moms.



66% have taken parental leave, half within last 3 years and the other half over 3 years ago.



# The R&R Framework for Parental Leave



At the intersection of growing one's family and pursuing a career, parents possess two core needs: the need to **recharge** from work and welcoming a new child and the need to **return** to work in a manageable, supported way. The extent to which parents realize these needs is influenced by three critical phases: pre-leave, leave, and post-leave, or return from leave. These three phases are fundamentally influenced by organizations. Organizations— policies, leaders, managers – impact parents' ability to recharge during leave and return to work through **five key drivers**.

In this report, based on qualitative analytics and predictive modeling of survey results, Werklabs presents a new integrated framework for organizations to optimize parental leave that's rooted in the fundamental needs of parents who are growing their families.



# 5 Key Drivers

In the order of impact level

## Policy & Access



Impact Level:  HIGH

“

*[The leave policy was] Very convoluted. I was lucky to have a strong HR team to walk me through all my options.”*

-Interviewed participant

Offering competitive paid leave is important but on its own is not enough to meaningfully support new parents during what is already an overwhelming time of life. Of critical importance to the pre-leave experience is the extent to which parental leave policies are inclusive, accessible, and easy to understand. Clear points of contact must also be established for when questions arise related to leave policy or logistics. Surveyed parents frequently mention confusing, complex, and convoluted policies with little to no administrative support to navigate, resulting in unnecessary and overwhelming added stress.

The **3 key components** of parental leave policy:

### Accessibility

*How easy is it to access leave information?*

### Inclusivity

*Does the policy support all employees welcoming a child?*

### Clarity

*Is there confusion around certain aspects of leave?*



# Time & Pace



Impact Level: HIGH

Time is key for all parents to recharge and return to work in a way that supports both their and their families' needs. There is no substitute, not even flexibility, for having adequate recovery time. The extent to which parents have adequate time to mentally and physically to return to work is a key, high impact driver influencing parental leave experiences for men and women. The pace at which parents return to work is also important. Parents who describe having a positive return to work experience attribute their experience to phasing into work gradually and receiving clear communication on organizational or role changes that occurred while away.

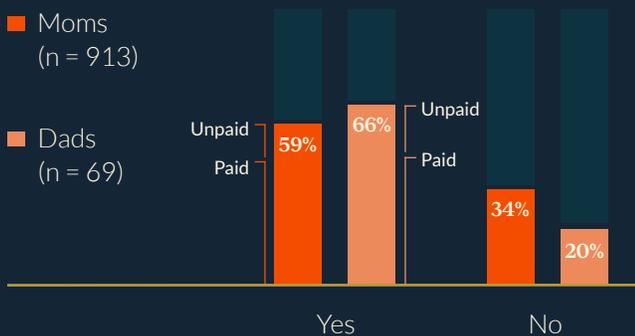
“

*I do not recommend returning after 7 weeks! I did not feel like myself mentally or physically for months.”*

-Interviewed participant

Werklabs also asked survey participants about their partners' leave, when applicable. Overall, when asked whether their partners took parental leave, close to 60% of respondents indicated that their partners took either paid or unpaid leave, while 33% said their partner did not take leave. Further, these findings vary depending on if the respondent identified as a mom or a dad, with moms reporting more often that their partner did not take leave. Similarly, moms also report less satisfaction with their partners' leave time than those who identify as dads.

## Did your partner or spouse take parental leave?



## How satisfied were you with your partner's leave?



# Flexibility

Pre-Leave

Leave

Post-Leave

Impact Level:  MODERATE

For employees growing their families - moms in particular - flexibility is not a nice-to-have, but rather a necessity. Remote work is key. From a physical standpoint, the ability to work remotely before giving birth is a huge benefit, allowing moms to continue to work in later stages of their pregnancy without the physical discomfort of a commute or having to dip into PTO days on occasions when going into the office is just not possible. Returning from leave while working remotely allows moms to pump and breastfeed throughout the day and spend more time at home. Having the flexibility to work at times of the day or evening that best meet their needs as a parent is also a key driver for the post-leave experience.

Managers and teammates play a role in the flexibility parents experience, with parents frequently noting how colleagues with other children “just get it” and can provide an additional level of support and understanding.

“

*My company has no work from home or hybrid work policy, but my manager has let me work from home or leave as needed. He has a young child and understands.”*

-Interviewed participant



36% of surveyed respondents report that their organization offers a flexible return-to-work plan for parents returning from parental leave.



# Respect

Pre-Leave

Leave

Post-Leave

“

*My manager continued to text me while on leave, [which] prevented me from disconnecting fully and tending to my own health.”*

-Interviewed participant

Impact Level:  **LOW**

True recharging during parental leave occurs through disconnecting from work. However, many parents are contacted by managers or co-workers while on leave to answer work-related questions. In extreme cases, some parents report being pressured during these conversations to return to work early. On the other hand, some express frustration that major changes happened in their organization or team while they were on leave, and they were not informed. Regardless, the extent to which colleagues and managers respect time away from work is critical.

**Q** — What, how, and when should managers communicate with employees who are on parental leave?

**A** — There is no one-size-fits-all answer here. However, part of the pre-leave experience should involve managers sitting down with their direct report to establish a communication protocol detailing how/if the new parent wants to stay in touch while out on leave.



# Support & Encouragement



“

*When I returned it felt like I never left. My team was supportive and caring. They brought me up to speed and let me lead my return in terms of workload.”*

-Interviewed participant

Impact Level:  **LOW**

Sometimes simple actions go a long way to enhance employee engagement and retention—parental leave is no exception. Having managers and colleagues provide encouragement pre-leave and support post-leave is a highly impactful intangible. More specifically, taking extra care to welcome back returning parents from leave, acknowledging both the major life event that they have experienced as well as how they were missed while out on leave.

A more tangible form of support for parents returning from leave is developing a welcome back guide including easy to access information regarding what the parent missed while being out on leave.

What to include in a **Welcome Back Guide**:

- ◆ An Out-of-Office summary, written by the manager
- ◆ Information on pumping rooms
- ◆ How to join the Parent ERG (Employee Resource Group)
- ◆ Care as Children Grow Plan



# Conclusion

A strong parental leave policy goes beyond the number of weeks offered or providing for fully paid leave. While these factors are certainly critical, they are the minimum foundation for truly comprehensive parental leave. Best-in-class policies support working parents **before leave** through clear and accessible policies and supportive planning, **during leave** through respectful communication practices, and **after leave** through gradual return to work, flexibility, and encouragement.

Many working parents don't have access to paid parental leave at all, let alone to the types of global leave policies that truly embody the recharging and returning framework. This presents a tremendous area of opportunity for employers seeking to make workforce investments that pay long-term dividends. Greater satisfaction with parental leave boosts employee loyalty and makes employees more likely to recommend their employers as great places to work. In short, not only does strong parental leave make sense for working parents, it also makes good business sense.

## Want to learn more?

Visit us at [Werklabs.com](https://www.werklabs.com).

Have questions? Email [insights@werklabs.com](mailto:insights@werklabs.com)



# Model

Werklabs' Parental Leave Questionnaire results formed the basis for an ongoing predictive model that identifies, first, what most impacts professionals' feelings and experiences related to the different phases of parental leave, and then through measurement and predictive analytics, understands the current and expected effect of a change in any of these characteristics on critical performance outcomes such as retention and recommendation.

In so doing, we can measure across time how these characteristics change both in definition and importance as well as how they impact bottom line performance. This will allow employers to understand where to invest resources to create flexible work structures with the biggest returns on employee engagement and critical performance outcomes. In future applications, this model can be adapted and customized by companies to create models segmented by industry, function, and role.

## Scores

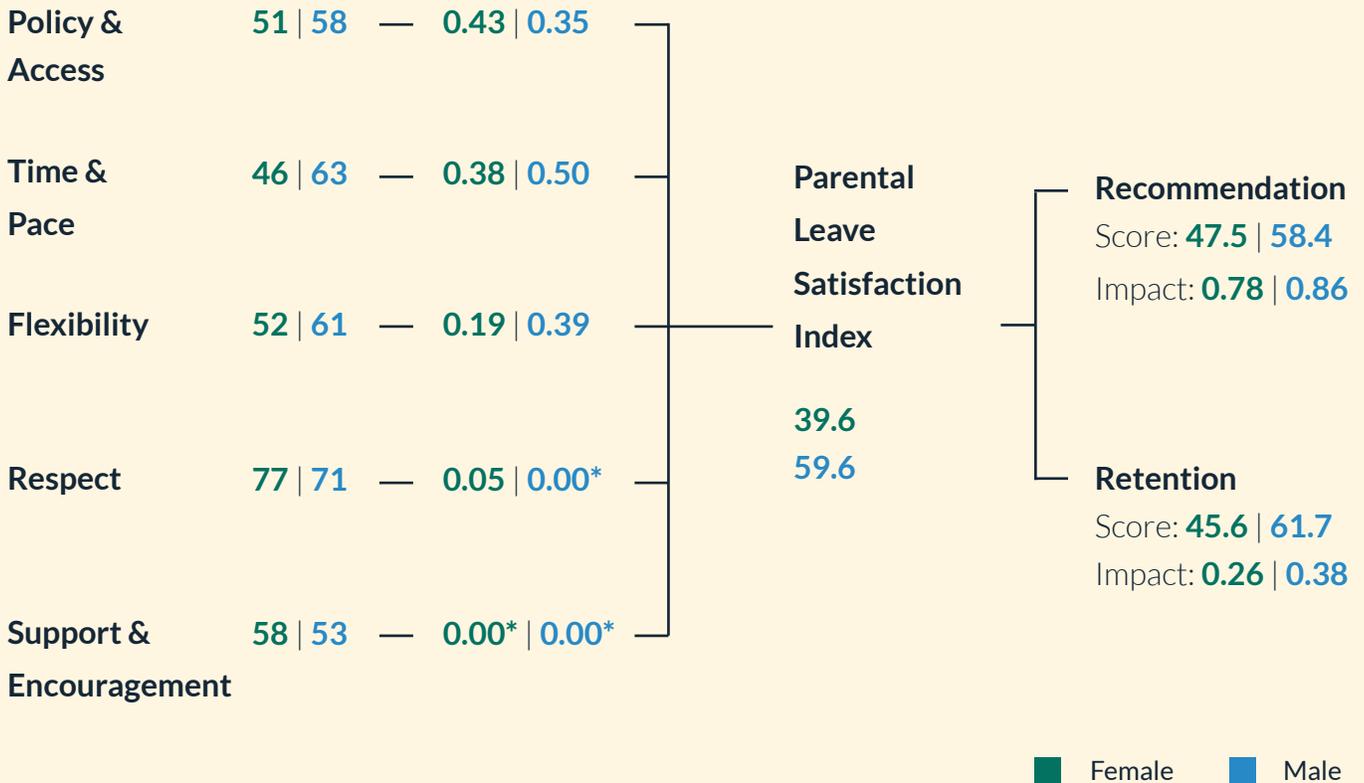
Current experiences on a 100-point scale

## Impact

The expected effect of a 1-point change in score on the outcome

## Outcome

Flexibility Index and Performance Outcomes



\* An impact of 0 does not indicate a lack of importance, but rather that incremental changes to that driver are unlikely to have a further impact on the outcome. This is usually due to that driver being relatively stable/expected in comparison to other drivers, and helps orient where changes should be focused.



# Glossary:

## The Recharging & Returning Framework Defined

### Key Drivers

**Policy & Access:** the degree to which employees believe their corporate leave policy was clear, relevant, easy to access, competitive, and inclusive

**Time & Pace:** the extent to which employees agreed that they had adequate time to be mentally and physically ready to return to work, and were able to ramp up their workload at a comfortable pace

**Flexibility:** employees' ability to work from a remote location, to work at times of the day/evening that are good for their schedules, and the extent to which employees believe their managers and teammates understood their unique flexibility needs as a parent

**Respect:** employees' ability to fully disconnect from work while on leave, including control over when/how they were contacted by work during leave, and the extent to which managers and colleagues respected time away from work

**Support & Encouragement:** the extent to which teammates and managers provided support and encouragement leading up to and returning from leave, as well as the extent to which managers helped create a strong plan to transition workload prior to leave

### Parental Leave Satisfaction Index

(1) Overall satisfaction with most recent parental leave experience, (2) the extent to which most recent parental leave experience compares to expectations, and (3) how most recent parental leave experience compares to ideal leave experience

### Outcomes

**Recommendation:** the likelihood of employees recommending their employer as a family-friendly and great place to work

**Retention:** the likelihood of remaining at their current employer in one year and three years

