

WHAT IS 'PAW'TERNITY LEAVE?

Bringing home a new pet is one of life's most exciting experiences and many Americans appear to agree — 68% of households in the United States own a furry companion. Recognizing that our pets are important to us and part of the family, some companies are now offering their employees “pawternity” leave (also known as “furternity” leave.) Pawternity leave acknowledges the growing role pets play in employees' lives by giving them time off specifically for caring for a new baby pet, to care for their ill or injured fur friends, or for bereavement after a beloved pet dies.

With millennials now representing the largest population in the workforce, as well as the largest population of pet-owners (over 35%), it's easy to understand why more and more businesses are incorporating pawternity leave into their benefits packages.

But don't rush out to adopt pawternity perks as your company's newest benefit just yet. Because it's so new, what's included in pawternity benefits varies widely from company to company. The types of animals covered by such policies fluctuate just as dramatically. Some companies include all types of pets for furternity benefits (even those that don't technically have fur), while others offer leave for dogs and cats only.

The concept of pawternity leave is catching on with more employers. A recent survey conducted by Nationwide and the Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) found that 91% of employees who work for companies with these types of pet-friendly policies are more engaged with their work.

The number-one reason cited for adopting pet-related benefits is that it boosts employee morale. It shows heart and recognizes the important role pets play in many people's lives, which translates to better employee engagement and retention. And that's good for any business.

Another advantage to the company: It may help you become an employer of choice when recruiting new employees, particularly millennials and Gen Zs searching for cutting-edge incentives, since few businesses currently offer pawternity leave.

Another potentially beneficial aspect of pawternity leave is that it has minimal financial repercussions for your business. Pawternity leave is simply a benefit that protects a person's position should they need to take a leave to be with their pet. It works this way: a person needs a week to be with their dog. If the employee doesn't want to use PTO or sick time (or doesn't have any remaining), then the employee can take a leave without pay and their job won't be in jeopardy.

Zogics of Lenox, MA has a pawternity leave program and offers other benefits like discounts on pet insurance and a pet-friendly office. “Every day is take your dog to work day at Zogics [Pet Division], and more than half of our employees bring their four-legged friends to the office,” says CEO Paul LeBlanc. It's because of policies like this that Zogics was recently named one of the Best Workplaces in America by Inc Magazine.

The most obvious drawback to offering pet-related benefits is that, by definition, they're not applied equally to all employees. For instance, if only half of your workforce owns pets, that means the other half won't qualify for the extra time off or flexibility to work from home.

If your firm is considering developing and implementing pawternity leave, there are some factors that should be considered.

1. What constitutes a pet?

Defining this is the first hurdle you'll need to clear before adopting pawternity leave. While cats and dogs are the most commonly owned pets, what about birds, bunnies, fish, rodents, snakes, lizards, and horses? What if an employee argues that their new goldfish needs help adjusting to its new home?

Allowing leave for some types of pets and not others may leave you open to claims of favoritism.

2. How much time will be allowed in the policy?

Just as HR policies have limits to sick days and vacation days, there should be limits to pawternity leave as well.

For instance, an employee who fosters sick animals may cope with multiple animals passing away each year. Do you allow a day for each animal that dies, or just one day a year? Make sure you consider all angles and scenarios so that you're not faced with excessive pet-based absences that may affect your business.

3. Does this benefit cover bereavement only?

Or will you also provide days off or the flexibility to work from home upon adoption of a new pet? What if their pet gets sick and they need to stay home? Whatever you decide, just make sure it's clearly spelled out in your policies and employee handbook.

4. How many days will be available for bereavement? What about for new-pet adjustment?

Again, the most important things to remember here are clarity and consistency. Communicate the specific number of days or the terms of any flexible arrangement allowed for each type of pawternity leave, and then apply your policy fairly to everyone. Do different needs allow for different amounts of time off? Taking care of a sick pet is different from bringing home a new puppy.

5. Will you offer pet health insurance?

The American Pet Products Association's research shows a rise in spending on veterinary services. As the New York Times reported, some companies have started offering health insurance for employees' pets as an additional benefit.

6. Is the policy unfair to other employees?

Allowing extra time off for pet owners may leave employees who don't have pets feeling left out. The policy should take this into consideration to ensure employees are given approximately equal benefits as permitted by their contracts.

Perhaps the easiest option is to be as generous with paid time off (PTO) as is financially feasible and to encourage employees to use their time as they need it. (This may require that you remind managers to control their judgmental comments about pet bereavement or puppy training.) You could also consider whether or not the employee can work from home and not use their PTO time at all.

Other pet-friendly business strategies to consider may include:

- Adding discounts on pet insurance to your overall benefits package
- Partnering with a nearby doggy day care center or pet supply store for employee discounts
- Adding an animal-focused charity to your corporate giving program
- Hosting lunch-and-learns focused on pet-related topics

Besides creating a new policy, there are many ways you can show your support for employees with pets. For example, you could welcome an employee's new fur baby with a gift basket or kit that includes some treats and a toy, much like you would host a baby shower for a human child.

Whether you want to incorporate a pawternity policy or are just looking for information about this new trend, it is a clear example of the changes that occur as society changes. Pawternity leave may just be a trend now, but in 10 years it may be standard practice in many industries and workplaces. Deciding whether or not to incorporate it can help a firm determine how it addresses its employees' needs both inside and outside the office.

With a little creativity, the possibilities are endless.