

# Diverse Thinking

Alina Polonskaia

## More Time to Mourn



**On the surface, the job** offer my friend recently received sounded great, so he set up a video call with the company's human resources department to get the rest of the details.

The HR specialist enthusiastically highlighted the job's eye-catching salary along with the firm's excellent healthcare package. My friend appreciated those benefits and then asked about the firm's bereavement policy. How much time does the company allow its employees to mourn?

The HR specialist, who is White, asked why it mattered, and my friend, who is Black, explained he experienced grief on a regular basis as he grew up in Chicago. Over the years, he had lost numerous friends and family to violence and poor health, and he unfortunately didn't see those circumstances changing. Being at funerals to honor the dead and comfort the living is a major part of his culture. "I don't want to come across as someone who is missing work for what colleagues think is for no reason," my friend told the HR specialist. "This is just my reality."

I work daily with organizations that say they are committed to making employees of all backgrounds feel welcome and appreciated. That's an excellent trend; organizations should look at who is designing benefits and what groups they may be targeting—and ignoring. And that includes something as seemingly small as a bereavement policy, which all too often bypasses the needs of whole sections of a workforce, creating an uncomfortable work atmosphere for people from underrepresented groups.

Sadly, in these times, bereavement policies deserve extra focus. Death literally surrounds all of us. According to a March poll, 13 percent of all Americans know someone who died because of COVID-19. That statistic rises to 17 percent of Latinx Americans and 31 percent of Black Americans. Hopefully we won't be experiencing another shattering pandemic soon, but it's not as if death is going away. People of different backgrounds and experiences can encounter grief more frequently—and process it differently—and they shouldn't be looked down upon by their company or their coworkers for it.

Perhaps it's understandable; death isn't something any workplace wants to dwell on. When companies think about their rewards and benefits packages, bereavement policies are probably close to the bottom of the priority list, most likely behind gym discounts and options for pet insurance. There is no federal law requiring companies to provide time off, paid or unpaid, after the death of a close family member, but nearly nine out of 10 US firms do—usually two or three days, with some companies offering as many as five.

But that policy dates back decades and was created by White men—a group that back then and now doesn't face trauma and death nearly as much as most other groups. Globally, it's a different story: France mandates that companies provide at least three days of paid bereavement leave, while China

mandates paid leave for deaths in the immediate family, as do Spain, Canada, and Brazil. Wherever an organization is located, the need is pretty clear: make some straightforward fixes. Offer more time, and don't require employees

take it all at once. Grief comes in stages. Also, expand the definition of family, since it is more common for people of lower economic status to be raised by relatives who are not their parents. And don't demand the employee provide a death certificate or other proof of death. Show some trust in the employee. Most importantly,

communicate across the firm that it's OK to take time off to grieve and respect how other colleagues mourn.

As for my friend, his prospective employer would provide just two days of paid bereavement leave. He turned down the job. ▀

**Something as seemingly small as a bereavement policy can bypass the needs of whole sections of a workforce.**

Polonskaia is Korn Ferry's global leader of diversity, equity, and inclusion solutions.