AbsenceSoft

2026

State of Leave and Accommodations

Introduction

For the 2026 State of Leave and Accommodations report, we surveyed 1,200 HR leaders across industries. Our goal was to understand how the landscape of leave and accommodations is shifting, and what it means for the workforce today.

For the third year in a row, the majority of HR leaders report continued increases in both leave and accommodations requests. Caseloads are growing, situations are becoming more complex, and employee support needs continue to evolve.

At the same time, the job market remains uncertain. More employers are instituting return-to-office mandates, even as employees continue to seek flexibility. This tension is driving a rise in remote work requests as accommodations, and in some cases, higher leave usage as employees seek time away to manage stress.

The data confirms what many HR teams already feel: leave and accommodations are intrinsically connected and should be managed together. After remote work, leave is the most requested accommodation. Physical injury recovery is now the leading reason for taking leave, and many of these cases require accommodations when the employee returns.

This creates a growing burden for HR. Teams are facing more requests, with more nuance, and fewer resources. Many are turning to AI tools like ChatGPT or Gemini to keep up. But without proper integration into purpose-built systems, and without compliance controls, this kind of usage opens the door to real risk. When decisions are made without vetted data, legal review, or audit trails, even well-meaning teams can find themselves exposed.

In the pages ahead, we explore what's driving these trends and how HR leaders can support employees through work-life transitions with the right tools, processes, and policies in place.

2026
Leave of Absence Forecast

For this section of the report, we surveyed 600 HR, benefits, and people operations leaders about their leave programs. Their responses helped us uncover year-over-year trends, as well as significant shifts in the leave of absence landscape.

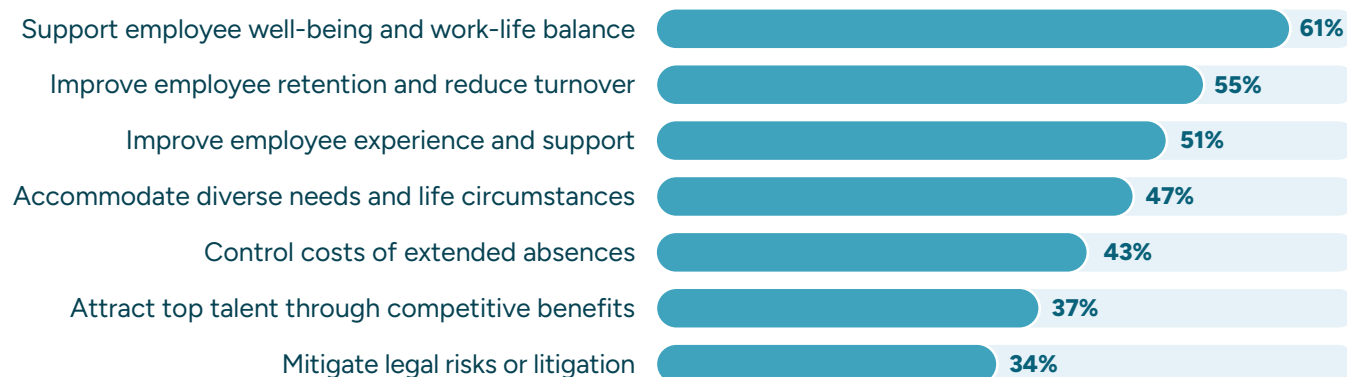# Recruitment, Retention, and Well-Being are Top Priorities

Recruitment and retention remain the top challenges for HR leaders, followed closely by stress and burnout. In today's uncertain job market, this could point to employer concerns about losing high performers or seeing employees "quiet quit" or "quiet crack," where they show up physically, but are disengaged and checked out. Many employees today are hesitant to leave their jobs or make a change, while HR ends up too overloaded from growing caseloads to offer much-needed support.

This environment is shaping how organizations think about leave. The top goals for leave programs are supporting employee well-being and improving retention, followed by enhancing the overall employee experience. This reflects a growing recognition that leave programs are a critical part of the employee value proposition that can make or break a workplace's culture and reputation.

In the past 12 months, did your organization face challenges with any of the following?

Challenge	Percentage
Recruiting the right talent	59%
Retaining valuable employees	57%
Employee stress and burnout	53%
Employee health and well-being	45%
Providing a positive employee experience	41%
Managing hybrid or remote employees	38%
Return to office mandates	25%

What internal goals are you trying to achieve with leave policies and programs?

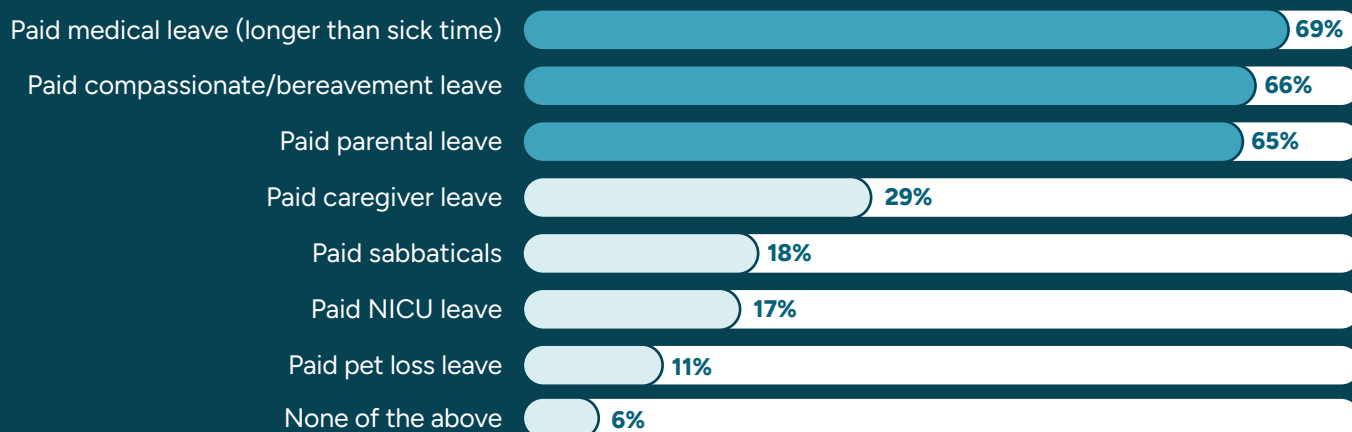| Goal	Percentage
Support employee well-being and work-life balance	61%
Improve employee retention and reduce turnover	55%
Improve employee experience and support	51%
Accommodate diverse needs and life circumstances	47%
Control costs of extended absences	43%
Attract top talent through competitive benefits	37%
Mitigate legal risks or litigation	34%

Paid Leave Offerings Highlight Good Coverage, but Some Missed Opportunities

Most organizations offer paid medical, bereavement, and parental leave. These three leave benefits are becoming standard across many workplaces. But beyond that, offerings drop off quickly. Fewer than one in three employers offer paid caregiver leave, even though caregiving responsibilities are a growing driver of both leave and burnout.

Non-traditional leave types such as sabbaticals, NICU leave, and pet loss leave remain uncommon. Only 18% of employers offer sabbaticals, despite frequent conversations about retention and well-being. Just 11% offer paid pet loss leave, even though the loss of a companion animal can bring significant grief and impact an employee's ability to function.

Does your organization currently offer any of the following paid leave benefits?

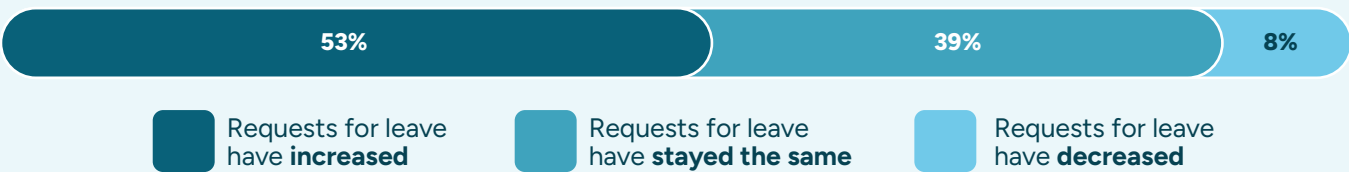| Benefit	Percentage
Paid medical leave (longer than sick time)	69%
Paid compassionate/bereavement leave	66%
Paid parental leave	65%
Paid caregiver leave	29%
Paid sabbaticals	18%
Paid NICU leave	17%
Paid pet loss leave	11%
None of the above	6%

As personal and professional lives continue to blend, these lesser-offered leave types can represent a meaningful opportunity to demonstrate empathy and drive retention. And it matters for talent acquisition as well: in an earlier report, we found 86% of employees say they are more likely to apply for a job if paid leave benefits are clearly listed.
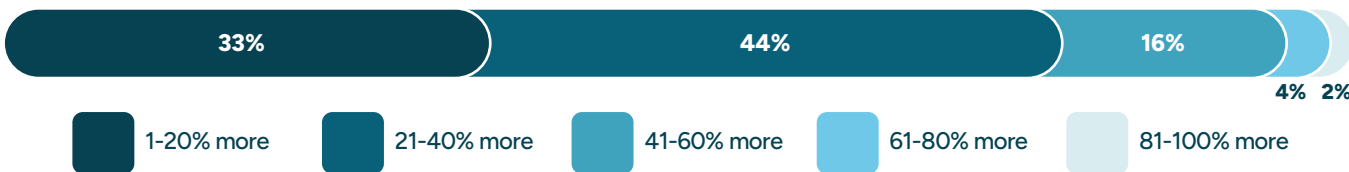
Leave Requests Keep Rising, Driven by Life Demands and Loss of Flexibility

Consistent with our prior results, more than half of employers reported an increase in leave requests over the past year. Of those, 66% said the increase was more than 20%. Only 8% reported a decline.

Has the number of requests for employee leaves of absence changed in the past year?

53%	39%	8%

- Requests for leave have **increased**
- Requests for leave have **stayed the same**
- Requests for leave have **decreased**

What increase in leave requests has your organization seen in the past year?

33%	44%	16%	4%	2%

- 1-20% more
- 21-40% more
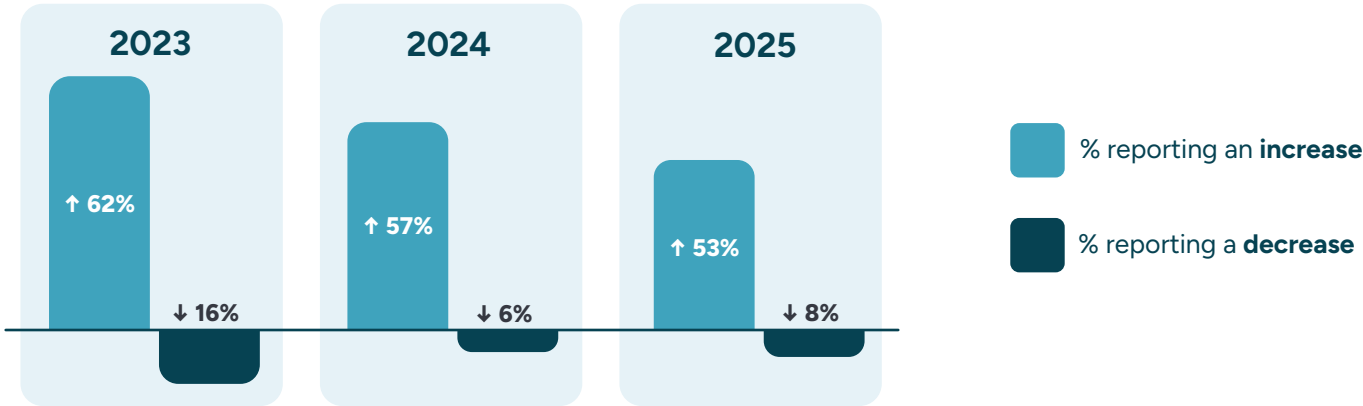- 41-60% more
- 61-80% more
- 81-100% more

New Leave Request

This marks the third year in a row that a majority of HR leaders saw leave volumes go up. Even though annual increases vary, the effect is compounding over time. Most leave teams haven't had the budget or headcount to scale with this growth, and many are still using manual processes. That leaves overextended HR staff managing more cases, with more compliance risk, and less time to support each employee well.

Among respondents who reported increases in all three years, the average cumulative growth in leave volume might be more than 120%. That means many HR teams could be handling twice as many leave cases as they were just three years ago. And they're doing it with the same or fewer resources.

Changes in Leave Requests Over Three Years

	2023	2024	2025
↑ increase	↑ 62%	↑ 57%	↑ 53%
↓ decrease	↓ 16%	↓ 6%	↓ 8%

% reporting an **increase**

% reporting a **decrease**

Leave Cases

Increases in Leave Requests Over Three Years
Percentage of respondents reporting 20% or more requests

2023	2024	2025
76%	53%	67%
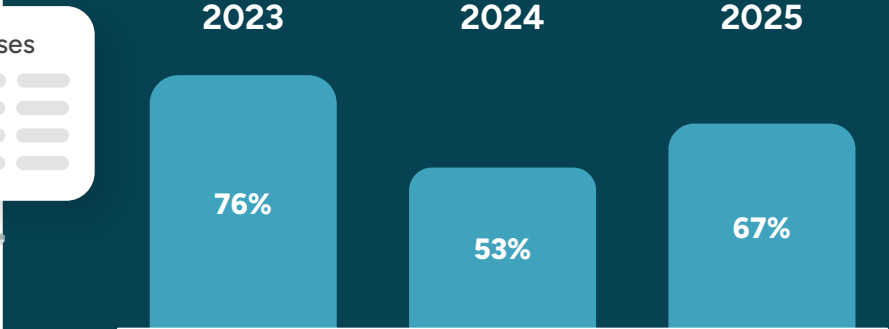
Injury, Bereavement, and Caregiving Move Up as Leading Drivers for Leave, Displacing Mental Health
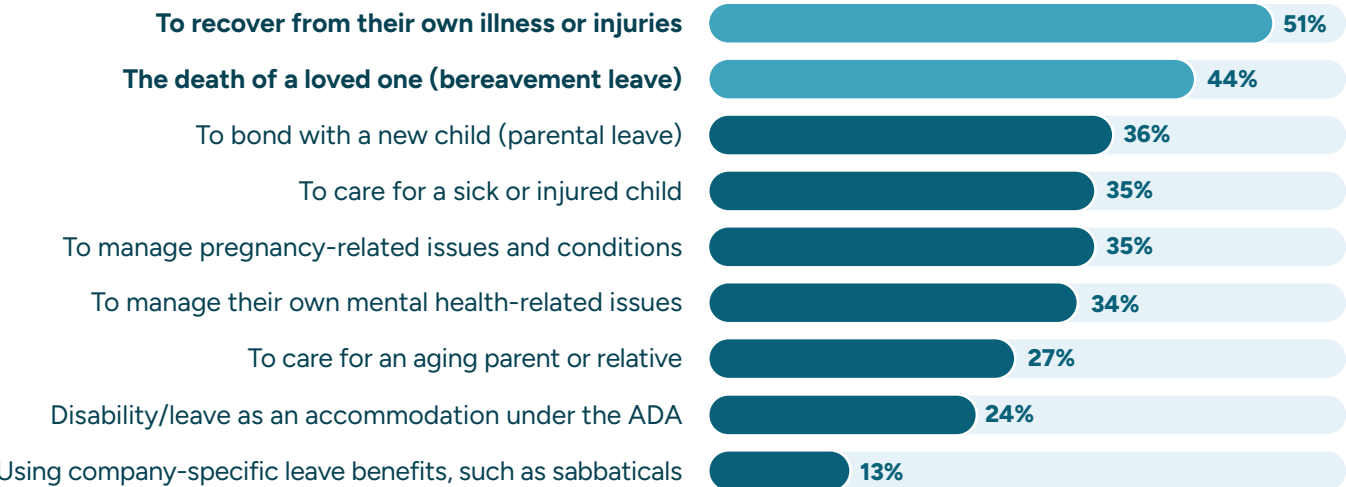
As leave requests continue to rise, the reasons behind them are shifting. This year, recovery from illness or injury (51%) and bereavement (44%) are the most common reasons for taking leave. Mental health, which previously topped the list, has declined significantly: from 55% in 2023, to 47% in 2024, and now down to 34%. However, in the next section, we'll see that mental health is still a top driver of accommodations, showing that employees are still being supported.

At the same time, the aging workforce continues to shape leave patterns. Older employees are managing chronic conditions or recovering from injuries. Many are also part of the sandwich generation, juggling caregiving for aging parents, often followed by bereavement. These realities are becoming more common and more impactful across all industries. The large spread of leave reasons highlights the diverse needs of today's workforce, which sometimes encompasses five generations of employees: everyone from young workers taking time for mental health, to new parents bonding with a child, to older workers struggling with health scares.

This growing workforce diversity, highlights the need for flexible, responsive leave programs that address the full range of employee life experiences, not just medical events.

What are the two most common reasons employees at your organizations are requesting leave?

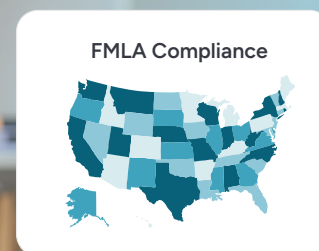| Reason	Percentage
To recover from their own illness or injuries	51%
The death of a loved one (bereavement leave)	44%
To bond with a new child (parental leave)	36%
To care for a sick or injured child	35%
To manage pregnancy-related issues and conditions	35%
To manage their own mental health-related issues	34%
To care for an aging parent or relative	27%
Disability/leave as an accommodation under the ADA	24%
Using company-specific leave benefits, such as sabbaticals	13%

FMLA and Intermittent Leave Still Top the List of Challenges in Leave Management

Managing leave remains one of HR's most complex responsibilities. While FMLA compliance and intermittent leave remain the most frequently cited challenges, more than one-third of employers also struggle with tracking, communication, eligibility, and pay calculation. These are critical tasks that affect every part of the leave process, from the initial request through return to work.
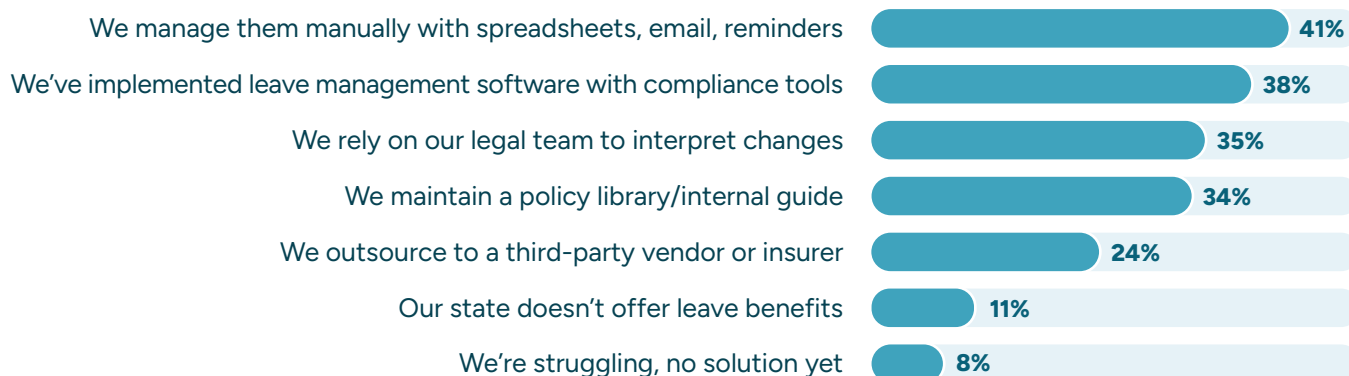
What challenges do you face when managing leave at your organization?

Challenge	%
Ensuring compliance with FMLA	41%
Managing intermittent leave and reduced schedules	38%
Tracking and reporting on leave usage and data	35%
Delivering an overall positive employee experience	32%
Knowing how much to communicate with employees on leave	32%
Accurately calculating employee pay during leave	32%
Calculating eligibility for leave entitlements	31%
Managing state leave policies with a distributed workforce	26%
Implementing or managing new company leave policies	25%
Providing a personalized leave experience	24%

On top of that, the rapid expansion of state leave laws has created a patchwork of requirements that becomes more difficult to manage as every new one passes. Many employers are still relying on spreadsheets, email reminders, and manual tracking to stay compliant. Forty-one percent say they manage state leave manually, while 38 percent have adopted leave management platforms to help manage the growing complexity.

FMLA Compliance

How are you addressing the growing number of state leave laws?

We manage them manually with spreadsheets, email, reminders	41%
We've implemented leave management software with compliance tools	38%
We rely on our legal team to interpret changes	35%
We maintain a policy library/internal guide	34%
We outsource to a third-party vendor or insurer	24%
Our state doesn't offer leave benefits	11%
We're struggling, no solution yet	8%

Despite the challenges, organizations recognize the need to modernize. Sixty percent plan to invest more resources in leave management next year, whether that means upgrading tools, adding headcount, or improving internal processes. And the urgency is real: our 2025 Leave of Absence Employee Experience Report found that 40% of employees say they would consider quitting after a poor leave experience.

In 2026, leave management cannot be left as a compliance checkbox. Experiences during these work-life transitions play a direct role in employee trust, retention, and operational success.

Are you planning on investing more resources in leave management next year?

|	
Yes: 60%	No: 40%

Most Employers Still Manage Leave In-House, Dedicated Solutions are Gaining Ground

This year's data confirms that most organizations continue to manage FMLA and other types of leave internally. A clear majority of respondents, 79%, manage FMLA in-house, and 74% do the same for state and company-specific leaves. Only a small share fully outsources leave, with 21% outsourcing FMLA and 14% outsourcing other types.
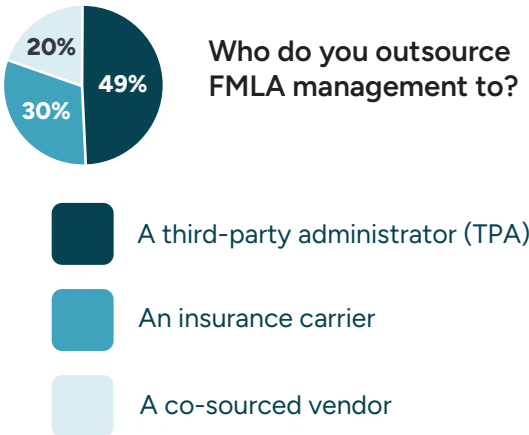
Does your organization manage FMLA in-house or with an outsourced provider?

79%	21%

■ We manage FMLA in-house   ■ We outsource FMLA management to a vendor

Among those managing leave internally, add-ons to payroll or HRIS systems remain the most common approach. But adoption of dedicated leave management software is growing quickly. This year, 22% reported using a leave platform, nearly doubling from 12% last year. At the same time, one in five employers still rely on manual processes such as spreadsheets, emails, and calendar reminders.
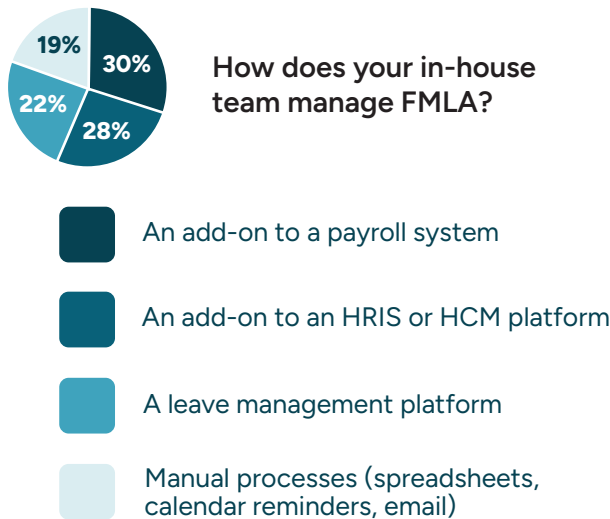
For employers that outsource, third-party administrators (TPAs) are the most commonly used partners. TPAs account for 49% of outsourced FMLA management and 44% of outsourced state and company leave. Co-sourced vendors and insurance carriers are also widely used.

How does your in-house team manage FMLA?

30%, 28%, 22%, 19%

■ An add-on to a payroll system

■ An add-on to an HRIS or HCM platform

■ A leave management platform

■ Manual processes (spreadsheets, calendar reminders, email)

Who do you outsource FMLA management to?

49%, 30%, 20%

■ A third-party administrator (TPA)

■ An insurance carrier

■ A co-sourced vendor

It's worth noting that TPAs themselves increasingly turn to dedicated leave platforms to streamline processes and provide better service to their clients. Whether leave is managed in-house or outsourced, platforms that support compliance, communication, and intelligent automation help reduce risk and improve the employee experience.

Does your organization manage state, company, and other leaves in-house or with an outsourced provider?
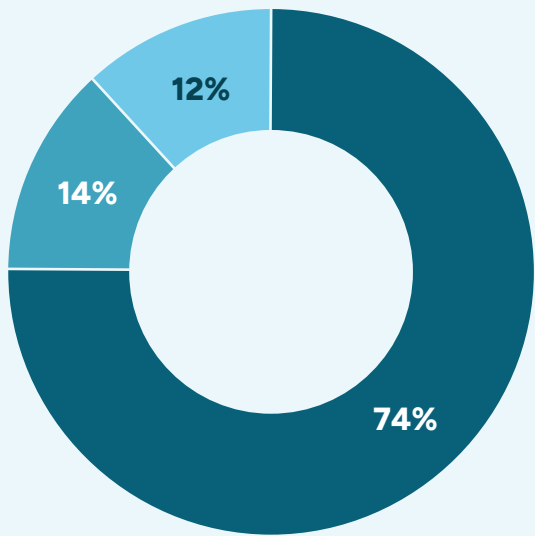
- 74% We manage other leaves of absence in-house
- 14% We outsource all leave management to a vendor
- 12% We don't manage leaves other than FMLA

How does your in-house team manage state, company, and other leaves?
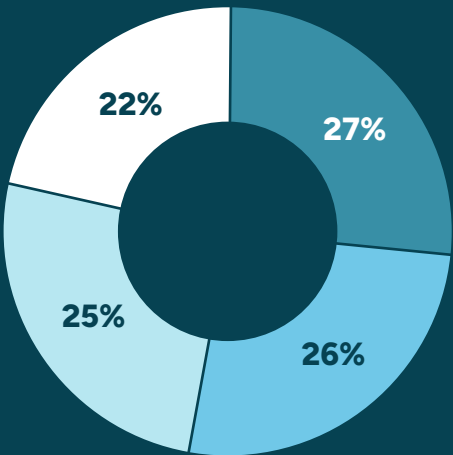
- 27% With an add-on to a payroll system
- 26% With an add-on to a HRIS or HCM platform
- 25% With manual processes (spreadsheets, reminders)
- 22% Dedicated leave management software or platform

Who do you outsource state, company, and other leave management to?

44%	29%	27%
A third-party administrator (TPA)	A co-sourced vendor	An insurance carrier
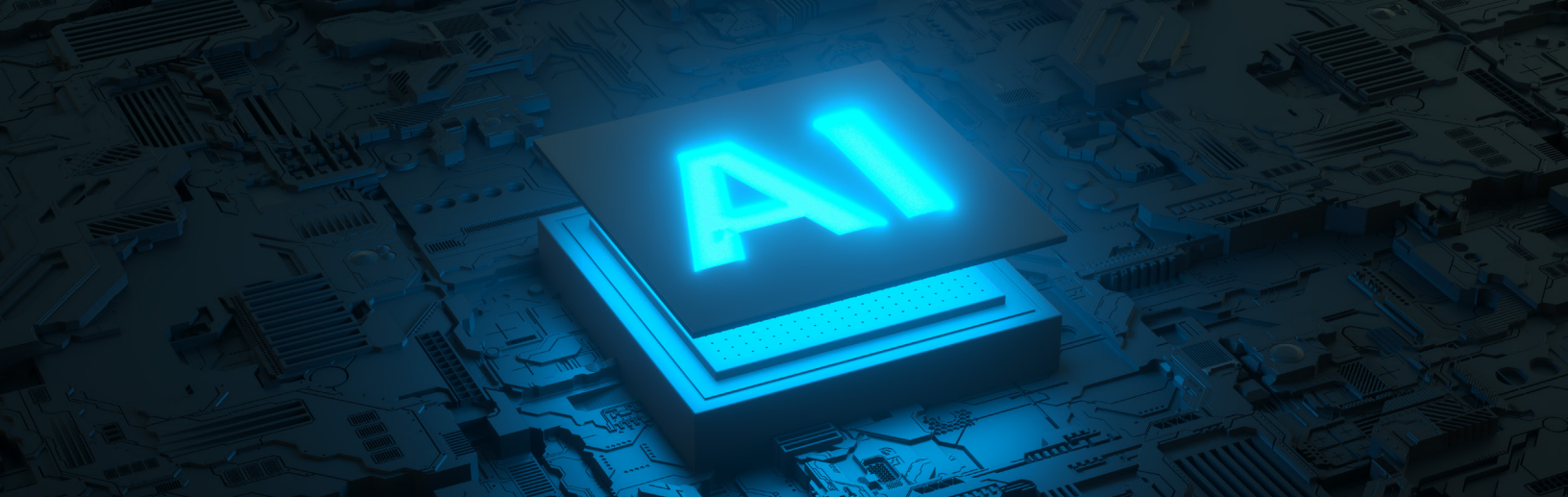
AI is Already in the Leave Process, but Largely Without Guardrails

AI is no longer theoretical in HR tech. Nearly half (45%) of employers say they're already using AI during the leave process. Most are using it for reporting and analytics, but usage goes far beyond that. More than 40% report using AI to write communications, determine eligibility, look up applicable laws, and even make eligibility decisions.

This is where the gap between innovation and compliance can become a concern. The Department of Labor has stated that AI should not be used to make key decisions about leave or to discourage employees from using leave. Despite that guidance, nearly half of respondents say AI is making eligibility decisions in their organizations. This likely includes unsanctioned or shadow use, such as ChatGPT or similar tools being used without oversight, legal review, or built-in compliance protections.

To help HR keep up with increasing demand for leave , AI has an important role to play. It can speed up processes, reduce manual workload, and innovate the employee experience. But it should always be used alongside human judgment in sensitive compliance situations. Without guardrails, employers may be introducing legal risk without realizing it, especially when AI tools are relied on that were not built for compliant leave management.

The data shows that many HR teams are still unsure about what to do next. Of those who reported they weren't using AI, 40% were uncertain about using AI in the future. That hesitation is understandable, and it highlights the need for tools that use AI thoughtfully, with compliance and privacy protections in place, and human oversight built into the process.
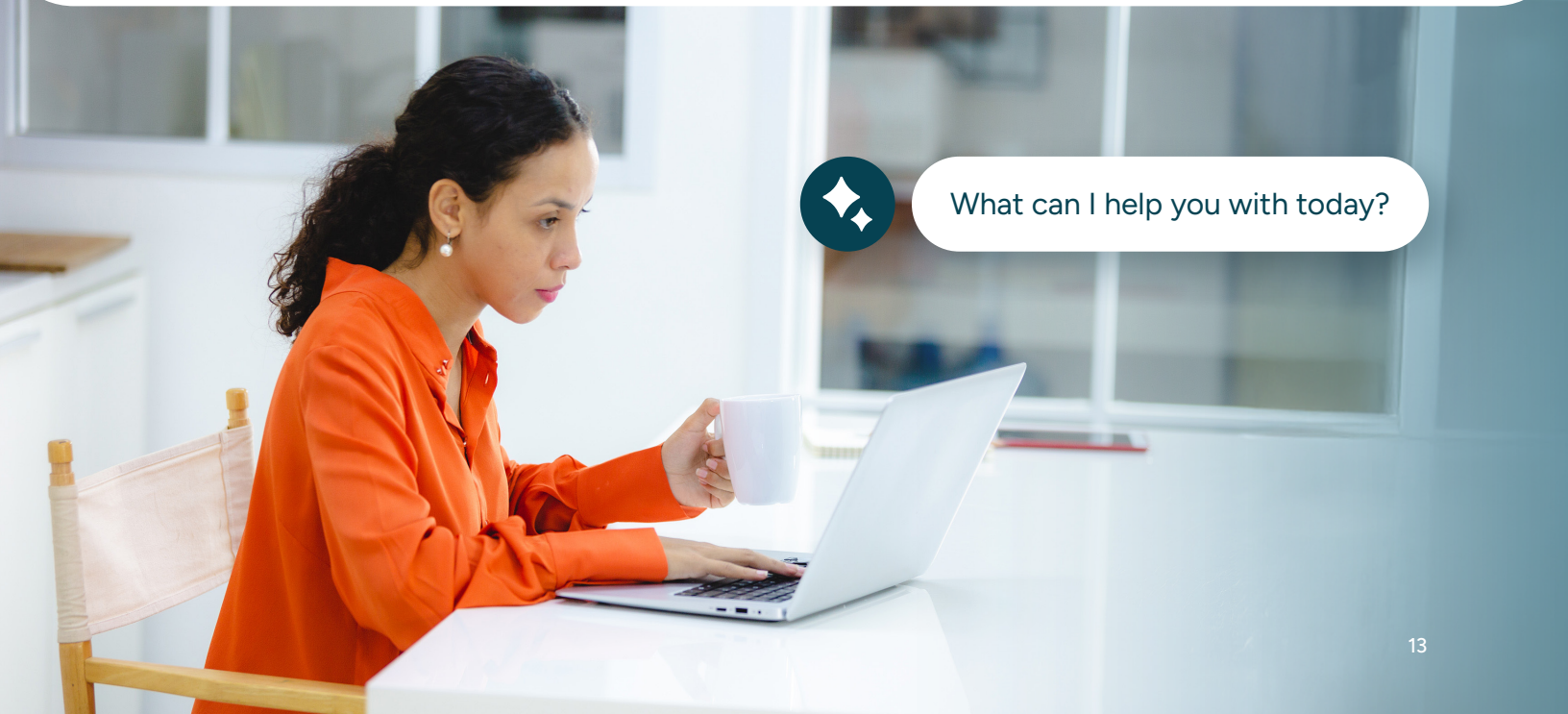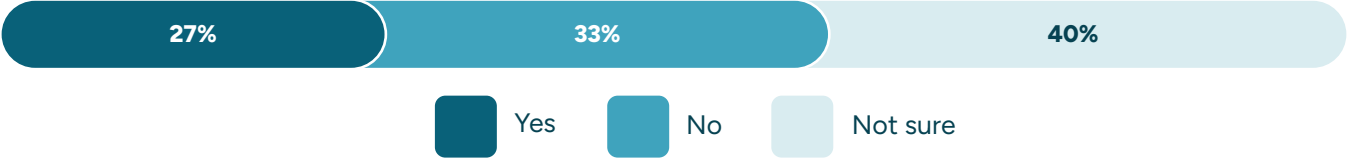
Do you use AI tools (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, etc.) during the leave process?

45%	51%	4%

- **Yes** (45%)
- **No** (51%)
- **We don't manage leave in-house** (4%)

How do you use AI when managing leave?

Category	Percentage
For reporting and analytics	62%
To write communications	50%
To understand employee eligibility	50%
To look up applicable laws	49%
To make eligibility decisions	49%
To calculate entitlement amounts	47%

Are you planning on starting to use AI in the next year?

27%	33%	40%

- **Yes** (27%)
- **No** (33%)
- **Not sure** (40%)

What can I help you with today?

2026
Job Accommodations Forecast

For this report, we surveyed 600 HR, benefits, and people operations leaders about their workplace accommodations programs and how the ADA and the PWFA are shaping the process. We saw a continuation of key trends, including the transformation of accommodations into remote work and time away. Looking ahead to 2026, the data also highlights rising request volumes, the impact of RTO on accommodations programs, and a sustained focus on mental health.

More Than Half of HR Teams Report a Sharp Rise in Accommodations Requests

For the third year in a row, a majority of HR leaders reported an increase in job accommodation requests. In 2025, 56% saw a rise in volume, and among those, three out of four reported increases of more than 20%.

HR isn't getting a break from rising accommodations requests. Employees are asking for what they need to stay productive, and they are more complex requests related to schedules, remote work, or mental health.

Today's workforce is also more informed than ever about their rights under the ADA and the PWFA.

But for most teams, this steady increase is adding to an already overloaded caseload. Without intelligent automation or centralized tracking, even the most well-meaning HR teams are at greater risk of delays, inconsistencies, or legal exposure.

Has the number of employee requests for job accommodations changed during the past year?

56%	32%	12%

- **Requests have increased** — 56%
- **Requests have stayed the same** — 32%
- **Requests have decreased** — 12%
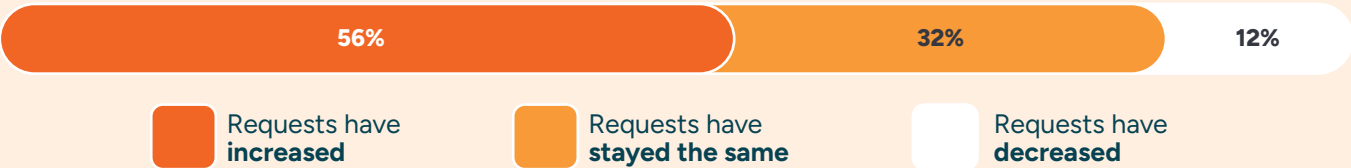
What percentage increase of requests for job accommodations has your organization received in the past year (previous 12 months)?

26%	45%	19%	8%	2%

- 1-20% more — 26%
- 21-40% more — 45%
- 41-60% more — 19%
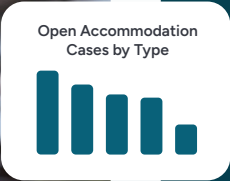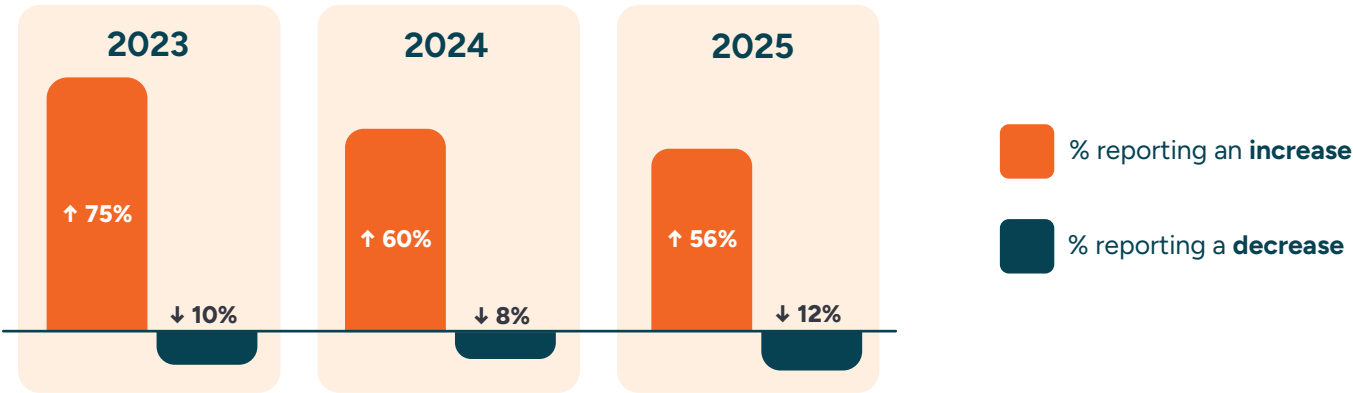- 61-80% more — 8%
- 81-100% more — 2%
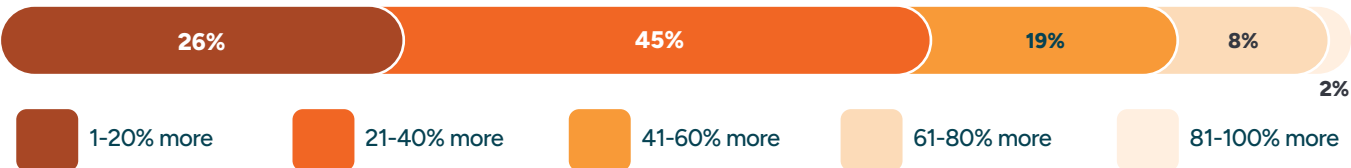
🔔¹ New Accommodation Request

While each year's increase may fluctuate, the overall volume of accommodations requests is rising sharply over time. For teams that reported increases each year, the cumulative growth could be more than 125%.

Changes in Accommodations Requests Over Three Years

2023
↑ 75%
↓ 10%

2024
↑ 60%
↓ 8%

2025
↑ 56%
↓ 12%

■ % reporting an **increase**

■ % reporting a **decrease**

Open Accommodation Cases by Type

Increases in Accommodations Requests Over Three Years
Percentage of respondents reporting 20% or more requests
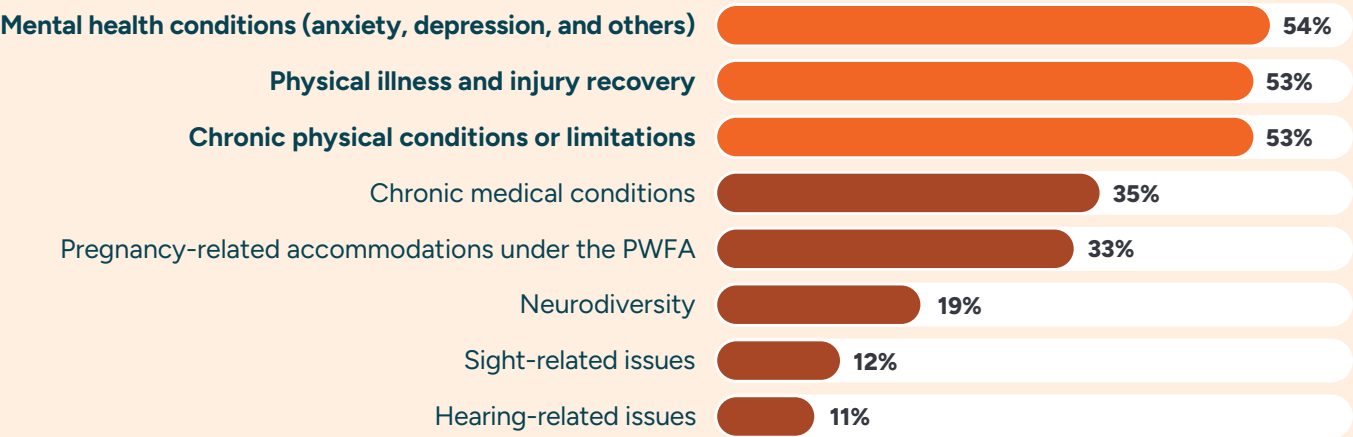
2023
74%

2024
62%

2025
75%
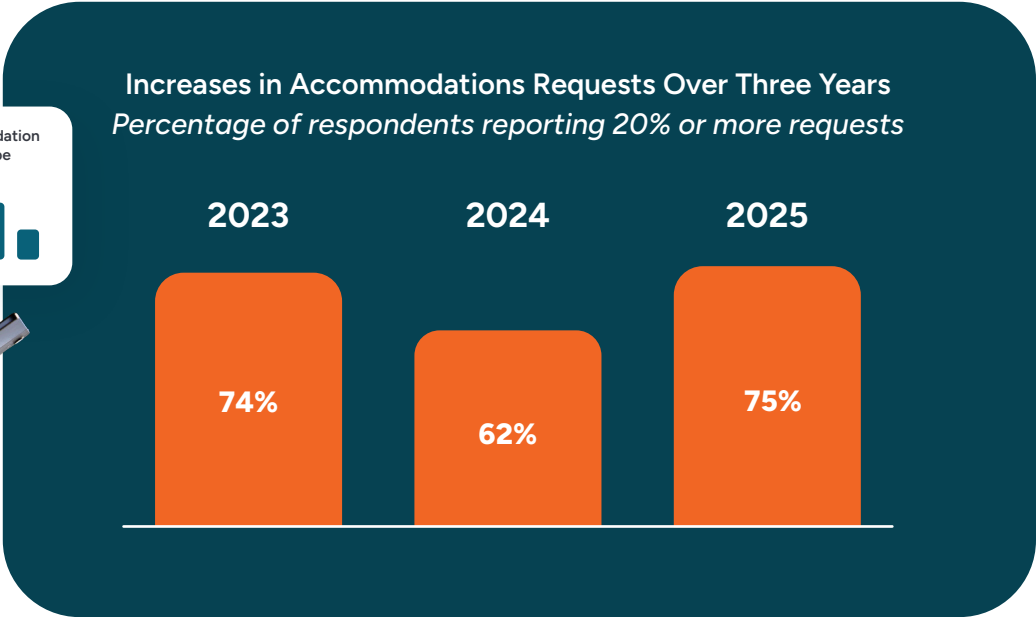
Many HR teams are managing more than twice the number of accommodation cases they handled just three years ago. And in most cases, they're doing it without additional staff or better systems to support the load. With this overload in work, comes increased risk: even the most well-intentioned teams can't always follow a fully compliant process when they are buried in paperwork and requests. And it just takes one case falling through the cracks to risk a complaint or lawsuit.

Accommodations Keep Trending Toward Mental Health, Time Away, and Remote Work

Mental health continues to be the most common reason employees request job accommodations, reported by 54% of HR leaders. That's closely followed by physical injury recovery and chronic physical conditions, both at 53%.

What are the top three most common reasons employees at your organizations are requesting job accommodations?

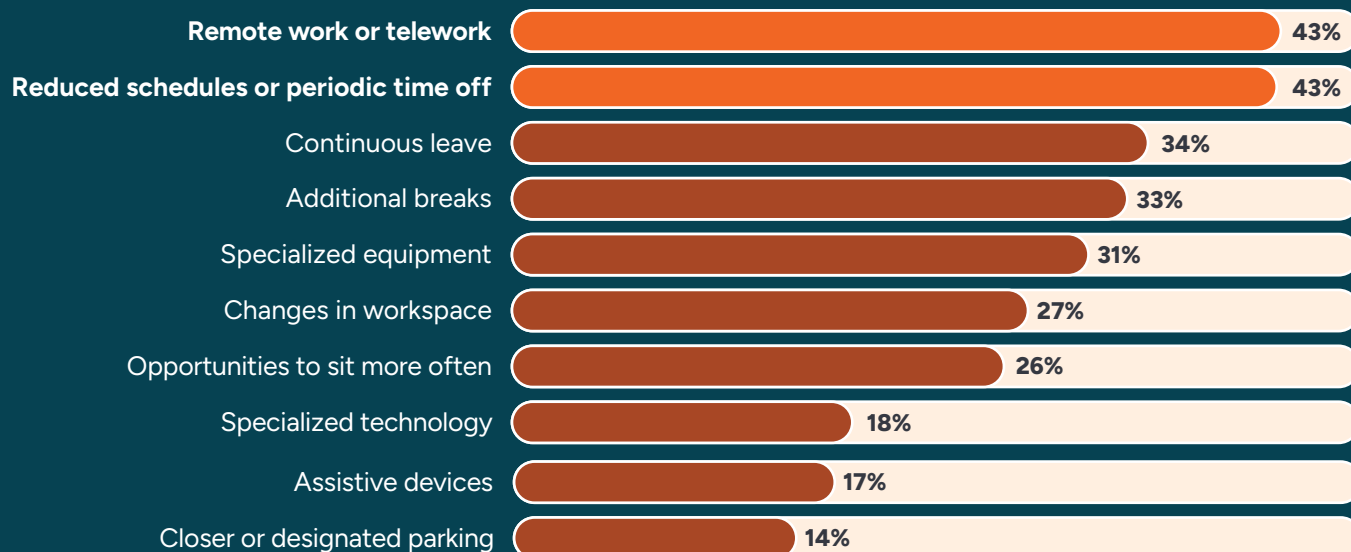| Reason	Percentage
Mental health conditions (anxiety, depression, and others)	54%
Physical illness and injury recovery	53%
Chronic physical conditions or limitations	53%
Chronic medical conditions	35%
Pregnancy-related accommodations under the PWFA	33%
Neurodiversity	19%
Sight-related issues	12%
Hearing-related issues	11%

This reflects an ongoing shift: while mental health leave requests are trending down, mental health accommodations are holding steady or increasing. Employees appear more willing to advocate for support that keeps them at work, rather than needing time away.

The data also points to a growing need to accommodate an aging workforce. With more people staying in their roles longer, chronic pain and recovery needs are becoming routine.

One in three employers cite pregnancy-related requests under the PWFA as a top driver. This is strong early evidence that employees are learning about their rights and using them.

When we look at the types of accommodations requested, remote work and flexible schedules top the list. Both were reported by 43% of respondents. Continuous leave was close behind at 34%, reinforcing the trend of accommodations becoming less about physical equipment and more about time, space, and support.

What are the top two most common accommodations employees at your organization request?

Accommodation	Percentage
Remote work or telework	43%
Reduced schedules or periodic time off	43%
Continuous leave	34%
Additional breaks	33%
Specialized equipment	31%
Changes in workspace	27%
Opportunities to sit more often	26%
Specialized technology	18%
Assistive devices	17%
Closer or designated parking	14%

Return-to-office policies continue to play a role here: 62% of employers implemented full or partial RTO in the past two years. That shift is likely a key driver of both the volume and the nature of new accommodation requests.

In the past two years, has your organization implemented full or partial return-to-office (RTO) mandates?

No: 38%

Yes: 62%
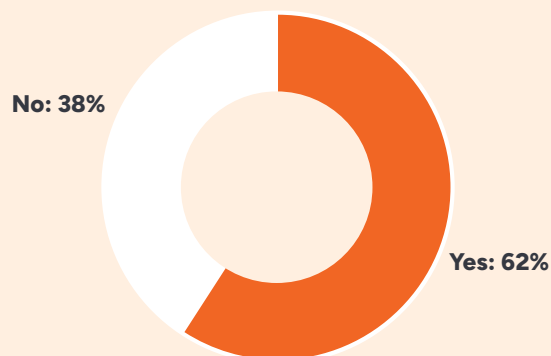
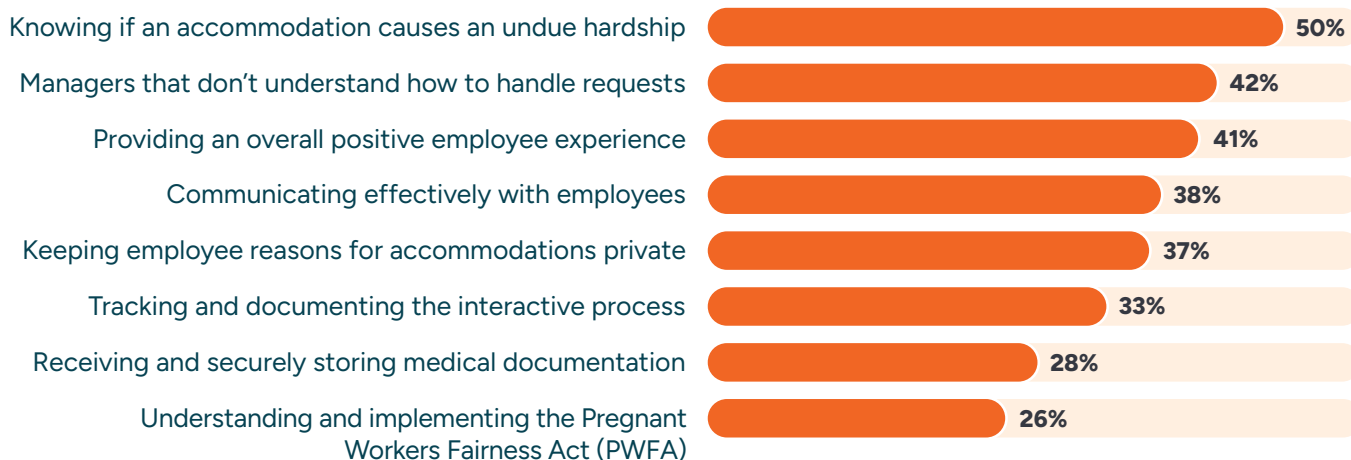# Undue Hardship and Manager Issues are Key Accommodations Challenges

For the second year, HR leaders say the hardest part of managing accommodations is determining when a request causes an undue hardship. The law is notoriously vague, and employers aren't sure when it's appropriate say no, especially with remote work.

For example, truck drivers or school nurses have duties that clearly require them to be on-site or behind the wheel. But requiring an assistant to be on-site while their peers work remotely can create real legal risk

Manager issues were also high on the list. As employee awareness of the PWFA grows, many managers might not know what employees are entitled to or how to respond to requests. If accommodations are granted based on who asks, or how, employee trust is broken, and compliance risk grows.

What challenges do you face when managing accommodations at your organization?

Challenge	Percentage
Knowing if an accommodation causes an undue hardship	50%
Managers that don't understand how to handle requests	42%
Providing an overall positive employee experience	41%
Communicating effectively with employees	38%
Keeping employee reasons for accommodations private	37%
Tracking and documenting the interactive process	33%
Receiving and securely storing medical documentation	28%
Understanding and implementing the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act (PWFA)	26%

This is why process matters. Technology with built-in workflows can help by routing requests and ensuring a consistent, comprehensive interactive process every time. Reports can provide data to evaluate fair decision-making across your organization

With more requests coming every year, tied to remote work, mental health, and time away, HR needs a lifeline. To meet these needs, 64% of organizations plan to invest more in accommodations management this year.

Are you planning on investing more resources (budget, technology, more people) in managing accommodations in the coming year?

Yes: 64%	No: 36%

# Accommodations are Still Largely Managed Manually

While accommodations are slightly less likely to be outsourced than the FMLA, most organizations still manage them in-house. Roughly one in 10 employers outsource this function, most commonly to third-party administrators.

What stands out most is how accommodations are managed day to day. Manual processes, including spreadsheets, calendar reminders, and email, are still the primary method for 43% of organizations. Compared to FMLA and other leave types, accommodations are far more likely to be handled without purpose-built tools.

As accommodation requests become more complex, especially with the rise in mental health, chronic conditions, and remote work, the lack of technology increases the risk of delays, inconsistencies, or costly mistakes. That risk exists even when HR teams are doing everything they can to keep up.

The growing complexity of accommodations calls for a shift away from scattered, manual tracking. Organizations need consistent, compliant systems that can streamline processes and help HR teams keep the interactive process supportive and human-driven.

Does your organization manage accommodations requests in-house or do you outsource to a vendor?

87% — We manage job accommodations in-house

13% — We outsource job accommodations management to a vendor
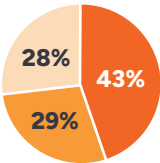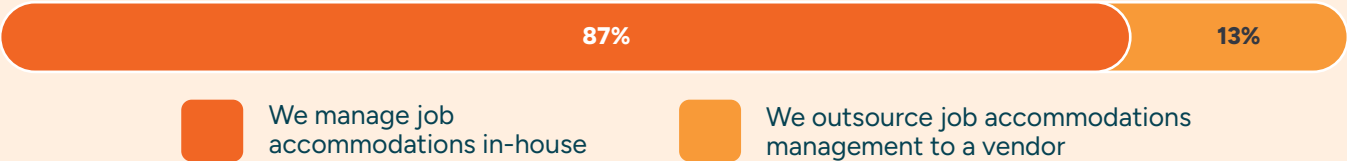
How does your in-house team manage job accommodations?

- 43% — With manual processes, including spreadsheets and calendar reminders
- 29% — With an accommodations management software/platform
- 28% — With an add-on to an HRIS or HCM platform
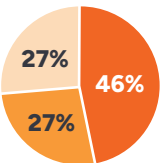
Who do you outsource the management of job accommodations to?

- 46% — A third-party administrator (TPA)
- 27% — An insurance carrier
- 27% — A co-sourced vendor (platform that offers managed services)
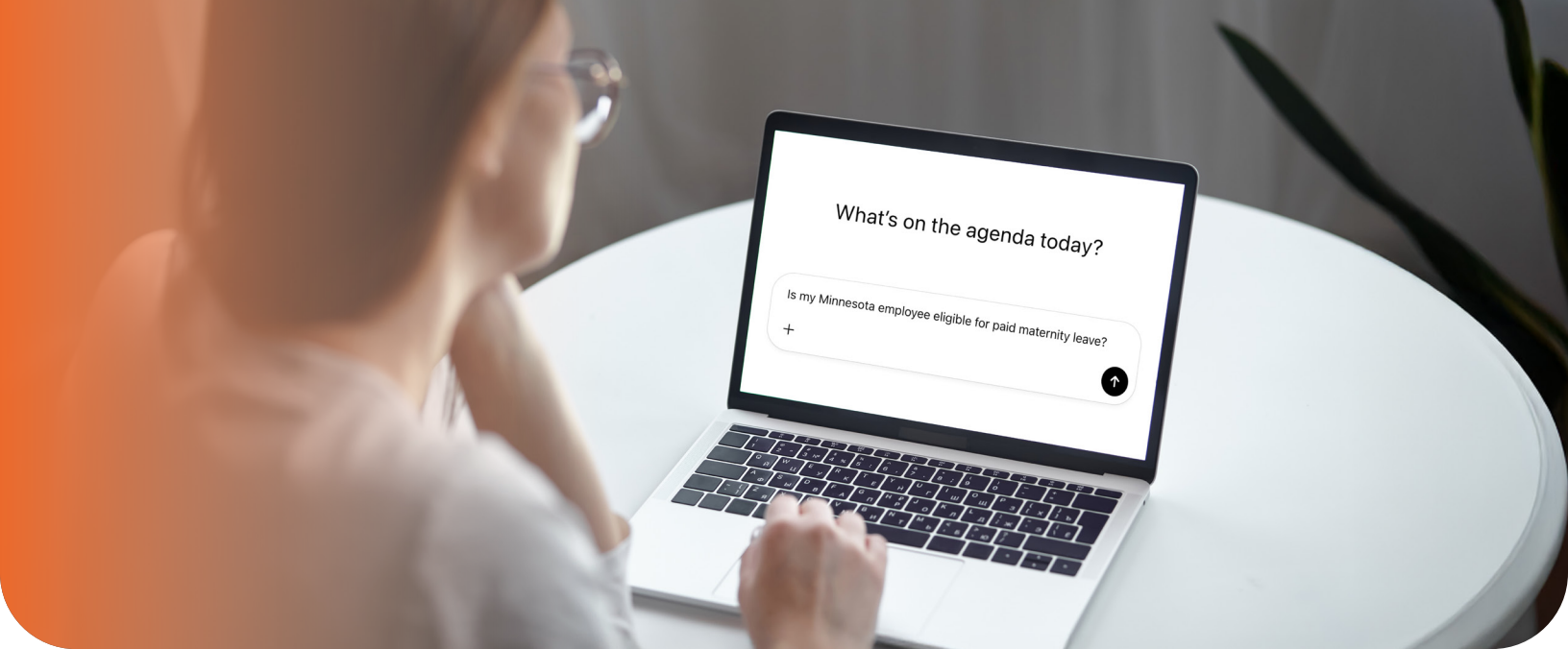
AI Adoption is Already Here, Heightening Compliance Risk

AI is no longer on the sidelines when it comes to accommodations management. Just over half of employers now use AI in their accommodations process, most commonly for reporting and analytics. But more than 40% report using it for tasks like decisions, interpreting laws, and managing communications, even though EEOC guidance advises that AI should not be making eligibility decisions.

When used without clear guardrails or embedded oversight, AI can quietly introduce

compliance risk into a highly regulated process. And when paired with manual processes, the situation gets more dire in terms of risk. HR teams are still juggling spreadsheets while AI tools operate in the background with limited oversight.

That combination introduces several risk factors, including inconsistent decisions, hallucinations, or failing to surface what is truly required to stay compliant with complex laws like the PWFA.

Do you use AI tools (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, etc.) when you manage accommodations requests or during the interactive process?

51%	46%	4%

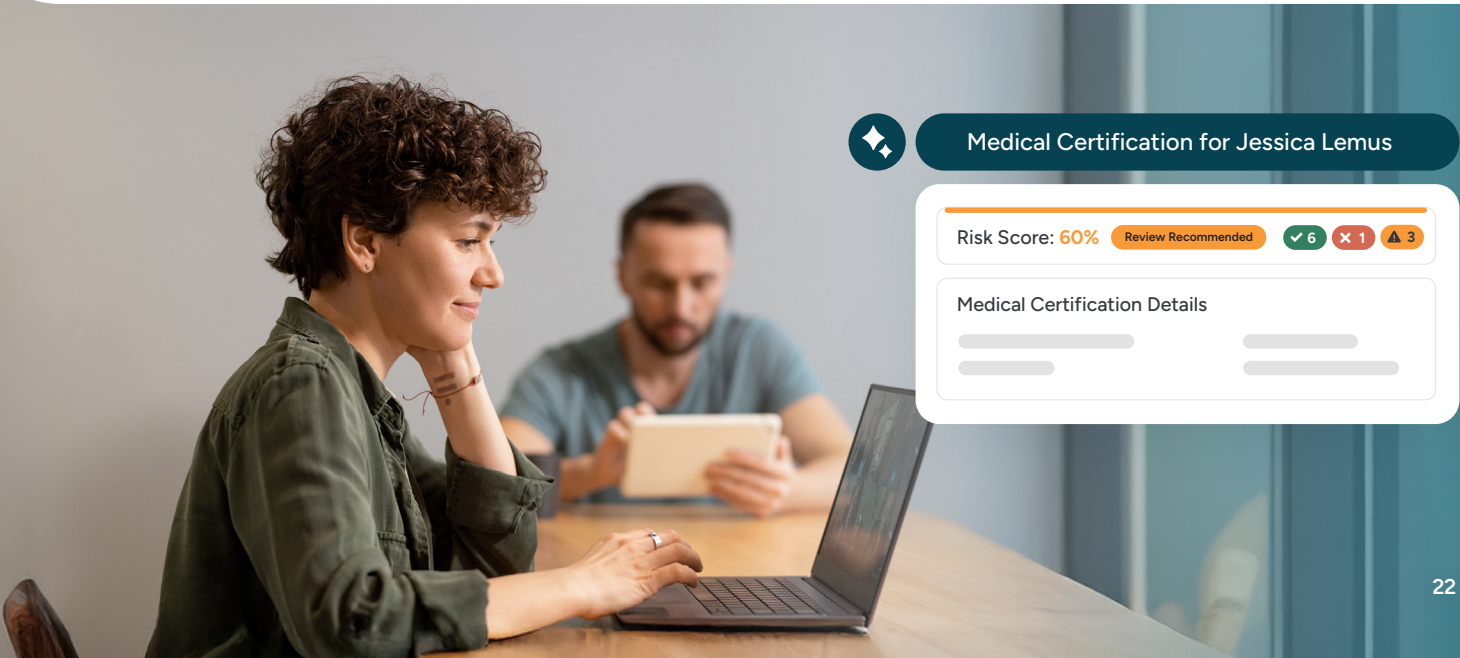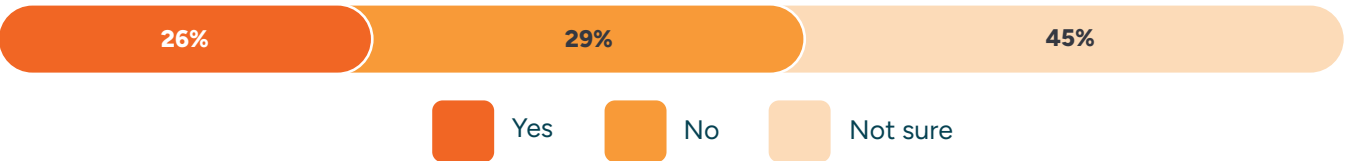■ Yes ■ No ■ We don't manage job accommodations in-house
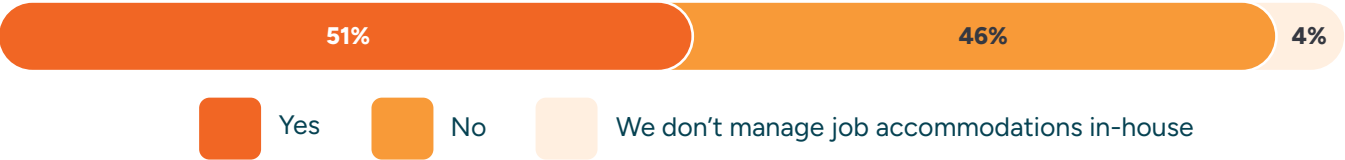
That being said, AI also has the potential to significantly reduce the administrative tasks accommodations management requires. For example, AI can help streamline intake, review certifications for completeness, and support personalization during the interactive process. However, AI tools should be complemented by human touch and oversight. To ensure compliance and reduce risk, AI should ideally be used within a purpose-built platform that relies on the right data sets and has clear guardrails in place.

How do you use AI when managing accommodations?

For reporting and analytics	63%
To write communications	53%
To look up applicable laws	52%
To make eligibility decisions	48%
To understand employee eligibility	48%

Are you planning on starting to use AI in the next year?

26%	29%	45%

■ Yes ■ No ■ Not sure

✦ Medical Certification for Jessica Lemus

Risk Score: **60%** Review Recommended ✔ 6 ✖ 1 ⚠ 3

Medical Certification Details

HR is at a Crossroads, and There Has Never Been a Better Time to Take Action

The results of this year's State of Leave and Accommodations report make one thing clear: the landscape is shifting rapidly. Requests for both leave and job accommodations continue to climb year after year, with many HR teams reporting double-digit increases. Employees are more informed, life needs are more complex, and the expectation for flexibility is here to stay.

Leave and accommodations can no longer be treated as separate processes or secondary priorities. The data shows how closely intertwined they've become. After remote work, time away from work is now the most common job accommodation. With injury and illness recovery topping the reasons for leave, it highlights the growing number of employees returning from leave that will need ongoing support to stay successful and engaged.

Meanwhile, organizations are struggling to keep up. Many still rely on manual tracking, siloed tools, and inconsistent processes, while also adopting AI in ways that are often informal, unmonitored, or outright risky. AI can absolutely reduce administrative burden and improve employee experience, but only when it's embedded thoughtfully within compliant systems that preserve human oversight.

This moment represents both a challenge and an opportunity for HR. Those that continue to patch together processes will likely fall behind, exposing their businesses to compliance issues and frustrating employees. But those that invest in integrated systems, upskill their teams, and embrace thoughtful innovation can move from reactive to strategic.

Supporting employees during life's most critical moments remains critical, whether it's through a leave or ongoing accommodations. The organizations that get it right will earn deeper trust, stronger retention, and a more resilient workforce built to thrive through what's next.

To learn how AbsenceSoft can transform the way you manage leave and accommodations, schedule a demo today.

Schedule a Demo