

One Workforce, Four Generations: A Practical Guide to Leave and Accommodations



Introduction

If you feel like your workload has gotten more intense lately, you're not imagining it. HR leaders reported a rise in requests for leaves of absence and workplace accommodations for the third year in a row, [according to AbsenceSoft's yearly survey](#).

As more employees ask for support, the requests themselves are also getting more complex. Today's workforce is made up of employees who belong to four distinct generations: generation Z, millennials, generation X, and baby boomers.

Across every generation, the vast majority of employees say they're comfortable asking for support. But employees in each age group ask for different kinds of support and navigate the process in different ways. This makes HR's job a challenge. Leave managers have to find a way to provide diverse forms of support to employees with wildly different expectations.

The stakes are high. When organizations fail to provide leave and accommodations in an efficient, effective way, employees are less productive and less loyal. But organizations that learn to deliver high-quality leave and accommodations experiences turn what was once a compliance obligation into a business advantage. Employees who receive the right support quickly are more productive, more engaged, and more loyal.

This guide covers how reasons for leave and accommodations differ by generation, where processes break down, and what HR can do about it. Along the way, you'll hear from real-life employees we interviewed for our 2026 State of Leave and Accommodations report, who tell it like it is.

"It has been the most difficult process I've ever gone through. You'd think it would be simple and go smoothly, especially given that the company handling the accommodations should have knowledge of the laws and respond quickly because of them. Instead, all of my disabilities got worse."

Gen X

"I was made to feel like requesting paid time off was something shameful."

Gen Z

"The entire experience was poor. If I had the chance, I would leave that job."

Millennial

"I asked for a hands-free headset because I had surgery on my neck and using the phone was painful. I asked my manager, and within a couple of days I had the headset. It was a great experience."

Baby Boomer

Why Employees Are Asking for Support

HR gets leave requests for a wide variety of reasons. When we asked employees to tell us the primary reason for their most recent leave of absence, their responses fell into fairly even categories. The top reason for leave — physical illness or injury recovery — earned the No. 1 spot by only one percentage point.

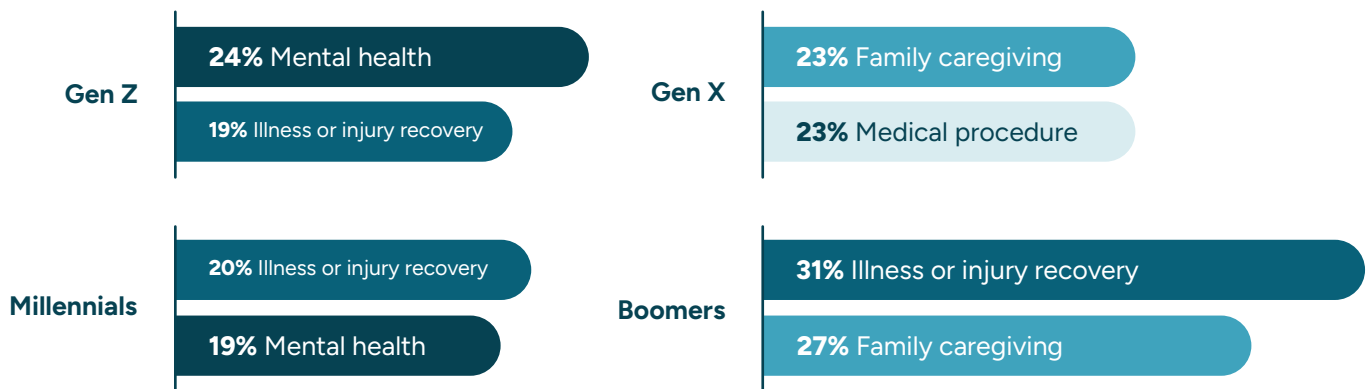
This trend held true for accommodations, too. Employees asked for accommodations to

support their recovery from illness, injury, or surgery. They asked for them to tend to their mental health and manage their chronic physical condition or pain.

Usage trends grow more varied among age groups. Mental health drives leaves of absence among younger employees. Among older employees, caregiving emerges as a top reason for leave.

Top Reasons for Leave, by Generation

Here are the top two reasons employees took leaves of absence, broken down by generation.



“I wish people would stop questioning me when I say I need to take leave.”

Gen X Survey Respondent



Top Reasons for Accommodations, by Generation

Here are the top three reasons employees asked for accommodations, broken down by generation.

"I wish my employer had taken more time to communicate what support options were available, so it never had to get to the point of needing leave."



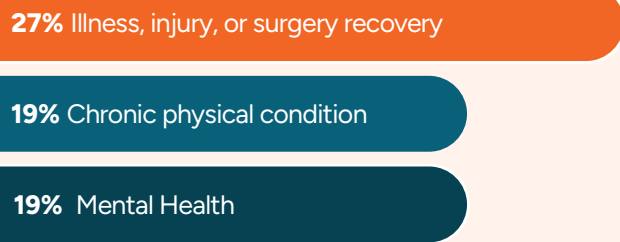
Gen Z



Millennials



Gen X

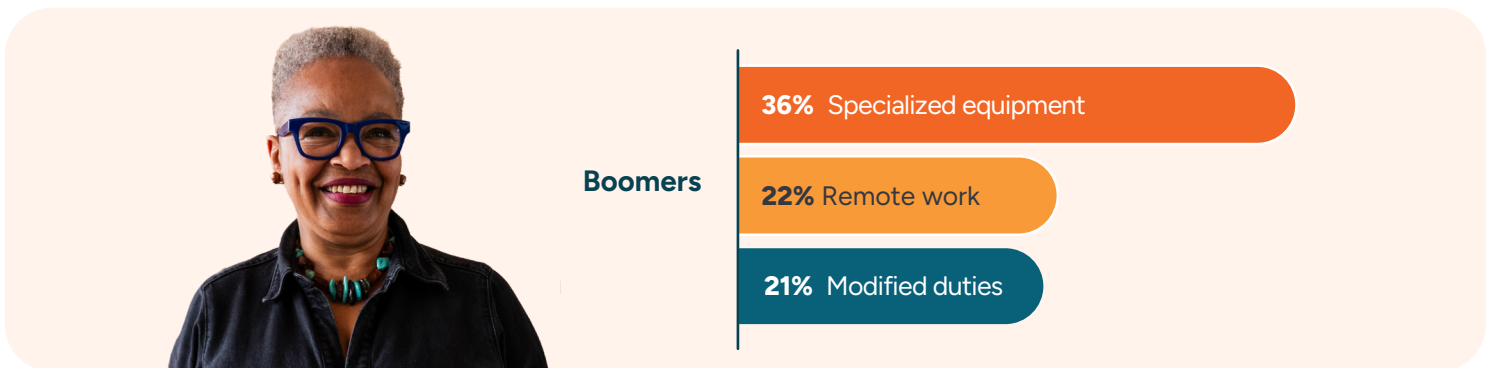
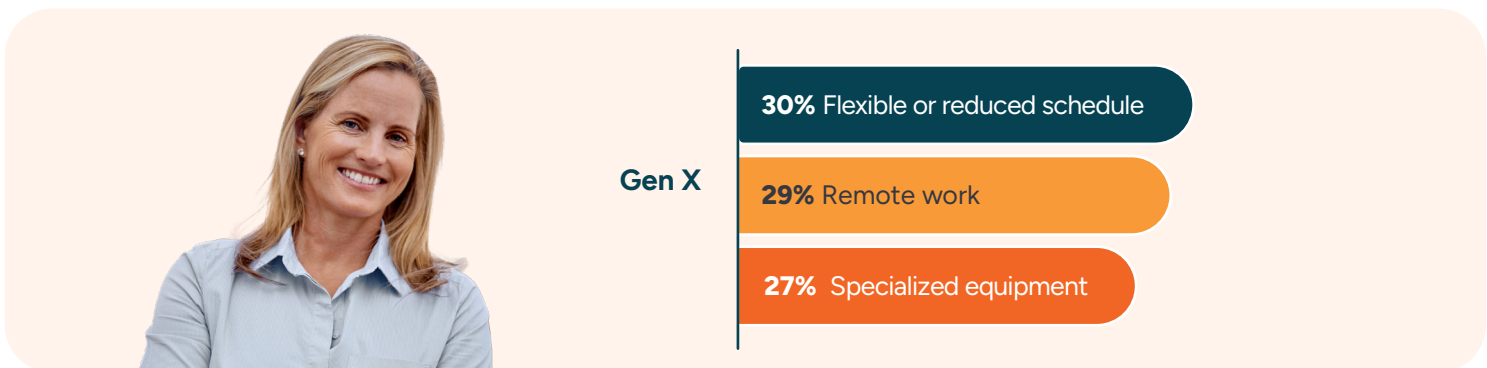
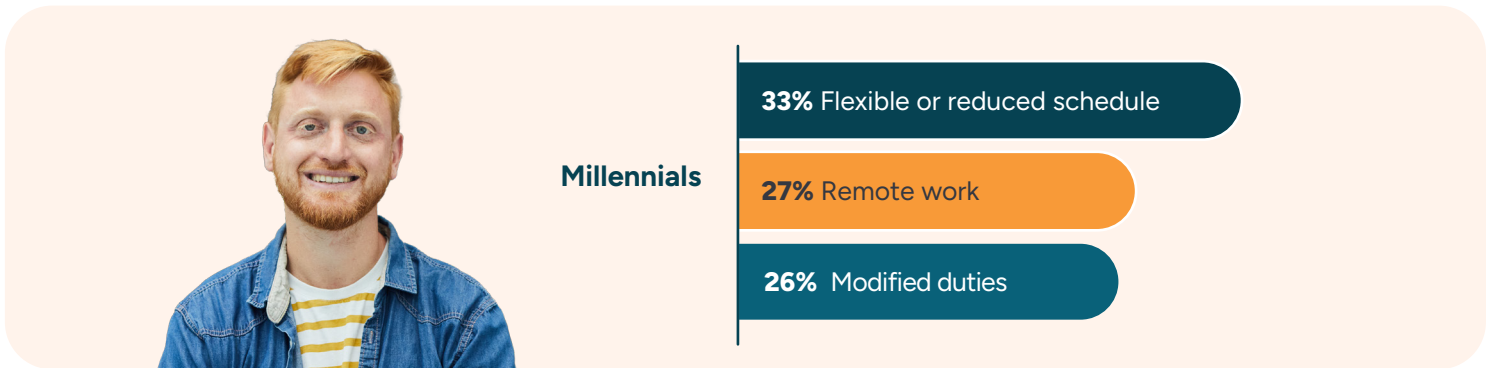
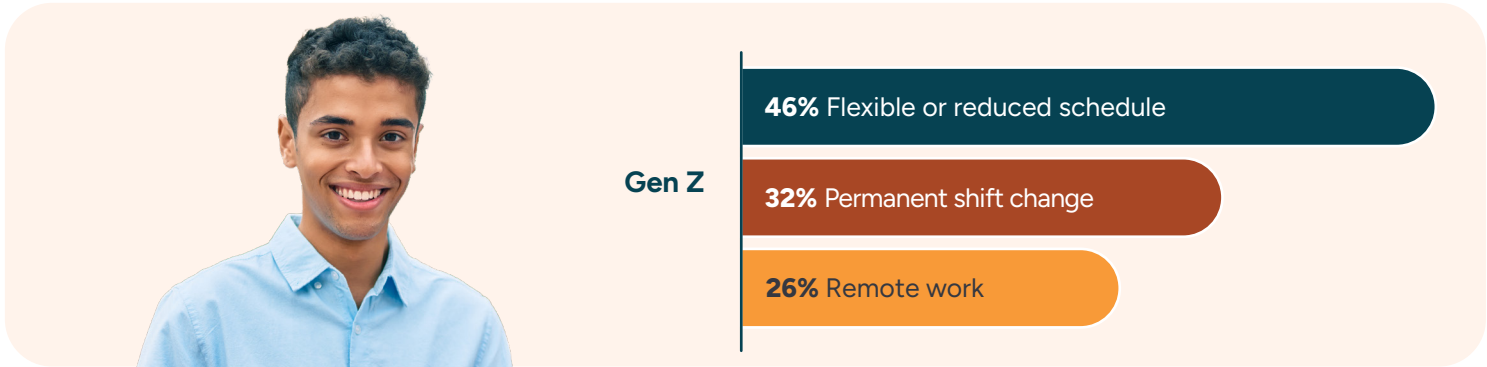


Boomers



How Does Age Impact Accommodation Type?

Employees in different age groups gravitated toward different types of accommodations. But some accommodations, like flexible schedules and remote work, were popular across all generations.

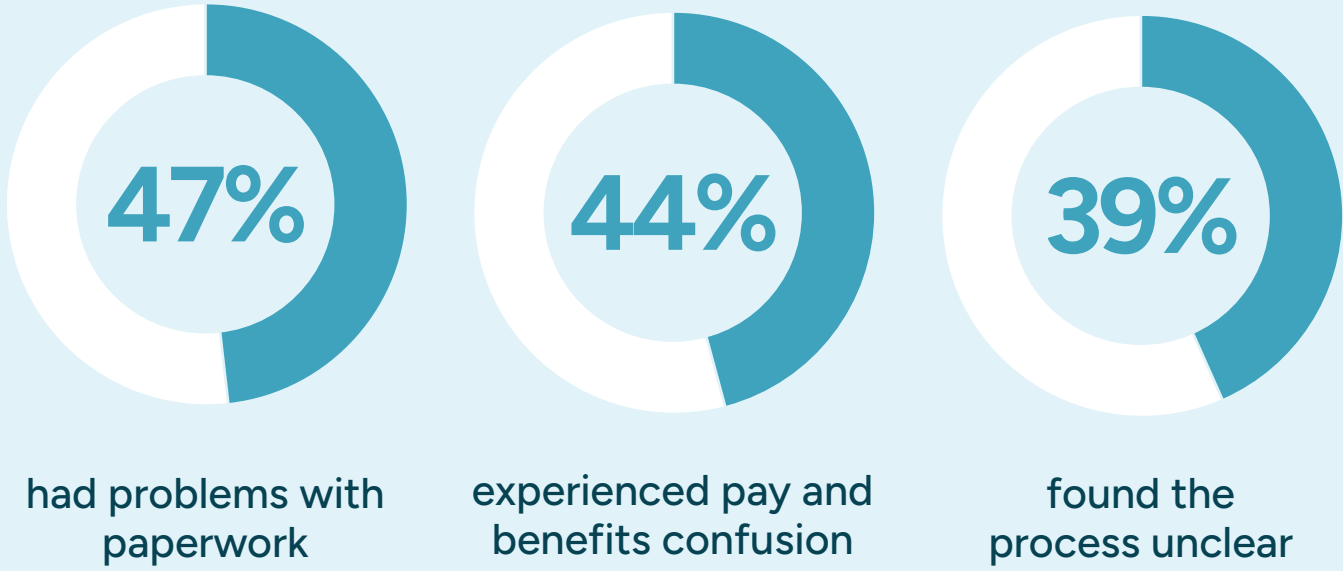


Where Leave and Accommodations Tend to Break Down

Employees of all generations struggle to get the support they need. While roadblocks are consistent, employees experience them differently depending on their age.

When an employee needs time off for chemotherapy or a flexible schedule to deal with their depression, their employer should be quick to supply the necessary support. But a few obstacles tend to get in the way.

AbsenceSoft research has found that employees of all ages experience similar issues in getting the support they need.



These process failures show up across generations. But they play out differently depending on the employee who's experiencing the mistake, obstacle, or confusion.

Leave Process Pain Points by Generation

When AbsenceSoft interviewed employees about their experience getting a leave of absence, their responses revealed frustrations particular to each generation.

Gen Z

The youngest workers often need proactive communication and guided intake. While they're the most likely to advocate for themselves, they're the least likely to know what support is available.

"I wish someone had walked me through the process instead of handing me a stack of PDFs and leaving me to figure it out on my own."

Millennials

Millennials want a sleek experience. Multi-step approval and scattered communication erode trust. This generation prefers a single point of contact and a digitized process.

"Having a single portal where I could upload documents and communicate with my HR rep would have made the whole process so much better."

Gen X

Ambiguity frustrates Gen Xers. They want clear timelines upfront, and they expect documentation requirements from the get-go.

"I wish the process had been clearer and more supportive from the start. Not knowing what documents were needed or what the timeline looked like added unnecessary stress."

Boomers

The oldest generation in the workforce needs more one-on-one support. They crave human interaction and compassion. The process often fails them at an emotional level in addition to an administrative one.

"I wish the people handling my leave had been kinder. My husband had open heart surgery, and the nurse at the facility was not compassionate during an already difficult time."

Accommodations Process Pain Points

Four distinct themes emerged as we spoke with employees about what it was like to get a workplace accommodation.

Mental Health and Neurodiversity Requests Drive Delays and Disappointment

Mental health has been the top reason for accommodations for three years, according to AbsenceSoft research. Despite the frequency HR is providing these accommodations, there are still some sticking points:



Neurodiversity requests saw the highest rate of manager discomfort. Nearly a quarter of respondents (24%) said their manager seemed uncomfortable or unsupportive when they asked for help.

"I was never informed about how my PTSD and bipolar disorder could be accommodated prior to talking to HR."

Gen Z Survey Respondent



"I think companies need to be very open-minded about mental health issues, because depression is real and anxiety is real. I understand that they have to follow a certain protocol, but it matters how they do it."

Gen X Survey Respondent



Confidentiality is a Precursor to Trust

When a worker asks for an accommodation, they usually need to say why they need the support they're requesting. Sometimes, these conditions are obvious, something you can see. But there are plenty of disabilities that are invisible to the naked eye.

Visible or not, a worker's medical information is always personal and private. Their conditions are not fodder for office gossip or conversations around the water cooler. When employees don't trust that their information stays private, they don't ask for the support they need. Or they may withhold certain information, which creates its own compliance risk.



Confidentiality is particularly important for mental health-related requests. Among employees who asked for mental health support, fear of retaliation was the second most-cited issue, at 20%.

"People shouldn't have to prove they are sick to receive help."

Gen Z Survey Respondent



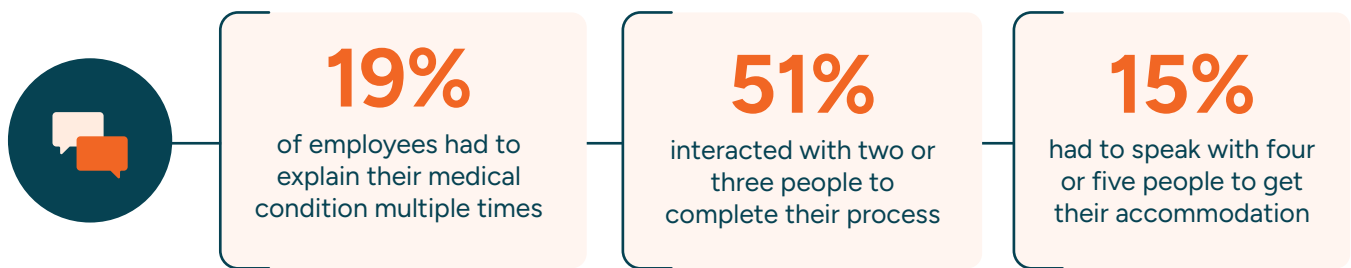
"I wish it could have been a bit more confidential, with information shared just between me and my manager."

Gen X Survey Respondent

Asking Once Should Be Enough

For an employee managing a stable, long-term condition, disclosing a medical need is rarely a one-time conversation. It often means re-explaining the same circumstances to multiple people, tracking down the same documentation, and bracing for the same uncomfortable exchange every time recertification comes around.

Recertification exists for good reason, and in many cases it's legally required. But how HR manages that process determines whether it feels like a routine check-in or a signal that the employee's word was never quite enough.



"Too much generic paperwork. I have to rewrite everything over and over, monthly."

Boomer Survey Respondent

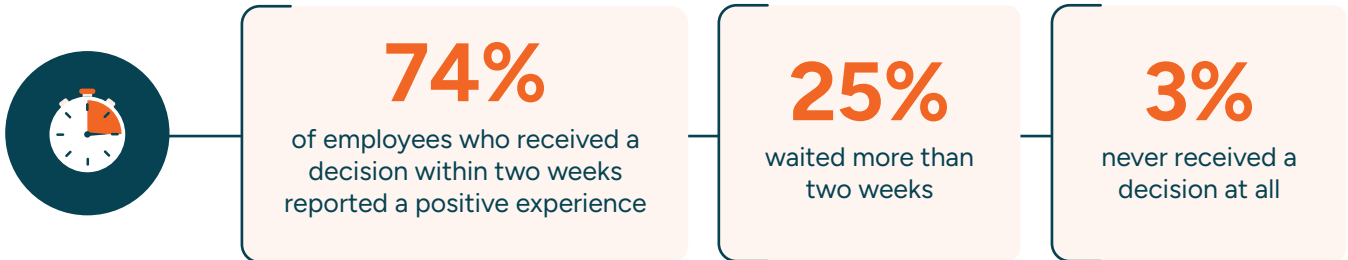


"It was frustrating how many times I had to repeat my story and advocate for a right I had as an employee."

Gen Z Survey Respondent

Accommodation Delays Downgrade Employee Satisfaction

When an employee asks for an accommodation, they usually need that support right away. Delays are frustrating and demeaning. They also drive attrition: 40% of employees who had a poor accommodations experience started looking for a new job.



76%

of employees said they would have preferred to manage their leave from a smartphone. Slow, manual processes create friction at every step.



"I wish I hadn't had to wait so long to get my specialized desk and chair."

Millennial Survey Respondent



"It went well. It took a long time to get my chair, and I don't really like it, but I'm not going to bother requesting a different one."

Gen X Survey Respondent

Return to Work: The Step That's Often Skipped

Two simple questions can help your organization get return to work right.

Return to work doesn't get the attention it deserves. According to AbsenceSoft research, only 26% of employees had a manager-led return-to-work conversation. This lack of preparation creates frustration and tension. When employees transition back from leave without proper planning, it looks like they've been forgotten about. Their teammates don't know they're coming back. Their manager isn't ready. They might not even have clearance to get in the building.

It's particularly important to get return to work right in a workplace with many age groups. Because employees are taking leave for a wide array of reasons, they're coming back to work with diverse mindsets, experiences, and concerns.

Younger employees returning from parental leave are returning to work exhausted, trying to figure out how to juggle a career and parenthood. Meanwhile, older employees may be coming back to work learning to navigate the office with new physical limitations as they recuperate from surgery, an illness, or an injury.

Organizations that bungle this moment are losing an important opportunity to improve the employee experience. By devoting a little effort to the return-to-work process, you make sure returning employees feel welcome, valued, and set up for success.

Here are two questions your managers can ask to improve the return to work process:

- ❓ When are you coming back to work? It's important to communicate clearly without pressuring employees to return early. In some circumstances, they may be entitled to extra time away.
- ❓ Do you need any support when you return? According to AbsenceSoft research, only 19% of employees were asked whether they needed an accommodation as they settled back into their jobs. But employees who have taken leave often need accommodations to help them recover.

What You Can Do to Offer Diverse Support to Employees of All Ages

This practical checklist will help you optimize your efforts throughout your leave and accommodations program.

Create a Streamlined, Centralized Process

It shouldn't be confusing or challenging to get a leave of absence or accommodation. When employees ask for support, a simple, straightforward process should quickly unfold. Employees should understand where to make a request, what paperwork they'll need to submit, and how long it will take to hear back.

Ideally, this process includes one leave manager and the employee's supervisor. More people can create miscommunication and disruption.

- Communicate all documentation requirements upfront
- Reduce the number of handoffs to minimize process gaps
- Offer multiple intake channels, including an employee self-service portal
- Centralize tracking and documentation

"I was made to feel like requesting paid time off was something shameful. On top of that, I had to get approval from three different managers. The process needs to be simpler and more fair."

Millennial

"The experience could have been better if there was a website or app to submit documents."

Gen Z

Prepare Your Managers

Managers are the first point of contact for 52% of leave requests and 36% of accommodation requests, according to AbsenceSoft research. This means that training is a compliance imperative, not just a cultural bonus. When managers know how to recognize and respond to leave and accommodation requests, employees get the support they're entitled to quickly and without issue.

It's particularly important to train managers on mental health and neurodiversity requests. As our annual report revealed, mental health is the No. 1 driver of accommodations requests across generations. Neurodiversity was the No. 3 driver of accommodations for Gen Z employees. Managers should be trained to spot these requests and respond quickly and compassionately.

- Teach managers the basics of leave and accommodation laws like the Family and Medical Leave Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act
- Instruct managers to send employees with leave and accommodations request to HR
- Give managers an opportunity to practice talking through requests, especially those related to mental health
- Emphasize the importance of confidentiality, ensuring managers understand to keep employee information private
- Train managers on return-to-work protocols, prompting them to offer accommodations when workers get back from leave

"The accommodations experience was traumatizing, as I was being judged every single step of the way. My manager even started spending time in my newly accommodated area before going to start his actual shift on the main floor."

Millennial

"I just want to share that if a manager or HR employee isn't handling an important accommodation properly, employees should be able to go to higher authorities within the company and file a complaint."

Gen X

Personalize Communication During Leave

In our survey, a third of employees attributed their poor leave experience to too much contact from their employer during their absence. While overcommunication can be irritating, it can also be a violation of certain leave laws.

- Limit communication to essential inquiries, like when an employee plans to return to work
- Offer a single, named point of contact to minimize back and forth
- Reduce handoffs and conflicting information
- Ask employees how they prefer to communicate and how much they'd like to be contacted during their leave

Speed Up Accommodation Delivery to Boost the Employee Experience

When an employee needs extra support to manage their diabetes, improve their mental health, or deal with their chronic pain, they need their accommodation as quickly as possible. Delays in the accommodations process put a hold on support while also hampering employees' productivity and well-being.

It's no surprise, then, that AbsenceSoft research found that response speed is the single strongest predictor of a positive experience. When you get employees the support they require, you position them for success.

- Reduce redundant recertification for stable, ongoing conditions
- Set and communicate clear timelines
- Audit whether mental health and neurodiversity requests move through the process as consistently as physical condition requests



Better Processes Make Way for Better Support and Better Business Outcomes

Employees of different generations seek different forms of support and experience different pain points as they secure leave and accommodations. Thankfully, you don't need to implement generation-specific solutions for each age group.

The data tells us that a few fixes can deliver meaningful relief to all employees, regardless of their age. Employees will benefit from clear processes, equipped managers, faster response times, and streamlined paperwork.

You don't have to make these changes on your own. When you partner with a trusted platform like AbsenceSoft, purpose-built technology will transform your leave and accommodations program.

AbsenceSoft centralizes all of your leave and accommodations efforts into one system. We provide built-in compliance checks, self-service tools, and the reporting mechanisms you need to manage employees at every stage of life.

If you're interested in learning more about how AbsenceSoft can equip you to serve a multi-generational workforce, [book a demo today](#).