



How to Lobby Your Employer for Adoption Benefits

For working people who want to adopt, the need to take time off without pay doesn't have to put adoption beyond your financial means.

■ By Elizabeth A. Mair

If anyone is seeking an issue for which to crusade in his workplace, may I suggest employee adoption benefits? If you are "waiting," this is the time to make a pitch to your employer to institute or improve these benefits. If you have already completed your adoption, you can certainly remember that your employer undoubtedly could have provided more support with paid leave, adoption fee reimbursement or both.

While I was in the waiting phase, I found several ways to work toward encouraging my employer to improve the benefits provided to adoptive parents. In the summer of 1996, I participated in a diversity session focusing on work and family issues. Several women at the session complained about the amount of paid maternity leave time provided by the company, indicating that it was not competitive with other firms in our industry. I piped up and informed the group that

the company offered no paid time for an employee who adopted a child.

After the session, I approached the facilitator who was one of the most senior women at my company. I asked for her assistance in identifying human resources employees who would be in a position to change benefits. Finally, in January of 1997, I submitted this idea to the company chairman's electronic suggestion box.

My focus was paid adoption leave, but this proposal could easily be altered to push for new or improved adoption expense reimbursement. I borrowed heavily from a booklet called "Advocating for Adoption Benefits: An Employee's Guide" which is published by the National Adoption Center to write the proposal. The Center can be reached at 800-862-3678 (website: www.adopt.org).

Changes were already in the works when I submitted my idea. In February of 1997, my company began to provide twelve weeks of paid adoption leave to the primary caregiving parent

in birth, adoption, foster care and guardian care situations. When I adopted in June of 1997, I was able to use the new paid leave benefit.

The time I was able to take off to be with my daughter was invaluable. During my leave, I wrote my company's CEO a note of thanks for instituting the generous paid leave benefit and sent along my daughter's adoption announcement. His handwritten response of congratulations will always be a treasure in my daughter's memory book.

I encourage you to send out an e-mail, use your desk as your soapbox or do whatever it takes to get your employer to institute or improve its adoption benefits. In doing so, your company can join the ranks of enlightened employers who acknowledge the fact that adoption is an important way to build a family. AE

Elizabeth Mair is a single mother in New York.

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**MEMO
FROM BETSY MAIR**

To the CEO of her company:

IDEA: Give adoptive parents paid leave time to spend with their new child at the time of the adoption.

As an employee of our company for over seven years, I have appreciated the generous benefits offered by the company. An area of vital importance to me at this time is adoption benefits, as I am in the process of adopting a child.

Adoption can be twice as expensive as birth, costing from \$12,000 to \$25,000 ("Adoption Aid," Working Mother magazine, November 1996 edition). These figures do not take into account the income a parent may forego during an unpaid leave. The company's current adoption benefit offers reimbursement of expenses up to \$5,000, however, the company provides no paid leave.

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption (614-764-3009, website: www.wendys.com/community/adoption/found.html) and the National Adoption Center have launched the "Adoption and the Workplace" initiative which encourages employers to offer adoption benefits. This program has identified several reasons that adoption benefits are good business, including establishing equity, keeping pace with current benefit trends, low utilization rates, building employee loyalty and goodwill and giving back to the community.

ESTABLISHING EQUITY • Mothers who choose to build their families through birth receive generous maternity benefits, including time off during which they continue to receive their salaries. The average paid time given to biological mothers is 11 weeks ("Adoption Aid," Working Mother magazine, November 1996 edition). An adoptive mother who is employed by our company is not able to access the same financial support when she, too, is experiencing the cost and stress of creating a family.

KEEPING PACE WITH CURRENT BENEFIT TRENDS • The number of employers initiating paid leave time for adoptive parents has risen over the last few years. On Wall Street, Merrill Lynch provides 5 weeks of paid leave for adoptive parents and Bankers Trust (now Deutsche Bank) gives 4 weeks of paid leave ("100 Best Companies for Working Mothers," Working Mother magazine, October 1996 edition. Note: this feature is published annually and a list of the companies can be accessed at www.workingmother.com/100best/index.html).

LOW UTILIZATION RATES • Less than 1/2 of 1% of any employee population will utilize adoption benefits during a year.

BUILDING EMPLOYEE LOYALTY AND GOODWILL • Employee satisfaction contributes significantly to productivity. A renewed sense of loyalty and commitment results from employer support of adoption. Even employees who do not adopt are pleased that their employer has included the needs of adoptive parents in the work and family agenda.

GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY • Financial assistance and leave time are critical to the success of an adoption. By making it easier for employees to adopt, an employer acknowledges the importance of families to children. Each year, American families adopt more than 100,000 children. Employer support of adoption can make a critical difference for these children and for parents who wish to build their families through adoption.

I have done further research on this issue and would welcome the opportunity to discuss it with the appropriate employees at the firm. Thank you in advance for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Mair