

# The benefit workers want most is less work

[Lila MacLellan](#) March 26, 2019



Reuters/Goran Tomasevic

Better things to do.

The quest to keep employees happy has spurred some employers to take a fast-fashion approach to perks, making cupcakes, or kombucha, or onsite CrossFit classes *a must-have* for some time—until the next big extraordinary benefit arrives.

But all the creativity and trend-chasing may be unnecessary. According to the just-released [MetLife Employee Benefits Trends Study 2019](#), which surveyed 2,600 full-time US workers, the top-rated “emerging benefit” is actually pretty intuitive and timeless. Among respondents, 72% expressed interest in unlimited paid time off, putting that perk ahead of wellness plans that reward healthy behaviors, phased retirement programs, paid

sabbaticals, and free or subsidized on-site services, like hair salons, dry cleaners, and restaurants.

Sure, that stuff all sounds great, the survey takers basically said, but what we really want is to have a life.

MetLife's research, which focused on employees in a diverse range of occupations aged 21 and older, found a fairly consistent agreement across generations on this topic. Among Gen Z workers (now aged 21 or 22), 73% percent of survey takers said they'd be drawn to unlimited paid time off, compared to 80% of millennials (aged 23-36), 70% of Gen Xers (aged 37-52), and 63% of Boomers (aged 52 and up).

Many of the creative perks offered by workplaces are essentially designed to keep [an employee at work longer](#) by removing excuses, like the need to eat, or see a doctor across town. The survey results suggest there is some demand for these kinds of programs.

But an unlimited paid time off benefit—increasingly adopted by a [range of firms, not only tech companies](#)— has the potential to be truly empowering and restorative. The perk gives employees permission to take the odd day off to deal with life or take a break, without triggering fear about “wasting” the paid days away allotted to them, which are [pitifully scarce in the US](#). (Companies avoid total chaos by asking employees to gain approval for long stretches of vacation, or an abundance of days, and reserve the right to deny requests that are deemed infeasible.)

In practice, of course, an unlimited vacation policy is [only as enlightened](#) as the managers who enforce it. It can become meaningless if managers themselves do not take time off, or if there is no minimum time away established. Research has shown that, in the absence of clear rules, some employees take fewer days off than they would [under a standard plan](#).

Another way to read the finding is as a pining for flexibility, which might

make unlimited time off less necessary.

MetLife also asked full-time workers who are planning to leave their job for “gig” work in the next five years what would convince them to stay. More money was the answer for roughly half the respondents, while a third felt better benefits could help change their mind. However, the third and fourth most popular responses were more flexibility with their schedule, and the ability to work from anywhere.