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# As More New Dads Get Paternity Leave, Companies Push Them to Take It

At some companies, new fathers get advice from older colleagues to take their full paid leave; 'If you don't take it, it's borderline idiotic,' one manager said

By Vanessa Fuhrmans

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As more companies offer new fathers more paid time off, a new challenge has emerged—persuading working dads to actually take advantage of it.

Job-related anxieties that come with parental leave, including worries about slowing one's career's trajectory, are familiar to many women. As more employers expand parental-leave benefits for men, new and soon-to-be fathers are confronting those same concerns.

Many men say they remain reluctant to take advantage of parental-leave policies. In a recent Deloitte survey of more than 1,000 U.S. workers, one in three male respondents said they worried that taking time off to tend to a newborn would jeopardize their careers, and more than half of the men said they felt using parental-leave benefits available to them would be seen as a lack of commitment to their jobs.

Managers are trying to change that, at companies ranging from Facebook Inc. and Twitter Inc. [TWTR +1.04% ▲](#) to American Express Co.

Facebook allows four months of paid parental leave and encourages bosses to ask both expecting mothers and fathers “when”—not “if”—they plan to take the time off. Like CEO Mark Zuckerberg, who took two months off when each of his daughters was born, male managers often post about their own paternity leave. At Twitter Inc., fathers gather quarterly for “Dads Lunches” to trade parenting tips and talk through how and whether to take the full 20 weeks of paid leave the social-media firm offers.



Mr. Appiah-Boamah feeds his newborn daughter, Amaris. PHOTO: JESSICA HILL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“If you don't take it, it's borderline idiotic,” is the consistent message young dads

get from senior managers and older fathers, says Twitter senior client partner Bob Belciano, who helps organize the lunches and took 12 weeks off after his son was born 13 months ago.

A study by researchers at Ball State University and Ohio State University found that across the U.S. only 14% of fathers who take leave do so for more than two weeks.

“Future Dads, Don’t miss these moments,” reads one of many posters of men and babies American Express Co. has in elevator banks and other communal areas at its offices in the U.S. Below a photo of a father cradling a sleeping infant, the caption continues, “Take up to 20 weeks parental leave. You both deserve it.”

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Companies encouraging male employees to take more paid time off say there is a compelling business case for overcoming the stigma of paternity leave. Research indicates both men and women who take parental leave have fewer absences from work and are more productive when they return. Employers such as American Express say actively promoting paternity-leave policies also gives them an edge in recruiting top talent, especially among millennials, who surveys routinely show tend to prize work-life balance over promotions and other career priorities.

“It’s a strategy that differentiates us in the marketplace,” says David Kasiaz, senior vice president of global compensation and benefits at American Express. In January 2017 the company expanded its paid-leave benefits for both mothers and fathers to 20 weeks, up from six weeks for primary caregivers and two weeks for secondary caregivers.

As part of the strategy, the charge-card giant holds support chats for new or soon-to-be fathers, including high-ranking executives, to talk about preparing for and returning from paternity leave and the firm’s other benefits for parents. At a June session of nearly three dozen recent and expecting fathers at the firm’s New York headquarters, the conversation quickly turned to the kind of qualms long familiar to working mothers.

“Would you be afraid to take the whole leave?” Mr. Kasiaz asked the group. A few hands went up. One of the men, Daniel Skolnik, had taken the 20 weeks off when he and his wife had a baby last year and wanted to know how best to approach his manager about another leave when the time comes for a second child. “My wife is assuming I’m going to take another 20 weeks—how do you have that conversation again?” asked Mr. Skolnik, a director in finance.

“Your career is a long road. This is just a blip,” Rajeev Subramanyam, American Express’s head of business-to-business digital payments automation, assured the room. One of the most senior executives there, he also took five months leave after his son was born last year. “It lets you be a role model,” he says.



Mr. Appiah-Boamah holds Amaris as his wife, Abby, right, looks on. PHOTO: JESSICA HILL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

American Express declined to detail how many male employees have taken paternity leave since the policy change, but says the majority do and the number has jumped 10% since it extended the benefit and boosted efforts to encourage fathers to use it. The company says, on

average, two babies a day are born and one child is adopted a week within its 55,000-employee global workforce.

Sam Appiah-Boamah, a director in American Express's finance department, says he initially thought he'd take about three or four months' leave when he and his wife learned they were expecting last year. Any more time off would send the wrong message to his bosses, he says he worried at the time. Then his superior, who'd taken far less time off when he'd become a father years before, urged him to go for it.

"His immediate reaction was you have no idea what you're getting into. You have to take the full five months," Mr. Appiah-Boamah said.

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After taking a couple of weeks off when his daughter, Amaris, was born in May, he started the rest of his leave this month and will be at home with her until November. For the past three months, Mr. Appiah-Boamah will be the primary caregiver, because his wife's health-care administration job gives her three months leave and she needs to return to work in August.

"It's so fantastic compared with only being partially involved," he said.

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