



A LESSON IN LEAV'IN

Demystifying leave types — an integrated
approach for handling leaves in the workplace

JANUARY 9, 2025

INTRODUCTION

The Leave Management Office at Columbia University serves the needs of the Columbia University community, creating an office that manages all leaves inclusive of Workers' Compensation, FMLA, Paid Family Leave, Short Term Disability, Long Term Disability and Workplace Accommodations. This unique arrangement blends services typically serviced by offices such as risk management, benefits, employee relations and labor relations into one.

EVOLUTION OF THE LEAVE MANAGEMENT OFFICE

- **Humble Beginnings:**

- 2001, began as a one-person operation. Focused on managing leaves of absence to help employees return to work sooner with accommodations.

- **Expanded Scope and Continued Growth:**

- 2002, assumed responsibility for the processing of NYS Disability
- 2007, the office took over management of Worker's Compensation

- **Where we are today:**

- We manage all medical leaves, FMLA, long term disability and workplace accommodations
- Our staff: Hana Bloch, Director, Kenesha Giocastro, Assistant Director, Nikki Adler, Manager, Nancy Ann Ramos, Coordinator and Dara Scolnick, Coordinator.

It is with gratitude to our devoted staff that this office is so successful

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN THIS BEFORE, ACT 1?

Nick Butler is a Project Coordinator in the School of Engineering.

- May 1, 2023: Welcomed a new baby with his wife and took 12 weeks of NYS Paid Family Leave.
- August 1, 2023: Nick returned to work and same day, unfortunately, tripped while walking to the bathroom, spraining his ankle. Took 2 months of Workers Compensation leave.
- October 1, 2023: Cleared to resume working, but only remotely for 4 weeks, transitioning to full duty thereafter.
- January 10, 2024: Nick called out sick due to emergency gallbladder surgery.
- Nick's first leave for NYS PFL, was handled by the Benefits Office
- Nick's second leave for Workers' Compensation was handled by Risk Management
- Nick's Disability leave for his gallbladder, was also handled by the Benefits Office
- He had no sick time left and wondered why. Meanwhile the department was frustrated by all of his absences

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN THIS BEFORE, ACT 1?

GUESS WHAT?

- Risk Management did not know that Nick just returned from a parental leave and processed his worker's compensation claim and leave and allowed him to be out of work and receive pay without any review.
- Benefits did not know that Nick was out with a sprained ankle and wondered why the Department was so frustrated.



CHOICES, CHOICES, CHOICES

There are a few ways to think about managing leaves of absence

1. Integrated approach: All leaves managed in one office, promoting consistency and efficiency.
2. Non-Integrated approach: Separate offices manage different types of leaves, creating potential communication challenges
3. Hybrid approach: Many, but not all leaves are consolidated in one office.

Many of us inherited an approach to managing leaves and feel stuck—you may need to decide what you can/cannot do in your own organization

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY'S INTEGRATED APPROACH TO LEAVE MANAGEMENT-OVERVIEW

- Columbia University employs over 20,000 benefit eligible full-time employees
- Our office provides services to all employees, not just benefit eligible, meaning we also may need to assist with adjuncts, part time, temporary and student employees

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY'S INTEGRATED APPROACH TO LEAVE MANAGEMENT

HOW IT WORKS?

- We offer a structure of a shared model with HR departments around the University, meaning that some of the leave functions are shared with local HR administrators
- Through our hands on approach and full-service model, our office maintains strong relationships with Departments around the University
- Our relationships are a key to our success

We cannot do it all alone!

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY'S INTEGRATED APPROACH TO LEAVE MANAGEMENT- HOW IT WORKS?

Employees typically inform their Departmental HR administrator about their leave.

Department HR provides instructions and directs employees to send documentation directly to Leave Management.



Our team reviews the documentation and checks for any history of previous leaves.

Outreach is made to departments when documentation is obscure

We proactively contact employees directly to request additional information as needed



Based on our institutional knowledge we know when there may be changes within certain departments that may impact the area/employees

We anticipate potential changes and adjust the leave process accordingly to ensure smooth transitions.

ACT 2- A LESSON ON LEAV'IN

John Jay is a 44 year old, HVAC engineer that returned from a 12 week NYS PFL leave to care for his mother on January 2, 2023. On February 5, 2023 he fell off a ladder and hurt his shoulder. Prior to these current leaves, he took PFL in 2021, NYS DBL in 2018 and has more than typical absences from work. Thinking about your own model, how would you know about any of this history if John Jay worked for you?

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY'S INTEGRATED APPROACH TO LEAVE MANAGEMENT- HOW IT WORKS?

- Based on our model we knew that when John was injured in February, he had just recently returned from a NYS Paid Family Leave (PFL).
- **Step 1: Information Gathering:** Contact the Department to review the workplace incident
 - The Department revealed on our call that they were already concerned about John's PFL leave because he was posting pictures of himself on the beach in Italy
 - The Department also revealed that the Supervisor overheard John stating that he was going to go back to Italy because his sister was getting married, but he was concerned that his vacation request would be denied. The information from the Department along with records of previous medical leaves allows us to obtain full details which helps us to determine next steps
- **Step 2: Investigation and Inter-Departmental Collaboration:** We decided to approve surveillance and a social media check and confirmed that the employee was indeed, in Italy
 - Gathering Labor Relations, the Department and General Counsel, we approved a termination

THE VENDORS

- To best utilize the strengths of our team and our relationships, we outsource the transactions to vendors
- The transactions, like those associated with Workers' Compensation and NYS Disability are time consuming, we greatly appreciate the added value of TPA's and insurance carriers providing assistance
- We utilize an absence software to keep track of all of our claims
- Accommodations are processed in house, using software for tracking

INTERNAL RESOURCES

- Our internal resources consist of HR Business Partners (employee relations), Labor Relations, and Office of General Counsel in addition to the local HR administrators
- Our office serves as a conduit to engage with these other partners and arrange meetings/outreach as needed
- We generally remain engaged in the entire process, rather than just referring out or waiting for someone else to handle
- Our secret to success is creating partnerships and trust with our constituents

WHAT THE CLIENT CAN EXPECT?

- Clients appreciate the one stop shopping approach whereby if we sense an issue, we gather all relevant parties to review
- Our office can help a department review the facts of a leave inclusive of whether other recent leaves were taken. This ensures proper FMLA counts and review of excessive time off
- Our integrated approach helps to reduce the risk of errors and provide departments with the clarity they need to make informed decisions.

ASK THE PANEL:

- Hana Bloch, MSW - Director, Columbia University, Leave Management
- Kenesha Giocastro, MPA - Assistant Director, Columbia University Leave Management
- Nikki Adler, MSW - Manager, Columbia University Leave Management
- Nancy Ann Ramos - Coordinator, Columbia University Leave Management
- Dara Scolnick, MSW - Coordinator, Columbia University Leave Management
- Maria Gerena, SHRM-SCP - Sr. Human Resources Business Partner, Columbia University Human Resources

DOES AN INTEGRATED MODEL MAKE SENSE FOR YOU?

- After hearing from our team, now it's your turn to think about whether process improvements or model changes make sense for you
- This is an institutional decision to decide which design is best for you

ACT 3, FINALE

- Andy Frank, an advising Dean submitted a note from her psychiatrist requesting a medical leave for 4 months beginning September 20th
- At first glance this leave does not appear to be problematic as Andy has never been on leave before, however....
 - Leave Management reviewed her documentation and while looking at her profile saw that she is also a student
 - We confirmed that she was registered for class by working with our Tuition Program department
 - We knew which offices to coordinate with
 - The Department met with their HRBP and General Counsel's office and decided to investigate by meeting with the employee
 - Andy confirmed that she was taking class and did not realize that going to school, instead of going to work was a problem

Andy returned to the office and 4 months of disability payments (which meant full salary was saved)

DOES THIS MODEL MAKE SENSE (CENTS)?

An integrated model allows you

- To keep tabs on who goes on any sort of leave and when
- To establish contact with individuals when out on any leave, especially if taking leaves consecutively
- To ensure FMLA is applied correctly

An integrated model may help you to bring employees back to work sooner, thus saving money on paying leave benefits to the employee

QUESTIONS

