

New parental leave benefit: Bridging a historical divide

Issued by [Ackermans](#)

5 Mar 2019

One of the biggest challenges parents face is the juggling of careers and family life. Women most often are the ones who take on the responsibility of caregiving in the home; adjusting their schedules and making compromises when the needs of children and other family members collide with work. However, in November 2018, through the signing of the Labour Laws Amendment Bill, South Africa has become the first African country to allow fathers to take on a more active and supportive role in the home.

“This is a step in the right direction for gender equality in the South African workplace. The Bill is progressive and will contribute to a more equitable society, as it supports the role of both parents in their caregiving duties towards their children. It allows for all parents to access paternal leave which includes fathers, surrogate & adoptive parents, leaving your family responsibility leave untouched,” says Fred Prince, Remuneration & Benefits Manager at Ackermans.

Prince welcomes this bill as he believes it better reflects the current times. “Benefits and leave policies were originally designed around the traditional nuclear family, where the father was usually the primary breadwinner, and the mother was the primary caregiver. Nowadays, we see more single parent families than previously, or scenarios where the mother works full time and the father looks after the children in the afternoons. The Amendment takes these dynamics into account, requiring that companies offer better support to families.”

Prince believes there is still some way to go before the law catches up with modern family structures.

In the meantime, Prince believes that there is a responsibility on the employer to ensure that their employee benefits packages are congruent with their employees’ needs. “Employees are increasingly seeking companies which provide meaningful benefits that take into account the demands of their family lives, over purely remuneration.”

To bring true value to the lives of their employees, the retailer recently reassessed its benefits offering to determine if its current policies and packages best support its workforce.

As a result, Ackermans adjusted its parental leave benefit by giving all fathers 10 days paid paternity leave per annum as well as offering a competitive salary to all mothers during the maternity leave period. The adoption benefit mirrors that of the maternity benefit and is applicable to either parent, thus taking into consideration of couples who choose to adopt.

“To further support working parents we offer the entire household access to all the services offered through our Employee Assistance Programme, which includes legal, financial and personal advice. We also offer bursaries and a lifetime education policy for their children,” Prince continues.

Prince believes that it is critical for employers to reevaluate their benefits offering holistically and on an ongoing basis, and question whether they are still relevant, or can be improved upon to the benefit of employees.

“When it comes to parental leave South Africa still lags behind countries such as India and Iceland, and while the signing of the Labour Laws Amendment Bill is definitely a step in the right direction, employers should be forward-thinking in how they support employees in achieving a healthy work-life balance.”

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