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Making the case to reform U.S. workplace polices



Alison Earle, a principal research scientist at the Institute for Urban Health Research, says employers could actually benefit by providing paid vacation leave. Photo by Lauren McFalls

January 20, 2010

The United States lags behind the vast majority of other nations around the globe in terms of providing basic, family-friendly workplace policies, such as paid vacation time, according to a new book by Alison Earle, a principal research scientist at the Bouvé College of Health Sciences' Institute for Urban Health Research at Northeastern University.

Contrary to popular opinion among business executives, Earle also found that workplace benefits, such as paid sick leave and a weekly day of rest, boost the competitiveness of companies and don't negatively affect job creation.

Raising the Global Floor: Dismantling the Myth that We Can't Afford Good Working Conditions for Everyone, debunks the popular misconception among business leaders that providing family-friendly benefits will only raise the cost of labor, reduce hiring capabilities and diminish a company's impact in the global

marketplace.

"Our research found no evidence of long-term economic gains if workers had no access to paid parental leave, paid annual leave, the right to reasonable work hours, and many other basic protections that would significantly improve the quality of their lives," Earle said.

Earle and coauthor Jody Heymann, founding director of the Institute for Health and Social Policy at McGill University, based their research on an examination of the labor laws for 190 of the world's 192 United Nations countries in what was the most comprehensive study of working conditions worldwide.

Before joining the Northeastern faculty, Earle was a research scientist at the Harvard School of Public Health. She received her PhD in Public Policy from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

For her most recent study, Earle found that of the world's top 15 economies, of which the United States is number one, 14 offer paid sick leave; 13 provide paid leave for new mothers; and 11 provide paid leave to care for children's health needs. The United States does not require employers to provide any of these benefits to workers.

Over the past decade, some of the world's most competitive companies are also those that have family-friendly workplace policies, such as maternity leave, breastfeeding breaks, wage premiums and mandatory days of rest, the authors found.

"We found no evidence that providing basic protections like paid parental leave and paid vacation leave results in job loss," Earle said. "Most of the countries with the lowest unemployment rates over the last ten years guarantee workers a full set of labor standards. The outlier, as is the case when you look at long-term competitiveness, is the United States."

In the long run, providing time for an employee to recoup from an illness, bond with a newborn child, or take a sick child to the doctor, would actually benefit employers, Earle said. In many cases, she said, employees return to work more quickly, take less total time off and are less likely to spread their illness to co-workers when they have paid leave. In addition, family-friendly policies such as maximum overtime laws can increase worker productivity.

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Earle recently addressed lawmakers in the nation's capital with the hopes of persuading them to pass the Healthy Families Act. The bill calls for employers with 15 or more workers to provide them with a minimum seven days of paid sick leave per year.

"The idea is to provide policymakers with the information they need to move forward on paid leave measures," Earle said. "The key question they have is whether these policies are economically feasible. Our findings say the answer is a clear Yes."

To learn more about the Institute on Urban Health Research, please visit: <http://www.northeastern.edu/bouve/research/IUHR/>

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