
Leave Doesn't Wait: Managing Absence When Volume Rises and Headcount Doesn't

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[00:00:00] **ANNOUNCER:** You're listening to The HR Mixtape, a podcast for leaders who want to understand people, strengthen culture, and navigate change with clarity. Today's conversation starts now.

[00:00:16] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Joining me today is Rachel Wyngaard, Senior Product Manager at Mitrtech. She spent years working in HR, talent acquisition, and recruiting before moving into product, and she now leads the early-stage development of an AI-powered intelligence platform. Rachel, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me.

[00:00:40] **RACHEL WYNGAARD:** Happy to be here. Thanks, Shari.

[00:00:42] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** So you have worked on both sides of the equation as we talk about what's coming up. The HR seat, and now the product side building for HR teams. So when it comes to things like leave of absence, what do people outside of HR completely underestimate in the process?

[00:01:01] **RACHEL WYNGAARD:** That's a great question. Before experiencing it firsthand, most might assume it's pretty straightforward. I certainly did, thinking you have a leave request, a policy, maybe a form. But in reality, there's three big things that are happening at once. One, policies are just not straightforward. There's a whole stack: federal, state, local, your company policies. Takes a lot of research to piece together what leave should look like, what it entails, and mistakes can create a compliance risk. Then two, it's not a check the box and done situation. Once you've got the research down, now you have to manage this living case with lots of paperwork, communications, requirements. It's messy. And then at the center of it all, you have the human, that employee, and the reason they need leave, which is often a major life event, surgery, family emergency. It's such a critical time to show up for your employee or risk damaging their trust and engagement.

[00:01:58] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah, that last point about leave being such a big part of the employee experience is definitely something that I think gets missed. When you talk to HR teams now about managing leave, what are the pain points that you keep hearing over and over again?

[00:02:14] **RACHEL WYNGAARD:** A few things keep coming up. One is leave volume without headcount. More than half of employers saw leave requests increase last year. That's a consistent trend since 2020, but they've not seen a corresponding growth in their staff or tools, and many teams are handling leave of absence manually. Then I hear a lot about compliance overload, so the major reason we're seeing an increase in leave requests is new and updated laws. There's more qualifying reasons for leave. So volume is up, but also the complexity of each case rises, because now you're looking at this overlapping landscape of federal, state, and local laws that all keep changing. So figuring out how they work together. Do they stack? Are they concurrent? Employers want to make sure that they're covering their bases, and it's really hard. And then lastly, I'd note that it's really challenging to coordinate all the things that come along with managing a case, the paperwork, the communications. It's a lot of admin on both the HR and employee side.

[00:03:18] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** So as you've talked with teams, your unique role of sitting in product now, I think is really fascinating, because I think that you have this ability to potentially see that gap between what the HR team is asking for and potentially what they actually truly need. Where do you pull those two things apart when it comes to figuring this out for us?

[00:03:40] **RACHEL WYNGAARD:** Great question. So the ask that I usually hear from HR is often pretty tactical: make this specific thing easier, or calculate this for me. But the root need is always the same. It's get this compliance risk out of my hands and into a process that doesn't depend on one person remembering everything and doesn't hold room for variability, which is where compliance risk can creep in. The other piece that I hear a lot is, "I'm so frustrated. I just want someone else to do it for me." So they

end up outsourcing, which can have mixed results. I've heard experiences of leave getting declined when it shouldn't, then they're liable or getting involved to fix it, and others wish that it was something they were capable of managing, because they want to give that human connection and be there for their employees.

[00:04:38] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** So as you think about this gap and some of the complexities that they have, in your career experience, you went from recruiting to product operations to building AI products. What do you think your time inside that HR function really taught you that still shapes how you think about building product now for HR practitioners?

[00:05:02] **RACHEL WYNGAARD:** Most of my focus was on the talent acquisition side, and there you're working with people and their careers, their livelihoods. Oftentimes it's wrapped in your identity, so again, very human-centric. And I think that's why I love building HR products. I'm always focused on a human experience involved. So the key thing that I bring to my product perspective is that humans are unpredictable. Things rarely happen in an ideal state. So when I build, I ask constantly: What is the most stressful version of this interaction? What happens when three urgent things hit all at once? Too often design can focus on an ideal state, but real HR just doesn't work that way. So I try to build for the hard day and not the easy one.

[00:05:52] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** That makes so much sense, especially because in HR we have a lot of hard days. And managing leave is difficult. We touched base just a little bit on that employee experience perspective, and it's so important to show up correctly for our employees, but it's also a toll emotionally on the HR practitioner, especially if it's a sensitive medical issue or some of those kinds of things. So having the right tools in place to help make the process run smooth is definitely an added value for the HR teams. When you've talked to smaller teams, what's one change that they can make this quarter to really ease up their leave burden, and maybe even without buying something new? Because while we love to talk about product and buy a new product, what's a change that they can make that really is gonna have a big impact this quarter?

[00:06:42] **RACHEL WYNGAARD:** Yeah, absolutely. So if you're not building case records now, or if you don't have a consistent way for tracking, that's the best place to start. Document your process so it can evolve, you can find the areas that you want to scale as you grow. But also keep an eye out on how your organization's growth is going to impact your process. Are you reaching employee count thresholds where new laws start to kick in? Is your remote workforce moving around? Are you expanding into new states? That can change what you need to be thinking about when it comes to leave.

[00:07:16] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. As our listeners digest all of this and they want to learn more about the company you work for and the work that you do, how do they do that?

[00:07:27] **RACHEL WYNGAARD:** Mitrates.com is a great starting point. Super easy to get in touch with someone who's excited to help you navigate HR compliance challenges. And if you're specifically interested in what we're building in the leave space, my favorite part of my job is talking to customers, so I would love to connect on LinkedIn, hear about your leave process, your leave experience. Feel free to reach out.

[00:07:48] **DR. SHARI SIMPSON:** I love it, Rachel. Well, definitely look forward to connecting online, and thank you so much for sitting down and chatting with me.

[00:07:56] **RACHEL WYNGAARD:** Thanks, Shari.

[00:08:01] **ANNOUNCER:** Thanks for tuning in to The HR Mixtape. Like, share, review, and subscribe to support the show and help more people discover these conversations. Until next time, keep the conversation going.