

PTO request denial email template

Decline a time-off request with a clear reason and an alternative, without damaging trust.

Updated October 15, 2026. Written and reviewed by the HRTally Research Team.

When to use this template

Sometimes a manager has to say no: too many people out the same week, a critical deadline, or a blackout period during peak season. A denial with no reason feels personal and arbitrary. A denial with a clear business reason, an alternative, and a quick response feels fair, even if it's still disappointing.

Before denying, check whether the request is actually protected time off, such as state paid sick leave, FMLA leave, or a religious observance. Those follow different rules. And talk to the employee first if you can. This email should confirm a conversation, not replace it.

Version 1: Conflict with other approved leave

SUBJECT About your time off request for [Dates]

Hi [Employee first name],

Thanks for submitting your request for time off from [Start date] to [End date]. I'm sorry, but I can't approve it as requested.

[Number] people on the team already have approved time off that week, and we need at least [Number] people to cover [shifts or work].

Here is what I can offer:

- [Alternative dates, such as the following week]
- [Partial approval, such as Monday to Wednesday]
- If someone's plans change, I will let you know right away

I know this is frustrating, and I'm happy to talk it through. If any part of this time off is for a medical or family reason, let me know, because different rules may apply.

[Manager name]

Version 2: Blackout period

SUBJECT Time off during [Peak period]

Hi [Employee first name],

Thanks for your request for [Dates]. Those dates fall within our [Peak period] blackout from [Start] to [End], which we shared on [Date]. I can't approve vacation during that window.

I would be glad to approve the same number of days [before or after the blackout]. Just send a new request and I will approve it quickly.

If this is for an emergency or medical reason, please tell me so we can look at it differently.

[Manager name]

Subject lines to try

- About your time off request for [Dates]
- Time off during [Peak period]
- Re: your PTO request
- Your request for [Dates]: let's find another option
- Update on your time off request

How to personalize it

- Talk first, then confirm in writing.
- Give the specific business reason.
- Offer at least one alternative.
- Mention that protected leave follows different rules.

Mistakes to avoid

- Denying sick leave that state law protects.
- Denying without a reason.
- Approving similar requests for some employees and not others.
- Letting a request sit until the dates have passed.

Legal and compliance notes

Paid sick leave laws in many states and cities protect use of sick time for the employee's or a family member's health, and some also cover safe time for domestic violence situations. Those requests usually can't be denied because of staffing needs. FMLA leave, military leave under USERRA, and religious accommodation requests have their own rules. Our PTO policy guide covers the differences.

| When to send it

Within two business days. A quick no with an alternative is better than a slow no. Publish blackout periods early so requests during them are rare.

| Before you hit send

- Dates, deadlines, and costs match the plan documents and carrier materials.
- Medical details stay between the employee and HR, not the manager or team.
- Required notices, such as FMLA forms or the Summary of Benefits and Coverage, are attached or scheduled.
- The employee knows exactly who to call, with a phone number.
- State leave programs and paid sick leave rules were checked for the employee's work location.

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