

An end to the away days

Forty million valuable working days are lost each year to workplace absenteeism. Staggeringly more than half of this absence statistic has nothing at all to do with ill-health. **Paul Roberts** provides an essential roadmap for successful absence management in your organisation

The UK, or more precisely UK plc, is suffering from absenteeism, a disease that is plundering profits and preventing businesses from performing at their peak.

Latest figures show that a staggering 40 million days are lost each year to workplace absence, and according to employer's organisation the CBI, every day that an employee is not at their desk, it costs their employer £533.

If you take workplace absence statistics at face value, it would be easy to come to the conclusion that we are a nation of 'sickies'. Dig beneath the surface of any company, however, and you will nearly always find a whole host of cultural, organisational and management issues lurking behind high absenteeism rates.

Maybe the business is not paying enough attention to work-life balance issues? Perhaps a long-hours culture or inefficient job design is putting people under unnecessary pressure?

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) research shows that the majority of employees cite colds and flu as their reason for being away from work. But, in fact, at least 50 per cent of all workplace absence has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with health.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

People decide to stay away from work for a whole host of personal and domestic reasons. Sometimes it's because they are feeling under pressure or are having difficulty dealing with a boss or colleague. Badly organised shift patterns, and quite simple practical issues, such as an arduous commute or difficulty finding somewhere to park, can also play a role. Often, employees stay away simply because they are bored with their job or demotivated.

Organisations are often reluctant to tackle absenteeism because they will be forced to address uncomfortable issues likely to come to light as they investigate causes behind high rates of absence.

This malaise is costly. When people are away from work, productivity declines and leading-edge knowledge is quickly lost. Customer service suffers, morale plummets among those left to cope with the additional workload and valuable corporate reputations are put at risk.

There is a direct impact on the bottom line. According to the latest estimate from the 2004-05 Self-reported Work-related Illness report published by the Department for Work and Pensions, sickness absence costs the UK economy £12bn a year.

WHO'S OFF AND WHY?

The good news is that it's relatively straightforward to manage absenteeism – and the benefits are both immediate and long-term. Having a clear picture of who's off work and why can help team leaders to plan efficiently. Armed with the right information, managers can look at what work is affected, how critical it really is, and what they need to do to plug the gap.

Equally importantly, if team leaders have at least some understanding of the nature of an employee's problem, they can make sure appropriate help and support is immediately made available.

There are wider benefits, too. In today's compensation culture, businesses that take heed of their responsibility to look after the health and welfare of their staff are less likely to find themselves vulnerable to expensive court cases.

In a tight recruitment market, a 'caring' approach can help companies stand out from competitors. Research suggests health-related benefits are valued highly and organisations which gain a reputation for



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looking after their employees are likely to be on the winning side in the war for talent.

The benefits of making a positive effort to manage absenteeism are clear. The challenge for companies is to deepen their understanding of how to tackle the issue quickly and effectively.

The good news is that once they take the plunge, just a few small actions can make a big difference to the lives of their employees and absence rates. For this to happen management must take the pulse of the organisation to find out just what it is that is keeping people away.

Do staff feel overloaded? Look for signs that suggest they might be feeling the pressure

A useful strategy is to bear in mind that trends often emerge among absent employees. Keeping a record of the reasons staff give for absence can help companies identify common threads. Sometimes contact with a difficult client or a difficult deadline is the real reason behind a high 'sickness' rate.

Absence management is a team effort and should not fall to just one person. Involving all the relevant parties in the solution will relieve the burden and make it clear that tackling absenteeism is a normal part of working in the organisation, not just a flash-in-the-plan project.

LINE MANAGERS AND PEERS

The HR department, for instance, may take the lead on absence management. But all line managers need to be equipped with the skills to tackle absence issues sensitively and ensure they do not step outside the bounds of the law.

Peer support is equally important. Employees who have been away need to feel that their colleagues are supportive and understanding, rather than resentful of any extra work they may have had to take on. When people return to work, they need to be greeted by a welcoming atmosphere, rather than being faced with a four-week backlog of post and e-mails.

Return to work interviews will help reassure employees that line managers and HR are interested in their continued welfare.

A variety of creative communication tools can also be used to good effect. Approaches that have been successfully employed by companies have included branded 'wellness' programmes, the development of cartoon characters to spearhead campaigns and the use of corporate intranets to spread awareness about occupational health services available.

Communication should be based around an ongoing programme – not just focused on a high-profile launch event. Managers need to give employees regular reminders of the help and support that is available. When people are ill or in the midst of serious personal problems, they may simply not remember what is on offer.

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FOUR TOP TIPS

- Encourage your team to be truthful about the real reasons for absence by acknowledging that personal problems can impact on work
- Make employees aware of any help such as corporate access to health services or career counselling
- Stay in contact with absentees to not only ensure that resulting workload issues can be addressed but to demonstrate support
- If an individual is unable or unprepared to come back, allow them to ease themselves back in by working part-time or from home.