


# Curing the absence disease

## Paul Roberts, healthcare consultant, IHC

Absence is a disease that is infiltrating the vast majority of UK workplaces, yet under half of organisations monitor the cost of absence on their business (CIPD, July 2007). Whilst not all staff appear to be affected by this epidemic, the workers who are repeatedly absent from work are having a massive impact on business performance, the rest of their team and the organisation as a whole.

On average the cost of absence is £659 per employee per year (CIPD, July 2007). In addition to this, the indirect cost of absenteeism on the organisation is significant, affecting productivity levels and knowledge management and putting customer service, morale and corporate reputations at risk.

Absence can be caused by a number of cultural, social, organisational and management issues. These might include personal and domestic problems, such as the need to care for elderly relatives or young children, difficulties dealing with colleagues and managers, workplace bullying or the pressure of one's job role. Factors such as unsatisfactory shift patterns, long commutes to the workplace or simply boredom and a  of motivation with the job may also contribute to absenteeism.

Organisations need to maintain awareness of absenteeism in the workplace; most businesses recognise that their people are their only competitive edge. Once we have addressed absence we can start to tackle moving the culture from attendance to performance – the holy grail of people management.

Here, Paul Roberts, healthcare consultant with IHC ([www.ihc.co.uk](http://www.ihc.co.uk)) outlines a number of steps that organisations should take to maximise their absence management procedures and minimise the effects of absence on the individual, the team and the organisation.

- **Take a preventative not a reactive approach to absence management.** The key to this approach is promoting employee wellness within the business and eliminating the common causes of absence before they impact on the workplace.
- **Build up a comprehensive picture of who is absent and when.** Is there a pattern of people and / or the days they are absent? Is it possible to identify the work that may be affected by this absence, how critical it is and what needs to be done to 'plug the gap'? Many organisations choose to invest in expensive software programmes to track illness and absence, but although these produce data relating to absence within the business, they do not provide solutions to the problem that is absenteeism – it takes people and focus to do this.
- **Have a clear absence policy in place.** Any company policy, but particularly one relating to absence, should be easy to understand and not open to varying interpretations. It should outline details such as when employees are entitled to be absent from the business, at what time the employee should inform their line manager that they are absent and where employees can go for support to get back to work and to prevent or reduce further time out of the workplace.

- **Integrate employee support services.** Ensure that the health and wellbeing services that may be managed, particularly in larger companies, by a range of individuals and departments, do not overlap, duplicate or leave gaps in policies or services. Companies should also ensure that each department is aware of the services that have been purchased by other departments within the business.
- **Tackle absence from the first day.** Management should check the facts surrounding the absence and address any immediate or short-term workload issues to ensure business continuity. Absent employees should be made aware of the services and support that is available to them (and, where appropriate, their families), such as Employee Assistance Programmes or occupational health services.
- **Support line managers to manage absence.** Line managers of absent employees should be supported too and should be trained to tackle this issue of absenteeism sensitively and within the requirements of workplace law (including the Disability Discrimination Act, Medical Records Act, Data Protection Act) and company policy.
- **Absence management is a team effort.** It should not fall to one person and by involving all the relevant parties in developing a solution to individual cases of absence and company policies and support services relating to it will relieve any burden on one person and will also highlight to the whole business that tackling absenteeism is a normal and regular part of work, not a 'flash-in-the-pan' project that can soon be forgotten.
- **Encourage team support of absent employees.** Employees who have been away from the office need to feel that their colleagues are supportive and understanding of them and their situation, not resentful of their time off work. Encourage team members to greet returners with a welcoming atmosphere and, where possible, remove any backlog of work, emails or post.
- **Seek help from experienced coaches.** Working with someone who has had experience of the pitfalls of absence can help. No two situations are the same but missing some of the obvious pitfalls can realise performance gains faster.
- **Stop and think before outsourcing.** Outsourcing absence management is a new and modern trend and needs to be considered carefully. Making quick gains is relatively easy but maintaining a sustained improvement is tough and few of these new suppliers can show real sustainability. Ask yourself the question about your peoples' value: do we want our employees to ring an outsourced call centre rather than another employee? Is that the best we can do?

Ultimately it is fair to say that absence is a reality of the working world. However, as is outlined here, much can be done to minimise it and its effects and stop it becoming a vicious cycle that, in the end, affects overall profitability, productivity, employee morale and customer service.

[952 words]