Managing Absence Effectively

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Virtually all organisations now have absence management policies in place but it is still clear that absence continues to cost the UK economy many millions of pounds each year, estimated by the CBI to be £13 billion in 2005. Evidence also indicates that time lost to absence across the UK workforce was 66 million days in the same year. According to the CBI, employers believe that 15 per cent of absence is non genuine, and similarly the CIPD report that around a third of employers believe that over 20 per cent of absence is non genuine. There would appear to be great scope for organisations to improve their absence and attendance management policies but how should this be achieved?

A successful absence management policy must recognise and take into account the different causes of absence and develop appropriate policies. It is also vital to recognise and accept that employees do take time off from work because they are genuinely ill. A certain level of employee absence is an unavoidable feature of working life and any successful absence management policy must offer support to those who are legitimately absent. A key objective of this support is to enable a fast and safe return to work. Alongside handling genuine illness in a positive manner, co-ordinated measures are needed to discourage non-legitimate absence. There is some debate about whether the approach to tackling absence should be punitive or well-being focused. In reality there is no choice, an absence policy needs to address both aspects to have maximum impact on sickness rates.

The causes of absence

First, the causes of absence should be looked at to provide insight into the problem and to illustrate the areas where policy have an influence. Research shows that the causes of absence fall into the following four distinct clusters:

The general health and lifestyle of employees and its impact on attendance at work has been a popular topic for research. Virtually all studies demonstrate a clear link, for example, between smoking and increased absence. Similarly research shows a strong link with excessive alcohol use and absence. For a proportion of employees there is a strong direct relationship between absence and poor health, but for others non-medical factors are equally important. Absence management polices need to discriminate between those who are unavoidably absent due to illness and those whose health is affected by factors over which the employer can have some influence.

The causes of absence

Health and lifestyle	Workplace
■ genuine illness/poor health	■ working patterns
■ smoking	■ health and safety concerns
■ excessive use of alcohol	■ travel times
■ lack of exercise	■ excessive hours
■ body weight	
Attitude and stress	**Domestic and kinship**
■ job satisfaction	■ Gender
■ career satisfaction	■ Number of children under 16
■ intention to leave	■ lack of flexible working arrangements
■ organisational commitment	
■ stress	
■ absence 'culture'	

source: IES

Employers who are able to support health education programmes which promote healthier lifestyles and actions such as providing healthy meals at work, encouraging exercise and aiding those who wish to give up smoking will all benefit from the improved general health of employees and reduced staff sickness rates.

Workplace factors

Some aspects of the working environment affect the well-being of staff. Research into how work is organised has shown the importance of teamworking with absence being lower where people work in small collaborative teams. Absence can also be a way of avoiding aspects of work that are emotionally demanding or stressful. This has been seen where work is inherently unpleasant as in an abattoir, or where there is risk of injury from members of the public or from dangerous equipment.

Travel to work time also affects the risk of absence, as the travel time increases so does the likelihood of being absent. The mode of transport used and the individual's level in the organisation are also factors, with employees in less senior roles with longer and more difficult journeys to work being at a greater risk of absence. The long hours culture also has an adverse impact on absence. A strong link exists between those who consistently work more than their contracted hours and both psychological and physical sickness levels. Management actions such as team working, awareness of health and safety issues and discouraging the working of excessive hours can all help to reduce the adverse impact of these factors.

Attitudinal and stress factors

How employees feel about their working lives has been shown to be an important influence on attendance. Research has demonstrated that organisational commitment has a directly beneficial effect on absence and through this to business outcomes. The major influence on the creation of this commitment has been identified as the line manager and the quality of their relationship with their staff.

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The sensitive handling of change within organisations, often in the hands of line managers, is also essential as various features of the change process are associated with deterioration in employees' health. These include uncertainty, lack of control, role ambiguity and job insecurity which can lead directly to reduced physical and mental health. Stress and absence are generally also shown to be related, although in the field of research the definition of stress is problematic and whether it should it be regarded as psychological or as a series of physiological symptoms has not yet been resolved.

Career satisfaction is one of the more powerful predictors of absence behaviour. Absence is higher among those expressing dissatisfaction with their careers. Among those who have marketable skills and are often absent the likelihood of them resigning is high. A link also exists between resigning and attendance behaviour. Those with poor attendance records are more likely to express an intention to leave and there is evidence that those with high absence rates are indeed at a greater risk of leaving.

Domestic and kinship factors

Most studies of absence show clear gender differences with women having higher absences than men. Many of these studies find little or no real differences in health, so attention has turned to aspects which only affect women. 'Kinship' responsibilities have been seen as the critical factor, referring to domestic care responsibilities that female employees have for other members of their families. Studies have found that more female absence is explained by their need to attend to domestic issues than that of men. Where a link with domestic responsibility has been found, factors such as the number of children under 16 and the presence of informal support mechanisms have been shown to be significant. The availability of a range of working arrangements and flexible hours in the workplace, aids female employees to cope with short-term domestic problems without having to claim to be ill.

Managing absence

All of these factors will combine to determine the level of absence in an organisation and suggest options for reducing absence by promoting health, addressing workplace influences, considering wider attitudinal factors and providing flexible working to allow staff to manage kinship responsibilities. With such actions in place to minimise absence caused by these factors, the key elements of a good absence management policy can be considered. The key elements of such a policy are:

- organisational culture of attendance

- clarity of roles

- clarity of procedures.

Accepting absence as unavoidable and inevitable in an organisation creates a culture of poor attendance. This highlights the critical role of senior managers in communicating clearly the organisation's expectations on attendance. Without positive action it is possible to have a culture where absence is just accepted as uncontrollable, or in the worst scenario, viewed as entitlement to extra leave. Communicating the objectives of any attendance policy clearly to all staff members is essential. A policy which is to be credible and successful needs to be understood throughout an organisation and applied consistently and fairly.

An individual's case of sick absence, depending on length, can require actions from various individuals and services such as the line manager, senior managers, the HR function, the HR Business Partner, Occupational Health Services and the Employee Assistance Provider. For an attendance policy to be effective in practice it is essential that the respective roles of the individuals and services involved in managing cases of absence are defined. This ensures that cases are handled systematically and efficiently. At any point in an absence it should be known who is responsible for each aspect and what outcomes are to be expected.

A key factor in business performance, therefore, is being left in the hands of unwilling managers.

Once the areas of responsibility are defined the procedures to be applied need to be established. This makes certain that each case is treated the same way, that similar approaches are used and standardised information collected.

The key elements of the three clusters of good practice are given below:

Organisational culture:

- emphasis on senior management commitment

- policy objectives defined

Clarity of roles:

- line managers responsible for implementing policy

- monitoring sickness patterns to be the line manager's responsibility

- manager's approach to be sympathetic and caring

- managers able to use discretion in applying absence policy

- HR involvement defined

- Occupational Health Services' role clarified

- Employee Assistance Providers' role known

Clarity of processes:

- employees to be aware of the procedures if they are unable to attend work and how the absence will be handled

- managers to conduct return to work interviews after every absence

- 'trigger' points (the number days away from work in a set period) defined for a review of an employee's attendance record to take place

- long and short term absence to be treated differently

- changes in job or working conditions to be considered to enable employees to return to work.

These requirements give the central role for managing absence directly to the line manager from monitoring statistics, conducting return to work interviews, initiating disciplinary action and managing staff back into the workplace. This shift in responsibility from the HR department to the line manager has been gradually made over the past two decades, until as the CBI found in 2004, this is the case in around three-quarters of organisations.

The same CBI survey explored the relationship between absence rates and those with the prime responsibility for managing it. This revealed that the average days lost were lowest at 4.9 when HR managers were responsible and considerably higher at 8.1 when line managers were handling absence. Casting some light on this finding, IRS in a survey in 2003 found that almost 90 per cent of the HR practitioner respondents agreed that line managers were not keen to take an active role in absence management because they did not feel competent to deal with it. A key factor in business performance, therefore, is being left in the hands of unwilling managers. A more disturbing finding from the CBI was that only 54 per cent of the organisations agreed that their managers had specific training in absence. This lack of training, it can reasonably be assumed, contributed to the managers' less successful figures and lack of enthusiasm.

Effective absence management

The success or failure of an absence policy within an organisation lies in the hands of its line managers who may well be ambivalent about this responsibility. There is a clear need for these managers to be well trained in all aspects of the process of managing absence, but they

need to be able to apply this with some discretion and common sense. Just placing an absence policy, no matter how well thought out, on the intranet or circulating documents is not enough to ensure it becomes embedded in the organisation's culture. Managers need to thoroughly understand the requirements of the actual policy and the procedures required to give a firm basis for their management.

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Research has shown that managers have to feel confident in their ability to handle absence before they can be effective. The key to managing absence successfully is to achieve fairness but to also recognise individual circumstances. There is no point in treating someone with a broken leg the same way as someone with repeated one day sicknesses. Without confidence managers resort to rigidly applying the rules and discipline individuals inappropriately, which alienates staff and brings the policy into disrepute. The most difficult skills to impart to managers are the inter-personal ones of how to conduct a return to work interview in a sensitive manner and how to approach those who are long-term absent. These are aspects that managers often find uncomfortable and shy away from.

A key challenge for organisations is to train line managers so that they have the skills and personal confidence to successfully manage absence issues. This training need is currently being overlooked in many organisations which have splendid policies in place but not the management skills to deliver them.

References

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