

ATTENDANCE MANAGEMENT

¶12400 OVERVIEW

An effective attendance management program is part of a strategic human resources management approach linked to the corporate mission and vision statement.

Formerly referred to as “absenteeism control” (a negative term implying that were it not for management intervention, non-attendance would be common), attendance management is a concept concerning the management and administration of an employee’s obligation to maintain a reliable and regular presence at work. The goal of attendance management is the creation of a working environment that motivates employees to maintain regular attendance.

The costs, both direct and indirect, of employee absence, have increased immensely in recent years due a multiplicity of factors. It has arguably become the pre-eminent workplace challenge for HR professionals and the managers they support. Widespread absence is a source of disruption, reduced efficiency,

compromised quality and productivity, and lost opportunities.

Absenteeism can be measured, costed, and targeted for action. The costs of an employee’s absence from work are relatively easily calculated. The most expensive items involve lost productivity and replacement costs. These are multiplied manifold when the absence is over a long period of time.

This section discusses the following aspect of attendance management:

- cost of absenteeism;
- identifying and managing attendance problems;
- types of absenteeism;
- excessive absenteeism; and
- developing an attendance management program.

¶12405 PRACTICAL APPLICATION

¶12407 Cost of Absenteeism

The management of attendance is an important aspect of supervision in the workplace. The cost of absenteeism may be greater than the direct payment of wages and benefits paid during the absence. Organizations must also consider the indirect cost of staffing, scheduling, re-training, lost productivity, diminished morale, turnover, and opportunity cost. The indirect costs often exceed the direct cost of absenteeism. It has been estimated that every person-day of absence costs the employer \$1,600 (based on 10 days’ absence out of 250 working days, and an average salary of \$40,000). By dealing with a relatively small percentage of employees, effective efforts in

attendance management will generate substantial savings, and increased productivity and morale.

¶12410 Identifying and Managing Attendance Problems

Confirming the Existence of an Attendance Problem

Statistics Canada has over the years tracked the average number of days of absenteeism for the workforce. The average is six to seven days per employee per year. Employee compensation and benefits typically make up to 70–75% of most organizational budgets. Unauthorized absenteeism may mean 3–4% of the budget.

Confirming the existence of a problem means undertaking these financial calculations and ascertaining the average number of days of absence from work among employees in departments or divisions. In the past, analysis has revealed that

- there are fewer absences among employees with longer terms of service;
- single employees are absent more frequently than married employees;
- married employees are absent longer periods when they are away from the workplace;
- women have a higher absenteeism rate than men (due mainly to child-care responsibilities); and
- absenteeism is less prevalent the higher one progresses up the hierarchy.

Managing Attendance

While the causes, effects, and costs of unauthorized workplace absence are clear, what is not always as clear is how to take action to control absenteeism in such a way as not to create a perception of discompassionate management.

The use of traditional methods of absenteeism control based on disciplinary procedures have proven to be ineffective. Further, where the issue of the legitimacy of the absence due to disability, or chronic illness is validated, courts, tribunals, and arbitrators have imposed a duty of accommodation on the employer.

Progressive methods of addressing absenteeism include the development of an attendance policy, a case management approach, wellness programs, and work-life balance policies.

Purpose of Attendance Management

The purpose of attendance management is to develop an understanding and willingness on the part of all employees to attend work regularly. As noted above, this can be done through

- attendance management policies that communicate the attendance goals of the organization clearly to employees;

- dealing with each case of excessive absenteeism fairly so deterrence can occur; and
- wellness programs that address the physical and emotional needs of employees.

Successful administration of an attendance management program requires managers and supervisors to be aware of and create work environments founded on the following principles:

- when organizational and worker goals coincide, employees are more motivated to maintain regular attendance;
- the higher the job satisfaction index, the higher the attendance level;
- encouraging supervisor/employee dialogue on workplace and personal issues will lower absenteeism rates; and
- employees with a low absence ratio have attitudes of confidence and “team” spirit.

¶12425 Types of Absenteeism

An attendance management program must first categorize absences into two types: culpable absenteeism and innocent absenteeism. Each type requires a distinct managerial modality.

Culpable Absenteeism

Employees whose absence from the workplace is without authorization, for reasons that are considered to be within their control, are classified under the category of culpable absenteeism. For instance, an employee who is on sick leave even though he or she is not sick, and it can be proven that the employee is not sick, is guilty of culpable absenteeism and subject to discipline. To be culpable is to be blameworthy. In a labour relations context, this means that progressive discipline can be applied in accordance with the collective agreement.

Procedures for disciplinary action should apply only to culpable absenteeism. Many organizations take the view that through the process of individual absentee counselling and treatment, the majority of employees

will overcome their problems and return to an acceptable level of regular attendance.

Innocent Absenteeism

When absences are considered to be beyond an employee's control (e.g., for reasons of illness or injury), they may be classified as innocent absenteeism. The concept is rooted in a labour arbitration decision in 1969, and is very common in unionized environments.

Innocent absenteeism is not culpable. This means that it is blameless. In a labour relations context, innocent absenteeism cannot be remedied or treated by disciplinary measures. Accommodation of the employee must be considered, and, unless there is clear and cogent hardship on the organization, it must be implemented. Courts, tribunals, and arbitrators do not, however, always agree on the sufficiency of the accommodation effort or the extent of hardship on the organization.

In many cases of extended and chronic absenteeism, employees point to work environments as the cause. There is a growing body of case law where employees have sought and obtained legal redress for damage to their physical or mental health as a result of stressful or conflict-ridden environments, supervisory styles, or job content.

¶12435 Excessive Absenteeism

Identifying Excessive Absenteeism

Attendance tracking is best done with the use of an HR information system. Attendance records should be reviewed regularly to be sure that an employee's sick-leave days are excessive compared to other employees. If all indications show that an employee is excessively absent, the next step is to gather as much information as possible in order to get a clearer picture of the situation. The employee's file should be reviewed with the immediate supervisor. This includes ascertaining whether documented authorization or a medical certificate covers each absence. The

commonly accepted benchmark for number of absent days is the unit/section/department/organization average. If the employee exceeds this average, it may then be considered as excessive. In jurisdictions where they are authorized by law, pregnancy, parental, emergency or family medical leave should not be included.

Terminating For Excessive Absenteeism

Terminating for lack of regular attendance is subject to provisions for cause in collective agreements, arbitral, and tribunal jurisprudence in unionized workplaces, human rights codes principles, and court decisions.

All Human Rights legislation in Canada prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability and requires accommodation to the point of "undue hardship". The standards for accommodation and undue hardship are subject to periodic review and definition, sometimes by consideration of local factors in dispute resolution and human rights forums. Recent decisions and legislation (Workers' Compensation) have also placed an onus of co-operation on the employee being accommodated.

When absenteeism is a behavioural issue and within the employee's control, a "last chance" agreement may be used as a precursor to termination of employment. In this agreement, guidelines and parameters are specified. Their breach is accepted as cause for discharge by both parties. This concept is also an evolving one in dispute resolution forums.

Causes of Excessive Absence

Employers need a clear understanding of the causes of absence in order to formulate policies that address the true causes of non-attendance. The main causes of absence can be viewed as four distinct clusters:

- lifestyle factors;
- workplace factors;
- general stress factors; and
- domestic factors.



Lifestyle Factors

Lifestyle factors contributing to non-attendance include the following:

- legitimate chronic illness;
- poor general health;
- smoking and substance abuse; and
- sedentary lifestyle.

Workplace Factors

Workplace factors also play a role in employee absenteeism. These factors might include

- workload;
- low morale;
- union/management conflict;
- health and safety concerns;
- excessive business travel;
- excessive hours;
- shift work;
- peer or supervisory conflict; and
- existence of an “absence culture”, where excessive absence is tolerated.

General Stress Factors

General stress factors that can lead to absenteeism include

- job dissatisfaction;
- lack of career satisfaction;
- conflict-ridden workplace;
- supervisor/employee conflict;
- unresolved peer conflict;
- “fast-paced” environment; and
- commuting or transportation problems.

Domestic Factors

Domestic factors can also contribute to non-attendance, and can include the following:

- finances;
- relationship issues;
- lack of work–life balance;
- parental care; and
- eldercare.

Prevention and Attenuation of Excessive Lack of Attendance

Clear attendance management problems and consistent and fairly applied procedures play an important part in managing attendance. However, this approach alone does not address some of the underlying causes of sickness absence. It is in some of these areas where prevention may be the cure.

A preventive action plan includes

- health promotion as part of a wellness program;
- recruitment and screening procedures that assess the prospect for regular attendance;
- flexible working arrangements;
- provision of an Employee Assistance Program;
- improving the physical working environment;
- job design audit to improve job satisfaction;

- best efforts at accommodation as part of a rehabilitation plan; and
- provision of short-term disability (sick leave) and long-term disability plans.

¶12460 **Developing an Attendance Management Program**

When developing an attendance management program, it is most important that it be based on the organization's values and culture. The procedures in the program must make a distinction between culpable, or behaviourally based absence, and those beyond the control of the employee, such as illness or disability. Further, the program must ensure that no employee is penalized or disadvantaged for taking authorized leaves under a leave policy or term of the collective agreement.

The key to a successful program is the initiation and maintenance of communication between the affected employee and management. This includes, in the case of a long-term medical absence, regular medical assessments of the employee's ability to return to work. The issue of medical notes is a controversial issue in the management of attendance. In addition to legislated privacy requirements, the doctor-patient relationship

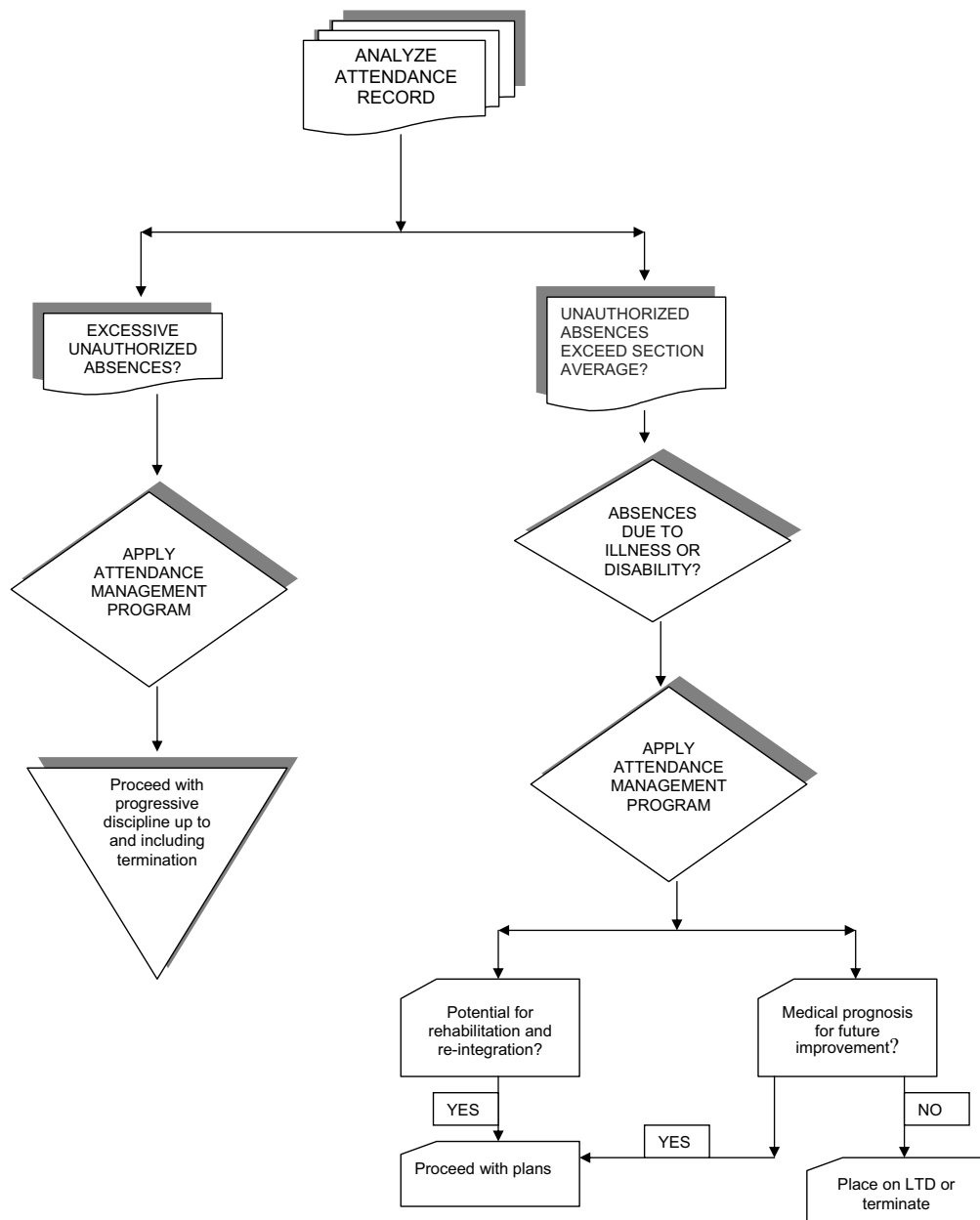
is subject to strict confidentiality guidelines. Legal counsel should vet any provision concerning these medical notes.

Caution should be exercised in terms of attendance incentives. Incentives that modify any term of a collective agreement (such as extra vacation for perfect attendance) have not been upheld in the jurisprudence. Also, any employee with a chronic or permanent disability may not be able to meet a standard of perfect attendance. The program may be considered discriminatory. The preferred approach is acknowledgement and appreciation at performance appraisal time.

The threshold for excessiveness must be justified based on calculated absenteeism rates most relevant to the employee's working location. The employee's attendance should exceed the unit average. In an organizational culture of tolerance of absenteeism, it may be very difficult to succeed in an employer claim that the employee's attendance is unacceptable.

In the final stage of the program, when termination of employment is imminent, the employee file should be audited by conducting a check of statistics, and ascertaining that steps and processes to modify work or other accommodation efforts are fully documented.

¶12465 Attendance Management Decision Flow Chart



¶12475 CHECKLISTS

¶12476 Effective Attendance Management Program Checklist

In order to ensure the implementation of an effective attendance management program,

- ☐ Clearly state the objectives of the attendance management program.
- ☐ Link regular attendance to organizational objectives and values.
- ☐ Make clear the reporting procedures to be used by employees who are unable to attend work, including medical certificate requirements.
- ☐ Develop and communicate trigger points to determine when absence should be regarded as excessive.
- ☐ Differentiate between culpable and innocent absenteeism.
- ☐ Clearly define when the advice of human resources and occupational health professionals should be sought, and the role they can play in helping supervisors manage attendance.
- ☐ Assign line managers the responsibility for managing the attendance of their staff, using their discretion on attendance reviews, and the timing of disciplinary action.
- ☐ In unionized settings, ensure provisions of the attendance management program do not violate any term in the collective agreement.
- ☐ Develop modified work procedures for health-related absences that emphasize the resources available to improve attendance (e.g., EAP, LTD, flexible hours, job-sharing, telework, etc.).

¶12485 SAMPLE FORMS AND LETTERS

¶12486 Attendance Management Letter (First Letter)

Dear Employee,

A review of your attendance record over the past year has disclosed that you have exceeded the average number of days of unauthorized absence from the workplace for your department.

In accordance with our Attendance Management Program, this letter is being sent to you to invite you to meet on _____ at _____ with me and a representative from the human resources department.

The purpose of this meeting is to discuss with you how we can work together to help you maintain regular attendance.

We thank you for your co-operation, and look forward to our meeting.

Yours truly,

Manager/Supervisor

cc. HR Manager

¶12487 Attendance Management Letter (Second Letter)

Dear Employee,

Further to our first letter, this second letter is to confirm the details of the attendance improvement plan discussed at our subsequent meeting.

It was agreed that

- You would familiarize yourself with the Attendance Management Policy;
- Your attendance objective is to reduce your rate of absence by 50% over the next six months; and
- Your attendance objective is to eliminate your rate of unauthorized absence, or as a minimum, not exceed the department average by the end of a 12-month period.

Should you feel it is appropriate, you are encouraged to avail yourself of the Employee Assistance Program. This program is confidential and free of charge, and no report is made to management about your use of the service, or any other detail.

We thank you for your co-operation and look forward to the successful resolution of any attendance issues.

Yours truly,

Manager/Supervisor

cc. HR Manager

¶12488 Attendance Management: Termination Letter

Dear Employee,

Further to our second letter, this is to inform you that your employment is terminated effective immediately upon receipt of this letter.

Over the past 12-month period, your rate of absenteeism has exceeded your departmental average. You have not availed yourself of the help and counselling provided for you.

It is expected that all employees maintain the highest standard of regular attendance, and you have not done so. This has resulted in an increased workload and loss of productivity in the department.

All the appropriate forms concerning your employment, as well as your last paycheque, will be mailed to the address currently on file.

We wish you the best in your future endeavours.

Yours truly,

Manager/Supervisor

cc. HR Manager

¶12495 MODEL POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

¶12496 Attendance Awareness Program: Sample Table of Contents

The following is a recommended Table of Contents (with explanation for each item) for an attendance awareness program. The program, as stated above, must integrate organizational, mission and vision statements, values, human resources management policies and procedures, and productivity requirements. A case management approach ensures that resources to resolve excessive absence issues are personalized and effectively utilized.

PROGRAM STATEMENT

- ☐ A narrative statement of the need and objectives of the program.
- ☐ Senior management support.

INTRODUCTION

- ☐ Applicability of the program.
- ☐ Need for communication and cooperation.
- ☐ Contact for information.

CASE MANAGEMENT PROCESS — CONTENT

1. Regular Review of Attendance

- ☐ Specify when a review of employee attendance should be undertaken. For some occupational groups, a higher occupational risk may merit more frequent review periods.

2. Documentation of Attendance

- ☐ List methods of collection and documentation, such as computerized records, time cards, etc.

3. First Meeting on Excessive Absenteeism

- ☐ Once the methods to document absence have been decided, it is then possible to determine “trigger points”. These are defined as the set number of days’ absence in a specified time period at which point a review of the employee’s case is undertaken.

4. Medical Information

- ☐ Some programs specify the provision of medical certificates only after a limited number of uncertified absences (three or four during a 12-month period), and when certificates are required.

5. Rehabilitation Planning, Modified Work Plans

- ☐ In some instances the employee’s position may be modified in terms of content and schedule to allow for visits to medical specialists and therapists.

6. Return-to-Work Considerations

- ❑ Provision should be made for the availability of work which falls within the employee's medical limitations. It is recommended that managers/supervisors hold return-to-work interviews with the employee after a long absence to offer support for regular attendance maintenance.

7. Ongoing Communication and Support

- ❑ This section should outline the need for communication between the manager, employee, and medical professionals, and support available during longer absences and at re-integration into the workforce date.

8. Workers' Compensation Procedures

- ❑ In case of absence due to injury or occupational disease, procedures for application and periodic review by Workers' Compensation Boards and the HR Department should be defined.

9. Follow up/Assessment by Insurer or Medical Doctor

- ❑ Benefit providers have developed guidelines for periodic assessment of employees on longer-term absence, and decision-points on certification for fitness to return to work.

10. Essential Factors when dealing with Non-Culpable Absenteeism

- ❑ The factors included in this section should deal with a non-disciplinary approach to this type of absence; the establishment of excessive absenteeism in relation to workplace averages; an attempt at accommodation to the point of undue hardship; medical prognosis for the maintenance of future regular attendance; and termination procedures.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Managers/Supervisors

- ❑ The exact roles of the Manager and the HR Department should be defined. The responsibilities of each should be aligned with the resources and knowledge available to manage the issues.

The Employee

- ❑ Employees need to be thoroughly acquainted with the Attendance Management Program and its requirements. This includes procedures for reporting absence from work, the need for medical certificates, and, in culpable absenteeism situations, progressive discipline steps. For those employees with excessive absence, it is well-settled now that they have a responsibility to co-operate with rehabilitation and re-integration efforts.

Health-Care Professionals

- ❑ Health-Care professionals are an integral part of the effort to manage and re-integrate long-term absentees. It should be kept in mind, however, that their role is to assess and certify fitness to return to work. It is management's role to act on this advice.

Human Resources Department

- ❑ The Department's key role is to support management in the implementation of the Program as well as its periodic evaluation. Care must be taken to ensure that the responsibility for managing employee attendance remains with operational managers and supervisors.

The Bargaining Unit

- ❑ Unions provide service and advocacy for their members. It is their role to challenge management's actions by requesting full documentation and opposing decisions they perceive as inappropriate in the circumstances. This role is imposed on them by the requirement for fair representation enshrined in labour relations legislation, as well as the Union Constitution.

Disability Plan Insurers

- ❑ Insurance and benefit providers have a responsibility for a measure of income protection when employees are legitimately and certifiably unable to perform the duties of their position. It is their role to co-operate with management in rehabilitation and re-integration efforts.

FORMS

- ❑ In this section, consider including relevant forms in the Program, or directing managers and employees to the internal network for self-servicing.