

Absence Management Factsheet

Introduction

Employers need to ensure that they have formal procedures in place to deal with employees who are absent from work because of sickness. If absence is not managed properly problems such as loss of production or a reduction in services can arise and staff morale can be adversely affected. Having a procedure to follow means that an employer can show that employees are treated equally, fairly and reasonably which is important if employees have to be disciplined or even eventually dismissed for poor attendance.

The more employees an employer has, the more difficult it can be to control sickness or other absences. Many employers find it useful to have a formal written statement or absence policy and procedure that informs employees what the procedure is for absences. What a statement or policy should contain is outlined in the section on 'What absence policies need to contain' below.

When employees know that their absence is being captured and scrutinised or can see their details of their absences the level of absence tends to decline as a matter of course. When you speak to employees about their frequent periods of absence they will realise that they will have to change their behaviour when they see you are taking sickness absence serious.

You can also publish anonymous statistics on absence and indicate the problems created by unacceptable absence levels to employees and this will reinforce your policy that employees who appear to be abusing the system will be investigated further which may lead to disciplinary action.

Effective absence management is also about creating work environments where employees are less likely to wake up and think 'I don't feel like going in to work today'.

Best Practice

- Sickness absence management should be conducted in a context of mutual trust and confidence and in the environment of a safe and health workplace
- Managers should develop a relationship of mutual trust and respect with their staff that enables open discussion and support in relation to sickness absence and its causes
- Have clear, fair and understandable process and policies in place for sickness absence
- Ensure that contracts of employment contain a clause referring to a procedure or a policy or an overview of the process
- Ensure that contracts of employment contain a clause requiring employees to agree, on request, to undergo a medical examination by an occupational health or other medical professional and to grant the release of the related medical report to the employer
- Ensure that employees are not expected to attend work whilst unfit, no matter how much inconvenience their absence is causing or likely to cause
- Employers should consult the employees doctor or a company-appointed professional where ill health may be affecting the ability of an employee to do their job
- Employers should take reasonable steps to remedy the cause and prevent recurrence when sickness absence is due to a workplace problem
- Positive policies should be in place to sustain good conditions of employment, such as flexible working
- Use of supportive measures such as occupational health service, contact by supervisors or manager, sending newsletters, and other workplace information to absence staff, also cards

and flowers where appropriate, helps to retain staff and smooth the return to the workplace after a long absence.

Types of Absence

There are many reasons why people take time off work. These can be categorised as:

- short-term sickness absence (uncertificated, self-certificated or covered by a doctor's certificate)
- long-term sickness absence
- unauthorised absence or persistent lateness
- other authorised absences eg annual leave; maternity, paternity, adoption, or parental leave; time off for public or trade union duties, or to care for dependents; compassionate leave; educational leave or authorised leave either paid or unpaid for other reasons.

This factsheet focuses on sickness absence issues.

Why measure absence?

A key element of managing absence effectively is accurate measurement and monitoring. A business must assess if it has a problem with absence, its extent and the best way to tackle it.

The data should be collected to identify particular patterns of absence and underlying causes, for example, the management style of a particular manager or an increase in workloads. It can also provide evidence of how absence impacts on the bottom line and why it is worth investing in an effective absence management programme or HR database.

Records should be kept of the employee's absence and the different reasons for the absence, e.g. sickness, holiday, etc. It is best to record the specific reasons for the sickness such as colds or backache so that you can see repeated reasons. Regular patterns that emerge should as regular absences on Mondays or Fridays may indicate that the sickness absence is not genuine.

How to measure time lost

There are a number of measures that can be used to assess absence, each of which gives information about different aspects of absence. Three of these are:

'Lost time' rate

This is most common measure of absence. It expresses the percentage of total time available which has been lost due to absence.

It can be calculated separately for individual departments or groups of employees to reveal particular absence problems.

Frequency rate

The method shows the average number of absences per employee, expressed as a percentage. It does not give any indication of the length of each absence period, nor any indication of employees who take more than one spell of absence.

By counting the number of employees who take at least one spell of absence in the period, rather than to total number of spells of absence, the calculation gives an individual frequency rate.

Bradford Factor

The Bradford Factor identifies persistent short-term absence for individuals, by measuring the number of spells of absence, and is therefore a useful measure of the disruption caused by this type of absence.

The trigger points used in this method will differ between companies and as for all unauthorised absence, the underlying causes will need to be identified.

What causes absence?

The main causes of sickness absence for manual and non-manual employees have been identified as:

- Minor illnesses (that includes colds, flu, stomach upsets, headaches, etc)
- Back pain
- Stress
- Musculo-skeletal injuries
- Recurring medical conditions
- Mental ill health
- Home/family responsibilities
- Other absences not due to genuine ill health

What absence policies need to contain

The first step to managing absence effectively is to ensure that you have a clear policy in place that supports your organisation's business objectives and culture. Legislation requires employers to provide staff with information on 'any terms and conditions relating to incapacity for work due to sickness or injury, including any provision for sick pay'.

Effective absence policies must spell out employees' rights and obligations when taking time off from work due to sickness. The policy should:

- provide details of contractual sick pay terms and its relationship with statutory sick pay
- outline the process employees must follow if taking time off sick – covering when and whom employees should notify if they are not able to attend work
- include when (after how many days) employees need a self-certificate form
- contain when they require a medical certificate (sick-note) from their doctor to certify their absence
- mention that the organisation reserves the right to require employees to attend an examination by a company doctor and (with the worker's consent) to request a report from the employee's doctor or from other health professionals
- include provisions for return-to-work interviews as these have been identified as the most effective intervention to manage short-term absence
- state that employees who fail to follow the rules on notifying absence or who fail to provide doctor's medical certificates will be subject to disciplinary action.

Managing short-term absence

Absence interventions

Effective interventions in managing short-term absence include:

- return-to-work interviews
- disciplinary procedures for unacceptable absence levels
- use of trigger mechanisms such as the Bradford Factor to review attendance
- involving trained line managers in absence management
- providing sickness absence information to line managers
- restricting sick pay
- involving occupational health professionals.

Return-to-work interviews can help identify short-term absence problems at an early stage. They also provide managers with an opportunity to start a dialogue with staff over underlying issues, which might be causing the absence.

The use of disciplinary procedures for unacceptable absence may be used to make it clear to employees that unjustified absence will not be tolerated and that absence policies will be enforced.

According to the CIPD survey only 15 per cent of organisations now use attendance incentives or bonuses as a tool of absence management.

Involving line managers

Line managers have an important role to play, either directly or indirectly, in the interventions to reduce absence levels. Managers need good communications skills to encourage employees to discuss any problems they may have at an early stage so that employees can be given support or advice before matters escalate. However, despite the importance placed on line manager/supervisor involvement, only just over 50 per cent of organisations train their line managers in the skills needed to do this effectively!

Line managers need to be trained in:

- the organisation's absence policies and procedures
- their role in the absence management programme
- legal and disciplinary aspects of absence
- role of occupational health services
- operation (where applicable) of trigger points
- development of return-to-work interview skills
- development of counselling skills.

Managing long-term absence

CIPD research shows that absences of 8 days or more accounts for almost 40% of total time lost through absence and absence of 4 weeks or more accounts for about one fifth. Consequently it is vital organisations have a formal strategy in place to help employees to get back to work after a prolonged spell of sickness or injury-related absence.

The role of the line manager is also crucial in managing long-term absence but other interventions are also important. These include:

- occupational health involvement
- line management involvement as part of the absence management programme
- restricting sick pay
- changes to work patterns or environment
- return-to-work interviews
- rehabilitation programme.

There are four typical elements in the recovery and return-to-work process.

- **Keeping in contact with sick employees** - ensure contact is maintained on a regular basis using a sensitive and non-intrusive approach. The form of this contact should be agreed with the member of staff and manager and, where appropriate, the union or employee representative.
- **Planning and undertaking workplace controls or adjustments** - some obstacles may hinder an employee's return to work. A risk assessment can identify measures or adjustments to help workers return and stay in work. Examples may include:
 - allowing a gradual return-to-work, eg building up from part-time to full-time over a period of weeks
 - changing work patterns or management style to reduce pressure and give the employee more control
 - altering the employees working hours, eg allowing flexi-working to accommodate family demands
 - accommodating the employee's mobility.
- **Using professional advice and treatment** - occupational health professionals should be able to play a major role in evaluating the reason for absence, carrying out health assessments, and assisting HR professionals and managers in planning a return to work.
- **Planning and co-ordinating a return-to-work plan** - a return to work plan must be agreed by the employee and the line manager, and any other staff likely to be affected. The plan needs to include:
 - the goals - ie modified working hours, or a modified job role
 - the time period
 - a statement about the new working arrangements
 - the checks that will need to be made to make sure the plan is put into practice
 - the dates when the plan will be reviewed by the employee and the line manager.

It may be helpful to appoint someone to co-ordinate the return-to-work process. This may include keeping colleagues of the absent employee informed of progress, so that all understand the situation, as well as easing the transition back to work and maintaining working relationships.

Legal issues

The Employment Act 2002 and the Employment Act 2002 (Dispute Resolution) Regulations 2004 and as amended, provide the main legal tools for facilitating absence management. However, numerous other pieces of legislation also have an impact on absence management such as:

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- Disability Discrimination Act 1995
- Employment Rights Act 1996 as amended
- Employment Rights Dispute Resolution Act 1998
- Employment Relations Act 1999.

Data protection

Employers must be careful not to breach the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA) when they collect, use and store information about their employees' absence. Details of an employee's health, either physical or mental, are categorised as 'sensitive personal data' under the DPA. The DPA also requires openness. Staff should know what information about their health is being collected and why.

Disability discrimination

Special consideration should be given to employees who could be considered to have a disability, as the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) will apply. Employees are covered under this Act if they suffer from a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. "Long term" in this context means that the condition has lasted or is likely to last for 12 months or more, or is likely to last for the rest of the person's life. Also conditions such as stress are often covered under the DDA.

The management of employees who become disabled as a result of sickness may mean employers have to make 'reasonable adjustments' as dictated by the DDA before they can return to their job. The types of adjustments that employers might be required to consider include:

- making physical adjustments to the workplace
- allocating some of the disabled person's duties to another person
- transferring the disabled person to another vacant post, with or without reasonable adjustments being made
- altering the disabled person's working hours through, for example, part-time working, job sharing or other flexible hours arrangements
- providing special equipment to assist the disabled person to perform their tasks, and giving training in the use of the equipment.

For more information visit the Direct.gov. website: <http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/index.htm>

Absence and pregnancy

Employers should record pregnancy-related sickness absence separately from other sickness absences. Employers have no obligation to provide different sick-pay provision for women who take time off work for reasons related to their pregnancy. However an employer who includes absence related to pregnancy in any assessment of a worker's sickness record, for example in a redundancy exercise or for disciplinary reasons, will be vulnerable to a claim of sex discrimination. An employee who is absent due to a pregnancy-related illness during the 4 weeks period prior to her due date can be required to start her maternity leave early, and will be entitled to maternity pay and not sick pay.

Finally - effective absence management is also about creating work environments where employees are less likely to wake up and think 'I don't feel like going in to work today' which makes your company a nice place to work that reduces turnover and absence related costs that can only help to improve your bottom line.

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