

# Investors in People Direct

## Approaches to attendance management

A starting point for taking a wider view of 'attendance management' – rather than mere 'sickness absence' – is ensuring you have effective mechanisms for recording and analysing current patterns of absence. With this in place, you can start to gather feedback to identify which measures are most likely to address the root causes and ensure these are applied fairly across the organisation.

Profile looks for evidence that the organisation's strategies, practices and values are aligned, and that people and managers understand their roles and responsibilities. Demonstrating effective people management may include providing evidence that:

- The organisation recognises the importance of staff wellbeing as a key part of the business strategy
- There is a strategy, applied by managers, for monitoring patterns of sickness absence
- People have a shared understanding – such as, but not necessarily, a written policy – of how the organisation supports people who are ill and help them to return to work when they are able to
- There is a common belief that the organisation manages attendance fairly and positively – supporting sickness absence in case of genuine illness, and promoting the kind of the working culture and flexibility which help avoid non-genuine sickness absence
- Capabilities of managers have been defined so they have the skills and confidence to apply the organisation's strategies. For example with attendance management or work-life balance, whether capabilities have been defined appropriately in individual cases.

### Understanding sickness absence

The most frequent causes of absence amongst both manual and non-manual workers are minor illnesses, issues of stress and 'home/family responsibilities', according to the CIPD Absence Management survey:

#### Manual workers:

1. Minor illness (e.g. colds, flu, stomach upsets, headaches)
2. Back pain
3. Musculoskeletal injuries
4. Stress
5. Recurring medical conditions
6. Work-related injuries/accidents
7. Home/family responsibilities

#### Non-manual workers:

1. Minor illness (e.g. colds, flu, stomach upsets, headaches)
2. Stress
3. Recurring medical conditions
4. Back pain
5. Home/family responsibilities
6. Musculoskeletal injuries
7. Mental ill health

The Work Foundation argues that the real challenge for business is identifying and tackling the problems that lead to long-term illness – rather than just eliminating the ‘sickie’ which they describe as: “a symptom of dull work and an expression of poor culture and poor work organisation”. More than 50% of the costs of sickness absence are found in long term absences which are a very small proportion of the overall total periods of absence recorded. Research published by the IRS Employment Review and EEF (the Engineering Employers Federation, the association for manufacturers) supports this, demonstrating that while long-term absence accounts for just 5.7% of absence cases, it represents almost 70% of the total time lost from work.

### Approaches to managing attendance

A crucial starting point is to identify how sickness absence affects your organisation – is sickness absence primarily short term or long term? What are the causes?

At an organisational level, collating regular and comprehensive figures on absence rates in different teams is key to identifying trends and spotting areas of the organisation with potential attendance problems.

At an individual employee level, CIPD suggests a number of metrics you might use for measuring absence, including measuring the percentage of time lost, the number of spells of absence, or the ‘Bradford factor’ which combines length and frequency to generate a score highlighting patterns of frequent short term absence.

Staff feedback is important too – including questions in surveys or meetings may help you to identify reasons people have for feeling obliged to take non-genuine sickness absence.

With the evidence gathered, CIPD suggests a number of approaches to tackling sickness absence:

- Return to work interviews – employers across all sectors rate this as the most effective approach to managing short-term absence
- Disciplinary procedures for unacceptable absence – based on a fair, well-publicised formula such as the Bradford factor (which multiplies frequency of absence by duration, to make it easier to spot frequent short term spells of absence which may not be genuine)
- Use of trigger mechanisms (e.g. after X days absent, following certain patterns or spells of absence in a given period) to review attendance
- Ensuring line managers are directly involved in absence management, and consider including absence management performance in line managers’ performance reviews
- Providing sickness absence information to line managers – not just leaving it to HR, but providing managers with data to use when reviewing sickness absence with their team members
- Offering an attendance incentive – nearly a fifth of employers now do this, though it should be introduced cautiously to avoid penalising genuine ill-health and encouraging “presenteeism”
- Limiting or withholding sick pay – where there is a problem identified with non-genuine sickness absence and the organisation has followed a clear policy detailed in the individual’s employment contract
- Training managers in absence handling procedures, so they are clear on, for example, how and when to make contact with someone absent from work, good practice in dealing with sicknotes and planning flexibly for rehabilitation, and available sources of help on occupational health issues
- Involving occupational health professionals positively and constructively – rated by employers as one of the most effective approaches to dealing with long term absence.

The role line managers play is clearly pivotal. Through supportive, flexible and confident handling of absence, they can help bring team members back to work more quickly and effectively. But if they lack the skills and knowledge, are unwilling to take action or think flexibly about how to facilitate return to work, or take actions which can be construed as harassment, then they can aggravate or escalate the situation.

You could also consider how the organisation supports work-life balance, and whether working patterns are impacting on levels of sickness absence. For example, do working parents currently have to take sickness absence to deal with family crises or fit in with available childcare? Could the organisation offer the opportunity to work flexible hours or work from home part of the time?

Finally, monitoring the impact of the approaches you adopt will help you to identify potential improvements, and calculate the return on your investment.