Review and revise workloads and duties with those who have been absent, especially in stress cases.

It's Monday.
So who's not here?

by Jon Howarth

Absenteeism costs £500 per person a year based on a 3 per cent absence rate. This equals seven days lost productivity for each person.

A firm employing a thousand people on 3.5% absence is losing £600,000 if they pay sick pay from day one. This equates to 7900 lost days. This cost is from sick pay, overtime to others, agency workers, diverted management time and usually underestimates hidden costs.

Some companies have very low absence rates, less than 2 per cent. Others have very high figures, more than 10 per cent. Why the difference? The answer is that those who tackle absence effectively and fairly get good results.

The public sector has higher absenteeism than the private sector, and manufacturing is often lower than retail sectors. Why? Because of different attitudes to attendance; public sector employment does not make you 'sicker' than private sector jobs!

What is attendance management?
Notice the phrase 'attendance management', not 'absence management'. Attendance is positive – absence is negative. There are five steps to attendance management:
◆ Understanding why people are not attending;
◆ Introducing a clear attendance policy and procedure;
◆ Training managers how handle absentees and absence situations;
◆ Building a positive attendance culture;
◆ Keeping at it.

Activities for improving attendance comprise the following:

Activity 1
Assess the situation and analyse available data looking for patterns and trends. Where are the hot spots? What are the real reasons for poor attendance? Hold a focus group discussion with line managers and with employees to identify perceptions about the type, nature and reasons for absences and see how managers are responding, or should be responding to absence. Bringing absenteeism into the open and discussing it shows management is serious, and this alone will have an immediate effect.

Activity 2
Write an attendance policy and procedure. This will let employees know what is expected of them,

what help is available, and informs them of how all absences will be managed. Adopt a fair system for calculating and measuring attendance and deciding where trigger points should sit. Tell employees about the procedure, why it is needed and how it should be adhered to. Ensure this meets the needs of employees who have a disability. Ensure the procedure is not discriminatory. Ensure it meets the needs of those who would like to take advantage of family friendly legislation.

Activity 3
Produce an attendance monitoring system for use by all line managers. This should be simple, yet record and track absences accurately. Monitor all employees and look for patterns and trends, discuss this with them promptly.

Activity 4
Introduce back-to-work-interviews for all absences on every occasion. Train direct line managers how to hold these. Set standards and action plans for individuals.

Activity 5
Ensure employees have access to support, medical referral and counselling where appropriate; genuine cases need to know you are supportive and serious.

Activity 6
Review and revise work loads and duties with those who have been absent, especially in stress cases.

Activity 7
Hold formal attendance reviews for persistent or long-term cases and make decisions on what steps to take and what routes to take. At this point, legal advice may be needed. Make allowances and adjustments for those who need your support.

Activity 8
Keep at it! This is a not a quick-fix solution. Progress-chase all cases with line managers; hold support meetings for managers to assist them to adjust to positive attendance.

Activity 9
Ensure those who meet your attendance requirements know they are meeting these standards; reward with praise and acknowledgement. **Why can**

attendance management be difficult?
Absenteeism creates stress and pressure on busy teams. Morale and motivation improve when absence cases are handled properly and promptly.

"Introduce back-to-work-interviews."

Employees with genuine difficulties need support, help and a sensitive response. This is crucial. A heavy-handed approach is not helpful.

The right messages must be sent to those who need reminders about unsatisfactory attendance. Absenteeism increases when it goes unchallenged by line-managers.

An employer's reputation is important and managing people consistently and considerately helps retain good people.

Many managers avoid handling absence issues, mainly because they are not aware of the impact of poor attendance on others, plus

"Absenteeism increases when it goes unchallenged."

there is a lack of knowledge and training about how to handle absence. In addition, many managers feel uncomfortable asking about private matters. It is also very time consuming initially and managers feel they should be busy on income earning activities.

Pitfalls and dilemmas
Some managers will stick to a policy and procedure too rigidly and this will create problems. Each case is different; a policy needs some flexibility.

A monitoring system to record and track absences at an individual

and departmental level need be nothing more complex than a paper based file, but remember data protection issues.

Publishing absence costs in meaningful terms on notice boards often gets the message across. Use pictures rather than statistics, ie express absence in terms of how many extra products need to be sold to cover the absence cost for the week.

Return-to-work interviewing by direct line managers after every absence do work. However, managers must be trained to run these properly.

Some organisations use trigger points based on Bradford Factor scores, or periods of absence per quarter triggers. These should only be used as guidelines.

A formal medical or counselling support facility linked into the procedure is essential. In some cases it is worth paying for a private medical note for even just one day's absence.

Appraisal or personal development interviews and schemes often help manage attendance.

Better management and regular one-to-one supervisory discussions on issues affecting work help attendance.

Reward schemes for good attendance are used but tricky to maintain and generally do not affect the real absence areas. It is often better to acknowledge the good attendees in non-financial ways.

A positive approach to addressing stress-related cases. Not hiding behind medical scenarios but tackling real stress issues helps everyone.

Discipline is rarely an effective tool. It can work but is negative, time consuming, tricky and often badly handled by managers.

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