

Pam Whyteleaf, head of life management services at ICAS discusses the issue of staff absenteeism

TACKLING THE £13BN SICKNESS ABSENCE HEADACHE: SHOULD YOU TAKE A SOFT OR TOUGH APPROACH?

Some employers are tackling the issue of sickness absence - averaging 10 days per year per employee - with incentives. Last year, Royal Mail offered staff who didn't take any sick leave for six months the chance to win a car and holiday vouchers.

Others are taking a harder line. Supermarkets such as Tesco and Asda are limiting their sick pay allowances. At Tesco for example, it has been reported that pay is stopped for the first three days an employee is ill. Some local councils have used a panel of nurses to question staff who phone in sick.

Measures such as these may 'drag' more people into work but does this produce the desired results? Studies have shown that unwell employees who go to work can be so unproductive that they can actually cost companies more than staff who stay at home to nurse their symptoms.

Other more widely used management tools to address the issue of absence include disciplinary procedures for unacceptable absences, the involvement of occupational health professionals, return-to-work interviews for longer term absences or for all absences, leave for family circumstances, attendance record as a recruitment criterion, health promotion, stress counselling and employee assistance programmes offering vocational rehabilitation services.

The reason for this need to manage sickness absence is the cost to business, which is estimated to be £13bn a year - or £531 a year in direct costs for every worker employed, according to statistics published by the CBI (2006). So where do you start? What can you do as an employer or line manager to reduce your current levels of sickness absence?

Firstly, it is important to recognise that all organisations can expect some degree of absence. It is the persistently high levels of absence that can be costly, adversely affecting efficiency, productivity and ultimately, profitability. In essence, employers need to develop a clear, positive approach to prevent, monitor and manage absence. Consider the following:

- Sickness absence can be affected by personal and work-related factors as well as ill-health
- Early intervention is important when helping an employee make a full, speedy and successful return to work
- Simple adjustments to the workplace/working arrangements can assist workers to return safely, contributing to both mental and physical recovery.

Successful management of sickness absence and return-to-work depends on open and constructive communication between all parties. You are not legally required to develop an absence strategy and provide a return-to-work policy but this can help to set rules and procedures to ensure that everyone is clear about what is expected of them. You may already have policies and procedures in place but it is worth reviewing these for their effectiveness. In particular, take a fresh look at how you:

- Train staff to manage absence and return to work
- Record, monitor and measure absence and how that data is used .
- Access professional advice/treatment to help your employees
- Control any risks to employees from work activities
- Keep in contact with absent employees and plan with them for their return to work.

There is no law requiring you to rehabilitate your employees who are off sick, although there are certain legal provisions. For example, the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 requires you to make reasonable adjustments to ensure disabled workers are not treated less favourably than other employees; the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 requires you to protect employees after they return to work if they have become more vulnerable to risk because of illness, injury or disability.

The real benefits of a well-managed and clearly communicated absence strategy lie in improved business Performance, retention of valued staff and better workplace relations.

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