

Dealing with the sickness-culture

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Many of my UAE clients are interested in hearing about workplace developments in the UK industry that may, one day, be the concern of companies here.

A recession often highlights an unwelcome and pervasive practice in the British workplace. Known as the "sick-note culture," it abuses the principle of allowing sick employees to stay at home, on full pay, until they feel fit enough to return to full-time work.

Malingers, those pretending to be sick, have been exploiting this for years, and this behaviour - so costly to industrial performance - has been worsening.

One reason is that managers no longer encourage a quick return to work, on the basis that a person that has been sick, but not completely recovered, will not be able to work to full capacity and may spread disease to others.

Another problem is that doctors are now so accustomed to signing these requested sick-notes that they have largely ceased to investigate whether or not they are justified. For a busy doctor, it is easier to sign a sick-note rather than to carry out a clinical examination.

This is how a deep recession like the present "credit crunch" provides perfect cover for an unscrupulous employee wanting to take advantage of a system that was devised in an entirely benevolent spirit.

Years ago, the manager of a local bus company needed stress-counselling because his company had become a breeding-ground of the sick-note culture. Three of his drivers were regularly absent from work, on the pretence of being sick; getting a sick note and then using the time-off to drive holiday tour-coaches.

Another driver kept pleading a migraine attack just before his shift. That employee, in particular, was clearly doing more than just avoiding work; he was deliberately trying to make his manager's job more difficult as a result of an old disagreement.

This type of unacceptable pressure is called "bullying from below." The manager was suffering permanent anxiety regarding the drivers' unpredictable attendance and its effect on of the company's passengers.

He was acutely aware that it was, also, making his own performance look bad. And he felt a constant sense of personal humiliation by the activities of these men.

With bullying, the solution is to bring the problem out into the open as soon as is possible. The alleged migraine-sufferer was interviewed by the company doctor, who quickly established that there was no indication of any disease - only an aversion to work! The other three absentees were deliberately kept apart from each other - two of them were switched onto different shifts, and one of them relocated to another depot. This made it more difficult for them to collude together, and the abuse stopped remarkably quickly.

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