

---

## Emotive issue of managing absence

<http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/09/02/24/10288768.html>

02/24/2009 06:07 PM | By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News

Is Absence Management a function that you can outsource? Or is it too personal, being part of an emotive area of ongoing debate between employer and worker?

Since Absence Management is recognised as a specialist area of expertise, a case in favour of outsourcing can be made, i.e., obtaining an objective view of organisational procedures and departmental working.

For the client, these benefits can be delivered in the form of an individual case-study or a departmental trend analysis - detailed research that sheds new light on the complex issues that contribute to absence figures.

Advantages include systematic monitoring of employees, liaison with medical professionals and insurers, plus the accurate identifying of malingerers.

It also helps in the formulating of corporate policies and resolutions regarding absence management.

As for the case against outsourcing, the most obvious point is the expense, although this needs to be weighed against the cost of the absence itself. A more sensitive issue is the employee's feelings about the employer's intentions. Does it reflect basic mistrust - that everyone is immediately suspected of being a malingerer until proved otherwise?

For employees who are genuinely sick this could poison the atmosphere, affecting their rapport with management. For malingerers it may remove a possible element of guilt about cheating on their own employer, if they feel they are reporting to a third party outsider.

The best use of external Absence Management specialists is to train the in-house team in this major HR skill, rather than continue to retain as expensive consultants.

Not long ago, we were called in by one of the UK's biggest vending-machine operators suffering a steep rise in absence - too much to be coincidence and clearly a case of poor attendance and increasing absence spreading from one employee to the next.

The newly appointed HR Director found that her team were largely untrained in Absence Management, and they did not know where to start in solving their escalating problem.

She felt the right solution was to retain someone of my background. But the problem was the company's policy against outsourcing.

With difficulty, she managed to procure a budget for us to come in and train the HR staff, and we had to be in and out in six weeks. This meant organising a "lightning" version of our usual training programme, and I was worried that it might not be enough.

But we made a good job of the first session, explaining the importance of the mission, and that small, young team quickly understood their own importance.

Soon they were listening attentively and responding well, and I could feel that we were getting through to them. After a short interval, the company did manage to reverse its disastrous absence record.

**Training: Specialists best placed**

- Specialist consultants contribute detailed research into complex issues
- The service is expensive, and could generate an atmosphere of mistrust
- Best use of Absence Management specialists is to train the full-time team
- *The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.*