Leave of absence

Long-term absenteeism can cause resentment in those staff left to pick up the pieces

With stress, anxiety and depression having overtaken physical ailments as the most common cause of long-term absence from work, and sickness absence reportedly costing employers an average of £522 per employee per year (or 10 lost working days), there are good reasons to look closely at the root causes of absenteeism and, where possible, provide early intervention to support employees in regaining their health.

SHORT-TERM ABSENCE

Short-term absence is usually defined as a period of absence of less than 10 consecutive working days, and will usually be the result of the employee suffering from a minor medical condition.

Yet, persistent short-term sickness is one of the most common problems employers have to face. Arranging temporary cover when an employee is off sick may not always be viable, and is often both disruptive and costly. Many employers, therefore, adopt the approach of persuading existing employees to cover for absentees on an *ad hoc* basis.

While this may work in the short term, when applied over longer periods it puts pressure on existing staff, as they struggle to do their own work in addition to that of an absent colleague.

The effect of this on staff morale can be damaging and counter-productive. Staff frequently feel resentful if required to do two jobs – often within the same timescale and for no extra remuneration. The situation may be compounded further when the absentee employee returns to work and is met with resentment from those who have had to cover for them during their absence.

LONG-TERM ISSUES

Long-term absence is defined as any period of absence in excess of 10 consecutive working days. Such absence – particularly where it is stress-related – presents a different problem for employers.

In the short term, they may feel able to cover an absence internally, but longer term it may be necessary to recruit temporary staff who will normally require induction training and may not necessarily fit in well with existing teams.

Temporary staff will also increase the salaries and wages bill, as well as involving the payment of costly agency fees.

After a long-term absence, a phased return to work will most certainly be recommended, with possible training needed to support the employee 'back into work'. Where rehabilitation is not an option, the costs of premature retirement due to ill health will also need to be taken into account.

Stress has a quantifiable impact not only on health, safety and individual wellbeing, but on the operational and financial performance of the company as a whole.

ATTENDANCE PATTERNS

The link between stress and absence is so well proven that statistics on non-attendance are often used as an indicator of stress 'hot spots' within a company. These figures may also be used to measure the effectiveness of stress management interventions.

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In the analysis of attendance patterns, any extended periods of sick leave will be apparent immediately. Obviously, a stress-related illness or injury cannot be 'undone', but positive steps can still be taken by managing the return to work of the employee actively, and minimising the risk of any identified stress recurring.

Of even more importance is the monitoring of short-term absences that may be the first sign of excessive pressure. Typically, absences that tend to fall into a pattern (eg, if an employee is off sick every Monday), or are linked to particular operational requirements (such as reporting periods) are the most likely to be stress-related.

It is important, therefore, to look initially at the pattern of absence, rather than the reasons given for it.

Stress is typically under-reported as a reason for absence – especially in the early stages – with alternatives such as colds, back pain, migraine or general fatigue being given instead. This under-reporting can occur for a number of reasons. For example, it may be that the individual has not recognised that they might be suffering from stress, or they may be reluctant to admit, either to others or themselves, that it is the real problem.

There is often a stigma attached to stress, related to a perceived inadequacy or inability to cope. This exacerbates the problem by creating an artificial barrier to its identification and management.

ABSENCE MANAGEMENT

Ideally, a successful absence management policy will create a culture enabling any individual to admit to stress-related ill health without feeling that their future employment or career prospects may be damaged.

Clearly, the earlier that specific sources of stress are identified, the sooner appropriate action can be taken to reduce the poor attendance that often ensues.

In order to establish a level of control over sickness absence, and to implement an effective policy, it is advisable to analyse employee data including the following:
- Number of days lost per year
- Number of staff taking leave of absence
- Average length of absence per employee
- Employees and department(s) with the worst – and best – record of absence
- Are there identifiable absence patterns?
- Is absence influenced, for example, by age, gender, the number of years in the job or seasonal variations?
- How many staff take their maximum paid sickness entitlement in a year?
- Who takes the greater proportion of sick leave or other absence during the year – workers, staff or management?

The reasons for the type and frequency of absence should then be assessed:
- Is a particular job too stressful or boring?
- Is the work dangerous or does it require too much physical effort?
- Is the working environment unsuitable?
- Is management weak or over-aggressive?
- Is morale poor?
- Is there a culture of taking days off?
- Do working practices lack support?
- Is there a general lack of motivation?

When all this information has been collated and analysed, it can be used to devise policies and procedures, in consultation with staff, that should, when properly implemented, substantially reduce the incidence of absence.

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