

The effective management of employee attendance

TIME OFF IS WORKERS' ANSWER TO STRESS

To understand why absenteeism is rising at so many companies, just consider the obvious reasons. In this right-sized era, where the interests of stock markets have more to do with how a company is run rather than what is actually good for the company, employees are overwhelmingly overwhelmed. They are working long hours and they are still leaving piles of work on their desks at the end of the day.

And they know that even if they worked *longer* hours, they'd still never finish.

And some days they wake up knowing that even if they went in to work, they still wouldn't put a dent in the pile. So they

MANAGING THE FOLKS WHO AREN'T THERE

One of the tough things about managing attendance is that employers are often not very good at it.

In many cases, an employer couldn't tell you on any given day how many people were off work, whether they were sick or on workers' compensation or other injury claim, whether they were on vacation. Many employers fail to track who's there, who ought to be there, and how often this is happening.

The relative lack of attention given by some employers derives from the fact that absenteeism is often expressed as a percentage or rate of absence. Since most people come to work most of the time, the

make a conscious decision to take a mental health break. Or two.

Although workers have lobbied for years for workplace flexibility to alleviate some of the burden, it's a slow train coming. But it will come.

In the meantime, employers are coping as best they can with managing employee attendance. Although they can't be happy about the guy who takes a day off for mental health reasons, they probably understand it. It's the people who take more that give them the concern. And the people who really *do* have injuries and illnesses but who seem to take way too long to get better.

percentages tend to be fairly low numbers, ranging between 2% and 8% for most Canadian companies. This obscures the impact that small changes in the rate might have in large organizations. It might be better to express the lost time in numbers of shifts lost and the estimated cost of the loss. Dollars are always easier numbers to grasp than arcane percentages.

It's a truism that if you don't measure it, you can't control it. (At least, that's what the MBA's say and in this case, they're right.)

But measuring attendance isn't just an exercise in setting up punishment guidelines. It a matter of tracking the

frequencies and, where possible, the causes of absenteeism. To be sure, there are people who take whatever they can get in regard to time off. There are also people who have time off for legitimate reasons but much longer than a reasonable time. And there are people off for legitimate reasons who could be back at work much sooner if someone took the trouble to make it easier for them.

It has been estimated that absenteeism in North America costs the economy around \$50 billion annually. However, that estimate doesn't include the hidden costs like

GETTING HOLD OF THE REINS

An early step in counteracting the growth of absenteeism and starting to reduce it is HR conducting an audit of all policies and procedures related to attendance, either directly or indirectly.

- ◆ Policies that reward absence should come under careful scrutiny and, where possible, be reformulated so as to reward actually showing up every day. That means rethinking generous sick leave provisions and the opportunity to substitute regular paid days with higher paid overtime work.
- ◆ Policies that reward people for not using sick days where the reward is at some distant date on the far horizon delay reinforcement too long.
- ◆ Policies that enable good attendance should be considered.
- ◆ Flextime has been shown conclusively to reduce absenteeism.

But by far the most important step is to start methodically and accurately tracking

deterioration of productivity, quality, safety which in turn have spin-off costs.

It is frequently argued that Human Resources (HR) needs to be more bottom-line oriented. But it is an anomaly that at the Board level, most companies give only lip-service to HR. They recognize that their employees often represent their biggest cost and yet they somehow shy away from trying to address absences.

There's an old joke told in some boardrooms that if a company's human resources are their greatest asset, maybe they should sell them.

attendance. You should be able to tell the frequency of Monday and Friday absences, who's guilty of those and how often, what departments have the greatest absenteeism, what supervisors have the highest no-show rates, if there is a common thread in what doctor your employees are seeing, and so on.

To be meaningful, the numbers need to be capable of interpretation. For instance, if there is a sudden increase in absences within a specific area after the placement of a new supervisor, maybe the supervisor's the problem.

And research also shows that employees typically underestimate the number of days they have missed. Perhaps as part of your re-write of company policies it would be a good idea to incorporate a way of letting people know what they're missing and how they compare to others.

Another factor that contributes to a lack of attention to absenteeism is that employers typically apply a medical model which suggests that much absence is due to sickness and that is a private matter, none of the employer's business. The corollary is that the absenteeism is not susceptible to management influence. In fact, one research study has shown that 72 percent of employees admitted that they had not actually been sick on recently used sick days.

The fact is, absenteeism is very *much* subject to employer influence. But it is a delicate balance that understands real people do have real illnesses and injuries —

CONCLUSION

People will always take time off if you give them a reason to. So if sickness only accounts for part of the reasons for absenteeism, how does an employer control it? By giving people reasons to come to work. It is too simplistic to say that their paycheques should be reason enough to show up for work. When a large portion of lost time appears to be employees' attempts to control their own mental health, perhaps it's time that the employer considers what steps might remove the incentive and the

and sometimes they should *not* be at work. It is a balance of firmness and humanity that respects the employee while expecting the best out of them — not more than they can ever be expected to give, just their best. It is a balance of sensible company policies that are designed to encourage and reward attendance and discourage the opposite. It is understanding that people often have real lives outside of their workplaces and they need to be able to strike a balance between both of their lives, a balance that an employer can help make more attainable by providing flexibility in work schedules or even locations.

need for their employees to just 'get out of there for a while'.

Absenteeism does not receive the attention it deserves or needs from a lot of employers. Absence is a cost of doing business but it should no more be ignored than the cost of the raw materials for your widgets. Higher HR costs due to passivity translates into a higher cost of getting your product or service out the door which hinders your company's competitiveness in the marketplace.

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