

You think absenteeism is a problem? Worry about this!

Most managers and business leaders are aware of the problems caused by staff being absent through sickness. When you consider stress-related absence, these problems are significant because the typical time off work is much longer than for many other illnesses. For non-manual workers stress related absence is the No 1 cause of long-term sickness absence (i.e. over 4 weeks). Overall it accounts for over 13.7 million lost days in the UK at a cost of over £23bn in lost productivity. However, this article is not aimed at concerns about absenteeism, but the problems brought about through presenteeism. It is estimated that about 60% of the £23bn is from presenteeism!

Presenteeism is where people come to work with some illness which prevents them being fully productive. This can include physical, and even infectious, illnesses and ailments – and the more “mental” problems such as depression and stress. Too many managers are content to see staff turning up for work without really paying attention to how effective they are when there! Research from R. Goetzel and others at Cornell University suggested that productivity **lost** through presenteeism is 5.1 times the losses through absenteeism! It is estimated that ill-health and stress related absence is some 150 times (yes 150x) that caused by safety incidents. Yet stress should also be covered by the same attention to Health and Safety as anything else. Combining these bits of research does suggest that presenteeism is a very expensive issue for organisations, but is something of a hidden cost.

Why does presenteeism occur? It is not just a result of the current economic downturn, it has been happening for years. However, it is probably more extreme right now. One aspect of presenteeism is individuals working harder for longer, often for less! Typically, in the UK, only 1 in 6 people in the workforce take a regular lunch hour. Many “lose” 1 week’s holiday a year either choosing not to take the time off or being asked to work. Some adopt the “hero” or “martyr” approach, thinking that turning up to work with a cold, flu’ or some other illness shows their commitment – regardless of the risk of infecting others. Some turn up because they are worried that any absence will be thought of negatively, showing a lack of commitment or loyalty. Those who are feeling stressed or depressed will turn up to avoid the stigma of their problem being identified or revealed. Many managers or bosses deny that there is an issue with this despite the evidence to the contrary. However, the instances of “self-medicating” in an attempt to handle things would also appear to contradict this claim. For many people this takes the form of alcohol and/or cigarettes and for others drugs such as cocaine. (Bear in mind, not all the sources of pressure are work related.)

For many bosses, according to Rachel Woolf from the Centre for High Performance Development, “Stress only comes on the radar when people take sick leave.” Many organisations are becoming better at recording this and doing something to help people to return to work after absence, including when they have had genuine stress problems. In some cases, the awareness of the cost and impact of stress to the organisation is becoming ever sharper. However, the majority of organisations do not think about the costs of presenteeism or acknowledge that it is an issue. This is a naive attitude. If people are turning up for work when they are becoming more and more stressed, as opposed to being under pressure, it could lead to them: having to take time off, which might be an extended period of absence; leaving because they are so demotivated; or being on the receiving end of some form of disciplinary process due to performance problems. Surveys from the American Medical Association suggest that productivity loss through depression and presenteeism is 3 times greater than the loss through absence. Also, presenteeism can decrease individual productivity by one third.

This information would seem to make a case for managers to become more observant. Rather than just worrying about whether someone is at work or not, pay more attention to what they are able to do. This can apply if they have turned up with a heavy cold or fever

and feel lousy (and possibly spread their illness to colleagues) as well as when they are feeling depressed and becoming stressed. The “good news” is that the former situations are easier to spot and if people are encouraged to take the time off to recover it will usually be quite a short absence. It is the second situation which is more challenging – and easier to ignore, not realising that it might be equally contagious. Remember some of the numbers quoted earlier, all forms of presenteeism cost the organisation either as direct or indirect costs.

The present difficult economic times have resulted in increased pressure on organisations and individuals. Various pieces of research tell us that individuals are feeling more stressed, with up to 47% admitting to physical symptoms having increased, and 30% saying they are feeling extremely stressed. The real drawback is because of workplace pressures (and management behaviour) people are reluctant to take time off in case their jobs are at risk. The American Psychological Association stated that levels of stress and a lack of willpower prevent people making lifestyle and behavioural changes. So, without support or encouragement many will go to their workplace even when they are not in the right state to contribute fully. This could be a result of concern about their jobs, a sense of obligation to their employer, inadequate sick pay, or not wanting to let colleagues down. A study by the Swedish Stress Research Institute found many handle pressure by “covert coping”. They suppress their frustration or anger with excessive pressures or frustrations. This leads to a 40% greater likelihood of suffering from heart attacks and other coronary problems – and even death.

What can organisations do about this? Raise managers’ awareness about the issue of presenteeism and encourage them to address it where they spot it. This should be part of their training in developing a better understanding of stress and its related issues and how to handle them, with the benefits of doing so. Recognise that health and wellbeing are key factors for professional human resource management – and that they pay dividends for the organisation too! Typically, organisations which do so will have an average of 3.0 days of unplanned absence per employee compared with 4.8 days in organisations with little or no health and wellbeing programmes. Eusebio Rial Gonzalez, head of unit for health and safety at the EU summed up the reasons why organisations need to pay attention to this whole area: *“Health is not something to give up in tough times. If you are to remain competitive this is completely the wrong time to cut down on health and safety. If your employees are not able to maintain a balanced mental state, innovation and competitiveness will suffer.”*