

Managing Absence/Attendance

A certain level of employee absence is an unavoidable feature of working life, but this does not mean that all absences should be regarded as inevitable and accepted passively. It is possible to reduce the amount of absence caused by aspects of work and also to tackle it by proactively managing absence due to sickness. A positive organisational background is critical for the success of any action taken to manage absence. The creation of an organisational culture where employees feel engaged and are committed has been shown to directly result in reduced absence. The main driver of this staff engagement has been identified as good line management which is a key to staff feeling valued and involved. There is some debate about whether the approach to managing attendance should be absence or well-being focused. In reality this is not a choice. An absence policy needs to emphasise both preventing 'illegitimate' absence while also providing support to those who are 'legitimately' absent and aiding their return to work.

The Employee's Perspective

Returning to work following a long period of absence is daunting in itself, but with stress-related absence this is often so threatening that some individuals never make the transition back to full time employment. If the illness was brought about by stress at work or there are unresolved bullying or harassment issues, it's likely that fear of a relapse, along with lack of confidence and low self-esteem, will inhibit rehabilitation. When work pressures only partially contributed to the illness, there may be a feeling of guilt on the part of the employee that he or she had let their fellow workers down. Such anxieties may be groundless, but individuals feel very fragile following stress-related illnesses, with anxiety, depression and panic attacks being common symptoms of breakdown or burnout. A considerable amount of support and encouragement is required if a full recovery is to be both achieved and sustained.

The Employer's Perspective

The long-term absence of an employee naturally puts pressure on an organisation, both in terms of the costs of covering the absence and also in maintaining the morale of team workers. Achieving the smooth return to work of an employee who has been absent for some time requires early steps to be taken to establish a non-threatening rapport with the individual, and this should be undertaken with care and sensitivity. It should be the responsibility of the line manager to keep in contact with the employee, as it's important that the absent employee feels valued but not pressured into returning to work before they are completely recovered.

Once it has been established that an employee is well enough to return to work, it's imperative that a phased return is planned. This should involve the employee's GP, HR officer or line manager, together with an external mediator if there are unresolved workplace issues that still need to be

addressed. The phased return should include a short induction programme and any necessary retraining. Workloads at this stage should be carefully monitored , as too much too soon could result in a crisis of confidence and a relapse; while too small a workload can have the effect of making the employee feel superfluous.