

Sick of the Sickie? How to Improve Attendance

As winter tightens its grip, so the number of absences from the workplace inevitably increases. Most absences are genuine but some are not. The short days, cold damp mornings and general gloominess that envelops Britain from November to March often induce the less committed of the workforce to take a “duvet day”. The average employee takes 6.5 days off a year for sickness and absence is much higher in the public sector than elsewhere.

The government has let it be known that it is going to do something about the absence culture which allegedly is costing the economy £2.7bn a year (how do they know?). It is considering proposals to give employers access to an independent appeals process that can assess whether a sick notes issued by a GP has been given for the right reasons. Within the first four weeks of a sign off the employer will have to pay a fee for this service. After that an employer can appeal at no cost. The appeal body will be an independent group of GPs who are expert in work health issues.

The government is also considering revising the employment support allowance which comes into force after SSP (Statutory Sick Pay) runs out after 28 weeks. The current weakness of the employment support allowance is that people are assessed for eligibility only after they have been on the allowance for thirteen weeks. When the assessment is made it is found that 60% of claimants are deemed fit for work of which half could have been at work during the initial thirteen week period.

So if these proposals are put into effect well and good. Employers will not feel so helpless in challenging sickness/absence that they suspect is either bogus or causes them to suspect malingering.

In the meantime there are existing ways in which as an employer you can reduce sickness/absence. Let your employees know that it may not be their fault that they are ill but it is their responsibility. An easy statement to make but how to deal with making clear this employee responsibility in practical terms?

Introduce a back to work interview. Whatever the length of an absence arrange a meeting with the employee’s immediate manager on the day they return to work. This will enable the manager to establish the reason for the absence, if the employee is now fully fit for work and if there are likely to be any further absences of a similar nature. The employee will feel immediately accountable for their absence and the effect it has had in the workplace.

The meeting, which need not be long, can also be used to discuss work which has not been dealt with as a result of the absence, or work which has been transferred for someone else to complete. In other words what steps need to be taken by the returning employee to recover any lost production caused as a result of their absence.



A meeting, which need not be adversarial, will quickly impress upon those whose absence is for a doubtful reason that they are responsible for fulfilling their part of the contract of employment, that is being present to carry out their duties, and that their employer is taking an interest in their absence. You will be surprised how much attendance improves.

For more information on managing absence and for details on a short briefing on the subject, contact Alastair Wood at alastair.wood@somerspartnership.com

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