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MEASURING AND MONITORING ABSENCE FROM WORK

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Introduction

In the mid 1990s, controlling sickness absence has become a priority on many management agendas. One of the main reasons for this is the recent change in Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) arrangements. From April 1994, organisations who pay over £20,000 in National Insurance are no longer reimbursed for any part of SSP. It has been estimated that this change will cost employers an extra £11 billion annually.

In addition to the emphasis on cost control, there is increasing evidence, particularly from employers in North America, which suggests that significant benefits can come from workplace health promotion. These benefits are in the form of cost savings, tangible health promotion outcomes, and other organisational benefits (*eg* improved reputation as an employer *etc.*).

Research also suggests that, in tackling sickness absence, a number of success factors can be identified. These include:

- high level management commitment
- clear responsibilities
- appropriate information
- suitably trained line managers
- attention to staff welfare

This report is concerned with the third of these success factors: the provision of accurate, timely and accessible information. Without this, the other success factors are likely to be ineffective.

Respondents to a number of recent surveys have rated improved monitoring and the provision of absence statistics to line managers as two of the three most important factors which they thought would, or had actually, helped to reduce sickness absence in their businesses. Research has also shown that active monitoring can have the effect of reducing sickness absence, by demonstrating that managers are taking the issue seriously, and by enabling them to understand better the characteristics and causes of absence.

However, there is a wide range of sickness absence measures (we note more than 40) and weak correlation between the various measures. These problems are compounded by a confused terminology which uses different terms for similar measures. As a

result, few organisations actually make best use of the sickness absence information which they have available, and benchmarking could have only dubious value.

The aim of this report is to provide line and HR managers with some tools and techniques which will help them to quantify, monitor and ultimately manage this problem better.

1. Measuring Absence

There are many ways of measuring sickness absence, each of which provides a different information set. Their value lies in providing a series of indices to detect trends, identify variations from the norm and to diagnose causes. In this section we will look at a number of broad measures including:

- measures of time lost
- measures of absence frequency
- measures of absence duration

Conclusions drawn from the uninformed use of sickness absence measures can be misleading. We will also therefore discuss some of the limitations of these measures.

1.1 Absence rates

The most commonly used method of expressing the level of sickness absence is the crude absence rate (sometimes called the *inactivity* or *time lost* rate) This is usually calculated as the time lost due to, or ascribed to, sickness absence as a percentage of contracted working time in a defined period.

The absence rate can be measured in days or, more accurately, in hours. It is calculated as follows:

$$\frac{\text{total duration of all spells of absence during period}}{\text{total contracted time during that period}} \times 100\%$$

Box 1 shows an example:

Box 1: Crude absence rate

A finance department has 20 staff working full time for 37 hours per week and 10 part-time staff working 18 hours a week. This group would normally work 3,680 contracted hours in a four week period. If, during that period, four of the full-time staff were each absent one week, and two of the part-time staff were also absent for one week each, the total lost time would be 184 hours (*ie* $(4 \times 37) + (2 \times 18) = 184$ hours). The absence rate would therefore be $184 \div 3,680 = 5\%$.

However, many organisations measure absence in terms of days lost. This raises a number of problems which are dealt with in the following paragraphs.

1.1.1 Partial absences

One of the definitional issues, which affects absence recording whether it is by hours or days, is whether absences which start part way through a shift or day, should be included or excluded in the absence figures. Measurement by days either excludes part day absences, so underestimating absence, or includes them as a whole day lost therefore overestimating absence. Experience suggests that most private sector organisations ignore partial days lost and that this can be a source of significant under-recording.

1.1.2 Defining working days

A second problem of definition concerns the determination of the number of days to be worked. Again, practice varies. For example, some count all days except Sundays, (giving 312 or 313 'working' days) while others exclude weekends, Bank holidays, other statutory days and average annual leave (usually giving between 225 and 228 'working' days). The effect on the absence rate can be very significant (see box 2).

Box 2: Working days

An organisation with 8 days sickness absence per head would have an annual absence rate of 3.5% based on 225 days but only 2.6% based on 312 days.

Good practice is to count only those days on which an employee would normally be expected to work. Thus, a clerical officer working a 'normal' five day week (Monday to Friday) who is absent on Friday and the following Monday should be counted as absent on two of five working days, not four of seven calendar days.

The only caveat to this is that, for epidemiological purposes we may actually be interested in the 'real' duration of any sickness absence episode which would mean including the scheduled days off.

1.1.3 Part-time staff absences

Calculating the absence rates for part-time staff is more difficult because of their irregular work patterns (Box 3).

Box 3: Part-time absence

A personnel department has 15 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff; 10 working full time, 37 hours a week and 10 working part time for 18.5 hours a week spread evenly over five days.

The full time staff record 40 days sickness absence in a 50 day period; the part-time staff record 20 days absence in the same period. Therefore the full-time staff lose 4 days per head and the part-time staff lose 1 FTE day per head. Overall, 50 FTE days are lost (40 by full-time and 10 by part-time staff) at an average of 3.33 days per FTE (*ie* $50 \div 15$). The absence rate is $3.33 \div 50 \times 100 = 6.7\%$.

If the same group of part-timers worked their 18.5 hours on three rather than five days, then their FTE days lost is $20 \times 0.5 \times 5 \div 3 = 1.67$. Overall, 56.67 FTE days of absence are recorded (40 by full-time and 16.67 by part-time staff) and the department's overall absence rate is $3.78 \div 50 \times 100 = 7.6\%$.

In general, if you must calculate absence rates using whole days, rather than hours, then ensure that the part-time element is expressed in FTEs, otherwise the amount of time lost will be exaggerated. The easiest way to calculate an overall absence rate is to divide the FTE days lost per head by the number of days in the period.

1.1.4 Issues and limitations

The advantage of this measure is that it answers a basic question which all managers should be asking: what proportion of time do I get from my staff? It is comparatively simple to calculate and can be used for costing purposes (see below). Calculating absence rates by staff group, department or function can help to identify particular problem areas. The sub-populations and other characteristics which need to be analysed separately may include:

- main occupations or functions
- men and women
- full-time and part-time
- broad age groups
- broad length of service groups
- department/location
- manager
- shifts
- certified and self-certified/un-certified absence.
- day of the week of absence

The latter recognises that there may be distinct patterns of absence related to, for example, absence just before or after weekends or days of planned leave, *etc.* There are specific measures which can

be used to monitor such patterns. Perhaps the best known of these is the Blue Monday index which is calculated as: the difference between total of Fridays' and Mondays' absentees for the period, divided by the average number employed.

Some organisations want to analyse absence by department or by manager. Variations in absence may reflect differences in composition, culture or management style.

The main limitation of crude absence rates is well known. The time lost may consist of a small number of people absent for long periods or a large number absent for short periods. Since absence rates tend to exaggerate the effect of long-term absence, they can give rise to misleading information. For example, absence rates may be relatively stable over time even though the number of staff absent may be increasing and the duration of absence falling, and vice versa.

Other limitations of absence rates are that:

- they give no information about the distribution of absences within a staff group (*eg* by grade or age) unless broken down in this way
- they provide no information on the number of staff having no absences
- they tell us nothing about those who might be frequently absent
- absence rates calculated for small staff numbers (< 20) tend to be unstable over short time periods.

Comparison of absence rates can give rise to false conclusions if other elementary indices such as number of absences and duration, are not also provided. In the next section we will examine absence frequency measures.

1.2 Frequency

In order to avoid the principal problem with absence rates, managers require a measure of the spread of absence across the workforce.

Measures of absence frequency provide a better indicator of short-term absence than the absence rate and may be a more valuable measure in planning absence control. However, frequency measures tend to discount long term sickness absence.

The absence frequency rate is given by:

$$\frac{\text{number of absences}}{\text{average number of staff}} \times 100\%$$

This is a measure of the average frequency with which staff are absent but says nothing about actual time lost. An absence of 20 days carries the same weight as an absence of only one day.

An individual frequency rate can also be calculated:

$$\frac{\text{the number of staff with one or more absences}}{\text{the average number of staff employed}} \times 100\%$$

The latter is a useful measure of the extent to which absences can be attributed to a small number of staff. Although, in practice the individual frequency rate becomes less valuable over time since it is increasingly likely that an employee will have at least one spell of absence.

Box 4: illustrates these two measures.

Box 4: Absence frequency measures

In one month an organisation's distribution department employed, on average, 40 staff. During this time 12 employees had periods of absence: one was away three times, two were away twice and nine were away once. A total of 16 spells of absence were recorded.

The absence frequency rate is therefore:

$$16 \div 40 \times 100 = 40\%$$

The individual frequency rate is:

$$12 \div 40 \times 100 = 30\%$$

Each absence should be calculated separately, not only when it is followed by return to work, but also when the reason for sickness absence changes.

A third frequency measure used by some organisations is the incidence (or prevalence) rate. This is calculated at a point in time (*ie* a specific day or reference week), and is given by:

$$\frac{\text{the number of staff absent}}{\text{average number employed}} \times 100\%$$

1.2.1 Inception measures

Measures of absence inception, that is measures of the start of a sickness absence period, are similar to those of absence frequency. Inception measures can be used in monitoring and forecasting absence levels and can be used as 'triggers' for management intervention (*eg* formal review or reference to occupational health).

Comparison of inception rates over time can be used to show whether patterns of absence are stable or not and to establish

whether more spells of absence have been started, or whether more staff have started spells of absence.

There are two main measures: inception rate for spells of absence and the inception rate for persons absent. These are calculated as follows.

The inception rate for spells equals:

$$\frac{\text{the no. of spells of absence which start during a period}}{\text{the average number of staff employed in that period}} \times 100\%$$

The inception rate for individuals equals:

$$\frac{\text{number of persons who start at least one spell of absence}}{\text{the average number of staff employed}} \times 100\%$$

Some organisations prefer to use termination rates (*ie* measures of the number of absences ending in a period). Clearly, inception and termination rates are closely related. The advantage of measuring termination rates is that the reason for absence is more likely to be known.

1.2.2 Definitions

The definition of absence spells is not always straightforward. For example, do you consider two consecutive absences for different reasons (*eg* a day off with backache followed by three days off with flu symptoms) to be a single or multiple event? Similarly, do you consider runs interrupted by scheduled days off, or running over the month end, as a single run? A clerical officer working a five day week (Monday to Friday) who is absent on Friday and the following Monday should (unless the reason for absence changes) record one absence spell even if the Monday is the first day of a new month.

The decision as to how these situations are treated must be determined by the user's needs. It is essential however that basic rules should be established and understood, and that they should be clearly and consistently applied.

1.3 Duration

There are a number of measures of absence duration. The main ones are: the average duration per spell and the average duration per person. They are calculated as follows.

The average duration per spell is given by:

$$\frac{\text{total duration of all spells ending during period}}{\text{number of spells ending in period}}$$

If calculated separately for different types of absence, this can be used to give some indication of the likely return date of absentees.

The average duration per person is calculated by:

$$\frac{\text{total time lost from spells ending in the period}}{\text{number of staff having an absence in the period}}$$

Box 5: Means and medians

The average duration, and other rates quoted here, usually refer to arithmetic means. The limitation of the mean value is that weight is given to each occurrence according to its magnitude. Thus, extreme values are emphasised over middle values. This is particularly important in absence data since these tend to be skewed, that is, large numbers of people have only a few days absence while small numbers have very long absences.

Some observers recommend the use of the median to summarise absence data sets. The median is obtained by placing the observed values in ascending or descending order of magnitude and then finding the central value of these.

Consider the following distribution of days off among a group of ten staff in a two month period:

0 0 0 1 1 1 2 4 7 40

The mean duration per person is 5.6 days (*ie* $56 \div 10$) while the median value is 1 day. Which measure best characterises the sickness absence pattern?

Similarly, median values can also be calculated for other measures such as the frequency of absence spells.

The main definitional problem with duration measures is that the total duration of some absence spells will be unknown in any *period* simply because they are incomplete.

1.4 'Bradford' Scores

In organisations where the majority of staff work shifts and rotas, the disruption caused by frequent short term absences is often greater than that caused by occasional long term absences.

The Bradford factor measures an employee's irregularity of attendance by combining measures of absence frequency and duration. These scores indicate whether the composition of an individual's sickness absence record comprises a few, or many, spells of short or long duration. They can be used to monitor trends in sickness absence, to provide 'trigger' points (see below), and for comparison with absence rates.

The basic formula is :

$$S \times S \times D$$

S = the number of spells of absence in a specified period

D = the number of days (or hours) of absence in that period

Box 6 illustrates the Bradford scores for three employees each with the same annual absence rate (based on 12 days absence).

Box 6: Bradford Scores

one absence of 12 days: Bradford score = $1 \times 1 \times 12 = 12$ points

six absences of 2 days each: Bradford score = $6 \times 6 \times 12 = 432$ points

12 absences of one day each: scores $12 \times 12 \times 12 = 1,728$ points

Box 7 shows how one NHS Trust is using Bradford scores:

Box 7: Using Bradford Scores

South Devon Healthcare Trust produces a quarterly manpower report for each clinical directorate, locality and staff group. In each case the report shows:

% of staff with less than 300 points

% of staff with 300 to 499 points

% of staff with 500 or more points

% of staff with 5 or more spells of sickness absence in a rolling 52 week period

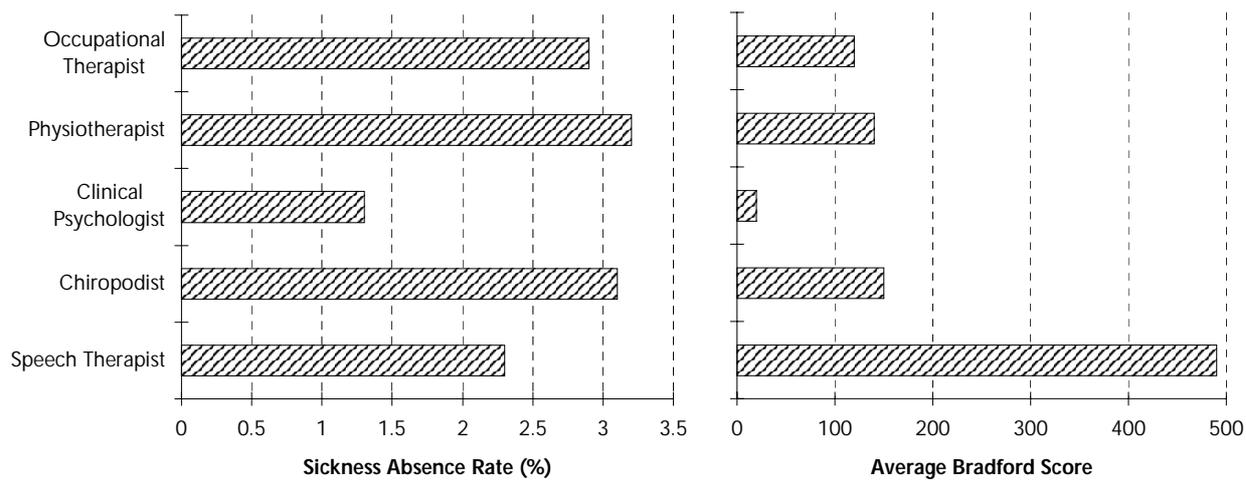
Comparison between sickness absence rates and average Bradford score can be revealing and can help to target action appropriately. Compare, for example, the contrasting position of speech therapists and physiotherapists in the example below (see Box 8).

A high absence rate and a low Bradford score clearly indicates that absence is due to a small number of staff with long absences. In contrast, low absence and a high Bradford score shows that there is a small number of staff with frequent short absences.

1.5 Summary

Any absence measure must be used with discretion. Best practice is to use a variety of absence indices providing information on different aspects of absence. Calculating the various measures for different sub-groups will provide important diagnostic information, helping managers to understand absence behaviour better and to target action appropriately.

Box 8: Comparing sickness absence rates and Bradford scores



Source: IES, 1995

Our recommended minimum data set for employing organisations who want to manage attendance better is:

- absence rate
- absence frequency rate
- average duration.

2. Monitoring Absence

This chapter considers five aspects of using measures to monitor sickness absence:

- presentation
- trigger points
- time series
- morbidity
- benchmarking.

2.1 Presentation

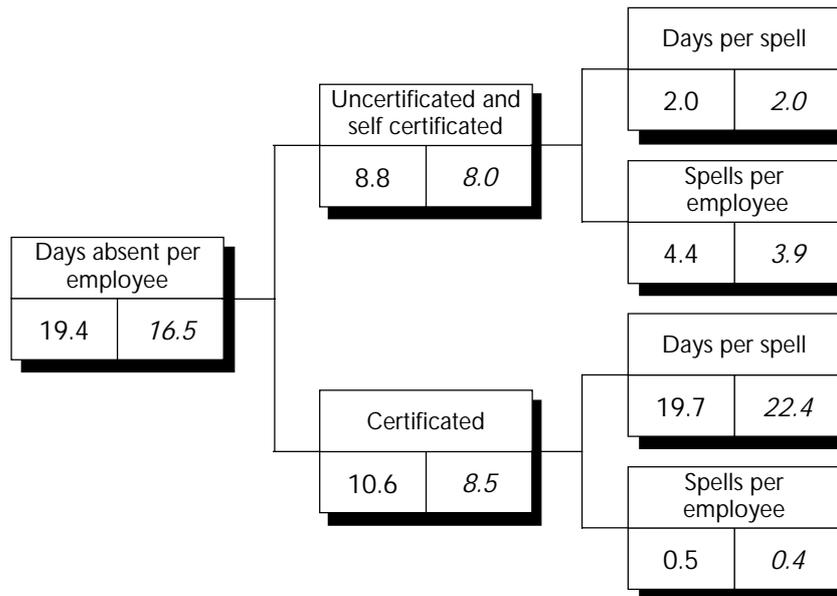
The presentation of absence information is as important as its measurement. Without clearly presented data, it is more difficult for busy line managers to identify key problems quickly and accurately. Frequently, managers seem to be provided with too much, rather than too little information.

Graphs and bar charts can be used to great effect in presenting aggregate sickness absence data. A less familiar way of presenting absence data is the 'logic tree' as shown in Box 9. The example shows sickness absence levels among officers in an inner London Borough's Social Services Department. By presenting figures in pairs it is a simple matter to compare the department (left-hand box) with the average (right-hand box figures shown in italics) across the whole authority. The tree presents days absent per employee, sub-divided into certified, uncertified and self-certified. Each of these categories is further sub-divided into duration and frequency measures. For example, the average days absent per employee are 19.4 in Social services compared with 16.5 across the Borough.

2.2 Trigger Points

One of the main uses of sickness absence information is to highlight those staff on whom the line manager should focus attention. An increasingly common way of doing this is to set parameters or 'triggers' which can help to determine where and when action is needed. The attendance record of individual employees may then be monitored against set criteria.

Box 9: Logic Tree



Source: Audit Commission (1990) *Managing Sickness Absence in London*, Occasional Papers no. 12

Triggers fall into two broad categories:

- informal arrangements where reviews of an employee's sickness absence pattern are undertaken either periodically or on return from each absence episode. In these cases it is usually left to managers to determine whether any action is required.
- more tightly specified absence thresholds, used by some employers to identify when managers should introduce a formal review, counselling, reference to occupational health, or taking disciplinary action.

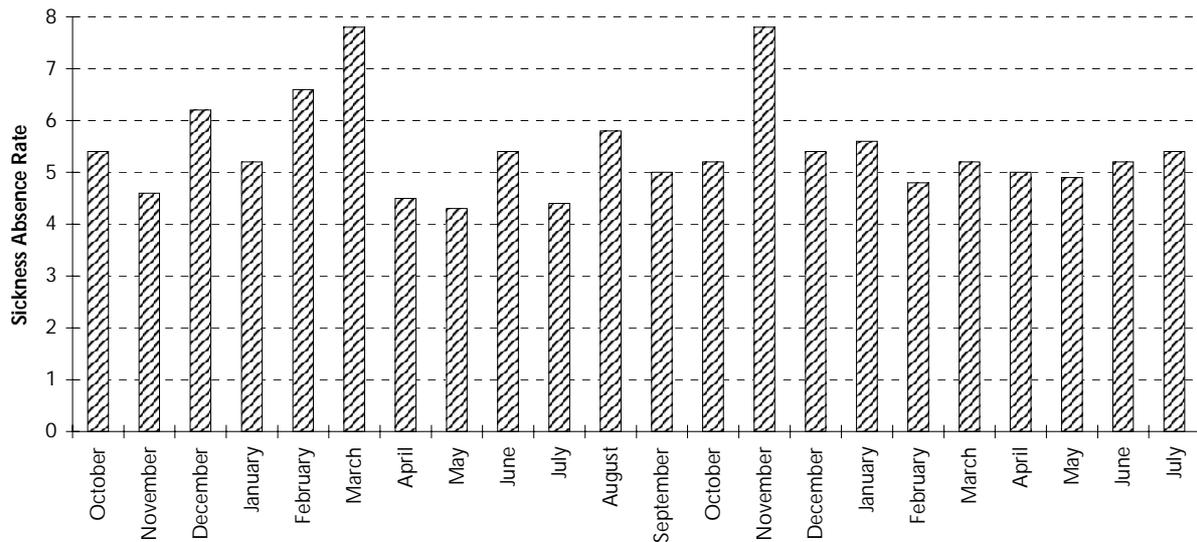
Trigger points may take a number of forms, for example:

- cumulative days of absence in a set period
- number of spells in a set period
- combinations of days and spells (*eg* by using Bradford scores)
- pattern related (*eg* number of absences preceding or following scheduled time-off).

In setting these thresholds, account has to be taken of the nature of each staff group and the organisation of its work. It may be necessary to set comparatively low thresholds for key groups, or where disruption and costs are higher.

Given that the main problem for managers is likely to be short term frequent absences, it may be best to set trigger points in terms of episodes, rather than days. It is also important that the time period is comparatively short, typically three months, so that action is timely.

Box 10: Sickness absence rate October 1992 to July 1994



Source: IES, 1995

There is a danger that the use of trigger points could be seen as institutionalising 'acceptable' levels of absence. Some organisations get round this by resorting to unpublished triggers, set by individual departments and varied periodically.

2.3 Time Series

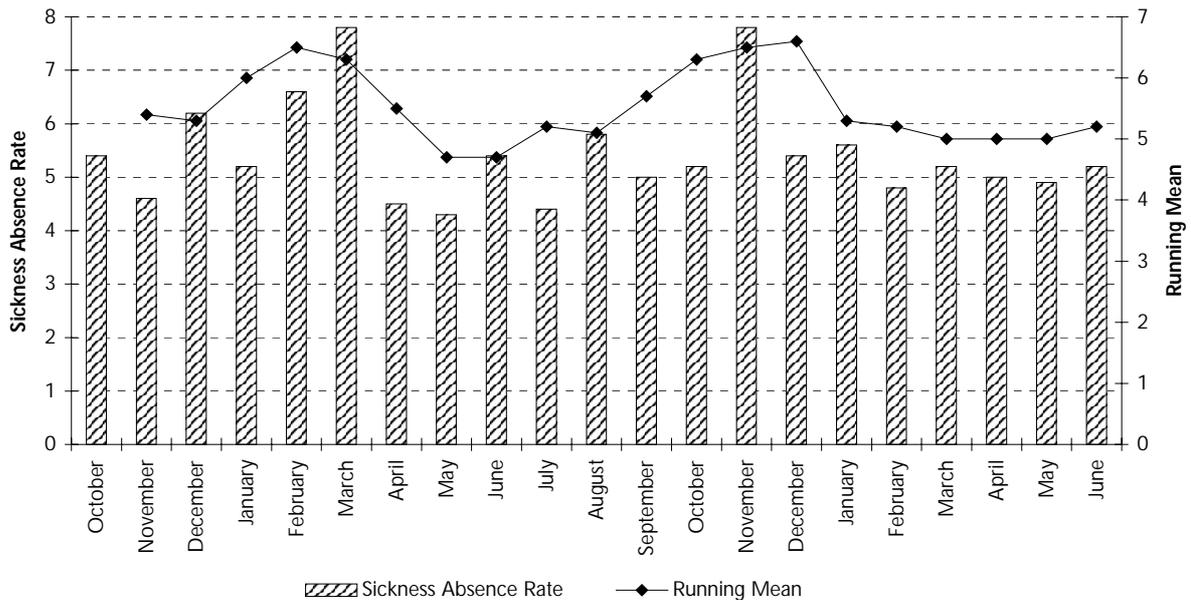
Many employers collect and report absence data in the form of time series. Box 10 shows an example of sickness absence among a group of staff over a 22 month period:

Reporting of a long run of data should enable users to examine how absence has changed over time. However, there are a number of influences on the behaviour of sickness absence over time which need to be considered in interpreting such series. The three main components of variation are:

- seasonal component: regular movements which influence absence at particular times of the year
- trend or cyclical component: a tendency which continues in one direction, or as a regular pattern, for a comparatively long period
- random component: irregular fluctuations in absence which cannot be explained by any of the previous components.

The chart in Box 10 displays a complex pattern in which values increase and decrease with apparent irregularity, making it difficult to identify any seasonal pattern or to judge the effects of any policy intervention. By smoothing out the marked irregularities using a running mean we can gain a better understanding of underlying trends.

Box 11: Three month running mean sickness absence rate



Source: IES, 1995

Box 11 shows the three month running mean sickness absence rate (that is, the first value is the average of months 1 to 3, the second value is the average of months 2 to 4 *etc.*).

2.4 Morbidity

Few employers make use of information on the reasons for staff sickness absence. And yet, such information could be invaluable in enabling occupational health services to identify appropriate workplace interventions and to focus health promotion activities.

In order to obtain sick pay for absences in excess of seven days, employees must provide a doctor's certificate stating their reason for absence. For shorter absences (in excess of three days) employees should provide self-certificates. Although the information contained in the latter tends to be vague, few organisations make use of this morbidity data.

One of the reasons for the lack of attention to morbidity data is the current lack of an appropriate coding system for medical certificates. The International Classification of Diseases (ICD 9 & 10) and the Read Codes, have been found too complicated and unwieldy for routine collation of sickness absence data. Most of the organisation specific classifications used are simply too crude to reveal occupational or workplace links.

Self-reported illness is liable to a variety of inaccuracies arising from misdiagnosis, and misrepresentation. Trying to code such 'diagnoses' is difficult without an agreed classification system which can be used in an occupational health setting. However, even taking into account self-reporting 'diagnosis' errors and

misrepresentations, the quantity and spread of the data may display underlying patterns or trends.

A prototype coding system, with something under 100 codes, is currently being developed by a major engineering company. If this system proves successful it could lead to a standardised instrument for use by occupational health services.

2.5 Benchmarking

Clearly, benchmarking absence levels must be done with great care, given the number of different absence measures which are available and the variety of definitions which can be applied.

However, attendance management is an area where comparative performance measurement can be used to identify best practice and improve performance. Box 12 suggests key attendance management processes for benchmarking.

Box 12: Sickness Absence Benchmarking Criteria

- organisational culture & management
- management responsibility & commitment
- induction, training & development
- operational procedures policies, guidelines & understanding
- information management
- counselling services
- occupational health
- health & safety
- family friendly policies

The characteristics of low, medium and high performers for each

Box 13: Sickness absence benchmarking: management responsibility and commitment

LOW	MEDIUM	HIGH
Issue of sickness absence is not addressed	Need for reduction in absence is recognised but few formal policies are in place	The reduction of absence is a business objective at board level with formal policies in place
Few managers accept responsibility and expect the personnel function to deal with absence	Some managers accept partial responsibility but expect personnel to lead	Line managers accept responsibility for their role, with personnel advising and monitoring
No resources allocated to practices designed to reduce absence	Some constraint on commitment of resources	Willing to commit resources to reduce sickness absence
Management uncommitted and unaware of implications of bad working practices	Some commitment to putting good working practices in place	Commitment to good working practices

Source: Oxford Consulting (unpublished)

of these key factors are then identified and an organisation can rate its performance against the criteria, establish differences in process against the benchmark and target future performance.

Box 13 shows possible criteria for one of these key factors: management responsibility and commitment.

3. Costing Absence

Costing sickness absence and communicating that cost to employees, is a powerful way of emphasising the importance to the business of attendance. However, few organisations have mechanisms to identify absence costs and fewer still actually examine them systematically. Nearly three-quarters of the respondents to a 1994 Industrial Society survey were unable to state a figure for annual sickness absence costs.

Some of these are direct costs, and comparatively easy to assess, others are indirect and more difficult to quantify. Nonetheless, sickness absence is costly, and one way of deciding how serious an absence problem is might be to ascribe some costs to its major components.

The main direct cost components are:

- occupational sick pay
- statutory sick pay
- temporary cover
- additional overtime costs
- lost production or service provision.

Indirect costs of sickness absence include:

- increased management time (*eg* dealing with attendance issues, revising schedules *etc.*)
- increased administrative and clerical time (*eg* administering sick pay, arranging cover)
- interrupted work flow
- lower productivity from temporary staff and from returning staff
- reduced quality and costs of lost materials
- added costs of meeting slipped deadlines
- loss of customers
- occupational health provision
- reduced staff morale

3.1 Top-down costing

The top-down approach provides an estimate of direct sickness absence costs to the organisation based on broad assumptions. This approach can give an indication of the magnitude of sickness absence costs and can assist in justifying expenditure on measures designed to reduce it.

Top-down costs can be derived in a number of ways. For example:

- average absence rate multiplied by average earnings
- costs of occupational and statutory sick pay
- costs of temporary sickness absence cover or overtime.

3.2 Bottom-up costing

The bottom-up approach concentrates on estimating in greater detail the costs of a single occurrence of sickness absence using the checklist of cost headings above. The checklist acts as an aide-memoire to managers in raising awareness of the various costs incurred by absence and allowing them an insight into the comparative costs of different absence cover options.

The checklist approach can be used to assess overall costs, by aggregating up notional average costs of one occurrence of short term absence.

3.3 Summary

Costing sickness absence in these ways can assist managers in determining the scale of the problem and can put into context the costs of introducing new methods of managing attendance.

4. Using Absence Data to Manage Attendance

Collecting and analysing absence data cannot, by itself, reduce levels of absence. It is just as important to have an approach to managing attendance as it is to gathering absence statistics. This final chapter will briefly highlight how data on absence can be used to help improve attendance at an organisational level.

There are, potentially, four audiences for absence data:

- Senior managers
- HR professionals
- Line managers
- Employees.

Each is discussed below.

4.1 Senior managers

A good deal of the research and consultancy work which IES has conducted in the field of attendance has shown that senior management commitment is seen as crucial to the success of any attendance management strategy.

Senior managers are important because:

- They can influence the culture within which absence statistics are used. They can send clear messages to employees that sickness absence is going to be monitored and managed. There is evidence that employees who believe that managers are indifferent to absence will have more days sick. Senior managers have a key role, therefore, in combating any 'leniency' effect which might exist in the organisation.
- They can 'sign off' expenditure on initiatives to improve attendance. This might include IT to help collect and analyse data, training for line managers, or more significant expenditure on health promotion activities or occupational health services.

Clearly, providing senior managers with data which helps them answer questions about the extent, nature and costs of employee sickness absence will help them make decisions about priorities and resources. Many will already be aware that sickness absence

may have serious financial implications. Well-presented data can help them to understand where cost-effective improvements can be made.

4.2 HR professionals

In most organisations it will be personnel specialists who are most familiar with absence data. They have several roles:

- Designing, setting-up and running systems to collect, analyse and report absence data. While some advanced IT systems allow for line managers to input and access these data, the majority of organisations have yet to grapple with this level of sophistication. This places more responsibility on HR professionals to ensure that measurement and monitoring systems are effective.
- Advising senior managers on absence trends and costs. This might also include recommending strategies for reducing absence levels.
- Advising line managers not just on trends and costs in absence, but on those factors which might influence absence. These might include things directly under the control or influence of line managers such as workloads, flexibility of working hours, health and safety issues, stress *etc.* Often, HR professionals have a role in designing and delivering training support for line managers on these issues.
- Formulating attendance management policies. This will mean ensuring that procedures are in place to deal with individuals with high absence levels (*eg* identifying them, the use of interviews, the role of disciplinary procedures *etc.*), and acting as internal support for line managers with particular problems.

However their role evolves, HR professionals are frequently central to an organisation's capacity to manage attendance.

4.3 Line managers

If, as is increasingly common, line managers have taken on devolved responsibility for aspects of finance, business development and people management, an avalanche of statistics on absence will be as unwelcome as they are unread. It is one of the paradoxes of attendance management that the group with probably most influence over attendance is the least likely to see its control as one of its primary roles.

Despite this, there are ways that absence data can be made accessible to line managers in a manner which is also demonstrably relevant, for example:

- Departmental/location breakdowns of absence data and costs can, if brief, graphical and accessible (*ie* with a brief

commentary), help line managers make internal comparisons and monitor change over time.

- Providing summary data from individuals' absence records can help managers keep tabs on their own staff, and decide when to make use of existing attendance procedures.

In addition, if staff attendance finds its way into the criteria which are used to manage the performance of line managers themselves, their interest in absence data will almost certainly be increased.

4.4 Employees

In a company in the service sector recently visited by IES researchers, the only data available to employees were individual absence records, presented as 'league tables'. This was a 'data-rich' company which could have made accessible a range of other performance indicators, yet it chose only to display absence data. Not surprisingly, employees felt untrusted and patronised.

From this extreme example it is clear that absence data can easily be abused and used inappropriately, especially in staff communication. There are, of course, more constructive uses for these data:

- Organisation wide or departmental absence data, in aggregated form, can show levels of absence and trends over time. It is better that these data are presented among a range of other indicators, or are communicated as part of regular briefings, to ensure that absence is not isolated as the only important indicator.
- Individual absence data can be helpful in ensuring that employees know about their level of absence, on a confidential basis. This, if set in the context of an organisation with clear attendance procedures, can encourage a degree of self-regulation.

Stories still abound of employees believing they have a sickness absence entitlement, and it is important that staff are clear that any absence data they see is intended to help monitor and encourage attendance rather than to punish absence.

4.5 Other good practice points

Aside from targeting absence data on particular audiences, several other uses of absence data might be attempted:

- Having differential trigger points. In essence, this means triggering absence as an issue once it reaches a pre-determined level. Rather than using the same point for all staff, some organisations set different triggers for different staff groups. For example, interviewing manual workers in occupations

susceptible to back injury when their sickness levels reach the average for all staff is time-consuming and wasteful. Setting a trigger point for each main staff group can facilitate a better and more targeted monitoring process.

- Enhancing data by collecting information on the *reasons* for absence can help improve levels of understanding about the underlying causes of absence. It also helps to focus measures which are most likely to lead to reductions (such as changes in working conditions, flexible working, or the use of occupational health services *etc.*).

Whatever use absence data is put to, it is essential that their collection and analysis does not remain an end in itself. Such data provide a powerful insight into the nature of any attendance problem, and represent a vehicle through which practical solutions can be targeted and delivered.

5. Sources of Information

Employers frequently contact the Institute to enquire whether comparative data are available which can help them to assess the levels of sickness absence in their organisation. This section outlines some of the main sources of information and help which are currently available. These include:

- Confederation of British Industry
- Labour Force Survey
- Industrial Relations Service
- Industrial Society

a. Confederation of British Industry

The CBI first conducted a survey on absence from work among its members in 1987. A follow-up survey in February 1993 contacted 1,200 CBI members and local authorities, of which 300 responded.

The report *Too much time out?* (CBI/Percom, 1993) includes information on:

- average days lost and % sickness absence by industrial sector
- average days lost by manual and non-manual employees
- average days lost for full-time and part-time employees
- % sickness absence by size (number of employees) of organisation
- % sickness absence by CBI regions (for full-time manual and non-manual employees)
- average number of days of authorised absence
- reported use of various absence policies.

The survey of CBI members is now repeated on an annual basis (see *Managing absence — in sickness and in health*, CBI, 1994).

b. The Labour Force Survey

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is a survey of 60,000 households conducted annually (since 1984) (and quarterly since 1992) by OPCS on behalf of the Employment Department. Results from

each quarterly survey are available on-line via the Quantime system around six months after the survey closes.

The LFS includes four questions concerning sickness absence. These are:

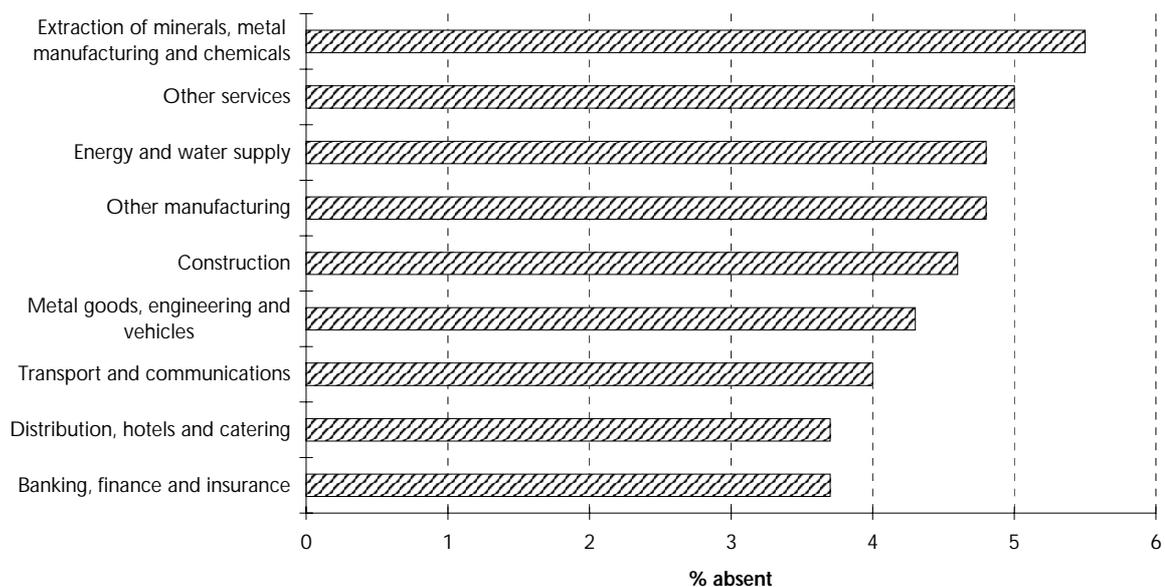
- any days off work sick or injured in the reference week
- number of days off work sick or injured in the reference week
- whether days off sick or injured includes Sundays
- period of sickness or injury.

Using combinations of occupation, employment sector and qualification, the LFS can be used to track sickness absence among particular industries (coded by the Standard Industrial Classification), occupations (using the Standard Occupational Classification). Data is also available by employment pattern (*eg* full and part-time) working hours and various demographic characteristics such as age, gender and marital status. However, there are constraints arising from the sample sizes for some of these sub-populations.

An example of LFS data is provided in Box 14 which shows the percentage of employees absent from work due to sickness in the reference week by industry for Spring 1994.

A valuable feature of the LFS is the availability of consistent time series data which is not influenced by the vagaries of different organizational definitions of sickness absence or recording methods.

Box 14: Per cent of employees absent by industry Spring 1994



Source: LFS

c. Industrial Relations Services (IRS)

IRS conducts periodic surveys of sickness absence, sick pay schemes and sickness monitoring. The most recent surveys were conducted in 1991 and 1994. Results from the 1994 survey appear in Issue 568 of *IRS Employment Trends* (September 1994).

d. The Industrial Society

The Industrial Society conducts periodic surveys of absence from work and attendance management practices. *Wish you were here* (1993) compares attendance management practices in UK and Japanese-owned organisations.

The most recent report (November 1994) in their Managing Best Practice series (*Managing Best Practice: 6. Managing Attendance*) is devoted to attendance management and presents results from a survey of nearly 500 personnel professionals.