

Attendance Management: a review of good practice

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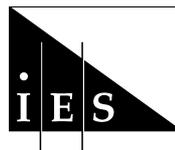
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1 Managing Attendance or Controlling Absence?

1.1 Introduction

Until relatively recently, most organisations seem to have regarded the health of their employees as being something private to the individual, and absence from work due to illness as being both unpredictable and uncontrollable. This view has begun to change in response to:

- UK and EU legislation which has placed a general duty on employers to safeguard employees' health, safety and welfare, and more recently, to require employers to carry out risk assessments of health hazards.
- Absence costs: the costs of sickness absence borne by employers have risen as a result of changes in the Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) regulations. Employers have become more acutely aware of the potential for savings if reductions in sickness absence can be achieved.
- Maintaining competitiveness: as organisations reduce the number of staff they employ, the value of each remaining employee rises. Employers recognise that each day lost through absence represents lost production, disruption, reduced efficiency, compromised quality and lost opportunities.
- Employee expectations: employees have generally higher levels of health awareness and higher expectations of what a 'good' employer should provide in terms of working conditions and benefits. There is a growing body of case law where employees have sought, and obtained, legal redress for damage to their physical or mental health at work.

In response to these changes employers have begun to look more closely at their attendance levels and to adopt a range of policy actions.

These include:

- Placing more emphasis on data collection, analysis and benchmarking.
- Enhancing the role of line managers by giving them access to data and empowering them to manage attendance.
- Linking attendance to pay either through sanctions or pay enhancements.
- Adopting punitive measures, including the use of disciplinary procedures.
- Adopting preventative measures and a positive attendance management strategy.

1.2 Aims of this report

This report centres on the practical aspects of attendance management. A summary of the factors that result in absence is made to provide insight into the problem and to illustrate which areas a policy can reasonably be expected to influence.¹ A model of best practice is derived from a study of current literature producing a set of criteria that are necessary for an absence policy to be successful. The current policies of thirty organisations are assessed against these criteria and the results discussed. Recommendations are made concerning aspects that are important in controlling absence, but which are generally neglected by existing policies.

1.3 Understanding absence

Absence control is an essentially negative term, implying that, were it not for management intervention, non-attendance would be widespread. Anecdotally, it seems that there has been a shift away from the more punitive approach of 'absence control' in favour of more enlightened 'attendance management' strategies which aim to provide a working environment which maximises and motivates employee attendance.

However, if such a shift is to be encouraged and successful strategies found, employers need a clear understanding of the

¹ A discussion of the causes of absence is given in Bevan S and Heron P, (1998) *'Sickness Absence: Causes and Cures'*, IES (forthcoming).

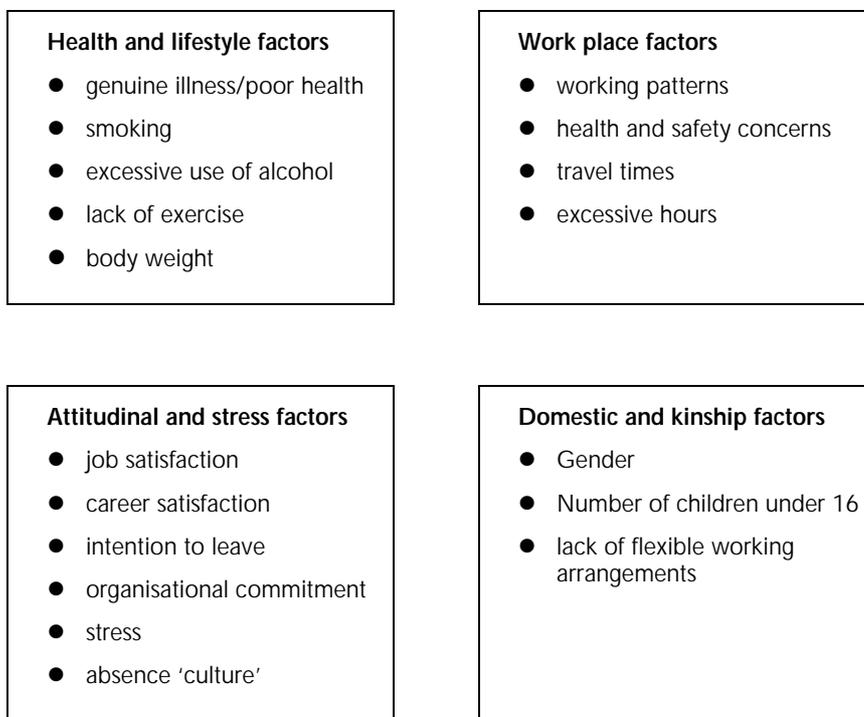
causes of non-attendance in order to formulate policies that address the true causes of it. This section summarises what is known about the factors most strongly associated with sickness absence. It will discuss the findings in general terms with the research references being given in the Bibliography.

The causes of absence can be viewed as four distinct clusters as shown in Figure 1.1. The research on each of these factors will be discussed in the next sections.

1.3.1 Health and lifestyle

It is often easy to forget that many employees take time off from work because they are genuinely ill. One could be forgiven for thinking, from the emphasis of some research, that the individual's morale or motivation has the most impact on their absence. There is support for both views in the literature. The

Figure 1.1 Causes of absence



Source: IES

relationship between absence and self-reported health show that those who report a poor level of health in the last year do have higher levels of absence. Very few links can be found between self-reported general health and measures of morale and motivation, however.

The general health and lifestyle of employees and its impact on attendance at work has been the subject of much research. Virtually all the academic studies demonstrate a clear link, for example, between smoking behaviour and absence. Different levels of tobacco consumption can be related to number of periods of absence and their duration, with both increasing together. If individuals are helped to give up smoking their sickness absence is reduced. Smoking due to perceived stress can also result in absence from work. Most research studies also show a strong relationship between excessive alcohol use and absence.

Exercise has been identified by some researchers as a factor which, through its positive impact on general health can be used to explain some aspects of sickness absence. Recent IES research among hospital staff has shown that those reporting better general health also took more exercise. Related to this is the issue of body weight and the clear relationship between being overweight or obese with a range of health problems. It would be expected from this that there is a link between sickness absence and excess body weight.

For a proportion of employees there is a clear and direct relationship between absence and poor health but for other groups non-medical factors are equally important. This suggests that absence management policies need to discriminate between those who are unavoidably absent due to illness and those who are affected by other factors over which the employer may have some influence. Employers can support health education programmes which promote healthier lifestyles. Actions such as providing balanced meals at work, encouraging the taking of more exercise and supporting those who wish to give up smoking can also improve the general health of employees and reduce their absence due to sickness.

1.3.2 Workplace factors

From the literature it is apparent that some aspects of the working environment can affect the attendance of staff. The

impact of working patterns have not featured strongly in absence research until relatively recently. The results are contradictory with some studies finding that part-time staff have higher absence than full-timers while others have shown the reverse. The composition of workgroups has been mentioned in a number of studies. The research here shows that absence diminishes the more people work in small interdependent teams.

An increasing amount of research is beginning to suggest that, for some employees, absence is a mechanism for avoiding specific aspects of work that are perceived as unpleasant or harmful: for example, where the work is inherently unpleasant as in an abattoir, or where there is the risk of physical injury from members of the public or dangerous equipment. The need to avoid emotionally demanding, or stressful situations in the workplace may also result in absence.

Other studies have shown that the time taken to travel to work can be related to the risk of absence. In addition there is evidence that the mode of transport used, as well as the individual's position in the organisational hierarchy can also be related. This implies that employees in less senior jobs with longer and more difficult journeys to work have a higher risk of absence.

There is a strong link between those who consistently work more than their contracted hours and absence. It appears that there is some psychological or physiological impact which results in absence when people work excessive hours over a sustained period of time. However, among specific sub-groups such as senior managers, the number of absences is lower among those working more than their contracted hours. This suggests that employees in responsible positions feel compelled to attend when it may be preferable for both them and their colleagues that they remain at home.

It can be seen that some employees' sickness levels can be attributable to characteristics of the workplace some of which can be addressed by management action, such as teamworking, awareness of health and safety issues and discouraging the prolonged working of excessive hours.

1.3.3 Attitudinal and stress factors

The relationship between job satisfaction and sickness absence has been the subject of much debate. Researchers have examined

the extent to which a proportion of sickness could be the result of poor morale and motivation, and the extent that it might lead to more disruptive behaviour. Other work has found that the link between job satisfaction and absence is far weaker or neutral. One or two studies have even shown that high sickness absence has, in itself, a negative influence on job satisfaction. On balance, it is likely that lower job satisfaction is related to increased likelihood of being absent.

IES data suggest that, of all the attitude predictors, career satisfaction is one of the more powerful. Absence and periods of absence are higher among those expressing dissatisfaction with their careers. Indeed, among those who perceive that they have marketable skills and who are frequently absent the likelihood of them resigning is relatively high.

There also appears to be a link between leaving an organisation and attendance behaviour. Those with high absence are at a higher risk of subsequently resigning. Supporting this finding, studies show that those with poor attendance records are more likely to express an intention to leave.

Organisational commitment is the extent to which employees identify with the mission, values and purpose of the organisation which employs them. It is a measure which often provides more insight than the traditional measures of job satisfaction. Previous research has found quite strong links between high organisational commitment and a low frequency of absence. Some studies have suggested that commitment together with a feeling of being involved in decision-making can improve attendance. One study found that absence was lower among individuals who felt the organisation was committed to them as employees. The sensitive handling of change is also vital in maintaining the trust and confidence of staff and through this their commitment to the organisation, resulting in an increased willingness to attend.

The relationship between stress and absence generally shows that the two are related. However, in this field of research there is considerable difficulty in defining stress, whether it is a psychological phenomenon or a series of physiological symptoms. In addition, there is the problem of how it should be measured. If self reports are used there is no way of ensuring people are talking about the same thing in the same way.

A good deal of research shows a 'leniency' effect: that is if employees believe management to be indifferent to, or tolerant of, absence, then absence increases. A culture of absence can become established.

In summary, these research findings suggest that employees' risk of being absent can be strongly affected by their attitudes to certain aspects of their work and the way they are managed. The aspects of job and career satisfaction, commitment to the organisation and intention to leave all play a part in helping to explain how experiences and reactions to events, change and organisational culture can affect individuals' propensity to attend work.

1.3.4 Domestic and kinship factors

Most studies of sickness absence show clear gender differences, with women having higher absence than men. Many of these studies find little or no difference in health, so attention has focused on other factors which may only affect women. The idea of 'kinship' responsibilities has begun to feature in these studies, referring to the domestic care responsibilities that employees have for other members of their families.

The evidence of a link between such domestic responsibilities is not clear, however. Some researchers have failed to find strong evidence that childcare problems are related to absence. Others have found that a higher proportion of women's absence than that of men is explained by their need to attend to domestic issues. Where studies have found a link with domestic responsibilities, factors such as the number of children under 16 and the availability of informal support networks have also been shown to be significant.

The availability of flexible working arrangements, and the acceptance by organisations of flexible hours, enables women employees to feel that they can cope with short-term domestic problems without having to resort to absence as a coping mechanism.

1.4 Conclusions

This brief review of the evidence on the range of factors which has been shown to be linked to absence suggests the following:

- Absence from work is the result of a complex set of factors.
- These influences comprise a mix of individual characteristics and behaviours, attributes of the working environment, the attitude and disposition of individuals or groups, and a range of non-work factors which may combine to make attendance difficult or impossible.
- This mix of influences varies between different employee groups.
- If the causes of absence are so different for individuals or groups of employees then the strategies adopted by employers to manage it must be equally varied.

2 Managing Attendance: Good Practice

This chapter will outline what constitutes good practice in attendance management as derived from an extensive study of recent literature. The criteria with their research references are given in the Appendix, where a brief comment on the content of each paper is given. The research papers often discuss wider aspects of absence than those criteria for which they are given as a reference.

In order to monitor and control absence it is necessary to have accurate, timely and accessible information. The issue of measuring absence and which methods are appropriate in different situations will not be discussed in this document.¹ The issue of what level of absence is acceptable in an organisation receives considerable discussion in the research papers, and references are given for this in the Appendix.

2.1 Key elements of good practice

Our review of the literature on absence policies has led to the identification of three clusters of good practice which are essential for an attendance strategy to be successful. These clusters are:

- organisational culture of attendance
- clarity of roles
- clarity of procedure.

¹ *Measuring and Monitoring Absence from Work*, IES Report 288 by I Seccombe, provides a detailed discussion of the issues of absence measurement, and gives clear recommendations on which measures are suitable in various situations.

The key elements of practice which comprise these clusters are outlined below.

2.1.1 Organisational culture

It has been mentioned in the preceding chapter that it is possible to create an organisational culture where absence is accepted as inevitable and something that cannot be controlled. The literature shows that the commitment of senior managers to a clear policy of attendance management is vital in avoiding such attitudes becoming entrenched. Making the objectives of any attendance policy clear is also essential. A policy which is to be credible and successful needs to be communicated clearly to all staff and applied uniformly throughout an organisation. The research demonstrates that a culture of good attendance can be created by discussion and feedback on attendance as a feature of regular staff briefings.

Key elements include:

Policy objectives defined. The purpose of any attendance policy needs to be clearly conveyed to employees so that the importance the organisation places on attendance is appreciated. This will contribute to the creation of an attendance culture.

Emphasis on senior management commitment. Senior managers must be seen to be committed to achieving good attendance and giving support to measures that will encourage staff to attend. This will emphasise the concern that the organisation has for the welfare of their employees and their attendance at work.

2.1.2 Return to work interviews

Absence control, as described in much of the recent literature, has increasingly become the responsibility of line management who have day to day contact with staff rather than the more remote HR department. Managers are recommended to hold return to work interviews with employees who have been absent, on the day they return. The simple, but vital, act of talking to employees after an absence has been shown to improve attendance without further action.

The research shows that to be effective the manager's approach should be sympathetic, and the studies highlight the need for

managers to receive adequate training to handle these interviews successfully.

The purpose of the interviews, as described in the literature, is to discuss the reason for the absence as soon as possible after the employee has returned. A secondary purpose is to demonstrate that the absence of the employee has been noticed by the employer. The opportunity should also be taken to explore if there are any personal or work related difficulties affecting attendance that could be resolved by counselling or other management action.

The literature recommends that managers should stay in contact with employees while they are away to demonstrate the continued concern for them, and the desire that they should return as soon as is practical.

Example

Return to work interviews, held by line managers immediately on the day of returning to work, emphasise the point that the period of sickness absence which has just finished (no matter how brief), has not gone unnoticed. It also provides the employee and their manager with an opportunity to discuss, informally (unless there is a recurrent problem), any ongoing or underlying problems.

These interviews are well-developed in some organisations. The London Borough of Lewisham has invested considerable effort, for example, in training its line managers in how to conduct them. The basic structure which is used is broadly as follows:

1. **Line manager preparation:** allows them to collect information about whether the employee complied with the procedures, about previous absence patterns *etc.*
2. **Welcome:** setting an informal and non-confrontational tone to the interview. Communicating the purpose of the discussion.
3. **Review of the absence period:** discussion of employees' current health, whether and when medical advice was sought, briefing the employee on how their work was covered during their absence (both to emphasise the consequences of the absence and to help them pick up the work again), probing on any underlying causes of absence which may be individually important.
4. **Reminder of previous absence record:** in cases where absence is potentially concerning, demonstrating that these data are held and regularly monitored can impress upon them that their attendance is under close scrutiny.

5. **Action and timescales:** where action is needed, it is important that there is agreement between line manager and employee, clarity over responsibility for these actions, agreement over when they are to be reviewed, and clarity over the consequences if they do not result in improvement in attendance. Such actions should be put in writing.

Evidence suggests that these interviews have significantly reduced casual absence.

Thus, a key element of any attendance management strategy should include the following:

Return to work interviews to be held by line manager with employee after each period of absence. Absence policies should recommend that return to work interviews are held on the day the employee returns, in a private setting. This provides an excellent opportunity to show the employee that their absence has been noticed and to discuss their absence record.

2.1.3 Role of line manager and HR department

Support from the HR department is also necessary. The exact roles of the manager and the human resources department need defining in any absence management policy. The literature describes various models. At one extreme, line managers are responsible for handling all absence problems including disciplinary procedures up to a fairly advanced stage, with human resources acting as advisors. In other organisations, any member of staff with an absence problem is the responsibility of the HR department from the outset.

Key aspects which should be addressed by attendance policies include:

Line management responsibility for implementing policy. Line managers are best placed to monitor and deal with the absence of staff reporting to them, as they know them personally and see them on a regular basis.

Monitoring of sickness patterns to be the line manager's responsibility. By monitoring the sickness in the unit as a whole the manager is able to make comparisons with other parts of the organisation, to assess the effectiveness of his attendance management.

Managerial approach recommended to be caring and sympathetic. Absence policies should stress that the manager's approach to a return to work interview is to be sympathetic rather than reprimanding. This provides the employee with an opportunity to discuss any work or personal problems that may affect their ability to come to work.

Manager to use discretion as to when an attendance review is necessary. Rather than relying mechanistically on trigger points which result in disciplinary procedures starting automatically, it is preferable to use the judgement of the manager as to whether such action is appropriate, as they should be aware of the individual employee's circumstances.

Managers to stay in touch during employee's absence. To ensure that the sick employee appreciates the concern of his employer and the interest in them returning to work, it is essential that contact by post, telephone or personal visit should be maintained by the line manager.

Human resources department involvement required at defined stage. Although the responsibility for their employees' attendance rests with the line manager the human resources department is there to support and advise. The point at which this department actively becomes involved in an absence case needs to be defined in an absence policy, to ensure that line managers are aware of the extent of and limits to their responsibilities.

Overall, the role of line managers is crucial to developing good practice in managing attendance, since they have the closest contact with the individuals concerned. Action taken by other parties (such as Personnel) is likely to be less timely, more formal and out of touch with the detail of the circumstances.

Where line managers play a part in the implementation of agreed procedures, they should receive regular training to support them. Where they can influence factors likely to contribute to absence (such as the working environment, some aspects of morale, access to flexible working arrangements *etc.*) then they should also be trained in the consequences of their actions on sickness absence levels for particular employee groups.

2.1.4 'Trigger points'

Once the measures to assess absence have been decided it is then possible to determine 'trigger points'. These are a set number of day's absence in a specified time period at which point certain actions are taken by the organisation to review the employee's case. This issue receives a significant amount of attention in the literature. In some instances the action to be taken at these points is at the manager's discretion but in others they are prescribed. Some organisations use differential trigger points for staff groups exposed to certain occupational hazards (such as risk of back injury among manual workers, nurses *etc.*). Information at a team or section level is needed to ensure that line managers are adequately informed about the staff they are responsible for. This will also enable comparisons to be made within the organisation and areas of best practice to be identified.

Absence procedures should, therefore, include:

Defined 'trigger' points for a review of an employee's attendance record. Trigger points ensure that an organisation uses the same criteria throughout for deciding when an employee's absence is becoming a problem and requires action.

2.1.5 Employee responsibilities

The literature makes it clear that employees need to be aware of the notification procedures if they are unable to attend work for any reason. These requirements should be applied to all employees and any failure to comply regarded seriously. The need to provide self-certified forms or medical certificates should be made clear to all employees. Any absence policy should define what disciplinary measure will be taken against staff who are persistently absent.

Details of notification and certification required from absent employees. Employees need to know the procedures to be followed when they are unable to attend work owing to ill health. They should be informed of this when they join the organisation and retain a written copy. These requirements should be applied uniformly among staff to stress the importance placed on attendance.

2.1.6 Long and short term absence

Research advises that it is good practice to approach long and short term absence differently. The need to distinguish between short term absence due to various causes and long term absence due to serious ill health needs to be recognised and different policies applied. The involvement of the occupational health department or company doctor in dealing with long term absence has received more attention and clarification in recent literature.

Key aspects here include:

Long and short term absence differentiated. Different procedures are required to manage long and short term absence and should be outlined in all policies. Frequent short term absences due to various causes needs initially to be dealt with by the line manager. The management of long term absence due to ill health usually requires consideration of whether the individual is capable of continuing to work, the involvement of occupational health, and changes in the job or working conditions.

Occupational health department involvement clarified. The stage at which the advice of occupational health should be sought should be set out in an absence policy to ensure full use is made of their guidance.

2.1.7 Changes in job or working conditions

The modification of working conditions following medical advice is recommended as a consideration if these would allow the employee to return to work. Short-term changes in the job content or hours worked could also be examined as a means of enabling the employee to return.

Short-term work changes to be considered. The need to consider changing working conditions should be mentioned in a successful policy, as this option should not be overlooked and may allow an employee to return to work who would otherwise be unable to attend.

Working conditions to be considered as a cause of poor attendance. The specific requirement to regard working conditions as a cause of poor health is an important reminder of this significant factor in creating good attendance.

2.2 Prevention better than cure?

Clear and consistently applied procedures play an important part in managing attendance. However, these mechanisms do not easily address some of the underlying causes of sickness absence discussed in the previous chapter. It is in some of these areas where prevention may, indeed, be better than cure.

Specific areas for preventative action discussed in the literature, and increasingly common practice among employers include the following:

- health promotion
- recruitment and screening procedures
- flexible working arrangements
- help with travel
- improving the physical working environment
- job design
- managing career expectations
- rebuilding trust and loyalty.

Each of these is discussed, briefly, below.

2.2.1 Health promotion

Health promotion measures represent steps which can be taken, over the medium to long term, to create a healthier workplace. Where there is evidence that specific groups of employee are more prone to sickness absence than others, it may be that certain health promotion measures might be taken. For example:

- smoking cessation initiatives
- healthy eating campaigns
- provision of exercise or recreational facilities
- weight control programmes
- health screening
- provision of counselling or stress management support.

Effort in targeting such initiatives on employees with high risk and with a clear expressed intention to change their behaviour or lifestyle, may well bear fruit through reduced sickness absence levels.

2.2.2 Recruitment and screening procedures

Research has shown that previous sickness absence records are a reliable indicator of future attendance behaviour. Absence risk can be assessed during recruitment by:

- requesting absence data from previous employers
- asking about absence record in interviews
- engaging in health screening for specific posts.

There is some evidence that employers who refuse to appoint candidates who are felt to have lifestyles (for example, excess alcohol consumption) likely to render them a serious absence risk, have had such action upheld in Industrial Tribunals. Employers may be well-advised to seek legal advice before relying on these precedents, however.

2.2.3 Flexible working arrangements

These can range from mechanisms that allow individuals to have more flexible start or finish times, to job-share, have term-time contracts, or to convert from full time to part time.

They can also involve greater flexibility in shift rostering, providing carer's leave and so on, where employee circumstances suggest they would be beneficial, particularly in helping them to attend work.

2.2.4 Help with travel

Some employers recognise that employee travel arrangements can be less than ideal. As we have seen, long travel times can sometimes inhibit attendance among less senior staff. Employers are more frequently making provision for these circumstances by hiring bus services to transport staff to and from home, where the density of employees who benefit from this warrants the expenditure.

2.2.5 Improving the physical working environment

Concern over workplace hazards can affect employees' attendance. Paying attention to the ambience of the working environment, without incurring massive expenditure, should

result in changes to heat, lighting, noise *etc.* where these are felt to cause problems.

They may have the effect of exacerbating the effects of poor morale or dull and routine work content.

2.2.6 Job design

If aspects of job satisfaction and morale affect sickness absence levels to a greater degree among some employee groups than others, then there may be scope for adopting one or more of a number of job design techniques to improve their job interest and involvement. These include:

- **Job rotation:** moving individuals between tasks in order to provide variety.
- **Job enlargement:** building extra tasks into jobs to increase variety and responsibility. These methods carry the danger of worsening morale problems if not carried out with care.
- **Job enrichment:** giving individuals greater control over a related sequence of tasks — these techniques are frequently among the most successful.

Job design and redesign should always attempt to improve factors such as control over work content and pace, use of skills and training, challenge, variety and sense of purpose. These are common components of job satisfaction, and can be easily overlooked in the drive for greater efficiency.

2.2.7 Managing career expectations

Research has identified employee concern over careers as being related to some sickness absence. This may reflect generic concern over job security. Many organisations have made statements about individual employees taking more responsibility for their own career development, without providing the necessary support or information for them to do so. Concern is often highest among those with long service, or those with no clear external marketability. Managers should be aware of these concerns, and seek to minimise them by managing career expectations among staff.

2.2.8 Rebuilding trust and loyalty

Research has revealed that a large part of individuals' sense of psychological well-being is affected by the way they feel their organisation is being managed. Sickness absence, like staff turnover, can be a useful barometer — measuring the pressure in the 'system'. While there may be many other reasons to rebuild trust and loyalty where they have been judged to have been eroded, reducing sickness absence can be a tangible benefit. Improvements in communication, consultation and involvement in decision-making can often contribute greatly to this process.

2.3 Rewarding attendance

It is worth mentioning, albeit briefly, the diminishing practice of paying attendance bonuses. Some organisations (often in manufacturing industry, or those employing large numbers of manual workers) continue to pay attendance bonuses. These are often linked to plant-level agreements which determine, for example, the payment of collective bonuses provided that absence does not rise above a certain level. The prevailing view of these practices is that they rely on paying employees twice for fulfilling what they are already contracted to do. Approaches which emphasise the encouragement of attendance are currently in the ascendancy.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter we have highlighted, from a considerable array of published work, a number of policies and practices which can be described as representing 'good practice' in the management of attendance.

Many reflect the need for good information, others the need for clarity of roles, procedures and communication. Others still emphasise the importance of culture and of managerial commitment. Few are revolutionary.

Our next step was to compare our 'good practice' criteria with real examples of attendance management policies in current use by some large employers. The results of this comparison are presented in the next chapter.

3 Does Practice Measure Up?

3.1 Attendance policies used in the research

The attendance management policies used in this research were collected from IES corporate members during 1997. Policies outlining the approach to be used by line managers from 30 organisations were received. Any policy that appeared to be addressed to employees only was excluded from the study as it was about the wider organisational context. A content analysis was carried out of each policy, and their features compared with the 'good practice' criteria derived in the preceding chapter.

Table 3.1 shows the distribution of the organisations by sector. It can be seen that the policies collected cover virtually all sectors of the economy. The organisations were predominantly large and usually were in more than one location. The attendance policies refer to a good mix of occupational groups and most had been reviewed in the past two years.

Table 3.1 Organisations supplying attendance policies, by sector

Sector	No. of policies
Financial services	7
Retail	5
Services	3
Manufacturing	3
Government department	4
Local authority	4
NHS trust	4
Total	30

Source: IES, 1998

Table 3.2 Policies containing 'good practice' criteria

No. of Criteria	Policies containing	%
Under 5	4	13
5-9	15	50
10-13	9	30
15	2	7
16+	0	0

Source: IES, 1998

3.2 Assessment of the attendance policies

All the policies contained at least some of the criteria but no single one had all of them. The distribution of our criteria among the policies was as below.

One policy had just three of the features. The highest score was fifteen, which occurred in two of the policies, one from a local authority and one from the retail sector. Just under two-thirds of the policies had under ten of the seventeen good practice criteria (Table 3.2). The attendance policies had clearly been influenced by developments in attendance management, but there were some major omissions in their approach.

Table 3.3 shows the actual scores of the policies against the individual good practice criteria. The aspects of attendance management that were stressed in the research and literature were generally reflected to some extent in the policies, as was also seen from the total criteria scores in Table 3.1, but there were some surprising shifts in emphasis.

The majority, 83 per cent, of the policies gave exact details of the procedures to be followed by employees for reporting that they were unable to attend work. As would be expected, almost three in four of the policies made line managers entirely responsible for the attendance of their staff. A surprisingly low number, 60 per cent, required the line manager to conduct return to work interviews. This is a relatively low figure for an action that features so strongly in the recommended approach to attendance. As an extension of the responsibility for each individual's attendance

Table 3.3 Number of attendance policies containing good practice criteria

Good practice criteria	No.	%
Details of notification and certification from employees given	25	83
Line management responsible for implementing policy	22	73
Occupational health department involvement clarified	21	70
Return to work interviews to be held by line manager	18	60
Long and short term absence differentiated	18	60
Manager to use discretion as to when review necessary	18	60
Managers to monitor absence in unit	16	53
Defined 'trigger' points for review of attendance record	14	47
Managers to stay in touch during employee's absence	14	47
Manager's approach to be caring and sympathetic	13	43
Short term work changes to be considered	13	43
Human resources department involvement defined	11	37
Objectives of policy defined	9	30
Working conditions to be considered as cause of absence	6	20
Senior management commitment stressed	5	17

Source: IES, 1998

the specific responsibility for the unit's attendance record was placed upon the manager in just over half the cases. Using data provided centrally, they were expected to compare themselves with other units in the organisation.

Sixty per cent of the policies relied on the manager's discretion to decide when a review of an employee's attendance record was appropriate. However, almost half the policies did have defined 'trigger' points when a review was at least to be considered. The adoption of a sympathetic approach was expressly recommended in a relatively low 43 per cent of the documents. This possibly reflects a lingering attachment to the view that absence is generally avoidable and should be discouraged.

The involvement of the human resources department was clarified in the majority of the cases. The manager was expected to have had enough training and technical knowledge to be able to handle most attendance problems until serious disciplinary action is required. Few of the documents specifically mentioned

a commitment to training line managers in handling attendance, although it may not have been seen as appropriate in a document outlining policy. In contrast, just over one-third of the documents gave the human resources department a definite point at which they were to intervene and become actively involved. This varied from almost immediately, to the point when dismissal was being considered.

The increasing importance of the occupational health advisor's role was shown by the clear definition of the point at which their assistance should be sought, in 70 per cent of the documents. Their role was to determine if the employee was able to work or whether with some changes they would be able to. Forty-three per cent of policies clearly suggest that short-term changes to working conditions should indeed be considered for an employee with ill health, either the hours or the actual duties performed. This was usually in the case of longer-term absence, which only 60 per cent of the policies clearly recognised as needing a separate management approach to short-term absence. Just under half the policies suggest that managers should remain in touch with staff while they are absent, generally by phone but some policies require personal visits to be made.

Interestingly, in view of the considerable amount of attention it has received, only one in five of the organisations wished working conditions to be explicitly considered as a cause of the individual's absence. Other neglected areas were the clear definition of the objectives of the policies, which were given in less than one in three of the documents. Senior management commitment was only stressed in five of the thirty organisations, although there is much evidence that this is essential to the success of creating a culture of attendance.

3.3 Other features of the policies

In reviewing the policies several ideas emerged which were not previously highlighted as significant but which appear to be worth further consideration. These items are shown in Table 3.4 In addition to discussions with the line manager, one-third of the documents recommended counselling by someone else, usually a professional, to try and assist staff with any problems that they may feel reluctant to reveal to a close colleague. One of the policies from the financial services sector advised that staff should be asked if they had been involved in a robbery at their

Table 3.4 Other features of attendance policies

Additional features	No.	%
Counselling offered	11	37
Clear flow chart of absence procedure	6	20
Discuss effects of employee's absence on unit	5	17
Measures to encourage good attendance	2	7
Attendance data to form part of employee's appraisal	2	7
Unit's attendance record to form part of manager's appraisal	2	7

Source: IES, 1998

branch, as stress and ill health resulting from this could be persistent.

Six of the policies had clear flow charts of the procedures to be followed covering both frequent short-term absence and long-term absence due to ill health. These made the instructions, which were often complicated, more comprehensible. It was suggested in five of the policies that discussing the impact of an individual's absence on the rest of the unit would enable them to realise that their contribution was missed and the extent of disruption it had caused.

Only a couple of policies went so far as to outline measures to encourage good attendance by rewarding those that had not been absent. Two of the policies used attendance as part of the appraisal system for the employee and one organisation used it to assess their managers. There are no data available to determine whether treating attendance as an part of appraisal is helpful or not. This would clearly discriminate against those who are genuinely ill and promotes the attitude that absence is generally avoidable.

3.4 Summary

In summary, the research has shown that current attendance policies have implemented good practise criteria by:

- Making clear the reporting procedures to be used by employees who are unable to attend for work.

- Line managers having responsibility for managing the attendance of their staff and being able to use their discretion on when reviews and disciplinary actions are necessary.
- Giving trigger points to determine when absence should be regarded as a problem.
- Clearly defining when the advice of human resources and occupational health should be sought and the role they can be expected to play in managing attendance.

In comparison the criteria that were relatively neglected in the policies were:

- The requirement to hold return to work interviews which was only stipulated in 60 per cent of the policies.
- The distinction between long and short absence which was not made in just under one-third of the documents.
- The need to consider short-term changes to hours worked and the tasks performed, which was only suggested in 43 per cent of the policies.
- Work conditions as a cause of absence were recommended to be considered in just one in five of the documents.

4 Conclusions

Absence from work is the result of a complex set of factors reflecting individual characteristics, attributes of the working environment, attitudes of the work group and a range of personal factors that all affect the individual's decision to attend the workplace or not. If so many different influences are possible, then more than one solution to ensuring employees to come to work is needed. The dual approach of both positively managing attendance and discouraging absence are both required.

Positive measures such as taking steps to create job and career satisfaction, involving staff in decisions, promoting healthy lifestyles and creating a culture of attendance by clear management commitment can all contribute to raising attendance. Conversely, absence can be predominantly controlled by absence policies which give a framework to line managers to monitor and handle the absence of staff. Within these policies there is scope for positive measures which assist staff to attend, such as job redesign, flexibility of hours, counselling and medical advice. Attendance policies can only address some of the influences that affect attendance, others such as job and career satisfaction are beyond their scope. However, all attendance policies should have provision for the employee to be able to discuss in confidence any problems that are affecting their ability to work effectively.

Attendance management has attracted considerable attention in the past few years, as it has been seen as an area for cost saving. It is clear that certain features are essential for the successful implementation of attendance policies. In our research the comparison of policies from thirty organisations has shown that the criteria of good practice have partially been implemented in current policies.

The criteria which have become generally accepted are: clear reporting procedures for employees, line managers to have responsibility for the attendance of their staff, the use of trigger points to determine when absence is becoming a problem and clear roles for human resources and occupational health. Return to work interviews, which are a major means of controlling absence were being used by sixty per cent of the organisations in the research which is disappointing for such an important tool in controlling absence.

The criteria which are important for managing attendance but which have yet to be widely applied in policies are separate approaches to long- and short-term absence, the consideration of short-term changes to tasks or hours to enable employees with ill health to return to work, and the recognition that working conditions could be a cause of absence.

All the attendance policies reviewed contained at least some of the criteria of good practice that had been identified, but no single one contained all of them. Attendance policies are receiving more attention now than in the recent past but there are still significant features that are omitted which could significantly improve their overall effectiveness.

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Appendix: Attendance Management Criteria

Criteria	Description	Reference
Management commitment/ attendance culture	Policy applied uniformly throughout organisation – known to all staff	Reynolds A (1990), 'A training contribution to the control of employee absence', <i>Training and Development</i> , August, pp.15-16
	Culture of good attendance created by consistent application of policy	Sandwith P (1987), 'Absenteeism: You get what you accept', <i>Personnel Journal</i> , 66, 11, pp.88-93
	Commitment at the highest level to a continuous policy of absence management and deserving senior management attention	Reynolds A (1990), 'A training contribution to the control of employee absence', <i>Training and Development</i> , August, pp.15-16
	34 absenteeism control mechanisms given plus rated effectiveness. Consistent application rated most effective	Dow Scott and Markham (1982), 'Absenteeism control methods: A survey of practices and results', <i>Personnel Administrator</i> , 27, 6, pp.73-84
Clear objectives	Objectives of policy defined-costs and targets set	Anon. (1996), 'Local sick pay provisions and policies: Survey of 178 trusts', <i>Health Services Report</i> , Spring, pp.2-6
	Lists eight features of clear policies	Dow Scott, Markham S E, Taylor G S (1987), 'Employee attendance: Good policy makes good sense', <i>Personnel Administrator</i> , 32, 1, pp.98-106
	Finding true reasons for absence most be main thrust of policy. Culture of organisation?	Hegarty S (1995), 'The not-so-hidden costs that managers like to avoid', <i>Works Management</i> , 48, 8, pp.78-81

Criteria	Description	Reference
	Need to establish company specific causes of absence	Reynolds A (1990), 'A training contribution to the control of employee absence', <i>Training and Development</i> , August, pp.15-16
	Disciplinary or reward strategy	Cole T C and Kleiner B H (1992), 'Absenteeism control', <i>Management Decision</i> , 30, 2, pp.12-16
	Various strategies to improve absence given	Erwin P J and Iverson R D (1994), 'Strategies in absence control', <i>Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources</i> , 32, 3, pp.13-32
Role of line managers	Incidence of written guidelines for supervisors in 75 organisations	Anon. (1994), 'Sickness absence monitoring and control: A survey of practise (Part 1)', <i>Industrial Relations Review and Report</i> , September, pp.4-16
	Managers trained to implement absence procedures	Anon. (1996), 'Local sick pay provisions and policies: Survey of 178 trusts', <i>Health Services Report</i> , Spring, pp.2-6
	Training support for managers in supervision and counselling necessary	Reynolds A (1990), 'A training contribution to the control of employee absence', <i>Training and Development</i> , August, pp.15-16
	Clear guidelines set out for managers on how to deal with absence	Anon. (1996), 'Local sick pay provisions and policies: Survey of 178 trusts', <i>Health Services Report</i> , Spring, pp.2-6 Cole T C and Kleiner B H (1992), 'Absenteeism control', <i>Management Decision</i> , 30, 2, pp.12-16
Monitoring by line managers	Useful to compare internal and external absence rates	Fitzpatrick M , Huczynski A (1990), 'Applying the benchmarking approach to absence control', <i>Leadership and Organisation Development Journal</i> , 11, 5, pp.22-26

Criteria	Description	Reference
	Need to provide analyses which indicate areas of concern	Cole T C , Kleiner B H (1992), 'Absenteeism control', <i>Management Decision</i> , 30, 2, pp.12-16
	79% of organisations in survey have computer records. Rates given for total staff, manual and non-manual in 75 organisations	Anon. (1994), 'Sickness absence monitoring and control: A survey of practise (Part 1)', <i>Industrial Relations Review and Report</i> , September, pp.4-16
	Sickness absence by industrial sectors in UK	Trapp R (1995), 'Where are you?', <i>Human Resources</i> , 5, 4, pp.78-79
	Cost of sick pay alone is £25-£714 per employee, average £327	Anon. (1994), 'Sickness absence monitoring and control: A survey of practise (Part 1)', <i>Industrial Relations Review and Report</i> , September, pp.4-16
	Estimated levels of absence by employees and managers shows own record seen in favourable light when compared with other staff and work groups	Johns G (1994), 'Absenteeism estimates by employees and managers: Divergent perspectives and self-serving perceptions', <i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i> , 79, 2, pp.229-239
Role of human resources	Absence control function of line management not personnel	Reynolds A (1990), 'A training contribution to the control of employee absence', <i>Training and Development</i> , August, pp.15-16
	79% of surveyed organisations records monitored by line managers, 91% personnel department	Anon. (1994), 'Sickness absence monitoring and control: A survey of practise (Part 1)', <i>Industrial Relations Review and Report</i> , September, pp.4-16
Role of occupational health		Dourado P (1995), 'Tackling the hidden enemy', <i>Works Management</i> , 48, 7, pp.20-21
Trigger points	Number of absences defined before disciplinary action or referral to occupational health department	Anon. (1996), 'Local sick pay provisions and policies: Survey of 178 trusts', <i>Health Services Report</i> , Spring, pp.2-6

Criteria	Description	Reference
	Definition of absence and calculation from 156 American hospitals	Taunton R L, Perkins S, Oetker-Black , Heaton R (1995), 'Absenteeism in acute care hospitals', <i>Nursing Management</i> , 26, 9, pp.80-82
	Trigger points of 75 organisations charted	Anon. (1994), 'Sickness absence monitoring and control: A survey of practise (Part 1)', <i>Industrial Relations Review and Report</i> , September, pp.4-16
Notification of absence by employee	Requirement to inform trust of inability to work defined	Anon. (1996), 'Local sick pay provisions and policies: Survey of 178 trusts', <i>Health Services Report</i> , Spring, pp.2-6
	Provision of self-certified forms, medical certificates or other documents requested	Anon. (1996), 'Local sick pay provisions and policies: Survey of 178 trusts', <i>Health Services Report</i> , Spring, pp.2-6
	Induction training to stress importance of attendance and procedures to follow if unable to work	Reynolds A (1990), 'A training contribution to the control of employee absence', <i>Training and Development</i> , August, pp.15-16
Procedures for long-term absence	Options given for handling long term sickness absence – redeployment, phased return, early retirement or dismissal	Anon. (1996), 'Local sick pay provisions and policies: Survey of 178 trusts', <i>Health Services Report</i> , Spring, pp.2-6
Return to work interviews	All staff returning from sick leave to be seen by manager	Anon. (1996), 'Local sick pay provisions and policies: Survey of 178 trusts', <i>Health Services Report</i> , Spring, pp.2-6
	Simple action of discussing absence with employee has effect of improving attendance	Muir J (1994), 'Dealing with sickness absence', <i>Work Study</i> , 43, 5, pp.13-14
	Data from surveyed organisations on whether interviews held	Anon. (1994), 'Sickness absence monitoring and control: A survey of practise (Part 1)', <i>Industrial Relations Review and Report</i> , September, pp.4-16

Criteria	Description	Reference
Working conditions as a cause absence	Consider whether absence due to workplace factors or external (ie flu). Take appropriate action	Harper I (1994), 'It pays to be ill prepared', <i>CA Magazine</i> , October, pp.24-26
	Importance of work environment that makes employees want to attend	Sharifzadeh M (1988), 'Dealing with your absence problems', <i>Management Solutions</i> , 33, 10, pp.35-38
	Results of survey correlating types of worker discontent to rates of absence	Levine G (1994), 'Reducing absenteeism', <i>Bobbin</i> , 35, 8, pp.92-94
	Importance of managerial support through job motivation	Erwin P J, Iverson R D (1994), 'Strategies in absence control', <i>Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources</i> , 32, 3, pp.13-32

Communication of absence policy and roles within the organisation:

- Communication of organisation's commitment to attendance
- Employees aware of their responsibilities
- Role of line managers defined, appropriate training given
- Involvement of human resources department and occupational health explained

Clear procedures established for:

- Notification of absence by employee
- Return to work interviews by line managers
- Monitoring of individuals and unit by line managers
- Requirements for a review of attendance, probably including trigger points
- Action to be taken by line manager if an individual's attendance is unsatisfactory
- Handling long and short term absence
- Referral to occupational health.