

Attendance Management Strategies

Stephen Bevan, Associate Director, IES

Three approaches to managing attendance are discussed in this paper:

- management policy
- preventative measures
- rewarding attendance.

We begin by examining those elements of attendance management procedures which should ideally be in place.

Management policies

There are a number of important elements of a basic attendance policy. These include:

- clear procedures
- a communication strategy
- return to work interviews
- recruitment and screening procedures
- line manager training.

Each of these will now be described briefly.

Procedures

These should include the following:

1. Employees should be clear that it is their responsibility to report that they are unable to attend, to estimate the likely duration of their absence and to provide a reason for their absence.
2. In cases of medium-term or long absences, line managers should maintain regular contact with the absent employee.
3. Informal discussion between the line manager and the employee on return to work, irrespective of the duration of absence.
4. Formal review if an unacceptable pattern or level of absence continues, with possible reference to Occupational Health

professionals or, in extreme cases, recourse to established disciplinary procedures.

5. Setting of individual attendance targets, reviewing alternative working patterns, or moving employees to alternative duties.
6. Clear procedures and guidance for self-certification of sickness absence.

Many employers with such procedures have found that their very existence and consistent application can have an immediate effect on sickness levels. This lends support the notion of a 'leniency' effect, in which employees' perceptions of indifference among line managers can be interpreted as 'permission' to have time off.

Communication

Any attendance policy should be clearly communicated to all staff so that they are aware not only of what it required of them, but also what support may be available to them (for example, Occupational Health or counselling services).

Again, clarity of communication can be key to employees understanding that attendance is under scrutiny. In some organisations, absence procedures fall under the scope of formal consultation arrangements. It is often the case that trades unions are as concerned as management over unwarranted sickness absence levels, though they will also have obvious concerns over consistency in the application of procedures, especially where these lead to disciplinary action.

Return to work interviews

This interview, held immediately on the day of returning to work by the line manager, emphasises the point that the period of sickness absence which has just finished (no matter how brief), has not gone un-noticed. 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 can significantly reduce casual absence.

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.

Line manager training

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.

Preventative measures

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 here include the following:

- health promotion
- 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.

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.

Flexible working arrangements

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

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

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.

Improving the physical working environment

As we have seen, 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.

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.

Managing career expectations

This study has identified employee concern over careers as being related to some sickness absence. This may reflect generic concern over job security, the potential impact of mergers or closures, or of changes to pay or grading arrangements. 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.

Rebuilding trust and loyalty

IES studies have revealed that a large part of individuals' sense of psychological well-being is affected by the way they feel the Trust 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.

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.

Conclusions

Aside from ensuring that effective and clear absence policies and procedures are in place and being used, many of the approaches to attendance management discussed here need to be tailored and applied where they will have most impact. This can only be done

effectively on the basis of good data about prevailing patterns and causes of absence among key groups in the workforce. 'Blanket' approaches are unlikely to work as effectively as well-conceived and targeted measures.

Further reading and advice

The following sources might be useful:

Bevan S and Hayday S (1998), *Attendance Management: a review of good practice*, IES Report 353. Brighton.

Cabinet Office (1999), *Managing Attendance in the Public Sector: Putting Best Practice to Work*, Cabinet Office: London.

Hendrix W, Spencer B and Gibson G (1994), 'Organisational and extra-organisational factors affecting stress, employee well-being and absenteeism for males and females'. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 9(2), pp. 103-128.

Johns G (1997), 'Contemporary research on absence from work: correlates, causes and consequences', in C Cooper and I Robertson (Eds), *International Review of Industrial and Organisational Psychology*, Volume 12, John Wiley & Sons: Chichester.

Secombe I (1995), *Measuring and Monitoring Absence from Work*, IES Report 288. Brighton.

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