

Is well-being still important at work?

Employers' views on recession, the new fit note and priorities for the year ahead

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Is well-being still a business priority?

While the economy was booming, so was a huge industry based around helping employers to promote health and well-being at work. Employers signed up wholesale to initiatives designed to provide healthy workplaces, good jobs and flexible working.

The business climate has clearly changed. In tough times, will employers feel this is one issue too many to worry about? Will all the messages about improving productivity and absence rates through promoting workforce well-being be lost? Do managers have too much on their plate just keeping their business alive to worry about how employees are feeling?

IES conducted a 'snapshot' survey of 50 workshop participants to find out

As part of our programme of training and events, IES consultants and researchers come into contact with a wide range of employers.

When IES staff spoke at a series of 'managing well-being at work' workshops run in conjunction with the Eversheds law firm, we took the opportunity to gain a 'snapshot' view of employers' current thinking on well-being. The workshops were held across England and Wales in May 2009, and we received responses from 50 employers (20 from the private sector, 10 from the public sector, 10 from the third sector, and 10 higher or further education providers).

We were particularly interested in:

- whether the recession had pushed health and well-being issues up or down the agenda
- whether employers were positive or unsure about the proposed move from a 'sick' to a 'fit' note
- employer priorities for the year ahead regarding staff health and well-being.

This small survey provides a snapshot of employer views on well-being. It is not intended to be representative, but gives an indication of current employer thinking.

Managing well-being is equally or more important in a recession

We asked employers 'Has managing employee well-being become more or less important to you in the context of the recession?' 42 employers gave us a view.

- 27 said yes, it had become more (or much more) important
- 15 stated that things hadn't changed because of the recession, or that well-being had maintained its high priority.

No employers stated that employee well-being had become less important.

Reasons for reporting that well-being has become increasingly important included:

- the need to keep staff at work, and controlling sickness absence or poor performance
- linking well-being to continued business development (eg looking after staff to ensure that they continue to provide excellent customer service)
- responding to increased stress levels among staff caused by issues outside work
- implementing organisational change sensitively
- understanding the financial pressures that staff were under and responding to staff concerns about the recession
- investing in Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) for the first time to offer staff counselling or using existing EAPs to offer support to employees who are suffering financially.

One public sector employer commented:

'Resources are shrinking. Improved performance with less is expected. We need employees to be at work to deliver this.'

These employers appear to have accepted that improving well-being has positive implications for staff efficiency and ultimately the profitability of their business. There is therefore no reason to lose focus on the issue during an period of economic uncertainty – in fact the reverse is true.

Fit note generally welcomed, but with reservations

We asked employers 'What is your view on the introduction of the fit note?' and 42 employers gave us their answer. Broadly speaking:

- 10 were positive about the idea
- 21 were open minded, but with some concerns
- 11 saw no benefits to the proposals.

Employers who welcomed the fit note appreciated the change of approach and the more positive focus on duties that employees are able to perform, rather than on what they can't. A number of the more positive responses felt that the fit note had the potential to reduce sickness absence.

Some reservations expressed by employers involved:

- concerns over the ability of GPs to manage occupational health (OH) issues successfully

'GPs are not qualified to assess. You'd need OH support in all GP practices.' (Private sector company)

'I'm unsure at this point. I have concerns over the ability/knowledge of GPs with regard to jobs/industries.' (Third sector employer)

- the way that they are introduced, and managers' ability to use them successfully

'I believe fit notes are a good idea but can also see problems with their electronic introduction. Managers need guidance on how to deal with issues on the form.' (Private sector company)

'Needs to be carefully managed by employer – could be misinterpreted.' (Private sector company)

- increasing the workload of employers

'As usual, more work for HR/employers.' (Private sector company)

'Another poorly thought through decision placing more of a burden on the employer.' (HE provider)

- the ability of employers to make the recommended accommodations

'My organisation has concerns as it is very difficult for us to allow returners on "light duties".' (Third sector employer)

An overriding point was that employers felt they needed more information about the practicalities of the fit note. At present uncertainty is one of the major causes of concern. One employer simply put 'Help!' as their comment on the issue.

Improving absence management is a top priority for this year to help employers reduce costs

We asked employers 'What are your top three priorities for your approach to managing work, health and well-being in the coming year?' 40 of the 50 employers gave us a response.

The list of employer priorities is varied, reflecting the differing natures of their businesses. The top five of these are:

1. **Absence management** (21 employers stated they would be taking some form of action on this)
2. **Line manager training**, engagement or up-skilling to deal with the well-being agenda (14 employers wanted to tackle this)

3. **Better policies/monitoring** of sickness (14 employers wished to make improvements in this area as one of their priorities)
4. **Closer communication with staff** about health/well-being (11 employers wished to intensify this, including contact with staff who are off sick)
5. **Stress management** and mental health issues (7 employers listed this as a priority).

A range of other issues were mentioned, including:

- getting senior management commitment to well-being and convincing them to make it a priority
- shifting from managing absence to managing attendance
- ensuring consistency of approach, and the fair application of existing policies
- securing new or extended access to OH providers and/or EAPs/counselling services
- offering flexible working.

It seems that the well-being agenda for the coming year is very much about reducing the costs of absence. There was little talk of health promotion activities, for example. Employers also appear to want clear and open communication within the organisation at all levels to reduce the negative impacts of the economic downturn on remaining staff.

Businesses are taking staff health and attendance more seriously than ever

The huge amount of work undertaken over the last few years to promote well-being at work does not appear to have been lost due to the recession. Responses from the small group of employers involved in this survey show that there is a lasting commitment to promoting attendance and performance through a focus on health.

Employers appear to recognise the importance of continuing to invest in staff, through training, communication and good underlying policies in the downturn. In these difficult times, getting the most out of their people is as important as ever.

The fit note could be a useful way forward, encouraging employers to enhance flexibility in how they deploy staff. There are still outstanding concerns about how the system will work, and employers need more information on how they should implement the scheme. It seems clear, therefore, that policy makers need to give guidance to employers on this issue sooner rather than later.

In conclusion, this survey indicates that:

- worker well-being is important for businesses, particularly during a recession
- absence management, always a business priority, becomes even more important when times are hard.

About IES

IES is an independent, apolitical, international centre of research and consultancy in human resource issues.

IES aims to help bring about sustainable improvements in employment policy and human resource management. We achieve this by increasing the understanding and improving the practice of key decision makers in policy bodies and employing organisations.

We believe that HR can make a significant impact on the success of organisations of all types. We have a team of researchers dedicated to work, health and well-being projects.

We can therefore help organisations with a range of issues, including:

- evaluating your absence and stress management policies and suggesting improvements
- analysing your sickness monitoring data and advise on upgrading this
- keeping you informed about the latest developments in absence and stress management
- bringing you together with other companies to share experiences via our membership events.

If you would like to talk further about developing your HR community, and your well-being strategy in particular, then please contact Paul Fairhurst:

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