

Prevention is always better than cure

There are three main ways to tackle sickness absence. In the first place, try not to recruit a problem. Secondly, try to identify and tackle the underlying causes of absence. The last is to move into your attendance management process as soon as you become aware of a problem.

If you want to ensure good attendance at work, try not to recruit a problem. If an employee had chronic ~~Mondayitis~~ in his last job, believe me, he~~d~~ go on having chronic ~~Mondayitis~~ in this job and that means you will suffer pain and waste time having to manage him.

Minimise your risk by building in some checks at the recruitment stage, for example, using a health screening questionnaire once an offer has been made and testing and cross-checking information gathered during the recruitment process against references. You should only ask about conditions relevant to the particular job that you~~re~~ advertising. For example, you might ask about arm or hand problems if the job requires frequent use of a keyboard. This means that you will have to change the form to meet the requirements of different jobs.

One of the most cost-effective ways of managing attendance is to try to prevent employees from being absent by tackling the underlying causes of absence. Create a healthy workplace and healthy habits to minimise the risk of ill health. For example, encourage people to drink plenty of water, take a break from the workplace at lunch time and take their holidays on a regular basis.

Most people want to do a good job and will attend for work regularly. If they are motivated, interested in their work, feel that they are being fairly and equitably treated and reasonably rewarded, that their company is a good place to work and they have a sense of involvement, then employees are less likely to be absent.

There will always be some employees whose absence is unsatisfactory and whose attendance needs to be closely managed, but these incidences will usually decrease if you take good preventative action.

Promoting best practice is an important part of bringing about long-term and widespread change to attitudes and behaviour around work and health.

Learning from life's lessons

The John Lewis Partnership's absence figures reflected the national trend of an increasing number of people being signed off with stress by their GP. Managers were asked to complete a Stress Risk Assessment for their branch with advice from their Occupational Health Adviser (OHA). Data about stress related ill health was collected through return to work interviews, absence figures, the number of employees attending Occupational Health (OH) with mental health issues and staff surveys. The main issues and trends were identified and the findings were communicated to the heads of department and directors.

The Company found that there was a lack of awareness amongst managers both about the impact that stress had on the business as well as the signs and symptoms, causes of and recovery from stress. They started to address it through stress management training.

Control measures were put in place such as policies and procedures for bullying, grievance, diversity, sick pay, family leave and security etc; effective HR procedures and employee representation and communication processes.

There was management and employee training in stress recognition, building personal resilience, communication skills, conflict resolution and job training. Support measures were introduced such as referral to OH, private counselling or other mental health therapies, individual rehabilitation programmes, return to work interviews, support from line managers and guidance from HR.

Branch management teams were given guides and advice on the role of the line manager and stress from the CIPD and the *Manager's Guide to dealing with Stress in the Workplace*.

The Company report that the initiatives have raised awareness of stress amongst employees at all levels and helped to ensure that they are referred to OH sooner, to enable early intervention and to ensure all support is place on return to work in terms of gradual rehabilitation. The greater understanding of mental health issues and increased level of support means that employees can access help quickly should they need to.

You could consider taking all or some of the following steps.

- Health screening as part of the recruitment process (but note that since the introduction of the Equality Act 2010, you can only ask for pre-offer health screening in very limited circumstances).
- Investigate how to improve physical working conditions.
- Offer healthy options in staff restaurants and at meetings.
- Investigate initiatives to promote a healthier workforce.
- Take ergonomic factors into account when designing workplaces.
- Ensure that health and safety standards are maintained.
- Give new starters, especially young people, sufficient training and ensure that they receive particular attention during the initial period of their employment.
- Wherever possible, design jobs so that they provide job satisfaction; jobs should provide variety, discretion, responsibility, contact with other people, feedback, some challenge and have clear goals.
- Review and update relevant policies, for example, training, career development and promotion policies, communication procedures and welfare provision to see if they can be improved.

- Ensure policies on equal opportunities and discrimination are fair and followed.
- Train managers so they can carry out their role properly and ensure they take an interest in their employees' health and welfare.
- Make confidential counselling services available for employees.
- Introduce flexible working hours or varied working arrangements, if this would assist employees without conflicting with production or other work demands.
- Encourage people to take their holidays within the prescribed period.
- Make employee an assistance programme (EAP) available to support employees with difficulties.

Learning from life's lessons

At the end of 2005, the sickness absence level at Shepway District Council had reached a total of 5,000 days per year, costing the Council £1 million annually. Wendy Head joined the Council in October 2005 as the new Head of HR, and decided to tackle the problem. By 2007, the number of staff on long-term sick leave had been reduced from 15 to two. One of the new regimes at the heart of the change was the introduction of an EAP. The EAP gives staff access to a telephone information and counselling service 24 hours a day. They are also entitled to six face-to-face counselling sessions if needed. The EAP covers topics such as debt, bereavement, legal advice, and other non-work and work-related issues. Details of the phone line are included in an absence management policy leaflet and on a separate card, given out to all staff. Whilst absence figures at Shepway District Council have been halved, there are further plans to reduce short term absence with the introduction of a health promotion campaign.