



What is Absence Management?



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Employee absence can be a high cost for many organisations. Research suggests that only a few employers monitor their employee's absence and how much that costs them.

Absence management is a process that you can use to monitor absence and help give a clear view of employee attendance. It is the attempt to reduce the amount of time people take off work usually due to sickness or injury. Managing absence is vital for organisations to help maintain productivity. Absence from work is also known as "absenteeism."

There are two categories that many businesses split absence into, these are unauthorised absence and authorised absence.



Unauthorised absences are linked to things such as not contacting your employer if you are unwell/unable to attend work for any reason.

Authorised absences constitute annual leave, maternity/paternity leave, etc. It is also worth noting that sickness does fall in this category when your employer is informed as per their sickness absence policy. However, some employees do cover sickness absence in its own right entirely.

In 2020, absences hit a record low. Although this was hugely associated with Covid, it is believed that having the ability to work from home helped employees to combat some illnesses.

In 2021 CIPD conducted a wellbeing at work survey. The main causes of short-term sickness absence were –

- Minor illness (includes colds/flu, stomach upsets, headaches, and migraines).
- Musculoskeletal injuries, including back pain.
- COVID-19 (including confirmed cases, self-isolation, quarantine and shielding).
- Stress.
- Mental ill health (for example depression and anxiety).

<https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/health-well-being-work>



Causes of Absence

It has been said that there are three factors as to the causes of absence, these are; job situation factors, personal factors and attendance factors. They have been analysed in great detail to understand what sits under these and why they are accounted for.

For job situation factors, this can entail things such as the job scope, stress-related absence (it has been said that 40 million working days are lost in the UK each year due to stress (Armstrong, 2017)), or the management style.

Personal factors encompass employee values, the employee's personality and even age. While age is a controversial analytic, it is one that should be taken into consideration by all employers to enable them to understand their employees and their personal circumstances.

For attendance factors, this could be shown in sick-pay schemes, reward systems or work group norms (relatable to culture).

Now, it is easy for us to reflect on the above and consider whether these are relevant to our organisation, however on understanding and evaluating these, you need to ensure that you have a comprehensive absence policy in place to maintain the management of your organisations absence.



Short-term Absence

Short-term absences are normally associated with things such as, bugs and colds. Occasionally you will find that certain employees will be reoccurring “offenders”. These types of absences are used by employees, mainly when they feel overworked, unhappy in their position or something as simple as needing a day to recover from a hangover! The latter is something that can be dealt with accordingly through absence management and/or the disciplinary procedure.

The other two situations are a view on the employment relationship. This is not necessarily in relation to pay, the economic or transactional aspect of the employment relationship but it doesn't mean they should be ruled out completely. The major factor to be considered is the social aspect of the employment relationship.

Measuring the absence can help employers to have an inward view of the employment relationship. It can help to gain employees views and their understandings, which in turn can help employees to improve that relationship, leading to a better working relationship.



Long-term Absence

Recent statistics from the CIPD (June 2021) suggests that around 16,400 workers leave the workplace each year as a result of injury or illness, many of whom may have stayed in work with better support. That is a big loss for many businesses.

Long-term absence is seen as four weeks or more continuous absence. The biggest causes of long-term absence are;

- mental ill health (such as clinical depression and anxiety)
- musculoskeletal conditions (such as neck strain and repetitive strain injury, including back pain)
- stress
- acute medical conditions

Long-term absence can be challenging for organisations, managers, colleagues and returning employees. Research shows that employees are more likely to return to work if they are well supported during their absence and on their return.

Compassionate and flexible absence management policies that accommodate individual needs, access to work adjustments and supportive line management can make the difference between a successful return and someone relapsing or even exiting the workplace (CIPD,2021).



Conclusion

It's important for businesses to understand that the working relationship is important and can be a substantial trigger toward absence. Although when it comes to some types of long-term absence, this may not be the trigger. The working relationship may also be a factor when the employee returns to work. The management of absences, ensuring all parties included are understanding of the policies/procedures and supportive can lead to an effective return to work.

