

Employee absence is part of running a business. People get ill, life happens, and sometimes patterns emerge that need addressing. For small businesses, the challenge isn't just the absence itself, it's managing it in a way that's fair to the employee, consistent across the team, and sustainable for the business.

When you have 5–50 employees, absence can hit hard. One person off can disrupt service, increase workload for others, and affect morale. And if absence management feels ad-hoc “it depends who's off” or “it depends which manager is on shift,” you can quickly end up with resentment, inconsistency, and avoidable risk.

This guide sets out a clear, focused approach to managing sickness absence and lateness at work without losing the human element.

Why absence management goes wrong in small businesses

Most problems come from one or more of the following:

- ✓ No clear absence policy or it exists but nobody follows it
- ✓ Inconsistent manager responses one manager is strict, another is relaxed
- ✓ Little or no documentation so later decisions feel sudden or unfair
- ✓ Avoidance issues drift until they become formal, then everyone feels blindsided
- ✓ Over-focusing on numbers without understanding what's behind them

A better approach is simple: create clarity, apply it consistently, and have regular, respectful conversations.

1. Start with a clear absence policy

A good absence policy answers the practical questions employees actually have and gives managers a consistent process to follow.

What to include in an absence policy

- ✓ How to report sickness absence who to contact, by what time, and how to call, text, email
- ✓ What information is needed, broad reason, expected duration, urgent handover points
- ✓ Keeping in touch expectations, how often and who will contact whom
- ✓ Fit notes, when they're required and how to provide them
- ✓ Sick pay basics SSP and any company sick pay, if offered
- ✓ Return to work interview process, what it is and why you do it
- ✓ Triggers for additional support/meetings e.g., repeated short-term sickness, patterns, or long-term absence

- ✓ How lateness at work is handled when linked to illness or when it's a separate conduct issue

Keep it readable. If a policy is too long or too legalistic, it won't be used.

2. Treat every absence as real and every pattern as reviewable

A practical and fair mindset for managers is:

- ✓ Don't assume employees are exaggerating or "swinging the lead."
- ✓ Don't ignore repeat patterns because someone is otherwise well liked or high-performing.
- ✓ Separate support from standards: you can be compassionate and consistent.

This balance matters because:

- ✓ the employee needs to feel respected
- ✓ the team needs to see fairness
- ✓ the business needs reliability

3. Make return to work interviews non-negotiable

A return to work interview is one of the most effective tools you have and it doesn't need to be heavy or uncomfortable.

What a return to work interview should do

- ✓ Welcome the employee back and check they're fit to return
- ✓ Confirm the dates and reason at a high level
- ✓ Identify any support needed, temporary adjustments, workload changes, medical advice
- ✓ Reinforce standards and absence reporting expectations
- ✓ Flag patterns early without jumping to conclusions

Keep it short and consistent

For most absences, 10–15 minutes is enough. The benefit comes from doing it every time, it reduces casual absence and helps genuine issues surface earlier.

Tip: Use a standard template so every manager covers the same points.

4. Understand the difference between short-term and long-term sickness absence

Short-term sickness absence

This includes occasional illness, repeated short absences, and patterns e.g., Mondays/Fridays, after holidays, before key shifts.

Your focus should be:

- ✓ return to work interviews
- ✓ tracking patterns
- ✓ supportive check-ins
- ✓ clear triggers for an absence review meeting where needed

Long-term sickness absence

Long-term absence often 4+ weeks needs a different rhythm. The focus becomes:

- ✓ keeping in touch appropriately
- ✓ understanding likely timescales and what support is needed
- ✓ medical input where appropriate
- ✓ exploring adjustments and phased returns where possible

Long-term absence shouldn't be left to drift. Early, respectful contact reduces anxiety for the employee and helps the employer plan.

5. Use absence triggers and apply them consistently

Triggers are simply a consistent point at which you review absence. For example:

- ✓ a certain number of instances in a set timeframe
- ✓ a certain number of days in a set timeframe
- ✓ a recognisable pattern

What matters most isn't the exact trigger, it's that:

- ✓ employees know what to expect
- ✓ managers apply it consistently
- ✓ the conversation is balanced and evidence-based

Triggers should lead to a **review discussion**, not an automatic disciplinary step.

6. The Bradford Factor: use it as a tool, not a decision-maker

The Bradford Factor highlights frequent short-term absences by applying a higher score to repeated instances.

What it's good for

- ✓ spotting patterns that might otherwise be missed
- ✓ prompting consistent review points
- ✓ supporting fair treatment across employees

What it's not good for

- ✓ making decisions on its own
- ✓ ignoring context including health conditions and individual circumstances
- ✓ treating all absence as equal

If you use the Bradford Factor, be clear that:

it's a **flag for conversation**

- ✓ decisions are based on facts, context, and fairness, not just a number

7. Don't mix up sickness absence and lateness at work

Lateness at work can be:

- ✓ linked to health e.g., medication side effects, mental health, ongoing conditions
- ✓ caused by practical factors e.g., childcare, transport
- ✓ conduct-related poor timekeeping, lack of care

Your job is to identify which it is and respond appropriately.

A fair way to manage lateness

- ✓ Confirm expectations start time, what "on time" means, how to report delays
- ✓ Keep a record of lateness and conversations
- ✓ Address it early and informally where appropriate
- ✓ If it continues, move to a more formal process with a clear improvement plan

Consistency is key: if you let lateness slide for one employee and challenge another, you create immediate resentment and increase risk if a dispute follows.

8. Document conversations without turning the workplace into a tribunal

Documentation doesn't have to be heavy. It can be:

- ✓ a simple return to work form
- ✓ a short note confirming what was discussed and agreed

- ✓ a quick action plan with dates e.g., “review again in four weeks”

This protects everyone:

- ✓ employees get clarity
- ✓ managers stay consistent
- ✓ employers have evidence of a fair process

9. Train managers in absence conversations, it’s a common weak spot

Many absence issues escalate because managers either:

- ✓ avoid the conversation, or
- ✓ go in too hard, too early

A short manager refresher can cover:

- ✓ what to say in return to work interviews
- ✓ how to discuss patterns without accusations
- ✓ when to escalate to an absence review meeting
- ✓ how to document fairly and consistently

In a business with multiple team leaders, this quickly improves consistency and reduces disruption.

Quick checklist: strong absence management in practice

- ✓ Clear absence policy employees can understand
- ✓ Consistent absence reporting expectations
- ✓ Return to work interview after every absence
- ✓ Simple tracking of instances/days/patterns
- ✓ Triggers that prompt a review conversation
- ✓ Bradford Factor if used treated as a flag, not a verdict
- ✓ Clear approach to lateness at work
- ✓ Brief documentation of key conversations
- ✓ Managers trained to handle absence confidently and fairly

If absence is becoming disruptive or you’re worried your current approach is inconsistent, Tick HR Solutions can help you put a simple, workable process in place. That may include an updated absence policy, return to work templates, manager guidance, and a trigger framework that suits your business.