

DEALING WITH EMPLOYEE ABSENCE

Employee absences are both costly and disruptive. In any year, workplace absence typically averages 7.8 days per employee at a cost of £434 to the employer. Multiply this figure by the number of staff in your company, and take into account the disruption and lost work caused by other employees having to cover for absent colleagues, and you can see that absenteeism is a significant factor in damaging your profits.

Here are some practical steps to take.

Track the problem

- Can you identify any particular problem areas? Are there patterns of absence? Does a particular department or employee have a below average record?

Focus on morale

- Unhappy staff are more likely to take time off. A financial incentive for low absence is one solution but creating a friendly environment, where staff feel valued as part of a team and where flexible, family friendly policies are in place is likely to prove more effective at keeping absenteeism to a minimum.

Support sick employees

- Long-term sickness must be handled sensitively. An employee's permission must be sought and given before applying for a medical report. Keep in touch so that the employee doesn't feel isolated. Consider referring them to an occupational health specialist. This can identify ways of helping them return to work and give you an indication of how long the absence is likely to last.

Have a clear policy – and enforce it

- Make sure staff are well informed regarding sickness policy and procedures and that these are seen to be followed, and keep accurate records.

It is sensible to ensure that employers are aware of the right to request an independent medical assessment in the event of an employee taking substantial numbers of days off work. When recruiting you could check a potential employee's attendance record with their previous employer, and you may consider requiring all prospective staff to undergo a medical examination.

Make it company policy always to carry out a return to work interview. This may just let the employee know that their contribution was missed, or it could help identify underlying problems that will affect your management strategy. It may also deter staff from feigning illness.

Remember that disciplinary action for unacceptable absence must be distinguished from capability procedures related to illness. Employers need to be aware of the full range of conditions which come under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. In this case, reasonable adjustments must be made to help the employee return to work.

Employee absence is a serious issue for most small businesses, but there are steps you can take to minimise its impact. However, we recommend that you take professional advice before altering contracts or terms and conditions of employment.

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