



Managing Absences and Attendance

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Identify the causes of absence
- ✓ Discuss training and support needs of line managers

Managing Absences and Attendance

The CIPD (Certified Institute of Personnel and Development, 2006) discovered that around 3.5 percent of the average person's work time was missed due to sickness. It was across both public and private organisations. When broken down, the statistics show each employee is absent from work an average of eight days a year. The Institute also discovered that absence is at a higher rate within larger organisations, not smaller ones.

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has reported that absenteeism costs the UK economy around £13 billion per year. It also points out that about 13 percent of all absence is not genuine. Unions, however, often point out that employees do make efforts to attend work even when they are ill. In many cases, certain events, (such as, the World Cup), have an effect on absenteeism, the effect being employees take more time off work. Companies can turn this around to their advantage, however, with some careful thought.

Process and Causes of Absence

The main causes for short absences as stated by employees are minor illnesses. Back pain and other illness (for manual workers) and stress (for non-manual workers) are reasons stated as the biggest cause of longer term absenteeism. This information was obtained from the CIPD. It is possible that stress leave has increased partly because it is now considered a legitimate reason for absence.

In the public and non-profit sectors is where stress is particularly widespread. Fear of redundancies, poor incentives, and poor bonuses are not very motivational. Rhodes and Steers, who developed a method of measuring absenteeism, suggest that attendance motivation is affected by two things: satisfaction with the job and pressure to attend.

Satisfaction with the job depends on the job situation, job expectations, and employee values. Factors that determine the job situation are things like the extent of responsibility and decision making. They also include work overload, difficult working conditions or hours, co-workers, and styles of management, if employees feel they can approach managers and discuss any problems or concerns, and promotion opportunities.

Job satisfaction, on the other hand, is regulated by the values and expectations of the employees. These values and expectations are based on personality and life experiences. They can, of course, also change over a lifetime. Whether the job matches the expectations and values of the employee will influence feelings of job satisfaction. If they are closely matched, the satisfaction level will be higher.

Research shows that younger workers who generally value their free time have higher rates of absence. Women who are looking after families or young children also have higher rates. When looking at *ability to attend* we are actually looking at motivation and actual attendance. An example would include an employee who has high

motivation to attend but has domestic responsibilities or difficulty getting to work due to transport issues. Here the motivation to attend work doesn't necessarily mean the employee *will* attend work.

Employee Absence and the Recession

It is important to note that the CIPD has predicted two-fifths of public organisations and one fifth (at least) of the private sector have reported that they will be making redundancies in the next six months. Only one third of companies have said they will not be making any redundancies.

Around one third of companies state that there are more and more people coming to work sick over the last year and more than two fifths have reported more employees with mental health issues. These issues are on the rise and are more common in companies that have stated there will be redundancies in the next few months. Despite these findings, only about 30% of companies state that they are increasing the focus on well-being/health of their employees because of the economic context.

Managing For Attendance

The causes of absenteeism are quite complex and management must take these into account. A lot of companies now have policies regarding absences and these focus only on decreasing short-term absence, not long-term absence.

Short-term and long-term absences usually need to be approached in different ways. Causes of absenteeism must be taken into account when creating attendance management policies. The causes can often be identified by discovering the patterns and creating an atmosphere where employees can be open about why they are absent. Methods that may reduce the risk of illness, reduce the incidence of absenteeism, and the length of absences, are available to employers. Generally, within organisations, there are processes to discourage absence and encourage attendance. They work differently with long-term and short-term absences.

Any policies within an organisation must be consistent with that organisation. This will ensure all employees understand their rights and responsibilities regarding absenteeism and also provide employee acceptance and line manager support. An example of the difficulties faced by line managers in production companies is reported in Dunn and Wilkinson (2002). It stated that one particular manager faced difficulties in his department because his staff had stricter absence procedures than other departments in the company.

If there are any inconsistencies with the policy, it is weakened, as are the procedures. The manager's main role is vital as he/she will have responsibility for absence and attendance issues. It is imperative that the line manager applies the policies correctly. This will be done with HR support, of course.

Monitoring new policies and procedures is crucial because it has been found that certain measures to control absenteeism often leads to more absenteeism.

Huczynski and Fitzpatrick (1989) founded the ALEIDIM process which stands for:

- Assess the absence problem
- Locate the absence problem
- Identify and prioritise absence causes
- Evaluate the current absence control methods

- Design the absence control programme
- Implement the absence control programme
- Monitor the effectiveness of the absence control programme.

Accurate Records

It is necessary to keep very accurate records in this area. Without this it would be difficult to get an accurate picture of patterns and levels of absenteeism. Those areas with high absence and the most common reasons for absence must be identified in order for the organisation to put into place suitable policies and procedures to counter it.

Line managers often receive absence reports from the HR department. These will include information about employees and their absences. If absences have hit the 'point of concern,' appropriate intervention by line managers will be needed. Dunn and Wilkinson found that, regarding line manager reports, some of them didn't even read the reports because they didn't feel that this was the best way to manage absenteeism amongst their staff. One manager even stated, "I know my staff well enough not to need these reports . . . at the end of the day it all comes down to good management and knowing your staff.'

It was argued by some managers that these reports were not useful because their employees often worked more hours than what they were paid to do and sometimes came in on the weekends. These managers felt that it was not appropriate to punish these employees in any way because of their commitment to the organisation and using these reports would be counter-productive.

Absence Targets and Benchmarking

Many companies have targets they want to achieve in terms of reducing absenteeism. These types of targets must be used very carefully so employees don't think that being absent is not allowed.

Training and Support for Line Managers

It is understood by most companies that line managers are crucial in administering absence procedures in a way that works to reduce absence levels. Training is important, especially when a new absence policy or procedure is introduced. Connex (IDS 2001) trains their managers by taking them to an employment tribunal to watch and learn from an absence related court case. This way the managers can understand what results will ensue if they don't deal fairly with their employees at work. HM Customs and Excise (IDS 2001) trains their managers with videos, which portray role - playing situations, such as interviews with employees when they come back to work. They learn to deal with the employees in such a way that there is no accusation or recrimination. The managers and their supervisory staff must watch the videos and then discuss it carefully.

Absence Notification Procedures

It is standard practice in many companies that employees must call their workplaces themselves (not ask someone else to do so) and explain that they will be absent. It is usually standard for the employees to speak only to their line manager and not a receptionist or work colleague. Considering this is the case, the phone conversation can be regarded as the first stage of an absence management process. The manager can ask questions about the nature of

the problem, the reason for the absence, and also ask about the date the employee is expected to return to work. The phone call is also viewed as important in reducing the length of the employee's absence.

In some cases, organisations may offer a different type of work for certain situations. If, for example, a receptionist who answers the telephones has a sore throat, he/she may be able to do other work. Managers must keep this in mind when employees call in sick. They may sometimes encourage the person to still come in and do other jobs, if appropriate.

Better Understanding of the Causes of Absence

Something that may help companies create better absence processes that relate to the most common absence causes is an analysis of data. It is important to distinguish between reasons that are legitimate and reasons that may not be. Not all employees will tell the truth about their absences. Sometimes, for example, an employee may call in sick but the real reason for the absence might be that he/she has to care for a family member or may have alcohol problems and is hungover. This is why it is important for the company to create an atmosphere of openness to encourage the employees to speak openly.

If employees feel safe enough to tell their employer the exact reasons for absence, it is then that absences can be handled effectively. Providing suitable support for employees will assist here. Risk assessment is also important as companies can evaluate the level of risk such as back pain or stress, for example, and the proper training can be offered to meet the employees' needs.

Ongoing Contact During Absence

Ensuring that contact with an employee is made during the absence will help reduce the length of time the employee takes off work. The contact will show the employee that the company actually cares. This will usually increase the motivation of the employee to return to work and take less days off work.

Return to Work Interviews and Formal Absence Reviews

Attendance procedures include return to work interviews and absence reviews. Around 81% of organisations used these methods (CIPD 2006). This is an increase of 24% and higher than in 2000. CIPD finds that these interviews are seen as most effective in dealing with short-term absences. In some companies return to work interviews are compulsory, even after only one day absence. There is, however, flexibility in how the interviews are done. This depends on the individual employee's circumstances.

The purposes of these interviews are to: welcome back the employee and give him/her an update on recent events; ensure that the employee is in good enough health to continue work as usual or if more support is needed; emphasise to the employee that he/she was missed and attendance has a high priority in the company; review the absence record of the employee. In some organisations it has been found that some managers feel return to work interviews are not as important as getting on with the job and therefore don't do them. Line managers in some cases also stated that they were relieved to have employees back at work and therefore didn't want to upset the working environment any more.

Use of Disciplinary Procedures

Disciplinary procedures will not work in getting a sick employee to come back to work faster. Neither the employee nor the organisation would win in this case. If an employee becomes too ill and cannot continue working, companies may have to dismiss the person in some cases. This is never the desired outcome, however sometimes these things must be done. Usually, they are done by the HR manager. All legal actions must be taken so that there are no grounds for legal action later.

- 1** Dismissing an employee who cannot work because of bad health is potentially fair under unfair dismissal law.
- 2** Before any other steps are taken, the employee must be warned that a potential dismissal is expected to occur if he/she doesn't come back to work. The employee must be consulted before the dismissal in order to establish whether or not he/she may return in the near future.
- 3** Whatever medical advice is available must be taken into account and acted upon.
- 4** Larger organisations will usually not dismiss an employee for at least six months unless that employee's position is very specialised or senior.
- 5** If the employee's condition makes him/her come under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, no dismissal should occur. The only time an employee can be dismissed from the company is if the company is completely satisfied that no adjustments can be made to accommodate said employee in order for him/her to return to work.

It is necessary to note that if someone is absent on a regular basis, the action to be taken must depend on whether there is a real medical condition that is the cause of the absences or not. If it is not the case then the company can take some disciplinary action quite early on. If the case is genuine then it should be handled like the long-term absence cases are handled. In cases where an employee's absences are very high, they may be dismissed legally as long as he/she has been properly warned ahead of time and been given a chance to show improvement in attendance. One thing that must be done is to treat all employees in the same fair manner.

Absence Levels and Performance Assessments

In some companies, it is made clear to the employees that their attendance levels are measured as part of their overall performance and will be included in annual assessments.

Bonuses and Rewards for Attendance

Some companies pay employees certain bonuses according to their records of attendance. There are, however, some managers that don't like this system because they feel employees are paid to show up for work anyway so it is like they are being paid twice. They feel that using this system is a sign that managers have no control over their work environments and they have abandoned responsibility for managing absences. Other managers feel that these bonuses were unfair because, in the cases where employees were genuinely ill, it was like penalising them for not being at work. It also may make sick employees feel they must come to work and this can lead to the spreading of illness which is not good for employees or the company. As this is the case, these types of rewards are still a contentious issue.

Occupational Health Support, Health Promotion, and Well-Being

Certain companies perform pre-employment screenings in an attempt to identify potential health problems in candidates. General fitness and job hazards (working with radiation, for example) are also looked at right from the beginning. Screening may include things like blood tests, heart check-ups, eye testing, discussing weight and lifestyle choices like smoking and drinking. This allows organisations to identify problems quicker and put processes into place (where appropriate) to help minimise the effects of the above health issues.

Some organisations encourage employees to follow healthy lifestyles, such as healthy eating, giving up smoking or exercising. Many employers today offer exercise classes or have a gym on site. In some cases, companies pay for gym memberships. The canteen menus are also changing to include healthier foods and snacks.

The CIPD (2006) found that one of the most effective management tools was support from occupational health professionals. These can be professionals from inside or outside the organisation. The London Borough of Brent (IRS 2002b) uses this type of support. This, however, is not available to many employees as few companies offer this kind of support. Many companies have counsellors, psychologists, and physiotherapists, who assist not only in the general well-being of employees, but also to help those employees recovering from illnesses or need counselling for work-related stress.

Changes to Work and Work Organisation

Within many organisations employees can work full or part-time, flexible hours, and sometimes, from the home. Redeployment or the offer of other lighter duties is also available in some companies. These can be limited by operational factors though. These would usually be in the manufacturing industries. Also, other departments are generally reluctant to take in an employee returning after illness for many reasons. Some of these include: worry that the employee may have lost the work habit, problems with pay if the former and new position are different or lack of budget within the new department to pay the new employee or buy needed equipment.

Practical Support

Practical support can be provided in many ways in order to decrease illness absence. Companies are sometimes left frustrated if their employees are on long waiting lists for surgical or diagnostic procedures. Sometimes, organisations will pay for the procedures in order to speed up medical treatment. With regards to stress, which is becoming a bigger cause of absenteeism, training for employees is provided. Child-care arrangements or support may also be offered. Not all organisations offer these very useful methods of support but increasingly companies are attempting to do more in order to control the absence problems.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Hugh Secord, (2003), Implementing Best Practices in Human Resources Management*
- ✓ *Michael Armstrong, (2012), Armstrong's Handbook of Human Resource Management Practice*
- ✓ *Kumar Pranita, (2010), Human Resource Management.*