



# UNIT-14

## 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

## Unit 14

### Managing Absences and Attendance

The CIPD (Certified Institute of Personnel and Development, 2006) discovered that around 3.5 per cent of the average person's work time was missed due to sickness. This finding applied across both public and private organisations. When broken down, the statistics show each employee is absent from work for an average of eight days a year. The Institute also discovered that absence occurs 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 per cent 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, resulting in employees taking 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 of 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 causes of longer-term absenteeism. This information was obtained from the CIPD. Stress leave may have increased partly because it is now considered a legitimate reason for absence.

Stress is particularly widespread in the public and non-profit sectors. 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 include the extent of responsibility and decision-making. They also include work overload, difficult working conditions or hours, co-workers, and styles of management, i.e. whether employees feel they can approach managers and discuss any problems, 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, 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 considering *ability to attend* we are actually looking at motivation and actual attendance. For example, an employee might have high

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

## Employee Absence and the Recession

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

Around a third of companies state that more and more people have been attending 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 the wellbeing/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. Many companies now have policies on 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 in which employees can be open about why they are absent. Certain methods that may reduce the risk of illness, the incidence of absenteeism, and the length of absences are available to employers. Generally, organisations have 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 that all employees understand their rights and responsibilities regarding absenteeism and will also secure 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). They stated that one particular manager faced difficulties in his department because his staff had stricter absence procedures than other departments in the company.

Any inconsistencies in the policy will weaken it, along with 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 lead 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 gain 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, with regard to 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 they were paid to do and sometimes came in at 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 the use of 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 to prevent employees believing 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 employment tribunals to watch and learn from absence-related court cases. In this way the managers can understand what will ensue if they don't deal fairly with their employees at work. HM Customs and Excise (IDS 2001) trains their managers with videos portraying role-playing situations, such as interviews with employees when they return 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 them carefully.

## Absence Notification Procedures

It is standard practice in many companies to require employees to call their workplaces themselves (and 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 rather than a receptionist or work colleague. The phone conversation can thus 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 the date when the employee is expected to return to work. The phone call is also viewed as important for 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 come in and do other jobs, if appropriate.

## Better Understanding of the Causes of Absence

The analysis of data may help companies to create better absence processes that relate to the most common causes of absence. It is important to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate reasons. 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 may be the need to care for a family member; alternatively, he/she may have alcohol problems and be feeling hung-over. 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, the absences can then 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

Maintaining contact with an employee 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 fewer 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% on the figures for 2000. CIPD finds that these interviews are considered most effective in dealing with short-term absences. In some companies, return to-work interviews are compulsory, even after only one day's absence. There is, however, flexibility in how the interviews are conducted. This depends on the individual employee's circumstances.

The purposes of these interviews are as follows: to welcome back the employee and give him/her an update on recent events; to ensure that the employee is in sufficiently good health to continue work as usual or to determine whether more support is needed; to emphasise to the employee that he/she was missed and attendance has a high priority in the company; and to 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; therefore, they don't conduct 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 further.

## Use of Disciplinary Procedures

Disciplinary procedures will not succeed in getting a sick employee to come back to work any 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 that person in some cases. This is never the desired outcome; sometimes, however, this course of action must be taken, usually by the HR manager. Only legal measures must be taken to ensure 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 not usually dismiss an employee for at least six months unless that employee's position is very specialised or senior.
5. If the employee's condition places him/her under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, no dismissal should occur. For an employee to be dismissed, the company must be 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, the company can take some disciplinary action quite early on. If the case is genuine, it should be handled in the same way as long-term absence cases. In cases where an employee's absences are at a very high level, he/she may be dismissed legally as long as he/she has been properly warned and been given a chance to show improvement in attendance. It is imperative 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. Some managers, however, don't like this system because they feel employees are being paid to turn up for work anyway; thus, it is as if they are being paid twice. They feel that using this system is a sign that managers have no control over their work environments and have abandoned responsibility for managing absences. Other managers feel that these bonuses are unfair because, in cases where employees are genuinely ill, it is akin to penalising them for not being at work. This approach also may make sick employees feel that they must come to work, and this can lead to the spreading of illness, which is not good for employees or the company. Hence, these types of rewards are still a contentious issue.

## Occupational Health Support, Health Promotion, and Wellbeing

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 examined from the outset. Screening may include things such as blood tests, heart check-ups, eyesight-testing, and discussing weight and lifestyle choices such as smoking and drinking. This allows organisations to identify problems sooner 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, and 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 may 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 with the general wellbeing of employees but also in helping those employees recovering from illnesses or in need of counselling for work-related stress.

## Changes to Work and Work Organisation

Within many organisations, employees can work full-time or part-time, flexible hours and, sometimes, from home. Redeployment or the offer of other lighter duties is also available in some companies. These can be limited by operational factors, however. These would usually be in the manufacturing industries. Other departments are generally reluctant to take in an employee returning after illness for many reasons, including a fear that the employee may have lost the work habit, problems with pay if the former and new positions are different, and the lack of budget within the new department to pay the new employee or buy necessary 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 regard 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 Pranit (2010), *Human Resource Management*.