

Managing Sickness Absence



How to manage sickness absence at work

There are bucket loads of information, support and advice available to employers on this topic both free and for sale, there are even companies who manage your sickness absence for you ! So there is plenty of choice, if you do a little research.

Sickness absence causes considerable problems to SME's in particular where there is little flexibility for internal cover so the answers are either get someone in, at extra cost, pay overtime or just do without and give work out to a few people to spread the load.

Deal with it early

Whatever your policy and procedures are for managing sickness absence you must **get involved early**, just letting things ride along will cost you heavily in the long run. Establish good practice and make sure it works and that managers are well trained in managing and monitoring sickness absence.

Ensure that someone is responsible for managing sickness absence – many problems occur when it appears that the issue of sickness absence is not being managed effectively (or even at all) by the company.

Be constructive

Create dialog between and keep in contact with employees who are likely to be away for more than a week but do not fail to monitor those who take the odd day off sick on a regular basis and deal with it in an appropriate manner.

Over the last 25 years attitudes to sickness absence at work have changed considerably and a raft of legislation post Health & Safety at Work Act 1974, has had a steady and increasing cost and time impact on businesses across the UK. Some would argue that the authority and control of the employer has been eroded away, only to be the unpaid administrators of government legislation. Others would suggest that it has been a long time coming in terms of workers protection and rights at work.

Indeed, sickness absence at work is calculated to cost the UK more than £12 billion a year, so is it important – you bet it is ! This equates to £495 each year for every working person in the UK.

In this issue, we focus on the key issues, considerations and impacts of effective management of sickness absence at work

The Basics

- **Keep a record of all sickness absence** – when & why are the two questions to ask here. This helps you to identify patterns and the short and long term causes of sickness absence, to plan suitable cover and to monitor work performance. Ensure that a weekly record is kept and updated.
- **Keep in regular contact** – effective and frequent communication is important both during the absence and on return to work but be sensitive about rushing someone back to work too early. Don't ignore someone who is off work for sometime, keep in touch.
- **Making adjustments for return to work** – remove any barriers for a return to work, consider any modifications, undertake a risk assessment and review the position regularly. Consider a phased or gradual return to work if this is needed but consider all cases on their own merit and act accordingly. Consider the implications on other staff of any decision you make and don't take too long in making a decision.
- **Making use of external service providers** – do you have a medical scheme which includes rehabilitation? Can you obtain access to Occupational Therapists? Does your existing company insurance cover rehabilitation? There are companies in the UK who will manage your sickness for you for a percentage of payroll costs. Most of these have the resources to provide physiotherapy, counselling, occupational therapy, absence control and management of the whole process, including a quicker return to work.

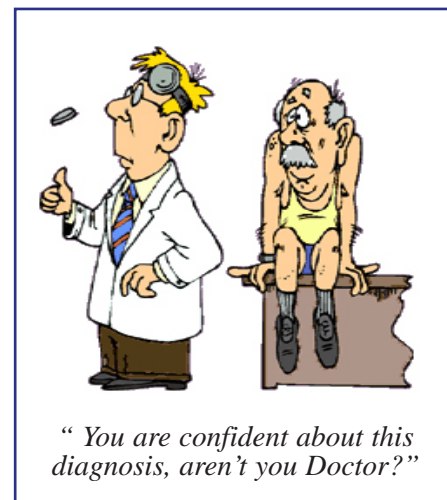


- **A return to work plan** – prepare in plenty of time, do not make the employee feel under pressure to return, particularly when there is some physical healing, movement issues or a lack of confidence. The return to work is a two way process so discussion is the key to a successful return to work following any length of sickness absence. Build in a review time and any encourage regular feedback. Ensure that all those involved in the return process are aware of their roles and responsibilities and that everyone is clear about who does what and the responsibilities of others.
- **Relevant legislation** – Health & Safety at Work Act 1974, seems to have been around for ever but is the mainstay of protection for employees at work. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995, looks at the rights of disabled staff amongst other things. The Employment Rights Act 1996, looks at the dismissal of employees on the grounds of sickness absence. The Data Protection Act 1998 relates to absence data, record keeping and the holding of medical information. The Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006.

Be flexible in your approach and remember that people vary in their recovery times, give the employee time to discuss concerns about a return to work, carry out interviews on return to work and seek a good understanding about how the employee feels, what they can and cannot do. Focus on health and safety and any other issues that involve risk, potential problems and the performance of the employee.

Remember, as the employer it is your duty to manage the situation so do not be afraid to spend time on such issues and ensure that you are aware of all the facts and that your decisions are consistent. Do not be afraid to deal with matters early and effectively ie continuous odd day absences. Sickness absence is not a one way street for the person off sick, it is a two way process with responsibilities on both parties. Be firm and fair but do not make snap decisions based on emotion, stress or poor management of the situation.

Do not be afraid to seek professional advice and support when needed, it will be well worth the money in the long term.



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More useful information, advice and tips coming up next month