

Managing Absence - Reducing and Preventing Absence

One of the biggest frustrations for small businesses is absence. Absence is a cost for any business – both financially and operationally - and therefore reducing and preventing absence makes good commercial sense.

There are many ways that an organisation can look to reduce absence. Detailed below are 10 top hints for managers. Some will be more appropriate than others (depending on the organisation and culture). All will support the absence management process.

There is however no single solution to reducing absence and the pursuit of achieving 'zero' absence is unrealistic – as we are dealing with people and there will be genuine periods where employees need time off. The organisation therefore needs to strike a balance between supporting employees during genuine periods of absence and encouraging full attendance.

Every organisation should however look to minimising absence. The 10 top hints will help you on your way.

Top Ten hints for managing absence (reducing and preventing absence)

1. Monitor and Measure Absence

Monitoring Absence is the single most important component if you want to reduce absence – as before you can reduce it you need to measure it! There are various monitoring methods that can be used and ideally any information should be recorded electronically to allow for analysis.

A simple monitoring system would be to require all employees to complete a **form** for both **planned and unplanned** absence. Planned absence would include holidays, prebooked doctors and dentist appointments or may ask to leave early or come in late.

Unplanned absence would include sickness or emergency leave situations and in these situations the Company form (e.g. a Company self-certification form), would be completed on the employees return to work.

Monitoring in itself will start to reduce absence as employees will know that any absence will be noted and could possibly be questioned.

2. Absence Reporting Procedure

Have a clear absence reporting procedure that employees need to follow if they are unable to attend work (unplanned). This should include requiring employees to speak to their manager and explaining why they cannot attend work. Only if they are totally 'incapacitated' should it be acceptable for someone else to call on their behalf.

It should NOT be acceptable to leave a message at reception or send a 'text' message!

Absence should be reported by a certain time (e.g. within half an hour of their normal start time).

Employees should also be aware that failure to follow the correct absence notification procedure could affect payments and could be a disciplinary offence and failure to report at all could even be considered to be gross misconduct (note: your policy documents should confirm and support this).

Make sure every employee is clear about the absence reporting procedure – and has a copy in writing (e.g. in the employee handbook).

3. Return to Work Interviews

A further monitoring tool is the return to work interview. This requires the employee to sit down with their manager to discuss any unplanned absence (and complete a Company self-certification form). The interview can include a number of areas such as:

- Discussing the reasons for absence
- Whether they visited their Doctor
- Whether absence was connected to work in anyway (e.g. stress, harassment etc)
- Reviewing previous absence
- Discussing any forward action.

It would also be suggested that a standard 'return to work' form is used to record responses.

4. Analyse Absence Records

With a good monitoring system in place records can be analysed for trends and to allow the organisation to monitor any initiatives for reducing absence to see if they are effective.

Decide on clear reporting information and collate this on a regular basis. For example quarterly or six monthly report showing:

- Total days absence in the period (including the days and date of absence)
- Total of any other absence (e.g. appointments, any part-days absence and reasons)
- Reasons for absence (broken down into holiday, sickness, other)
- Patterns to absence (any Friday/Monday syndromes!)
- The cost of absence (e.g. sick-pay or salary paid during absence, or overtime paid to cover absence, temps etc).

Compare reports from each quarter and monitor the trends in absence. This will indicate if absence is increasing or decreasing – and in any particular area.

If there is a computerised personnel system in place (or payroll system), reports should be easy to generate on a regular basis (provided information has been entered!).

5. Act on the Information

The analysis of absence records can then be used to decide what appropriate action may be needed in any situation; for example:

- ***The employee with a pattern of odd day's absence on Fridays and Mondays for various reasons (e.g. cold, stomach upset).*** It may be appropriate to hold a meeting with this employee to point out their pattern and level of absence (possibly informally first, but advising the employee that formal disciplinary action may be considered if it continues). Letting the employee know that you are monitoring and have some concerns may in itself reduce future absence.
- ***The employee who has lots of 'doctors appointments' at inconvenient times during the day.*** You may want to make some further enquires with the employee about the number and reasons for the appointments (is there an underlying medical condition?) and also to discuss whether appointments can be made for a more appropriate time.
- ***The employee who has been off for six weeks.*** In this situation you may want to consider requesting the employees consent to write to their doctor for a medical

report in order to clearly understand the reason for their absence and when they may return (or arrange for them to see your occupational health advisor if you have one).

- **The employee who is off on a regular basis for the same or similar reasons.** This may indicate an underlying medical condition and you may want to refer them to your occupational health advisor or request a medical report.
- **The employee who has not taken any holiday during the year.** You may wish to remind them to book some holiday dates (as it is a health and safety requirement that they take at least four weeks off per year).

Note: you may want to discuss the above with an HR advisor to ensure that appropriate procedures are followed.

6. Consider Terms of Employment and Bonus Schemes

Your terms and conditions of employment should support your objectives for managing absence.

You should consider the following:

- Have a clear absence reporting procedure (see above) and be clear about how failure to follow the procedure may affect the employee (e.g. non-payment, disciplinary action).
- Be clear about what payments an employee will receive during periods of absence and the different payments (or non-payment) that might apply in different situations e.g. smaller organisations may only pay SSP; there may be different payment terms set out for short term and long-term sickness; consider payments relating to attending appointments during working hours, emergency leave, compassionate leave etc.
- Ensure your contract of employment allows you to request a medical report from employees (employees will still have to give their consent, but you will at least have a contractual right to request this).

7. Company Doctor / Occupational Health Advisors

Having a Doctor or Occupational health advisor appointed by the Company can be of assistance in managing absence.

Employees can be referred for a number of reasons. It can also support a general well-being programme. A company appointed medical advisor may therefore assist with:

- Pre-employment medicals
- Medical reports associated with long-term absence or frequent short term absence where there may be an underlying medical problem
- Advice on how to support an individual's return to work (e.g. reasonable adjustments under the DDA, return on shorter ours)
- Health and Safety issues (e.g. a medical opinion on whether an employee on certain medication should be driving?)
- General medicals and preventative health care.

8. Health Care

Health care is a valuable benefit to any employee, but there is also a good commercial reason to provide employees with health care. Generally an individual with health care can be seen and treated more quickly. This in turn means that a) they are not 'worried' and 'distracted' for such a long period and b) they will be treated and return to work in a shorter period of time.

This is a benefit to both the employee and the organisation.

9. Pro-active Management

A pro-active way to reduce absence is to look at prevention. This can be achieved by considering a range of well-being programmes. These can take many forms and can have a range of results (including increasing productivity as well as reducing absence). Some initiatives that have been used include:

- Offer flu jabs to all employees
- Health education in the workplace
- Encouraging 'healthy' social events
- Lunchtime fitness sessions
- Offering gym membership.

10. Have a written Absence Policy Document

Once you have decided on your absence management strategies, these should be clearly documented and communicated so that employees and management are clear about the objectives, processes and procedures that make up your absence management policy.

The document should be reviewed on an ongoing basis to make sure it continues to meet the organisation's objectives for managing absence.

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