

## THE IMPACT OF SICKNESS ABSENCE AMONG WORKFORCE

Studies have revealed that sickness absence, from short-term and longer-term sickness, is one of the major reasons for employee absences. Stress is also emerging as a major factor with its impact higher compared to earlier periods.

Any absence management program would hence require special focus on sickness absence.

### Different Kinds of Sickness Reported for Sickness Absence

Minor illness such as colds, flu, stomach upset and headaches are the most frequently reported kinds of sickness, among both manual and non-manual employees. Employees might just call in sick reporting such problems.

Manual workers engaged in physically demanding work tend to suffer more from physical ailments like back pain and musculo-skeletal injuries. For non-manual employees stress is a major problem, with one study reporting it as the second most frequent type of sickness, after minor illnesses.

Recurring medical conditions is another major contributor to sickness absence.

### Stress-Related Sickness Absences

Excessive and sustained pressure of work can lead to stress when it goes beyond acceptable levels of pressure. In such cases, employers can be held liable for compensation payments for stress-related injuries.

Even psychiatric disorders can result where employees have to work in a confusing, non-rewarding and non-empowered manner, without support and understanding from their managers.

Stress adversely affects health, happiness and performance at work. Even without compensation payments, stress can cost the employer in the form of lower level of employee performance.

Stress is not a single illness, but a range of health problems arising from varied kinds of work pressures.

Under law, employers are obliged to assess stress risks in workplace and manage things in a way to reduce incidence of stress.

### Impact of Stress Assessment on Sickness Absence

Even without the compulsion of law, enlightened employers would recognize the impact of stress risk assessment and remedial workplace measures. Stress is estimated to cause the highest level of sickness absence in this century.

Interacting with employees through questions, attitude surveys and job satisfaction surveys are the typical ways for stress-risks assessment. The assessment seeks to assess whether:

- Employees find jobs too demanding
- Employees are able to control how the work is done
- They receive adequate support from colleagues and managers
- They are clearly aware of their roles and responsibilities
- They have to suffer unacceptable kinds of behavior from others
- Organizational changes are affecting them unduly

### Reducing Sickness Absence

The stress risk assessment factors mentioned above would give an idea of how stress can be reduced. Develop policies and job specifications that help employees understand their roles and responsibilities clearly. Give them some leeway in how the work is done. Create a workplace atmosphere where workers seek to help each other instead of find faults with each other. Educate the employees so that they are better able to cope with problems.

For sickness absence in general, it is important to let employees know the procedures involved in availing sickness absence. Some kinds of short-term sickness might need only self-certification while others would need a doctor's certificate or even an examination by the company doctor. Employees need to inform their supervisors about their absence and the reasons for it.

A return-to-work interview after a sickness absence, particularly short-term sickness, can help the organization identify real problems and take suitable measures. Managers can discuss the situation with the employee and help the latter with the problem.

Managers are trained to conduct return-to-work interviews and to help employees with health-related problems. Sick pay is often restricted to discourage availing sick leave to the extent possible.

With the help of occupational health specialists, organizations can take steps to reduce the incidence of occupational health risks at the workplace.

Measures such as the above could have a significant impact on sickness absence.

### Conclusion

Minor illnesses and stress are emerging as the major contributors to sickness absence. In certain industries, occupational health risks can contribute to increased sickness and absence. All organizations could benefit from carrying out a stress risks assessment survey of their workplaces, and adopting policies and job practices that reduce stress. A return-to-work interview by properly trained managers can help identify problems early, and help employees handle them.