Managing people and absence management management essay

INTRODUCTION

Managing attendance at work is recognised as being an increasing priority for all employers. Both short term and long term absences have a significant impact upon the efficiency and resources of any company and the management of such absences can have a significant effect on both the company and the individuals who are involved. The focus will be on Coleg Sir Gar and how they deal with absence.

One of the key challenges facing organisations is how to manage absence effectively to ensure that those who are genuinely sick are fully supported, and that the small minority whose absence is not health-related is deterred. UK legislation places a duty on employers to safeguard employee health, safety and welfare, in addition to which there are rising expectations among staff of what employers should be providing in terms of working conditions and benefits. Adopting an approach to sickness absence management that is both supportive of the genuinely sick and that acts as a deterrent to the few whose absence is not health-related is difficult to achieve, but a crucial element of successful management practice.

While the majority of absence is thought to be genuine and related to ill-health, a number of factors appear to have an impact on absence levels. These include motivation, work levels and morale within teams. Individuals perceive their work as stressful – due to factors such as overwork, heavy administrative loads and relationships within their teams. Many individuals who feel valued in their roles are less likely to take sick leave as they appreciate that their contribution is important to their organisation. Other

causes of absence include needing to take time off for domestic responsibilities such as childcare. Although most organisation have in place a policy relating to special leave aimed at coping with domestic emergencies, awareness of this leave does not appear to be high.

The presence and implementation of a good sickness absence policy is an important first step to managing absence well. Ideally, a policy should be clearly understandable and take into account different causes of absence and develop appropriate ways of dealing with these. It is also vital for an organisation to accept that a certain level of employee absence is an inevitable feature of working life. Appropriate support should be offered to employees who are absent and unable to work for health reasons, and a policy should ideally recognise that employees may sometimes need to be absent for reasons other than health, and that this should not be counted as sickness.

MANAGING PEOPLE

Absence is very expensive. The CIPD annual survey ' Absence Management' 2009 was based on replies from 642 employers in organisations employing a total of more than 1. 9 million employees. The average cost of absence per employee per year was £692, which is a slight increase from the previous year's figure of £666. The annual cost of absence, as last year, is highest in the public sector, averaging £784 per employee per year; however, this represents a reduction from the previous year's figure of £906 per employee per year. Manufacturing and production employers recorded the next highest cost at £754 per employee per year, a slight fall from the figure for the year before of £759. Absence costs among non-profit organisations also fell

slightly to £698 from £741 per employee per year. Private services organisations recorded the lowest annual absence costs, averaging £666 compared with the previous year's figure of £663. For an organisation with 1000 employees, this is nearly three quarters of a million pounds per year. But direct costs are only a part of the problem. Absence disrupts production, operations, customer service and morale. Organisations have to spend extra money on temporary cover or overtime as a result. And unchecked absence can lead to bad feeling, conflict and disciplinary action, including dismissal. And that can lead to tribunal hearings, and even compensation payments, if organisations are unable to demonstrate that they have acted fairly.

Why measure absence?

A key element of managing absence effectively is accurate measurement and monitoring. An organisation must assess if it has a problem with absence, its extent and the best way to tackle it. Only 41% of employers monitor the cost of employee absence, a figure which has remained low over the last few years. Employers should collect and use data to identify particular patterns of absence and underlying causes, for example, the management style of a particular manager or an increase in workloads. It can also provide evidence of how absence impacts on the bottom line and why it is worth investing in an effective absence management programme.

There are a number of measures that can be used to assess absence, each of which gives information about different aspects of absence. There are two aspects to absence in Coleg Sir Gar:

1. Total time lost 2. How that time is distributed.

Total time lost

This is the crudest measure and the one used most often. To calculate this, the total number of days that could be worked in the organisation is added. Then the number of days that were lost due to absence are deducted and expressed as a fraction of the total. In a sense, this is the cost of the ' extra people' that the organisation has to employ purely because of absence. For example, an organisation of 1000 people with an absence rate of 3. 5 per cent has to employ 35 more people than would otherwise be necessary, just to cover the absence.

How that time is distributed

Many organisations only measure the total time lost. Yet this figure can describe several quite different problems. In a department of 30 people, an absence rate of 3. 5 per cent could result from one person being away for a year with a longâ€' term illness, with no other absence in the department, or it could result from everyone taking small amounts of time off. Or it could result from a few people taking quite long absences. Before you can define the problem, you have to ask:

Who is being absent?

How often are they being absent?

How long are they being absent for?

Bradford Factor

The Bradford Factor identifies persistent short-term absence for individuals, by measuring the number of spells of absence, and is therefore a useful measure of the disruption caused by this type of absence. It is calculated using the formula:

S x S x D

S = number of spells of absence in 52 weeks taken by an individual

D = number of days of absence in 52 weeks taken by that individual

For example:

10 one-day absences: 10 x 10 x 10 = 1, 000

1 ten-day absence: 1 x 1 x 10 = 10

5 two-day absences: 5 x 5 x 10 = 250

2 five-day absences: 2 x 2 x 10 = 40

The trigger points will differ between organisations. As for all unauthorised absence, the underlying causes will need to be identified. So should we try to manage absence? After all, if someone is ill, they are ill. The answer is that we should. And there are several reasons for this. Stopping theft of working time. Some people do take unauthorised time off for no reason other than personal gain. These people are stealing. They are stealing from their employer, because they are being paid for work they are not doing, and they

are putting unfair extra work on to their colleagues. Stopping this theft of time is a clear moral and legal imperative.

Some people take time off because they have a problem. This may be a personal problem, or a problem affecting someone close to them. By investigating the absence, managers can find out about such problems. In many cases, the organisation will then be able to offer support to the employee. In the longer term, this will reduce absence and help the employee. Some people take time off because of stress or unhappiness with work. It is very likely that these problems will be affecting performance generally, quite apart from affecting attendance. Investigating the absence may uncover such problems and enable the manager to address them, resulting in better performance in general and less absence.

There must be no question of trying to coerce someone who is genuinely and unavoidably ill into coming to work. But in this case it is still important that the organisation knows the facts and so is able to plan its response accordingly. The sick employee may well suffer unnecessary extra stress and anxiety if he or she is not sure how the organisation views the illness. Directly confronting the illness, and being clear about the organisation's attitude to it, will not only help the organisation know what it has to deal with, it can help the employee deal with the illness, too. Confronting and discussing absence not only helps the organisation, it helps the absentee.

What causes absence?

First, the causes of absence should be looked at to provide insight into the problem and to illustrate the areas where policy has an influence. Research shows that the causes of absence fall into the following four distinct clusters:

The general health and lifestyle of employees and its impact on attendance at work has been a popular topic for research. Virtually all studies demonstrate a clear link, for example, between smoking and increased absence. Similarly research shows a strong link with excessive alcohol use and absence. For a proportion of employees there is a strong direct relationship between absence and poor health, but for others nonâ€ medical factors are equally important. Absence management polices need to discriminate between those who are unavoidably absent due to illness and those whose health is affected by factors over which the employer can have some influence. Employers who are able to support health education programmes which promote healthier lifestyles and actions such as providing healthy meals at work, encouraging exercise and aiding those who wish to give up smoking will all benefit from the improved general health of employees and reduced staff sickness rates.

Some aspects of the working environment affect the wellâ€ being of staff. Research into how work is organised has shown the importance of team working with absence being lower where people work in small collaborative teams. Absence can also be a way of avoiding aspects of work that are emotionally demanding or stressful. The long hours culture also has an adverse impact on absence. A strong link exists between those who consistently work more than their contracted hours and both psychological and physical sickness levels. Management actions such as team working,

awareness of health and safety issues and discouraging the working of excessive hours can all help to reduce the adverse impact of these factors.

How employees feel about their working lives has been shown to be an important influence on attendance. Research has demonstrated that organisational commitment has a directly beneficial effect on absence and through this to business outcomes. The major influence on the creation of this commitment has been identified as the line manager and the quality of their relationship with their staff. The sensitive handling of change within organisations, often in the hands of line managers, is also essential as various features of the change process are associated with deterioration in employees' health. These include uncertainty, lack of control, role ambiguity and job insecurity which can lead directly to reduce physical and mental health. Stress and absence are generally also shown to be related, although in the field of research the definition of stress is problematic and whether it should it be regarded as psychological or as a series of physiological symptoms has not yet been resolved. Career satisfaction is one of the more powerful predictors of absence behaviour. Absence is higher among those expressing dissatisfaction with their careers. Among those who have marketable skills and are often absent the likelihood of them resigning is high. A link also exists between resigning and attendance behaviour. Those with poor attendance records are more likely to express an intention to leave and there is evidence that those with high absence rates are indeed at a greater risk of leaving.

What policies need to contain?

Good policies should clearly define the roles and responsibilities of key factors such as line managers, senior managers, the HR function, the occupational health function and the individuals themselves. They should also establish procedures to ensure that each case is treated in the same way and that standardised information on absence is collected. The first step to managing absence effectively is to ensure that you have a clear policy in place that supports your organisation's business objectives and culture. Legislation requires employers to provide staff with information on ' any terms and conditions relating to incapacity for work due to sickness or injury, including any provision for sick pay'.

Effective absence policies must spell out employees' rights and obligations when taking time off from work due to sickness. The policy should:

provide details of contractual sick pay terms and its relationship with statutory sick pay

outline the process employees must follow if taking time off sick – covering when and whom employees should notify if they are not able to attend work

include when (after how many days) employees need a self-certificate form

contain details of when they require a fit note from their doctor

explain that adjustments may be appropriate to assist the employee in returning to work as soon as is practicable

mention that the organisation reserves the right to require employees to attend an examination by a company doctor and (with the worker's consent) to request a report from the employee's doctor

include provisions for return-to-work interviews as these have been identified as the most effective intervention to manage short-term absence.

Sickness absence policies are put in place to manage sickness absence. Staff are expected to maintain a satisfactory record of attendance. However, the aim is to balance the sensitive nature of individual sickness and ill health against its needs to achieve its objectives. As a caring employer, the aim is to assist employees to retain or regain good health. It is essential that the procedures be carried out with tact and sensitivity and a realisation that the management of attendance is the joint responsibility of the line manager and the individual member of staff. Human Resources (HR) will be available to advise and support line managers and their staff. Employees may be requested to consent to be examined by the occupational doctor or nurse and to agree to allow Occupational Health to provide a medical report. Employees may also refer themselves to Occupational Health. If a member of staff fails to comply with notification or certification procedures or otherwise abuse the procedures, the disciplinary procedure may be used. The policy and procedure that apply are:

This policy and associated procedure incorporate the following principles.

Good faith

The policy and procedures will be applied to all members of staff in a consistent manner and without discrimination.

Fairness

Any action taken will be reasonable and necessary. Members of staff involved are entitled to be heard with courtesy and respect.

Confidentiality

Information relating to sickness absence will only be shared with individuals who have a need to know.

Representation

If issues of attendance arise within these procedures and a formal approach is required to deal with them, a member of staff will be entitled to be accompanied by a trade union representative or by a work colleague.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Accepting absence as unavoidable and inevitable in an organisation creates a culture of poor attendance. This highlights the critical role of managers in communicating clearly the organisation's expectations on attendance. Without positive action it is possible to have a culture where absence is just accepted as uncontrollable, or in the worst scenario, viewed as entitlement to extra leave.

Overall, it is clear that managing absence is complex, and a successful approach must involve a mix of elements that successfully support those

that are genuinely ill and deter the small minority of those that are absent for non-health-related reasons. Line managers are key in terms of implementing the policy, but they must be adequately supported by other areas of the organisation, such as senior management, the HR function and the occupational health function. Further, it is important for line managers to achieve the right balance when managing sickness absence, and to learn to tailor their approach appropriately. For example, in terms of the frequency and type of contact with individuals during long-term sickness absence, what is right for some individuals may not work for others, who may want more or less frequent contact? It is therefore up to line managers to find the appropriate balance between what is perceived as intrusion and support.

Communicating the objectives of any attendance policy clearly to all staff members is essential. A policy which is to be credible and successful needs to be understood throughout an organisation and applied consistently and fairly. An individual's case of sick absence, depending on length, can require actions from various individuals and services such as the line manager, senior managers, the HR function, the HR Business Partner, Occupational Health Services and the Employee Assistance Provider. For an attendance policy to be effective in practice it is essential that the respective roles of the individuals and services involved in managing cases of absence are defined. This ensures that cases are handled systematically and efficiently. At any point in an absence it should be known who is responsible for each aspect and what outcomes are to be expected. Once the areas of responsibility are defined the procedures to be applied need to be established. This makes

certain that each case is treated the same way, that similar approaches are used and standardised information collected.

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