



Managing Sickness Absence - an overview



One of the most common issues that an employer faces is the amount of time individuals take off from work due to short-term, coughs, colds, upset stomachs, or long-term sickness, lasting more than four weeks.

Based on the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) Survey on Absence Management the average level of sickness absence is 8 days per annum per employee at an average cost of £598.

Actively managing sickness absence is shown to reduce sickness absence levels as employees better understand what is required of them and what is acceptable to an organisation.

Effective measures to consider

Effective measures to consider in managing short-term sickness involve line managers in:

- Monitoring and recording sickness absence, and identifying any patterns or trends
- Conducting return to work interviews
- Using disciplinary procedures for unacceptable levels of absence – yes you can discipline someone for being unable to attend work due to sickness, where a fair procedure has been followed, the employee understands the expectations of them, they have been given an opportunity to improve and you have established whether there is any underlying medical condition
- Restricting occupational sick pay, but if you plan to do this it should be stated in the employment contract that the organisation reserves this right
- Contacting the individual's doctor for information, obviously with their consent

Managing long-term absence

Managing long-term absence is equally important, according to the CIPD survey, one fifth of all sickness absence is for four weeks or more, and here again the manager plays a vital role. The key considerations are:

- Staying in touch – it's easier for an employee to return to work if regular, non-intrusive contact has been maintained
- Use medical advice – with the employee's consent, contact their doctor and use the information they provide to assist in making decisions regarding the employee's return to work
- Plan for the employee's return to work – can you allow a gradual return to work over an agreed period of time; can work patterns be changed; undertake a risk assessment to identify measures and adjustments that could be made to allow an employee to return and stay in work
- Review regularly both during the period of absence, and after the employees return, particularly in the initial stages



Disability

A further area to consider in the management of sickness absence is what to do when an employee becomes disabled during employment, as there are specific requirements laid out in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA). The DDA covers any physical or mental impairment which affects an employee's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities, as well as named specific conditions including cancer, multiple sclerosis and HIV, which are covered from the time of diagnosis. Under the DDA there is a requirement on employers to make reasonable adjustments to

allow employees to continue in their job. The types of adjustment may include:

- Making physical adjustments to the workplace
- Providing specialist equipment and training in it's use to enable them to do their job
- Making changes to their working pattern such as reduced hours, flexible working, amended shift patterns

Summary

Managing any sickness absence is not only about the cost implications but also the human element involved. Employees working alongside someone who regularly takes time off sick, need to provide cover and may start to feel aggrieved, they may also think if they can do it, why not me.

To be effective, managers need to deal with situations quickly when they happen, be fully aware of the organisation's policies and procedures and follow them, but they also need good communication skills to encourage employees to discuss any problems at an early stage so that they can be dealt with quickly.

Active management of sickness absence issues can also assist in maintaining employee motivation, commitment and creating an environment where employees want to come into work rather than opting for a day in bed.



For further advice and assistance

Please contact **Peta Fry**, HR Director on **01793 818300** or email petaf@monahans.co.uk