Taking Control of Employee Absence—Best Practices in Absence Management

by | Amélie Meilleur
By utilizing a clearly defined attendance policy, effective communication and management training, organizations can implement return-to-work strategies that benefit employees and their bottom line.
The Canadian economy suffers a staggering $16.6 billion in losses annually as a result of the direct costs associated with employee absenteeism. When incidental days and longer term absences are factored in, the Conference Board of Canada estimates that the average Canadian employee will miss two full weeks of work each year due to unplanned time away from his or her job.¹ As alarming as these statistics may sound, they do not begin to factor in presenteeism—where the employee is physically at work but struggling. And yet, less than half of all Canadian companies have an attendance management policy in place to communicate employer expectations or make use of an efficient tool to track absenteeism.²

A Cowan Insurance Group assessment of industry best practices has revealed four target areas for employers to focus on to have a positive impact on employee absenteeism and presenteeism rates—policy definition, employee communications, management training and return-to-work strategies.

**Defining Expectations**

It's crucial for employers to have a comprehensive attendance management policy in place if they are trying to curb employee absences. A concise and clearly communicated policy helps to define company expectations and outlines the specific steps that will be taken if an employee does not meet these expectations.

One of the first steps in developing an absenteeism policy is to determine what types of absences will be covered. A comprehensive policy addresses a range of absence types—from casual time away to longer term leaves and disability.

**Constant Communication**

The spotlight has historically fallen on the subject of absenteeism. The significance and impact of presenteeism have only recently begun to be studied and understood. Presenteeism, or working while sick, can have a broad range of undesirable outcomes including productivity loss, employee exhaustion, chronic poor health and workplace epidemics.

Employers often underestimate the importance of effective communication about prevention and wellness when addressing presenteeism. There are resources already available to many companies that can help reduce incidental absences and short-term disability incidence and duration. Often all these require is effective communication on the part of the employer to increase employee awareness and utilization. Regular and ongoing messaging to employees about employee assistance programs, wellness reports, health tips and links to online resources such as health assessment tools can raise awareness and offer support. Employee assistance programs also have tools and services that are designed specifically for front-line managers to facilitate effective communication with absent employees.

Direct communication also can help with incidental absences. When employees call in sick, best practices call for them to speak directly with their front-line managers—Voice mail or third-party calls are not accepted. Direct interaction enables the supervisor to gauge the severity of the situation and helps with monitoring. Organizations with successful absence plans have a standard referral, such as a referral to an absence and disability management provider, at day four or day seven, at the latest, which helps reduce the incidence of casual absences and is an early intervention strategy that can positively impact duration.

Front-line management, or a dedicated human resources representative, retains accountability of an employee should the employee progress to a short-term disability leave. They also keep in contact with employees during a leave, keeping them up to date on any changes within the department and maintaining the relationship, which will help with return-to-work reintegration. Training on the appropriate means of communication is recommended and can foster employee engagement and reduce leave duration.

**The Importance of Proper Training**

In the past, organizations have tended to promote high performers into supervisory roles without taking into account human resource management skills or background.
These managers have been identified as having more difficulty with employee engagement, which in turn leads to increased absenteeism with a detrimental impact on team productivity.

Ensure that front-line managers are aware of proper human resources management practices and have sound training and skills to deal with employee absences and the situations that may lead to time away from work. A high-level quarterly or biannual review of absence trends and results by an organization’s director or business unit lead can identify front-line managers who are struggling and in need of guidance. Once identified, an appropriate resource can be sought to create an action plan and coach the supervisor on how to effectively address any issues. Appropriate resources can include another front-line manager or the director of human resources, access to internal resources, wellness/employee assistance program resources or your disability management provider. The key is to ensure that front-line managers receive the needed coaching or training and do not merely delegate their responsibilities elsewhere.

Front-line management training should cover presenteeism—how to recognize and address barriers, how to intervene, what to do and what resources are available. Training also should cover proper reintegration of an employee during the return-to-work phase after an absence.

Organizations that prioritize front-line management education also tend to include training on the costs of absenteeism and the benefits of temporary workplace accommodation—employee morale, costs, duration of illness, productivity and team perception. The strategy used by these organizations is to be as proactive with staff on short-term disability as with employees on workers’ compensation or long-term disability. This type of initiative needs buy-in from higher management if it is to be implemented effectively across an organization.

**Return-to-Work Strategies**

A final area of focus that employers may wish to consider is the creation and active promotion of a return-to-work protocol for management. Nothing creates more anxiety for employees than not knowing where to go or what to do on their first day back—Having a plan in place can help to decrease anxiety and prevent relapses. “It is important to create a culture of collaborative communication and support that helps employees reengage with their job in a safe and timely manner,” says Colleen Baker, principal and vice president, corporate sales at the Williamson Group—A Cowan Company. “Employees need to feel supported.”

An efficient protocol includes a detailed process to follow when an employee on leave is scheduled to return to work and includes the below steps for the employer.

- Discuss the plan and what resources are available to employees for their first day back in advance of their return.
- Make employees aware of any changes that may have occurred in the workplace during their absence.
- Ensure that building security access is enabled for returning employees; this also includes passwords to computers and machinery, if applicable.
- Have employees’ workstations ready, greet them personally upon their return and review the plan for that day and the remaining week.
- Decrease productivity measurements while an employee is on a progressive return to work or during a work accommodation—Some organizations extend reduced productivity measures beyond the full-time return-to-work phase.
- Provide regular support to employees during their progressive return to work as well as after

**Takeaways**

- The average employee will miss two full weeks of work each year, yet less than half of companies have an attendance management policy.
- A clear, concise policy will help to define company expectations on employee absence.
- Regular messaging on resources including employee assistance programs, wellness reports and online tools can boost awareness and support.
- Training front-line managers to deal with employee absenteeism and presenteeism can increase productivity and morale.
- A detailed return-to-work protocol for management can improve the transition for employees returning from an absence.
they have returned to work full-time.

Commitment and participation of management, supervisors and employees in all aspects of absence management and tracking are keys to success. Organizations that have managed to mitigate bottom-line losses from absenteeism have one thing in common—They have made addressing employee absenteeism a priority. Utilizing medical monitoring and accommodation services, often offered by professional disability management providers, can help mitigate and prevent absences.

The most forward-thinking organizations have kept overall accountability with front-line managers or with a dedicated human resources team. They have created measurements to help supervisors identify problem areas and implemented strategies that use practical tools to track employee absences.

While consistent tracking of incidental absences is key to effective absence management, it’s the employers that adhere closely to best practices that will have the most success in staunching the bottom-line bleed from employee absenteeism over the long term.

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Endnotes

2. Ibid.

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