

INDUSTRY INSIGHT



Sickness absence may be tied to elements of medicine and occupational health, but it encroaches on management issues and HR, so to treat it as purely medical can be short sighted, says **Joy Reymond**, head of rehabilitation services at UnumProvident

Leave off the blinkers

Sickness absence is an umbrella term covering a wide range of circumstances, from the occasional day off for minor ailments, to far longer periods of absence due to major trauma.

Usually employees call in sick because they have an illness or injury and are too unwell to work. However, other reasons are generally accepted too. Employees may choose to stay away from work to avoid infecting others or to rest following an illness. Sometimes employees also use sick time to deal with unplanned personal events or in response to personal issues such as bullying, anxiety or depression (whether these are work-related or not). In other cases, it is used to avoid unpleasant working conditions or unreasonable demands. Often a doctor will have sanctioned the absence via a sick note.

Sickness absence clearly encompasses not only elements of medicine and occupational health, but also management, human resources and interpersonal skills. So, if we treat all absences as if they are purely medical, we risk missing the point for staff whose absence is influenced by other factors.

When a medical cause is clearly preventing an employee from doing his

or her job, there are few debates about sickness absence. However, when it's not so clear cut, the absence will be influenced by social and contractual agreements between the employer and employee. Some of these agreements, such as sick pay policies, are explicit.

Quite often, however, the agreements appear to be implicit in the organisation's culture. For example, when someone is not feeling entirely well, does the employer expect them to do what they can, or does it suggest to the employee that they take time off and only come back when they are completely better?

The employer may find it hard to judge these more discretionary absences fairly and to avoid this difficult scenario may resort to a doctor's note. This tends to do little more than move the difficult judgement to a doctor, who may be less equipped to know what is driving the absence and how to resolve it.

The danger in not addressing discretionary absence in its early stages is that the absence can become entrenched, and the illness role validated. And once absent for a length of time, staff can find it hard to return.

Health researchers now recognise the positive health value of being in work.

While the workplace was previously thought of as a place for the fit and well, we now understand it can actually be therapeutic for staff to be at work even when they are not completely well. Conversely, staying away from work can worsen an illness and prolong recovery.

Leading employers are promoting this positive message to staff and implementing it in their approach to sickness absence. Instead of relying on sick notes, they are asking doctors to identify which of the employee's work activities are medically inadvisable, and which can help the employee recover and return to work. They are also working with front-line management to identify and tackle any work issues that may be exacerbating the absence.

As many employers have discovered, there are no easy fixes. Nor are there universal prescriptions for best practice, a solution which works well in one workplace may not work in another.

As a leading provider of income protection, UnumProvident works closely with employers to help them understand the unique drivers of their sickness absence, and to manage the many factors which influence whether their employees will choose to be at work.

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