Managing Absenteeism

Although we have seen a reduction in the level of absenteeism since 2022, illness related absences are on the rise again and to effectively manage absenteeism, Employers need comprehensive strategies that combine policies and procedures, communication, and support systems. Managers should be able to understand their policies and consider the appropriate leave option.

High levels of absenteeism can have serious implications on an Organisation, so it is important for Employers to understand and calculate the costs associated with absenteeism.

What is considered high levels of absenteeism?

There is no set standard on what is considered high when it comes to unexpected absences although a healthy figure is generally below 4%. According to our HR Barometer 7.1, the absence rate for Organisations across Ireland expected for the full year in 2023 is at 6%, slightly higher than what is seen as more manageable.

The effects of high levels of absenteeism

- Increased cost for Employers.
- A further increase in the levels of absences.
- Increased workload.
- Planning cover.
- Quality of work.
- Extended task deadlines.
- Decreased staff morale.
- Increased turnover and.
- Amendments to documentation to ensure compliance.

What is an absence rate and how do I calculate it?

An absence rate is a record or metric of sporadic periods of absenteeism relating to illness or other personal reasons. All Employers should understand their Organisations absences rates, as well as each individual departments to ensure their managers can put the appropriate measures in place. A high level of absenteeism may reflect a more serious issue in your Organisation as a whole, or within a particular department.

The calculation = (The period of absences / Number of workdays in the period) x 100.

The calculation allows Organisations to identify if high levels of unexpected absences is causing a problem. It allows management to assess which departments have higher levers than others to analyse the metrics and determine the appropriate measures. By introducing the necessary absence management protocols, it will reduce the levels of unexpected absences and foster a healthier, more productive, and efficient workforce.

Managing High levels of Sporadic or Unexpected Absenteeism

1) Robust Policies and Procedures

As a first action point, Employers should conduct an internal review of their absence policies and procedures to assess whether they could be amended. Employers should also assess whether their current policies are being adhered too.

The notification requirements for reporting an absence should be discussed with your management team to review what the current practice is. Naturally, it is far easier for an Employee to send a text message to their manager as opposed to making a phone call. Employers should adopt the approach that all Employees must call in advance to their line manager, or another manager if unavailable, at least 2 hours before their start time. By accepting a text message to a manager or even to a colleague to inform that you are unwell as appropriate, you are fostering an environment whereby it is 'easy' to call in sick to work.

2) Setting Boundaries

If absenteeism has never been addressed as an issue, or even highlighted within an Organisation, it is important to communicate plans before acting. It may be necessary to update all staff with the Organisations absence rate and highlight the implications and measures that you plan on rolling out over the next couple of months. Proper forewarning is essential for any fair process.

3) Return to Work Interviews

Return to Work Interviews are an excellent tool for Employers to adopt to document high levels of absenteeism in the workplace in an informal manner. This process involves holding a 1-1 meeting with an Employee on the morning of their return to work. During these meetings, management should request that a return-to-work form is completed by the Employee.

Employers can assess, how the Employee is and if there is any additional support required. It also gives Employers the opportunity to highlight a continuous trend of absences if it is starting to become an issue. Adopting this approach will inevitably put an additional deterrent in place to avoid some of the casual unexpected absences that tend to happen.

4) Disciplinary Action

Disciplinary proceedings can be quite stressful for management, but sometimes necessary. As above, highlighting absenteeism as an issue with staff before starting any formal proceedings is important. It is unreasonable to immediately start a disciplinary process with an Employee who has high levels of absenteeism, when it has never been an issue beforehand. An informal approach may be more suitable as a first action, prior to initiating a disciplinary procedure but objective justifications should always exist to address absenteeism in this way.

5) Improving Workforce Morale

Improving workforce morale can be a massive project for Employers depending on where the Organisation is at. It may be beneficial to make use of a staff survey, or even conduct a culture audit to assess how staff are feeling. As outlined above, high levels of absenteeism can be a result of a serious underlying issue relating to the culture of the Organisation.

Some measures you could look at introducing could be:
- Weekly one-on-one meetings.
- Providing an EAP service.
- Increased flexibility and work life balance.
- Upskill your managers to become better leaders.
- Personal development.
- Continuous positive feedback.
- Workplace activities.
- Investing in your induction and onboarding process.

6) Flexible Working

Many Employees struggle daily trying to find a balance between their personal and work life commitments resulting in burnout, stress, or several other health problems. Adopting a flexible working approach will support Employees which in turn will reduce the levels of absenteeism. The

degree of flexibility an Employer can provide depends on the operational requirements and it may not always be suitable.

Overall, there are several measures Employers can implement to reduce high levels of absenteeism in the workplace. The most important factor whether you decide to adopt any of the above measures is consistency with your approach. Managing absenteeism can be time consuming, but the rewards make such efforts worthwhile.

If your Organisation needs advice, support, or guidance in relation to compliance with employment legislation or indeed any HR issues, please contact Adare Human Resource Management for details of supports under our Partnership Programme.

Contact Details: Phone (01) 561 3594 or email info@adarehrm.ie

Adare Human Resource Management is a team of expert-led Employment Law, Industrial Relations and best practice Human Resource Management consultants.