

Presenteeism: A Hidden Cost to Employers

Absenteeism has long been regarded as a key focus for employers when it comes to ensuring the smooth running of their businesses— after all, the impact of having workers physically not doing their work can be huge. But with COVID-19 now seeing many employers unable to check on the physical and mental wellbeing of their staff as easily, how can they make sure that their teams are well and fit for work from afar?

Kevin Rogers, CEO of Paycare — a not-for-profit Health Cash Plan provider — explains how there's even more risk of employees suffering from presenteeism as a result of not being in the physical workplace and therefore feeling pressurised to continue working, and offers advice for businesses on how to mitigate the financial impact of lower productivity.

“So many of us have adapted to new ways of working — some of us are already well versed in flexible working, but others have been thrown in at the deep end, particularly those whose jobs are centred around a physical workplace.

“This means that there's potentially a huge gap between those who are able to manage and cope with balancing work and home life effectively, and those who are finding it more difficult to make the transition. Whilst we've had a few weeks to adjust to this new way of working now, the common productivity issues that many businesses can face in ordinary times — such as absenteeism and presenteeism — are still huge potential issues, perhaps even more so than before.

“Presenteeism is essentially the act of showing up for work while feeling unwell or unable to function effectively. Employees may not be able to operate at their full capacity due to stress, illness, a long-term condition or a number of other factors.

“At a time when most of the UK's employees are working from home, actually taking a day off poorly is going to seem more pointless due to the fact that we don't have to show up to work physically — it can be hidden very easily.

“But what issues does working when ill have on an employee's health and performance, and what does that mean to an employer and wider business? While many employees assume that 'working' when poorly is beneficial to the business and that they're doing the right thing by carrying on as normal, it could be doing more harm than good.

“Decreased productivity, poor work quality, and compromised safety, not to mention longer recovery times, mean that working whilst ill is actually having an adverse effect. It also costs businesses on average £605 per employee every year¹.

“Presenteeism specifically can be caused by underlying mental health conditions — something which is very prominent given the times we’re currently living in. The likelihood of employees facing struggles with their mental wellbeing is increased massively as a result of COVID-19, whether they’ve had issues before or not. This is a completely new challenge being thrown at everyone, and we’re all going to cope with it in different ways.

“Some may be impacted by financial worry, the change around the way they work, the security of their jobs, and of course the health and wellbeing of their loved ones. It’s a lot of pressure for anyone, and I believe that the issue of presenteeism will only be exacerbated by it.”

So, what steps can employers take to avoid presenteeism and help team members who are feeling unwell or stressed during this highly uncertain time? Here, Kevin shares his top tips to preventing presenteeism in the ‘virtual’ workplace:

- Take a close look at your company’s sick leave policy: strategies with strict rules may discourage staff from taking time off. Conversely, managers with a supportive attitude towards absence and a more flexible approach can help drive down presenteeism incidences
- Manage workloads: becoming stressed or overburdened because of the demands of the job — plus coping with the added pressures of living through a global health pandemic — mean staff may struggle on rather than admitting they need some time off. Engaging with staff, encouraging open discussions and trying to restructure workloads where practical can help boost morale (and lessen the chances of stress-related illnesses)
- Focusing on balance: encouraging regular breaks and emphasising the need for a break away from emails outside of working hours can help staff with their work/life balance
- Wellbeing perks: lots of companies are now offering benefits and perks relating to employee wellbeing, looking at the bigger picture of how these can benefit not only the staff but the company too, thanks to increase productivity and loyalty (and of course, less presenteeism). Perks can include Employee Assistance Programmes where confidential one-to-one advice is given over the phone and/or a 24-hour GP service so team members can get professional advice any time of day or night.

Since 1874, Paycare (formerly known as Patient’s Aid Association) has worked to help individuals, families, businesses, and their employees access a variety of preventative and reactive healthcare services which protect their financial, physical and mental health and wellbeing. Its dedicated mental health division — Paycare Wellbeing — launched in 2019 and provides qualified and confidential training to corporate groups including managers, CEOs and HR teams. For more information, please visit www.paycare.org, its COVID-19 page on www.paycare.org/coronavirus, or call 01902 371000.