

Presenteeism the unseen absence in the workplace

We have all been there. You have a stinking cold and really should be tucked up in bed with a cup of **hot** lemon but instead you have dragged yourself into the office as your emails are out of control and you have an important conference call with a potential new client. Whilst this is admirable and may be perceived as the correct thing to do, is this the most productive use of your time and how much damage are you doing to both yourself and the company's productivity in the long run?

Presenteeism- the practice of being present at one's place of work for more hours than is required– is described by [Professor Sir Cary Cooper at Manchester University](#) as the biggest threat to UK workplace productivity, costing the UK economy almost twice as much as absenteeism. Whilst the term is relatively new, the concept of employees either turning up for work ill or attending the office when they should not, has been around for generations but with increasing concern about job security, is more prevalent than ever.

As expected the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's findings show that presenteeism is more prevalent in companies where long working hours are seen as the norm, and where targets and figures tend to take precedence over employee wellbeing. Studies by Fellowes show more than half of UK workers currently continue to work at below par levels rather than taking days off to recover which can further prolong the effect of illness.

Legal & General research carried out in 2012 suggested absenteeism can lead to a 4% reduction in productivity but presenteeism can be as high as 12%. Proving furthermore, that the inhibition to stay in work has a detrimental impact on the quality of an employee's output.

So what can companies do to tackle this ever-growing issue without breaking the bank?

Firstly, companies should renew and revamp their sickness policy to incorporate details of both absence and illness at work. Something as simple as confirming it is ok to have a day off when ill can reinforce the notion people will not be penalised for being sick. Additionally, senior members of staff being seen to have days off when ill can reinforce this notion.

Operate an open door policy and remove the mental health stigma. Giving employees the chance to speak about their feelings or the pressure of work/family life helps with the overall awareness of the situation. Preferable this should not be HR or management as employees will often be reluctant to speak to them. A popular alternative is to employ a “buddy system” or Mental Health Champions who have received appropriate mental health training.

Whilst it has been suggested flexible working has led to employees working longer hours, the overall concept of choosing when and how you work can be empowering and vital for employees. This will allow them to work when they are most productive and reap the rewards.

Make use of or implement health and wellbeing benefits. Research shows employees who have a strong health and wellbeing package are likely to be more loyal to their employer. Most Group Benefit products offer a free of charge Employee Assistance Programme, which have a 24/7 free of charge helpline assisting in anything from financial worries to stress counselling. Promote and make sure employees are aware of this.

Ultimately, happy and healthy employees do better work and companies that promote employee wellbeing will in the end outperform any that emphasise solely on productivity.

Dan is one of our Employee Benefit Consultants and can be contacted on 01883 332260 or daniel.pullin@wingatebs.com

References

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