

## ATTENDANCE MATTERS

### 5 simple key actions for managing sickness

#### 1. Devise a straightforward policy on sickness

As with all performance management, whether it is day to day or sickness absence management, it's crucial to have a standard clearly set out for everyone to see. Ideally your sickness policy should be included within your employee handbook.

It should state clearly and simply your position on: reporting in for sick – the how, when and by what method, the criteria required to be eligible for sick pay (both statutory and company sick pay if you have it), your position on medical examinations, light work, attending medical appointments, protocols for infectious diseases, and importantly any disciplinary sanctions that may be attached to ill health or failure to follow the standard in place.

#### 2. Record every single absence

To manage sickness effectively you need to record every single instance of sickness absence. Adopt a simple method of capturing the following information:

- The date of the absence
- The length of absence whether it be a half day, few hours or several weeks
- The reason given for the absence
- When / if you received a self certificate and was it completed fully – if not investigate why
- When / if you received a fit to work note

#### 3. Complete a return to work interview (RTW) – *every time*

RTW interviews are one of the most powerful tools when managing sick absence and yet many employers find them a challenge. Could it be that asking an employee about their medical issues feels too personal or insensitive? Sometimes it is but if you don't, how will you understand what has kept the employee away from work? As an employee you certainly have a right to privacy; however as an employer you need to know the impact of any further sickness on their attendance.

Employees who know that they will have to sit down in a face to face meeting with their manager (every time) when they return to work may feel less likely to take unnecessary days off work.

It is not unreasonable to ask: How an employee is feeling? Are they well enough and ready to be back at work? Do they foresee there being another instance of sick absence of this type? And then to welcome the employee back to work and ensure the employee is fully up to speed on what has been happening while they were away.

In some instances the reason given for sick absences are not always the whole picture. Employees sometimes take sick days for other reasons such as: looking after a family member, or if they have a domestic emergency that they don't feel they can share with you, they may be stressed, or perhaps being bullied at work, or just be fed up and demotivated or even in some cases even going for a job interview. During the RTW interview you can gently probe (not interrogate) into the reason for the absence and it is only when you have done this can you decide how best to manage the situation from that point on.

The RTW interview also allows you to check whether any adjustments need to be made to accommodate your returning employee. This can be important as employers have a responsibility to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made for employees. It could be that for a period of time reduced hours are required or more regular rest breaks. Equally there are times that during the interview you need to make the employee fully aware that their job is at risk if their attendance continues not to be of an acceptable level.

In all instance use a RTW interview form to ensure you use the same format with every employee and have a written record of your conversation with your returning employee.

#### **4. Understand why employees are taking sick absence**

Collect data to analyse trends regarding why employees are taking sickness absence and for how long as well as the frequency of sickness periods. Measure the hours / days lost against to the overall hours /days available to give you a figure to work towards improving. Attendance will never be perfect – employees (and you) are human after all!

Compare your data to industry standards. Through proper investigation you may identify issues to be addressed. For example you could find your workplace is too hot or too cold, you may have poor sanitation or below standard kitchen hygiene or there may be a requirement to review working hours or revised shift / break patterns.

Make a plan, begin addressing each issue and then measure the results and evaluate the progress you are making.

#### **5. Consider other interventions – get creative if you need to!**

Anything you can do to promote health and wellbeing at work should encourage employees to look after themselves or seek professional advice in relation to their health. Show that you are interested in topics such as mental health, healthy eating, health and safety, physical health, smoking cessation, alcohol dependency.

We must be clear, no one is expecting you to become an expert on these topics but there are many leaflets and much information that could be included on a healthy workplace section of intranet or even a staff notice board. Consider an affiliation with a local gym many of whom offer attractive corporate rates.

Alternatively some employers offer incentives for certain levels of attendance, (not always ideal as you want employees to come to work but not at any cost!), but sometimes the thought of a prize or additional days holiday if a certain attendance level is met may encourage an employee to come to work.

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Kate Kelk Director                      email | [kate@cajunhrservices.co.uk](mailto:kate@cajunhrservices.co.uk)      T | 07803726931 |

Jenny Smallman Director              email | [jenny@cajunhrservices.co.uk](mailto:jenny@cajunhrservices.co.uk)      T | 07836 724464 |



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