Reducing Absenteeism: 2011

Two ways to look at absenteeism

Staffing environments today are “lean and mean,” and there’s no doubt that employers struggle when employees are expected to get the job done and don’t show up. So when does a manager stop trying to be patient? When is enough enough? What’s the best way to handle this troublesome subject?

In this day of advanced technology and diverse, geographically challenged workforces, many believe there are two ways to look at absenteeism: the traditional way, and the new way. We’re strong believers in the new way. But we also recognize that there are many companies who are not quite there yet.

So first, here’s more about the traditional way.

There are two kinds of workplace absenteeism: the kind employees can’t help – when they’re out due to illness or injury, for instance – and the kind they can: when they sleep through the alarm clock, take a sick day when not really sick, or just fail to show up. Fortunately the former is the most common.

For several years, CCH (formerly the Commerce Clearinghouse) conducted a poll on the sources and solutions for workplace absenteeism (when asked why they stopped, their answer was simply that they’ve moved to other things, but it could be that they too have bowed to the new way).

The last and final CCH Unscheduled Absence Survey, conducted in 2007, found that personal illness accounted for just a third (34%) of unscheduled absences, while two-thirds were due to other reasons, including family issues (22%), personal needs (18%), entitlement mentality (13%) and stress (13%). The survey found, on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being most effective), that the work-life programs rated highest for reducing unscheduled absences were alternative work arrangements (3.6), telecommuting (3.5), compressed workweek (3.3), leave for school functions (3.2) and flu shot programs (3.2). But unfortunately, these researchers also found that telecommuting and compressed workweek were not the programs that were being most used. And paid leave banks, which were reported to work best year after year, were reported not used by 40% of companies surveyed.

Reducing unscheduled absenteeism: some traditional solutions

These offerings have been shown by both research and company experience to reduce unscheduled absence:

- Flexible work arrangements
- Paid leave banks
- Sick care and backup care for both children and adults
- Leave for school functions
- Onsite health services
- Employee assistance programs
- Wellness and fitness efforts
- Dependent care resource and referral services
- Flu shot programs
- Onsite childcare
- Families allowed to join shift workers on meal breaks
- Converting unused paid sick days to additional pay or vacation
- Multilingual hotline for low-wage workers
- A day's salary for every sick day not used
- Hourly vacations
- Treating each absence as an "occurrence" and penalizing for a certain number of occurrences
- No-fault policy
- 30 hours' work for 40 hours pay
- Letting new parents phase back after childbirth or adoption
- Allowing employees to carry over unused sick days for future use
- Contraception coverage

And these have been found to be either ineffective or unfair to legitimately sick employees:

- Personal recognition or other rewards for good attendance
- "Use it or lose it" sick days
- Sick-day policies
- Bonus programs
- Buyback
- Return to work interviews

Here's what California HR expert Diana Gregory recommends. First, establish and communicate a clear attendance policy and train supervisors and managers to enforce it consistently. Address individuals with poor attendance immediately. Track attendance and absenteeism to make sure you catch patterns that seem to be out of the "norm." Track departmental and organizational attendance (is one department experiencing a higher rate of absenteeism than the rest of the organization? Investigate). Get familiar with your industry's absenteeism rates. If it's 30% and yours is 50%, you may have an organization-wide problem. Employee surveys or other feedback programs may help you learn what could be causing those high rates.

**Another way to think about absenteeism**

Even though we know instinctively that the number of hours employees spend at work don't necessarily equal the amount of work that's done, for many of us, measuring those hours is the only way to know whether they're doing their job. We suggest that there is another way for the majority of employees. It involves taking our eyes off the clock and focusing on results.

Here's the rub. It means taking a careful look at what each employee needs to accomplish or produce, setting measurable goals, and being clear about what success will look like when it's achieved.

For some employees, it isn't an easy task, or it may require measuring a combination of results and hours. A retail cashier must simply be there, and if they're not, they must be replaced. But it may also be possible to set goals and occasionally observe the cashier's performance, or ask occasional customers to complete a 3 question survey. Was the person cheerful and welcoming? Did the customer feel well-treated? Did they get any questions answered competently? There's nearly always a way to measure results.

It may be true that some managers are simply not clear about the desired outcomes for many of their employees, and to become clear would call for adding a new task to an already-full plate. It's simply
easier to look at hours and physical presence when calculating whether an employee is worth his/her salt. (Only wet babies like change, as the saying goes.)

We’re suggesting that the payoff for setting measurable goals for each employee is well worth the time it may take. In 2007, University of Minnesota researchers took a close look at Best Buy, which had implemented a program called ROWE – “Results Only Work Environment.” That study of 658 employees compared those who participated in ROWE with those who worked in a more traditional environment. It found “statistically significant” patterns of change in both employees and the work. More ROWE employees reported a decrease in work-family spillover and a better “fit” between work and personal schedules. They were more satisfied and more viewed the culture as family-friendly. Fewer ROWE workers came to work sick, and more saw their doctors when they needed to. They exercised more frequently, had more energy and slept better. Fewer felt they were doing low value work, felt pressure to work overtime or had thoughts about quitting. They had greater organizational commitment and more job satisfaction. And a BusinessWeek article also reported on the program: average voluntary turnover among ROWE participants fell drastically, it said, and productivity rose an average 35%.

Absenteeism? They simply took their eyes off whether people actually came to work and focused on the results they produced.

It may not be for everyone. But here’s a suggestion that’s easily doable. Ask for volunteers and conduct a three-month pilot. Set goals for it. Ask each participant, with their manager’s help, to set measurable goals for their own work and be clear about how they’ll know success when they see it. Then see if absenteeism doesn’t become a non-issue.