

The 5 essentials for managing sickness absence

Janice Haddon, MD, offers advice about managing sickness absence...

According to statistics, today is classed as “National Sickie Day”, and that suggests a lot of people are going to come down with sudden “colds”, “stomach bugs” and “I-don’t-want-to-work-today-type illnesses”. It also means that HR managers nationwide will be fielding calls regarding unscheduled absences.

So, how can HR managers manage not just these absences, but sickness overall?

There are some fundamental things that can be done, and HR practitioners and line managers should remain fair and consistent when it comes to handling sickness absences. Here are my 5 essentials when it comes to businesses dealing with sickness absence.

1. Have a clear policy in place

When you have a clear policy in place, absence from work becomes easier to manage. It is important that employees are clear about expectations, that they are treated fairly and that managers know how to handle absence correctly. Most absence is genuine so deal with it sensitively.

2. Keep records of absence.

You cannot manage absences effectively if you don’t record them. The key to managing absenteeism is accurate recording and producing management information so you can recognise patterns, both in individual employees and in certain departments. This will help you highlight what the problems are so you can establish a plan of action and rectify the situation.

3. Return to work interviews

For all absences, employees should complete a sickness absence form when they return to work stating the reasons for their absence. Return to work interviews should then be conducted by their manager to establish the reasons for absence and if the employee is fit to return to work. This is essential to ensure that your health and safety and duty of care responsibilities are fully met. It is important to handle these interviews sensitively and to take all reasonable care to understand why the employee has been away from work and what can be done to help them return.

The return to work interview ensures that your employees know that you effectively manage sickness absence and that, in itself, will help you to control the level of absence.

4. Frequent and Long Term Absence

If you are dealing with an employee who is frequently absent from work, then you need to fully establish the reasons and communicate expectations going forward. For frequent,

ad hoc absence follow the stages in your procedure in order to gain significant improvements. You may withdraw the right to self-certification absence, if your policy is written correctly. All absence from then on will therefore need to be supported by a medical certificate.

If you have long-term sickness absence, maintain contact and discuss an appropriate timeframe for a return to work. There may be measures you can put in place, such as reduced working hours for a time period, a change to some duties etc, in order to transition them back into their normal contractual hours and role.

5. Dismissal

Following your policy and the appropriate stages will enable you to put employees on notice for improvement. If their absence rate continues to fall below expectation, the ultimate stage in your procedure will be to instigate dismissal proceedings.

In the case of long-term sickness, you may consider cessation of their contract or early retirement on the grounds of ill health.

Make sure you follow procedure, give due consideration to the employee's contract, your policy and the law. If you step outside of that, it will damage your reputation and be very costly in managing claims.