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Feature

Presenteeism May Be Costing Your Organization More Than Absenteeism

How employers should deal with it

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Organizations who are looking closely at issues of Presenteeism (not just at absenteeism) in the workplace will be well served in building resilient and responsive cultures.

You may be wondering what presenteeism is, how do you know it's an issue for your organization and what to do about it if presenteeism is a concern.

Presenteeism is commonly defined as employees who come to work despite having a sickness or issue that justifies an absence. As the result of them coming to work, their performance is less than optimal and potentially creates a series of other concerns such as reduced capacity to handle stress or crisis, decline in productivity, mistakes they would not normally make and communication breakdowns to name a few. It occurs when an individual's ongoing physical or mental/emotional conditions prevent employees from being fully present and productive at work. Examples of this include ailments that can affect your employees such as mental health issues, dealing with grief, asthma, chronic pain, arthritis, migraines, allergies, depression, diabetes and anxiety — the list of conditions is long and varied. Your organization and employees could be more affected than you realize.

When employees come to work not fully and mentally present due to sickness, extreme stress, family crisis or after a significant loss, they are not allowing themselves the time they need to get better, heal or deal with the situation at hand. There is much research connecting stressful life events to a variety of health issues to absenteeism and presenteeism. Employees who have had a major health issue such as surgery or medical treatment for chronic illness are more likely to take time off such as sick days or access health benefits. This is an example of absenteeism and a good reason to take time off work.

Many organizations are struggling with how to address this issue. Building team charters, providing training, scheduling informational in-services and improving the workplace culture go a long way in addressing the issue of employee engagement and supporting employees when they need help the most.

Employees who have sought psychological help, counselling or other supports for mental health related issues are more likely to present with presenteeism and not as likely to take time off work. We see this more commonly in employees who have aging parents (where the employee is actively involved with their care), employees who are parents, lower waged employees, employees where there is uncertainty in their employment status (e.g. still on probation, temporary or seasonal employees) and individuals who struggle in setting boundaries in times of stress or in demanding situations.

There are a number of reasons that employees don't take time off when they should, including financial, no backup plan or anyone to assist with workload in their absence, fear of returning and being overwhelmed with additional work, commitments (e.g. to meetings, projects, events, deadlines), concerns about job security and concerns about how they will be perceived by others

Organizations tend to track, monitor and measure absenteeism because there are systems and processes in place to more easily do this. However, presenteeism is not typically measured or monitored because it is less tangible and often the employer is not aware that this is an issue. Many employers make assumptions that if sickness rates are low in the organization, then their employees must be healthy and well. Research tells us that the costs of presenteeism could in fact be greater than those of absenteeism. Sometimes the workplace culture has embedded in it an undertone of "come to work regardless..."

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Employees then feel guilt or fear if they were to take time off. We see this a lot after community crisis situations such as following a disaster. Employees feel that their situation may not be as severe as others so they come to work.

What can organizations do to effectively identify and deal with presenteeism? Here are examples of what some organizations have effectively implemented:

- Create a culture where employee health, wellness and mental health is valued, talked about and modelled. A culture where it is safe to approach your supervisor to request a couple of days off or a shift change to allow time to deal with a family issue that is impacting their ability to work productively, safely and efficiently. Create a culture of care.

- Work from home day.

- Monthly "just because" or mental health or wellness day or a bank of flex days per year. Many organizations handle this similar to their sick time.

- Support employees through training in skill sets that can help them cope such as work life harmony or stress management training, communication and conflict resolution skills training, time management and productivity support.

- Train managers and supervisors to be alert to employees at work who are unwell and how to respond.

- Ensure your policies support a culture of wellness.

- Senior executives should encourage a positive culture that encourages good attendance when people are well but supports employees in taking necessary time off which also includes return to work practices.

Some organizations are engaging employees in their presenteeism strategy planning- what a great approach to engaging employees in a way that benefits the organization and culture.

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