

5 Reasons for Absenteeism: What Can You Do?

By: Fred Decker

Few things can alter a routine day faster than unscheduled employee absences. Large firms or departments can roll with the punches more effectively than smaller workplaces. But even there the cumulative effects of lost productivity and higher stress can become a significant problem. Annual absenteeism surveys performed by consulting firm CCH through 2007 demonstrated that a relatively small sample of factors accounted for most absenteeism:



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- **Illness:** Genuine illness is, in fact, the most common single reason to use a sick day. It typically accounts for about one third of all unscheduled days off.
- **Family Issues:** Employees have kids – and increasingly, parents – who require care. Sometimes that conflicts with getting to work.
- **Personal Needs:** Signing a mortgage, receiving an important package, or anything else that's crucial to the employee can sometimes conflict with company time.
- **"Entitlement Mentality":** A vague and perhaps pejorative term, CCH uses it as a catch-all for employees who feel they deserve or are owed time, and simply take it.
- **Stress:** Lack of job fulfillment, trouble with the boss, overwork or harassment – anything that contributes to stress and poor morale is a driver for absenteeism.

So what can you do? Quantify your current level of absenteeism, so you can set a baseline measurement. If your staff works "on the clock," punching in and out, that information is readily available. Otherwise, you might need to rely on managers and supervisors to note who's out of the office.

Once you've sized up the problem, try to get a feel for what's really going on. If you note that some of your staff is absent more often than others, find opportunities to speak to them directly. Remember, it's not an interrogation. Polite concern for the employee's well-being, and a genuine desire to identify potential trouble areas should be your motivators. Often the problem can be resolved simply, once it's identified.

The 2007 CCH study reported that family issues and personal needs accounted for about 40 percent of all unexcused absences, and in most cases these are the easiest to negotiate. Flexible work schedules, periodic telecommuting and compressed work weeks are all well-proven strategies for accommodating family or personal issues. Or you might simply offer a set number of "personal days" as opposed to sick days.

Workplace stress can be easy to address, as well. Improved lighting can reduce seasonal "gloominess," and upgraded office chairs can reduce fatigue and stiffness. Better monitors can minimize eyestrain, and ergonomic keyboards can help keep carpal-tunnel syndrome at bay. More important, these changes show your employees that you're interested in their well-being. And that is good for morale.

Management's role in stress prevention is more complex. Creating new responsibilities and friendly competitions can help keep employees engaged if their positions aren't fulfilling. Stopping inappropriate or bullying interactions between employees is also important, because if left unchecked it's not only unproductive but can potentially result in legal liability. Overbearing or punitive management styles can be more difficult to address, and might require a hard look in the mirror. If you suspect there's an issue, it's easier to have a manager from another workgroup make quiet inquiries on your behalf.

Additionally, management can address the issues collectively identified as "entitlement." Employees who feel unappreciated sometimes act out by "playing hooky," to their employer's detriment. If your perception of these employees' job performance varies sharply from theirs, perhaps it's time to ask yourself how clearly performance is measured and communicated in your workplace. For employees, understanding what's expected is the first step toward measuring up. If you have a number of chronic offenders, you might find it necessary to create a formal absenteeism policy. Your standards should include escalating disciplinary action, so all employees, even the "entitled" ones, understand where the boundaries are.

As for genuine illnesses, it's in your interest to encourage staffers to stay home when they're contagious. A desire to "gut it out" is admirable. But few people do their best work when sick and miserable. Providing plenty of hand-washing and hand-sanitizing stations can help slow the spread of communicable illness. The seasons for allergy and flu are predictable, and having a few extra staffers available – and providing flu shots for employees – can help reduce their impact.

In short, there's no "silver bullet" to fix absenteeism, but most of its root causes can be addressed and moderated with creative management and a healthy dose of common sense.