

CBI / AXA Absence and Wellbeing Management Conference 2008

This annual event took place on 14th May and this year focused on proactively managing attendance and wellbeing, a welcome move away from reactively managing absence.

The conference is a vehicle for launching the CBI/AXA annual absence survey figures which for 2007 had fallen a little on the previous year from 7.0 days per employee in 2006 to 6.7 days per employee in 2007 with a direct cost of circa £517 per employee. Given the focus of the Health, Work & Wellbeing Agenda, the Stress Management Standards and the huge sums of money pumped into the NHS, the figure of 6.7 days is only 1.5 days lower than 20 years ago and remains disappointing for employers and for government.

The gap between the best performing employers and the worse performing employers remains high at 2.3 days per employee at the lower end and 11.5 days per employee at the highest end with SMEs performing significantly better than larger employers. The survey does not purport to be research and there is no way of knowing exactly why this gap is so large but one cannot help but wonder if employee engagement is greater in SMEs than in larger organisations and if that is the case, why it should be and what can be done about it.

The public sector absence figures are still significantly higher than those from the private sector at 9.0 days per employee and 5.8 days respectively. This is perhaps not surprising given that the public sector includes fire fighters, paramedics, police and nurses all of whom have sometimes dangerous and stressful jobs which do not readily lend themselves to light duties or even to cosseting members of staff who are "under the weather" for a short time.

Not surprisingly, absence amongst manual workers remains higher than non-manual workers (7.6 days compared with 6.1 days).

Every year the survey shows that absence is higher in unionised environments than in non-unionised organisations but it is easy to read more into this than is reasonable. The public sector is heavily unionised and additionally, trade unions tend to seek recognition in those organisations where staff are less well treated and their wellbeing less well considered so one would anticipate higher than average absence figures.

Long term absence, that is 20 days or more, has a disproportionate impact on lost working time and although not recorded, probably has a disproportionate impact on management time in dealing with the issues. Non-work related stress remains the greatest reason for long term absences for non-manual workers.

Short Term Absence	%	Long term absence	%
Minor illness	98%	Non work related stress	66%
Back pain	47%	Work related stress/depression	50%
Other musculo-skeletal problems	40%	Other musculo-skeletal problems	48%
Non work related stress/depression	48%	Back pain	45%
Work related stress/depression	36%	Cancer	33%
Non work related injuries	28%	Heart/blood pressure problems	26%
Respiratory problems	20%	Non work related injuries	26%
Work related injuries	24%	Respiratory problems	10%
Heart/blood pressure problems	11%	Minor illness	11%
Cancer	2%	Work related injuries	5%

A number of speakers addressed the conference, many of whom had stories to tell about how their organisations had approached attendance issues. There was a powerful message that 'good work is good for you', with the opposite, of course, being just as true.

Of particular interest was one organisation which had expressly linked absence with recruitment; the premise being that square pegs in round holes are unlikely to be happy and fulfilled and therefore more likely to be ill and for longer. We think this is an unarguable fact and if the cost of recruitment is added to the cost of absence it is easy to see how poor recruitment and selection practices go straight to the bottom line.

Achieving an equitable balance between work and private lives was another recurrent message. Organisations approach the issue in different ways; many have flexible working models that allow employees to manage their lives in a way that best meets their individual needs. Others provide debt counselling and other supportive services which encourage employees to deal with their life issues without them impinging on the workplace. It is easy to see that if an employee has an overwhelming external issue, then their focus is not going to be on the job at hand and the outcome could be a protracted stress related illness.

Occupational Health featured strongly with one public sector organisation working with all the GPs in their catchment area, giving those GPs direct and free referral access to the organisation's Occupational Health provider. This reduced sickness absence for the organisation and reduced patient contacts for the GPs - a true win-win situation.

Several organisations had undertaken stress audits and addressed the issues highlighted by the audit.

The audience was left in little doubt that managing attendance has a greater impact than managing absence and that the cost incurred by properly training managers in recruitment, enlisting the help of occupational health providers and/or moving the organisational culture to one that embraces a flexible and output orientated focus more than balances the cost of high sickness absence levels and makes for a happier and more productive and innovation workplace.

This article would not be complete without a report on the political input to the conference. Dame Professor Carol Black outlined her proposals for a 'fit certificate' to replace the current 'sick certificate' and her proposals were supported by Dr Peter Holden from the BMA, although he was of the view that there are currently insufficient Occupational Health professionals and the associated money to make the proposals a realistic option in the short term.

Lord McKenzie, a Minister from the Department of Work and Pensions talked of government proposals to get people off incapacity benefit and back into the workplace through private companies working under contract to the government to place and support the long term sick getting back to work. Chris Grayling, Shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, also focused on the significant numbers of people drawing incapacity benefit and in particular the large numbers of young people who have never worked and are, by the age of 30, already on incapacity benefit. It is not yet clear how these proposals will be implemented but given the current momentum it seems likely we will see or feel pressure to employ those who have been out of the workplace for significant lengths of time doubtless with attached financial benefits for participating employers.

If attendance is an issue for your organisation, contact us to find how we help organisations both in diagnosing the issues and in training your line managers to put matters right.

Brenda Roper
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