ASSESSING AND MEASURING SICKNESS ABSENCE

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Sickness absence is a challenge for any enterprise be it small, medium or large. For small businesses, at least 4 days are spent away from work due to sickness and 5.5 days annually for businesses with an employee base of 50 to 249 workers (CIPD, 2016). For large organizations with a workforce of over 5000 employees, an estimated 9.4 days is lost annually per worker.

Research reveals that an estimated £29 billion is spent annually on sickness absence costs in the UK (Halsall, Edwards, Baker & Green, 2019).

We aim to discuss sickness absence and attempt to create awareness on the impact of sickness and absenteeism along with how it can be measured and assessed.
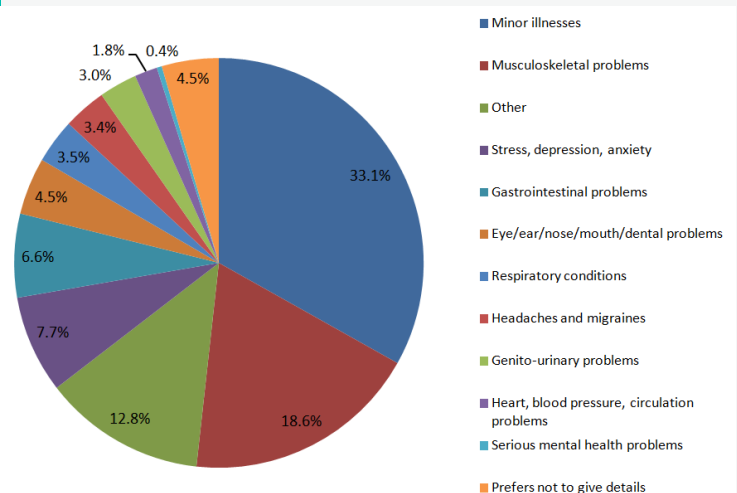
Causes of Sickness Absence

The major cause of short-term absence is minor illnesses, followed by stress. Similarly, long-term absence is continuously attributed to acute medical conditions, stress, and mental ill health.

Studies show that non-genuine absence is ranked among the top five reasons for short-term absence for 25% of the firms surveyed (CIPD, 2016).

The top causes of absence in the private sector are due to illegitimate absence and career/family/home responsibilities. Whereas stress, mental ill health, and musculoskeletal injuries are the main causes of absenteeism in the public sector.

Causes of Sickness Absence in the Workplace

Pie chart legend:
- Minor illnesses — 33.1%
- Musculoskeletal problems — 18.6%
- Other — 12.8%
- Stress, depression, anxiety — 7.7%
- Gastrointestinal problems — 6.6%
- Eye/ear/nose/mouth/dental problems — 4.5%
- Respiratory conditions — 3.5%
- Headaches and migraines — 3.4%
- Genito-urinary problems — 3.0%
- Heart, blood pressure, circulation problems — 1.8%
- Serious mental health problems — 0.4%
- Prefers not to give details — 4.5%

Office of National Statistics 2016

Impact of Sickness

There are several ways sickness absence affects a business. First is the reduction in productivity (Unum, 2018). Frequent absences can delay projects, as well as cause inconsistency within teams as a result of fewer workers. Similarly, the need to seek, train, and pay for the temporary cover, as well as obligations to pay salaries of absent workers adds to direct operating costs.

Covering for absent employees gradually reduces employee morale and motivation. This is especially evident in cases where an employee consistently 'pulls a sickie'. The rest of the team must pick up the workload, increasing stress levels. When handling more tasks simultaneously, mistakes are bound to happen.

Workers under stress are more likely have low enthusiasm and be easily irritated (Østhus & Mastekaasa, 2010). This creates an unhealthy working environment that affects work performance.

Measuring Absence

Measures of absence frequency calculate the average number of periods of absence per employee as a percentage, which is an important measure in planning absence control.

This is achieved using the incidence rate, the individual frequency rate, and the absence frequency rate.

Incidence rate is a measure of the frequency with which a disease or other incident occurs over a specified time period. It is expressed as the number of cases per individual divided by period of observation.

To obtain the individual frequency rate, divide the number of workers taking one or more spells of absence during a period by the number of employees in the period, then multiply by 100. The aim is to show the number of individual employees absent during a period of time as a percentage. The absence frequency rate is the average number of periods of absence per worker as a percentage.

These measures can be applied in supervising and predicting absence levels, as well as functioning as 'triggers' for administration involvement.

In addition to these, an assessment of inception rates – the proportion of new episodes starting in the measurement period – can be obtained by dividing the number of spells of absence starting in a period, with the number of employees.

This can periodically be employed to reveal if patterns of absence are unwavering or not, in addition to establishing if additional absence spells have begun, or if more workers have begun spells of absence.

There are numerous measures of absence periods; however, the major one includes the average duration per person and the average duration per spell.

Bradford Scores

In companies where employees work in shifts, such as call centres, the Bradford scores are a suitable choice for measuring irregular attendance by merging measures of duration and absence frequency. The Bradford scores show the compilation of an employee's sickness absence record comprising of a few or a lot of spells.

The Bradford score is S*S*D. S represents the number of spells of absence in 52 weeks taken by a worker while D represents the number of days of absence in 52 weeks of absence in 52 weeks, the Bradford factor will be 5*5*11 = 275.

The disruption caused by multiple short-term absences is generally greater than that caused by irregular long-term absence (Institute for Employment Studies, 2018). These scores can be used in ascertaining 'trigger points'.

Trigger Points

The purpose of trigger points is to assist managers to highlight the staff in need of critical attention.

The common approach to achieving this is to establish 'triggers' or parameters that can assist in determining when and where action is required.

Triggers can be classified into an unofficial arrangement where timely assessments of a worker's sickness absence pattern is undertaken, and the manager is left to ascertain if any action is needed (SART, 2018). Concurrently, more tightly specified absence thresholds are applied by some workers to determine when administrators should bring in an official review, refer to occupational health, counselling, or take disciplinary action.

Typical triggers may include; three periods of sickness absence within six months, any number of absences that establish a pattern, periods of absence lasting longer than a specified number of weeks. These would then trigger an absence review meeting.

The importance of this information is to assist managers in making better decisions regarding priorities and resources by answering questions concerning the extent, nature, and cost of worker absence.

Conclusion

The impact of sickness absence not only affects the financial growth of a company but also operational efficiencies in the workplace.

The effects are felt in all types of organisations, with smaller business taking the most heat. As a result, different methodologies have been formulated to measure, analyse, and ultimately prevent absenteeism.

Whilst sickness is ultimately inevitable, ensuring proper metrics and processes are adhered to can help businesses control and plan for the occurrences.

Implementing preventative measures, such as record keeping against Bradford scores, and having measures against trigger points being activated, means that businesses can keep on top of employee productivity.

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