

10 Top Tips for How to Manage Absence

Good attendance is a vital factor in the effective operation of our business. High levels of attendance will help to maintain good quality services and an excellent professional reputation. Poor levels of attendance have a major impact on business and will result in poor quality services, damage to the professional reputation of the business, and reduced customers. So how do you reduce absenteeism? Here are a few simple tips.

1. Identify what causes absence

Good attendance is a vital factor in the effective operation of any business. High levels of attendance will help to maintain good quality services and an excellent professional reputation.

Absence is defined as “Any time when the employee is not at his / her place of work during normal working hours or at other times when the employee is contractually required to be at work (e.g. periods of contractual overtime) **OR** when not performing duties away from the workplace including travelling between workplaces at time when required to be undertaking these duties.

It is a good idea to keep a record of all absences and analyse exactly why they occurred so you can react accordingly but don't treat all absences as bad.

Some absences are unavoidable and understandable such as injury or travel problems etc. but even these need to be identified and monitored because if they become frequent, inappropriate or are without authorisation they can escalate into real problems.

Other causes of absence include illness, the employee is stressed due to workload or issues at home, feel bullied/harassed at work, reasonable adjustments to medical issues have not been addressed or they just feel out of their depth. These absences need monitoring so that you can spot and address them and support the employee quickly to avoid them increasing to the detriment of all.

Unauthorised absence is the most serious type of absence and includes things such as not following the phone in or absence reporting procedures of the organisation, taking part in activities whilst off sick that they shouldn't be, exceeding leave allocations or false absence claims. Arriving at work late, taking extended coffee and lunch breaks, and leaving work early can cause the same serious problems as missing work altogether.

These types of absence need to be identified and dealt with quickly using a suitable procedure and disciplinary measures if necessary. Employees need to remember that they are there to do a job which is important and it needs doing whether they are there or not so if they are not, someone else has to step in which affects their workload and possibly their attitude towards the absent employee.

2. Not all absences are bad

In this context bad means unauthorised absence, but for an organisation all absences have a potential to be bad for it. These 'good' absences are split into 3 main categories.

Every employee has statutory entitlement to certain absences such as time off for antenatal appointments, dependant and parental leave as well as jury service. The length of time these are for, and any timelines required, are usually set by government and any employer who does not allow them can face serious consequences such as fines. Even within these types of absence employees do need to follow the statutory as well as organisational procedures of notification, timing and duration etc.

The second category are absences authorised by the employer which are not necessarily statutory. This can include annual leave, which does have a statutory minimum amount per year, but an employer can choose to give additional annual leave over and above this minimum which is usually specified within the contract. It can also include approved attendance on training courses subject to confirmation of attendance and also compassionate leave for attending/organising funerals etc. If an employee sticks to what is in the contract or policy regarding duration, timescales and notification then their absence in these circumstances is classed as authorised.

The third category of absence is absence contractually provided for. In addition to extra annual leave employers can give employees the right have specified amounts of time off for medically certified and self-certified sickness as well as dentist/doctor appointments and on-going medical treatment appointments. These rights are again usually specified in the contract of employment or within specific policies referred to in the contract.

On top of these 3 main categories, employers may, at their discretion, also authorise absences for other events not covered above which are either specified within the relevant organisational policies, or are dealt with on a one to one basis but these in particular need to be monitored to ensure fairness, equality and avoid abuse.

Even though these are 'good' or authorised absences, as said in the previous section, they still need to be identified and monitored so they don't evolve into unauthorised or 'bad absences'.

3. Start at the beginning – the contract

When someone starts working for you they are entering into an employment contract with you and there are certain legal requirements for such a contract. The principle statement of employment particulars must be given on day one of the employment to lay out the key requirements of both the employer and the employee.

It must contain specific information such as the employer and employees names, employers address, places employee will be working from, start date with any continuous service, probationary period, job title or brief job description, pay including frequency and when, working hours, notice period for both sides, training to be completed, holidays and holiday pay, sick leave and pay and any other paid leave or benefits.

As you must include paid leave details, it is a good idea to include a brief summary of the absence from work details from the Absence Policy (see next section for details). You should include the reporting requirements and it is strongly advised not to allow text or email reporting or reporting by a third party unless absolutely necessary. Also include the self certification and fit note requirements. For some professions such as catering or dealing with children, a clause stating you can't return to work for at least 48 hours after a period of vomiting or diarrhoea has ceased should be included. It should also include a brief summary of the return to work options available.

It needs to include the possibility of the organisation requiring a medical examination before your return to work with the support of Occupational Health.

In addition it is always a good idea to include statements like this:

- In the event of your being absent for any reason other than pre-arranged holiday you will be required to complete the organisation's Absence Record form.
- If the absence is not established to the organisation's satisfaction as genuine absence on account of sickness you will not be paid for such day or day's absence.
- In addition to the provisions above, the organisation may take disciplinary action in appropriate circumstances.

Putting all these details within the particulars which the employee signs means that they know from the start what is expected from them in regards to absence.

4. Have a policy, but be flexible

Any organisation should have a policy detailing how they will deal with different types of absence, authorised and unauthorised. This policy needs to be accepted by and communicated to all employees and managers so they know and understand their roles and responsibilities with the procedure.

Any absence policy needs to include the following elements:

How to deal with lateness. This should include the reporting requirements for if someone knows they are going to be late detailing the reason and likely length of the lateness. This could be due to adverse weather conditions, issues with public or private transport, or emergency appointments etc. It should also include any salary implications of the lateness or how to make the time up etc. which you can be flexible on.

Appointments and on-going medical treatment. Again this should include reporting requirements and salary implications with flexibility. Don't forget pregnant women are allowed paid time off for ante-natal appointments.

Compassionate, emergency or family leave. This is for when there is a home or family emergency or a bereavement of a relative etc. Again it is up to the organisation to spell out the reporting and salary implications but you can be flexible.

Public duties. You have to allow an employee time off for jury service and help them fill in a loss of earnings form if necessary. For other public duties it is up to the employer to agree what is reasonable time off, unless there is a specific minimum linked to the duty, and whether none, some or all is paid leave.

Sickness absence. This should again include reporting requirements, self certification for under 7 days and fit notes for over that period, what happens to annual leave accrued during the absence, maintaining contact during the absence, Statutory Sick Pay regulations, procedure for returning to work and long term sickness issues.

It should also outline how you monitor absence, the trigger points that would lead to discussions about high degrees of absence and any relevant actions and warning procedures. You should always monitor all absences to assess if there are specific areas of concern, but also in relation to sickness absence, are there any reasonable adjustments that need to be made to reduce the absence.

5. Treat everyone as an individual but not special

As stated in the previous section you need to have policies and procedures to deal with absence management, and to use these properly. However, if you wrote every possible scenario into the policy, with all the stages and solutions, it would be longer than War and Peace! You need to have the basic principles and legal obligations in there, but then allow flexibility of delivery to accommodate the myriad circumstances that lead to absence and organisational need.

There is nothing more unfair than treating everyone the same. If you do treat everyone the same then those with specific disabilities, requirements or circumstances will be disadvantaged and that is no good for the individual or the organisation. We are all individuals and should be treated accordingly wherever possible.

You need to find out exactly why the absences are occurring, gain as much information from as many sources as possible, and then talk to the employee, informally at first, to bottom out the issues. Do not include the words 'in special circumstances' within policies or procedures for instance, instead say 'all circumstances will be assessed on their own merits' as this will highlight the need to take all things into consideration and remove the 'special' aspect.

Everyone should be assessed individually and, through discussion and negotiation, be provided with a tailored solution for them where possible and practicable. The problem with this approach is that others might think that they are missing out or that they didn't get as much consideration when they had issues.

It is a fine line between treating someone as an individual and providing them with specific, tailored solutions, treating them as a special case and going overboard with trying to help them or turning a blind eye to transgressions. The same procedure should be followed for all but it is the interpretation of the evidence and circumstances which need to be assessed individually. All decisions around adjustments or discipline have to be based on fair evidence from a variety of sources, assessing each on their own merit.

Remember, you must be able to defend your decisions to other employees, management and possibly even an employment tribunal.

6. Conduct return to work interviews

A return to work interview should take place after every period of absence. The purpose of a return to work interview is to ensure that employees know their absences are noted & are taken seriously. They help build relationships and demonstrate that they have been missed and that you value their return. They help to identify and understand causes and provide an opportunity to discuss ways forward. If the absence is not genuine it is harder to tell a story face to face than via someone else or on the phone. Failure to conduct meaningful return to work interviews is linked to ineffective absence control.

Prior to the interview you should obtain as much accurate information on the period of absence as possible and review the employees previous absence record to look for patterns or recurring illnesses. It is good to have an organisational form to complete before, during and after the interview which lists the key points to discuss. However, be mindful that the interview is not a form filling exercise, it is a chance to have meaningful discussions with the employee about their absence.

Interviews should be conducted in private and not in the presence of other employees. Be welcoming and ask how the employee is feeling, check what the absence was for and if they are on any medication and if there are any side effects or storage issues that need to be taken in to consideration, especially if they may affect their ability to do their work. Be sensitive and consistent, don't treat it like an inquisition. Discuss any underlying causes and what the organisation can do to help the employee get back into the swing of things.

Make sure you update the employee on anything they may have missed while being absent relating to the business, site or team, including who has looked after their tasks so they can chat with them for any specific updates. Also discuss the consequences of further absences, especially if unauthorised, by clarifying the trigger points and possible disciplinary consequences. Make sure you note down any action points for the organisation and the employee to take forward.

After the interview make sure any action points are dealt with appropriately and quickly. Ensure the interview notes are clear, accurate and signed by both you and the employee and placed in the employees personnel file.

7. Make reasonable adjustments

Sometimes the absence is due to situations at work aggravating a recurring issue for the employee. If this issue is removed or reduced then maybe the absence will too. When people mention reasonable adjustments most people think of adjustments to help those with a disability gain employment etc. Though this is a very important part of enabling employees to return to work, there are other things that can help reduce absence and help employees return to work successfully after an illness or personal issue.

First of all see if their hours of work need to be reduced or changed either temporarily or permanently. The absence could be due to child or other care issues for instance which need revised hours. Look at a phased return of a few hours or few days a week slowly building as they improve.

The employee may no longer be able to do their old job successfully so look at removing part of the role or transferring specific tasks to other employees. You could look at reducing or removing certain work targets or if necessary transfer the employee to another job entirely. You could consider more supervision or support such as a buddy to help the employee ease back into their role. This kind of adjustment could help those who have mental health concerns as well as physical illnesses.

Sometimes, in the case of a disability or chronic back pain for example, you may have to modify equipment or manuals, buy new office equipment or even make adjustments to premises to enable the employee to work easier and more often. The Equality Act means you must provide reasonable adjustments in these circumstances.

It is very important that when considering making any adjustments to what an employee does or how they do it, you must make sure that they are reasonable and fair. Provide what the employee needs and what you can provide based on a full analysis of the employees needs and the organisations ability to provide. Also all parties need to agree to the adjustments, especially those involving different roles and work patterns as these are contractual changes which have to be by agreement of both parties.

8. Monitor absence trends

Did you know that on average time lost due to 5 minutes lateness per day every month would cost an employer £305 per employee annually. Absence rates can often be an early warning system for organisations that things are not quite right as high absence rates, or ones starting to climb, can be a sign of low staff morale. Accurate measurement and monitoring to identify trends and underlying causes are key elements in effective absence management.

Setting up **procedures for measuring absence and sickness** in the workplace allows you to identify:

- how much working time has been lost and its cost
- where absence occurs the most, eg among particular types of worker or department which may lead to departmental or production changes
- how often individual workers are absent which may highlight underlying health issues
- whether there is a pattern of absence, eg where a worker regularly calls in sick on a Friday which could indicate the need for disciplinary action

It will also show whether the absence is:

- due to short-term sickness and certificated
- due to short-term sickness and uncertificated
- due to long-term sickness
- not sickness-related and authorised
- not sickness-related, but unauthorised

There are a number of different ways to measure time lost through absence. The first is the 'lost time rate' which measures the total amount of time available which has been lost. Another way is to use the 'frequency rate' which measures the average number of absences per employee as a percentage by dividing the number of spells of absence by the total number of employees times 100. The problem with this is that it doesn't identify the length of each absence or employees who take more than 1 spell of absence.

The most complicated method is the 'Bradford Factor' as this can identify persistent short-term absence for individuals. Care should be taken with this measure as it doesn't identify employees who come back quickly after an illness or issues relating to disability covered by the Equality Act 2010. You also need to take into account the Data Protection Act 2018 and inform employees what data you are collecting and what it is to be used for.

9. Keep records

To be able to monitor trends, and deal with unauthorised absence quickly and fairly (see next section), you need to keep accurate records of absence.

A good place to start is to develop an absence and lateness record sheet which is filled in each time someone is absent for any period of time and any reason. Some organisations have separate sickness absence, holiday and unauthorised/misc absence forms, but you can combine them all into one form if you use letter codes for the different types of absence. For example L for lateness, H for holiday, U for unauthorised, S/S for self-certified sickness etc. This form can then be used to monitor holiday entitlement, sickness records for Statutory Sick Pay and lateness or unauthorised absence for performance issues. It is kept with the individuals personnel record.

There are also a number of absence management computer packages available which will automatically maintain the data totals and provide detailed reports on different absence types, individuals and departments which makes the monitoring of trends a lot easier. They also provide fair and accurate information for performance reviews and discipline hearings if needed.

In addition to the actual absence records you also need to keep a record of any performance reviews which mention absence as an issue and of course all details of any investigation and disciplinary hearings that may result. This includes notes of informal discussions and warnings not just full investigations and hearings as things may escalate so you need to know the situation right from the start to be able to make valid and fair decisions.

The records need to be kept secure either in locked cabinets or on password protected and restricted access computer systems. All the information recorded will come under the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018, and some, such as medical data, will be classed as special category data under the Act. This means that you must inform the employee of what information you are keeping on them and what it will be used for. They must also be able to see the information held and ask for it to be rectified if incorrect and removed if there is no legitimate business reason for keeping it.

10. Deal with unauthorised absence quickly and fairly

As stated before whether an employee is present or not their work still has to be done. Here are some of the consequences of absence:

- Increased salary costs
- Unhappy colleagues and low morale or motivation
- Reduced work quality and production
- Health & safety risks
- Business losses

To avoid, or at least reduce, these consequences you need to ensure that any unauthorised absences are dealt with quickly and fairly.

If you have created robust staff behaviour and sickness policies, as well as absence monitoring procedures, it will be easier to identify the unauthorised absences early so you can tackle them appropriately. Do not let things fester. Remember to include trigger points in the policies such as 3 unauthorised absences in a 12 month period leads to a written warning up to dismissal triggers.

To enable you to do this you also need to have a robust discipline policy and procedure with complimentary grievance procedure in case employees feel you have not treated them appropriately or fairly.

Any good discipline policy should start with informal action such as informal discussions or chats so you can nip things in the bud quickly. This could be by giving a letter of concern to the employee with informal corrective action highlighted as well as the possibility of active counselling to help the employee adjust their behaviour. The corrective actions need to include targets and review date and the notes etc. need to be kept securely for 12 months.

If more formal discipline is required then a full investigation is needed to gather all the evidence you can which you then take to a discipline hearing. Here the employee can hear the allegations and respond to them and give mitigations. The person conducting the hearing needs to ensure they ask questions rather than make statements and probe as much as possible to ascertain the full facts around the absences. They need to take into consideration the employees performance, discipline and absence records before making a decision.

Any decision must weigh up all the evidence and look back at how others have been treated in similar circumstances to ensure the employee is treated fairly.

As stated it is vitally important it is to get all your policies right at the start of employment, to ensure consistency and tackle poor performance early on. Over the years we have helped a number of public and private sector organisations develop practical and realistic policies and procedures to deal with discipline, appraisal and performance management. We have also delivered training in new policy implementation from investigation to appeal hearing, conducted disciplinary investigations and hearings, been a critical friend at hearings as well as support organisations at employment tribunals, and we haven't lost one yet.

For more information on this please contact Lynne: lynne@petandr.co.uk