Understanding presenteeism

Presenteeism is often referred to as the invisible absence. It's where an employee is at work but is ill.

It can be difficult to spot and sometimes goes unnoticed until there's a drop in the employee's productivity or their quality of work, or maybe there's an uncharacteristic deterioration in workplace relationships. You may notice that an employee's concentration is reduced or they appear forgetful or disorganised.

People who are undergoing treatment for a physical illness may often be absent, whereas someone with a psychological illness is more likely to remain in work. (1)

An employee struggling with presenteeism can have a major effect on a business through low morale and reduced productivity prompting a decline in customer service levels and damage to the company reputation.

Presenteeism can also have a negative impact on the wider work population as colleagues notice the change in behaviour. This can lead to a cycle of colleague resentment and a feeling of guilt for the affected employee of 'burdening colleagues'.

Employers also need to be aware 'Leaveism', which might be a new concept to some, but the behaviour it describes will be familiar to many people professionals.

Nearly one third of staff persistently turn up to work ill and only **35% of staff are generally present and healthy**. (2)

Nearly nine in ten **(89%) people professionals** had observed presenteeism in their organisation over the past 12 months. (4)

The cost of presenteeism from **mental ill health** alone is calculated as costing **£15.1 billion a year** while absenteeism costs the UK economy £8.4 billion. (3)

Nearly **three-quarters** of respondents to the Health and well being at work survey report (CIPD March 2020) have observed some form of 'leaveism', such as using holiday entitlement to work, over the past 12 months. (5)

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Leaveism is when:

- employees use allocated time off such as annual leave entitlements, flexi hours banked, re-rostered rest days and so on, to take time off when they are in fact unwell;
- employees take work home that cannot be completed in normal working hours;
- employees work while on leave or holiday to catch up.

This can often lead to more long term issues including further health issues and poor performance. (6)

Tips to identify presenteeism

- Be aware of changes in an employee's behaviour and attitudes. This may include a drop in productivity, or taking longer to complete tasks or making errors when doing so.
- Conversely working longer hours than usual to complete work.
- Taking sporadic self-certificated absences with multiple issues.
- Changes with interpersonal relationships – the employee may interact less and become socially withdrawn.
- They may appear less motivated and enthusiastic about their work.

Tips for managing an employee with presenteeism

- Firstly, it is essential that the employer and employee address this together; it is not solely the responsibility of the employer.
- Ensure regular one-to-ones are carried out with documented and mutually agreed feedback.
- It is essential that line managers have appropriate training in communication, wellbeing and resilience in the workplace.
- Ensuring a workplace culture of treating all fairly is crucial, as is development in role to improve job satisfaction.
- Adopting meaningful wellbeing strategies in the workplace is very useful as is embedding health promotion initiatives.
- Enable an accessible Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)
- Ensure their holidays are taken throughout the year and all are taken.
- Ensure a culture of team-building activities.

Employers should also consider the workplace culture regarding technology, as this can often have a negative impact where employees feel the need to be constantly in touch either by e-mail or phone. This type of culture doesn't allow for 'down time' or enable the individual to switch off.

Sources

(1) Workplace Mental Health – Core concepts and issues CMH www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk
(2) Prof Cary Cooper – The cost of presenteeism 27/11/15 – https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/presenteeism-costs-twice-much-sickness-absence
(3) Centre for Mental Health – Workwell a working paper on presenteeism – https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/managing-presenteeism/
(4) Health and well being at work survey report (CIPD March 2020):
(5) Health and well being at work survey report (CIPD March 2020):
(6) Dr Ian Hesketh and Professor Sir Cary Cooper

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Registered Office: Unity Place, 1 Carfax Close, Swindon, SN1 1AP

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