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Employer Assistance and Resource Network



Federal Absence and Disability Management Policies

Each year workers in the U.S. miss more than half a billion work days. Employee absenteeism, or frequent absence from the workplace, is related to low levels of staff morale and productivity and increased costs. Studies by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimate the direct financial losses due to absenteeism to be more than \$40 billion a year and additional research suggests that if illness-related absenteeism were a line item on a company's profit and loss statement, the cost would probably exceed 15% of profits. These operational implications make effective absence and disability management important for all employers, especially federal agencies where excessive leave-taking is a particular problem.¹

This research-to-practice brief draws on current disability and absence management research in both the public and private sectors to explain the types and common causes of absenteeism and to suggest effective strategies for reducing them. This multidimensional approach includes consideration of the relevant legislation and the intersection of leave-management, work-life balance and reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities.

Understanding Absenteeism

Types

While employees may have a multitude of reasons for not attending work, the Disability Policy Research Center at West Virginia University¹ divides absences into two categories: innocent and culpable. Innocent absenteeism refers to employee absences related to legitimate medical or personal issues that are out of the control of the employee, including disability-related absences. Culpable absences occur without a genuine cause and are within an employee's control. Innocent absences typically warrant an employer response of education or assistance for the employee, while culpable absences may warrant disciplinary action.

Causes

Culpable absences often occur as employees take more sick leave than is necessary, especially around holidays, on Mondays and Fridays, and before and after scheduled leaves. Innocent absences are legitimate and documented, but in cases where they are excessive they may cause operational difficulties for departments.

An important part of addressing absenteeism is first determining the cause in order to craft an appropriate and effective response.

In addition, there is another phenomenon, presenteeism, in which sick employees attend work when they should not, often due to employer pressure not to take sick leave, even when appropriate. This can result in lowered productivity and related financial costs that exceed the impact of absenteeism.^{1,5}

Common Causes of Absenteeism¹

- Fatigue
- Overall weakness
- Doctor's or therapist's appointments
- Medical treatments
- Transportation problems
- Caregiving responsibilities for spouse, child, or parent with a disability
- Low morale
- Problems performing job tasks to supervisor's satisfaction
- Communication problems with coworkers and/or supervisor
- Difficulties arising from activities of daily living such as toileting or eating
- Excessively authoritarian management styles

Acknowledgement

This research brief is based largely on Staying on the Job: Federal Absence and Disability Management, a white paper written by the Disability Policy Research Center (DPRC) at West Virginia University. The project was funded by the Office of Disability Employment Policy, U.S. Department of Labor. For more information on this research contact D.J. Hendricks at 304-293-6560 or DJHendricks@mail.wvu.edu.

Types of Employee Absence¹

	Innocent	Culpable
Absences...	...are related to legitimate medical or personal issues out of the employee's control	...occur without a genuine cause and are within the employee's control
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability-related absences • Excessive... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... use of sick leave ... outside appointments during work hours ... absences to deal with family problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessive lateness • False or no explanation for absences • Absences that are not for legitimate reasons
Suggested Employer Response	Assistance and/or training for the employee	Disciplinary Action

Federal Employer Guidelines

Absence management among federal employers is governed both by far-reaching federal legislation with which all employers must comply, and by federal absence management initiatives.

Employee Leave Legislation

The primary laws governing employee leave are the:

- Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)
- Rehabilitation Act
- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA)
- Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA).

Overall, the purpose of these laws is to provide equitable leave policies in response to a wide range of employee circumstances, but the complexities and overlap among these laws can make interpretation difficult. Understanding the nuances of each piece of legislation in relation to each policy decision is critical to implementing fair and effective leave policy. Federal human resource managers must balance concerns about employee absenteeism with government-wide leave policies and programs.

Absence Management Initiatives

The federal government has made employee safety and health management programs a priority with the Protecting Our Workers and Ensuring Reemployment (POWER) Initiative. POWER emphasizes the use of programs that have proven effectiveness and extends previous workplace safety and health efforts by setting more aggressive performance targets and encouraging the collection and analysis of data on the causes and consequences of frequent or severe injury and illness of workers.⁶

As part of the POWER initiative, each executive department and agency is expected to improve its performance by⁶:

- reducing total injury and illness case rates;
- reducing lost time injury and illness case rates;
- analyzing lost time injury and illness data;
- increasing the timely filing of workers' compensation claims;
- increasing the timely filing of wage-loss claims;
- reducing lost production day rates; and
- speeding employees' return to work in cases of serious injury or illness.

Effective Absence Management

As discussed previously, employees are absent from work for a wide variety of reasons, ranging from disability-related challenges and health concerns to problematic interpersonal workplace relationships. The wide ranging causes of absenteeism warrant a variety of responses from employers. The section below discusses some of the most common employer responses to employee leave concerns.

Work-Life Balance Programs

Work-life balance programs are gaining momentum in both the public and private sectors, reflecting a growing appreciation of the interaction between work and non-work factors and their impact on employee health and productivity. Workplace-based interventions that take a coordinated, integrated approach to reducing work- and non-work-related employee health threats have been shown to be most effective in protecting and improving worker health and well-being.⁷

Based on this research, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) recommends that federal agencies, through consultation and support, adopt and develop work-life balance programs and policies that are designed to create more flexible, responsive work environments supportive of employees' commitments to community, home, and loved ones.⁸

Effective Work-Life Balance Programs¹

- Alternative work schedules
- Part-time work and job sharing
- Tele-work
- Leave for family purposes
- Child care support or subsidy programs
- Parenting/Dependent care flexible spending accounts
- Support for care-givers
- Employee Assistance Programs
- Health and other flexible spending accounts
- Health promotion programs
- OPM's HealthierFeds Initiative

Although most large federal agencies have implemented work-life balance programs, to date this has not translated to high employee satisfaction ratings. Only the top six large federal agencies have an employee satisfaction rating higher than 50%. Among smaller agencies, only the top ten have employee satisfaction ratings higher than 50%. The highest satisfaction rating among large federal agencies is just 64% and the highest rating among smaller agencies is 65%.¹

These low satisfaction ratings may be an outgrowth of the use of ineffective work-life balance programs. While employers offer an average of nine work-life balance programs to employees, these do not always include those with demonstrated effectiveness. For example, a compressed work week has been shown to be the most effective intervention for reducing unscheduled absences, but less than half of the employers surveyed by the Commercial Clearing House offered such a program.⁹ This highlights the importance of selecting work-life programs with demonstrated effectiveness in improving employee health and reducing absenteeism.

Commonly Used Leave Management Strategies¹

- Flexible scheduling, telecommuting, paid time off, and elimination of time limits when dealing with family issues
- Establishment of open door policies and comfortable “brainstorming” areas
- Involvement of employees in goal setting processes
- Cash rewards for good ideas
- Increased interactions between senior leadership and lower-level employees
- Tuition reimbursement and/or paid time off for study
- Incentive programs and training opportunities
- Recognition programs that include money, gifts, or vacations
- Childcare centers that offer a variety of family-oriented programs
- Encouragement of community involvement and volunteer activities
- Developing trust as an intrinsic part of the work culture

Effective Leave Programs

Much as with work-life concerns, employers use a variety of leave programs, some of which are more effective than others. For example, the use of paid leave banks (where employees receive a single bank of undesignated leave hours to use as they see fit), bonus programs and positive reinforcement to reward employees for excellent attendance have been shown to be effective in curbing unscheduled absences, while disciplinary action has been shown to be less effective. Despite these findings, employers are more likely to use disciplinary action programs than banked leave.⁹

In addition, there is evidence that employees with good or very good morale miss less work than employees with fair or poor morale and that high morale translates into higher levels of productivity, reduced absenteeism and a greater commitment to the organization.^{9,10} Workplace culture also has an influence on employees’ understanding of what is and is not acceptable behavior. Clear attendance expectations and positive reinforcement are essential elements in reducing absenteeism.

Disability Disclosure and Absence Management

It is not uncommon for federal agencies to employ individuals with disabilities; in fact, there are several federal initiatives in place to encourage the hiring and retention of such workers. In some cases employees may choose to disclose their disability during the application process, while at other times employees may acquire a disability after years of service, or choose not to disclose their disability at all.

Many employees with disabilities do not have issues with disability-related absenteeism and may not request accommodations from their employers. While it is always an employee’s decision whether or not to disclose a disability, in cases where an employee has excessive absenteeism related to a disclosed disability, the accommodation process or return to work strategies can be of assistance. Reasonable accommodations such as flexible scheduling can remove barriers and provide flexibility so that employees with disabilities can seek treatment, obtain repair of equipment or devices, or attend necessary training (e.g., for a service animal) while still performing their jobs effectively. The Job Accommodation Network (JAN; www.askJAN.org) is an excellent resource for employers seeking information on accommodating employees with disabilities, and the Disability Management Employer Coalition (www.dmec.org) is a similarly valuable resource for integrated disability, absence and productivity management.

Return to work for employees after illness or injury can warrant the use of special strategies by employers. The Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy’s Return to Work Toolkit for Employees and Employers (<http://www.dol.gov/odep/return-to-work/>) provides specific guidance for this situation.

Recommendations

Decreasing absenteeism rates and improving disability management across federal agencies represents a challenge for federal employers. To help guide employers in this process, the Disability Policy Research Center at West Virginia University has proposed the recommendations below specifically for federal employers.

Conclusion

Excessive employee absences have significant consequences for federal employers and represent an ongoing challenge as agencies balance policy requirements with federal leave programs. Effective work-life balance and leave programs, disability management approaches, appropriate accommodations, and return to work strategies can be instrumental in enhancing job performance and attendance by all employees, including people and veterans with disabilities.

Recommendations for Effective Absence Management Practices¹

1. Incorporate absence management as part of the overall accommodation process for all employees
 - Define the problem causing the absences
 - Determine what accommodation/flexibility would address the problem
 - If accommodation/flexibility is insufficient, consider alternative placement options
2. Incorporate absence management into the overall accommodation process
3. Implement work-life balance programs that reduce barriers and increase morale and group awareness of company objectives
4. Identify promising work-life practices that can be implemented across agencies
5. Explore absence control programs successfully implemented in the private sector
6. Develop accessible online training modules, including accommodation options, work-life balance programs, and absence-control strategies for employees, human resource, and management personnel
7. Incorporate USERRA and FMLA amendments into work-life and job accommodation programs for veterans with disabilities
8. Encourage federal employees with targeted disabilities to respond to the "Federal Human Capital Survey"

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About this Series

Federal Absence and Disability Management Policies is part of a series of briefs presenting the practical implications of recent research in disability employment. Each brief focuses on a key issue for employers, presenting background, research findings and key recommendations.



Disclaimer

The National Technical Assistance, Policy, and Research Center for Employers on Employment of People with Disabilities is funded by a cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy to Cornell University.

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