

Absenteeism: A 360° View

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Every year, Barbados has twelve (12) public holidays, add that to the statutory entitlement of holiday with pay of either 3 or 4 weeks. Additionally, many employees are entitled to six (6) uncertified sick days as well as six (6) weeks of certified leave with pay. This means that an employee can potentially be away from work for 11.5 weeks in a 52 week calendar year without suffering any loss of earnings. While I am sure that many employees do not exhaust all of the leave options available to them, the fact is, that the need for higher levels of productivity and customer service have been driving the discussions around absenteeism.

Absenteeism refers to unscheduled time away from work. This is not restricted to not being at work, but also includes poor timekeeping. When examining productive time lost due to absence, employers should consider incidents of:

- Arriving late (or poor timekeeping)
- Leaving early (again, poor time keeping)
- Extended tea or lunch breaks
- Attending to private business during working hours
- Not attending to his/her duties in terms of the employment contract
- Extended toilet breaks
- Feigned illness – time off to “visit the doctor”
- Other unexplained absences from the workstation or premises.

Within recent months, the issue of absenteeism seems to have taken centre stage, with the BEC hosting a panel discussion on May 16, 2013 entitled ***Sick Leave: Employees Right vs. Employers Plight*** and HRMAB’s recent breakfast session which was focused on the issue of absenteeism. However, this an issue of national concern, and has been for a while. Absenteeism is costly and high levels of absenteeism can contribute to declining productivity and increased cost of living. When an employee fails to report for work most often employers pay the employee even though not at work, pay employees who have to be called into work, sometimes at double rate if called at short notice, as well as disrupt service delivery. One company has reported that within a 12 month period, certified sick leave alone totaled over \$150,000.00, and that figure excludes costs associated with replacement labour

The reasons for absenteeism are many and varied. There are some instances where employees themselves are the sole reason for absenteeism, for example poor work ethic. Other reasons may be as

a result of poor working conditions or bad management practices. Additionally, there are some situations that force employees to be absent, for example caring for a sick child or conducting business transactions.

Absenteeism in the workplace is probably one of the most difficult areas of employee discipline to control. Some supervisors ignore it on the basis that the employee won't get paid for the time/day, however some businesses incur high costs of replacement labour, not to mention lost production and other workers getting upset because they have to pick up the workload of the absent employee. Additionally, many companies do not adequately monitor time and attendance and therefore it is only when a trend becomes apparent that they seek to gather relevant data.

Employers must institute adequate systems for monitoring absence and should also establish an Attendance Policy to assist with the management of absenteeism. The policy should clearly define what is deemed as absence, what will be viewed as excessive absenteeism as well as the forms of discipline to be applied. Also, employees must be aware that proper attendance at work is a basic common-law duty of every employee and that when employment is accepted with the company he or she acknowledges that attendance at work will be daily as required, and attendance will be for contractual working hours. In addition, the employee warrants that he will present himself at work in a fit and proper condition to carry out his contractual duties.

Whatever the underlying cause for absenteeism, whether cultural, situational or individual, what is apparent is the need for research to gather more information to adequately deal with the issue. In the past, different bodies have performed research into absenteeism in Barbados, including NISE, UWI and the Productivity Council. The National Insurance Department would also be a prime data source, more specifically on certified sick leave, as information is attainable through the benefit scheme.

Is your workforce absent because of a high prevalence of non-communicable diseases? Then the employees are genuinely sick and employee wellness programmes and lifestyle information may assist. Are employees absent due to situational issues? This is where national data could prove most useful; employers may not be able to change opening hours or shift times to accommodate an employee with family care responsibilities, however, a business opportunity may exist for someone to offer a needed service. It is only through understanding the causes for absenteeism, that adequate solutions can be employed to the benefit of employees, businesses and the nation as a whole.