

Handling Excessive Absence

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Absenteeism can have a devastating impact on a business whether small, medium or large. Where a company does not have policies and procedures in place to effectively deal with and respond to workplace issues, longevity of the business is crippled. What is excessive absence? How can an employer curb such behaviour? The Society for Human Resource Management attempted to quantify excessive absence. After perusing legal decisions they compiled the following response, *'there's no easy answer, but juries typically consider one sick day per month, or 12 days a year, as a threshold'*.

Excessive absence can be either wilful habitual evasion of work or involuntary occasional absence due to valid causes, or reasons beyond one's control, such as accidents or sickness. When the true reason of the absence has been discovered the company can adequately chart a path to response. However the company responds to absenteeism will be guided by contracts of employment, collective agreements, company policies and legislation.

Most organisations will allow a certain number of uncertified sick or casual days per year per employee. Additionally, companies generally offer employees a maximum number of days or weeks for certified sick leave for which companies may have agreed to pay the employee's salary in full or part in conjunction with the National Insurance and Social Security Scheme (NIS). If a case arise where the employee has an illness which takes them away from work on a regular basis, the company will need to evaluate situation. Can the illness be triggered by the environment of workplace? Will the employee be able to perform assigned tasks? The best procedure for dealing with such an instance is to allow the employee to visit a doctor selected by the employer, to conduct a medical assessment. This assessment will seek to decipher if the individual may be deemed as fit/unfit to recommence work as well as highlighting the probable cause of illness.

Human resource professionals need to exercise high levels of observation to assist with tracking patterns of behaviours and likely causes. If the employee is not suffering from chronic illness but refuses to come in to work and tends to take Mondays or Fridays home, this is a recognisable pattern. When management allows employees to continue in their bad habits without communicating its detriment to the company, this decreases the morale of other employees and causes the development of a bad work culture.

So management has established that there is a problem, how do you fix it? Fixing the problem can be accomplished in a few steps:

1. Do not rush to judgment: place the individual on a paid, investigatory leave (in accordance with disciplinary procedure if available) if you need additional time to reach a conclusion.
2. After the problem is spotted, the employee should be informed of their attendance record and recommendations made. If the employee is legitimately ill, discuss the option of the NIS sickness benefit which is paid for a maximum of twelve (12) months with the employee. If the twelve months elapse and the employee is still unable to work, the Employment Rights Act gives the employer the right to terminate the employee based on their incapability to conduct their work functions.
3. If it is concluded that the absence is wilful, a disciplinary hearing should be convened. Here, management, the employee and their representative will discuss the evidence and management will give a decision. If the employee is warned and recommendations made, these recommendations should have a date of review to ensure that the employee is meeting his/her targets. When the date of review arrives, and the employee's practices still continue, and management decides to place him/her on punitive suspension (without pay), management should verify that the policy or collective agreement sanctions this. However, a company has the right to plan, direct and amend work practises which are important for viability.
4. To curb the attitudes and behaviours of the remaining staff, a review of the organization's written policy, if any, with the help of a Labour Management

Advisor to ensure you retain the most discretion in managing this thorny issue, is imperative.

5. Review your organization's past practices (for example, all of the disciplinary actions and terminations related to unauthorized absence in the past two years) across departments, divisions and locations. Account for inconsistencies in prior decisions. Remember that you have the choice to change a policy or practice by notifying employees in advance and in writing.
6. Implementing schemes such as employee of the month or merit awards, which will encapsulate the attendance, may further assist in creating the type of culture necessary to propel business and personal growth.

The best ways to control absenteeism is to create an atmosphere where good attendance is valued and poor attendance is dealt with accordingly. This can be done through reward and discipline programs re-emphasising to employees the importance of attendance. It is important for management nip any bad practices in the bud because today's problems are tomorrow's disasters.