

## Absenteeism or presenteeism: which is worse?

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Most employers would probably argue that absenteeism is a bigger problem for them than presenteeism, because it is clearly visible (or visible by the employee's absence) and measurable. However, a recent UK report claims that presenteeism (where an employee attends work but is unwell or disengaged) may account for up to 50% more working time lost than absenteeism.

The report, published by The Work Foundation (UK) and Axa PPP Healthcare in April 2010, surveyed more than 500 employees and was reviewed on the UK website *Personnel Today* on 2 June 2010. It also uses the term 'sickness presence' to describe an employee who is unwell and should be on sick leave but still turns up for work.

### Main findings of report

The report suggests that sickness presence, as well as affecting productivity, could contribute to increased sickness absence later on because it exacerbates the employee's condition. Therefore, addressing the underlying factors related to presenteeism is also likely to reduce absenteeism.

- Sickness presence is more prevalent than sickness absence, with 45% of employees reporting at least one day of it during the reporting period versus 18% reporting at least one day of sickness absence.
- The main factors that caused employees to attend work when unwell were personal financial difficulties, work-related stress and perceived pressure to attend from either managers or work colleagues. Around 40% of employees claimed that they felt pressured by others to attend work when unwell.
- Sickness presence adversely affects work performance and is also associated with lower line management supervision, reduced psychological wellbeing and increased absenteeism.
- Sickness presence had a much more significant negative impact on overall job performance than sickness absence. Levels of the latter were not significantly correlated with performance.
- Employees who felt pressured to attend work were more likely to report that their job performance was adversely affected when they did so. This was particularly the case when employees could not adjust their work to accommodate their condition.
- Presenteeism is a useful indicator of general employee health and wellbeing, although the report stopped short of claiming that there is a direct correlation between the two. Employers that ignore it and focus only on absenteeism may miss some important warning signals.

A 2009 report by the health care provider SimplyHealth also found that fears of job security and redundancy during the economic downturn of 2008–09 had sharply increased the level of presenteeism, with 40% of employees claiming they had taken no sick leave during the previous 12 months.

### What should employers do?

The latest report made the following key recommendations:

- Review your absence management policies and assess how line managers are interpreting them. Are they applied consistently? Do managers and employees actually understand how policies can benefit them?

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- Review how policies are communicated to employees, such as reporting and recording systems for absences. For example, are the reasons for policies communicated in a way that demonstrates that management actually values employees' health and wellbeing, or is there more of an 'enforcement' approach'?
- Look for any factors that are contributing to increased employee stress and reduced wellbeing. Also, review the capability of line managers to deal with these issues, including how well they understand how the causal factors operate.
- Review how managers and their teams work together, in particular their ability to adjust work for employees and accommodate any health problems.
- Offer workplace-based financial support for employees in difficulty — for example, access to financial counselling. Evaluate how well any current initiatives are working (eg whether they are accessible to all employees who may need them, and whether employees are encouraged to use them).
- Monitor and evaluate levels of employee health and wellbeing, including the effectiveness of all targeted interventions.

### Challenges for management

The above lists of causes and recommendations sound straightforward enough, but tackling presenteeism is a complex issue; it is not as clearly defined and easily measurable as absenteeism.

For example, some employers may take the view that if an employee is working at say 80% of their capacity, that is still 80% better than if he/she was absent. Another issue is 'how ill is ill' — at what point is it better for the employee to be absent instead of present?

The nature of the work is another issue. If no-one else can do the employee's job, he/she may return from absence to a huge backlogged pile of work, in which case struggling along while unwell may seem like the better of two unattractive options.

Finally, there are different types of presenteeism. Some of it is caused by illness, but a large proportion is due to disengagement, lack of motivation, incompetence or work environment issues. Therefore, presenteeism needs to be regarded as a wider job performance issue. It has both physical and psychological dimensions.

### Focus on health management, not absence management

The report suggests that many employers take too narrow a focus when dealing with presenteeism. They tend to monitor trends (eg absenteeism rates), instead of assessing and promoting overall health and wellbeing. Absenteeism is merely one element of the latter, the physical dimension.

Even when employers focus on employee health and wellbeing, they may take too narrow a focus. The issue goes beyond initiatives such as healthy eating, physical activity or health promotions. While often popular with employees, these do not go far enough and do not address the whole relationship between health, presence at work and job performance.

A risk assessment approach is recommended. This approach requires managers to understand the various issues involved and to be able to detect the symptoms of problems (eg the early warning signs of mental health issues). Managers also need to be aware of their management styles, for example, whether they are putting direct or indirect pressure on employees to attend work when it would be better for both parties if they did not do so.

Some attention to flexible working arrangements can often be helpful to accommodate issues, provided that it does not merely lead to employees working at home under sufferance.

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Training of line managers is also recommended. It should focus on the following:

- how to identify the symptoms of increased work stress, reduced employee wellbeing and possible mental health problems
- maintaining an environment and culture where employees feel that they are able to have open conversations with managers about health and wellbeing issues and can expect a supportive approach to assist them to make accommodations at the workplace
- providing awareness of what they can do to reduce the likely causes of stress and ill health at work from arising.

### Further information

Nic Paton, [Presenteeism v sickness absence: which is more costly?](#), published on *Personnel Today* (UK) website on 2 June 2010 (accessed 7 June 2010).

Full report: K Ashby and M Mahdon, *Why Do Employees Come to Work When Ill? An Investigation into Sickness Presence in the Workplace*, published by the Work Foundation UK, April 2010. Download [here](#).

**Writer:** This article was prepared by Mike Toten, HR Writer.