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How to combat Seasonal Absenteeism

Seasonal Absence Syndrome. It sounds more like a made up term than something to be taken seriously, but, it defines a common problem affecting many UK business. To put it simply - whether it's the first fall of snow or the hottest day of the year, absence rates can increase significantly in relation to the weather.

How do you encourage employees not to take days off for no reason other than the weather is favourable, particularly when you already pay them to come to work? Do you adopt a 'stick' approach and refuse to pay sick pay for the first few days and risk penalising those that are genuinely ill. Or do you adopt a 'Carrot' approach and reward for good attendance? Or both?

Summer Absenteeism

We spend 8 months of the year waiting for summer to come around and with the increase in temperatures comes an increase in absenteeism as employees take a day off at the expense of the business. The cost and implications of this have a considerable effect on efficiency, profitability and team morale, but what is the best way to tackle it and should you? You already pay your employees to come to work, so what more can an employer do? Do you positively acknowledge your staff for the days in which they do come to work or do you take a strict disciplinary approach. Neither option is perfect and the approach needs to be balanced to avoid being discriminatory and generating resentment.

The 'Stick'

Two large super market chains adopted a tough 'stick' approach to tackle their spiralling absenteeism rates. They no longer pay sick pay for the first 3 days of leave and, although one saw a drop of 5% in absenteeism rates, it also brought widespread demotivation as staff felt unable to take a day off for genuine ill health. The implications of the 'stick' mean that staff often come to work when they should, for their own health and the health of their colleagues, be at home. This is especially true during the current times with the fear of a swine flu epidemic. Those that are unwell should be actively encouraged to stay at home to prevent widespread infection rather than being forced, by the sick-leave policy, to come to work.



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The 'Carrot'

On the other hand a well known mail delivery service introduced a 'carrot' approach to tackling high absenteeism rates by rewarding employees who didn't take any sick days in a given period. Although the company saw an 11% increase in attendance this approach could have legal implications. Staff are rewarded for not taking days off, but what if such an event was of an unavoidable nature such as, a funeral, religious holiday or activity, public duty or disability? Could a claim of discrimination be sought for someone upholding a mandatory duty and losing out on the reward given to others through no real fault of their own?

'A Balanced Approach'

Neither Carrot nor Stick will, in isolation, deliver the desired result and a balanced approach is key. Have in place a disciplinary procedure for unauthorised absences and there are tools, such as the Bradford Factor, that can help you identify and monitor high-risk individuals. But at the same time, it is important to encourage good attendance and one method is to provide incentivisation where an unconscious by-product of the incentive campaign is a reward for good attendance. This low-key approach to rewarding attendance is an excellent half-way house providing as it does gentle and covert promotion of good attendance while avoiding many of the political and occupational difficulties that often accompany openly rewarding basic attendance.

Incentive campaigns that reward achievement and improve performance can be designed to deliver, as secondary benefits, behavioural and cultural improvements such as regular attendance etc. By having multiple targets such schemes can be an excellent weapon with which to combat unscheduled absence. Costs are low and, when compared with productivity, offer a high return on investment.

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