

Why 'presenteeism' is a big threat to your company's productivity

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A company with employees who are physically present at work but not functioning at their full potential because of an illness or other medical condition may have a "presenteeism" problem.

Presenteeism is one of the largest threats to productivity, and its impact can rival that of absenteeism.

Some studies estimate that presenteeism costs U.S. employers \$150 billion to \$250 billion annually, which represents about 60 percent of the total cost of worker illnesses.

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In addition, presenteeism can have far-reaching consequences, affecting coworkers, clients and vendors alike, which compounds the situation further.

There are a number of ways to address presenteeism in the workplace, including a shift in corporate culture, establishing employee wellness programs and implementing paid time off (PTO).

1. Corporate culture

Corporate culture and management style have a big impact on employee behavior. In some organizations, employees who work when they are sick are viewed as dedicated and loyal to the company. In other cases, employees may avoid taking time off because they are concerned about workloads, overburdening coworkers or even losing their jobs. Supervisors unknowingly encourage presenteeism when they praise employees who come into the office sick or discourage staff from missing work for any reason.

One way to help alleviate this pattern of behavior is to change the culture so that genuinely ill or contagious employees are encouraged to stay home. Guidelines should be developed to help managers and employees determine when they should take sick days. Company leaders can drive this cultural shift by positioning paid sick leave as an investment in productivity, rather than simply taking time off due to illness. Communicating this viewpoint to staff at all levels will encourage the cultural change needed throughout the organization.

2. Employee wellness programs

Healthier employees not only lead to enhanced productivity, including fewer sick days, but also become a



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more engaged workforce. Establishing an employee wellness program may help workers focus on their health, which can lead to the prevention of serious illnesses and other conditions that impact productivity. Programs promoting exercise, good nutrition, health assessments, counseling services or free flu shots can pay for themselves by boosting productivity and reducing company health care costs over time.

Allergies, depression, back pain, sleep disorders and migraines are all common, and often undiagnosed or untreated health problems affecting the quantity and quality of work. Identifying and treating common ailments can make a difference in employee well-being and a company's bottom line.

3. PTO programs

Another way to help reduce both presenteeism and absenteeism is to implement a PTO program, allowing employees to use paid leave at their discretion.

In the past, it was common for companies to offer paid time off that was designated for specific needs, such as vacation, sick leave, doctors' appointments and other personal matters that required an employee to be away from work. Today, more and more employers are implementing a PTO program, giving employees the freedom to take time away from the office for any reason without question.

In addition to giving employees the flexibility to decide how to use their time, this arrangement can potentially reduce the abuse of sick time. For example, when employees have a predetermined number of sick days they must use or lose, some may take that time off, whether they are ill or not. With a more general PTO policy in place, such "use it or lose it" dilemmas are removed.

Policy guidelines

City and state laws vary regarding paid sick time. In some areas, businesses must provide a certain number of days for paid sick leave, or allow employees to use part of their sick leave to care for a significant other or child. Employers should know the rules governing their specific geographic location when establishing a sick leave or PTO program.

Eventually, all employees will need time off from work, whether or not it is to deal with an illness, take a child to the doctor or go on a vacation. Fostering a company culture that supports time away, including staying home when sick, and creating and implementing company policies reinforcing this mindset will go a long way toward managing presenteeism, increasing productivity and becoming a preferred employer.



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