

Solving an Absenteeism Problem



Every day, thousands of managers receive a call from an employee saying they'll be absent from work for a few hours, a few days, or even a few weeks. In a global market where competition is increasingly fierce and results count more than ever, few managers can afford to ignore the harmful impact of employee absences. In organizations today, absenteeism is one of the biggest causes of decreased productivity.

When it comes to absenteeism, action rather than reaction will translate into improved overall productivity for your team, and have a positive impact on employees' health as well. Absenteeism is almost always a symptom of a bigger underlying problem. Whether this problem is associated with the work environment or the employee's personal life, the best solution is prompt intervention.

Understanding the nature of absenteeism

► The various causes of absenteeism

These days, business standards are all focused around one principle: performance. Performance objectives bring with them heavy demands and a great deal of pressure that individuals are now forced to deal with on a daily basis. In addition, people can't help but be affected by the many changes taking place in organizations, like mergers, reorganizations and budget cuts. While these changes are a source of motivation and satisfaction for some, they're a major source of stress and dissatisfaction for many others. These negative reactions often lead to a common outcome: **absenteeism due to work-related problems**.

Today it's increasingly difficult for people to keep their personal life separate from their professional life. New life circumstances, the need for work-life balance and changing social trends (joint custody arrangements, blended families, caring for aging parents, etc.) are creating a new phenomenon: **absenteeism due to personal problems**.

► Absence warning signs

When employees have the impression that their presence or absence makes no difference to their supervisor and co-workers, they clearly have a problem with motivation and self-esteem. **Lack of motivation is often the first sign of a potential absence**. It can be seen in the employee's behaviour through indicators like a sudden drop in performance, an increasingly hostile attitude, constant negative comments, a growing lack of interest in work, etc.

Job motivation is directly related to self-esteem. Therefore, to prevent or manage an absenteeism problem, it's important to make employees feel that they're important. Employees who have a positive opinion of themselves are also more motivated and more likely to get involved in finding solutions when they're having problems that could affect their attendance at work.





► Your attitude toward absences

When an employee's problems have a negative impact on their work, their absence may seem positive in the short term. However, the situation can deteriorate quickly. The advantages of an absence are generally far outweighed by the disadvantages it creates. Absence from work has an impact on the employee personally, as well as on the employee's co-workers who remain at work and have to pick up the slack, and on the manager, who is responsible for keeping things going and maintaining a balance within the team.

Believing that illness is the determining factor in the length of an absence is a preconception. **Good absence management depends on a variety of factors, many of which are related to the work environment.** Your attitude is instrumental in managing absenteeism. If you don't stress the importance of attendance, you give your team the impression that it's not a priority for you. Most of the time, ignoring the problem will be interpreted as lack of interest or lack of leadership. It can also give the impression that absenteeism is implicitly tolerated by the company.

Make sure you have accurate absence data

► Your tolerance of absenteeism

What is your tolerance level? The clearer you are in your objectives, the easier it will be to communicate them to your employees, and the easier it will be for your expectations to be met. Your objectives originate from two sources: the company's policies, rules and standards, and the criteria specific to your department and your management style.

- Does the company have an attendance policy in place?
- If so, do your employees know what it is and understand it?
- Do employees know the tolerable number of absences and the criteria for each type of absence?
- Do you know the average absenteeism rate in your company and the average rate for each group (by department, for example)?
- Do you have access to reliable data that tells you which employees are exceeding the acceptable number of absences?
- Do you keep an absence record for each employee that includes the dates and reasons given for the absence?
- Do you compare employee absences and the reasons given with the absence data for other departments and the company as a whole?
- Is there an established procedure to follow when an employee is away?
- Do you refuse to allow employees to notify you of their absence by email or voice mail?
- Are employees with perfect attendance records recognized for this behaviour?
- Do you take attendance into account when evaluating an employee's performance?

The more "Yes" answers you have, the more clearly you have defined your tolerance level to your staff.



Evaluating the absenteeism problem

► The source of the problem

First of all, it's important to know whether the source of the problem stems from the employee's personal life or from the work environment. You can learn a lot in this regard by simply observing the person's actions, listening to the comments they make, and asking their co-workers a few questions. **If the source of the problem is a personal matter, your involvement should be limited to reducing the impact of the absence on productivity.**

If the source of the problem is work-related however, you first need to identify the organizational factors that could be responsible, in whole or in part, for the absence. The questionnaire on the following page will help you identify these factors. Completing this questionnaire will help you determine whether the absence is due to the work environment, the person's skills and motivation, or their attitude towards attendance.

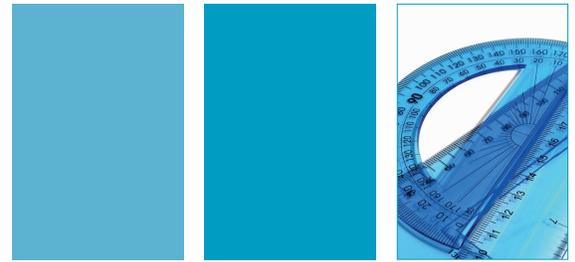
► Monitoring tools

Only that which is measurable or supported by facts can be corrected. Once the source of the problem has been brought to light, you then need to assess the type and frequency of the absences before deciding what kind of action to take. Occasional absences for example, cannot be treated the same way as frequent or excessive absences. **The objective is to work with facts, not impressions.**

This is why an individual absence record should be kept in order to clearly establish the frequency and impact of the absences over a given period. It's very important that your records be accurate: when you meet with an employee, you want to discuss the absenteeism problem, not defend the accuracy of your data. **As a result, the importance you place on your monitoring tools must be in line with the desired results.** In this regard, the absence report is an essential tool (see example below). It indicates the dates, duration, reasons given and impact on the productivity. You will find this tool very useful when you meet with the employee.

► Absence Report

Name of employee:		For the period from:		to :
Date of Absence	Length of Absence	Reasons Given	Impact of Absence	



Assessment of Organizational Factors

Use this questionnaire to assess whether the following factors could be the source of the employee's absenteeism.

Name of employee: _____

Yes

No

Work environment

- Is the physical work environment adequate, safe, and suitable for the functions required? Yes No
- Does the employee have the technical resources needed to achieve the performance objectives? Yes No
- Does the employee know and understand the job procedures? Yes No
- Does the employee know the scope of their role and responsibilities? Yes No
- Are the objectives of the employee's job clear, and are the results measurable? Yes No
- Can the employee adjust their work schedule with the supervisor's approval? Yes No
- Does the employee receive regular feedback regarding the quality of their work and performance? Yes No

Job skills and motivation

- Does the employee have the physical and intellectual skills required to do their job? Yes No
- Is the employee under-qualified or over-qualified for their job? Yes No
- Is the employee asked to help define their objectives? Yes No
- Does the employee have enough flexibility and autonomy? Yes No
- Is the employee required to perform a lot of routine tasks? Yes No
- Does the employee show an interest in their job by suggesting solutions to various problems? Yes No
- Does the employee often have conflicts with you or their co-workers? Yes No

Attitudes towards attendance

- Does the employee know what the tolerable number of absences is? Yes No
- Does the employee understand the importance of being at work? Yes No
- Does the employee think of sick days as another way of taking vacation? Yes No
- Does the employee ever make comments like:
"Everyone takes a little holiday now and then. It's only normal." Yes No



Don't confuse an absenteeism problem with a performance problem

Developing an action plan

► Inability or lack of motivation?

Attendance is based on two principles: **ability to work, and motivation to work**. For example, a person can be motivated to go to work, but be absent because their child is sick, they had an accident, the transportation system is on strike, etc. This person is motivated to go to work, but is unable to go.

Job satisfaction is a major source of motivation. People who are dissatisfied with their role in the organization, or who don't see the value of their contribution, easily turn to other interests and priorities. In this case, the person is able to go to work, but doesn't have the motivation to go.

Before discussing an absenteeism problem with an employee, first determine whether it's a question of inability or lack of motivation. Your approach will differ in each situation. Then collect all the documents you need to prepare for your meeting, like the absence record and the company's attendance policy.



Meeting process

- √ Welcome the employee and remind them of the reason for the meeting.
- √ Describe the problem calmly based on the facts.
- √ Remind the person of your expectations and the company's expectations regarding attendance.
- √ Listen carefully to the employee's explanations.
- √ Help the person identify the impact of their absence on themselves, their co-workers, their department and the company.
- √ Ask for the employee's help in resolving the problem. Discuss and take note of any realistic solutions suggested.
- √ Decide together on what measures should be taken.
- √ Draw up an action plan that describes the objectives, how they could be achieved, the time frame and each person's responsibilities.
- √ Set a date for a follow-up meeting.

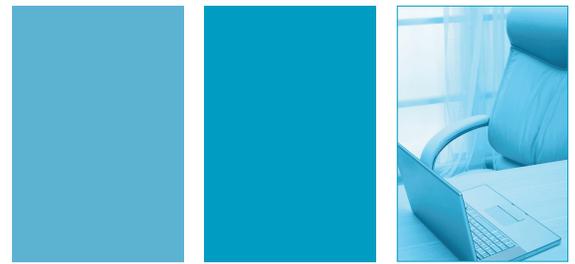
► Intervention strategy

The purpose of meeting with the employee is to explain that the situation will no longer be tolerated, and to indicate the possible consequences if the desired changes aren't made. **To do this, you need to distance yourself emotionally from the situation, and stick to the facts.** Remain focused on the matter at hand by using a meeting process similar to the one shown in the example on the left.

After the meeting, it's important to set up an action plan in which you clearly indicate your expectations. If you are partly responsible for the solutions—in terms of an organizational change, for example—identify who should do what, and when. **A written action plan allows you to avoid any misunderstandings about what you have agreed on with the employee.** The notes recorded in the plan also make it easier to follow up more effectively.

A follow-up meeting should take place no later than two weeks after the initial meeting. By taking prompt follow-up action with the employee concerned, you're confirming the importance you give to the desired changes. This follow-up will also give you the opportunity to give the employee some feedback on the corrective measures taken. If you notice that the situation has deteriorated, you can implement appropriate disciplinary measures.

Your emphasis on resolving the problem should be proportional to its importance



► Key elements of an effective policy

Attendance is achieved by giving it the emphasis it deserves. In this regard, an attendance policy is essential. Drawing up this kind of policy can either be very simple or more complex, depending on such factors as the company's size and culture, and the number of people involved in the process. **All attendance policies must however, include four elements: the company's philosophy on absences, its objectives, each person's responsibilities, and the procedures to be followed.**

If this kind of policy already exists in your organization, when was the last time it was communicated to your staff? Remember that the more aware employees are of the policy's existence, the more effective the policy will be. For example, a reminder during the employee's performance appraisal will allow you to emphasize the importance of the policy.

Also, a clear process for handling absences will enable you to manage these situations more easily. **Although absence management involves situations that require managers to use their own judgment, the process used should always be the same.** This way, your employees will be more aware of your expectations regarding absenteeism, and will see that you treat all team members equally.



Company philosophy
Indicate the rationale behind the policy and the importance the company places on attendance.

Objectives
Indicate the company's goals (quantitative and qualitative) in terms of attendance.

Responsibilities
Indicate the responsibilities of everyone involved (employee, immediate supervisor, Human Resources department, etc.) when a person is absent from work.

Procedures
List the procedures that will apply for absences (authorized leaves, doctor's note required, obligation to call immediate supervisor, forms to complete, consequences for repeated unauthorized absences, etc.).

Solving an absenteeism problem is not always an easy task. But regardless of the techniques you use, the key to effective management is action. Ignoring the problem will only lead to frustration for both the manager and the employees who are at work. By analyzing what's causing the absenteeism in your team, you can only improve the situation.

Remember that the more satisfied a person is with their job, the more importance they will place on their attendance. In addition, take the time to develop and use monitoring tools, which will help to both prevent absenteeism and to take action when this kind of problem occurs. Lastly, by promoting your attendance policy and enforcing it fairly and systematically, you'll be doing everything you can to ensure good attendance.

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