

Fundamentals of Attendance Management: Part 1 of 2

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Employee absenteeism is frequently a primary cause of anxiety and frustration for many employers. Although there are some general rules of thumb when it comes to dealing with absenteeism issues, it is important to consider these issues on a case by case basis. Attendance management issues in the workplace are becoming increasingly complicated to deal with and are requiring more and more expertise in order to effectively assess individual cases. From an employer's perspective concerns may include any or all of the following:

- employee welfare;
- workflow and scheduling disruptions;
- trust (identifying legitimate sick benefit users versus abusers);
- human rights issues;
- privacy issues; and
- legal and financial repercussions.

In this first part of a two part series about attendance management in the workplace, the focus is on identifying the general causes of workplace absenteeism, the differences between culpable and innocent absenteeism, informing you of what type of medical information employers should be requesting and describing the elements required for a successful attendance management program.

Understanding your absentee employee and why they are struggling with their attendance is a good first step in tackling the problem. Amongst the most common causes for employee absenteeism are employee health issues, attitude toward work and attendance, lack of mature self-respect, domestic problems and responsibilities, the nature of the work (routine, dull, shift-work), the organizational culture and alcohol/narcotic dependency.

In terms of attendance management, a problem employee is anyone whose absenteeism requires attention from the employer. Once you have identified the cause of the problem, you must determine the extent of it. Ask yourself: how frequently is the employee absent from work? How long are the absences? Is there a pattern? Are the absences innocent or blameworthy? Innocent absences are beyond the employee's control (i.e. poor health, etc.). Blameworthy or culpable absenteeism occurs when the employee breaks the rules (i.e. failing to notify employer of absence, premeditated/fraudulent use of sick benefits, etc.).

It is generally a good idea to have a policy in place informing employees as to when a medical certificate may be required. However, this policy should leave room for discretion for the employer to request such a certificate at any time. It is most useful to

exercise this type of discretion when you suspect an employee is abusing his/her sick leave entitlement provided by the organization.

Unfortunately, abuse of sick benefits is of common occurrence, and most of the time, employees get away with it because they go undetected or the employer is simply ignorant to the sort of medical information and pressure that it can place on a sick leave abuser.

Whether an employee is off sick for legitimate health reasons or if they are abusing their sick benefit, a regular frustration is that many of the medical certificates provided by physicians consist of cryptic one line messages that really provide little information with virtually no substantive value to the employer. While an employer does not have a right to request information pertaining to the medical diagnosis of an employee, it does have the right to request information in regards to the prognosis for the employee's return to work and the types of restrictions or accommodations necessary in order for the employee to carry out the duties of his/her job. This information should be elicited by the employer throughout the sick leave period. By obtaining the above information, the employer may be able to proactively mitigate the length of a potentially protracted sick leave.

Given the metaphoric minefield in which employee absenteeism issues lie, it is highly recommended that employers develop an attendance management system prospectively rather than wait for a problematic situation. The first step in developing an effective attendance management system is to enhance attendance awareness throughout the organization. In doing so, employers should regularly and clearly communicate attendance expectations to all personnel. For new employees, expectations should be communicated during orientation. The second step is to ensure that there are attendance control procedures in place so as to mitigate any potential non-culpable attendance issues from spinning out of control. Thirdly, the overall program should contain strong attendance reporting procedures inclusive of a tracking system of all absences. Through the implementation and consistent application of a comprehensive attendance management program, employers are better equipped to nip small attendance issues in the bud and prevent them from becoming bigger ones.

Stay tuned for the second part of this series to be posted in February 2008. The second part will focus on more aggressive means of attendance management and on how to handle absentee issues that are becoming pervasive and out of control.