

Absenteeism Reflection

*“Eighty percent of success is showing up”
(Woody Allen)*

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While the famous quote above may be directed at the movie industry and an attempt at humility, it is likely transferrable to most workplaces. Not to downplay the other twenty percent (20%), which we can assume gobbles up the education, skills, abilities, experience, and other attributes employers require, many employers would probably agree with Woody Allen. Although rewards for perfect attendance are considered discriminatory nowadays, the notion remains that employers generally think highly of employees who actually show up for work. Consider that Lou Gehrig’s consecutive game streak in baseball is as much a part of his iconic status as his quality of play and unfortunate death. By contrast mention the Canadian Senate and the first thought is their collective woeful attendance.

Attendance at work crosses the range of workplace considerations, not just from the obvious almighty dollar point of view, but also on the less obvious impacts such as morale. When an employee is absent it impacts other employees – perhaps others have to work harder, a less productive replacement is required, or the work does not get done. On its face, the result can be a grumpy employer and grumpy coworkers. In context the employee who is legitimately unable to come to work – perhaps due to an undisclosed disability or a family situation – feels terrible for missing work and letting his/her coworkers down.

There is no shortage of statistics surrounding typical “sick leave” usage. In fact, sick leave is touted as being the most widely abused benefits provided by employer in North America. The average Canadian misses about two (2) weeks per year. Federal senators, correctional officers, nurses, and teachers are amongst the highest users (all public sector) and so-called “professionals” such as engineers, accountants, consultants and the like

are amongst the lowest. Public sector workers use more sick leave than private sector workers, and there are variances amongst the Provinces and Territories. Likely the number of paid sick leave days the worker has to draw from influences usage, as does the quality of the absenteeism rules at the workplace.

However, statistics alone do not give the full picture of the very emotional attendance issue. An employee, who misses three separate days’ work in a year, with all those days on short notice and a busy shift may be more of a concern for an employer than an employee who misses 30 shifts per year where those shifts are known and planned. The difference between the two centres around the two (2) normal types of absenteeism, culpable and innocent. The third type of absenteeism is the “hybrid” – a combination of culpable and innocent absenteeism.

Culpable absenteeism is basically an employee not coming to work on the claim of being sick when in fact the employee is not sick and is likely able to work. Handling that occurrence – an unauthorized “no show” - is the same as handling any other workplace wrongdoing; the discipline process. Usually the process involves progressive discipline (the same misconduct gets a higher penalty as it occurs again and again). Some incidents of culpable absenteeism could mean immediate dismissal; those decisions revolve around the specific circumstances and other factors that can mitigate the penalty. For unionized workers, some collective agreements list strict penalties such as automatic termination for things like, for example, “using a leave for other than what it was intended” and “missing three (3) consecutive working days without a satisfactory reason.”

Innocent absenteeism is when the employee is absent above the normal standard for the workplace but the absences are considered legitimate in nature. It is a non-disciplinary issue, usually handled through workplace accommodation. Attendance management programmes do draw in so-called excessive absenteeism, legitimate but no common disability (i.e., flu here, cold there, bad stomach some other time). Generally, the employer attempts to curb the absences – which could mean a range of possibilities such as different hours, duties, etc. Bear in mind that human

rights legislation requires the employer to accommodate to the point of undue hardship for grounds such as disability and family status. But over some extended period of time when the excessive absenteeism persists, despite all good efforts to accommodate and there is no reasonable likelihood that the absenteeism will not continue in the foreseeable future (usually based on medical information) then the employer can trigger a non-disciplinary termination.

The hybrid absenteeism can take on many forms. For example, an employee could be targeted for innocent absenteeism but a suspicious pattern of absenteeism is identified (i.e., always missing weekends or dates when the Blue Jays play a day game). In that case, a potential innocent absenteeism may switch to culpable absenteeism. Another occurrence could be an employee who seemingly has a pattern is monitored but through medical information it is determined that a workplace accommodation is justified. In that situation, a potential culpable absenteeism moves to the innocent. And let's not forget the employee who has a disability but uses a sick day when he/she is actually not sick as another example of a hybrid form of absenteeism.

The causes of higher than expected absenteeism are likely much more complicated than the raw statistics around usage and the handling of absenteeism via the appropriate disciplinary or non-disciplinary response. A checklist for such causes would include topics such as: safe workplace culture, policies for work-life balance, training around accommodation and harassment, mental health issues, appropriate rules, modern working conditions, appropriate supervision, motivated employees, morale, reasonable monitoring and follow-up, and appropriate support such as an Employee Assistance Plan.

Maybe eighty percent (80%) of success is just about showing up. The challenge for employers is having a workplace culture wherein the employee wants to show up – and does - as often as the employee is able.