1. INTRODUCTION

This report outlines additional factors associated with managing short-term absenteeism. “The cost of absenteeism is substantial to organisations and it is therefore a logical target for managerial intervention” (Mayfield 2009). While focusing on management interventions, this report will discuss a number of areas. Firstly, it will deal with trends and patterns associated with absenteeism. Additional management considerations have been discussed such as “Fit Notes” and Presenteeism. Finally, a focus was placed on additional areas of concern within the U.S. in the form of bullying and harassment.
2.0 THE METHOD, PROCEDURES AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 TRENDS AND PATTERNS

2.1.1 CLASS SURVEY

A class survey was conducted with the aim of engaging with the audience and determining their experiences of the management of absenteeism in their respective workplaces. Please see Appendix 1 for full results.

2.1.2 BIOMETRIC DATA

IBEC (2011) determined the following:

- 78% of employers record absence
- 74% of these companies do so on a formal basis
- 23% on an informal basis.
- 70% of smaller firms do so (<50 employees).

Methods of recording absence include:

- Manually – record cards, time sheets, sign-in books;
- Mechanically – clock-in systems;
- Computerised system; or
- Spreadsheet (manual or computerised);
- Biometric recording – facial, retinal or iris recognition, fingerprint or hand geometry biometrics, voice or signature.

Biometrics is gaining traction as a more secure method of recording attendance, with 1% of employees indicating that they use fingerprint or other biometric information to register attendance. Biometrics is the practice of automatically identifying people on their physical characteristics through the use of computer recognition software systems. The benefits of these systems are their accuracy in identifying the individuals clocking in and out.

There are two major considerations for employers considering the introduction of biometrics:

1. They are encouraged to take legal advice in relation to data protection issues which may arise; and
2. Secure storage of this data is necessary.

Companies using biometric data need to ensure that they have appropriate hi-tech security measures in place to prevent unauthorised access, tampering, sharing or destruction of the data held. The Data Protection Commission advises companies to undertake a Privacy Impact Assessment prior to introducing Biometric Technology. Companies need to ensure that the data will be fairly obtained and processed when deciding to move to Biometric Systems. They will also need to ensure that the data held is not excessive but proportionate to their specific needs i.e. verification of attendance.

2.2 ABSENCE TRIGGERS

An organisation that has an absence management procedure in place can identify absence,
spells and patterns of absence. The system then needs to determine whether particular absences are a problem absence or not. Trigger points indicate that management should be taking action about staff absence IBEC (2011). See below examples of triggers.

- Triggers can be used for recurrent short-term absence, where it’s not always easy to spot patterns. Triggers may include;
  - cumulative days absence in a set period;
  - number of spells in a set period;
  - combination of days and spells;
  - pattern-related. (IBEC, 2011).

2.3 MANAGING ABSENTEEISM

2.3.1 FIT NOTE

A review was carried out by Dame Carol Black of the health and working age population in the UK (Black 2008) following which the UK Labour Government proposed a number of initiatives aimed at reducing the incidence and duration of workplace sickness absence. A strong theme that ran through the Black Review was the need to address the fallacy according to the Review that “illness is compatible with being at work and that an individual should be at work only if 100% fit” (Black, 2008: 21). One key initiative, which came into force in April 2010, was the introduction in the UK of a Fit Note or Statement of Fitness for Work, replacing the former medical certificate.

Doctors in the UK now issue fit notes after seven days of an individual’s sickness absence to provide evidence of the doctor’s advice about the individual’s fitness for work (Department and Work and Pensions, 2013; National Health Service 2012). The fit note allows doctors to advise that individuals “may be fit for work” taking into account the advice of the doctor or “not fit for work”. Part of the Fit Note also enables a doctor to indicate the types of adjustments that can be implemented for the employee’s work e.g. reduced hours, workplace adaptations, if the employer is able and willing to provide same to encourage the employee’s return to work.

2.3.2 PRESENTEEISM

Presenteeism can be defined as attending work while ill (Johns, 2010). Employees who have high job demands may be pressurised to work harder and attend work when sick (Demerouti et al, 2009). Presenteeism is largely prevalent in human service work where employees provide care or help to other people and have a strong commitment to the needs of their clients (Aronsson et al, 2000).

The phenomenon of presenteeism is a growing organisational problem attracting increased scholarly attention. This is due to the fact that there is now a wider recognition that presenteeism has adverse effects on employee well-being and organisational productivity (Gustafsson & Marklund, 2011). Baker McClearn et al (2011) have suggested that presenteeism may be rising due to the increased reluctance of employees to take time off work during times of economic uncertainty and when many organisations are downsizing.
Factors that relate to the work context have been viewed as the most important predictors of the reason's employees choose to attend work while ill. Research suggests the following are the key factors – excessive workloads (Demeourti et al, 2009), understaffing, and the related difficulties of being easily replaced if off work sick (Johns, 2011) and attendance policies (Grinyer & Singleton, 2000).

Recent research has shown that high job demands are associated with presenteeism which in turn predicted longer absence spells and that employee perceptions of distribution justice acted as an important mechanism through which presenteeism mediated the relationship between job demands and absenteeism (Deery et al 2014).

Deery et al (2014) therefore advise that organisations should take heed of the following:

• Organisations should be made aware that work overload and strict management practices can stimulate presenteeism.
• Managers should recognise that presenteeism can subsequently lead to longer spells of absence.
• Employee perception of fair outcomes minimise the deleterious effect of presenteeism on Absenteeism.

2.4 ABSENTEEISM IN THE U.S. A

2.4.1 BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

Absenteeism caused by bullying and harassment, is a result of an employee’s negative experiences associated with their job situation, job satisfaction and motivation to attend. These factors are outlined in the process model of major employee attendance influences as outlined in the figure below (Steers and Rhodes 1978).

Figure 1 - Major Influences on Employee Attendance: A Process Model

Steers and Rhodes (1978)
Research suggests that workplace bullying and harassment is one of the most prevalent causes of workplace absenteeism in the U.S., after the health and wellness issues discussed within the group presentation. Forbes (2013) suggests that employees who are being subjected to bullying and harassment are far more likely to call in sick in order to avoid situations.

LaVan and Martin (2008) suggest that determining statistics, which quantify absenteeism rates, are difficult to produce. However, it is proposed that 77% of employees are subjected to some form of bullying or harassment. Further to this, Hall and Lewis (2014) suggest that with 80% of US employees working within the service sector, human interaction is significantly increased which in turn increases the likelihood of workplace bullying. The figure below outlines the types of bullying experienced within the U.S. work environment.

**Figure 2 - Bullying Management Framework**

Numerous researches suggest that there is an increased level of cyber bullying occurring within the US workplace. With the advent of technology such as email and social media, cyber bullying has become one of the most common in the US workplace with one third of victims experiencing bullying in this form (Privitera and Campbell 2009; Borstorff et al 2007 cited in Hall and Lewis 2014).

There are numerous sources of research on how best to manage bullying and harassment. LaVan and Martin (2008) propose that allowing the victims to simply leave the organisation is the simplest approach as their replacements are less likely to proceed absent. However, Wormald (2005) suggests that the costs associated with employee turnover such as recruitment and training are far greater in the long term than those associated with absenteeism. Stag and Sheridan (2010) suggest
that the most effective method of managing bullying within the business environment is for the recipients to receive an apology from the source, and to provide workplace programmes.

Kumar et al (2012) propose that in order to effectively manage workplace bullying, employers must adopt a multi-faceted approach. Employers should spread awareness while also fulfilling management functions such as policies outlining methods for dealing with workplace bullying.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out by way of a literature review. This is important to demonstrate, explain, and evaluate the current existent literature about the theme of the article. Furthermore, through this review, we compared and contrasted previous research in this area. Further study beyond the literature was necessary to fulfil the goals of this research. This was undertaken in the form of qualitative research. Qualitative research is a broad term that covers a wide range of techniques and philosophies. In simple terms, a qualitative research method can be defined as an approach that allows a researcher to examine people’s experiences in detail by using specific research methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, observation, content analysis, life histories, or biographies (Hennink et al. 2010).

Additionally, was decided to run a brief survey in one class of the University of Limerick about the student’s experiences with the management of absenteeism in their workplace, whether they have had been absent themselves and for what reasons. The aim of the class survey was enriching this report with accurate, reliable and validated data.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In conclusion, this report has outlined that absenteeism is a significant factor within Human Resources Management. The trends and patterns section outlined a Class Survey, methods for measuring absenteeism and triggers associated with the concept. The management section focused on “fit notes” and “presenteeism”, discussing how these concepts are impacting on rates of absenteeism.

Finally, the U.S.A section highlighted that bullying and harassment are significant causes of absenteeism, while also outlining methods for managing workplace bullying. Additionally, the diverse implications associated with absenteeism make it extremely difficult to eradicate. However, research suggests that active management and employer initiatives can significantly reduce the rates of absenteeism.

APPENDIX 1 – CLASS SURVEY

CLASS SURVEY

As part of this research, we decided to run a brief survey on our classmates’ experience with the management of absenteeism in their workplace, whether they have had been absent themselves and for what reasons. The aim of the class survey, was to enrich this report with accurate, reliable and validated data.
The questions posed and the options were:

1. What is your name? (To prevent a duplication of responses).

2. Is it possible for you to take leave whenever you require it? (24 respondents)
   - Always 12.5%
   - Often 45.83%
   - Sometimes 33.33%
   - Never 8.33%

3. For what reason have you taken leave (not including statutory leave)? (18 respondents)
   - Sickness 61.11%
   - Lack of interest in the job/work dissatisfaction 11.11%
   - Long working hours/working conditions 22.22%
   - Family reasons 33.33%

   A Comments Box was provided to gather additional information. A few answers included;
   - To return to fulltime education
   - Injury
   - Bereavement
   - Planned operation

4. Excluding statutory leave (holidays, maternity leave….) on average, how many times do you take leave in a year? (24 respondents)
   - 0 33.33%
   - 1 37.50%
   - 2 6.67%
   - 3 0.00%
   - >3 12.50%

5. Which of the following have you availed of? (21 respondents)
   - Sick leave (certified) 42.68%
   - Sick leave (uncertified) 23.81%
   - Blanket (or Duvet) Days 4.76%
   - Other (please specify) 42.86%

   - Bereavement
   - Compassionate leave
   - Not applicable
6. Does your company have an Absence Management Plan? (24 respondents)
   Yes 41.67%
   No 41.67%
   Do not know 16.67%

7. Please tick the methods your company has used to manage absences? (20 respondents)
   Attendance Bonus 10%
   Compassionate Family Leave 25%
   Counselling / EAP Programmes 0%
   Involving Line Managers 15%
   Occupational Health Referral 20%
   Return to Work Interview 35%
   Varying Sick Pay Entitlements 10%
   Phased Return 20%
   Other 30%

   • Unaware of any
   • Suspension from sick pay scheme
   • None

8. Have you engaged in a Return to Work interview? (24 respondents)
   Yes 20.83%
   No 79.17%

9. Please provide any additional information or feedback on this subject. (10 respondents):

   “I have engaged in a return to work interview but not with my current company, I have with a previous and bigger company. My current company are very flexible in giving leave once cover is available, but because this is a small company this it can be a problem”

   “If you know that no one will be doing your work in your absence and that the work will only pile up while you are out: 2 consequences - (1) hard to take sick leave if genuinely sick, therefore leading to presenteeism (2) on the flip side - not inclined to ‘pull a sickie’ / take a duvet day as just not worth the stress and additional workload upon return to work!”

   “My past work experience has been summer work in the hospitality industry. If I called in sickie (with nothing actually wrong with me) someone else on their day off would have to come in due to the hotel being that busy. I guess I was just lucky I was never really sick to miss a day during the time I was working.”
“By following a fair and consistent process with all colleagues we have improved attendance levels and brought this KPI from red to green against target”

“I work in a company of circa 400 employees. Absenteeism is not really an issue as each employee knows their work will be still waiting for them on their return so it’s of no real benefit to go off. Also, there is a substantial bonus at Christmas for not taking any leave during the year (outside of statutory) which is paid annually at Christmas.”

“The following questions I have answered relate to my current job except for the last question. My answer to the last question relates to previous employment with a large retail company”

“My company doesn’t pay sick pay. I ticked 0 for number of days off per year it’s probably on average between 0 and 1. Great idea to do a survey, looking forward to your presentation.”

“I believe the addition of flexible Duvet Days would reduce the number of sick days people take.”

“I would consider myself a self-driven, motivated & honest individual, but when I became disheartened/disinterested in my previous job absenteeism soon followed. I found it difficult to motivate myself to get up in the morning because I simply could not face the work environment I was in. I’m sure people go absent for a multitude of reasons but for me it was very much linked with a loss belief in the organisation.”

“Whilst the company I worked for had an Absence Management policy, it was not routinely followed”

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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