8 STEPS TO MANAGE PRESENTEEISM

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What is Presenteeism?

There is some confusion in the research literature about what actually constitutes presenteeism with some researchers describing it as being about working long hours i.e. being present in the workplace for longer but not being any more productive. Some researchers describe Presenteeism as being where people are distracted by games/social media/phones etc. The type of presenteeism that generates the most cost and where most of the research has had its focus, however, is about employees who go into work when they are ill and should really be staying at home.

The Direct and Indirect Costs of Presenteeism

Presenteeism is very costly in a number of ways. It is not only costly in terms of lost productivity/performance but also, in terms of employee health.

The Direct Costs of Presenteeism

The figures produced by the Centre for Mental Health (007) demonstrate that sickness absence due to mental ill health in the workforce costs UK employers around £8.4 billion pounds per year. Interestingly, Presenteeism costs UK employers almost double. Staff turnover i.e. recruiting and training new staff to replace employees who go off with mental health problems and don't come back costs an additional £2.4 billion. In total this equates to about £1000 per employee per year; which is not an insignificant amount, especially when you think that this figure is just in relation to mental health not bad backs, flu, shingles and everything else. The research also suggests that this may be a conservative estimate and that the true cost of Presenteeism may up to 3 times that of sickness absence.

The Indirect Costs of Presenteeism

There are also indirect costs associated with Preenteeism, which are difficult to calculate but are there nevertheless. One indirect cost is that Presenteeism leads to lower engagement, and lower job satisfaction. Presenteeism also had consequences for health and can lead to: contamination amongst colleagues e.g. where someone remains in work with flue and infects colleagues, Long Term Health Consequences e.g. Future Incidence of Coronary Heart Disease.

Presenteeims has also been linked to future sickness absence. Hanson & Anderson (2009) found that Presenteeism is associated with long-term sickness absence of at least 2 weeks' duration as well as with spells lasting at least 2 months.

Presenteeism also has a negative Impact on: Colleagues, Customers, Company Brand and Reputation. Colleagues may have to pick up extra work for team members

engaging in Presenteeism. Equally, the employee engaging in Presenteeism is less engaged, which can result in negative experiences for customers/clients/patients and therefore have a negative impact on the reputation and brand of the organisation. Accident rates have also been found to be higher, where higher level of presenteeism exist. This is of particular concern for organisations where safety is critical.

Are Particular Types of Employees More Prone to Engaging in Presenteeism as opposed to Absenteeism?

The research has shown that Presenteeism increases when jobs are at risk, so employees who perceive themselves as having less job security are likely to opt for Presenteeism. Presenteeism is also more common amongst white collar workers, so organisations with a high proportion of office based staff may have to be more vigilant. Employees with mental health conditions more likely to demonstrate presenteeism. People experiencing mental health conditions are more likely to engage in presenteeism due to stigma and fear of losing opportunities or even their job. Similarly, employees with early stage health problems more likely to demonstrate presenteeism Employees with health problems generally want to carry on as long as they can before having to take sickness absence. In addition, they may be afraid of raising their health issues with their manager.

Presenteeism is predominantly a Mental Health Issue

Mental health conditions and stress have become more prominent causes of absence in recent years which is not surprising given the challenging times that we live in. Everyone is working leaner and trying to do more with less. Unfortunately, this can take its toll on employees. Mental health is now amongst the top causes of both short and long term absences, so it is high likely that mental health is also one of the leading causes of Presenteeism.

There are also some general health conditions that have been linked to presenteesm, so whichever way you look at it, if you want to address presenteeism then you need to increase overall wellbeing within the workplace. Presenteeism, motivation and engagement are all inextricably linked and those organisations who seek to promote engagement without taking account of mental health/health factors are wasting their time and money.

What Causes Presenteeism?

The research evidence into the causes of Presenteeism is inconclusive but a range of organisational and personal factors have been implicated e.g.:

ORGANISATIONAL FACTORS	PERSONAL FACTORS
Organisational culture and attitudes	Financial difficulties
Heavy Workload/Job Design	Over-commitment to work
Time pressure/Lack of resources	Poor boundaries
Sick Pay Arrangements	Education level
Concerns about Job Security	Attitude towards absence
Long working hours	Age
Inflexible Sickness Absence processes	

8 Steps To Manage Presenteeism

1. Promote Flexible Absence Management
2. Measure Presenteeism
3. Build a Resilient Organisation
4. Make it OK to Talk About Health/Mental Health issues
5. Manage Mental Health in the Workplace.
6. Provide Professional Support
7. Promote Health and Wellbeing.
8. Manage the Organisational Impact on health

1 Sickness Absence

Sickness absence and presenteeism are two sides of the same coin and if you concentrate on driving down sickness absence figures then you are probably increasing presenteeism, which can be more costly in the long run. Absence and presenteeism are both symptoms of organisational ill health and need to be addressed in a holistic manner as they both affect productivity.   There are a number of steps that you can take to address this. Firstly, you should review your absence policy to try and assess the extent to which it is likely to facilitate Presenteeism. There are some steps that you can take to improve your sickness absence processes and procedures:

Encourage sickness absence – by that, I mean create a culture whereby it is expected that you will take sickness absence if you are ill. Make employees aware of the difference between absenteeism and Presenteeism. Advise them that you will expect them to take sickness absence if they are too ill to work. This is a difficult message to take to a Board because they just want to see absence costs reduced and will likely see this initiative as encouraging employees to 'swing the lead'. You will need to help

the Board understand the larger costs that are incurred by Presenteeism so that they support a more holistic approach to managing costs and wellbeing. Encourage your senior managers to role model this behaviour themselves.

See what scope there is to 'flex' your absence management policies. Aggressive sickness absence policies can do more harm than good, particularly where triggers are used. Triggers are generally perceived as being punitive and are particularly unhelpful for anyone experiencing mental health conditions or stress. If you have to have triggers then moderate the impact by having a positive outcome associated with reaching a trigger e.g. a wellness discussion which identifies any issues and any support required.

Ensure that Managers understand both Absenteeism and Presenteeism. Presenteeism is a problem for most businesses and managers need to be aware of the growing evidence that presenteeism is a more significant cause of lost productivity than sickness absence. It is important that managers understand the relationship between absenteeism and presenteeism as they are in a position to help and support staff. Use flexible working/shift patterns/home working to give people more options when they are experiencing health difficulties

2, Measuring Presenteeism

Measuring Presenteeism is not easy and relatively few organisations attempt to measure it in any systematic way. There are, however, specially designed questionnaires that measure presenteeism e.g. The 'World Health Organisation' Health Performance Questionnaire (HPQ), or a simpler method would be to add a few questions about health and wellbeing to your staff survey. If you do not have a staff survey, you could just ask staff a few questions about whether staff have worked on days when they felt they should have been off sick/ask how many days they have where they don't feel that they get through as much work as they usually do.

When someone is engaging in Presenteeism, their overall productivity will be reduced. This will often be visible in the workplace especially if managers are encouraged to be vigilant and watch out for changes in performance levels that could indicate that someone is experiencing a problem. . Organisations should also ensure that they have management information systems which collect both sickness absence data and information about the prevalence and impact of chronic illness. There should be performance measures in place which are sophisticated enough to pick up any deterioration in performance and these measures should be monitored alongside sickness absence.

3, Build a Resilient Organisation

We could write several books about how to build a resilient organisation as it is such a large topic, however, for the purpose of this document, we will have to restrict ourselves to looking at a few pointers. The more resilient organisations tend to be those that have: good job/work design, a degree of autonomy for staff and that habitually treat people in a fair and supportive manner. An organisational culture that promotes openness and trust is more likely to encourage employees to be honest

about any issues that they are experiencing that may be impacting on their work. This will help reduce Presenteeism. In addition, upskilling employees helps to facilitate engagement and make people feel valued. It also helps employees to cover gaps where team members are off sick or struggling to cope.

Some organisations develop cultural norms for absenteeism and Presenteeism which have a detrimental effect on productivity. Be vigilant in looking for these types of trends and be prepared to act where you see them.

4, Make it OK to Talk about Mental Health/Health

Raise awareness of mental health conditions, their signs and symptoms and where to access support. This will help reduce stigma and encourage people to talk to their managers if they are experiencing problems, rather than suffering in silence and engaging in Preenteeism. There are many ways in which you could raise awareness e.g. most organisations have 'Health promotion' days, so you could add in a few 'Mental Health Promotion' days. Put information about mental health where staff can see it e.g. in the canteen, on the notice board/staff intranet etc. Encourage staff who are willing to share their experiences of what it felt like to experience a mental health condition. Invite them to act as a 'buddy' for other staff who may wish to know more about these experiences and how they coped.

Make sure that staff know that help is available and where they should go to access that help e.g. OH/HR (depending on who has this responsibility for this function within your organisation).

5, Manage Mental Health in the Workplace

There are a number of actions that you could take in order to more effectively manage mental health in the workplace:

Train managers to spot the early warning signs of stress/mental ill health and to hold supportive conversations. Employees with stress/mental health problems often do not receive support as they do not feel able to disclose their problem in the workplace. Therefore they are more likely to use presenteeism rather than absenteeism. Training managers to manage stress and mental health more effectively will reap real rewards, in terms of, reduced sickness absence and increased productivity.

Train staff to manage their personal finances -In difficult economic times, financial worries can be very stressful for people. The research has demonstrated that providing basic financial advice can be very useful in helping employees to cope and reducing stress.

Train staff to be emotionally resilient - Emotional resilience training has been proven to be very beneficial in helping employees cope better with organisational/life pressures, whilst retaining a higher level of wellbeing. This means that employees will be less likely to succumb to ill health and will retain their productivity levels.

6, Provide Professional Support

There appears to be a very good business case for implementing specialist support such as screening for depression/health screening and simple well-being programmes in the workplace which address both physical and mental health. See table 1 below. Taken from Knapp et al (2011).

Table (1) The Return on Investment in Mental Health

Intervention	Short Term	Medium Term
Early diagnosis and treatment of depression in the workplace	£1.96 for every pound spent	£3.07 for every pound spent
Workplace Health Promotion	£9.69 for every pound spent	Data not yet available

If you have the budget for it, offer specialist services, such as screening for depression and general health screening. Provide support to Managers in making reasonable adjustments for employees who need flexibilities. Managers often misunderstand the key role that they play in supporting their team members and it is vital that they are aware of the boundaries of their managerial discretion with regard to providing support to team members.

7, Promote Health and Wellbeing

Make sure that you have a health and wellbeing policy which details your approach to absence and presenteeism. Promote it regularly so that it is fresh in the minds of employees. In addition, you could implement a well-being strategy that addresses both physical and mental health. The strategy does not have to be elegant or expensive, often a few simple steps can reap big rewards

Beware, research carried out by Bustillos et al (2013) found that simply having access to a wellbeing programme did not reduce presenteeism. The other elements that we have mentioned such as raising awareness of health issues, managerial behaviour and organisational policies are all part of a holistic approach to improving wellbeing and reducing presenteeism.

8, Manage the Organisational Impact on Mental Health

The physical risks to health are usually well recognised and documented in the workplace but those affecting mental health are not generally well understood. As employers, you need to be aware of the organisational factors that can contribute to poor mental health and take steps to mitigate them. Factors such as excessive job demands and low control over work are such factors. The HSE 'Management Standards' framework could be used to identify and manage risks to mental health.

Work to minimise stressors where possible and where it is not possible, encourage managers to be vigilant and supportive. Make employees aware of stressors and how to seek support if required. You should also be vigilant about work/life balance.

In Summary

- Absenteeism and presenteeism are two sides of the same coin and have to be addressed jointly if you are going facilitate wellbeing.

- Offering access to wellbeing programmes, in isolation, is unlikely to reduce Presenteeism.

- Taking action in the 8 areas that we have just been looking at could help you reduce sickness costs by up to 30% (Centre for Mental Health, 2007)
- Managing presenteeism is much wider than just managing absence and productivity. It requires a holistic approach that may involve a change of culture and behaviours

Cognoscenti Business Psychologists Ltd is a business psychology consultancy specialising in: Wellbeing, Leadership/Entrepreneurship, Change/Project Management and Executive Coaching. If you would like to talk about Presenteeism or any related topics, please ring me on 0161 344 5492/07771 870 547 or email me: Sharon@cognoscenti.uk.com

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