

Absenteeism - problem or symptom?

Alistair Schofield argues that while tackling absenteeism by direct action may alleviate the problem in the short-term, addressing the causes of the problem will provide long-term benefits.

During the last few months there have been a variety of articles in the national and trade press focussing on the problem of absenteeism at work. Invariably all have emphasised the measures organisations can take to ensure that persistent offenders are deterred from taking time off.

In one example, York City Council is using experienced nurses to handle calls from employees who phone in sick. The idea is that early medical intervention can help people return to work more quickly. However, while I agree that the idea behind the service is a good one, the fact that it was introduced as a result of an absenteeism problem means that it has negative connotations and is most probably addressing the symptoms of the problem rather than the cause.

While it is possible that high levels of absenteeism may be as a result of the nature of the work or the physical environment in which it is carried out, in many cases I believe the root cause is more likely to be lack of job satisfaction or motivation on the part of the employees.

In short, if people enjoy their work, enjoy the environment in which they work and feel valued, they are far less likely to take time off unnecessarily.

So the question is, how do you create such an environment?

In 1980 a journalist by the name of Robert Levering was asked to write a book with the title 'The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America'. During the next few years, he and his co-author Milton Moskowitz studied numerous organisations and interviewed inspirational business leaders such as David Packard of Hewlett Packard and Fred Smith of FedEx.

When the book was published in 1984 it was an instant best seller and sparked a great deal of interest in the subject of employee satisfaction and workplace environments.

Robert later teamed up with Amy Lyman to establish the

Average annual days lost per employee by industry

Highest

Transport, storage	12.0
Food, drink, tobacco	12.0
Health	11.6
Central government	11.0

Lowest

Consultancy	5.5
IT services	5.6
Media, publishing	6.0

Source: Employee Absence Survey 2004 - Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development

Great Place to Work[®] Institute, which now produces '100 Best Companies to Work For' lists in 23 countries around the world including the UK.

As a result of their work, they have identified five characteristics of the relationship between an employee and their working environment which, taken together, form a definition of what constitutes a great place to work. These are as follows:

- **Credibility** – It is important that employees see their leaders and managers as being credible, that what they say is true, that they honour their commitments and that they set high standards and behave ethically.
- **Respect** – People within the workplace must respect one another. They must listen to alternative points of view and value other people's opinions, even if they disagree with them.
- **Fairness** – People need to know that they will be treated fairly by others, regardless of their role or hierarchical status.
- **Pride** – It is important that people have a sense of pride, not only in their own work but in their team and in the organisation as a whole.
- **Camaraderie** – An organisation is a community and it is important that employees feel welcomed and at home within that community.

Although this article is specifically looking at the issue of absenteeism, it is also worth noting that the best places to work tend to have higher productivity and profitability, better customer satisfaction and lower staff turnover than organisations that score less well against these criteria.

For example, in a study published in Fortune magazine in 2001, the 100 Best companies had staff turnover that was 50% lower than their competitors. In another study that compared the stockmarket valuation of the 100 Best companies with the Standard & Poor's 500 list between 1997 and 2003, the 100 Best companies outperformed the S&P 500 list by a factor of almost three to one.

Tackling the symptoms of the problem in York City Council's Adult Services Department, where they estimate that absenteeism is costing them £2.3m per year, may reduce the problem in the short-term. But the long-term solution requires that they look to the root causes of the problem and create a working environment where there is trust and where the problem of absenteeism disappears by default.

Creating such an environment is not a challenge of management, but a challenge of leadership – But that's another subject.

About the author:

Alistair Schofield is the Managing Director of Extensor Limited and can be contacted at as@extensor.co.uk.

To learn more about the Great Place to Work[®] Institute, visit their UK web site at www.greatplacetowork.co.uk