

Are you Well?

It seems that over recent years one of the latest hot topics to emerge is the management of wellness in organisations.

Lead by the government initially, it began in 2005 with the appointment of the first national director of health, work and well-being strategy to spearhead initiatives that promote and improve health in the workplace.

The trend towards managing wellness, a proactive process, is a counter-balance to managing absence, which is a reactive process. The proactive stance of tackling wellness is probably due, on the whole, to rising stress levels, increased working hours and to a backlash to the implementation of overzealous rigid absence management policies. The cost of absence in the UK has continued to rise over the years, thus defeating business objectives to tackle this issue and providing an argument that it has not worked.

It can be argued that increasing absence levels have been caused by:

- Generous sick pay provision
- Increasing employee age and perceived high levels of job security
- High levels of stress, job intensity, job repetitiveness and worker passivity.
- Low levels of working-time flexibility, job responsibility and control.
- Poor absence management and lack of accountability for the costs of sickness absence.
- Lack of information about the normal duration of illnesses and recovery periods from operations.
- High reliance on public health systems and their physicians to certify absence.
- Failure to put in place a company wellness policy and rehabilitation programme.
- Conflicts between sickness absence policy, health and safety policy and work-life balance policy.

A major problem with many sickness absence policies is that they concentrate mainly on the action to be taken when an employee becomes unwell, setting out bureaucratic procedures to record and deal with sickness absence whether long or short term.

The implementation of a wellness policy, on the other hand, addresses the wider and positive issue of employee wellness. The aim should be to minimise sickness absence through a mix of health awareness, clearly defined entitlements and tight management controls.

Issues that could be covered in a policy to promote the avoidance of absence include working time and second jobs, stress management, disability, work/life balance, violence and bullying, healthy working environment, controlled temperatures, job content/satisfaction. The policy could then be linked or incorporated into an existing absence management policy.

A starting point to gauge the level of opinion in how employees perceive the management of wellness in an organisation could be to undertake a survey. The findings will then give key information to take action.

So whose responsibility should be it be to implement a wellness strategy/policy? Well, as with all key business initiatives, senior management should be on board and should drive the issue from the top. It should be, the responsibility of middle management to then continue to drive the process throughout the organization coordinated with the support of HR, occupational health and health and safety where appropriate.

The wellness agenda can be supported through the tailored introduction of flexible working, employee assistance programmes, counselling services, health promotion, regular health screening and checks, life-style medicals, diet and health education, nutrition programmes, medical insurance, annual flu jabs, periodic polio immunization, occupational health support, risk assessment and management, stress management, gym membership, exercise promotion, access to clinics for staff not covered by health insurance, who need treatment to recover quickly. A mix of some or all of these suggestions could make a significant change within organisations improving attendance and retention quite dramatically.

The cost of introducing many of these initiatives are easily outweighed by the reduction in absence management costs.

As with all strategies and policies the management of wellness should be monitored and reviewed on a regular basis to check whether progress is being made.

The growth in wellness is linked to a growing awareness of the contribution of well-being to productivity and high performance working. According to the CIPD, research suggests that employees in poor health cut productivity by around 20 per cent, which adds weight to giving serious consideration to the issue of managing wellness.

Wellness management should be a holistic strategy combining better health and better management, thus ensuring individuals are able to perform and so improving productivity and, therefore, the bottom line of the business.

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