



PRESENTEEISM AND LEAVEISM: CAN YOU RECOGNISE THESE ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS IN YOUR WORKPLACE?

Absenteeism continues to be a thorn in the side of many HR professionals. However, recent studies have shown that this is not the only attendance management problem for HR.

Take a moment to see if the characters below are familiar to you...

Mucus-trouping Melvin... takes pride in turning up to work even though he is knocking on death's door with some horribly contagious lergy.

Major stress Tess... is normally a good performer but she is suffering in silence after a traumatic divorce. Sick with stress, Tess can't focus and takes work on holiday to try and meet her deadlines.

All-work-and-no-play makes Jack... a high performing workaholic. He loves work but needs watching as he hardly ever switches off and rarely takes annual leave.

Must-try-harder Tristan... is performing badly in a role that's too demanding for him but he's trying to keep up by working late and at the weekends.

Put-upon Pippa... is a top performer but she can't say no. Pippa works part-time and exceeds all her targets but only by working secretly on her days off to meet unrealistic deadlines.

Presenteeism and Leaveism are on the rise

If you recognise similar employees at work, don't carry on regardless. Any one of these individuals could, ultimately, pose a serious liability to your organisation (and themselves). Why? They are all displaying signs of presenteeism and/or leaveism; two attendance management problems which are becoming increasingly prevalent in the workplace.

What are presenteeism and leaveism?

Presenteeism

Rather than employees failing to come to work because they are sick (i.e. absenteeism), many are coming into work when they are sick. This is known as “presenteeism”. A business dictionary definition of presenteeism describes it as “The practice of staying at work longer than usual or when you are ill to show that you work hard and are important to your employer.”

Melvin presents a textbook example of “presenteeism” by dragging himself into work when he is sick. Tess, who is working while suffering from crippling stress, and Tristan, who is working late just to keep up, are also showing classic signs of presenteeism.

Workaholic Jack is a difficult case as it seems that his long hours are a lifestyle choice. However, Jack becomes a potential liability to his employer if he never takes time off and increases his risk of burnout and related illness or performance problems.

Leaveism

“Leaveism” occurs where employees either:

- use allocated time off (such as annual leave or rostered rest days) for sickness
- take work home that they cannot complete in normal hours
- work while on holiday or during other leave to catch up

Tristan and Pippa are both showing clear signs of leaveism by taking work home at the weekend to ensure they get their work done. Tess is a good example of how presenteeism can often feed into leaveism, where stress related illness is resulting in unproductive time at work and causing her to take work on holiday to catch up.

What are the red flags to look out for?

Presenteeism and leaveism aren't always easy to spot. High-performing employees such as superwoman Pippa or dedicated Melvin are often lauded by their managers for their work ethic. Conversely, stressed or struggling, poor performers like Tess and Tristan just about manage to keep their heads above water (and under HR's radar) by hiding their problems through leaveism.

Would you be able to spot the tipping point where the (successful or struggling) employee has pushed themselves (or been pushed) too far and is at risk of mental and/or physical illness?

To help you identify presenteeism and leaveism, here are some examples of the red flags you should be looking out for.

Presenteeism

- **Noticeable level of mistakes:** making more mistakes than usual is common
- **Poor quality work and/or low levels of productivity:** this can be accompanied by a seeming lack of care or pride in the employee's work
- **Poor time-keeping:** arriving late and leaving early, particularly if the employee is ill and can only just manage to get to work and watch the hours pass until they can race home
- **Excessively long hours:** in contrast to the above, others are 'flogging a dead horse' sitting at their desk for hours but struggling to get anything done
- **Working whilst obviously sick:** this isn't so difficult to spot – screwed up tissues and paracetamol on the desk are often a clue
- **Showing signs of tiredness and exhaustion:** sometimes this can be accompanied by poor appearance or personal grooming
- **Erratic or aggressive behaviour, tearfulness and low mood:** deteriorating relationships with colleagues and poor communication can also be evident

Leaveism

- **Constant connection:** employees are rarely logged off, constantly available on the phone and frequently emailing outside of business hours
- **Reluctance to book and take annual leave:** HR have to chase an employee to take their annual leave or they routinely carry over unused leave
- **Lack of trust and inability to handover projects:** inability to 'let go' of a project or entrust it to a colleague during a day off or longer periods of annual leave
- **Cancelling annual leave at the last minute:** cancelling or postponing leave as soon as an important event occurs at work where the employee is reluctant to hand over to others
- **Finishing off work at the weekend or taking it on holiday in order to meet deadlines:** never completing proper holiday notes because the employee would prefer to complete the work themselves

What are the dangers?

If you can't spot leaveism or presenteeism in the workplace, you could be facing significant human resources problems such as employee stress and "burnout"; increased risk of mental illness; the spread of contagious illness; and low employee morale. There are also potential business issues including the cost of an increased number of mistakes, low productivity, poor performance, safety risks and high employee turnover.

Presenteeism and leaveism can trigger a number of employment law liabilities for your organisation including breaches of health and safety laws, working time regulations and, where disability is involved, failure to make reasonable adjustments.

The Government report "Thriving at work" estimates that presenteeism costs employers in the UK between £17 billion and £26 billion every year.

It is difficult to quantify the cost of leaveism. Initially, it might appear that employers are getting extra value for money from the employee who works extra hours, unpaid and in their own time. However, the long-term costs of damage to staff morale and wellbeing are significant risks (and definitely not worth turning a blind eye to) when leaveism is not kept in check.

What action can be taken to curb leaveism and presenteeism?

There are a number of measures that organisations can take to help tackle leaveism and presenteeism in the workplace:

- **Do not rely on sickness absence data as the sole indicator of employee wellbeing:** restricting the focus to absenteeism gives a misleading picture of employee wellbeing. Due to the often secretive nature of leaveism and presenteeism, HR need to look beyond absence statistics and be alert to the red flags mentioned earlier.
- **Ensure that attendance management policies do not promote presenteeism and leaveism:** these policies are essential to provide HR with a transparent and objective procedure for handling absenteeism. However, overly rigid adherence to these policies can prompt presenteeism or leaveism. For example, some employees may be so fearful of taking a day off sick and triggering a performance or disciplinary threshold that they would rather come into work or take annual leave when they are not fit to carry out their duties. We recommend that there is a margin of flexibility so that the policy can provide supportive outcomes, particularly in the case of mental health problems, rather than purely punitive ones.
- **Monitor workload and compliance with legal obligations:** according to a recent CIPD report in 2019, workload is the major cause of workplace stress and this can feed a culture where presenteeism and leaveism become the norm. In the current climate of job insecurity and 'lean working practices', manufacturing employees may be particularly susceptible to workload pressures. There are not always easy (or easily affordable) answers to improving workload distribution. However, organisations must be aware of their legal obligations, such as health and safety and working time requirements, as well as duties to make reasonable adjustments for employees who may be struggling due to a disability.

- **Encourage role modelling and a culture which doesn't ignore (or promote) presenteeism or leaveism:** senior management can make a significant impact on reducing these attendance problems by displaying positive wellbeing practices such as: not working excessively long hours; taking regular breaks and using their annual leave; disconnecting from technology when they are on leave and making it clear that this should be the norm for their employees; working flexibly; focussing on outputs rather than work input; and removing the stigma associated with mental health conditions by sharing first hand experiences of dealing with stress or mental illness.
- **Provide line managers with training so that they can spot the red flags:** line managers need to be able to pick up the early warning signs of presenteeism or leaveism and nip it in the bud before it escalates, for example, into a serious health issue for the employee or a health and safety incident for the employer. Line managers should also be equipped to provide an adequate first response to presenteeism or leaveism, from holding sensitive conversations which highlight the problem to signposting employees to specialist help. Mental Health First Aid training is one option which could be beneficial.
- **Develop an employee wellbeing strategy with buy-in from senior managers:** we recommend developing a sensible strategy with affordable measures which target the actual needs of a particular workforce (rather than throwing free fruit and yoga classes at employees under a wellbeing banner and hoping for the best). This requires careful research, for example, through employee surveys or focus groups and, crucially, buy-in from senior management. A recent CIPD report found that simply having a wellbeing strategy did not discourage presenteeism. However, organisations with senior managers who acknowledged the importance of wellbeing were more likely to reduce presenteeism.

How we can help

Come to our seminars

MANAGING ILL HEALTH, TACKLING ABSENCE, PROMOTING WELLBEING

Effectively managing employees with physical or mental health conditions, while minimising the legal risks and promoting wellbeing, is one of HR's biggest challenges for 2019.

Handling cases of presenteeism and leaveism is just one of several topics that we will cover in our regional seminars, drawing on our legal, HR and occupational health expertise to provide you with practical guidance and resources on actively managing ill health in the workplace.

Secure your place today.