

Don't Let "Sick" Workers Undermine Your Organization



A new survey
puts employee
absences in
a new light.

In a recent survey, employers report that 60% of unscheduled absences are due to reasons other than physical illness.¹ Yet even human resource professionals who recognize the effectiveness of work-life and absence-control programs in curbing absenteeism and its cost (averaging \$610 per employee per year) report that their organizations haven't implemented these practices.

Why Aren't They Working?

More often than not, calling in "sick" has less to do with the employee's health than other reasons, the survey found. Cited most often as the reason for no-shows are:

1. family issues (21%)
2. personal needs (20%)
3. employees' entitlement mentality (14%)
4. stress (5%).

The results provide good news and bad news, says Nancy Kaylor, a workplace analyst for CCH, which sponsored the survey. "You can't cure the common cold, but you can do something to reduce the number of unplanned absences due to the non-illness needs that account for most no-shows."

To better understand how organizations can reduce unscheduled absences, the survey asked employers about their experiences with work-life and absence-control programs. Surprisingly, the survey found that programs perceived to be most effective aren't the ones most used.

Which Work-Life Programs Work Best?

On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being most effective), the work-life programs ranked highest by human resource professionals for reducing unplanned absences are, in order of effectiveness:

1. flexible scheduling (3.8)
2. compressed work week (3.8)
3. leave for school functions (3.6)

4. on-site health services (3.6)
5. job sharing (3.5)
6. telecommuting (3.5)
7. employee assistance program (3.0)
8. work-life seminars (3.0)
9. wellness programs (3.9)
10. child care referral programs (2.8).

As to what organizations put into practice, only flexible scheduling was used by a majority of respondents. Two-thirds (66%) of respondents use flexible scheduling. However, another of the leading work-life programs seen to reduce unplanned time off—compressed work week—was offered by only 28% of responding organizations.

The work-life program most employers have in place is an employee assistance program, with nearly three-quarters (73%) reporting use. Yet employee assistance programs received only an average effectiveness rating of 3.0, as did wellness programs, which 41% of employers use.

Other work-life programs used by respondents are: job sharing (25%), leave for school functions (24%), on-site health service (23%), telecommuting (20%), work-life seminars (25%), and child care referral programs (14%). Figure 1 summarizes these findings.

On average, employers report that they have 3.4 work-life programs in place. The survey found that the organizations with “good” to “very good” morale offer a greater number of work-life programs

Effectiveness and Use of Absence Control Programs

Absence Control Programs	Effectiveness Rating (1: Not Very Effective to 5: Very Effective)	Percentage Use
Paid Leave Bank	3.9	21%
No Fault	3.7	31%
Disciplinary Action	3.5	88%
Buy Back	3.4	17%
Yearly Review	3.2	58%
Personal Recognition	3.1	33%
Bonus	3.1	21%

FIGURE 2

(3.6) than those with “fair” to “poor” morale (3.1).²

Which Absence-Control Programs Work Best?

While employers realize that absence-control programs can reduce absenteeism, there is, again, a disconnect between the programs they rate most effective and those they actually put into use. On a scale of 1 to 5, the absence-control programs ranked most effective are:

1. **paid leave banks** (3.9)
(Paid leave banks, also known as paid time-off programs, provide employees with a bank of hours to be used for various purposes instead of traditional separate accounts for sick, vacation, and personal time.)
2. **no-fault systems** (3.7)
(No-fault systems limit the

number of unscheduled absences allowed, regardless of circumstances, and take specific disciplinary actions if that number is exceeded.)

3. **disciplinary action** (3.5)
4. **buy-back programs** (3.4)
(Under a buy-back program, employees are compensated for the allotted time off that they don't use.)
5. **yearly review process** (3.2)
6. **personal recognition programs** (3.10)
7. **bonus programs** (3.10).

As these results show, the most effective programs give employees control over their own time. Paid time-off programs provide the best way to avoid unscheduled absences, because employees can plan ahead to meet upcoming personal needs rather than calling in “sick” at the last minute for personal appointments they may have known about well in advance.

Although paid leave banks are the most effective program, only 21% of the organizations offer them to employees. Disciplinary action is the most-used program, with 88% reporting use. Over half the respondents (58%) use the yearly review process, while 33% use personal recognition programs, 31% use no-fault systems, and 17% use buy-back programs. Figure 2 summarizes these findings.

What Do These Results Mean for You?

If you're serious about curbing unplanned absences, the survey points a clear path for how to do so. You need to step back from the

continued on page 16

Effectiveness and Use of Work-Life Programs

Work-Life Programs	Effectiveness Rating (1: Not Very Effective to 5: Very Effective)	Percentage Use
Flexible Scheduling	3.8	66%
Compressed Work Week	3.8	28%
Leave for School Functions	3.6	24%
On-Site Health Services	3.6	23%
Job Sharing	3.5	25%
Telecommuting	3.5	20%
Wellness Programs	3.0	41%
Work Life Seminars	3.0	15%
Employee Assistance	3.0	73%
Child Care Referrals	2.8	14%

FIGURE 1

day-to-day management of employees who call in “sick” at the last minute and approach the problem strategically. Rather than use tools you already have in place, such as disciplinary action or a yearly review, consider new approaches, such as these:

1. Reconsider what a “work week” looks like. That may mean providing more flexible hours, compressed work weeks, time off for school events, or other arrangements that will help your employees strike a successful balance between their personal demands and their jobs.

2. Give employees more control over their time. Provide paid time-off programs that let employees use their “sick” time for personal reasons.

3. Offer programs that encourage proactive, cooperative absence planning between employers and employees.

4. Understand your employees and the issues they face. Implement programs and policies that are responsive to their needs. See “Ten Steps to Reduce Absences” on this page.

5. Take back control. Many employers are slow to adopt new

Organizations with “good” to “very good” morale offer more work-life programs.

human-resource programs for fear of losing control over their employees, the study found. The irony is, employers don’t actually have control, only the illusion of control. In many cases, employees have taken charge, determining when and how they want to use “sick” days. By helping employees balance work-life demands, employers become partners with their workers in managing workflow.

“You can’t cure the common cold, but you can reduce absences due to non-illness needs.”

6. Take a new look at costs. The survey found that many organizations avoid new work-life and absence-control programs for fear they will cost too much. As the survey shows, however, ignoring such programs can be even more costly to an organization.

As Kaylor points out, “There is no one-size-fits-all solution, and not all work-life or absence-control programs are appropriate for all organizations. You need to understand your workforce and what programs will best support your people. Then, carefully consider the cost and effect of implementing

those programs against the cost of standing still. Only with that analysis can you make the decision that’s best for your organization.” ■

Footnotes

¹ The “CCH Unscheduled Absence Survey” was conducted by CCH (2700 Lake Cook Road, Riverwoods, Illinois 60015, 800-449-9525, www.hr.cch.com), a leading provider of human resource and employment law information.

² See “Building Morale: The Key to Successful Change,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (www.snpo.org).

Resources

Glasrud, Bruce, “Here Comes Your 21st Century Workforce!”, *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 4.

Neddermeyer, Dorothy, “Employee Assistance Programs: Tackling Employee Dysfunction in the Workplace,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 4, No. 5.

These resources are available through the Society’s Resource Center, www.snpo.org.

Ten Steps to Reduce Absences

- 1. Find out why employees aren’t at work.** One way to do so is with a focus group or survey. Track absences for a six-month period.
- 2. Take a demographic snapshot of your workforce** to help understand your employees’ needs. Be sure to capture different employee constituencies, if applicable, to determine if there are any specific patterns of which you should be aware.
- 3. Review your organization’s policies, benefits, and programs** to determine what is currently offered.
- 4. Measure usage** of existing programs.
- 5. Compare the fit** between existing programs and the current and projected needs of your workforce. If differing employee needs surfaced in the demographic snapshot, make sure your comparative analysis considers these needs.
- 6. Identify new policies and programs**, or fine-tune existing ones, to fill any gaps you identify.
- 7. Consider your organization’s culture and workflows** to ensure that your proposed programs will support your organization’s objectives and that people will use them.
- 8. Communicate and reinforce the value** of balancing work responsibilities with personal and family needs, and make people aware of your benefits and programs.
- 9. Evaluate your absence-control and other employee programs** regularly.
- 10. Measure unscheduled absences at set intervals** to see if offerings continue to make sense for your organization.