

Sensitive handling of sickness at work

The CBI estimates that the annual cost to British business of sick days is £13 billion, and the average worker takes seven sick days a year. Twelve per cent of sick days are estimated to be bogus by the CBI.

Sickness is a sensitive issue which requires correct handling if you are to avoid any inference that you have been unfair or heavy-handed: on the other hand you cannot be expected to stand back and watch absenteeism decimate the work force and extinguish your profits.

Absence through sickness costs businesses a huge amount of money and wastes management time, placing a burden on those employees who conscientiously soldier on. So what can be done?

The most important thing is to have an appropriate policy, not a dusty piece of paper lingering in a filing cabinet, but active practices that have been communicated, have teeth and clear consequences.

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An active 'return to work' procedure is invaluable. An employee who has been sick should be interviewed on returning to work, even after a short absence. Turn up the heat on employees who are "sick" around weekends and Bank Holidays. Tackling employees and asking them to explain their absence on a regular basis has been shown to produce a deterrent effect.

You need to be mindful of the interaction between sickness absence and disability and other forms of discrimination. Also, persistent absenteeism can be a symptom of stress and should ring alarm bells if a negligence claim is to be avoided.

It can be a tricky course to steer and one which you cannot afford to get wrong with the potential for unlimited financial claims in the employment tribunal.

Keeping a finger on what is going on around sickness will have a significant impact on productivity. It is better to be proactive than reactive – this will always be the cheaper option.

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good on paper, even better in person

Contact us

Ware & Kay's specialist, Gill Wilkinson, has extensive experience in all aspects of employment law. Contact her on 01904 716000 or gillian.wilkinson@warekay.co.uk.

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