The annual cost of unplanned absenteeism is estimated to run to between £10 and £12 billion in the UK. In this article the authors investigate the potential causes of unplanned absences and outline what organisations can do to prevent these and increase the levels of engagement in their organisation.

The cost of unplanned absence

When a member of staff is unexpectedly absent from work it raises immediate cause for concern with regard to:
• the likelihood of missing deadlines;
• disruption to the quality and continuity of service delivery;
• increased workload and pressure for team members who take on other's work;
• time invested by managers and team leaders in resourcing and HR issues;
• costs involved in hiring temporary or replacement staff;
• loss of productivity and efficiency;
• drop in motivation and employee engagement and commitment;
• decrease in internal and external customer satisfaction and retention;
• reputational risk for the organisation of not providing an excellent service.

On average, each employee has 8.3 days unplanned absence from work each year. Studies show that unauthorised absence is most likely to occur in certain groups, such as younger people, new starters, manual workers and people who work in larger organisations where absenteeism is not so readily noticed. However, recent force majeure events, such as bad weather and airport closures have proven that unplanned absenteeism can affect many thousands of people in businesses across the globe.

Reasons for absence

Let’s start by considering the causes of absence from work, remembering that there are many valid reasons why people can be absent. These include authorised holidays, compassionate leave, time off to care for dependents, paternity and maternity leave, adoption and parental leave, study leave, as well as time off for jury service and trade union duties. Employees have a legal right to be absent for these and many other reasons. If you are unsure about employee rights, a good source of reference is the Acas website: www.acas.org.uk.

What is of concern is unauthorised, unplanned absence. This can be caused by short or long term sickness, including stress, persistent lateness or ‘duvet days’, where employees decide not to show for work. Sometimes called ‘Monday morning syndrome’ this type of absence may be
linked to major sporting events or national holiday periods e.g. taking an unplanned absence either side of a Bank holiday. It can also be caused by external factors, such as weather and travel disruption.

**Employee engagement**

Unplanned, unauthorised absence can be an indicator of lack of employee engagement at work.

Engagement is characterised by employees being committed to the organisation, believing in what it stands for and being prepared to go above and beyond what is expected of them to in order to deliver outstanding service to the customer. Employee engagement is more a psychological contract as it is a physical one. Engagement is something the employee has to offer. As we will see, the employee makes a choice about how they behave and the extent to which they are engaged. Engaged employees feel inspired by their work, they are customer focused in their approach, they care about the future of the company and are prepared to invest their own effort to see that the organisation succeeds.

Engagement can be summed up by how positively the employee:

- Thinks about the organisation
- Feels about the organisation
- Is proactive in relation to achieving organisational goals for customers, colleagues and other stakeholders

In other words the degree to which they perform their role in a positive and proactive manner.

**Identify the root causes of absenteeism**

If your organisation or team is subject to high levels of unplanned and unauthorised absence, it is essential to identify the root causes. An anonymous employee engagement survey can be a useful way to do this. Establish a working party from different parts of the business to help create the survey. They can agree the types of questions to be asked as part of the survey and how the survey will be communicated and disseminated. Do not under-estimated how important it is to position the survey well, to fully explain the reasons for why you are running it and to assure confidentiality. It is also helpful to have a dedicated resource internally who can collate the results.
If you do decide to go down the survey route, when you ask people to complete the self assessment, do stress that there are no right or wrong answers. It is essential that the survey is completed anonymously so that people feel that they can answer honestly. It is acceptable however to ask for business function or area so you gain a true picture of the variations of levels of engagement are within your organisation.

**WIFI**

To help group the drivers of engagement into a meaningful plan of action for you to address, you can use the WIFI model of engagement. Like a wireless network, its make up is invisible to the eye but once connected it allows you to work efficiently and where ever you are. This state of ‘flow’ – the term used by the American Psychological Association to describe the state of mind in which people become completely involved in an activity and become so immersed that they lose track of time – is when an employee is highly engaged. When the network is down the employee becomes quickly disengaged and disaffected.

**The WIFI model**

Like a network, the WIFI model of engagement is made up of some basic components which when brought together are very powerful. In my experience of best practice organisations there are four key elements that drive employee engagement:

- Well being
- Information
- Fairness
- Involvement

**Well Being**

Feeling good about the organisation and having the organisation in turn care for you is a fundamental aspect of engagement. There are two facets to this component: external and internal. In the later chapter on Well Being I explore the external aspects of well being:

- Corporate social responsibility which is about how companies conduct their business and the impact that they have economically, socially, environmentally and in terms of human rights
• Employer Branding: which is about the external face that organisations project in order to attract and retain employees.

But Well Being is far more than what we feel about the external face of the organisation. Research indicates that engagement is more likely than not to be associated with a good work-life balance. HR policies such as flexible working hours and family friendly policies go some way to generating a level of engagement.

Job design and structure, having sufficient challenge in ones job and sufficient resources to do ones job well are equally important in helping employees feel fulfilled in their roles. Likewise Well Being encompasses equality and diversity policies that go beyond compliance with antidiscrimination legislation and can lead to greater levels of employee engagement.

A further aspect of this element is genuine care for the employee as expressed by their immediate line manager.

Well being is also underpinned by a set of organisational values that employees see to be aligned to the behaviour they also see others display.

**Information**

Having a clear vision of where the organisation is going and what it wants to achieve and communicating this effectively is an essential element in binding employees together. Having clarity around organisational goals appears in many studies as essential in helping the employee to know where they are going and why and how they fit into achieving those goals. The regularity and appropriateness of information at all levels is a key driver of engagement.

**Fairness**

Fairness can be seen in many aspects of the employee journey, starting with recruitment and selection. Hiring the right people for the right jobs is fundamental to ensuring that the individual begins their working life with your organisation in the most positive way.
Fairness also manifests itself in the performance management process your business adopts. Being clear about what is expected of you in your job and receiving regular and timely motivational and developmental feedback appear as key factors in all research on employee engagement.

Likewise it has been established that it is important for employees to have a personal development plan. Ready access to training and development that meets individual needs has been proven to be important for many organisations in developing a culture of engagement. Research into employee engagement by Blessings White demonstrated that career and talent management are important to many people.

Finally businesses with high levels of employee engagement provide appropriate and fair reward and recognition.

**Involvement**

Organisations with high levels of employee engagement recognise that communication is two way. They actively engage in conversation with their employees. According to a recent study by Watson Wyatt Worldwide, organisations with effective internal communications have a 19.4% higher market premium and deliver 57% higher shareholder return. The study also found a strong correlation between a company’s communication and its employee engagement and retention levels. Firms that involve their employees effectively are 4.5 times more likely to report high levels of employee engagement than firms that communicate less effectively. They are 20 per cent more likely to report lower turnover rates than their peers.

Involvement also manifests itself in the degree to which team work is actively promoted and encouraged.

**The Impact of the WIFI model**
Unplanned Absences and Employee Engagement

Figure 1: The impact of WIFI

Use the results of the survey to tackle the root cause of absenteeism. There is no silver bullet in terms of preventing unplanned absenteeism. However, the results of a survey should give you a wide range of actions you can take to minimise the incidence. It could be, for example, that a well-being programme can help identify the causes of stress at work and help you take active steps to minimise these.

Conclusion

It is unrealistic to expect to completely eradicate unplanned, unauthorised absences. However, by adopting a proactive approach and identifying root causes, organisations can help increase their levels of engagement.
Steve Macaulay and Sarah Cook are development specialists who focus on helping managers and organisations to achieve change in a customer-focused way. Steve is a Learning Development Executive at Cranfield School of Management, Sarah is Managing Director of The Stairway Consultancy. She is the author of “The Essential Guide to Employee Engagement” published by Kogan Page. Steve can be contacted via email on s.macaulay@cranfield.ac.uk; Sarah on sarah@thestairway.co.uk

{loadposition copyrightmessage}