



COMBATING ABSENTEEISM IN THE WORKPLACE

One of the major problems facing employers is the excessive use of sick leave by employees, usually without advance notice to the employer. What aggravates the problem is the fact that several myths exist about employee rights in respect of sick leave. Some are convinced that they enjoy better work security when they are sick than when they are healthy. Others believe that medical certificates cannot be questioned, or that until all sick leave has been used, the employer cannot take steps to address the disruption caused by regular absenteeism. Failure to address the problem does not only cost money, but could be extremely disruptive and also demotivating to more loyal employees.

Overcoming the problem of regular absenteeism requires an extensive strategy that should include incentives, as well as sanctions. Naturally the ideal is that employers should tackle and overcome the problem in co-operation with their trade union(s) or other employee representatives. The point of departure of such a strategy is determining and implementing an "acceptable" standard of absenteeism due to illness, after which follows a counselling process with informal and formal steps, followed by action plans until an ultimatum and final investigation that would normally result in dismissal. The main objective throughout should be to combat abuse and not to punish persons who are really ill or have become disabled. There are very clear guidelines for such cases in statutory codes of good practice.

Administration of medical certificates should also be improved. Developing a good dose of cynicism about such documents (which in effect are merely hearsay evidence of which the content and format need to be acceptable) is advisable. It is important to set clear guidelines about what must appear in a certificate before the employer would accept it. The Basic Conditions of Employment Act contains some of these guidelines. A clear policy on when certificates are required is also necessary, e.g. for absence on Mondays or Fridays and when the employee is absent due to illness on more than two occasions in an 8-week period. Where abuse of certificates is suspected, further investigation should be undertaken with a view to institute disciplinary steps. In suitable cases, medical practitioners who issue certificates in the knowledge that it constitutes abuse may also be reported to their professional body. It is definitely recommended that employers who do not provide medical services on their premises, make use of a medical practitioner to advise on the acceptability or not of suspicious certificates on a consultancy basis and on other ways of combating abuse. Alternatively, there are institutions whose exclusive business is investigating the validity of certificates, helping to combat abuse and encouraging sound health care.

Another way of discouraging abuse is by conducting a short, structured interview with each employee returning from sick leave, at which certain relevant information is gained. This serves as an early warning to the employee that his or her absence is being monitored.

It is strongly recommended that incentives be given to those who hold a good attendance record. This may take several forms, but need not be excessively costly. It may entail money (e.g. in the form of bonuses), pro rata additional holiday leave or something more practical such as food coupons. More controversial, but extremely effective, is the publication on notice boards within the enterprise of certain information, including a graphic representation of the absenteeism pattern and the impact thereof in rands and cents. One could also display attendance registers, without invading privacy, to complete the picture. Keep in mind however that the purpose is not to disadvantage people who are really ill or absent due to pregnancy for example, but to combat the most disruptive forms of absenteeism.

Employers naturally need to ensure that the working environment, working conditions and their management methods do not contribute to the problem. Finally, no strategy would be complete unless employers provide assistance programmes to employees who need it or at least make access to assistance possible.