

How healthy is your workplace?

This article from ACAS, featured in HR Review, sheds light on how to maintain healthy workplace relations and keeping absenteeism to a minimum.

For those in employment, work can be a key part of life, so the workplace can have a significant impact on their health and well-being. This can be positive or negative. Work can offer self-esteem, social interaction and companionship, structure and status as well as income. There is evidence that being in work generally leads to better health but not all workplaces are healthy.

Apart from the obvious negative physical effects of a minority of workplaces, factors such as job design, poor management, a bullying/blame culture, lack of control or discretion, consistently high work demands and low social support can all lead to ill health in any workplace. According to the Choosing Health White Paper two million people suffer an illness they believe has been caused or made worse by their work. This can take many forms including stress, anxiety, depression, musculoskeletal disorders and increased risk of coronary heart disease. In turn, this leads to sickness absence and reduced productivity. If people are not healthy and happy at work they are less likely to go that extra mile and provide good customer service. Instead they are more likely to take "sickies" or to leave the organisation altogether.

So the real task is to have a "Healthy Workplace" where the quality of management and leadership is good, there is open and honest communication, and bullying and a blame culture are not tolerated. For employees, this can also extend to a workplace where individuals have as much discretion and control over their jobs and the way they are done as is possible within the constraints of the job and working environment. Acas' experience is that there are too many "unhealthy" workplaces - we see the symptoms of this only too often. High "sickness" absence or employee turnover because people are voting with their feet, high levels of individual grievances against managers/colleagues, complaints of bullying or harassment - the list is endless.

Having difficult conversations

It can be difficult talking to employees about why they have been absent from work. Some employees, naturally, find it difficult to discuss personal medical problems. Also, many managers shy away from what they perceive as a 'showdown' with employees – particularly if they suspect that the sickness has not been genuine or if they wish to discuss high levels of sickness absence.

For example, an employee has been over-celebrating a sporting victory. Do you talk to them even though the rest of the team don't seem too bothered by

the absence? If another employee is always absent for the monthly finance meeting how soon do you realise that there may be an underlying problem?

It can also be easy to make assumptions about absence. For example, a colleague with a bad back should be ready to return to work. Is the delay in returning due to a recurrence of the medical problem or is it due to anxiety about resuming their work routine?

Research by the CBI, and Acas' own experience, has found that early intervention and good communication are key ingredients in managing attendance. As a manager you need to:

- apply standards consistently
- look after your employees' well-being
- keep within the law
- look after the best interests of the employee and the company.
- Keep in touch with employees when they are sick and away from work.

When they return, conduct a return to work interview.

Healthy workplace relationships

We at Acas know what contributes to healthy relationships at work and deliver a wide range of services to help organisations improve the way they approach this important aspect of health and well-being in the workplace. Acas has offices throughout Britain and a network of advisers who can help organisations with a wide range of workplace issues - we can help organisations to:-

- Identify and explore underlying issues which are causing people to take time off sick or feel negative/stressed about their work
- Work with managers, team members and employee representatives (where they exist) to identify ways of making things better
- Give managers the skills they need to successfully manage attendance and have those "difficult conversations"
- Raise awareness of issues of bullying and harassment to ensure it is not a feature of the workplace
- Resolve individual/colleague disputes - issues which have often got out of hand
- Set up an in house mediation scheme and train/accredit mediators

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