

10 ways leaders can tackle employee absenteeism

Stop just counting absences and start managing their causes. Prevention is the best cure for absenteeism, and it starts with proactive leadership concerned about worker wellbeing.



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Most companies can tell you how many and which of their employees are off work at any given time, but few can tell you why. That's because the data is often filed away with HR.

Meanwhile, the issues absenteeism provokes are left to pile up: work has to be reorganized and workloads redistributed, quality suffers, and the workplace climate deteriorates.

But it doesn't have to be this way. "The companies with the lowest absenteeism are those that don't just count absences but manage their root causes," says Ignacio Garcia, citing research by Deloitte where he is a partner. And that management responsibility isn't left to HR but extends to everyone from the C-suite to line managers.

"Rethinking absenteeism" was discussed at the [Food & Beverage Industry Meeting](#) held at IESE Barcelona in June 2026. Below are 10 recommendations that emerged to help reduce absenteeism, ensuring employees are present not just in body but also in spirit.

1. The first person who has to show up is you

"Absenteeism must be tackled before it happens," says Pedro Casaño, Chief People Officer of Hijos de Rivera, brewer of Estrella Galicia. The person best positioned to spot early warning signs is the line manager, he says. Do you notice mood swings in your team? Do you sense something is wrong before anyone even says anything? The tuned-in manager acts before problems arise. This makes all the difference.

Staying closely attuned can sometimes be [easier in family firms](#), believes Jordi Muns of the family-run food retailer Ametller Origen. There, store managers are trained in both the human and strategic dimensions of leadership, and a variable portion of their pay is linked to team-support indicators.

This aligns with [research](#) by IESE's [Mireia Las Heras](#): Employee wellbeing starts when their supervisors likewise feel supported by their managers; this creates a positive trickle-down effect, fostering a mutually supportive work environment, the absence of which contributes to absenteeism.

Judith Viader, CEO of Frit Ravich, offers a simple tip that many managers fail to practice: When an employee returns from sick leave, sit down with them to see how they really are and if there are any workplace issues that need to be addressed to ease their transition back to work.

2. Organize workloads before managing absences

One common driver of absenteeism is too much work or unrealistic demands being placed on workers. It's worth assessing what kind of pressure employees are under and the resources available to help them. Seasonal businesses are particularly vulnerable: They can ill afford to have [employees off work during peak production periods](#), yet it may be that work overload

that's causing them to be absent.

As part of workload assessment, companies should review which tasks are merely being performed out of duty or habit, and may no longer be necessary. Ametller Origen does this, with Muns explaining that outdated operational processes are eliminated, relieving pressure on teams.

Implementing health and safety standards like ISO 45001 is another preventive management action, anticipating workplace risks before they lead to accidents and medical leave.

3. Put employee growth at the center

In the face of any change, whether technological or organizational, people must feel part of it, knowing that their company will support them through the process. If not, as IESE's [Maily George](#) has highlighted in her research, workplace changes can [threaten employees' sense of identity](#), leading to stress or a loss of meaning. But if the company genuinely listens to its people and takes their concerns seriously, it can learn how best to manage them through change.

IESE's [Nuria Chinchilla](#) cites the case of the Spanish energy company Iberdrola, whose introduction of a 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. workday led to a 20% reduction in absenteeism. This was part of a conscious effort to [make work more flexible and responsive to human needs](#), as Chinchilla describes in her book, [Fundamentals of Human Ecology as a Paradigm for a More Sustainable Economy](#).

"As a CEO, there's nothing more rewarding than seeing your people grow professionally," says Viader. Make that your priority. Frit Ravich's commitment to leave no one behind has been one of its founding principles, shaping its transformation projects ever since.

4. Move forward as a team or don't move forward at all

Individual results don't sustain an organization. "Our results and performance will improve only if the team moves forward together, supporting one another," says Muns, adding that this conviction must be explained and reinforced constantly until it becomes shared by all employees and embraced at all levels of the organization. In intense operational environments where problems must be resolved quickly, team support becomes even more critical.

5. Build belonging, so as not to let others down

[Strong emotional bonds with the organization](#) help protect against absenteeism, but "pride of

belonging cannot be bought with a salary,” notes Casaño. “It is built through employee development, recognition and meaningful work.”

And this is cultivated day by day. As Viader explains, it starts by building trust, in your people and with your teams. Then, you build commitment to a common project and to your colleagues. “Without trust, there is no commitment,” she warns. Throughout it all, there must be good communication, so that each and every individual understands what they do and the impact it has on others and on the common project.

Viader emphasizes this dimension of co-responsibility — being aware of the impact of your absence on others. “What happens when I don’t go to work today? What impact does that have on my teammates? It has an impact, and each of us needs to appreciate that,” she says.

When this collective awareness is present, the team is better equipped to handle day-to-day pressures and challenges. This is the same logic Mireia Las Heras explores in her [case study on castellers](#), Catalonia’s tradition of human tower-building. In a human tower, no single person can let the others down.

6. Decide fast, correct faster

When problems within teams are detected, response time matters. In large corporations, processes can take longer than in small family businesses. And in retail, issues converge at a faster pace, and you have to resolve problems much more quickly, says Muns. No matter the nature of your business, the panelists agree that you must be quick to decide, quick to make mistakes and quick to correct.

7. Focus on real wellbeing, not empty gestures

Looking out for employee wellbeing is not about putting fruit bowls in the office, says Casaño. The wellbeing that reduces absenteeism is the kind that supports employees during difficult times such as a bereavement, an illness or a personal life crisis; it focuses on prevention through workplace safety, ergonomics and mental health. One way Hijos de Rivera [demonstrates its commitment to employee wellbeing](#) is through its “Your Health Is the Star” initiative, promoting people’s health and psychological support for employees, both inside and outside of work.

8. Expand wellbeing to include financial security

The impact of inflation on wages in recent years has shifted what employees expect from their employers. Economic stability has become a basic need that cannot be ignored or offset

with other perks. This requires rethinking the company's value proposition to employees: "It's no longer just about the salary," says Muns. "It's about the company serving as a safe harbor for workers."

9. Rethink incentives, rewarding those who do show up

Are your incentives aligned with the behavior you seek? In some countries, like Spain, the benefits are such that people can be off work and still receive 100% of their salary. Ametller Origen changed its policy so as not to reward absenteeism, reducing sick pay for temporary, non-serious illnesses, while introducing a bonus for those who maintain consistent attendance. This has brought absenteeism down to prepandemic levels.

10. Drill down into data for answers

According to Deloitte's Garcia, 1 in 3 companies doesn't even calculate the cost of absenteeism, and of those that do, only 1 in 6 calculates it well in terms of measuring its indirect as well as direct costs. Tackling the problem requires not just having the data but having a granular understanding of what lies behind absenteeism figures. Only then can you begin to take remedial action.

Which absences are due to illness? Which ones recur among the same workers? "Just as we segment our consumers to understand them better, we must apply that same segmentation to absenteeism," says Viader.

Garcia's research finds a small percentage of employees accounts for the majority of sick leaves, which invites a deeper examination of the root causes for that cohort. Is it related to personal wellbeing? Is it a leadership issue? Does work need to be organized differently?

Viader also makes a keen observation: Not all absenteeism is visible. People can be present in body but absent in spirit. Again, a deeper understanding of worker wellbeing can help you cultivate an organizational environment where people will want to show up, in every sense.

SOURCE: Edited from a panel discussion on "The invisible cost: rethinking absenteeism in a post-COVID workforce," with Pedro Casaño, Jordi Muns and Judith Viader, and moderated by Ignacio Garcia, during the [Food & Beverage Industry Meeting](#) held at IESE Barcelona in June 2026 under the academic direction of IESE's [Miquel Lladó](#).

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Absenteeism: Different approaches to a common concern

United Kingdom

A white paper published under the Starmer Labour government, called [Get Britain Working](#), received support from 250 of the U.K.'s biggest employers. "The group aims to prevent people dropping out of work due to ill-health and encourage those signed off to come back, with official figures showing the issue costs the UK £212bn a year," [reported the BBC](#). Under the plan, companies "will track sickness absence, return-to-work outcomes, and disability participation, which the government said would make workplace health performance visible for the first time."

Germany

Chancellor Friedrich Merz has proposed serious reforms, insisting "we can no longer afford this competitive disadvantage caused by prolonged absences from work," as [reported in The Independent](#). Among the proposals is a requirement for workers to "submit a medical certificate from the very first day of illness," rather than getting a sick note over the phone as before.

Spain

Spain leads the European Union in temporary absenteeism: [4.5% of employed workers between the ages of 20 and 64 were on leave in 2024](#) (the latest data available), nearly double the EU-27 average of 2.5%. Moreover, [public spending on temporary incapacity rose to €18.4 billion in 2025](#), the biggest social security expense after pensions. In response, the Spanish government has launched the [Temporary Disability Observatory](#), bringing together various ministries, business organizations and trade unions to study the factors behind temporary incapacity and to propose policies that would improve the health and recovery of workers and facilitate their return to work.

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