

Absenteeism: Prevention is the only cure

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Workplace absenteeism is not only bad for business but erodes trust between employer and employee. A new study examines the root causes of the problem and proposes prevention strategies.

Workplace absenteeism is a big problem in many economies. In Spain, absenteeism accounts for estimated annual losses of at least 60 working hours, or 2,000 euros, per worker.

Besides the damage it wreaks on a company's bottom line, absenteeism brings other consequences that are more difficult to quantify, such as general breakdowns in labor market conditions and in employee commitment and morale.

Most disconcerting is the fatalistic acceptance of the phenomenon. "Professional absentees" often know more about labor codes and what they can get away with than many HR managers do.

What makes a person skip a day's work in the first place? Absenteeism is often a symptom of an underlying problem, such as union tensions, poor work environments, stress or inappropriate management styles.

IESE's International Research Center on Organizations (IRCO), in association with the consulting firm Persona, conducted a series of focus groups with a team of respected experts in the field. The results reveal strategies for combating absenteeism by better managing employee commitment.

In body but not in spirit

Although absenteeism generally refers to being physically absent from work for part or all of the day, the authors point out that absenteeism can also be mental.

Indeed, according to a recent Gallup poll, only around 20 percent of employees give their all at work — meaning that 80 percent either do not focus enough attention on achieving the tasks assigned to them, or they spend part of the day on tasks and activities completely unrelated to their jobs.

Mental absenteeism can often lead to physical absenteeism, as employees are overcome by feelings of demoralization, monotony and general lack of interest.

Prevention strategies

While the fight against absenteeism may require some punitive and control measures, the study found that the real focus should be on prevention. The authors propose a holistic approach based on four key elements.

1. Promoting Commitment. Improving the work environment and communicating company objectives across all levels of the organization will help strengthen employee commitment to both their employers and their work.

Managers must make a conscious effort to show employees how much the company values their work. All corporate messages must be coherent and consistent — after all, what is needed is a complete change of organizational culture.

To prevent a culture of "minimal effort," companies should adopt a management approach that genuinely involves and motivates staff.

2. Boosting Motivation. Supervisors and middle managers must play a leading role in motivating the workers closest to them. If not, the battle against absenteeism will almost certainly fail. For them to take the lead, managers may need appropriate training in interpersonal and people management skills.

3. Sensitizing Managers. Senior managers must understand the importance of absenteeism, both in financial terms as well as its negative impact on the labor environment. Absenteeism is not just a problem for the HR department to deal with: all managers must assume responsibility for it.

4. Improving the Environment. Efforts must be made to promote flexible hours and work/family conciliation. The main causes of workplace stress must be identified and addressed, for example, by establishing protocols against discrimination.

The authors believe that such preventive measures will have a positive affect not only on absenteeism, but also on other key HR indicators, such as turnover, productivity and job satisfaction.

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