

# Partnership on Health And Safety in Scotland

A paper by Robert Atkinson, Development Manager

## 1. Introduction

Employers, clinicians and experts agree that many employees will need to take sick leave from time to time and, in most cases, this lasts only a few days. If however, this turns into long-term sickness absence, or repeated periods of absence, it can have devastating effects on the productivity and competitiveness of a business, as well as the health and well-being of those employees who remain at work.

Working in partnership with employers, employees and their representatives to manage sickness absence, and help those off work, return to work can bring considerable benefits to the business and the individual concerned. This philosophy mirrors the messages contained in the Scottish Executive Strategy for the improvement of the health of the working age population in the publication "Healthy Working Lives, a plan for action" and Dame Carol Black's review of the health of the working age population of Britain.

Statistics for working days lost through sickness absence vary between 6.6 and 9.1 working days per employee. A CBI/AXA study on absence and labour turnover reports that the cost to the UK economy is over £13.bn per year. On average, direct costs are estimated at £531 per worker and if indirect costs are added, the figure reaches £1600 per employee. The study suggests that over a third of days lost are due to long-term sickness absence.

The document "Improving health and work: changing lives". The Governments Response to Dame Carol Black's Review of the health of Britain's working-age population 2008, states that some 172 million working days are lost due to absence costing business £13 billion per year. In its figures for 2004/2005, the HSE estimates that 35 million working days were lost overall due to work related activity (1.5 days per worker), with 28 million due to work-related ill health and 7 million due to workplace injury. Also, 2.0 million people were suffering from an illness, which they believed was caused or made worse by their current or past work.

Short-term absence is commonly reported as a result of minor illnesses such as colds, flu, stomach upsets and headaches. Work related long-term sickness absence is commonly reported as: musculoskeletal injuries and back pain (MSD's); stress and mental health difficulties. These are all preventable if the employer is aware of the problem early and takes suitable action. The CBI Absence and Labour turnover Survey 2007 suggests that minor ailments, MSD's and non work related stress are the three most common causes of short term absence and non work related stress, MSD's and work related stress are the three most common causes of long term absence.

The ability to record and manage sickness absence is particularly difficult for small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in Scotland. SME's make up nearly 99 per cent of private sector business and employ almost 57 per cent of the Scottish workforce. The Black report states that 40% of businesses do not have a sickness absence policy and recent unpublished research into a small group of Scottish SMEs suggests that some

78% have no arrangements for an HR function thus no effective way of recording or management sickness absence.

The Health and Safety Executive have long recognised the link between sickness absence, poor business performance and the potential for long-term absence to lead individuals onto the benefit system. After six weeks absence an employee's ability to return to work falls away rapidly, for example someone with six months' absence due to back pain has only a 50% chance of return. As a result, the HSE has, supported a number of projects to begin to address the issue and recognises six main elements in the return to work process:

- recording sickness absence
- maintaining contact with the employee while off work sick
- making use of professional treatments and advice
- agreeing and reviewing any return to work plan
- planning and undertaking any necessary workplace adjustments
- co-ordinating the return to work process

The HSE supported, Sickness Absence Management (SAM) project, provided the first important part of this return to work process, offering participating organisations access to a whole range of services and support specially designed to help businesses actively manage their absence and look at workplace health and health and safety issues.

## **2. Background**

The SAM project was an initiative offering a free software package, (SART, Sickness Absence Recording Tool) with on-demand help and support for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in Scotland. This work was delivered by University of Glasgow's Healthy Working Lives Research Group (HWLRG) and has been evaluated. The project was delivered in partnership with The Scottish Centre for Healthy Working Lives (SCHWL) and Scottish Engineering Employers Federation and the Health and Safety Executive.

The SART software was commissioned by the HSE and was developed by the Institute of Occupational Medicine. It provides a straightforward way of recording, classifying and analysing absence. In addition, it gives advice and links to further information on addressing absence for the individual and at an organisational level. The software has been piloted in this study.

The HWLRG at the University of Glasgow monitored the usefulness of the tool and gathered data on the management of sickness absence and return to work, as well as the tool's contribution to wider organisational health and safety matters.

The participation in the pilot was voluntary and each organisation taking part was provided with free SART software to allow recording of details about the business and its employees plus support on managing sickness absence including seminars and training. Links to further information on addressing absence for the individual and at an organisational level was, and continues to be available through partners, primarily The Scottish Centre for Healthy Working Lives.

Recruitment to the pilot was carried out by all the partners involved and organisations taking part in the study contributed information to the SAM project for a period of no less than 12 months. During this time each organisation completed a brief questionnaire before installation of the software from CDROM. Following installation of the software, the organisation provided feedback on the help they received from the SAM project team and on a monthly basis, emailed the team with anonymised data, which was created automatically from the software. Quarterly during the pilot and on completion, the organisation also completed an evaluation questionnaire.

### **3. Current Position**

The research element of the SAM project came to an end in 2008 and there is to be no further finance available from the HSE in London to continue to fund the project in its current form. Although funding from HSE is no longer available, there is considerable willingness from all parties to ensure that the tool and the considerable effort that went into its development and promotion, is not lost.

At the steering group meeting held at Glasgow University on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2006, a partnership was proposed where each of the original members of the steering group continue to provide elements to a service, ensuring that the tool continues to be developed, promoted and used to assist organisations to manage their attendance and sickness absence to the benefit of each organisation, its staff and to provide information and data that would be of use in a wider public health setting. Each partner would bring a unique set of skills and resources to the table to allow the tools to be developed and used in a wider context.

The key partners in this process would be:

- The Health and Safety Executive (HSE)
- The Scottish Centre for Healthy Working Lives (SCHWL)
- The Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC)
- The Engineers Employers Federation (EEF)
- University of Glasgow's Healthy Working Lives Research Group (HWLRG)

Currently the Institute of Occupational Medicine are developing a document to assist the tendering process. This will include identifying the most effect way to move the tool forward, looking at issues such as continued support, documentation development, options for programming language and web location and storage of data. It will bring together the recommendations for the SAM report and other feedback and outline approximate costs in development. This document should be available in late April 2009.

### **4. Partners activities in future development**

As stated above, the current SAM pilot was administered by HWLRG at Glasgow University and offers the first in a series of six recognised elements in the return to work process, recording absence. Any continuation of the pilot into full use among organisations would need to offer support on all strands of a thorough return to work process, that is:

- recording sickness absence
- maintaining contact with the employee while off work sick
- making use of professional treatments and advice

- agreeing and reviewing any return to work plan
- planning and undertaking any necessary workplace adjustments
- co-ordinating the return to work process

The Research Group is based within the Department of Public Health at Glasgow University, providing it with credibility in terms of academic achievement and purpose. The Group also has considerable knowledge in terms of this project, the software, data analysis, research and reporting and public health issues which will be critical in ensuring that the developed tool fits with organisational need while also providing information into a public health arena for Scotland.

As part of the strategy on Healthy Working Lives, the Healthy Working Lives was introduced in April 2007. This Award Programme has, as one of its criterion at every level (Bronze, Silver and Gold) a requirement for participating organisations to address support for staff with attendance difficulties. The criterion requires organisations to:

- Record absence at a basic level
- Designate a person responsible for gathering and recording attendance figures, this individual must have knowledge of the reasons for and benefits of, recording and using attendance data, such knowledge could be gained through provision of information or basic training
- Have attendance management procedures which include the following:
  - a. Clear definitions around short term, long term and unexplained absence
  - b. Provision of leave or time off to attend appropriate medical appointments
  - c. Arrangements for keeping in contact with staff who have been away from work for specified times
  - d. Arrangements for return to work interviews including training and support for managers in conducting return to work interviews
  - e. Arrangements to help staff return to work for example adjustments to the workplace, temporary changes in working hours, referral to occupational health
- Inform and involve staff in the process by raising awareness of:
  - a. The systems in place for recording days when staff cannot work
  - b. Who is responsible for recording Benefits to the employees

The centre also has 85 front line staff working within Scottish industry and the public sector to promote health and well-being. The framework for attendance management is promoted to all organisations visited, whether as part of an award programme or as independent involvement for an organisation. Currently the Centre has contact with some 4000 organisations in Scotland and links to bodies such as Scottish Business in the Community (SBC) where the promotion of sound attendance management processes can be continued.

Services available through the Centre include:

- An advice line – the advice line was closely involved in the development of the SAM pilot and offers advice in sickness absence management and rehabilitation.
- The Scottish Centre staff have been closely involved in the SAM pilot and have been involved in the provision of training and presentations on the topic.
- All Healthy Working Lives staff have experience in giving advice and guidance to organisation both large and small in a range of topics.
- Other rehabilitation pilots (Dundee, Lothian, Borders) offering opportunities to refer clients to vocational rehabilitations services.

- Workplace visits and hands on advice that can include return to work and workplace adaptations.

The Centres' front line staff include 18 Occupational Health and Safety Advisers, all of whom have received training in attendance management practice, in line with the HSE's Workplace Health Connect Service in England and Wales.

- The Health and Safety Executive – expertise in development; promotion and endorsement; finance; access to funding streams; access to case studies
- The Scottish Centre for Healthy Working Lives – web space, staff for training and advice; policy tools; FLS support; promotion; advice line; finance; access to funding streams
- The Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC) – support; promotion and endorsement; finance; training venues, support, web space; training of SCHWL staff; access to funding streams

The Engineers Employers Federation (EEF) – support; promotion and endorsement; finance; training venues, web space, training of SCHWL staff; access to funding streams  
 University of Glasgow's Healthy Working Lives Research Group – research expertise; data analysis, independent and credible data capture and reports; updates of service delivery; staff training; access to funding streams, including knowledge to be used in development of the tool and associated documentation, case studies, access to staff knowledge and expertise, avenues for support, promotion and distribution of the tool, assistance in training staff and clients.

## 5. **Proposal for future use**

It has to be recognized that not all absence is within an employer's control, but it is clear that an employer has an important role to play in managing and reducing sickness absence and creating a positive and healthy working environment for employees. This is particularly important in cases of long-term absence. Studies show that the positive management of sickness absence brings about a reduction of its incidence and much can be gained by employers and employees adopting a positive approach to the management of sickness absence, that is, a system that is based on proactively helping individuals who are off-sick, to recover and reintegrate back in to work.

It is unlikely that any single organisation can provide the levels of support that would be needed to see such systems adopted widely in Scotland, particularly within the SME sector where the current SAM tool is targeted. Therefore a multi agency partnership is proposed to bring the strengths of a number of bodies into the arena, each providing expertise in the background or through front line delivery to offer a product that will be usable and add benefit to Scottish commerce and the working population.

What is proposed is a package on sickness absence management for organisations that sign up to the initiative. This package could include:

- Provision of web based software to record absence and accident data, this software would be supported for technical problems and updates
- The web based software would assist the organisation to analyse their data as required but it would also feed anonymised data to a central organisation where data could be fed into public health statistics. Accident data could be used to support SE/HSE Action Plan on accident under reporting in particular it may provide sectoral information.
- Each participating organisation could receive web based monthly or quarterly reports on their sickness absence.

- Each participating organisation would have access to an advice line
- Each participating organisation would have access to a series of information and training events throughout the country
- Each participating organisation would have access to current and future services from SCHWL
- Participating organisations within a Vocational Rehabilitation pilot area would have access to these services
- Each participating organisation would have access to example tools such as policies and procedures.
- Micro organisations that feel the tool is too much for their needs at present could be provided with a simplified version, perhaps in paper form that would allow easy formatting and transfer onto the web based system at some time in the future. (this tool is currently under development)
- Access to an endorsed training programme on attendance management delivered through SCHWL

## **6. Benefits to client organisations**

Each participating organisation receives advice, information and staff training on attendance management. They also have software to allow them to record their information and receive quarterly reports on the status of their attendance management. This could be benchmarked against other organisations in the programme and feed into the Business Health Check tool currently being piloted. The proposed model would fulfil criteria for a Healthy Working Lives award.

## **7. Financial implications**

There would be significant financial implications in developing and maintaining this tool for example:

Marketing and promotion, development to a web based system, ongoing software support and development, quarterly updates and data analysis, training preparation and delivery, venues, travel costs etc.

## **8. Cost options**

While there will clearly be costs, it may be possible to off set some of these against a system of charging or licensing for the product. For example:

- An annual licence for use, buys the software, updates, X number of places on training courses, quarterly summaries, newsletters, access to workplace advice and advice line etc.
- A scale of charges could be used by company size, by registration for a HWL Award or for organisations that want a Bronze, Silver or Gold package.
- Alternatives would be provide the tool and support free and to charge for training and seminars.
- Sponsorship may also be possible on a web-based system
- Bringing on board additional partners may open up news funding streams for example FSB, Scottish Enterprise and HIE.
- Exploration of funding streams from the Health Work and Wellbeing initiatives.
- Possibility of jointly developing the tool could be explored with options to share development costs with in England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

## 9. Risks

Any joint venture will be presented with risks to the fulfilment of the process; some potential risks to this service are outlined below:

- Failure to secure finance to develop the tool and services
- Continued software problems
- Inability to gain support from all partners
- Training delivery resolution (who, how, when, where, how often, to whom etc)
- Loss of a partner organisation, either front line or development e.g. software developer going into receivership.
- Lack of interest in product from client base, low take up
- Failure to secure long term funding for service
- Poor information gathering making input to any national picture patchy
- Massive over subscription making meeting demand for software or advice difficult to cope with
- Individual organisational support lost by loss of lead employee
- Introduction of other systems to the market place (free or otherwise)
- Failure to attract other partners in promotion e.g. Scottish Enterprise

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