

MINISTERIAL TASK FORCE

ON HEALTH, SAFETY AND PRODUCTIVITY
THE WELL MANAGED ORGANISATION

DIAGNOSTIC TOOLS FOR
HANDLING SICKNESS ABSENCE

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THE WELL MANAGED ORGANISATION

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Introduction

This toolkit has been designed to take forward the recommendations of the Ministerial Task Force for Health, Safety and Productivity. It supplements the guidance for Boards and HR directors on absence management and healthy attendance.

Simply put, sickness absence matters because:

- It is a cost - and a good measure of overall organisational efficiency;
- It affects the public reputation of your organisation;
- It is a good indicator of the health of your organisation. It reflects overall levels of employee well-being.

The guidance documents identify that a successful absence strategy has the following four elements:

- Monitoring, measuring and understanding absence information;
- Managing sickness absence when it happens;
- Promoting a healthy environment: tackling the underlying causes of absence;
- Promoting a culture that encourages attendance.

An underpinning principle is that successful implementation demands effective engagement with the workforce and their representatives.

This toolkit contains the following, all of which are designed to help you develop and implement a sickness absence and healthy attendance strategy.

What's in this toolkit?

Management Skills and Training Needs

This diagnostic tool focuses principally on two elements of the strategy:

- monitoring, measuring and understanding absence information and
- managing sickness absence when it happens

Furthermore, it will enable you to identify whether managers have the skills to

- understand an underlying pattern of absence, and
- promote a healthy environment by tackling the underlying causes

It consists of a draft questionnaire that will enable you to evaluate the overall competence of your managers and respond with a programme of training and development.

Promoting a healthy environment: tackling the underlying causes of absence

This diagnostic tool is designed for operational managers who have identified an underlying problem driving a pattern of absence. It will only be effective if managers already possess the skills required to manage absence effectively. This diagnostic contributes to the delivery of these elements of the strategy:

- promoting a healthy environment – tackling the underlying causes of absence
- and
- promoting a culture that encourages attendance.

Specifically it includes:

- Information about the HSE's Stress Management Standards; and
- A Work Organisation and Well-Being questionnaire that employees are invited to complete. This will allow managers to be more precise about the workplace factors that are driving their underlying absence problem. They will also be able to devise an action plan in response to the survey results.

Taking the workforce with you

An overarching principle in the guidelines is that organisations must take steps to ensure that the workforce and their representatives are actively and closely involved in any initiative to reduce levels of absence. This third diagnostic is focused on the final element in the strategy:

- Promoting a culture that encourages attendance

Specifically, it offers you a tool to evaluate your current systems for communicating with the workforce and the unions along with an opportunity to benchmark your performance against best practice.

How you choose to use this toolkit is a matter for you. The HR department will probably find the first and third elements most useful because they deal with organisation-wide issues. The diagnostic tool to identify underlying causes can be used at an operational level where managers have direct responsibility for work organisation and job design. Nevertheless, HR professionals will need to make managers aware of the tool and ensure that they feel comfortable with this approach to addressing the underlying causes of absence.

Diagnostic: Management Skills and Training Needs

Introduction

This diagnostic will enable you to evaluate the competence of managers in operating current procedures. It will also allow you to assess whether there are skills gaps that need to be filled before a new system can be made to work effectively. This diagnostic is principally focused on the first two elements of strategy to reduce sickness absence and promote healthy attendance:

- Monitoring, measuring and understanding absence information; and
- Managing sickness absence when it happens.

In addition, the diagnostic will enable you to assess whether managers are able to use the information they receive to identify patterns of absence and then, in line with the guidelines:

- Promote a healthy working environment and tackle the underlying causes of absence.

What do managers need to do?

Set out in the box below is a summary statement of the skills managers need to handle absence effectively.

The Management Skill Set

- A clear understanding of the importance of effective absence management.
- The ability to make proper use of the electronic HR system (or other administrative system) for the recording and analysis of absence.
- Knowledge of the appropriate procedures and a clear understanding of when to intervene including:
 - the meaning of “early intervention”
 - the differences between the treatment of long-term and short-term absence
 - clarity about when long-term absence becomes a capability issue
 - an understanding of the role of occupational health and when a reference should be made
 - clarity about the nature of OH advice and an understanding of how to handle difficult medical issues
- Strong communication skills. More specifically the ability to:
 - conduct an effective back to work interview; and
 - communicate with employees sensitively but appropriately about their health problems
- An understanding of the requirements of the DDA and knowledge of how to make a “reasonable adjustment” to accommodate an employee within the organisation.
- The ability to identify systemic problems and make changes to work organisation, job design and management culture.

Conducting a Training Needs Analysis

Before you make an assessment of managers training needs you need to be clear about the situation in which you are operating, in particular the systems and processes that managers must use and the effectiveness of these arrangements.

The next step is to identify the extent of the change that you are trying to make. You can then draft a questionnaire (a model can be found below), which assesses managers' current competences and allows you to identify skills gaps. You may wish to recast this to suit your own purposes and it is intended to be no more than a guide.

Essentially the questionnaire works as follows. Managers are asked to explain what they do now – and a judgment can then be made whether this is consistent with the policies and procedures that have already been established.

Managers are then asked whether they feel confident in communicating difficult messages to employees and are asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements about the effective management of absence.

The next element of the questionnaire is designed to assess the competence of managers to identify and deal with the underlying causes of absence. This is about understanding the systemic causes for a pattern of absence across a group of staff rather than understanding reasons for individual absence. The intention is to assess whether managers are equipped to address problems of this nature as well as deal with individual causes of ill-health. The point of principle here is that an organisation that fails to use sickness absence information to deal with systemic and collective problems is unlikely to be well managed. More could therefore be done to improve the quality of the working environment, which would lead in turn to improvements in the health of the workforce.

Finally, managers are asked to assess their ability to deal with the Disability Discrimination Act and questions of reasonable adjustment.

Once the questionnaires have been completed they will need to be reviewed and evaluated. In principle this will be the responsibility of HR department, although some organisations may wish to make use of external consultants. When this process has been completed it will be possible to develop a clear understanding of the skill base of the organisation, the areas where action is needed and individual training and development needs. Discussions can then take place with individual managers as part of the appraisal or performance review process so that their development goals can be set for the forthcoming year. Furthermore, it should be possible to identify the extent of the organisation wide need for training and development and deploy resources accordingly.

If you have arrangements in place for upward appraisal or 360° appraisal you may wish to use these arrangements to assess how staff evaluate their managers' performance. Similarly, you could, if you wished, add a series of questions to your regular staff survey to elicit employees' views about the effectiveness of sickness absence policies and procedures.

Training Needs Analysis

Draft Questionnaire

Please note that items and response categories in this first section will need to be adapted in order to match your organisation's particular process requirements. This questionnaire is intended to be a guide and you will need to adapt it freely to suit your own circumstances. More questions can be added if necessary.

Knowledge and understanding of processes

The questions are intended to assess managers' knowledge of processes in the following areas:

- how to record absence as required by the attendance management process
- using the data captured by the monitoring process to identify process of absence
- intervening as required by the process when an employee displays a pattern of absence
- dealing with long-term absence as a capability issue at a stage consider appropriate by the process
- referring to occupational health as required by the process

	Please circle one response for each question
When an employee calls in sick I:	a) wait to until see if they come in the following day before recording the absence b) record the absence immediately c) wait for the employee to return and ask them to record the absence themselves d) do not take any action about recording the absence e) don't know
I receive sickness absence data for my team:	a) weekly b) fortnightly c) monthly d) other... (please specify) e) don't know
From the information that I receive I:	a) find it easy to identify individual patterns of absence b) find it hard to identify individual patterns of absence c) can spot trends that require further investigation d) find it hard to spot trends e) don't know
If an employee is sick and absent for longer than 5 days I:	a) tell the employee a doctor's certificate is required and ask them to produce one b) let the employee decide for themselves c) don't know

When an employee returns to work I carry out a return to work interview:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) regardless of the length of sickness absence b) only if the absence is more than 2 days c) only if the absence is more than 5 days d) at the point when I am required to by the sickness absence policy e) based on whether I think the individual case requires an interview f) don't know
When I see a pattern of absence I:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) intervene and talk to the employee immediately b) wait and watch the pattern for a few more occurrences before talking to the employee c) watch the pattern but do not discuss with the individual employee d) do nothing e) don't know
I refer cases to occupational health:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) when a pattern of absence is identified b) only when I feel an individual case requires a referral c) don't know

[Assessment of knowledge levels is based on how many correct responses participants give to the above questions.]

Communication Skills and Interactions

Please indicate whether the following statements are an accurate description of the way you communicate and your interactions with employees at different points in the attendance management process

Competence	Extremely strongly agree 1	2	3	4	5	6	Extremely strongly disagree 7	Comments
<p>At the return to work interview:</p> <p>I review the employee's pattern of absence before beginning the interview and check their compliance with procedures</p> <p>I can create an informal and non-confrontational setting for the meeting, being clear about the purpose of the discussion</p> <p>I discuss the employee's current health and look for underlying causes of absence.</p> <p>I remind the employee of their absence record, point out that data is being collected and explain that their behaviour is being carefully scrutinised.</p>								

<p>If action is to be taken I agree in writing with the employee what is to be done, when it is to be done and when it will be reviewed.</p> <p>I explain to the employee the consequences of failing to achieve an improvement in attendance</p>													
<p>In dealing with long-term absence</p> <p>I know where to seek advice on mental health issues where they are the cause of long-term absence.</p> <p>I know where to seek advice about the employee's physical health where this is the cause of long-term absence</p> <p>I am confident about contacting staff at home to discuss their condition.</p> <p>I know when to refer an employee's case to Occupational Health.</p> <p>I am confident about handling medical issues. In particular I understand how to respond to the advice from occupational health and the views of the employee's GP.</p> <p>My objective in dealing with long-term sickness is to encourage the employee to return to work.</p>													
<p>Dealing with individual patterns of absence</p> <p>I will investigate whether an individual's pattern of absence is caused by workplace or other problems.</p> <p>If the reason for absence is not workplace related I will point the employee in the direction of impartial sources of advice.</p> <p>If workplace related I will explore whether the problem is caused by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relationships with the immediate line manager/ supervisor • other relationships in the team • the employee's workload • whether the employee possesses the skills they need to do their job efficiently and effectively 													

<p>I will respond by taking action to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improve relationships with the line manager/ supervisor or other team members • reallocate workload if the burden the employee is carrying is unmanageable • develop a training and development programme to equip the employee with the skills they need. 										
<p>Tackling the underlying causes of absence across the organisation/team and creating a positive culture of attendance</p> <p>If the absence monitoring system reveals a pattern of absence across my team then I will review the design of jobs and the organisation of work to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make boring jobs less monotonous • consider whether employees can be given more control over their work • ensure that workers are able to cope with their workloads • assess whether employees believe that they are properly rewarded for the work that they do • review whether workers believe that they are treated fairly. 										
<p>I consider whether my behaviour as a manager may be contributing to the pattern of absence.</p> <p>I recognise changes in employee circumstances and adjust plans accordingly</p> <p>I prioritise objectives and plan work to make the best use of time and resources</p> <p>I make time so I am available to support my staff</p> <p>I take personal responsibility for making things happen</p> <p>I show integrity, fairness and consistency in decision-making.</p> <p>I clearly agree what is expected of others and hold them to account.</p>										

<p>I seek to understand people's needs and motivations. I encourage and support others to make the best use of their abilities.</p> <p>I use a range of leadership styles adapted to the people and the situation.</p> <p>I work to ensure that relationships in my team are based on trust and co-operation</p>										
<p>Rehabilitation and the Disability Discrimination Act</p> <p>If an employee returns to work with a disability I understand when I must make a reasonable adjustment to respond to their needs</p> <p>I will seek the advice of an occupational health professional to check that the employee is covered by the DDA.</p> <p>If necessary I will, in consultation with an occupational health professional arrange for an assessment to be made of the employee's needs.</p> <p>I am confident in discussing an employee's disability with them so that we can agree the reasonable adjustment that will be made.</p> <p>I am confident in reorganising work, redesigning jobs or changing working patterns to accommodate an employee's disability.</p> <p>I am confident in making changes to the workplace environment to accommodate an employee's disability.</p> <p>I am aware that public service organisations now have an explicit statutory duty to promote the equality of disabled people and I understand what this means for me as a manager</p> <p>I receive clear and regularly updated guidance from the HR department on the legal requirements of the DDA.</p> <p>I understand that funding may be available from the Access to Work scheme to help pay for any reasonable adjustments.</p> <p>I know how to access such funding.</p>										

Collating the results and devising an action plan

Once this process has been completed you can begin to devise an action plan. The results from the training needs analysis will enable you to identify both organisational weakness – skills gaps displayed by many managers – and individual development needs. How you decide to deploy your resources is a matter for you. The important point is that you develop a clear delivery plan with well-defined “milestones”, a definitive implementation date and some opportunity for a review of progress. It is likely that the board will wish to agree the headline elements of your action plan and will wish to receive regular reports on progress.

The importance of performance management

What really counts of course is that the new arrangements become embedded in the organisation so that people can say “this is the way we do things round here”. The performance management system has a critical role to play, both as an instrument for developing management skills and as a device that can create clear expectations amongst employees. Managers are more likely to manage absence effectively if they know that their own performance is being monitored, measured and rewarded. Employees will also understand that they should be at work if they are fit for work and that genuine sickness will be dealt with sympathetically.

This means that managers must be given explicit targets for the management of absence and must understand that they will be evaluated against their absence management record. Targets and objective must not be set arbitrarily and must reflect the particular situation managers face– the nature of the jobs, the skill levels of employees, the composition of the workforce etc. Managing sickness in a Whitehall department is rather different from managing sickness in a prison.

Diagnostic: Addressing the Underlying Causes of Absence - Work Organisation and Job Design

Introduction

This diagnostic is designed for operational managers who have identified a pattern of absence in their division or unit and wish to understand the factors driving the pattern so that they can take remedial action.

The diagnostic should be seen in the context of the four elements of a successful absence management strategy:

- Monitoring, measuring and understanding absence information
- Managing sickness absence when it happens
- Promoting a healthy environment: tackling the underlying causes of absence
- Promoting a culture that encourages attendance

To use this diagnostic effectively you must have:

- an information system that gives you trustworthy and accurate information about absence; and
- knowledge and understanding of the procedures to be applied so that you can manage absence when it happens.

Specifically, this diagnostic is designed to enable you to implement the final two elements of the strategy:

- Promoting a healthy environment: tackling the underlying causes of absence; and
- Promoting a culture that encourages attendance.

It suggests that you refer to the HSE's Stress Management Standards as a useful starting point in developing a more sophisticated understanding of the causes of absence. Furthermore, it offers you a questionnaire to be answered by your staff that can offer further insights into the factors that drive a pattern of absence. You can, if you wish, add these questions to a regular staff survey.

The HR department should be able to offer you support in evaluating responses and in designing an action plan to improve performance in the future.

It is important to understand that this diagnostic is focused on patterns of absence across the workforce. It is not about responding to individual patterns of absence.

Focus on Prevention: Identifying the underlying causes of absence

Of course, the first step towards an effective prevention strategy is compliance with minimum standards of health and safety practice. This will help to reduce the risks that you are exposing your workforce to factors that may adversely affect physical and mental health.

Nevertheless, compliance with minimum standards, though a good beginning, can be supplemented with effective voluntary action. For example, a well-developed body of research shows that the following workplace factors can influence the overall health of your workforce

- Employment insecurity;
- Monotonous and repetitive work;
- Autonomy and job control;
- A balance between effort and reward – this is not just about money, but also embraces the idea that workers are praised for good performance and treated with respect by their employer and their colleagues;
- An employment relationship characterised by procedural justice – in other words, employees know that they will be treated fairly by their employer.

If your performance on all these dimensions is poor then your workforce faces a higher risk of mental illness, gastro-intestinal conditions and coronary heart disease (CHD).

However, while the evidence may be compelling, it can be hard to know where to start. The problems look complex, the scale of the challenge can be immense and other priorities more pressing. The purpose of this diagnostic is to help you grapple with an issue that can either look too difficult to deal with or too abstract to have any practical relevance.

Getting started

So where should you start?

A useful guide to approaching the issues can be found in the HSE's Stress Management Standards, details of which are set out in the box below. For further details see www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm. Although these standards are focused explicitly on stress, they are potentially relevant in tackling the wider causes of sickness absence identified above.

HSE Stress Management Standards

Demands

Employees indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs.

Control

Employees indicate that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work.

Support

Employees indicate that they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and superiors

Relationship

Employees indicate that they are not subject to unacceptable behaviours, eg. bullying at work

Role

Employees indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities.

Change

Employees indicate that the organisation engages them frequently when undergoing an organisational change

In each case the employer must be able to demonstrate that systems are in place to allow for an appropriate response to concerns raised by individual employees

A further example of good practice is the Engineering Employers' Federation's Work Organisation Assessment Questionnaire: a tool for the risk management of stress – see www.eef-fed.org.uk . This uses a "risk management" approach to stress suggesting that employers should:

- Identify the hazard;
- Evaluate the risk associated with the hazard;
- Decide on appropriate control strategies;
- Develop an action plan;
- Review and evaluate actions.

Five areas are identified for intervention:

- Relationships between the employer and employees;
- Relationships with colleagues;
- Being valued;
- Physical environment;
- Workload.

The first step in the EEF's model is to invite employees to complete a questionnaire that explores the levels of satisfaction with a range of workplace factors. The objective is to identify the aspects of the workplace that drive employee dissatisfaction and develop an action plan to deal with these problems. Once again, however, the questions raised here are relevant to absence generally rather than those incidences that are exclusively stress related.

The Work Organisation and Well- Being Questionnaire

Set out below is a draft questionnaire which draws upon these other standards and diagnostic tools. It should be completed by all your employees and will enable you to make a comprehensive assessment of the underlying causes of absence. You will be able to see where the problems lie, identify the steps you must take to address them and promote a culture of healthy attendance.

Work Organisation and Well-Being: Draft Questionnaire

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Comments
My job is interesting						
I am able to undertake a variety of different tasks in my job						
The physical environment in the workplace is good (cleanliness, temperature, furniture, equipment etc)						
My working environment does not cause me discomfort						
I am confident that my job is secure						
My workload is manageable and I can cope with the demands of my job						
I am under a lot of pressure most of the time						
I am fairly rewarded for the work that I do						
My manager praises me when I have done my job well						
I have control over the way that I do my job and I can make my own decisions about how work gets done.						
I get the support I need from my manager when I am asked to undertake difficult tasks						
I have access to the training I need to be able to do my job well						
I use all my skills to do my current job						
I know that I can rely on my colleagues. We support each other						
My line manager treats me with respect						
I am consulted regularly about the day to day management decisions that affect me directly						
I am given information about the major strategic decisions that will affect the future of the organisation						
If I have a grievance or other problem I am confident that it will be resolved fairly						
Managers treat people fairly here						
There is no bullying in this workplace						
This is a good place to work						

An analysis of the responses to the survey should enable you to identify the factors in your workplace that adversely affect employee well-being. You should in other words be able to identify hazards, evaluate risks, develop a control strategy, take action and review effectiveness.

It is difficult to give you precise guidance about how you should react, largely because there can be huge variations in starting points. Nevertheless, it is likely that your action plan will need to focus on the following:

- Work organisation;
- Job design;
- The design of the physical environment;
- Communication with employees and their representatives;
- Performance management.

If there is an annual staff survey then the HR department may simply wish to add these questions to the existing list. On the other hand, you may wish to conduct a survey for your department or operational unit alone if you believe that there is an immediate problem that demands attention. Whatever your situation, you will need the assistance of the HR department to evaluate the results and develop an action plan. You are not expected to be an expert in all these issues, but you will know more about your operational unit than anybody else and your insights will prove invaluable in developing an effective response to the underlying causes of absence.

Embedding the Process in Your Organisation

You need to make regular assessments of staff opinion to benchmark progress and evaluate the health of your organisation. Administering the survey every year will also enable you to monitor the improvement in perceived employee well-being, which is essentially a “soft” measure, alongside the “hard” measure of sickness absence statistics.

Diagnostic: Involving the workforce and their representatives in creating a healthier workplace

Introduction

Successful implementation of a sickness absence and healthy attendance strategy depends upon the engagement of the workforce and their representatives. Employees need to be confident that they will not be penalised if they are genuinely ill and unfit for work at the same time as employers establish the very simple principle that if you are fit for work then you should be at work.

The pace of change is accelerating across the public sector and employees must be given the confidence to believe that they are not subject to impersonal forces over which they have little or no control. Effective union and employee involvement can help ensure that workers see their employer as trustworthy. Communication of sickness absence policies need not be threatening and can be a powerful demonstration of the employer's concern for the welfare of the workforce. Maintaining a high level of trust is essential if the implicit contract between public service employers and employees is to be sustained. If workers and their representatives understand the problems they can assist managers to design effective solutions.

This diagnostic will help you to implement the final two elements of a successful sickness absence and attendance management strategy:

- Promoting a healthy environment: tackling the underlying causes of absence; and
- Promoting a culture that encourages attendance

Furthermore, you will need to talk to employees and their representatives at an early stage about the introduction of new systems for collecting information about sickness absence, new reporting arrangements and new procedures for managing absence when it happens.

The Cabinet Office has produced a diagnostic, Driving Change [insert web link], which is focused on trade union and employee involvement in public service reform. The principles set out below draw upon that diagnostic simply because the implementation of sickness absence policies is an exercise in managing organisational change. According to the Driving Change model, successfully engaging the workforce and their representatives depends upon the following:

- A clear articulation of the case for change
- Openness and transparency in implementation
- Outcomes characterised by “mutual gains” – better service delivery and more efficiency for the employer, better working conditions and a healthier workplace for employees

It is suggested that those managers responsible for communication, people management and relations with recognised unions should be invited to complete the following questionnaire. The questions themselves are grouped as descriptions of best practice, good practice and poor practice. This will enable you to judge where you sit on a continuum of effective consultation through to a conflict driven relationship. You should then be able to develop an action plan that addresses the weaknesses identified.

These questions reflect the approach to employee engagement adopted by other standards – Investors in People for example. Further information can be found at <http://www.investorsinpeople.co.uk/IIP/Web/default.htm>. You should think about whether you should use your normal consultation machinery to engage the workforce and unions in any initiative around sickness absence and healthy attendance. The questions set out below are more in the nature of an aide memoire than a detailed prescription, although the answers that managers give will allow you to benchmark your performance against best practice.

At this point it is important to recall that employee and union involvement is a continuous process. Obviously activity is likely to be most intense when a new policy or procedure is introduced, but there must be a process for both monitoring implementation, evaluating results and revising current practice if that is necessary. Similarly, you may find that administering this questionnaire could be useful if you are trying to apply well-established policies and procedures more consistently and effectively.

Union Engagement Questionnaire

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Comments
Best Practice	Union engagement						
	Consultation with unions on sickness absence takes place at the "glint in the eye stage", before decisions are taken.						
	We take decisions jointly with the unions on matters relating to sickness absence policies						
	We regularly review the progress of implementation with our trade unions						
	We have a process agreed with the trade unions for reviewing the effectiveness of sickness absence initiatives						
Good Practice	We inform the unions of decisions we have taken about sickness absence policies and then discuss implementation with them						
	We occasionally discuss the effectiveness of sickness absence policies with the unions, although there is no formal process for doing so						
Poor Practice	We inform the unions of decisions that we have taken and the consequences of implementation for their members						
	We negotiate with the unions about pay and conditions but never discuss other operational matters like sickness absence with them						

Employee Engagement Questionnaire

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Comments
Best Practice	Employee engagement						
	A regular organisation wide newsletter is published that gives employees information about sickness absence policy						
	There are regular all staff meetings at which important messages about absence and healthy attendance are communicated						
Good Practice	Employees can ask questions of senior managers at these meetings about new sickness absence policies						
	There are regular team meetings at which sickness absence policies can be presented and discussed						
	Individual employees can ask questions about new sickness absence policies at team meetings						
	Sickness absence issues are discussed with individual employees at regular face to face meetings with line managers						
	We communicate new policies on sickness absence through line managers as the principal dissemination channel						
	New employees are informed of the absence policy when they start work for the organisation and are told where they can find further guidance						
	We inform employees by letter about changes to sickness absence policy						
	We regularly update the staff handbook to inform employees of changes to sickness absence policies						
	Poor Practice	It is left to line managers to decide how they communicate new sickness absence policies					
Information about new policies is simply posted on the staff notice board or intranet without further explanation							

The approach adopted here is consistent with the new regulations that require the establishment of institutions for information and consultation. For more information see: <http://www.dti.gov.uk/er/consultation.htm> and www.acas.gov.uk.

It is worth recalling that the “default procedure” for information and consultation requires the employer to:

- Inform employees’ representatives of the recent and probable development of the undertaking’s activities and economic situation;
- Inform and consult about the situation, structure and probable development of employment within the undertaking and on any anticipatory measures envisaged (in particular where there is a threat to employment within the undertaking); and,
- Inform and consult with a view to reaching an agreement on decisions likely to lead to substantial changes in work organisation of contractual relations

The final principle reflects the best practice set out above and is the best route to the support of both employees and their representatives in any new sickness absence initiative.

You may wish to supplement this questionnaire for managers by adding some questions to your regular staff survey to evaluate how employees rate the success of your sickness absence management policies and procedures. This can be a useful corrective to any distortions that may emerge when you ask managers to assess their own performance. Similarly, you may ask the trade unions to undertake their own assessment of the effectiveness of information and consultation on sickness absence. This can lay solid foundations for a more sophisticated discussion about the problems and opportunities.

Action Planning

When you have evaluated the results of the questionnaire you will then be able to make a strategic judgement about what you must do to communicate effectively with the workforce and the trade unions as you develop your sickness absence and healthy attendance strategy. Once this process is completed you will then be able to approach the trade unions and begin an exploratory discussion.

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