The Conference Board of Canada

What Are the Links Between Attendance Decisions and Mental Health?

Organizational policies are developed with specific intentions in mind. But policies can have unintended results—and create intriguing conundrums.

Why, for example, do remote workers tend to take time off when they are physically unwell, but will force themselves to work despite feeling mentally unwell?

This research reveals the organizational and employee factors that influence how mental health, absenteeism, and presenteeism interact. Organizations that understand this reality and ensure their policies are evidence-based, integrated, and more intentional will reap the benefits of having a healthier, happier, and more productive workforce.

For the full analysis, read our impact paper, _Why Employees Choose Work Over Wellness: The Links Between Absence Policies, Attendance, and Mental Health_.

Current policies leave gaps

Providing paid time off strongly influences employees' attendance decisions.

Our research shows that having more paid time off is linked to increased employee psychological safety, better self-rated job performance, and reduced stress. Employees who receive fewer paid days off have higher absenteeism _and_ presenteeism. Almost all organizations we surveyed offered paid vacation days and sick days, while two-thirds offered paid personal or flex days and only one-fifth offered paid days off specifically for mental health.

Most organizations (82 per cent) aren't monitoring absenteeism by work arrangements.

As a result, they are losing the opportunity to understand how hybrid, remote, and fully on-site work arrangements might influence absenteeism and presenteeism**.** Our research shows that employees working fully on-site have higher overall absences than workers in hybrid settings, and higher absenteeism and presenteeism due to physical health reasons than employees working in a hybrid model or remotely. Employees who work fully on-site are more likely to work despite feeling mentally unwell than employees who work fully remotely.

Most organizations don't measure the impact of their absence policies on attendance (80.9 per cent) or on productivity (88.4 per cent).

Absence policies and practices that are not evidence-based may have unintended consequences, including increasing presenteeism, with potential repercussions on employees' work-life balance, health, and productivity. When employees feel limited by their organizations' policies on taking time off they are more likely to work when they feel unwell instead of taking care of their health.

Some employees may be underserved by current workplace mental health and wellness policies designed to mitigate absences.

For example, members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community reported more absences for mental health reasons and more presenteeism days for both mental and physical health reasons than other employees. Although employees in low income levels have a higher number of mental health–related absences than employees in high income levels, they receive significantly fewer paid sick days.

Attendance policies should consider mental health and inclusion

Re-evaluate policies on paid time off.

Identify opportunities to enable greater equity in paid sick days, personal/flex days, and vacation days. Give specific attention to employees at lower income levels, essential workers, those with care responsibilities outside of work, and those with prior disability leaves.

Engage representatives from equity-deserving groups in policy development.

Accept the fact that a traditional one-size-fits-all policy approach is inappropriate and counterproductive. Continue working to destigmatize mental health. Various segments of your workforce may need different approaches to mental health awareness and promotion. Find out what resources they need and promote their use throughout the year.

Examine the effect of work arrangements on mental and physical health.

Use employee surveys to gauge how employee perceptions and associated behaviours in various work environments affect their physical and mental health. If the needs of employees differ because of their specific work arrangements (i.e., on-site, remote, or hybrid), assess whether a customized policy approach would be more beneficial.

Measure and track absences.

Collect information that will elicit more nuanced data on employee engagement, health, and reasons for absence. Assess whether your benefits provider is enabling or hindering this goal and inform them about your expectations. Establish a well-planned measurement framework and ensure human resources leaders are using it appropriately to track data that can be used to create evidence-based attendance policies.

About the Workplace Mental Health Research Centre

The Conference Board of Canada's Workplace Mental Health Research Centre is committed to increasing awareness and understanding of workplace mental health through research and analysis. It tackles critical matters facing Canadian organizations and the wellbeing of their employees. This study is the Centre's second report.

Learn more about the Workplace Mental Health Research Centre.

Read our impact paper, *Why Employees Choose Work Over Wellness: The Links Between Absence Policies, Attendance, and Mental Health*.

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