BusinessManagement DAILY

JUNE 23, 2021

Checking up on sick workers: The 6 do's and don'ts

When used appropriately, sick days benefit both employee and employer. Sick days provide workers time off to recover from an illness or injury. They also play a critical role in maintaining a healthy workplace by keeping away from the office germs that might infect others on staff. Managers usually do not look favorably, though, on workers pretending to be sick in order to avoid coming in. They may view it as a violation of trust and dislike the extra burden it places on remaining team members.

With 40 percent of workers admitting to calling in sick when they weren't, leaders do have some grounds for suspicion. Thirty-eight percent of employers have checked up on a sick worker, and 26 percent have fired someone for using a fake excuse.

However, companies should be aware that going too far to catch a lie could invite discrimination and harassment claims or unnecessarily damage morale. A better route is establishing a written policy regarding sick days and sticking to it for everyone. Here are six do's and don'ts to keep in mind when it comes to checking up on sick workers.

DO follow your organization's stated guidelines

Leave no doubt as to expectations regarding sick days. Who does the person who will be out need to contact and by what time? Is an email or text acceptable? Under what circumstances does the company require a

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doctor's note? What disciplinary measures can someone be subject to for lying or not following sick-day protocol?

Establishing a common frame of reference reminds employees of their obligations and reduces claims of a manager just "picking on" someone who takes a sick day.

DON'T play games designed to catch lies

If a worker does not call in or won't return calls within a reasonable period of time, a manager may decide to visit the employee's home to check on wellbeing. If the employee isn't home, the manager can later ask where the person was during that time. If the worker claims to have visited the doctor or a drug store, the company can request a note, prescription receipt, or other proof.

Watch, however, not to enter murky territory. Sitting in front of someone's house to monitor comings and goings looks a good deal like stalking. Ditto for repeatedly phoning the person out sick to make sure he's home. Do you really want to risk annoying someone genuinely trying to attend to his health? What message are you sending to your staff about mutual trust? Are such actions really a good use of your valuable time?

DO be careful when using social media as "evidence"

Social media posts often bust modern fakers. A worker who is supposed to be resting at home shares a picture of the delicious lunch she's eating at a trendy new restaurant. You should immediately call her on it, right?

If the person's settings are such that anybody can see the picture, a manager might draw this to her attention at a meeting to discuss the sick day. Be cautious, though, if you cannot personally access the page. It might give others (including lawyers in any future suits) the impression that you're targeting this specific employee or trying to invade her privacy.

DON'T involve other employees

Refrain from putting the rest of your team on the spot. Yes, an employee with whom the absent person is close may know the sick claim is a front for a day at the beach. Testing loyalties, however, can lead to staff discord that may prove more damaging to the workplace than the initial sick day offense.

Likewise, don't ask team members to call the colleague in question or to pull up their friend's social media for you to view. It's also best to discourage ratting. Tattling creates tensions, and information received may not even be accurate as colleagues sometimes enjoy getting a fellow worker in trouble.

DO hold discussions with repeat offenders

A manager may decide to let an isolated incident slide, but a history of such behavior needs addressing. Talk with the employee in question. Stick with observations rather than sounding accusatory. "Your attendance history shows a sick day taken on the Friday leading into a holiday weekend three times this year" is different from stating "I'm tired of you always claiming to be sick when anyone can see it always happens on the last workday before a long weekend."

If appropriate, use this meeting as a time to discuss overall performance issues. Taking unwarranted sick days may be just one element in a pattern of low productivity or poor attitude (or poor morale!).

Keep an open mind during the discussion. Something may be going on of which you aren't aware. The employee could have a recurring health problem she doesn't want revealed or might feel embarrassed that the real reason behind absences is depression. Treating the person with respect and expressing a desire to help with

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adjustments or accommodations may lead to better attendance.

DO consider combining sick days and vacation days into a general category of PTO

Many people who lie when taking a sick day do so for a simple reason: They do not get sick very often but feel entitled to those days off. They feel “punished” for staying healthy or think they deserve to use those days for assuming greater responsibilities while others were out sick.

Companies can avoid such a scenario by lumping sick days and vacation days together as paid time off. Employees can use the days as they need or like without explanation, sick or not.

In addition to removing the need for lies and making time off fairer for all, this system may promote general wellbeing. Individuals who could use a mental health break often do not feel comfortable admitting it. They either feign an “acceptable” reason like a backache and then feel guilty, or they ignore their desire for some respite and wearily carry on. The option to take a day without pressure for an excuse, especially in light of what everybody has been through due to the COVID-19 pandemic, may prove truly impactful.

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