

# 10 ways to reduce the threat of 'presenteeism'



Nearly one-third of employees show up for work at least five days a year when they know they are too stressed to be effective. And “presenteeism”—when workers clock in even though they are physically or mentally unable to work at full speed—has risen to 22%, according to a new survey by EAP provider ComPsych.

ComPsych CEO Richard A. Chaifetz attributes the high level of presenteeism—up by 3% from a year ago—to prolonged stress brought on by the extra work so many employees have taken on, while their companies take a wait-and-see approach when it comes to hiring.

*Result:* Stress, burnout and reduced performance.

In fact, the survey reveals, 63% of the 1,800 employees who participated reported high stress. More than one-third said they lose an hour of work each day because of it.

Stress and personal relationship issues remain the top reasons why employees miss work, outpacing personal illness and caregiving.

## A cure worse than the disease?

Managers who focus on improving productivity by cracking down on absenteeism could be replacing one problem with another, as they encourage or even pressure employees—sometimes unwittingly—to report to work when they are sick. In turn, those sick employees share their germs with colleagues, which compounds the number of absences—and cases of presenteeism.

That pattern is increasingly acute during times of economic worry, when employees feel afraid they will lose their jobs (and have trouble finding new ones) if they call in sick even when they are legitimately ill or injured.

*Upshot:* Reducing absences does not necessarily improve productivity.

*Irony:* Studies show that presenteeism can cost twice as much as absences due to personal illness because sick employees are unproductive while they’re at work.

## Solutions to presenteeism

Here are 10 solutions to stem the growing rate of presenteeism among your employees:

- 1. Identify the problem.** Examine whether lower absenteeism at your organization is the result of greater presenteeism. Some managers say they know presenteeism is up whenever absenteeism is down. Take a close look at whether productivity rises when absences wane. If it doesn't, your organization might have a presenteeism problem.
- 2. Make HR a safe place** for employees to seek help. Some employees simply don't trust their organizations with personal information, so they never take time off to tend to those problems. *Result:* Their conditions worsen. Instead of taking a few days off to nurse a condition in its early stages, the employees wind up taking long-term absences.

A 2011 study showed that employees fear they'll be stigmatized or fired if they disclose stress, depression or even a chronic physical ailment to HR or a supervisor. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found that just 25% of employees felt encouraged to speak openly about their problems, and they struggled with concentration, decision-making and customer service when they worked while not feeling well.
- 3. Embrace kinder, gentler management.** Abrasive and aggressive management tactics—often driven by the need to squeeze more work from threadbare staffs—don't increase productivity. They do trigger stress. Train managers to improve their social and interpersonal skills. Advocate for attendance policies that support employee well-being and allow staff to take time off when they're sick.
- 4. Train managers to intervene** when employees become unproductive because of stress or chronic illness. Help them learn to spot sick and disengaged employees and probe to find out why they dragged themselves to work when they should have stayed home. In fact, studies reveal that deciding to show up at work instead of nursing an illness at home is likely a symptom of an employee's job anxiety.
- 5. Offer flextime and telework** to employees whose jobs allow for that. For some, a day spent working at home can be far more productive than coming to the office, especially if the employee is struggling with stress or depression, or just getting back to work after an illness or injury.
- 6. Help employees learn to work smarter,** not longer. Convince managers to measure performance by results rather than hours worked.
- 7. Broaden your wellness program** so it addresses employees' mental and personal well-being in addition to physical wellness.
- 8. Measure your wellness program's effect** on presenteeism. Does it improve employee health *and* productivity? Stats to track: absenteeism rates, claims for prescriptions for chronic conditions, incidence of lifestyle-induced illnesses such as smoking-related heart disease and obesity-induced diabetes.
- 9. Push your organization's employee assistance program.** Make sure employees know it's there to help them with personal and mental health issues that cause stress, lead them to miss work or distract them during their shifts.
- 10. Leverage HR's influence.** When working with office managers or facilities staff, remind them that chronic back and neck pain are common causes of productivity loss. Push them to upgrade workstations to optimize comfort and posture. Remind executives and managers that your leave policies are intended to improve organizational effectiveness. They should encourage employees to use earned vacation days for week-long, rejuvenating breaks.