

# Reining in excessive absenteeism & tardiness: Do's and don'ts



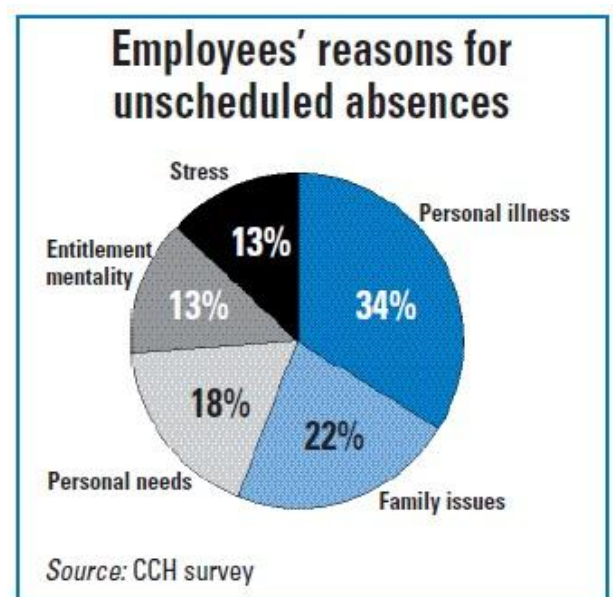
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Managers have heard all the excuses: *My alarm didn't go off. My babysitter didn't show up. I have a bad cold.*

While those excuses sometimes ring true, excessive absenteeism and tardiness can become a major problem in the workplace if left unchecked. The costs —reflected in lost production, overtime and temporary replacements for the absent worker—can add up quickly.

One key thing to remember: Managers can't instantly say, "Be here or be fired" to an employee struggling with attendance issues. That's because those absences and late arrivals may be a legal right for employees who have medical conditions—or have family members with medical conditions—that qualify under laws like the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

For this reason, managers have to work with HR to employ strategies that not only combat absenteeism, but also avoid legal trouble.



## Keep it legal: Questions to consider

It's normal to feel stuck between letting absences spiral out of control and worrying about triggering lawsuits by improperly denying leave. Ask yourself these questions to make sure you're on the right track—both strategically and legally:

- Do you have a clear understanding of the attendance policies? Do your employees?
- Do your employees know how to properly report absences?
- Do you enforce company absence policies consistently?
- Do you understand the FMLA before charging employees with unexcused absences?
- Do you consider religious accommodations before charging employees with unexcused absences?
- Do you consider the ADA concerning absences for drugs, alcohol or medical treatments?
- Do you confront employees early if a pattern of absenteeism develops?
- Do you spell out the penalties for excessive absenteeism completely and ask employees if they understand them?

## Set and communicate a clear absenteeism policy

Most organizations have policies dealing with employee absenteeism. Make sure your staff knows the specifics, including what conditions an employee will be paid (or not paid) for absences.

Employees should also know the types and stages of discipline that will apply to those who violate the policy.

Variations include no-fault policies, which count all absences toward an established maximum, or those that differentiate between excused and unexcused absences.

**Caution:** Some courts have found employers may have to reasonably accommodate an employee's qualified disability under the ADA regardless of its no-fault [absenteeism](#) policy. Also, you can't count [FMLA leave](#) time toward absences under a no-fault policy.

## Sample scripts for discussing excessive absenteeism

At a loss for words on how to discuss absenteeism and tardiness with your employee? Consider some of these phrases:

- "Sarah, now that we've discussed the number, or quantity, of incidents, we've got to discuss the quality, so to speak. Yes, I look at the number of unscheduled absences. But I also look to see when they're occurring on the calendar."
- "In your case, two or three of the incidents either happened on a Friday or a Monday, and that's a separate problem in and of itself."
- "The way we look at it, any time an employee takes more than 50% of his or her time off around weekends and holidays, then we may have a 'pattern' problem on our hands."
- "Yes, three occurrences of unscheduled absence won't trigger anything formal at our company in terms of a disciplinary response. And two or three incidents occurring on Mondays or Fridays may be pure coincidence. But I need you to become very sensitive to this issue as well."
- "In short, I need you to fix both areas. Can I count on you to do that?"

## Always document absences

Documentation is a cardinal rule in any activity for which an employee may be disciplined. Keep

attendance/absence records for all employees.

## Be consistent

Supervisors should clearly understand their responsibilities for recording absences, counseling chronically absent employees and handing out discipline.

Be cognizant of unpreventable problems, such as occasional car trouble, inclement weather, etc. Your organization's [absenteeism](#) policy may have built-in flexibility to allow for special circumstances. If so, follow it and be consistent. Don't let one employee slide for calling in absent due to slick roads, while punishing another for not showing up for the same reason.

**Advice:** Make it clear to employees that a sick leave or [absenteeism](#) policy is not a benefit to be equated with vacation time or personal leave.

## Use positive discipline for excessive absenteeism

Because absenteeism typically comes under the "minor problem" category, the first step is a pre-counseling session between the individual and his supervisor. In this session the supervisor determines if the employee understands the company's policy on absences.

The positive discipline approach then consists of the following stages:

**Oral reminder stage.** This stage follows the counseling session and lasts three months or however long seems to be in the company's best interest. But the period has to be uniform for all employees. If you resolve the problem, the slate is wiped clean and so is the documentation of the incident.

**Written reminder stage.** If the problem still exists after the counseling session, a second counseling session between the employee and his supervisor is scheduled. This time, however, the supervisor writes a memo to the individual spelling out the problem, the worker's acknowledgment of it and his agreement to work toward its resolution.

A copy is placed in the employee's personnel file. The written reminder stage lasts six months, or however long you think is best for the company. If the problem is resolved within this time, the memo is considered inactive and there are no repercussions for the worker. However, don't discard the memo-keep it in the employee's personnel file.

**Decision-making stage.** If the absenteeism problem still exists after the written reminder stage, the supervisor has a final meeting with the employee, during which he spells out the company's policies again. Then the employee is given a one-day leave of absence to decide if he wants to continue working for the company on the condition that he agrees to abide by its rules.

## Do's & don'ts of absenteeism discipline

When punishing employees for attendance problems, follow these tips:

1. **DO figure out what is an acceptable level of absences.** Know your company policies and make sure the employees know as well.
2. **DON'T penalize employees who have legal reasons for leave,** such as going to physical therapy or a covered medical appointment.
3. **DO make sure you understand who gets the last word on any gray areas** that may be in dispute

in any policy that affects attendance.

4. **DON'T undermine your company's absenteeism policy** by ignoring any step that isn't convenient.
5. **DO recognize the difference** between an employee who was out one day all year—even if you suspect it wasn't for a good reason—and an employee who has a chronic problem. Adjust discipline accordingly. The law lets you get tougher on repeat offenders.
6. **DO begin documenting absences as soon as you notice a trend.** Record dates, hours absent and the reason the employee gives for them.
7. **DON'T put employees in the impossible situation** of choosing their jobs over their health or family duties. That could be an FMLA violation.

## **Tardiness: Tips to curb the other productivity problem**

Employees who are chronically tardy can cause just as many problems as those who don't show up at all. Shifts can get backed up, co-workers may be forced to work overtime, customers could be left in the lurch. Use the following tips when you're faced with a chronically late employee:

- Talk with the employee after every late arrival, giving him or her a chance to explain the reason.
- Counsel employees who are excessively tardy to try to pinpoint what is causing the problem. Warn them that continued late arrivals can lead to discipline, up to termination.
- Put all comments—yours and the employee's—in writing, regardless of whether disciplinary action is taken.
- Be sure to distinguish between excused and unexcused tardiness in your records.
- Explain that unexcused tardiness has a negative effect on performance appraisals that affect raises, promotions, and continued employment.
- Spell out penalties for excessive tardiness completely and be sure employees understand them.
- Set improvement goals and dates for when you expect to see improvement in their ability to arrive on time.

## **5 shifts managers can make to help reduce absenteeism due to job burnout**

The last thing you want is employees skipping out on work because they can't handle it anymore. That's not healthy for anyone. It's also surprising preventable. Try these ideas to shift your workplace culture into a more positive, less stressful place:

**Let them dissent.** When people don't have outlets for their job pressures, they tend to run from them. Make dissent possible by encouraging people to speak up, hearing them out and, where feasible, acting on what you hear. Employees may learn they don't have to escape from the workplace to let off steam.

**Cut the drag of boring work.** You can't eliminate boring work, but you can reduce the need to flee from it. Expand boring jobs so employees can see their tasks through to a worthwhile result. Giving a job a beginning, middle and end increases at least threefold the satisfaction to be gained from it. Or try to break down boring jobs into smaller pieces to distribute dull tasks among more people. Diversifying each person's job makes the work a little more interesting.

**Use incentives.** Extra pay for showing up is not a radical idea, and it's relatively cheap. The concept of "well pay" instead of sick pay has proved itself and is easy to adopt. For each paid sick day unused by year's end, an employee gets paid for a day and a half. Or let employees bank sick time to use in case of future disability. These kinds of arrangements can be a magnet to the workplace.

**Try gimmicks.** They're only good for the short term, but they're also reusable from time to time. Try a departmental contest—for example, the person with the fewest absences in a three-month period wins an

oversized turkey. Use gimmicks sparingly, but play them up when you do. And make them fun, not work: Don't ask people to do anything except come to work on time.

**Explain how absenteeism affects everyone.** When people feel easily replaceable, they think they won't be missed. If you tell them why they're needed, they won't want to stay away. Each employee is in some way a specialist; taking the time to point this out makes each one feel skilled, valued and needed.