Employee attendance: Addressing violations & setting expectations

Perhaps most importantly, the employee handbook needs to lay out the consequences of attendance problems. What can a worker expect to happen if he is late once or has an unexcused absence? What disciplinary action occurs for repeat offenders?

Irene slips into her desk, hoping her boss has not noticed that she is 10 minutes late. Unfortunately for her, John actually had already stopped by first thing this morning to discuss a point she brought up at yesterday's staff meeting. At the time, he did not think much of her not being there. He reasoned that perhaps she was just in the washroom. But as he walked back to his office, John overheard snippets of a hushed water cooler conversation where three colleagues traded stories of all the times they witnessed Irene's tardiness.

Thinking back over the past few weeks, John realizes they are correct. While he sort of noticed, he put the issue on the backburner both because Irene excels at her job and because he is not fond of unpleasant conversations. With other team members talking, though, he knows he must act. He does not want charges of favoritism, nor does he want an epidemic of employees thinking they can start their workday whenever they want. He wishes he would have documented all the instances in case this problem advances to needing disciplinary action.

At small businesses and large ones alike, employers must pay attention to tardiness, absenteeism, and other attendance issues. Company success depends on having sufficient human capital available to complete tasks. When someone is late or does not show up when expected, productivity suffers. Furthermore, the absence strains other team members to pick up the slack. It also damages employee morale when co-workers see others breaking attendance rules without consequence. Thus, organizations must develop an employee attendance

policy and stick to it.

The importance of the employee handbook

Effective attendance management starts by getting everyone on the same page. Outline expectations, procedures, and consequences in the employee handbook. This written document provides reference and clarity for workers and managers alike.

Human resources should go over employee attendance policies when onboarding new hires. Such attention shows your organization takes good attendance seriously. Answer any questions, and obtain a signature confirming that the person understands the content.

Many businesses find it beneficial to address the following attendance issues within their handbook:

Tardiness/Leaving early

- Why is it important that employees show up on time and stay for their full scheduled shift?

- Who should a worker notify and by what method if she is going to be late or needs to leave early because of an emergency or unforeseen circumstance?

Employee absences

- When an employee needs to take sick days, who should he contact, when, and by what method?

- How will an absence be handled if the person does not have accumulated PTO to cover it?

Inclement weather

- What are the organization's expectations regarding attendance during snowstorms, hurricanes, and similar situations?

- In what circumstances does the office close?

- How are employees notified of a closure (by what time and method)?

- Does the company have a remote work policy? If so, when and how does it go into effect? Who is eligible for remote work?

- If the office is open but a worker judges it unsafe to travel, what options does he have (such as using PTO or taking a day without pay)?

- What happens if inclement weather occurs during work hours? Can employees leave to go home?

Start with a conversation

Companies frequently choose a "verbal warning" as the first action for attendance problems. Sometimes, managers making offenders aware that they noticed the occurrence proves sufficient to get people to change their ways out of embarrassment or fear of future repercussions. They know they no longer can slip by.

Present the problem as factually as possible, such as "Your scheduled shift starts at 8:00. Records show that you did not clock in until 8:15 on Wednesday and 8:10 on Thursday." Explain that barring an emergency, workers must be present on time.

Allow employees an opportunity to respond. They may provide information useful for resolving the situation. For instance, when John from the opening scenario approached Irene about her tardiness, he found out her 5-year-old's school bus route had recently changed. She is trying to find someone to walk him to the corner and stay with him until his ride arrives but has not been successful yet. Not trusting him out there alone, she has remained with him, which causes her to be late. John was able to offer a temporary accommodation: Irene's official schedule could shift by 15 minutes, meaning she can start 15 minutes later than before and clock out 15 minutes later at day's end.

A conversation also could reveal other types of personal or professional issues. An employee's poor attendance might be the result of a health problem, and it might make more sense to suggest a leave of absence under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) than to continue a sporadic attendance record. Or, perhaps an employee is experiencing bullying from another team member. Whenever put on the same shift, the victim calls in sick. Resolving such a conflict is in the company's best interest and could do wonders for overall employee engagement.

Following through on the stated policy

Unfortunately, verbal warnings do not always work. If attendance problems keep occurring, managers must follow progressive disciplinary procedures. At many companies, this involves a write-up or other method of formal acknowledgment of unacceptable behavior.

Human resources often provides a template for this type of reprimand so that managers can create a permanent record containing all pertinent information. Besides detailing the infractions, the write-up — or, at some places, the Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) — lays out expectations going forward and consequences for failure to take corrective action. It may state, for instance, that barring an emergency situation that the employee will not show up late again for the next three months. If he does, the company suspends him without pay for the day and warns that the next infraction spells termination.

To get both the offender and other employees to take attendance policies seriously, employers must follow through on what they say. Idle threats just make management look ineffective to all.

Think of follow-through also as an investment in your other employees. The more they need to pick up the slack for a co-worker who is routinely late or absent, the more discouraged they get. These feelings are not good for employee morale and retention.

Other ways to improve employee attendance

Of course, the most desirable scenario is simply for employee attendance issues not to occur. The following actions can assist with that goal:
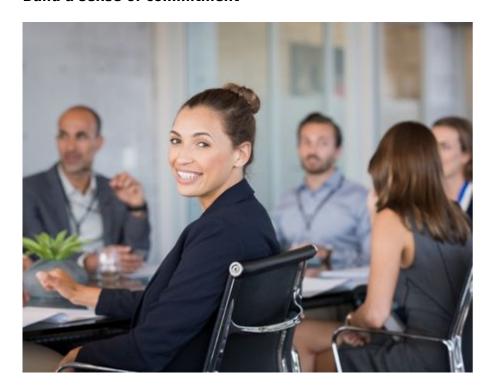
Track employee attendance

Let employees know you are watching. Modern employers have a variety of options for managing employee attendance. Some use handwritten or electronic timesheets on which workers sign in at the day's start and sign out when leaving. Others do time tracking through punch clocks. These devices automatically record the time when someone puts his card through the machine, which eliminates fudging. Explain to everyone in no uncertain terms that "buddy punching" (someone clocking in for a late or absent colleague) is not allowed and will be punished. On the highly sophisticated end, biometric time clocks use methods such as facial recognition, iris scans, or fingerprints to identify an employee and automatically record her punch time.

The increase in remote work as both a career option and as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic has led many companies to explore attendance management options that span beyond the office door. Some organizations pair logging in and out of an attendance management system with tactics designed to monitor productivity, such as measuring keystrokes or taking random screenshots.

Some employers, however, have discovered that too much attention to the exact attendance patterns of remote workers causes more harm than good. Morale can decrease if remote workers feel untrusted, or they may spend more time outwitting the monitoring system than on productive work. Or, they may be actually giving you more time than what is registered on the clock by working here and there without reporting. Consider evaluating remote workers on meeting established goals rather than on employee time logged.

Build a sense of commitment

Let employees know that their individual performance is vital to the mission and success of the company. Attendance problems compromise overall goals. They also put undue strain on their fellow team members. When workers internalize that the absence of one affects many, they may try harder to fulfill their obligation.

Employers agree that unplanned employee absences or tardiness are especially hard to handle. These situations require quick reassignment of tasks or finding new coverage. Urge people to be good team players who give as much notification as possible when they encounter an attendance problem.

Encourage use of paid time off

All workers require time away from work to deal with personal issues or simply to recharge. Support usage of PTO. Oftentimes, the employee can schedule the day(s) off in advance, giving management ample time to deal with the absence.

Similarly, work with employees on scheduling vacations. The rejuvenation provided by a good break can lead to better physical and mental health, which can lead to better attendance records. Let people know upfront how vacation is granted, especially around holidays. Some employers may experience exceptionally busy times they need to block out as unavailable for taking vacation. Others may be able to only grant so many requests at one time.

Finally, tell workers who are sick to stay home. While their sick leave may cause a temporary workplace disturbance, look at the big picture. Inattention to getting better could cause the employee to miss even more time. And a bug passed around the staff can wreak havoc on overall attendance for weeks!